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'Caligula,' Story of a Tyrant Who Goes Nowhere

By John Freedman

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Yevgeny Mironov plays the cruel Roman emperor Caligula and Maria Mironova his wife Caesonia in Camus' play. **Marius Nekrosius**

Theater is cursed — sometimes blessed — to be an art of the present moment.

Rarely have I seen that basic law hold truer than in Eimuntas Nekrosius' production of Albert Camus' "Caligula" for the Theater of Nations.

The great Lithuanian director took this play about the nature of the relationship between dictators and the people who make them possible — and made it seem as though it has almost nothing to do with us.

On one hand, we have no right to complain that when Nekrosius began rehearsing this play no one knew of the dictator-inspired conflagrations that would flare up from North Korea to Belarus and North Africa by the time his production would open.

On the other hand, we can't help it that we spectators do have that privilege — if that's what it is — as we watch his nearly four-hour theater piece unfold.

Despite its length, this production is given a small reading. Designer Marius Nekrosius set it in a kind of dead-end street — as if some bums were holed up in an abandoned urban corner where everything, including a makeshift Arch of Triumph, is made of scraps of corrugated roofing.

There is a sense that these people rarely venture far beyond the perimeter of the territory, marked by a doghouse, and that no one else ever comes here.

As Caligula, Yevgeny Mironov cuts an aimless picture. He repeatedly commands his slave Helicon (Igor Gordin) to bring him the moon, but it is never certain what thoughts give rise to his demand.

Is he crazy? A dreamer?

If it is the former, what is the point of the play? Madness as a justification for behavior may be a diagnosis, but not a dramatic option. One can study madness and its mechanisms in art, as has often been done well, but using it to explain away behavior is a dramatic dead-end.

Dreamer, then. Is this Caligula a dreamer? If so, this is where Nekrosius' "Caligula" runs up against the brick wall of political and historical reality.

Of late, I and hundreds of millions have been glued to our television sets as Kim Jong-il, Alexander Lukashenko, Hosni Mubarak, Moammar Gadhafi and others flail to impose their will on the world, and if there is one thing they are not, it is dreamers.

The whole notion of the dreamy, pensive dictator is bogus, plain and simple.

OK, so that's not it. How about evil and its twin — banality?

Camus seems to give a nod in this direction by having Caligula's subjects constantly refer to him as Gai, Caligula's real name. But the more we chase down justifications for Nekrosius' reading of Camus' play, the further we get from the work itself.

And there is no getting around it: This is the most static, least inventive production I have ever seen from this director who is world renowned for his bold inventiveness.

True, actors often race from corner to corner of the stage. The poet Scipio (Yevgeny Tkachuk), whose hatred for Caligula stems from the fact that Caligula murdered his father, frequently goose-steps from wing to wing without uttering a word. Others, plotting to assassinate Caligula for his crimes, play leapfrog. Caligula runs in and out of the arch standing at stage center, or scales its walls to take up positions looking down on all.

None of this masks the fact that virtually nothing changes in the course of this performance. The Patricians eternally plot to kill Caligula, who continually defies them by calling their bluff and thwarting their plans.

At the center is Mironov's inert Caligula. Soft-spoken and a little incredulous, he appears to

kill for no other reason than no one bothers to stop him.

A few actors do stand out.

Maria Mironova plays Caligula's wife Caesonia as a slightly unbalanced and highly compelling Cassandra figure who sees danger ahead. Yelena Gorina beautifully performs the silent, spectral role of Drusilla, Caligula's beloved sister who dies before the play's action occurs.

Alexei Devotchenko infuses the role of Cherea, the only honest person around Caligula, with a tough, even humorous cynicism.

Overall, though, this "Caligula" looks false and out-of-touch.

Maybe Nekrosius can't be faulted for not being a prophet, but neither can we leave our awareness of current events at the coat rack when entering the theater.

In the end, the biggest problem with "Caligula" is that it goes nowhere and says little while taking four hours to do that.

"Caligula," a production of the Theater of Nations, plays March 29 and 30, April 11 and 12 at 7 p.m. at the Mossoviet Theater, located at 16 Bolshaya Sadovaya Ulitsa. Metro Mayakovskaya. Tel. 629-3739, www.theatreofnations.ru. Running time: 3 hours, 45 minutes.

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