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Good Start for Karbauskis at Mayakovsky Theater

By John Freedman

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Turgenev's drama focuses on Natalya, a woman who is competing with her ward for the attention of a man. **Denis Zhulin**

Alexander Ogaryov's production of "A Month in the Country" at the Mayakovsky Theater is something of a beginning. It is the first new show created by the company since Mindaugas Karbauskis was appointed artistic director late last season. The theater has been through difficult times in recent decades, slipping from its status as one of Moscow's most important houses in the 1970s and '80s to the position of a venue you could safely ignore if you had better things to do.

Ogaryov's rendition of Turgenev is an about-face for the theater. It is a big, beautiful, bold production that demands your attention and offers audiences the opportunity to enjoy performances by stars and debutantes alike. The costumes and design by Tatyana Vidanova, as well as the lighting by Taras Mikhalevsky, are richly imaginative. Ogaryov's direction is audacious at every turn — actors enter and leave the stage by flying, a "pond" downstage

swallows actors up, and oversized props such as kites and trunks give the proceedings the sensation of a dream.

I will say that in this early stage of the run (I attended the first night) one senses that the show is so big it has not yet fully come together. As I saw it, it worked best in parts — individual scenes were gorgeous or moving or hilarious. They didn't always cohere to one another and, as a result, the story's central arc did not always flow smoothly.

This is a test every new show faces. Shows are not born full-fledged on opening night. They are like fawns struggling to stand on their feet. Some do it quickly, others more slowly. Some never make it because predators are lurking in the shadows. This process is exaggerated in "A Month in the Country" because Ogaryov's ambition is so great.

Time will tell how well the show copes with its challenges, but I was impressed by its strengths.

Ogaryov did not so much illustrate the specific loves, jealousies, generosities, hopes and whims of a constellation of people living on an estate in the Russian countryside, as he did craft an essay about how these qualities exist dormant, but fully formed, in all people at all times.

Turgenev's central conflict revolves around Natalya Petrovna, a woman of 29 who finds herself in competition with her 17-year-old ward for the attention of a student who is the girl's tutor. Always present in the margins is Rakitin, an aimless man of 30 who is hopelessly in love with Natalya.

Perhaps as a nod to the fact that 60 today is the new 40, age was thrown out of the equation at the Mayakovsky. The aspirations and sufferings of the characters here are spread out over a vast array of ages.

Yevgenia Simonova, a leading actress at the Mayakovsky since the 1970s, plays Natalya as a woman who is so steeped in frustration that she has grown used to it and has even turned it to her advantage. It allows her to sharpen her sense of humor and irony. She pays no attention to her husband and does her best to tolerate Rakitin (Alexander Andriyenko) because, well, because what else can she do? This is her life, one of banter, flutter and harmless make believe.

It is a stunning revelation Natalya makes when she realizes that the imposing, muscle-bound tutor Alexei (Alexei Fateyev) may be capable of loving her rather than her ward Verochka. This is a fierce moral test for a woman who suddenly grasps that this may be her last chance in life for a wild, youthful fling; for a few moments, at least, of genuine, lacerating human experience. It is not a test she passes well, which provides many with plenty of food for thought and agony.

Making her debut in a major role at the Mayakovsky, Polina Lazareva puts a tough, modern twist on the role of Verochka. This young woman is no one's fool and no one's puppet. She is capable of strong feelings and profound naivete, but she is the kind of person to turn her back and walk away from happiness without an inkling of doubt if that's what life requires.

Aside from the central figures, Ogaryov gave his show added volume by enhancing the presence of some secondary characters. This was especially successful in the case of the servant girl Katya (Darya Khoroshilova), a well-read, French-speaking lass who constantly observes the goings-on with interest and affection.

"A Month in the Country" plays Sunday, then Dec. 11, 18 and 27, at 7 p.m. at the Mayakovsky Theater, located at 19/13 Bolshaya Nikitskaya Ulitsa. Metro Arbatskaya. Tel. 690-4658, 690-6241. www.mayakovsky.ru. Running time: 3 hours, 5 minutes.

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