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Elusive 30s Drama is a Suitably Odd Show

By John Freedman

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Yana Irtenyeva playing the headless child Sonya, whose presence perforates the absurdist play's characters.

"Christmas at the Ivanovs" is one of the quiet classics of 20th-century Russian drama, and it comes across exactly as that in Denis Azarov's production at the Gogol Center.

"Quiet" because "Christmas at the Ivanovs" is never going to compete with, say, "The Seagull" on some big theater's main stage. This is a distinctly and proudly odd piece of dramatic writing. But there is no doubt about its "classic" status. This sometimes exhilarating work miraculously employs chaos, mayhem and nonsense to drive home an obscure message while sinking into the marrow of your bones.

Alexander Vvedensky wrote the play in 1938, three years before he died at age 37 on a train transporting political prisoners. Virtually no one knew of it at the time, but in ensuing decades, this play, like Vvedensky's surviving prose and poetry, grew in influence.

Vvedensky, like his friend Daniil Kharms, is a seminal figure in that fascinating group of off-kilter writers known as the OBERIU. This, if you're looking for the source, is where the absurd in literature first raised its crooked head.

Azarov and his designer, Alexander Barmenkov, split the audience into blocks facing different directions. No one group sees all the pieces of the set scattered throughout the hall and consisting largely of tables, a sofa and chests of drawers. Nor can anyone clearly see all the action, which takes place in all corners of the hall.

The effect is that we are plopped into the middle of the odd goings-on in a house full of children, aged one to 82, where preparations are, or are not, underway for a Christmas party.

Having said that, however, I already run up against the difficulties that Vvedensky happily throws at anyone trying to make sense of his play. First, there is no one named Ivanov in "Christmas at the Ivanovs." Why the two parents (Sergei Muravyov and Yulia Gomanyuk) are called the Puzyryovs (the Bubbles) and the children bear such last names as Ostrova, Shustrova and Serova, no one knows. Although this is the least of our concerns.

What does grab our attention quickly is that, while the parents are at the opera, the nanny (Yevgenia Afonskaya) loses her temper with the precocious Sonya Ostrova (Yana Irtenyeva), leads her through a closet into a back room and — cuts off her head. This would be bad enough, of course, but the real drama arises when Sonya refuses to go away.

No matter what happens — the police making arrests, children playing, the mother and father trying to share a little intimacy on the sofa — Sonya is there to make things weirder, more frightening, and, on occasion, much funnier.

Take, for example, the moment when the dead, "headless" girl leans over and asks a spectator to "straighten" her crooked head. The shock and laughter that follow that gesture made for one of the best examples of audience participation I have seen this season.

The acting is excellent, with Irtenyeva's sad Sonya leading the way. Particularly touching, and funny, is the veteran actress Maya Ivashkevich in the role of the one year-old Petya in diapers.

As this performance progressed I found myself relinquishing the need to understand anything in the usual sense. Not only do you not understand what is happening, you don't care. More important, you don't need to know because "Christmas at the Ivanovs" is not about plot or story at all.

For all the humor, of which there is plenty, this show is marked by an ever-present sense of foreboding. Something is wrong. Children and adults know it. But they haven't the vaguest notion of what to do.

The wending ways of wayward plot take us through police interrogations, a trip to an insane asylum, a court hearing where two judges drop dead, and finally a Christmas party that concludes like a Shakespeare tragedy, with bodies, bodies everywhere.

What arises from it all is the sense of people attempting to ignore the past — in this case,

the murder of Sonya Ostrova. But the more they try to stuff it — the past and Sonya's body — back into the closest, the more it haunts them.

By the end of this ominous and often delightful production I couldn't say exactly what I had witnessed, but it was done well and left me moved. No question there.

"Christmas at the Ivanovs" (Yolka u Ivanovykh) plays June 2 and 27 at 8:30 p.m. in the small hall at the Gogol Center, located at 8 Ulitsa Kazakova. Metro Kurskaya. Tel. 499-262-9214. Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes.

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