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Kharms Dance Novella Is a Hit

By Katherine Lawrence Mansfield

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A young man stops to ask an old woman the time. Offering him her clock, the young man replies, "There are no hands here." The old woman, consulting the blank clock face tells him "It's now a quarter to three."

"Oh, so that's what it is," says the young man, and he nonchalantly moves on.

And with that we have clearly entered a world of fiction — a world in which characters behave not quite as we would expect. This is a place where clocks have no hands, miracle makers make no miracles, and strange women turn up unannounced to drop dead at your door. We have entered the world of Daniil Kharms.

Relatively unknown outside of his native Russia, Daniil Kharms — who produced most of his writing in the 1930s before being arrested by the NKVD and confined to a mental asylum where he ultimately died of starvation during the siege of Leningrad — is wildly popular at home. Falling somewhere between Kafka and Beckett, Kharms' prose is short, funny and incredibly absurd. His tales are full of comedic reversals, nonsensical outcomes

and cartoonish outbursts of violence. In short, his stories make for a joyously surreal and confusing read.

A good read, but what about a live performance? Can the world of Kharms be transported from the page to the stage?

The answer is yes.

This weekend Alexander Pepelyayev, a pioneer of Russian contemporary dance, will present "The Old Woman and ...," a complex and multilayered performance based on Kharms' novella, "The Old Woman." Using a mixture of dance, theater, video and animation, Pepalyayev creates a unique theatrical experience that tells the tale of a young man, lost in time, who must deal with the consequences of an old woman who died, unaided, in his flat. Think of it as an absurd reversal of Crime and Punishment.

Cross-disciplinary performances often run the risk of becoming cacophonous and disjointed. But, as Pepelyayev explains, "dance, comics, film, animation — all these genres are united by the fact that, above all, they are visual, and so for me the problem of combining them never came up." While this mix of genres is visually pleasing, its primary purpose is to capture the strangeness and absurdity of Kharms and bring his stories to life.

Particularly effective in this regard is the use of interactive video technology.

The show has been performed several times abroad and Pepelyayev believes this is partly because Kharms makes for a good dance show. "The system of symbols of a Kharms text and a dance show are very similar" he explains.

Whether a dance lover or a Kharms fan, "The Old Woman and ..." promises to offer something new.

"The Old Woman and..." ("Starukha i ....") runs Sat., Sun. 6 p.m. Aktovy Zal. 18 Perevedenovsky Pereulok. Metro Baumanskaya. (499) 265-3935. www.aktzal.ru.

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