

A Bold New Take on an Old-Fashioned Classic

By [John Freedman](#)

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Viktoriya Verberg plays Leona, the voracious heroine whose life changes utterly after the death of her husband.

Genriyetta Yanovskaya over the years has directed several rare or semi-forgotten works on the stage of the Theater Yunogo Zritelya.

When she dramatized Mikhail Bulgakov's "The Heart of a Dog" in 1986, it was one of the first theatrical productions of that popular novella. Her various stagings of Jacques Offenbach ("Bluebeard"), Shelagh Delaney ("A Taste of Honey") and Agatha Christie ("Witness for the Prosecution") all traversed far and wide from the usual fare in contemporary theater.

Her latest — Fernand Crommelynck's "Hot and Cold, or, Mr. Dom's Idea," under the title of "Farewell, You, You, You" — takes on a piece that, to my knowledge, has never been done professionally in Moscow.

Crommelynck will always be famous in Russia for “The Magnanimous Cuckold,” which was produced by Vsevolod Meyerhold in the 1920s and Pyotr Fomenko in the 1990s. But while several of the Belgian’s plays have been done here over the decades, he is largely considered one of those classic writers whose works are rarely staged.

I can see why that is true in “Farewell, You, You, You.”

The play has an old-fashioned feel. It is both an intellectual piece, with symbolist strains, and a well-made play, with all the twists and turns neatly built into it. It also has a strident note that runs against the grain of the contemporary sensibility, which prefers a heavy dose of nonchalance in its irony.

“Farewell,” especially under Yanovskaya’s direction, comes at us like a downbound train.

Leona (Viktoria Verberg) is a woman of voracious appetites. Besides her husband, she juggles several lovers in her two hands while keeping her impressionable and sex-starved young female servant Alix (Natalya Moteva) on constant tenterhooks. Moreover, when her husband dies and Leona learns he had a mistress all along, she takes it on herself to save and rearrange the young woman’s crumbling life.

Were Leona not so willing to be devilish, there might be something of the divine in her, at least in her compulsion to be in charge of absolutely everything that comes into her view.

Yanovskaya created a show that, despite its three-hour running time, is quick, bold and rhythmic. It could easily be a knockabout farce, with lovers entering and exiting four different doors. In fact, that is the predominant tone of the first act. This is achieved through the pulsing music, the snappy delivery of lines, quick light changes and the superb tongue-in-cheek performance by Moteva, who melts deliciously when any foreign body, male or female, comes close to hers.

The death of Leona’s husband in the second act changes this, although not for reasons you may expect. We never see Mr. Dom, nor hear anything from him except that he “has an idea” — one he never expresses before expiring.

As such we don’t care about him in the least. What does reach us is the consternation that overcomes Leona.

This is no moral revelation. Far from it. It is deeper and more disturbing than that.

What emerges after Dom’s death is the sensation that Leona knew nothing about the man she spent her life with. What, then, can she know about her own life? She thought she understood love best of all. But she was mistaken.

Dom’s young lover Felie (Tatyana Rybinets) tells so convincingly of his tenderness that Leona is dumbfounded. And when this waif insists that she will lie down in her lover’s grave, the only thing Leona can do to avert such a disaster is to convince her own favorite lover Odilon (Ilya Sozykin) to distract the girl by seducing her.

Naturally, he succeeds in the blink of an eye. As such, Leona not only loses a husband she never knew, she now loses a lover she thought she wanted.

Crommelynck raised all of this to the status of existential angst, and Yanovskaya followed him there. The second half of this show holds a tight focus on Verberg's Leona, a woman who always thought she had the secrets of life locked up.

"He wasn't a great man. I made that up," Leona says of Dom. "I thought it would be funny."

The joke is on her, though. Only after nothing can be changed does she realize that everything is slipping through her fingers.

Designer Sergei Barkhin created an interior that, rather like Leona's life, looks deceptively glamorous at first blush, but which is revealed to be worn and tattered upon closer inspection.

"Farewell, You, You, You" (Proshchai, Ty, Ty, Ty) plays Nov. 6, 13 and 28 at 7 p.m. at the Theater Yunogo Zritelya, located at 10 Mamonovsky Pereulok. Metro Tverskaya, Mayakovskaya. Tel. 699-5360, www.moscowtyz.ru. Running time: 3 hours.

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