

The Plain, Hard Truth About Klim

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Pardon me if you have heard me tell this one about the director [Alexei Yankovsky](#). But Yankovsky himself loves to repeat the story. In fact, he did it again this weekend at a small gathering following the Moscow premiere of his production of "An Angry Play," a new work by the playwright and director known as [Klim](#). Why should I not indulge?

Some time ago, Yankovsky created a homemade book — the complete collected works of Klim. Naturally, there is just the single copy in existence. Yankovsky, changing the story only a little each time he tells it, likes to say he has willed this unique tome to his children and grandchildren. And that one day they will sell it through Sotheby's and with the proceeds will acquire Mediterranean beachfront properties, fancy sports cars, penthouses in Paris, vacations in the Seychelles, lost weekends in the casinos of Monaco, diamond jewelry and whatever all else their hearts desire.

The director always tells the story with a satisfied and knowing smile, as if to say, "You don't believe me? Just stick around." That is how much Alexei Yankovsky believes in Klim, and Yankovsky is not alone.

Another believer in Klim is [Pavel Rudnev](#), the art director of Moscow's Meyerhold Center. Rudnev is currently preparing an anthology of contemporary Russian drama that will include

one of Klim's nearly 30 plays. Not counting Yankovsky's handmade volume, of course, this will be the first-ever publication of a Klim play. More important, Rudnev repeatedly has made the stage at the Meyerhold available to Yankovsky's productions of Klim. Rudnev is always looking to import interesting out-of-town shows and, thanks to him, in recent years we have seen Klim's "Romeo and Juliet," "The Buchenwald Cabaret," "The Little Match Girl," and "An Angry Play."

Another devotee, if I may use such a word, is [Tatyana Bondareva](#). Tatyana is an actress from Riga who set herself the task of performing a series of Klim's plays under Yankovsky's direction. Seized by the power of Klim's words, Bondareva sought out Yankovsky in St. Petersburg several years ago and, despite the logistical and geographical difficulties, together they mounted "The Buchenwald Cabaret" in 2005. This, like the subsequent "Little Match Girl" (2007) and "An Angry Play" (2009), was a monologue for a single performer. The pieces are poetic, incisive and always provocative. "The Little Match Girl" runs for over an hour in almost total darkness, the only moments of physical illumination coming as the actress strikes one of 60 matches she has at her disposal on stage.

"An Angry Play," like many of Klim's works, draws its inspiration from the prose of Fyodor Dostoevsky. In this case, the springboard is the character [Ferdyshechenko](#) from "The Idiot." But Klim does anything but rehash other people's works. His "[Romeo and Juliet](#)" explores characters and events William Shakespeare left in the dark. "[The Little Match Girl](#)" — a harsh piece about an actress's love-hate relationship with the theater — has almost nothing to do with Hans Christian Andersen's tale. "An Angry Play" seems at times to be a composite of all of Dostoevsky's insulted and injured characters from "The Idiot," "The Brothers Karamazov" and "Notes from Underground" as seen through the prism of the Bible and a 21st-century sensibility.

The white-hot monologue begins as a challenge thrown at God. It develops into an insolent challenge tossed at the feet of men and women. It concludes with an almost merciless self-examination. The language is crisp, the thoughts penetrating. The overriding sensation of the play is of someone stripping away the conventions of human interaction, the courtesies and the caveats in order to stand up and speak the plain, hard truth. Klim is a truth-seeker and a truth-speaker. It is no coincidence that his characters, addressing an audience directly, often repeat several variations of a simple phrase — "Has that sunk in?" "Did you hear that?" "Do you understand?"

Klim, who currently lives in Kiev, is one of those awkward figures no age can do without — the major artist who struggles for recognition among his contemporaries. By "awkward," I mean awkward for history and his contemporaries. Klim himself is supremely focused and anything but awkward in his art. He may see himself primarily as a director. Having studied in the 1980s with Anatoly Efros and Anatoly Vasilyev — two of the greatest Russian directors of the second half of the 20th century — Klim went on to establish himself as an important avant-garde director with a fanatic cult following in Moscow in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He enjoyed major critical success with several productions at the Theater Na Liteinom in St. Petersburg in the mid- to late 1990s. But for whatever reasons, Klim rarely directs anymore. He now tends to speak primarily through his plays.

The plays Klim has written, mark my word, will be read, staged and studied for as long as anyone retains an interest in the age we inhabit. His voice is as distinct and unique as any. Period.

Klim is the quintessential antidote to cultural fashion. His art does not respond to, or even

acknowledge, the flavors of the day. I'm not casting aspersions on writers who do that. I know several who do so brilliantly. I am referring, rather, to what makes Klim stand apart. His art emerges from tradition and builds upon it. In his plays, he locks into polemical exchanges with God, the great writers, thinking people and — most of all — himself. By shunning the fool's-gold glitter of his times, Klim creates works that are timeless. There is something of the hermit and the prophet about him, although it would be a mistake to carry that image too far. He is a gentle, thoughtful, courteous man who inspires as much affection as awe in those he comes into contact with.

Watch out with his plays, though. They'll whack you over the head.

Yankovsky is right: Klim will make his grandchildren rich. The paradox is that the riches of Klim's art are already, ours and they are there for the taking. Sotheby's will only come around to it when everybody else has figured it out. Has that sunk in?

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