

'Idiots' Tears Down Boundaries of Convention

By [John Freedman](#)

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Two "idiots" grappling in Kirill Serebrennikov's stage adaptation of Lars Von Trier's famously controversial film. **Alex Yocu**

With the premiere of "Idiots" at the Gogol Center, the suspected has become obvious. This new organization, formed on the basis of the old Gogol Theater in September and reopened to the public in February, has established itself as the leading theater in Moscow.

Quite simply, "Idiots," scripted by Valery Pecheikin and directed by Kirill Serebrennikov, pushes the art form in this city several steps ahead of everyone else.

This is the second in a series of three productions to be based on classic European films. "Brothers," adapted from Luchino Visconti's "Rocco and his Brothers" is up and running, and "Fear," an interpretation of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's "Fear Eats the Soul," opens next week.

Lars Von Trier's
original
characters spiral
away
from 'normality,'
but
Serebrennikov's
production is
immaculately
constructed.

It's a furious bit of activity for a theater that has been open for less than five months and already counts nearly a dozen high-quality, forward-looking shows in its repertoire.

"Idiots" is a freeform riff on Lars Von Trier's famous film of the same name. It claims to faithfully follow the rules of authenticity of Dogme 95, as Von Trier claimed to do in making his film, but whether it actually does or not is unimportant. What it does provide is a brash new manner of acting, directing and writing that finds fascinating middle ground between traditional, psychological theater and a natural, or documentary, style.

As this performance progresses it feels like it runs its own course without ever lurching out of control, but, in fact, everything is considered and executed beautifully.

The premise is this: Some outcasts in an apartment belonging to Yelisei (Artur Beschastny) resolve to act like "idiots" in public, feigning physical and mental challenges that mock, irritate or infuriate "normal" people. Yelisei claims there is nothing political about their actions but their defiant behavior cannot help but take on shades of mutiny.

These "idiots" are rebels against polite, stable society. And in Russia's current socio-political atmosphere, anyone challenging the status quo is not merely someone seeking personal freedom or fulfillment, but is politically suspect, a potential traitor, an enemy.

This reality is reflected clearly in several scenes, such as one of the "idiots" encircling a model of the Kremlin in flames, or when a man being tried in court goes berserk when the judge demands he state his real name. Slamming like a madman at the bars in the courtroom cage, Pasha, nicknamed Govno, or Shit, screams at the judge, "What is YOUR name?! What right do you have to ask my name?!"

It is a visceral, powerful, cathartic moment, that turns the tables on the notion of a corrupt justice system and puts the only honest question right out in the open.

Power and catharsis are integral elements of this production. Politeness and propriety are not. There is abundant full nudity, plenty of choice words, and the very notion of healthy people imitating the physically challenged may push some beyond their tolerance level.

Moreover, in order to suggest that these "idiots" are angels in disguise, Serebrennikov in the finale brings out a half dozen actors with Down Syndrome, all dressed as ballet dancers. The scene, which has not avoided controversy, is sublime as it messes radically with our

preconceptions of "normal."

At the show I attended there was a slow, but nearly constant, trickle of people heading for the exits. No matter. During the curtain calls the still-packed house gave the cast a thunderous ovation.

Designer Vera Martynova uses the same raised stage splitting the audience in two that is employed in "Brothers." As in that show it can wreak havoc with acoustics. But in this case the "documentary" nature of the performance mitigates concerns about garbled and lost dialogue.

The entire cast works as a well-oiled team, but I can't fail to note that Oleg Gushchin is superb as an arrogant potential buyer of Yelisei's apartment, as well as a marvelous confused ditch digger who is the butt of one of the "idiots'" pranks.

Also especially memorable is Harald Rozenstrem as Cuba, a male cross-dresser who impartschutzpah and intelligence to this group of mostly grungy rebels.

Serebrennikov's "Idiots" is a lacerating, courageous piece of sociopolitical commentary. It is also breathtaking theater.

"Idiots" (Idioty) plays June 28 at 8 p.m. at the Gogol Center, located at 8 Ulitsa Kazakova. Metro Kurskaya. Tel. 499-262-9214. gogolcenter.com. Running time: 3 hours.

Contact the author at jfreedman@imedia.ru

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