The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

A Critic's Dubious Premiere in a Moscow Theater

By John Freedman

May 26, 2009



My wife, I think, is envious. She is an actress, a very good one. She has worked with many of the finest and most influential theater and film directors in Russia. But she has never worked for the extraordinary people at Moscow's Ten Theater (*ten* being Russian for "shadow"). After the Tuesday night premiere of their latest show, "The Epic of Lilikan," I have.

"John, do you realize the company you're keeping now?" my wife asked, half-smiling, half-scowling as we drove home afterwards. "Anatoly Vasilyev staged a show there. Tonino Guerra &mdash Fellini's own screenwriter, Fellini! &mdash staged a show there. Sergei Yursky created a show there. Actors there have included Nikolai Tsiskaridze, Nikolai Fomenko, Pyotr Fomenko, Kama Ginkas and Roman Viktyuk. And now you. You're one of the Mohicans."

"Well," I said, fighting back a grin and dusting a pesky fleck of something off the lapel of my

white sports coat, "I, uh, I don't know..."

"No, I mean it," she said with that surge of energy that has been known to make spectators in the last row of big theaters laugh uproariously and cry inconsolably. "These guys have won seven Golden Mask awards! Nobody in Russia has that many. Next year the Golden Mask is yours. Hands down."

"Yeah, well, only if they decide to give out awards for the person who performs worst best," I replied.

That is not a typo. You see, my job in "The Epic of Lilikan" was to perform as badly as I possibly could. Believe me, it's a task for which I have no limitations. You want it bad or you want it really bad? I can do both &mdash with a flourish.

Ilya Epelbaum
The author, and the voice of "The Epic of Lilikan," peering into the miniature Lilikan Theater of Drama, Opera and Ballet.

As conceived by the husband-and-wife creative team of Vyacheslav Ignatov and Maria Litvinova, the 35-minute puppet show of "The Epic of Lilikan" is performed in the Old Lilikan language. It's a dead language that, in order to be performed and understood in modern-day Moscow, requires translation and interpretation. Ignatov and Litvinova, under the guidance of Ilya Epelbaum and Maya Krasnopolskaya, the founders of the Ten Theater, set out in search of someone who could mangle the Russian language and still be understood. After rejecting a whole army of losers, they found the loser who suited them best &mdash me.

A month ago they lured me into a recording studio where they gave me a printed text I had never seen, filled with words I had never heard, let alone spoken. There was all kinds of stuff about Goddesses of Fate, Great Mother Tortoises, Trees of Life, suffering ancient warriors, travels to the underworld realm of gnomes, encounters with treacherous water sprites, battles with fuzzy evil monsters and the like. As befitting an epic text, the diction was highfalutin, to put it lightly.

Vyacheslav was almost humane as we began the session. I asked if I could read the text over once before speaking it into the microphone, and he said I could. But Maya, who was present because she had snatched me off the street like a kidnapper and whisked me off to the unknown and unmarked recording location, was not going for any of that civilized hokum. "Naw," I could hear her voice in the next room through my earphones, "just have him read it cold. It'll be better that way."

For those who haven't figured it out yet &mdash at that moment I hadn't &mdash "better," of course, meant "worse." That is what this fiendish group of theater artists was after: the subtle aesthetics of incompetence. A text spoken so clumsily in Russian that an audience couldn't help but feel giddy.

Do you know what it's like when the measure of your success is how grandly you fail? After Tuesday night's premiere, I do.

"There's no success like failure." Bob Dylan wrote that around 1965 in a song called "Love Minus Zero/No Limit." And he tries to deny that he's a prophet! Dylan clearly was writing about my future collaboration with the Ten Theater. Surely the treachery of these people out to exploit my linguistic gaucherie knew no limits.

Every time I slurred a word, every time I missed a stress or flubbed an intonation, every time I slammed down too hard on a soft consonant or mushed too lightly over a hard one, the audience loved it. Oh, they just thought that was so funny!

"The Epic of Lilikan" will normally be performed in a spectacular doll-size opera house that stands just five feet tall and three feet deep and seats just five spectators around its outside walls. For the premiere, however, some 100 people crammed into the Ten Theater's small stage to watch the performance on screen by video feed. My warbling voice boomed through the hall, and I cowered in the corner next to my proud wife, wondering how low a man will stoop to get his name to go down in history and up in lights. The answer, I guess, came during the curtain calls when Vyacheslav and Maria, beaming from the success of their show and the ovation that washed over them, called me to join them. I jumped up and ran.

There I was &mdash standing next to the talented, accomplished members of the show's creative team who were rightfully and justifiably accepting the tribute of impassioned applause for their extraordinary work. The designer Yekaterina Ivushkina did a magnificent job of recreating the ancient fairy-tale world of the Lilikan nation in the confines of a tiny puppet theater. The charming actors Maria and Ruslan Volfson were superb as they flawlessly manipulated the puppets and kept the scenery changing almost every second. Albena Dyulgerova's animated film clips were delightful and magical.

Vyacheslav and Maria are deserving of special note. They not only conceived an enchanting and humorous tale buoyed with wisdom. They not only kept their team on the ball throughout the creative and rehearsal process. They not only oversaw everything from the drawing of the first sketches to the recording of the last words &mdash they also, in their spare time, gave birth to a gorgeous baby girl whose two-month birthday coincided with Tuesday night's premiere. Now that's what I call being creative with a capital C.

Standing on stage, bowing up and down like a brainless bobble-head doll, I shared the plaudits with these fine artists and admirable people like the proverbial thief in the night. My contribution was my ineptitude. Apparently, that was good enough.

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