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Love and Theater in 'Lear Rehearses Death'

By John Freedman

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Spectators watch a film clip of actor Viktor Rotin rehearsing a scene from “King Lear” at the Double Edge Theater. **John Freedman / MT**

I once participated in a public discussion about perceptions of theater in the U.S. I spoke my piece and one of the actors of the host theater raised his hand and said, almost, but not quite, aggressively, "Yeah, but what about love?"

I was grateful that Carlos Uriona, a leading actor of Double Edge Theater in Massachusetts, brought that up. He gave me both the kick in the pants, and the right, to talk about love and theater in one breath. I have used Carlos's question to kickstart numerous conversations since and I use it again in the following consideration of Georg Genoux's production of "Lear Rehearses Death," a joint production of Joseph Beuys Theater and the Meyerhold Center.

"Lear Rehearses Death" is infused from top to bottom with love — the love of a director for his work and the people who help him make it, the love of literature, life and myths,

the love that we harbor for a fellow human being who has the nerve, the courage and the hubris to love himself even when, as the actor playing the actor who is rehearsing a future production of Shakespeare's "King Lear" boldly admits, he never loved a soul in his life.

That man, the actor playing this role, is lying, of course. He loved his mother. He may no longer love his son and his former wife, whom he bitterly rejects, but now, at the age of 80-something, he is willing to forgive his daughter even if he claims he no longer loves her.

But doesn't this production prove that forgiveness is, in some way, a manifestation of love?

Perhaps forgiveness is an exalted form of love. And, if it is, failure to achieve it is the failure to achieve a love of great proportions. What is important to recognize here is that failure is just one step, one measly step, away from greatness.

"Lear Rehearses Death," which makes thoughts like this inevitable, is a kind of performance installation. It combines film, documentary drama, museum exhibits and live performance. It boldly erases the lines that separate an actor, Viktor Rotin, from the character he plays, an actor rehearsing the role of King Lear.

Over the period of a year, Genoux and playwright Lyubov Mulmenko met with Rotin, interviewed him, filmed him and asked him to film himself and his home surroundings as he talked about his past, his work and his present. Rotin rehearses bits and pieces of "King Lear" as he tells how he spent three years in prison for "speculation" during the Soviet years, how he believes that his wife stole money his mother left for him, how he rejected his children and has now come to live for doing charity work.

Some of this information we watch in film clips, some we hear as audio recordings while we peruse museum-like exhibits hanging on the walls — photos and other objects from Rotin's personal and professional past. Halfway through the performance Rotin himself appears and sits silently among the spectators in various places around the room.

Let's be careful about attaching to Rotin too much of what emerges during the performance. Genoux gives him a few moments at the end of the show to step out of character and have his own say. One of his first comments at the show I attended was, "Genoux took a lot of liberties with my personal history."

Let's accept that statement at face value, even as we accept at face value the love that this strange, fragmentary performance encourages us to embrace.

The actor played by Rotin, and drawn by Rotin, Genoux and Mulmenko out of his own biography, emerges as a profoundly strong, flawed, wise, foolish, tragic, intangible and lovable character.

Doesn't that describe King Lear perfectly?

Genoux, a native of Germany, offers this production as the last staged by his Moscow-based Joseph Beuys Theater before he moves to Bulgaria where he now runs a new, experimental theater. "Lear Rehearses Death" is a beautiful, moving show, arguably the best thing Genoux has done in 15 years in Russia. It is a true labor of love.

"Lear Rehearses Death" (Lir Repetiruyet Smert), a production of the Joseph Beuys Theater and the Meyerhold Center, plays Sat. and Sun. at 7:30 p.m. in the 4th-floor Black Box at the Meyerhold Center, located at 23 Novoslobodskaya Ulitsa. Metro Mendeleyevskaya. Tel. 495-363-1038. www.meyerhold.ru Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes.

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