

Theater Mafia Turns Audiences Into Investigators

By [Lena Smirnova](#)

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Skorobogatov defending his innocence to the police and theatergoers. **Natalia Budanova**

"Nozhnitsy" is one of those plays where the theater critic is never afraid of giving away the ending. The reason is, no matter how many times you watch the play, you'll never know what the ending will be.

This new production by the Independent Theater Project envisages the audience playing an interactive mafia game with the play's characters, four of whom are suspects in a murder case. It is up to the audience to interrogate the characters with unexpected questions and, ultimately, vote for the one that will be charged with the crime.

The play's ending can be different depending on each night's popular vote.

"This play will always be new here and now, such as its ending, which we can never be sure of, and the questions that we don't expect," said the play's director, Dainius Kazlauskas, who has

previously seen the play performed in the United States. "It's a living play. Each day it'll be different."

The play was originally written by the German playwright Paul Portner and, in 1978, revised into an American version, "Shear Madness," becoming a hit around the world. Its Boston staging is the longest-playing drama in the history of American theater, with a 35-year running streak.

It is a new format for Russia, but if the first performances are any indication, it is destined to be a hit on the local stage.

The plot line is nothing particularly groundbreaking. A number of clients enter a hair salon in Moscow and end up being locked in for a police investigation after a famous retired pianist is murdered on the floor above. Each of the characters then becomes a suspect in the murder, but where the plot takes a turn is when the lights in the hall come on and it becomes up to the audience members to help the two policemen determine who is really guilty.

There are three possible endings, depending on which suspect the audience chooses as the killer, and even the director has not made up his mind about who is guilty.

Though the subject is grim, the story manages to become a humorous one, thanks to the outlandish characters picked to play the suspects.

Perhaps the most memorable is Antoine (Alexander Lobanov), the flamboyant hair-salon owner who desperately tries to cover up his less glamorous official name, Anton Kuritsin. Kuritsin's empty-headed and short-skirted assistant Kristina, (Yekaterina Molohovskaya); a scheming antiques collector, Eduard Skorobogatov (Igor Kistol); and the capricious wife of a high-ranking official, Victoria Lvovna (Marina Dyuzheva), are also on the suspect list, all with their own motives for killing the old lady.

Two policemen (Georgy Dronov and Dmitry Malashenko) complete the character set, skillfully engaging the audience in their witty repartee and detective game.

There are no actors in the audience to lead the interactive portion of the play, and although the actors can prepare in advance for some probable questions, they still spend a part of the play improvising responses to unexpected remarks from theatergoers.

"One of the biggest challenges was to understand how the Russian audience would react to the light coming on in the auditorium and to guess what they would ask," Kazlauskas said.

It is also up to the actors to maintain the rhythm of the play and keep the whole situation humorous. In the play's premiere performance on March 1, some questions did seem to catch the actors off guard, but they quickly found solid ground again and responded with wit.

The play includes plenty of jokes on contemporary Russian politics, arts and society, which are not there in the German or American scripts.

Kazlauskas explained that the play was not simply translated into Russian, but completely rewritten. The general plot stayed the same, but script adaptor Sergei Kamenkov-Pavlov added new jokes and filled in the "holes" left in the plot about the characters' motivations

for the murder.

In the future, the actors might also switch roles. Just to be prepared in advance, as much as one can be in a play like this, each of them underwent a crash course in hair dressing to be able to play the roles of the salon owner or his assistant.

"Today's performance showed that the audience bought this idea," Kazlauskas said after the premiere. "There is also the possibility of actors switching roles, which is also interesting. This means the play could have a long run."

The next performances of "Nozhnitsy" (Shear Madness) are March 18, April 1 and April 9 at 7 p.m. at the Malaya Bronnaya Theater, located at 4 Malaya Bronnaya Ulitsa. Phone: +7 495-690-5953. www.teatrntp.ru. Duration: 2 hours, 30 minutes.

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