

Hendrixs, Joplins and Morrisons Light This Fire

By [John Freedman](#)

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Marakulina is one of two Janis Joplins in “Light My Fire,” a fantasy on the theme of artists bucking society.

One of the great things about art is that it embraces the impossible. The latest proof of that for me is Teatr.doc’s “Light My Fire,” written by Sasha Denisova and directed by Yury Muravitsky.

There is simply no way that a Russian production purporting to tell the stories of Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix should work.

Let me reveal my prejudices: I went to this show shaking and trembling in anticipation of an unbearable two hours. Within moments my snobbery had been knocked off its self-erected pedestal. By the third of this production’s two dozen brief scenes I was enthralled.

“Light My Fire” is an innovative, moving performance that manages to spoof and revere its

characters simultaneously. But that is only the beginning. It merges cultures and travels through warps in time, making the past present and vice versa.

The genius in the telling of this tale is that no one seeks to present anything even vaguely resembling a “real” picture of these famous musicians, their short lives and their early deaths. All are offered up as mythological emblems of outcasts, rebellious youths and frustrated talents. These are people — not legends — who live in a society that does not understand them, and which they do not accept.

The cleverest twist is that each musician is, in some way, Russian. They reminisce about performing in various Moscow theaters, about traveling to the Volga or about growing up in Vologda. They are interviewed by Russian TV personalities on Russian TV (with footage of American talk show host Dick Cavett projected on the wall). The implied setting is often a Russian school room — the characters carry around the kinds of notebooks that Russian school kids do their lessons in.

At the same time, cultural and historical references are pulled in from all over — Hurricane Katrina stands alongside the movies of Oliver Stone. Jimi Hendrix is from Uzbekistan.

One scene, especially, confounds all limits of time and space. The faculty at the UCLA film school critiques a student film made by Jim Morrison. But as the experts pontificate, it becomes clear that this is primarily a parody of the public discussions that routinely take place at Teatr.doc itself. If you know the usual suspects at Teatr.doc — Mikhail Ugarov, Olga Mikhailova, Maksym Kurochkin and others — you will recognize them here as clearly as Jimi, Jim or Janis.

You get the picture. “Light My Fire” is what a Jewish scholar might call a midrash. It is a fantasy on the theme of artists bucking a society that bucks them. It is a universal story, and it is the universality that this company holds to the forefront at every moment.

Six actors share the roles of the three musicians, their families, their colleagues and band members. This lends a fluidity to the performance that repeatedly discourages us from seeing anything strictly biographical in what is portrayed. Yet many famous incidents are familiar — Jim arrested on charges of indecent exposure (“I just wanted to help people,” he tells a furious policeman over and over); Janis agonizing about what she perceives to be her lack of beauty; Jimi playing an incendiary “Star Spangled Banner” at Woodstock.

Muravitsky’s use of music is clever and convincing.

There is a hilarious scene of Jim Morrison (Ilyas Tamayev) disappearing during a performance of “Light My Fire,” while lead guitarist Robbie Krieger (Alexei Yudnikov), keyboardist Ray Manzarek (Talgat Batalov) and drummer John Densmore (Mikhail Yefimov) soldier on hoping against hope that the singer returns for the final verse.

Janis (Arina Marakulina) becomes locked in a comic battle with her lead guitarist while performing “Summertime.” He constantly wants to overwhelm her with volume and notes; she repeatedly tries to outwit and outshout him.

In both cases the actors don’t pretend to play music so much as they perform skits about what

it might be like to play this music. It's a subtle but crucial difference that keeps intact this show's balancing act between reality and make-believe.

The performance's prologue immediately reveals Muravitsky's knowledge and understanding of his topic. The entire cast, including the enigmatic Anna Yegorova, at moments a dead ringer for Janis, bounces out on stage to do a wild hippie dance to a recording of Jim Morrison singing a song not by The Doors, but by another Morrison — Van Morrison's proto-punk classic "Gloria."

From this sleight of hand — which Morrison is which? — "Light My Fire" proceeds to play tricks and throw surprises at us for two glorious hours.

"Light My Fire" (Zazhgi moi ogon) plays June 11, 25 and 29 at 8 p.m. at Teatr.doc, located at 11/13 Tryokprudny Pereulok, Bldg. 1. Metro Pushkinskaya. Tel. +7 (909) 698-7458, www.teatrdoc.ru. Running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes.

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