

Thoughts Prompted by the Golden Mask Festival: Chekhov or Not Chekhov?

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A scene from Anatoly Praudin's production of Anton Chekhov's "The Lady With the Lapdog," a production that has garnered controversy for adding elements to the famous Chekhov short story of the same name.

Apparently, Anatoly Praudin's production of Anton Chekhov's "[The Lady With the Lapdog](#)" for the [Bolshoi Drama Theater](#) of St. Petersburg has caused some people a good deal of consternation. The keepers of the flame of Chekhov's purity think they smell a rat.

You see, Praudin's production, performed as an entry in the [Golden Mask Festival](#) on Wednesday and Thursday at the [Meyerhold Center](#), is only in small part a dramatization of Chekhov's popular and resonant story. The play script, created by Praudin with his wife Natalya Skorokhod, also contains characters and scenes drawn from the short-story "The Tale of an Unknown Man" and the one-act vaudeville "[The Bear.](#)"

In fact, there may well be other sources, too, although nobody has identified them. Neither

the program nor the Golden Mask or Bolshoi Drama Theater web sites give us any hints. My attempt to reach the authors through the always-helpful Golden Mask offices ended in failure when the Bolshoi Drama Theater refused to provide telephone numbers.

Chekhov's story is a tight, immaculate and devastating piece of literature that follows the brief, unresolved relationship that flares up between Dmitry Gurov, a womanizing bank officer from Moscow, and the cute owner of a little white lapdog, Anna Von Diederitz, from the provincial city of S.

Praudin and Skorokhod's dramatization fills in the world around these two with a host of characters, including, among others, Gurov's put-upon wife and an elderly man who falls for her even though he is horrified by the notion of marital infidelity. A brief visit to the theater by Gurov and Anna is expanded into a full-blown performance apparently drawn from "Madame Butterfly," in which the lead characters are played, so to speak, by Gurov's wife and her suitor.

So, is this Chekhov?

Of course it is.



Praudin and Skorokhod delved into the world of Chekhov, his paradoxes, his cutting honesty, his lack of sentimentality, his willingness to stand tall before the desolation and wreckage that life can throw at us. Gurov thinks he'll just enjoy a brief and innocent fling. Anna is more conflicted about falling into an affair for the first time in her life, but she, too, thinks it is something that can eventually be shelved away in the dark forgetfulness of the past. Both are wrong, and that's what Chekhov goes after in his story.

What the team of Praudin and Skorokhod did was to blow this intimate portrait up into a large painting. Here we see the shrapnel and the collateral damage that is invariably incurred when an explosion of any kind takes place. We see the back sides of the story Chekhov told, but in a way that is entirely keeping with Chekhov's world view.

Someone may complain that there is too little of the title story in this production. I might even go along with that. I thought [Alexandra Kulikova](#) was superb as Anna, and I wanted to see more of her than there was room for in this adaptation. On the other hand, [Tatyana Aptikeyeva](#) was marvelous as Gurov's wife, a character who doesn't really exist in Chekhov's story. That was a fascinating discovery.

I think Praudin made a mistake by leaving the title of Chekhov's story as the title of his production. It promised something the director and his cast couldn't deliver. But that's nitpicking, isn't it?

"The Lady With the Lapdog" is up for a bundle of awards — best small form production, best director (Praudin), best actor ([Vasily Reutov](#)), best actress (Kulikova), and best designer (Alexander Orlov). In my book, any one of them has a good chance at winning — Chekhov or not,

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