

Gorky's 'The Lower Depths'

By [John Freedman](#)

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One of the uglier parts of being a critic is when you are brought face to face with your prejudices. Most of the time you do a good job hiding them, minimizing them, avoiding them or just plain ignoring them. But every once in awhile the escape routes are closed.

Just such a moment came upon me yesterday in Nitra, Slovakia, where I am attending the 20th anniversary running of the International Theater Festival Divadelna Nitra. It was the second day of the six-day event and there was my bugaboo come home to haunt me: Maxim Gorky.

I really hate Maxim Gorky. I think he was probably a very interesting and talented man. Some very fine people counted him among their best and most trusted friends — Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov among them. Now you would think that any friend of those guys would be a friend of mine. Life isn't that easy, however.

I came on the scene a few years late to meet Gorky in person. He died in 1936. I wasn't born for another 18 years. Not much of a difference, I guess, but it was enough to mean that the only way I could ever commune with the Great Proletarian Writer was through his

literature. I never learned how to do that and I long ago lost the desire to try.

Divadelna Nitra presented the Vilnius City Theater's production of Gorky's classic play, "The Lower Depths," as directed by Oskaras Korsunovas. Now, Korsunovas is the most respected director to come out of Lithuania in the last 15 years. He has established an international reputation staging contemporary plays and classics in a bold, ultra modern style. He is a star in Moscow, where his shows have performed on tour many times.

I say this because when I saw I was in line to attend a production of "The Lower Depths," Gorky's portrait of a bunch of Russian skid row dwellers, I first cringed and then I heaved a sigh of relief. If Korsunovas is doing it, I thought, it's got to be of interest.

The festival booklet gave me reason for hope. The English-language blurb describing the production pondered the question of whether this show referenced a "press conference or the Last Supper?" Now, that sounds original, doesn't it?

Sure enough, Korsunovas' actors sat in a row at a long table, looking like horribly rumped versions of Christ's disciples. They glowered at the spectators taking their seats in the hall. It didn't take much imagination to figure that most of them — the characters, now, not the actors — had been drinking. A ticker on the back wall delivered famous bombastic quotes from the play the way CNN informs us of the latest doomsday news — "Talent is belief in oneself," "Man lives hoping for the best future," and so on. On one wall a noisy slide projector flashed up a running series of bucolic landscapes — the kinds of pictures that make you want to toss everything up right now and head for the Maldives or the Mediterranean Sea.

I should have taken that as a hint, but I didn't. I remained to see the actors smash plates, drink vodka with reluctant audience members, toss crackers at us, dance, shout, fight, harangue us and each other and, oh, did I say drink vodka?

If I'm sounding sarcastic it's my hatred of Gorky. The actors in this show, in fact, were extremely good. They masterfully teetered on the fine, sharp edge separating the charming from the repulsive. But there's nothing you can do with Gorky. He weighs a ton, no matter how you play him.

If Chekhov was quicksilver and Tolstoy was gold, Gorky was just plain lead. Gorky had the great misfortune of being smart enough to see and understand the greatness and the innovation of Chekhov and Tolstoy. He imitated both and came out on the short end of the stick every time.

Chekhov wrote about subtle, fragile, paradoxical people inexorably succumbing to the killing tedium of the world around them. Gorky wrote about people who were bored and boring.

Tolstoy had the hubris to imagine he had the right not only to challenge God, but to stand tall and look down at the world from God's point of view. Tolstoy was a great thinker and philosopher, flawed and controversial, perhaps, but his was a mind and a conscience that burned with a holy fire. Gorky moralized.

Surely there's someone out there howling that I am ignorant and a boor to boot. Many of my Russian friends are appalled at my insensitivity. In their defense and as proof of my guilt, they

explain how much they love Gorky even though, by all rights, they should hate him. His plays and novels were shoved down their throats in school, they say, but now they see the light — they see what a fine writer he was.

Entirely unconvinced, I always tell them this is merely proof of their good conscience and the lasting trauma Gorky has done them. You see, they feel guilt for hating Gorky and so convince themselves that they love him. I feel no such guilt. I am ready to stand up and sling mud at the old codger any old time.

So there I was yesterday at Korsunovas' production of "The Lower Depths." I arrived at the theater with all my professional weaponry at hand — my willingness to be open-minded, my readiness to ignore my prejudices, my conviction that every piece of art deserves to be understood on its own terms.

And then the Gorky goop just started piling up. All those whining pseudo-intellectuals-masquerading-as-lowlifers knocking back vodka and swaggering about as they spat out banalities like "Man! It has a proud ring!"

Spare me, please!

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