

War Reporter Drama, Timely But Unconvincing

By [John Freedman](#)

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"Hidden Perspectives" attempts to look at the issues of war journalism but rarely goes beyond the superficial. **Elena Sidyakina**

Journalism and the disasters of the modern world are a fine manifestation of yin and yang at work. It doesn't matter what it is or where it happens — a terrorist attack in Mumbai, a tsunami in Japan, or a civil war in you-name-the-country — journalists are on top of it. Like it or not, we get whatever happens right now and we get it live thanks to reporters who are in our face 24/7.

Less obvious, though no secret, is what bringing those stories to the world can cost. The death of The Sunday Times journalist Marie Colvin in Syria in February made headlines for a day or two. Then she, like those who had gone before her, slipped out of the news cycle quickly, pushed aside naturally by bigger stories covered by other journalists.

American playwright Donald Margulies concocted a behind-the-scenes look at some people

involved in this phenomenon in his 2009 play "Time Stands Still." Retitled "Hidden Perspective," and bearing dedications to Colvin and murdered Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, the play is now in repertory at the Sovremennik Theater.

I found it a frustrating play, a compact, slickly written four-hander that leans heavily on clichés.

There is the brave, demanding photojournalist Sarah (Chulpan Khamatova), who is emotionally attached to the bold but doubting reporter James (Sergei Yushkevich) — don't dare call him Jimmy unless you're one of his inner circle. They are friends with the loyal but powerless magazine photo editor Richard (Alexander Filippenko), whose new girlfriend Mandy (Darya Belousova) is cute and bubbly but may have no brain and is young enough to be Richard's granddaughter.

Sarah's back home in the States recuperating after nearly being blown up by a roadside bomb. She's in the care of James, who kicks himself for not being with her — he had a meltdown when a person blew up within arm's reach and he got a face full of someone else's guts. Plus, he was rather ticked off about Sarah's affair with a fixer who ended up getting killed in that bomb blast. James and Sarah are facing down demons, in their own heads and in their relationship.

Some of this is serious stuff.

What right does Sarah have to stand by and take photographs of dying people? Why didn't Richard stand up for James when his hard-hitting expose on refugees in Africa was bumped from a special issue on Hollywood and then dropped altogether because it was no longer timely news? Why would James, a talented investigative reporter, increasingly want to sit around the house in search of a "normal" life?

The problem is that the conflicts of Margulies' play come across as homogenized horror served up in palatable sound bites. Yevgeny Arye's production of it, performed in Semyon Pastukh's grandiose glass and metal set depicting a New York loft apartment, does little to combat that.

Mandy's complaints about a reporter who allowed a baby elephant to die while capturing the event on film is symptomatic of the depths to which this play refuses to go. It's enough to toss off the story to make a point and get laughs too. Sort of like killing two birds with one stone, if you don't mind my using the image.

Margulies surely knew he was treading on thin ice with this issue play, for he inserted a scene in which the characters mock a recent trip to the theater to see just that, an issue play. James is outraged by the way the performance allowed people who paid \$100 a seat to shed a tear and then go home feeling good about themselves for having felt something. Is this the M.C. Escher school of self-referential drama?

It is also an unavoidable fact of current Russian life that awkward questions arise in regards to Khamatova's objectives (according to a booklet published by the Sovremennik, she initiated the project).

This popular actress famously and controversially made a video supporting presidential candidate Vladimir Putin in February. It is virtually impossible for anyone attending the theater to not know about this event and not have an opinion about it. Meanwhile, Khamatova dedicates her work, in part, to Anna Politkovskaya, who, it is generally considered, was murdered for her investigations into the way Vladimir Putin's first and second presidential administrations waged war in Chechnya.

It makes for a messy mix of signals that further undermines a play already weak for its effort to balance a diluted sociopolitical message against the demands of entertaining theater.

"Hidden Perspective" (Skrytaya Perspektiva) plays Thurs. and Fri. at 7 p.m. at the Sovremennik Theater, located at 19 Chistoprudny Bulvar. Metro Chistiye Prudy. Tel. (495) 621-6473. www.sovremennik.ru. Running time: 2 hours, 50 minutes.

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