

'A Fine Place to Feed the Dogs' Homes In on Havoc

By [John Freedman](#)

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Alexander Kalyagin, center, plays an old arms dealer whose cynicism and mystery keep the audience on its toes.

We already know a great deal before the first words of Tarik Noui's "A Fine Place to Feed the Dogs" resound on stage at the Et Cetera Theater.

Georgy Alexi-Meskhishvili's set is a world unto itself. It is a post-Apocalyptic territory where an old piano sinks crookedly into the ground, books lie abandoned around the base of a trash can, and an old, battered car gathers dust in the back. Throughout this strange, broken field of detritus stands an array of numbered objects. Are they gravestones? Upon closer examination, when you realize there is an old, tattered screen hanging on the back wall, you conclude that you are gazing upon the blasted remains of an old movie theater. Those numbered objects are what is left of the theater's seats.

Sure enough, after a pianist (Elen Terni) takes her seat at the listing piano, some ragged

scenes of Greta Garbo and John Gilbert in "Flesh and the Devil" come to life on the screen. But no sooner does a gunshot ring out in the movie than an explosion rocks the stage. As the dust settles, an imposing, unwelcoming figure rises as if out of the bowels of the earth and stares into our faces.

In the role of the Old Man emerging from the netherworld, Alexander Kalyagin catches us off-guard instantly. His fierce expression and his bear-like body promise aggression and power. Instead, he begins talking with the thinnest and tiniest of voices. It is a total mismatch and it throws us into glorious confusion. The play has only barely begun and we already doubt what we think we know about it.

Noui's play tosses an old arms dealer into the company of a young man (Sergei Davydov) and a young woman (Natalya Blagikh), both seeking to buy guns for different reasons. It is a story in which victims and victimizers exchange places instantaneously although the sense of doom hanging over everyone never changes.

Kalyagin's old man is a wreck of a human, although he isn't as jaded as he could be. He does, after all, talk the young man into giving up his idea of committing suicide. True, he then turns him into a kind of dog slave that runs and fetches sticks when he tosses them across the debris. And he does convince the young woman to kill the young man to satisfy her deep-seated need for revenge.

But this old codger is marked by something other than evil. Cold, tired and indifferent as he is, he is moved at all times by his rich command of knowledge and experience. He knows people are hopelessly trapped inside their destructive and self-destructive instincts and, as long as no one and nothing will ever change that, he sees no reason why he shouldn't use it to his advantage.

"I am a scoundrel," he says simply, by way of self-definition. "That is my profession."

Kalyagin's performance is at times brilliant, mixing deep cynicism and weary wisdom in a gruff, I-don't-give-a-damn-but-I-know-more-than-I-show package. He is funny, occasionally frightening and quite often remarkably thought-provoking.

The actors around Kalyagin pretty much do what is expected of a supporting cast. They create necessary diversions, foils and justifications for his actions, although they don't emerge on their own as individuals of particular interest or importance.

The few twists and turns in this play's plot, as well as its revelations about character, are rather standard. Perhaps this was Noui's choice, an attempt to play with clichés of human character and interaction. If so, I'm tempted to say it fell short of drawing any seriously unexpected conclusions, although that central figure of the old arms dealer is an admirable achievement.

"A Fine Place to Feed the Dogs" is Georgian director Robert Sturua's first Moscow production since leaving the Rustaveli Theater in Tbilisi in 2010 and taking on the chief director position at the Et Cetera. You feel he left his finger prints on both sides of every dash and comma in the text. This is unmistakably a Sturua production, one that strives to be quirky, well-paced, anchored in humor and an atmosphere of consequence.

When this show does trip up it is in that goal of giving the story weight. It has a habit of aiming for big things but achieving the small. When it does click it is usually connected in some way to Kalyagin's enigmatic performance of the merchant of death and destruction.

"A Fine Place to Feed the Dogs" (Nichego Sebe Mestechko Dlya Kormleniya Sobak) plays Oct. 16 and 17 at 7 p.m. at the Et Cetera Theater, located at 2 Frolov Pereulok. Metro Turgenevskaya. Tel. 495-625-2161. www.et-cetera.ru. Running time: 1 hour, 20 minutes.

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