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New Play Shows When Theory Meets Real Life

By John Freedman

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Actress Inna Sukhoretskaya performing as Alisa while standing before a video collage in “Alisa and the State.”

It seems to be a universal problem in the 21st century: How do you build a functional state? Ask anybody in Greece, Egypt, Italy, the U.S. and — admit it, you have been waiting for this — Russia.

That is just the start of the list of crumbling countries, of course, but it is as far as we need to go in order to have a say about "Alice and the State," another of the provocative new shows to open this fall at the Meyerhold Center.

You may want to bring your pencil and paper to this show in order to take notes. But do not forget to wear your weekend best. Yes, it is half lecture with a stated generic description of "sketchbook with scholarly commentary," but it is also all spectacle.

Working with a team of highly physical actors from Liquid Theater, playwright Sasha Denisova and director Alexei Zherebtsov applied a bit of imagination to a series of lectures about the role of government in society by the prominent economist Alexander Auzan. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the result is a wicked satire.

Leaning on Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland," the creators put their Alice in an exam room with a bunch of professors. When she freaks out at the increasingly aggressive questioning she falls into a faint. There, in her mind, she encounters bunny rabbits, flower-headed women, an evil queen, partying protesters, pontificating politicians and many others. She repeatedly engages this strange world of strange characters in an attempt to get them to understand the basic principles of good governance.

You can imagine how well that goes.

The production is basically a hodgepodge of scenes tacked onto one another. By the time the end is in sight you cannot help but wonder if every single one of them needed to be trotted out on stage. Every point this performance has to make is made by the 90-minute mark and every point that is made over the remaining 45 minutes is, as a Russian saying has it, butter buttered.

That said, however, "Alice and the State" is a bold, colorful, often funny and usually on-target broadside on the rule of law, or lack thereof, in Russia. At heart it is an expose of what happens when theory and common sense come up against real life practices.

A comic skit of three flower-headed retirees haggling out problems with their local housing office is followed immediately by Alice's "lecture" on the theory of home and shelter. Alice's argument that the state should serve people is followed shortly by an arrogant monarch shrieking, "Off with her head!"

There are some fine performances among the skits, including Alexander Gorelov, Andrei Smirnov and Darya Demidova as a group of too-hip political protesters. Smirnov and Oleg Tolkunov on stilts conduct a wild scene of two cops towering over the bemused Alice as they continually find reasons to arrest her or let her go.

But it is Inna Sukhoretskaya's Alice who makes this production work. Frumpy, unflustered, thoughtful and almost always one muscle contraction away from a wry smile, Sukhoretskaya is a walking enigma. Like the scholar that her Alice is, she is curious about everything and always ready to pose difficult questions. She is never daunted by her task of seeking enlightenment, even though, as far as I can remember, and just as one might expect, she never succeeds in convincing anyone of anything.

This Alice is like a low-key Don Quixote or Joan of Arc, always ready to do and say what is right, always finding herself outmaneuvered by the realities of the strange world she inhabits.

Designer Yelizaveta Dzutseva employs a few objects to transform the Meyerhold Center's empty black box stage. A few chairs are joined by a towering, enclosed wooden box on rollers that opens up in various locations for various purposes. Hanging at the back is a large screen on which video films by Vsevolod Taran and Alexei Bersenyev sometimes interact with live actors and sometimes take the action into another realm entirely.

"Alice and the State" does not solve the conundrum of whether states are necessary, or whether they are even possible. But it does heap a good deal of laughter on some deserving targets.

"Alice and the State" (Alisa i Gosudarstvo) plays Oct. 28 and 29 at 7 p.m. at the Meyerhold Center, located at 23 Novoslobodskaya Ulitsa. Metro Mendeleyevskaya. Tel. 495-363-1048. meyerhold.ru. *Running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes.*

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