

Intimate, Warm Version of 'Ksenia of St. Petersburg'

By [John Freedman](#)

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Tatyana Matyukhova, left, as Ksenia, a woman who lived 45 years of voluntary madness in the 18th century. **Maria Moiseyeva**

We don't know yet what Vadim Levanov will be best remembered for. It has been only six months since his death in December at the age of 44. Levanov wrote more than two dozen plays, many of which have not been staged. This is certain, however: His "Ksenia of St. Petersburg" already made its mark.

A big production of the play by Valery Fokin at the Alexandrinsky Theater in St. Petersburg in 2009 was nominated for a Golden Mask award the following year. Now a small, intimate interpretation by Natalya Shumilkina has been mounted in Moscow at the National Youth Theater.

It would be hard to imagine two more dissimilar approaches to a single work. Fokin's take on the play was grandiose and somber. Shumilkina staged the piece as if it were an 18th-

century folk play performed by skomorokhi, the old Russian itinerant clowns.

She and her cast brought warmth and humor to the story of a woman who, as Russian Wikipedia puts it so eloquently, lived 45 years of "voluntary madness" in the second half of the 18th century.

In Levanov's version, at least, the reason for that choice was that a certain Ksenia Petrova's husband, Andrei, died without penance. And in order to save her late husband's soul, Ksenia gave away everything she had, including her name.

In honor of her husband, she assumed his name, wore his clothes, and spent the last half-century of her life as a penniless God's fool. After her own death in 1806, her legend grew and lived on in public memory as an example of extreme self-sacrifice. She was awarded sainthood by the Orthodox Church in 1988.

Levanov wrote an episodic play that explores several of Ksenia's encounters with people from various social ranks, including a pack of cruel children, an arrogant priest and his pompous wife, a prostitute who had been Andrei's favorite, a self-destructive poet, another "holy" woman and others. Every meeting reveals one or another aspect of Ksenia's ability to exhibit love for others, no matter what their attitude to her.

This is not, however, a religious play, and Shumilkina's production makes no effort to force any notion of religious piety on the story. Instead, this becomes a comical tale about the woman who loved and forgave all, even as she is repeatedly sinned against.

Tatyana Matyukhova plays Ksenia as a helpless, unknowing and pure-hearted woman. Innocent she is, but not exactly meek. One gets the impression as the action moves along that this is a woman of such innate simplicity that she gets herself into and out of scrapes without really knowing how or why. It is her unknowing and unassuming quality that lends her a saintly demeanor. She is quite likely herself to blow up in anger, but it is always without malice.

In this interpretation, the turning point in Ksenia's life occurs when she is approached by the prostitute Katya (Oksana Sankova). Here is an encounter that truly cuts Ksenia to the heart. Until this moment, her ability to forgive and forget the aggressions of others is never fully put to the test, for she can pretty much wave them off and be done with them.

In the case of Katya, however, she finds she must actually love this woman who loved, and was loved by, her husband. Only then can her vow of fidelity to God and her husband's suffering soul be confirmed.

One senses the tone of the production change after this scene. What has, until now, been something of a circus lark is now a story asking us to measure ourselves against a higher moral.

Levanov had a bit of fun with those of his own kind by sending Ksenia up against an exalted poet with a death wish. "I was a famous poet! My enemies did me in!" howls the writer, who tried to drown himself but was pulled out of the water by Ksenia. "I am dead!" he pronounces grandly and then strikes an affected pose worthy of a monument in a city square.

The poet's protestations, like the egotistical claims and conduct of the others, cast light on the behavior of one woman who found the wisdom, and then acquired the strength, to devote herself to a lofty calling.

Shumilkina's lighthearted production, supported by colorful costumes designed by Vera Zotova, allows Ksenia's transformation to take place in an atmosphere of fun and tomfoolery, while never losing sight of Levanov's message of love and devotion.

"Ksenia of St. Petersburg" (Ksenia Peterburgskaya) plays June 10 at 7:30 p.m. at the National Youth Theater, located at 2 Teatralnaya Ploshchad. Metro Teatralnaya. Tel. 692-0069, 692-1879. www.ramt.ru. Running time: 1 hour, 35 minutes.

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