

Comedic Value Undermined in 'An Ardent Heart'

By [John Freedman](#)

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The all-too-human characters taking a while to reach their comedic peak in the soul-sucking town they inhabit. **Sergei Petrov**

There are plenty of laughs in Yegor Peregudov's production of Alexander Ostrovsky's "An Ardent Heart" at the Sovremennik Theater. And yet, by the time this three-hour performance concludes, it doesn't quite seem right to label it a comedy. Moreover, a title like "A Hot Head" might be more accurate than the original.

This is an occasionally difficult show to watch, especially the first act, which is slow, diffuse and obscure. It hits its stride following the intermission, when characters and themes finally come into focus, but is that too late?

Ostrovsky called his play a comedy because of the ingenue Parasha, a sweet young woman who seeks true love with a deserving man and, perhaps, does find it in the end.

What started out
as a comedy has
morphed into a
much darker tale
in the capable
hands of Yegor
Peregudov.

However, Peregudov, in switching scenes around and merging multiple characters into one, shunted this and a few other key lines of the story into the margins, laying his withering gaze on one specific character. At the forefront of his telling of the tale is the independently wealthy, hot-headed contractor Taras Khlynov (Artur Smolyaninov). He has so much money, he says sadly, that he gains no pleasure spending it.

The catch is that Khlynov doesn't make his appearance until the first act is on the wane. Everything leading up to that, and there is plenty, is mere table setting.

The merchant Kuroslepov (Vasily Mishchenko) discovered that someone stole 2,000 rubles from him. His wife Matryona (Darya Belousova) may be dallying with Kuroslepov's steward Narkis (Dmitry Smolev). Vasya Shustry (Ivan Stebunov), who has eyes for Parasha (Svetlana Ivanova), ends up an army conscript against his wishes. The town mayor Gradoboyev (Vladislav Vetrov) gets involved in most everything, usually not in a flattering light.

But these bits and pieces of story don't amount to much until the bizarre moment when Khlynov bursts upon the scene. Finally, here is a character and a topic that give this performance something to say.

Khlynov is totally unhinged. He is cold, calculating and manipulative. He is also smart and inventive, something Peregudov and designer Vladimir Arefyev signal by having Khlynov appear like a conquering warrior in a weird, smoke-spewing mechanical contraption that looks like a cross between a little submarine and a giant rat.

This man, the production's creators suggest, is so far out ahead of everyone else in this town — and just so far out — that he has no competition. Khlynov knows that better than anyone. He quickly turns Shustry into his personal slave, mercifully mocks the powerful Mayor, and quietly bends Kuroslepov nearly until he breaks.

Ostrovsky satirizes everyone in this rather sad town, debunking them, as it were, through relatively good-natured laughter. Peregudov turns the author's smiles into a dark, accusatory scowl. Petty corruption and trifling mean-spiritedness now come across as aggravated cruelty and premeditated evil.

In order to amuse himself Khlynov joins some acquaintances who decide to pretend they are bandits hiding in the woods. The idea is to give a few people a scare then let them go. But with the manic Khlynov in the lead, their supposedly innocent game turns into rape and mayhem.

Smolyaninov's performance of Khlynov is over-the-top in all the right places. His wicked smiles, his iron sense of purpose, his almost complete lack of scruples make him both

dangerous and fascinating. The actor increases the depth of his character by occasionally revealing brief moments of mournfulness. It is never enough to take the edge off his deep-seated sadism, but it is enough to remind us he is human. It is that touch of humanity and paradox, of course, that makes Smolyaninov's work so impressive.

Composer Sergei Starostin contributes a musical background dominated by wind instruments that is both melancholy and eclectic. It is as though the air breathes in mourning over the unfortunate events of the tale.

Beyond Khlynov's witty "submarine," designer Arefyev created a stageful of impressive objects and settings. Among my favorites were the towering brick wall that one man throws himself through, and the starry sky depicted on a huge black panel in back that induces a sense of vertigo by sliding from side to side or even crashing down on stage.

Peregudov's retelling of Ostrovsky's familiar tale is bold and distinct. At its best it is a harsh, unflinching version for our ruthless contemporary age.

It does, however, often struggle to keep the dramatic momentum going. The further the focus shifts away from Smolyaninov's Khlynov, the more difficult it is to remain in sync with this production.

"An Ardent Heart" (Goryachee Serdtse) plays Sat. at 7 p.m. at the Sovremennik Theater, located at 19 Chistoprudny Bulvar. Metro Chistiye Prudy. Tel. 495-628-7749. www.sovremennik.ru. Running time: 3 hours.

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