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An Audience Odder Than Gorky's Pawns

By John Freedman

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Natalya Filippova playing a long-suffering writer's wife in "Odd People." **Yevgeny Lyulyukin**

"Odd People" by Maxim Gorky. A Comedy.

That's what the program says, and that's what director Yury Ioffe aimed for in his intimate production on the small stage of the Mayakovsky Theater.

But if that's the case, why was the trio of women sitting next to me groaning and muttering furiously under their breath so frequently throughout most of the second half of this show?

Not everyone, as it turned out, saw the humor in this story of a devious, egotistical and self-proclaimed 'kind-hearted and sensitive' writer, who plays various women off of one another while never letting his wife stray too far from his embraces or clutches.

"What a miserable person!" my neighbor hissed after the actor playing the writer told one more blatant lie to his wife. "Isn't that just how we live?"

I rarely turn over precious space in my reviews to anonymous commentators. But I cannot do

otherwise in this case. The way three twenty-something women sitting beside me responded to what they witnessed may say something about Gorky's play and the performance that I was unable to notice alone. It hit so close to home for them, that they were constantly moved to respond as if it were a real-life experience.

I am no Freud, but I don't think I'm going out on a limb in guessing that the young woman to my immediate right has known well the sting of male prevarication. She certainly recognized its every nuance and shading each time it raised its ugly head in the performance, and did not hesitate to let everyone know exactly what she thought of it.

When the writer's wife admitted that she loved her husband even in spite of his dalliances my neighbor's patience finally broke. "How could she possibly love that horrible idiot!" she spat out bitterly in full voice.

I offer this glimpse into another person's perception of this show in the spirit of inclusiveness. I had far more difficulty getting inside the tale that was told.

I have always found Gorky's plays to be pompous and heavy-handed. In light of the irony and understatement that is taking over most of the best contemporary theater, Gorky, to my mind, looks even more old-fashioned than ever.

"Odd People" strikes me as something that the author cut from balsa wood with a long-handled axe. What it lacks in subtlety it fails to make up for in insight. It is a routine, contrived tale of a "great Russian writer" with lots of quirks that irritate those close to him and entertain those who stand a little further back.

Designer Anastasia Glebova gives the space the look of a country folktale with walls and fences built from heavily slanting wood slats. Perhaps this is a world that is ready to collapse and fall over, or perhaps the design suggests we are getting a skewed view of reality. In either case, the actors ham up their characters with big gestures, booming voices, bitter tears and thunderous laughter.

The first act, with Gorky doing his labored best to emulate Anton Chekhov's plays about constellations of quirky people gathered in a single place, features the flippant writer Konstantin Mastakov (Yevgeny Paramonov) failing to hide his lover (Darya Poverennova) from his suffering, saint-like wife (Natalya Filippova) as a bunch of cynical neighbors and friends look on in amusement. The precious few scandalized by it look grim and humorless for their trouble.

The dialogue, to say nothing of the scene construction, is clichéd. The local jokester and drunk Vukol Potekhin (Viktor Vlasov) launches into typical Gorkian speeches pondering the nature of fatalism and offering up such pearls of wisdom as "asses are a useful animal." Characters suddenly run off stage or appear miraculously just in time to see events that kick the plot down the path to the finale.

It was only in the second act, when Mastakov's hungry eye and fevered ego began searching for other objects of affection, that the humor cranked up some, as did, perhaps expectedly, the indignation of the women sitting next to me.

But did "Odd People" grow funnier towards the end, or did my thoroughly entertaining neighbors make me forget how tedious it had been until then? Or perhaps I missed the whole point of what made this show so real to them? There you have it: the mystery and paradox of art.

"Odd People" plays Friday, June 13 and 26 at 7 p.m. on the small stage of the Mayakovsky Theater*, located at 19/13 Bolshaya Nikitskaya Ulitsa. Metro Arbatskaya. Tel. 495-690-4658, 690-6241. Running time: 2 hours, 55 minutes.*

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