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Ovation for Dmitry Bykov, Not So Much for Play

By John Freedman

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Irina Alfyorova and Albert Filozov, right, play a couple that finds a bear has suddenly appeared in their bath. **Yulia Budko**

The only other time I have seen it happen was when Alexander Solzhenitsyn entered the hall at the Maly Theater prior to the opening curtain of his play "The Feast of Victors" in 1995: The audience burst into applause at the sight of the great man.

That is just what happened last week when Dmitry Bykov walked into the packed hall at the Contemporary Play School for the first performance of his play "The Bear." A bright, lively, I would even say affectionate, wave of applause rolled through the house as people realized that they were in the company of their hero of the moment.

Solzhenitsyn and Bykov. I'm not making this comparison up, nor am I being ironic in the slightest. It's a fascinating phenomenon. I have attended hundreds of play openings with authors in the house over the last two decades. I have seen people murmur at the sight of Tom

Stoppard. But I have only seen Solzhenitsyn and Bykov honored with ovations before the performance began.

I could be ironic, even sarcastic, here, and add that there was a certain logic to this, since in both cases the applause made more sense beforehand than afterward. But let me hold off on that and stay serious for a moment.

Bykov is a protean figure who has established his star status with opinionated journalism, serious literary and film criticism, witty television appearances, award-winning novels and more. All of this gives reason for the public's affection for the writer, but none of it explains it.

The true source of Bykov's celebrity is the ongoing Poet and Citizen satirical project he has worked on with the actor Mikhail Yefremov. It began on the Dozhd television channel, but moved to the Internet when the channel took umbrage either at the content or the form of Bykov's satires. They are based on the characters and language of classical Russian poetry, but they stick pins in the gassy balloons holding many Russian political figures aloft, including President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

A video called "The Arab Variant" posted on YouTube in late February has garnered over 680,000 views.

These two-minute satires are essentially everything that "The Bear" is not, at least in the production by Iosif Raikhelgauz. Economy, rhythm, pungency, clarity of thought and daring — all words describing Bykov's poetry — have virtually nothing to do with the performance of "The Bear." This lumbering, lethargic piece leans on more pop cliches than an MTV "newscast."

Bykov tells the story of a family that learns one day that a bear has spontaneously combusted into life in their bathtub. They first consider getting rid of it, but that quickly proves impossible. The bear is declared a state monument, the man of the house is honored with a position in the Academy of Sciences, his daughter becomes a pop star, his wife, after doing the A-list party circuit, apparently joins the police department, and the two-headed figure of Putin-Medvedev drops by to declare that this miracle was made possible "thanks to the return of freedom in our country."

The problem is that the story is patently predictable. The final moments, in which Alexei Tregubov's set design tosses out a big surprise, provide a legitimately chilling moment, but this comes three hours too late. Almost everything else — the cute though annoying FSB agents, the TV mogul who gets caught stealing his company's profits and an eager but stupid pack of journalists — is all conceived and executed on a ho-hum level.

Raikhelgauz runs the entire production at the theatrical equivalent of a plodding 30 kilometers an hour, rarely, if ever, speeding up, slowing down, or making turns. The actors seem almost uninterested in what they are doing. Lines are tossed off lazily, punch lines are swallowed, scenes rarely seem to flow one into the next, but rather attempt to start the show up all over again from scratch each time.

It is not a compelling sight.

Bykov, to his credit, clearly had a fine time watching the show unfold. He wore a big, happy grin that almost never left his face. Maybe he knew something that I didn't. Perhaps he was looking past the empirical evidence in front of him and was seeing the play he wanted to see in his head.

For my part, I came home, fired up my computer and watched "The Arab Variant" for the umpteenth time. Now that is wit, literature and politics on the highest level.

"The Bear" (Medved) plays Oct. 27, Nov. 4, 12 and 25 at 7 p.m. at the Contemporary Play School, located at 29/14 Neglinnaya Ulitsa. Metro Trubnaya. Tel. 694-0756. www.neglinka29.ru. Running time: 3 hours, 5 minutes.

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