

Silence, Lies and Truth in Vyrypayev's 'Illusions'

By [John Freedman](#)

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Actors Liske, Sukhoretskaya, Alyabyev and Gruszka, from left to right, are on the stage throughout the play. **Alexandra Atamanchuk**

Ivan Vyrypayev has an extraordinary ability to achieve the complex by way of the simple. He loves to stand actors virtually motionless on stage. They face the audience and talk. To some extent that has been the method in his plays “Oxygen,” “Genesis No. 2” and “July,” all of which take on huge topics ranging from genocide and mass murder to original sin. It is also the modus operandi for his newest play, the absolutely delicious “Illusions,” which is now in repertory at Praktika Theater.

On the surface, “Illusions” is even simpler than the writer’s previous plays. Four actors take the stage, usually one at a time, to relate stories of love involving four people who comprised two married couples.

All actors sit on stage at all times, three watching the fourth deliver his or her lines either

from behind or in front of a podium wired with a powerful microphone.

The microphone is a crucial theatrical tool. It is set to pick up the most insignificant of sounds. Strictly speaking, there is no need for a microphone in the tiny Praktika hall. Anyone's unamplified voice can easily be heard in the tenth and final row of seats. But Vyrypayev, who both wrote the play and directed, wanted his actors to sound as if they are whispering in our ears. Speaking into the sensitive mic, their every sound, breath, and swallow — even the dryness of their mouths — is registered audibly in the hall. Each actor employs personal rhythms, mimicry and intonations to tell bits and pieces of the interlocking stories of four people who loved each other in reality or in their imagination.

It begins as Karolina Gruszka tells the simplest, most straightforward tale of all — how Danny, lying on his deathbed, called his wife Sandra to him to tell her how deeply he loved her his entire life. It is a sweet, moving tale of fidelity, purpose and emotion. If my brief retelling of it sounds maudlin in its sentimentality, it is nothing of the sort in performance. Gruszka, gently locking eyes with spectators and speaking in a voice just above a reverent whisper, paints a beautiful picture of a man who loved and who knew how to share his love.

From there, as might be expected, everything slides downhill. Little by little Danny's pristine story is picked at, deformed, challenged and overturned by subsequent stories that lead to deception, despairing confessions, heartrending discoveries and even suicide. There is something of "Rashomon" in Vyrypayev's "Illusions," the former being Akira Kurosawa's great film that tells a single story from various, conflicting viewpoints. But, Vyrypayev is only partly interested in showing the illusory nature of love or of people's perceptions of love.

At the heart of these simple narratives, delivered simply by the actors, is the teeming complexity of everything that affects the human experience. What happens when people lie? What is a lie? Is remaining silent a lie? Is it a favor? Perhaps some lies bring us closer to the truth than anything possibly could? Might tragedy arise for no substantial reason at all, but for a carelessly chosen word or two?

The actors do not play the four characters, but tell us about them. Like Gruszka, Inna Sukhoretzkaya and Alexander Alyabyev mix affection and irony with a direct, personal approach that makes us feel as though we are sharing intimate moments with them. Cazimir Liske, who adds sonic color with some sparse but deft banjo playing, is given the slightly different task of adding pepper and spice to the proceedings. He has a more devilish approach, which reminds us time and again that there is much going on beneath the surface of what is being said.

Vyrypayev and his designer Margarita Ablayeva organized the performance with exquisite simplicity, providing us with seemingly insignificant, though obvious, signposts to changes of pace occurring in the text and performance. These shifts are marked by the actors stepping out from behind the podium for the first time, by the first appearance of music, by a quietly comic change in the music when we think Liske is playing his banjo but is really not, and by the appearance of lines of electronic red lights running across the back wall.

"Illusions" may be the most seamless piece of theater Vyrypayev has created yet. It is beautiful, moving and funny. It is also profoundly unsettling, as any honest discussion of love and life will be.

“Illusions” (Illyuzii) plays Dec. 2, 3, 4, 21, 22, 23 at 8 p.m. at Praktika Theater, located at 30 Bolshoi Kozikhinsky Pereulok. Metro Mayakovskaya. Tel. 544-5545, 699-6667.
www.praktikatheatre.ru. Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes.

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