

# An American Critic on Nikolai Kolyada

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I promised last week I would have more to say about a recent trip to Yekaterinburg and here I am to honor that pledge.

While in that great Urals mountains city I attended Nikolai Kolyada's production of Shakespeare's "Hamlet" with a group of American theater artists. They are travelling around Russia as participants of a program called Beyond the Capitals: Not the Usual Suspects, organized by Philip Arnoult's Center for International Theatre Development. When I walked out on the street after the show I spied Robert Avila, the theater critic of the San Francisco Bay Guardian, looking deeply impressed, if also a bit dazed.

Kolyada's work can do that to you — knock you off your feet.

I once attended a performance of Kolyada's interpretation of Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire" in Moscow with American director Robert Falls. As I learned, Falls knew Williams well, had staged his plays several times and had seen untold numbers of Williams productions. After the curtain fell on Kolyada's "Streetcar" Falls turned to me

and said, "That's the best production of Williams I have ever seen."

But that was on a tour of the Kolyada Theater in Moscow.

In fact, the experience of seeing Kolyada's work increases manifold when you see it in the highly unique space of his own venue in Yekaterinburg. And so I asked Avila if he would share his impressions of what he had seen and experienced during the performance of "Hamlet." The next day during a trip to a monastery I pulled out my camera and recorded his comments.

"I wait sometimes a long time for a moment in a theater that's as satisfying as this," Avila said. "I heard before going that some people like [Kolyada's] style and other people maybe not. But I don't think you can deny that it is a very rich and serious aesthetic.

"It brought to mind a lot of different analogies, none of them perfect, but they're just ways of trying to find a language for ways of expressing the richness of this very distinct style," he continued before mentioning the names of avant-garde playwright and director Richard Foreman, Monty Python member Terry Gilliam, and eccentric film director Tim Burton.

This "Hamlet," Avila declared, is "a world unto itself, very much reflecting our own, but in a language distinct and meticulously crafted. It's full of playful invention, but also driven by very serious passions."

It is, he said, "unlike any other" "Hamlet" he has ever seen.

When I joked that it is hardly the Hamlet-in-a-black-sweater that we often see, Avila shot back, "It's not Hamlet in a black sweater, although they had black sweaters that they put on their heads."

He called the world of the play "teeming, dark, rich, colorful but macabre."

One of the first of many images that struck him was "a parade of Mona Lisas." Here was, he said of the famous painting, "this ubiquitous and yet untouchable classic that they were touching, and in fact, groping throughout the whole play."

This symbolized for Avila "the sureness and the seriousness" of Kolyada's intent in taking on Shakespeare's classic tragedy.

But anyone who has ever visited Kolyada's theater knows that the show is only part of the show. There is also the astonishing foyer and entrance that is packed ceiling-high with artifacts, photos, paintings, sculptures, toys, videos, trinkets, utensils and who knows what else.

Avila admiringly compared it to "a children's playroom or a basement," and described it as "a quirky, individual, playful and rich space full of a lot of care and excessive energy."

The theater was packed with young people the night we attended and that, too, impressed Avila. "It had an energy I really enjoyed, a very distinctive place."

To hear these and other comments by Robert Avila, click on the video image at the beginning

of this blog.

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