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Reckless Italian 'Brothers' Get Russian Makeover

By John Freedman

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Viktoria Isakova playing Visconti's tragic heroine Nadya and Nikita Kukushkin as boxer Tyukha, who falls for her. **Alex Yocu**

Luchino Visconti's classic 1960s film "Rocco and his Brothers" as a Russian stage play in 2013? Not an obvious transformation, perhaps, but one that clearly was waiting for the right people to come along and do it.

"Brothers," as the adaptation by Mikhail Durnenkov is called, is part of a series of European film classics currently being recalibrated for the stage at the Gogol Center. Under the direction of film director Alexei Mizgiryov, it looks every bit a Russian-born tale.

Durnenkov pared Visconti's sprawling tale about a gaggle of irrepressible brothers down to the bone, leaving bare essences. The original five siblings are now four. The mother is gone, except as a figure that one of the sons writes to from time to time. Gone are all but the most crucial secondary characters.

Mikhail
Durnenkov's
adaptation
of the Italian
classic is a plea
for morality.

What is left is the meat of the story: Young men, ambitious beyond their capacity to understand, fall victim to their own naive dreams and the brutality of a world that doesn't give a damn about dreams.

Kazan (Ivan Fominov), Tyukha (Nikita Kukushkin), Obmylok (Rinal Mukhametov) and Hobbit (Roman Shmakov) are certain that if they leave their hometown and make it to Moscow, life will be a bed of roses. They were raised to cherish family ties — they proudly say they are possessors of "royal blood" — and they will stand as a small army of four against whatever the big city throws at them.

Well, not quite.

The eldest, Kazan, finds himself with a wife, a child, and a drinking problem before he knows what hit him. Tyukha, who has the dubious asset of feeling no pain, falls tragically for the voluptuous Nadya (Viktoria Isakova) while quickly rising to the status of champion in a no rules boxing circuit. Obmylok, whose name means something like "leftover soap," is a sensitive youth who finds love with Nadya, but cannot break free of his blind fraternal loyalty to save her in a moment of mortal danger.

Designers Vera Martynova and Kirill Serebrennikov placed the action in a boxing ring that splits the audience in two. Hanging above the stage, as in a boxing ring, is a screen that, instead of displaying the rounds and score, provides titles for each segment. In a clever nod to Visconti's classic black-and-white film, it also shows black-and-white video projections of the fight scenes.

There is a downside to this visually effective setting that cannot be ignored — the acoustics are atrocious. Actors usually perform with their backs to half of the audience, and what they have to say often doesn't make it back in the other direction. Even when speaking into microphones, more than a little of the dialogue is lost in muddy echoes.

But Mizgiryov's dynamic direction, backed by excellent performances, easily sidesteps those drawbacks. Even his use of mics, for example, is less for amplification than for style. It frees actors of the need to "perform" certain scenes physically, allowing them to present entire incidents as inner thoughts or detached literary narrative. This gives the production a huge range of stylistics, from the deep realism of the bone-crunching fights to the abstract episodes of stationary actors facing each other and voicing their lines.

The escape from realism reaches its apogee when the actors break into karaoke song, following texts provided on the screen above the stage. The sappier the music — and it gets pretty bad — the more touching, or even tragic, it is.

Kukushkin's performance of Tyukha is brilliant. He is a bomb at the end of a short, lit fuse. He is charismatic and funny and when his face is dripping in gold earrings and studs and he comes to beat Nadya within an inch of her life for falling in love with Obmylok, he is the definition of mindless, evil savagery, of a human reduced to mutilated instincts.

Isakova's Nadya makes an enormous, affecting journey, from a sarcastic tart to a vulnerable lover, and ends as a broken, cloying whore.

This rough, tough story of men trying to be men and failing ends with an admonishing shake of the finger that could come across as knee-jerk moralism were it not handled so well. The usually silent and almost invisible youngest brother, horrified by Tyukha's descent into evil, reports him to the police. It is, he says, the only way to keep the crumbling family together.

In the context of contemporary Russia, this calculated and purposefully formulaic ending rings out as a desperate plea.

"Brothers" (Bratya) plays June 25 and 26 at 8 p.m. at Gogol Center, located at 8 Ulitsa Kazakova. Metro Kurskaya. Tel. 499-262-9214. www.gogolcenter.com*. Running time: 2 hours.*

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