



#### About the author:

**EVGENIYA (ZHENYA) BERKOVICH** is a prize-winning theater director and a poet. She is a member of Kirill Serebrennikov's Seventh Studio and the founder of the independent theater company, SOSO Daughters.

A Russian military court has sentenced her and a playwright Svetlana Petriyuk to six years in prison on charges of "justifying terrorism" in the 2020 play *Finist The Brave Falcon* about women marrying jihadists in Syria. The play had been awarded two prestigious Golden Mask national theatre awards in 2021.

In years following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Berkovich wrote a number of powerful anti-war poems that were published in social media and recited by theater actors and social activists, some of whom are so-called "foreign agents", a state opposition. There are speculations linking Berkovich's arrest and trial with the poems, seeing the play as a pretext for a case and an eventual grave sentence.

Women in Berkovich family have been human rights activists in several generations: her grandmother, Nina Katerli, passed away in 2023, while Berkovich was kept in prison during the case investigation, denied of parole; and so is her mother, Elena Efros.

Through years, Berkovich was active in charity, founding and running a theater festival, *You Are Not Alone*, for children in the orphanages. In 2019, she with her husband adopted two girls, aged 13 and 15, whom she got to know through this charity work.

Zhenya Berkovich wrote her prison tale, *Pets*, for her daughters, but it will definitely travel to a vast adult readership who is open to bold genre and text experiments and wants to support people of art who are in prison and under prosecution. Berkovich wrote *Pets* by hand, sending us notebook sheets, while her friends made copies, deciphered the text, forwarded the printed version back to us and the editor for her notes and questions.

According to Zhenya, writing the story of a cat struggling with odds to re-unite and, ultimately, to free her imprisoned owner, has helped her to survive through these tormenting times. We hope that the fairy tale spirit of the book will unite people in support of Berkovich.

#### *Selected Bibliography*

2024 — **Pets**, *novel*

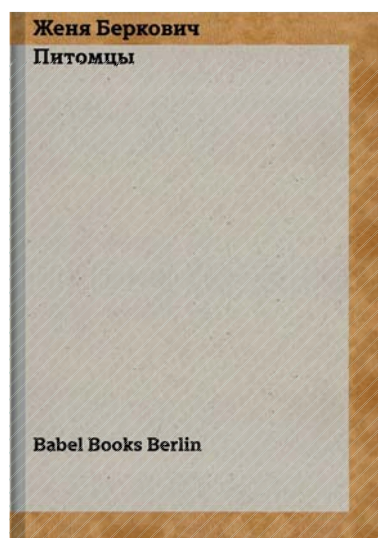
#### *Awards*

**Anna Politkovskaya Prize 2023**

**Music Heart of the Theater National Award 2021**

**Snob Award**, nomination Theater 2021

**Award-winning theater director and  
a poet sentenced to prison**



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Carinthian Summer Festival, Austria

English sample  
available soon

## PETS

Zhenya Berkovich, a celebrated theater director, who is now doing a six-year prison term after a fabricated, politically charged, case, has written a book that upends the tradition of prison writing in Russia. *Pets* is a sharply humorous and – quite surprisingly – hopeful tale for adults that describes prison life from the perspective of its animal inhabitants – cats, mostly, but not without a whimsical involvement of a (white) crow.

There's Cat, a free stray cat, a leader of the cats' gang – residents of prison, known as Purrrison. As a true leader of a gang with its strict hierarchy, Cat is cunning, strong and resilient – all the qualities that are vital to be able to survive in the harsh prison environment. Quite ironically, Cat, a prison cat, treasures his freedom mostly, and his pragmatic approach helps him to head the gang, providing for himself and the kittens, keeping a peace treaty and a balanced co-existence with other inhabitants of the prison quarters, including rats and the old lonely dog. This carefully maintained balance worked smoothly until a sudden intrusion of a crow named Irky, whose naivety, impulsiveness and impracticality immediately disrupt the prison's established order.

Irky, a young and clueless crow, lands in the prison's courtyard, covered in fresh white paint from an unfortunate encounter with a newly painted birch tree. But it is not only the white paint that makes the crow a proper embodiment of a "white crow". Raised by humans in a deli/café, Irky has no experience of survival, but has learned to read and even speak human language. After the café's owner passed away Irky sets out on a journey as an independent bird, until her flight gets disrupted by a tree's bulk. Accustomed to the pet/owner dynamics, she sees Cat as "her" cat, of which, luckily to her, he remains unaware.

Paradoxically her abrupt arrival intervenes with a riot-plot within the cat gang, when younger and stronger cats seek to undermine Cat's status as the Cat in Charge.

Irky persuades Cat to run a "rescue" operation of a human inmate – for the sake of Shiny, a British domestic cat, another character in the heart of the story. Shiny has been brought to prison in a desperate quest to reunite with her recently arrested and confined owner. With her once pristine fur, delicate demeanor and absent – surgically removed – claws Shiny would be a justified target for constantly underfed inhabitants of the Purrrison, rats and cats alike. Yet Cat and Irky decide otherwise.

With their own lives and the existence of all animal inhabitants of the prison in mortal danger, the newly bonded friends concoct an intricate plan of making the owner and the domestic cat reunite and succeed – against numerous odds and disruptions – in an impossible mission: to release the human inmate from the prison.

Through vivid descriptions, hilarious dialogues, quite eccentric inclusions of poetic texts, and a mix of dark humor and poignant moments, Berkovich paints a complex portrait of life in confinement, where the boundaries between humans and animals blur, and survival depends on friendship and loyalty, but also on luck and wit, and – ultimately – on an enduring hope for freedom.

### Selected quotes

*Pets* is a thriller with humor. A phantasmagoria from the lives of animals in prison: cats, crows, rats, and even cockroaches – with witty dialogues, funny verses, and a perfect happy ending. <...> Berkovich masterfully, with a fine sense of rhythm, sprinkles real characters and true details of prison life into this bright, life-affirming reality at the necessary moments. <...> She enriches her daily experiences in prison with hope. But this is not a self-

delusion in the sense of "everything will be fine," but the daring declaration "I will not despair." A witty, free world full of joie de vivre, like something out of dreams and favorite cartoons, she transfers into her prison world – a true testimony of disobedience.

*Anna Narinskaya, for Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*