

'Anarchy' Shocks and Indulges at Sovremennik

By [John Freedman](#)

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Yefremov, left, plays Billy Abortion, an abrasive old punk who was left to die by band members 30 years before. **Sergei Petrov**

In his play "tHe dYsFUnCKshOnalZ!" which has had significant success in the English-speaking world since it premiered in 2007, Mike Packer pulled off the impossible. He wrote an MTV-like cartoon that happily piles up clichés about graying, beer-bellied punk rockers and yet he never backed off from the goal of having his subversive say while he was at it.

Renaming it "Anarchy" for its Moscow run, the Sovremennik Theater gave the play the big treatment.

Rock star Garik Sukachyov directs. Popular rock band Neprikasayemiye recorded songs for the performance. Mikhail Yefremov, whose already impressive reputation spiked upward over the last year due to his participation in the viral, politically motivated "Citizen Poet" videos, plays the broken-down old lead singer Billy Abortion.

Designer Andrei Sharov made sure that everything seems bigger than life. He constructed a towering bank of some 20 video monitors that constantly flicker behind the highly raked, mostly empty stage. The projections show animated scenes from an apartment or jail house, photographic panoramas of New York City, or fragmented "documentary" footage from the ancient past — 30 years ago when Billy's band members left him bleeding to death in a hotel in Copenhagen.

Billy is not only the focus of "Anarchy," he is surely the character closest to Packer's heart. He is abrasive, demanding, surly and principled. He is anti-corporate, anti-commercial, anti-compromise. He is still furious that his band mates abandoned him all those years ago. He now works in a warehouse pushing around industrial-sized crates of canned beans, and may or may not have given up smoking and drinking.

Whatever peace the old punk knows is shattered when his former lead guitarist Marc (Dmitry Pevtsov) shows up to say their old band tHe dYsFUnCKshOnalZ received an offer of £200,000 (\$317,500) to reunite for 20 minutes. All they must do is play the chorus from their one-hit song, "Plastic People." The occasion will be a corporate kickoff for a new credit card called Freedom Card. What the company doesn't know and what Billy remembers well, is that his song — tossed off in five hazy minutes three decades ago — is not a hymn to "plastic people," but a scurrilous attack on them.

Hell, no, he tells Marc. I'm not selling out.

Cut to New York after Billy agrees to do what he said he would not. What no one realizes is that he has something else up his sleeve. When the band begins to play their ditty, Billy takes a knife to his throat and belly. Blood spurts. Chaos. Scandal. Jail. And, of course, unprecedented fame.

"Anarchy" wobbles back and forth between a desire to exploit stereotypes and tackle serious problems. On the one hand, we have a plethora of jokes in the line of Marc fearing he will die without ever having done anything except with his penis. On the other, Billy's bitter anti-American, anti-corporate diatribes border on the offensive but are always bolstered by valid arguments. You can feel Packer's play trying to burst out of the entertainment format it is packaged in and be taken seriously.

That only happens from time to time at the Sovremennik. This is mostly a giddy celebration of old men behaving badly. Fat guys doing too much cocaine. A wheezing geezer crawling on a woman's body without much hope of anything happening. For the spectators who find punk music and rock behavior offensive, Sukachyov provides a feel-good version of Gloria Gaynor's disco smash "I Will Survive" danced by a bevy of boogie kids in pink and turquoise sweat suits.

And yet. And yet. There is Yefremov's Billy railing at everything from America's self-pity after 9/11 to the modern shopping mentality and benefit concerts for "dead Iraqi children."

This is not safe drama. And, while I admit to being rather shocked to hear the Sovremennik audience burst into enthusiastic applause when Billy blurts out that 9/11 was the "happiest day" of his life, it's not like we don't know where that hostility comes from. Packer taps into those difficult, gray areas of contemporary consciousness.

Yefremov is superb as the complex Billy, bringing an over-the-edge authenticity to his irascible character. His mirror image, the fuzzy headed drummer John Smith who admits he went to a party in 1976 and came home in 1989, is played with warmth and depth by Vasily Mishchenko.

"Anarchy" sometimes wallows in a lazy desire to indulge. Then at moments it reaches out and gives us all a healthy slap.

"Anarchy" (Anarkhia) plays March 12, 13, 14, 29 and 30 at 7 p.m. at the Sovremennik Theater, located at 19 Chistoprudny Bulvar. Metro Chistiye Prudy. Tel. 621-6473. www.sovremennik.ru. Running time: 2 hours, 50 minutes.

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