

Bunin Love Stories Get Grand Guignol Treatment

By [John Freedman](#)

April 06, 2011



Director Dmitry Krymov shows the dark reality of love in his inventive new production at the Meyerhold Center. **Natalya Cheban**

Dmitry Krymov is arguably the most critically acclaimed Russian director of the last half-decade. But is that really what he is, a director?

“Katya, Sonya, Polya, Galya, Vera, Olya, Tanya,” Krymov’s new production based on a cycle of Ivan Bunin stories called “Dark Alleys,” had me pondering this question long after I left the theater.

Krymov is a chameleon of a theater artist. If I think back over the major productions he has created for the School of Dramatic Art — “The Demon: A View From Above,” “The Cow,” “Opus No. 7,” “Tararabumbia” and now “Katya, Sonya” — they come at me from different directions at different speeds. All are unified in their inventiveness, their uncovered use of the tricks of the trade — such as painting, sculpture, light, space and makeup — but the end

results are quite diverse.

The elegant, grandiose procession of “Tararabumbia” is diametrically opposed to the marvelously chaotic and intimate “Demon.” The childlike “Cow” is unlike the exquisite complexity of “Opus No. 7.”

“Katya, Sonya” also differs from Krymov’s previous shows because it was created for a different space, the hall at the Meyerhold Center. The stages Krymov uses at the School of Dramatic Art are unique to that theater alone. The Meyerhold stage is a generic modern black box, and Krymov uses its every advantage to the fullest.

Designer Maria Tregubova encircled the stage with a daunting battery of theatrical spotlights, all aimed at the 11 actors. The floor around the stage is covered in a jungle of electrical wires that occasionally trip actors up.

The action is in progress as the spectators enter. Seven men sit on chairs having slightly grotesque faces painted on by makeup artists. Three men silently saw a woman’s body in half, before one lights a fuse that burns to the first row of seats and gives the impression, with the help of lighting, wind machines and cellophane, of setting the theater on fire.

These early moments are astonishing in their theatricality and anti-traditionalism. Spectators come to the theater to see Ivan Bunin, the great lyrical prose writer. What they get is Grand Guignol mixed with circus and, perhaps, maybe a bit of street theater.

The first man to speak (Arkady Kirichenko) rattles off a monologue so speedily that the only sense we make of it is his tense frustration. He is followed by a coy streetwalker (Anna Sinyakina) who punches her way out of a box before engaging in an odd conversation with an invisible customer. She speaks to him teasingly as the words of his responses are projected on a screen. The two “speakers” constantly overlap, making it difficult for us to follow everything being said.

If it isn’t clear by now that Krymov is shaking Bunin upside down and inside out, there is more to come.

The woman severed at the waist (Maria Smolnikova) drags her torso to her legs, attaches herself to them and dances with a beau (Maxim Maminov) before he magically makes her disappear altogether. Another woman trapped in a box (Varvara Nazarova) crawls over the heads of the unresponsive men and lands in the arms of her beloved (Mikhail Umanets), who embraces her until he kills her and puts her back in the box.

“Katya, Sonya” is a gripping, funny, challenging, off-putting and, paradoxically enough, often beautiful interpretation of Bunin’s famous stories about love. Love, Krymov tells us, is anything but a sweet walk in the park. And, by extension he suggests, men are anything but romantic. They may, in fact, be monsters.

One man (Valery Garkalin) reminisces about a romantic tryst with the help of a puppet theater on wheels. In a moment of frustration he flings the puppet of his sweetheart and she careens off the puppet theater box onto the floor.

Whatever lyricism an audience expected to find in these stories is dispensed with once and for

all in the final scene of a bookish tour guide (Natalya Gorchakova) leading a motley group of schoolboys through a museum of Bunin's literature — a space covered with the gruesome remains of bodies and love affairs.

Krymov in "Katya, Sonya" deconstructs Bunin, literature, love and theater in one fell swoop, creating one of his strongest productions yet. It looks nothing like anything anyone else is doing. It doesn't look like what he has done in the past. But it is the product of a director who is redefining what it means to be a director.

"Katya, Sonya, Polya, Galya, Vera, Olya, Tanya," a production of the School of Dramatic Art, plays April 25 and 26 at 8 p.m. at the Meyerhold Center, located at 23 Novoslobodskaya Ulitsa. Metro Mendeleyevskaya. Tel. 632-9344, www.sdart.ru. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/04/06/bunin-love-stories-get-grand-guignol-treatment-a6165>