

Human Theater Shows Absurdist European Drama

By [John Freedman](#)

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Olga Sokolovskaya and Andrei Kiryan play Raimonda and Gritsko in the play "Winter Under the Table."

Lyudmila Roshkovan's Chelovek, or Human, Theater has always stood apart from the rest of Moscow's theaters.

That is true geographically — though centrally located, it stands on a side street more than a stone's throw from thoroughfares and metro stations. And it is true of the kind of work Roshkovan champions — European plays flavored with a twist of the absurd.

Over the years — the Chelovek dates to 1974 — Roshkovan has presented plays by Slawomir Mrozek, Eugene Ionesco, Fernando Arrabal, Tadeusz Rozewicz and others of their challenging, surrealist, avant-garde ilk.

The director's latest, "Winter Under the Table," is the last play by Roland Topor, a Frenchman of Polish heritage who was a jack-of-all-trades and enjoyed great respect among the farther-

out artists of his time. He did illustrations for a film by Arrabal, acted in Werner Herzog's cult favorite "Nosferatu the Vampyre," and wrote a novel, "The Tenant," which was made into a respected film by Roman Polanski.

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Although "Winter Under the Table" was written in the mid 1990s, shortly before the writer's death in 1997, it has the feel of those quirky, absurdist dramas from the 1960s that see in the trap of sexual attraction a recognizable reflection of the sad human condition. I'm not sure this play raises these seemingly mundane human experiences to the level of philosophy, but it's a quick-moving piece that changes directions often, thus keeping an audience on its collective toes.

Florence (Milena Tskhovreba) has given shelter to Dragomir (Alexander Sokolovsky), who lives under her kitchen table. It's a great place to curl up and sleep, as well as to get some great sight lines on Florence's shapely legs while he repairs her shoes and she takes her meals.

Florence's friend Raimonda (Olga Sokolovskaya) is appalled by the situation, although she does make a point of pulling her long skirt up over her knees when she walks past the low-lying Dragomir.

Things are complicated by Dragomir's friend Gritsko (Andrei Kiryan), a violinist who appears to move into the space beneath the table for awhile, and Florence's publisher Mark (Andrei Savostyanov), who appears ready to go to any lengths to make Florence his own.

Crude, one-minded and utterly conventional in his courting tactics, Mark is clearly no match for the effervescent Florence, whose affections lie with the crude, unkempt Dragomir. Even worse, Mark makes a mistake no love-struck publisher should ever make — he misspells Florence's last name on the cover of a novel she has just translated for him.

"Do you know how much I have wasted on you?!" he blurts out in an ignorant attempt to deflect blame and justify himself before the angry translator.

Oops. Not smart. It is a lovely little reminder for anyone out there planning on impressing a potential love interest — do not ever bring up money or expenses with someone whose heart you are trying to win. Take Topor's and my word for it. Just don't do it.

In any case, with Dragomir out of the picture and Mark thrown out on his ear, a romantic vacuum is formed which Gritsko thinks he might fill. A man can dream, can he not?

Roshkovan provides a light, speedy reading of the play. There is much physical humor, actors running around, bumping into one another, and groping themselves and each other

in varying states of desperation, confusion and arousal. The music tends to be cheery, or at least, perky, even in the manner it is delivered. The performance begins as Raimonda plucks at a keyboard that slowly slides down the wall in near-total darkness.

The spartan space design by Viktor Platonov features a big, blue table in the middle of the empty stage.

"Winter Under the Table" does not fit the trends that define Russian theater as we know it today. To some it might appear old-fashioned. To others it might look a little alien. What it is, however, is Lyudmila Roshkovan remaining faithful to herself and her own personal vision.

Even at the age of 40, the Chelovek Theater remains dedicated to anything that is out of the ordinary. "Winter Under the Table" is more proof of that.

"Winter Under the Table" (Zima pod Stolom) plays Weds., Feb. 11 and 25 at 7 p.m. at the Chelovek Studio Theater, 23a Skatertny Pereulok. Metro Pushkinskaya or Arbatskaya. Tel. 495-695-7707, 691-1921. chelovek-theatre.ru. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes.

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