

Dostoevsky's Prose Reappears on Moscow Stage

By [John Freedman](#)

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The “otherworldliness” of Lysov’s staging of “A Gentle Creature” is emphasized through Shepelyov’s lighting. **Natalya Cheban**

It has been said often, but it bears repeating — Fyodor Dostoevsky never wrote a play, but for more than 100 years his works have remained among the most popular on Russian stages.

I own a book called “Dostoevsky and Theater.” It was published in 1983 and it discusses 200 dramatizations of Dostoevsky’s novels and stories that were mounted throughout the world after 1846. Yes, even at that early date, before Dostoevsky wrote any of his major works, the theater world recognized the dramatic quality of his prose.

I suspect that a book about all the Dostoevsky dramatizations done since 1983 would be even fatter than “Dostoevsky and Theater.” His short story “A Gentle Creature” has been staged in Moscow twice in the last year — first by Irina Keruchenko at the Theater Yunogo Zritelya and now by Igor Lysov at the School of Dramatic Art.

Lysov essentially used the story as a pretext for his stylish, affecting production. Dostoevsky wrote the piece from the point of view of a man whose wife has just died, but here the exposition of the situation that brought this man and woman together, and then cast them asunder, is narrated by Viktoria Kostyukhina, who plays the wife. More importantly, Lysov cut away large chunks of text and replaced them with expressive silent scenes performed to music played live by a quartet of musicians.

The changes and interpretation that the director brought to the work give it a crystal clarity that is not a usual component in Dostoevsky.

Dostoevsky is famous for his withering, clinical insight into human behavior, but he was a marvelously obtuse and purposefully inelegant writer. In Lysov's reading, the unfortunate man and woman who found themselves paired in an uneven marriage emerge as defenseless, if not innocent, victims of the world they inhabit. Dostoevsky tends to heap blame on the husband in his story; Lysov finds room to sympathize with both husband and wife.

That is not to say that the director let sentimentality creep into his production. On the contrary, this version of "A Gentle Creature" remains a harsh tale about an unforgiving world.

Kostyukhina's Wife is a lonely, hungry teenager with no one and no way in the world. She met her future husband (Alexei Kobychiev), a relatively gloomy type, by one day entering the pawnshop where he earns his living.

This is not so much a love story as it is a tale of lonely hearts seeking warmth. They find it briefly and unexpectedly, and quickly leap into marriage. Never, however, does their union become more than a bad haven from the storms of their own inferiority complexes.

The husband was once kicked out of his army regiment for refusing to take part in a duel. It was a stupid incident, in which he believed he exhibited the greater bravery by refusing to buckle under the pressure of his peers. Public opinion, however, took a different view: He was forever branded as a coward.

The wife — the gentle one of the title — is incapable of escaping the shame of her lowly place in society.

Lysov creates several beautiful scenes that have the effect of stopping the story in place and providing detailed impressions of the characters' emotional states.

Half-danced, half-pantomimed, these silent scenes are acted to the accompaniment of the quartet that performs penetrating variations on the melodies of songs by Yury Shevchuk. They include the first moment when the couple achieves physical intimacy, the first time she appears to betray him, a moment of frustration when she threatens to kill him, and a lovely, funny and sad scene depicting the friction that money brought to their marriage.

Money, after all, was just one more implement of power that the wife felt her husband used against her.

The dances or pantomimes are performed by the actors in halting, repetitive movements, almost as though they might be figments of someone's imagination or memory. Indeed, this must be true, since the entire story refers to events that took place in the past. She, now, is

dead, and he is left to live with the memory of what was and thoughts of what might have been.

Designer Izabella Kozinskaya devised a set of small items — chairs, tables, pictures on the wall — which are dwarfed by the large white hall in which the performance is held. The lighting by Andrei Shepelyov employs whites, yellows, reds and shadows to accentuate the otherworldliness of this moving production.

"A Gentle Creature" (Krotkaya) plays Sun. and Tues. at 8 p.m. at the School of Dramatic Art, located at 19/27 Sretenka Ulitsa. Metro Sukharevskaya. Tel. 632-9344, www.sdart.ru. Running time: 1 hour, 25 minutes.

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