

Mirzoyev Modernizes Classic Satire by Ostrovsky

By [John Freedman](#)

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Felix Antipov plays Krutitsky in Ostrovsky's "Enough Stupidity in Every Wise Man" at the Taganka Theater. **S. Sidorina**

It says something about the way things have changed that Vladimir Mirzoyev's production of Alexander Ostrovsky's "Enough Stupidity in Every Wise Man" at the Taganka Theater looks almost traditional in conception and performance.

It's not, of course. There are plenty of the signature quirks that mark the style this director has evolved over the last 20 years or so.

Mirzoyev always provides a fresh, unexpected look at the writers he stages, whether they be classic or contemporary. "Strange" bits of action or scene settings creep into his shows, and it happens here, too, such as one event set in something like a fitness center shower room, or the dervish dance that the cast breaks into at one point.

And when Ostrovsky wrote his play in 1868, it surely never occurred to him that one day someone would stage the finale to Elvis Presley belting out "Jailhouse Rock."

But this production of one of Russia's seminal social satires has an almost classical clarity. It showcases Ostrovsky's wickedly funny text and in most cases presents nuanced actors' portraits of the colorful characters. This may be because Mirzoyev has simplified his approach, or it may be because he and other experimental directors have pushed the envelope so far over the years that what once was bracing and unusual now strikes us as comfortable and familiar.

This "Wise Man" is an attractive show, designed and clothed by Alla Kozhenkova with taste and imagination. A tall, crude, grungy cement wall standing at stage right contrasts with a stylish, sparkling hardwood floor. It is as if someone here has plans for improving his life and living conditions but has only just begun. Or perhaps the attempt has already failed. Not all the floorboards have been cut and finished, and a pit of stagnant wood chips below the floor suggests that construction was abandoned.

This is all something of an illustration of Ostrovsky's play, of course. Its lead character, Glumov, is a young man from an impoverished family lacking status seeking entrance into society's pampered class. He has a quick mind and some talent for seeing through the hypocrisies of people around him. That gives him some advantages, although he is unaware of the dangers it presents. It's always a mistake to overestimate your own superiority while underestimating the savvy of others.

Glumov (Sergei Belyayev) pins his hopes on his rich uncle Mamayev (Mikhail Lukin), although it really is Mamayev's wife (Anastasia Kolpikova) who holds the key to his future success. What Ostrovsky paints as a light flirtation between the young man and older woman Mirzoyev interprets as a full-blown erotic pursuit. But if Mamayev's wife eagerly puts herself in compromising positions, she herself has sharp eyes and ears and is fully ready to turn on Glumov if necessary.

He provides her with a reason to do that by seeking marriage with the pretty, rich, young Masha (Maria Matveyeva). To make sure nothing goes awry, he enlists the services of the old matchmaker Manefa. Lyubov Selyutina turns in a wildly comic pair of scenes as the blustery, shamanistic old woman.

Glumov assumes he is smart enough to always stay one step ahead of a world filled with lies, stupidity and falsely inflated egos. He need only feed people's hunger for flattery and his career is made. Working for the bloated old Krutitsky (Felix Antipov), Glumov is entrusted to take a pointless, clumsily written philosophical treatise and make it readable. He does that well, even as he writes scathing satires about the old man and everyone else he encounters in a secret notebook.

What a disaster it would be were someone to find his private jottings.

Mirzoyev staged Ostrovsky's fiendish gallery of fools, crooks and sinners in a straightforward manner but could not help but update the original. From a 21st century point of view, who could possibly be surprised that people lie, cheat and backbite? No one, of course. And no one in Mirzoyev's production is even vaguely taken aback when Glumov's chicanery is exposed.

In this sense, Antipov's crusty, unwavering Krutitsky emerges as a central figure, full of hot air and devastatingly shrewd. Antipov plays a roaring force of nature who surely did worse than Glumov to attain his position. So he neither holds Glumov's transgressions against him nor would expect anything different from an ambitious young man. Glumov is merely playing a game that one imagines Krutitsky helped invent.

"Enough Stupidity in Every Wise Man" (Na Vsyakogo Mudretsa Dovolno Prostoty) plays Oct. 26, Nov. 4 and Nov. 18 at 7 p.m. at the Taganka Theater, 76/21 Zemlyanoi Val. Metro Taganskaya. Tel. 495-915-1217. Running time: 2 hours, 45 minutes.

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