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# Taganka Tension Silenced by Brilliant Production

By John Freedman

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Maria Matveyeva and Filipp Kotov perform with video of Vladimir Vysotsky and Zinaida Slavina behind them. **Daria Aksenova**

Let's get this out of the way for the scandal-mongers.

I attended the first performance of "Presence" at the Taganka Theater, the third event in the 50th anniversary project being conducted by a group of young artists, critics and theater managers on hire from the Moscow Culture Committee. If anyone was expecting this show to be greeted by outbursts of protest from Taganka actors and their allies — as the two previous events have been — they would have been sorely disappointed.

Sitting four arms-lengths away from me in different parts of the hall were famed Taganka veteran actors Felix Antipov and Veniamin Smekhov. When the performance ended Antipov raised his hands high above his head and applauded. Smekhov couldn't stop grinning as he clapped in unison with everyone else in the hall.

Enough of that, then. This production is too impressive to waste any more time looking for scandal wherever it is that scandal lurks.

"Presence," conceived and directed by the St. Petersburg director Semyon Alexandrovsky, is an exhilarating mash-up of theater and history. I doubt I have ever seen anything like it and I can't imagine it being done any better.

Alexandrovsky set out to provide an audience with the opportunity to experience the excitement and power of one of Soviet Russia's most famous productions ever, Yury Lyubimov's staging of Bertolt Brecht's "The Good Person of Setzuan," which christened the Taganka in 1964. It was a show that gave Moscow, Russia and the world a new star — Vladimir Vysotsky, but that was only the beginning.

"Good Person" remained in repertory for many years before dropping by the wayside, as even the greatest works of theater art do. Lyubimov then revived it with a completely new generation of actors in the 1990s after he returned from exile.

Employing video recordings, headphones that provide excellent sound, and a group of five live actors, Alexandrovsky brought together three, actually four, generations of "The Good Person of Setzuan" at the Taganka.

The use of video and headphones alone was a stroke of genius.

Everybody knows that theater does not come across well on video. The live aspect is lost. The sense of space is distorted. The sound goes from big and booming to tiny and tinny. It's no way to watch theater.

But what happens if you project the video on the enormous back wall of the very stage where that performance was held? And what if you give spectators headphones to provide the best possible audio quality? Well, I'll tell you what. Magic happens. Seeing Vysotsky, larger than life, projected on the back wall of the old Taganka stage is a revelation. As is seeing his brilliant partner Zinaida Slavina stay with him step by step.

The sorcery multiplies when the clips of Vysotsky and Slavina are juxtaposed against the same scenes performed later by Nikolai Gubenko, Ivan Ryzhikov and Lyubov Selyutina. But what really makes your jaw drop is to see Alexandrovsky's live cast — Filipp Kotov, Mikhail Lukin, Konstantin Lyubimov, Maria Matveyeva and Galina Trifonova — performing the exact same scenes, employing the exact same gestures, movements and intonations.

The visual layering of performances spanning 50 years is combined with documentary-style recitations of historical texts — memories of Vysotsky and Slavina, recollections about the production and how it was made and received. This all encourages us to ponder that eternal question: What does time bring us and what does it take away?

It is no wonder that the most moving moments of this performance are the clips of Vysotsky and Slavina. Who ever expected to see them come to life again like this on this stage?

But video scenes of Lyubimov rehearsing are also a revelation. And then there are the live actors literally putting themselves in the shoes of those who came before them. Their precision is astonishing, especially when Alexandrovsky hits the rewind button and the actors

suddenly find themselves doing everything backward as they follow the motions of the moving images projected on the wall.

"Presence" is not a new "Good Woman of Setzuan." It is a brilliant and moving tribute to a show that gave birth to a theater that obviously remains very much alive today, even in the shadow of its great history.

*"Presence" (Prisutstviye) plays Jan. 28 and 29 at 7 p.m. at the Taganka Theater, located at 76 Zemlyanoi Val. Metro Taganskaya. Tel. 495-915-1217. Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes.*

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