

Mismatched Lovers Give Play a 'Killer' Edge

By [John Freedman](#)

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Andrei and Oksana, played by Yevgeny Volotsky and Natalya Zlatova, get together after he agrees to kill someone. **Yelena Lapina**

It is disconcerting at first. We are used to seeing contemporary plays like “Killer” performed in a small black box — by which I mean the grungy, welcoming space at Teatr.doc.

The famous White Room at the Theater Yunogo Zritelya has hosted some of the most bracing, cutting-edge theater of the last few decades. But productions there have invariably been drawn from the Russian classics — Dostoevsky, Pushkin and Gogol specifically.

Kama Ginkas made the White Room famous with his productions of “We Play ‘Crime,’” “K.I. from ‘Crime,’” and “Pushkin: Duel: Death.” In recent seasons this space has more often been turned over to young directors, although the writers they have staged have come exclusively from the 19th century.

At least that was true until Alexander Molchanov's new "Killer" came along.

"Killer" was directed by a young man from St. Petersburg who goes by two names. As a playwright who particular success a few years back with a piece called "Five Twenty-Five" — at Teatr.doc, incidentally — he is known as Danila Privalov. As a director, who works with admirable success in several provincial cities, he goes by the name Dmitry Yegorov.

All of that said, Molchanov actually provided Yegorov with a deceptive play.

"Killer" starts out showing many of the attributes of what is known these days as "new Russian drama." In this case a definition of that can be boiled down to a few young, disaffected anti-heroes pushing the boundaries of social norms.

Andrei (Yevgeny Volotsky) and Oksana (Natalya Zlatova) are students thrown together by fate.

Andrei owes a chunk of money to Oksana, and their tough-guy friend Seka (Alexei Alexeyev) offers him a way out of the predicament. If he'll go kill a guy who owes Seka 50,000, Seka says nobody will bring up Andrei's debt of 12,000.

Just to avoid any funny business, Seka sends Oksana along for the ride and the two end up going through more of an emotional roller coaster than either could have imagined.

Appropriately enough for this theater space, Molchanov begins his play with a deeply introspective moment in a Dostoevskian vein. Andrei rails at the notion that he must be so obsequious when praying to God. Surely he and God are equals?

While that question remains without answer, what quickly becomes clear is that Andrei and Oksana are anything but equal. She is openly scornful of this guy who fits her model of a perfect nerd and fool.

That doesn't stop Andrei from falling for this cute girl who is stuck with him for a day or two against her will. And he comes up with a plan that, if it works, will take care of everything — his debt, his promise to Seka and his desire to make Oksana his.

He'll go home and tell his mother (Maria Ovchinnikova) that he's getting married and she's sure to give him the money he needs.

And this is only the beginning of the twists and turns that buffet the unlikely couple.

Molchanov wrote the piece as much like a short story as a play. The characters narrate their own stories, frequently revealing their inner thoughts to us, but not to others. This allows events to unfold quickly, even as nothing happens on stage — two or three characters may sit motionlessly while the narrative careens ahead at full speed.

This highly literary device not only distances "Killer" from the so-called "new drama," which tends to scorn literature, it heightens the tale's irony. Two people staring at each other across the distance of a meter usually are thinking very different things. Rarely do their perceptions of each other come even close to matching.

As such, what begins as a probing, harsh tale eventually morphs into something cozier and

maybe even sentimental. In that, “Killer” is unlike the usual fare at Theater Yunogo Zritelya and Teatr.doc alike.

Volotsky and Zlatova as mismatched lovers are funny and touching. Volotsky’s Andrei is sensitive, awkward and boldly ambitious. Zlatova’s Oksana, for all of her bluster and sarcasm, reveals a tad of vulnerability when a hint of tenderness enters her life.

The set by Femistokl Atmadzas consists of a bunch of cheap box springs that can be moved around the stage to make beds, benches, tables or anything else that is needed at the moment.

“Killer” probably delivers a little less than it promises with its Dostoevskian/new drama opening. But it is a pleasure to watch two endearing young people make a mess out of a potential romantic encounter.

“Killer” (Ubiitsa) plays Dec. 21 at 7 p.m. at Theater Yunogo Zritelya, located at 10 Mamonovsky Pereulok. Metro Pushkinskaya. Tel. 699-5360, www.moscowtyz.ru. Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes.

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