'Imaginary Friends'.

Continued From Page 1

Center Theater production in 2001 of Tom Stoppard's dreamlike drama about the poet A. E. Houseman. That play, "The Invention of Love," was "far denser, far more cerebral," Mr. O'Brien said.

"I assume there are three kinds of people who will see 'Imaginary Friends,' " he continued. "Aficionados of both women; people who have heard of them but don't know much about them; and people who have no idea who they are and could care less. My job is to make it accessible, entertaining and educative to all three. It's not an inside joke, just for fans of two ladies. To my mind, it's about the dilemma of smart women in the latter part of the 20th century."

In devising a fantasy about the relationship between the two sharp-tongued antagonists, Ms. Ephron found books, background material and quotations by McCarthy and Hellman that underlined the rage that drove the two women apart. They finally converged in 1980 when McCarthy appeared on "The Dick Cavett Show" and famously said of Hellman, "Every word she writes is a lie, including 'and' and 'the.' "

Against the advice of her lawyer, Hellman sued McCarthy for libel and $2.25 million in damages. McCarthy, who was not wealthy, endured financial hardship as a result of her legal fees but was unrepentant. Hellman died in 1984, at the age of 77, before the case could be tried.

"I didn't want her to die," McCarthy said at the time. "I wanted her to lose in court."

McCarthy died five years later, also at 77.

Ms. Ephron, seated in a coffee shop near the Globe Theater in the Balboa Park area of San Diego, said that for years she had thought about writing a drama about the two women who were, in virtually every way, diametric opposites: "Mary McCarthy was a famous beauty, Lillian Hellman was plain; one was Catholic, one was Jewish; one was poor, the other was rich; one was a Trotskyite, the other was a Stalinist — as violent a political opposition as you could probably ever have in the 20th century. Mary was a great critic, Lillian was a dramatist, which are almost like different muscles of the brain. Mary distrusted commercial success, Lillian was commercial."

"All this made the car crash seem inevitable," Ms. Ephron added.

Beyond that, Hellman and McCarthy wrote — and lived their lives — in entirely contrasting ways. Few writers have suffered more from critical reappraisal than Hellman, the author of, among others, the

Marvin Hamlisch, left, Jack O'Brien an

trast, McCarthy was obsessed, even in her fiction, with telling the truth, down to the slightest detail — truth that wounded lovers, husbands and friends.

"I'm not criticizing her for this, because I'm certainly from the thinly disguised school of novel writing," said Ms. Ephron, the author of the novel "Heartburn," a thinly veiled account of her marital breakup with the journalist Carl Bernstein. "But the point is she almost didn't change anyone's name. I mean, her first husband was named Harald. The first husband in 'The Group' was named Harold. She changed the spelling from Harald to Harold. Hello? You can do better than that. How about Howard? How about Arthur?" The novel "The Group," which was later made into a film and follows the lives (and sex lives) of eight Vassar women, brought McCarthy a popular audience.

"IMAGINARY FRIENDS" infers that Heliman's duplicity and McCarthy's obsession with the truth were based on their childhoods: Hellman's father was a womanizer, and as a child she fabricated stories about her happy life; McCarthy's parents died of influenza

At 85, a Director Who's Seen It All Keeps His Eyes Open

By JOHN FREEDMAN

Moscow

IT is not yet noon on a mild September day, but Yuri Lyubimov is already rolling. It is Day 1 of a new season at the famed Taganka Theater, and Mr. Lyubimov stands in the narrow aisle before the stage, cracking jokes and offering counsel as he greets his large company and a few guests scattered about the auditorium.

"You must be competitive these days," he says in his deceptively soothing voice, which never leaves any doubt about his authority. "The competition is fierce. I don't like words like these, but you don't choose the age you live in."

Who would know that better than Mr. Lyubimov? When he celebrates his 85th birthday tomorrow with the opening of a new show, he will look back on a life lived in the thick of history. Born on Sept. 30, 1917, just weeks before the Russian Revolution,

The legendary Yuri Lyubimov, once a Russian exile, keeps going, and winning even the Kremlin's praise.

he has experienced everything known to the archetypal hero: fame, struggle, exile, a triumphant return and a new beginning.

As an unseasoned acting student in the 1930's, he briefly met the great innovative director Vsevolod Meyerhold shortly before Meyerhold was executed. Now, an idol of his own era, he accepts the compliments of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin.

Mr. Lyubimov's latest production, a mercurial two-hour adaptation of both parts of Goethe's "Faust," will be the highlight of two weeks of activities honoring the director in the Russian capital. But for Mr. Lyubimov, an imposing man with expressive facial features, it will be just one more day on

John Freedman is the theater critic of The Moscow Times.

Faust
Directed by Yuri Lyubimov.
Taganka Theater, Moscow.
Opens tomorrow.

the job. Astonishingly, he has staged 11 productions since his 80th birthday.

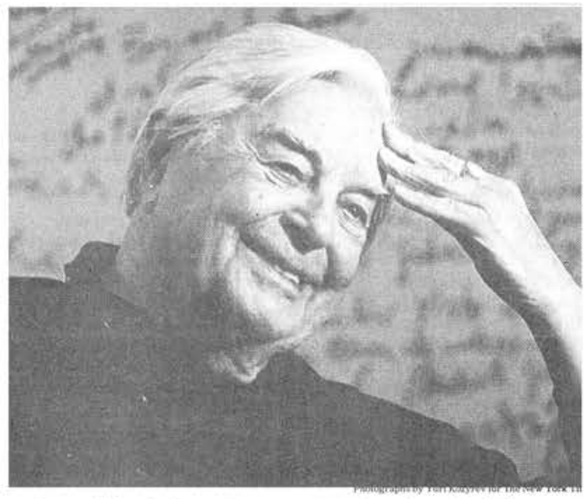
The West knows Mr. Lyubimov best for the work he did in exile between 1984 and 1989, after the Politburo stripped him of his Soviet citizenship and before he was reinstated as the Taganka's artistic director. But in Russia he was already a star in the 1950's after winning the nation's top honor, the Stalin Prize, for his acting at the Vakhtangov Theater. When he founded the Taganka in 1964 with some Vakhtangov students performing a bold version of Brecht's "Good Person of Sichuan," he embarked on one of the most storied directing careers in the 20th century.

"That was a stunning production," recalled Kama Ginkas, a respected theater director himself, who was 23 at that time. "It made a very strong impression by working through allegories, tales and minute changes in the plot line that served as links between segments. The show earned its fame. It was an artistic and political event of the first rank."

Subsequent productions, like an adaptation of John Reed's book about the Russian Revolution, "Ten Days That Shook the World" (1965), "Hamlet" (1971), Mikhail Bulgakov's "Master and Margarita" (1975) and Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment" (1979) prompted Arthur Miller to say that the Taganka had renewed his faith in theater and the British critic Martin Esslin to name Mr. Lyubimov "one of the greatest directors of our time."

Mr. Lyubimov's trademark has been a fast-moving, unabashedly theatrical style that employs satire, irony, dance and song. His Hamlet, played by the legendary actor and bard Vladimir Vysotsky, who died in 1980, strummed a guitar onstage. Taganka actors routinely address the audience, establishing a personal bond with the spectators. The formula has worked: 27 years on, "The Master and Margarita" is still in repertory after 1,006 performances.

During his early years at the Taganka, a cozy two-story building at a busy crossroads called Taganka Square, Mr. Lyubimov was



Photographs by Yuri Kozyrev for The New York Ti

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led to add his signature to the hundreds
utographs of famous people who have
ed Mr. Lyubimov's office walls over the
ades, he settled on an empty space be-
h a portrait of the great poet Alexander
hkin. "Look here," Mr. Lyubimov told a
or, with a twinkle in his eye, "you'll see
igned above Sir Laurence Olivier. He's
ool, picking a spot between Pushkin and

IN THE THICK OF HISTORY
Top, Vladimir Chernyayev, left, in th title role of a new "Faust" and Timur Badalbeili as Mephistopheles during rehearsal with Yuri Lyubimov (left) the Taganka Theater (above), wher Mr. Lyubimov has been the artistic director through decades of a tumultuous Russian century.

in the 1970's.

Meanwhile, Mr. Lyubimov, who has c
scribed his favorite activity as rehearsir
just keeps working. At a run-through
"Faust" — a show that includes a dozen ta
dancers in tuxedos as Mephistopheles's ac
lytes — the director repeatedly stopped t
actors as they slunk across the stage, ca
ing silhouettes on the back wall. "You forg

Letters From Squeaky

A Would-Be Assassin Explains Herself to the Actress Who Plays Her

INTERPRETATIONS vary as to whether Lynette (Squeaky) Fromme (rhymes with homey) intended to kill President Gerald Ford when she aimed her gun at him on Sept. 5, 1975, in Sacramento; the chamber of the .45 Colt was empty. But her larger motivation was clear. Ms. Fromme has said — and in his libretto for "Assassins," the musical he wrote with Stephen Sondheim, John Weidman has reiterated — that she committed the crime so that Charles Manson, whose "family" she had joined in 1967, would appear as a witness at her trial, and thus have a worldwide platform from which to preach his apocalyptic vision.

Despite touring as a child in California with a dance group called the Westchester Lariats (they twice performed at the White House), Ms. Fromme's own family life had not been pleasant; her father, an aeronautical engineer, was by all accounts rough and tyrannical. It was after an argument with him that she met Mr. Manson on a Venice, Calif., beach. Soon she moved to Stockton, where she and several other Manson adherents set up a communal home.

An assassination attempt brought Lynette Fromme instant infamy in 1975.