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Irish Comedy Brings New Direction to Taganka

By John Freedman

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McDonagh's "The Cripple of Inishmaan" is a stylized black comedy, but it is often more slapstick at Taganka. **Alexander Sternin**

Whatever the Taganka Theater will look like from now on, it will not be what we are accustomed to. The break between the theater's founder Yury Lyubimov and his troupe last summer — leading to Lyubimov's resignation as artistic director — sent the playhouse off on a whole new trajectory.

That is more than evident in Sergei Fedotov's production of Martin McDonagh's "The Cripple of Inishmaan."

Fedotov, the respected founder of the small Theater U Mosta in Perm, makes his Moscow directing debut with this show. To do it, he turned to one of his favorite authors. Having staged five of McDonagh's eight plays, Fedotov is considered the writer's discoverer in Russia. His 2009 production of "Inishmaan" in Perm led to the theater being awarded a prestigious

Golden Mask.

Fedotov's version of the play at the Taganka is close to his original staging in spirit and in deed. It is dark and stylized with every performer leaning on his or her talents as a character actor. Fedotov's set and the costumes designed by Olga Pankova are virtually the same. The unchanging store belonging to two aging women is constructed of drab, cold stone and wood. Most everyone's clothing is the sum of layers upon layers of warming cloths.

Also as in the Perm production, snippets of Robert Flaherty's classic film "Man of Aran" are projected on the theater's back wall. This famous film about the hard life and tough people of Ireland's Aran Islands provides a backdrop for McDonagh's play.

The lives of the people of Inishmaan are thrown into chaos one day when the town gossip Johnnypateenmike (Sergei Trifonov) brings news that a Hollywood film is being made on a neighboring island.

This especially captures the imagination of Billy (Dmitry Vysotsky), a young man who has a speech defect and only partial use of his legs. Headstrong and smart, he sees Hollywood as a way to break out of the horrible rut of small town life. Telling a little white lie that plays on old tragedies, he convinces the local boatman Babbybobby Bennett (Mikhail Lukin) to ferry him across the waters to the film site, then runs off to California with the film crew.

Bobby's aunts Kate (Anna Kolpikova) and Eileen (Margarita Radtsig) – essentially, his two mothers – are devastated. The town's hottest and most high-strung young woman Helen (Yelizaveta Vysotskaya) is furious. She thought Hollywood would choose her.

What no one expects, however, is that Billy will reappear in Inishmaan one day, having rejected the bright lights of the city for the cold, gray skies of home.

McDonagh's play is a bracing mix of sentimental melodrama, cutting black humor and sharply drawn personalities. Fedotov and the Taganka actors plumb the melodrama and character more than the black humor, although they do evoke plenty of laughter. Still, the humor revealed here is as often slapstick (eggs cracked on heads and drinking jokes) as it is the deep, existential humor that I suspect McDonagh was going for.

Vysotsky turns in a heroic and heartwarming performance as Billy. And Vysotskaya, as Helen, Billy's unlikely love interest, is a fireball of aggressive energy. When she unleashed an egg attack on her brother Bartley (Viktor Karpeko) at the show I attended, backing it up with cracking slaps up the backside of his head, the crowd at the Taganka gasped collectively from the sheer velocity and efficiency of it. Of all the cast, this pair probably approximates McDonagh's odd genre best.

Billy's human warmth is tangible and affecting, but even stronger is his strength and independence of mind. As much as anything, this production emerges as a lurching hymn to believing in oneself, and to taking chances to follow one's dream.

The serrated edges of Helen's personality, her charming but wicked smile, her unblinking and unthinking cruelty and the magnitude of her overpowering life force make her a quintessential McDonagh heroine. There is every reason to fear and condemn her — as most

in Inishmaan do — but somewhere deep inside is a fascinating woman and only someone of Billy's insight will be able to see it.

At times the show can make for slow going. The remainder of the cast, while turning in admirable performances, often relies on comic book-like caricatures to build their characters. The altered voices, pouting gazes, and eccentric, but studied, behavior gets rather thick.

Whatever the case, "The Cripple of Inishmaan" is nothing like anything we have ever seen at the Taganka.

"The Cripple of Inishmaan" (Kaleka s Inishmaana) plays Feb. 18, March 3 and 24 at 7 p.m. at the Taganka Theater, located at 76 Zemlyanoi Val. Metro Taganskaya. Tel. 915-1217. www.taganka.theatre.ru. Running time: 3 hours, 15 minutes.

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