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New Volodin Play Tells a Lonely Tale

By John Freedman

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Sofya Raizman and Yevgeny Volotsky act in Yanovskaya's staging.

As I watched Genrietta Yanovskaya's production of "Don't Part With Those You Love" at the Theater Yunogo Zritelya, I could not help but think of what the Jewish-Russian-Ukrainian philosopher Lev Shestov once said about Anton Chekhov.

"Chekhov was doing one thing alone," Shestov wrote in "Creation from the Void" in 1908, "by one means or another, he was killing human hopes."

Chekhov has virtually nothing to do with Yanovskaya's production because the play she staged was written by the classic Soviet-era writer Alexander Volodin. What does fit are Shestov's words. Yanovskaya's "Don't Part With Those You Love" is a devastating take on the loneliness of the human animal.

Before anyone jumps too quickly to conclusions, however, allow me to add immediately that this production is also very funny, warm in all the right places, though never sentimental, and is acted with irony and feeling.

Volodin tells a tale of people whose love lives have crashed against the hazards of mundane reality. Couple after couple appear before a judge to finalize their divorces. All have their reasons or, at least, they are convinced they do.

Yanovskaya transformed this collection of vignettes into a large canvas that demonstrates a society's ills and follies in equal measure. During transitions dozens of people swirl about the stage, rarely making contact, lost in their own reveries, sorrows and, more rarely, joyful moods.

Designer Sergei Barkhin provided the director with an attractive, eclectic set that looks something like a village green. The stage is covered in verdant astroturf, and various objects are scattered across it — a telephone booth, a clothesline, an apartment interior and the judge's desk.

The judge's desk is ground zero. This is where each of the couples comes, as they believe, to put an end to their misery. Viktoria Verberg plays the judge as a crusty, no-nonsense witness to human misery who, nevertheless, has not yet entirely lost all hope in man and womankind.

Verberg's judge badgers the petitioners with questions born of exhaustion, disgust and bitter experience. When someone tells her the reason for divorce is that their characters do not match or that their interests are divergent, this judge can barely contain her indignation. "Don't you realize what a cliche that is?" she barks at them derisively.

One couple's happiness has been ruined by vodka, another's by a mother-in-law, still another by a dalliance on the part of the husband or the wife, or perhaps by both.

It is the drama of this latter couple, Katya and Mitya Lavrov (Sofia Slivina and Yevgeny Volotsky), that runs through the entire piece as something of a tenuous leitmotif. They are the first of the couples to be divorced, and they are the ones whose further adventures lend much of the comedy and tragedy to the tale.

Katya's vague involvement with a photographer (Sergei Belov) drives Mitya to distraction, while his flirtations with a perky, doe-eyed young woman (Sofya Raizman) are the beginning of a process that sees Katya wind up in a mental asylum. Whether or not they actually ceased to love each other and whether or not they should have divorced are questions that remain unanswered until the end.

Misery, however, does not come exclusively from being tied to someone who becomes a stranger over time. It also can come from never having had the opportunity to cultivate such ties.

Oksana Lagutina plays a lonely woman who drifts dreamily through the maelstrom of broken love affairs, spouting lines from Nikolai Gogol's "The Marriage." She imagines herself the sad, broken heroine of this classic play, wherein a young woman gets as far as putting on her wedding dress before the prospective groom leaps out the window and escapes.

Even the judge finally breaks down in bitter tears as she recalls the man she did not marry.

"Don't Part With Those You Love" consists of pretty much equal parts laughter and tears. It

does not have much to say in the way of optimism about the human penchant for destroying or avoiding happiness. But it reminds us that the more foolish we are, the funnier we are as well.

"Don't Part With Those You Love" plays Sat. and Nov. 23 at 7 p.m. at the Theater Yunogo Zritelya, 10 Mamonovsky Pereulok. Metro Pushkinskaya. Tel. 495-699-4995. moscowtyz.ru. *Running time: 2 hours.*

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