The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Underwhelming Fairytale on Steroids Gets Few Laughs

By John Freedman

February 19, 2014



Meyerhold Center's new play "Herbivores is a collaboration of directors Talgat Batalov and Maksym Kurochkin, yet does not match up to past works. **Courtesy of The Meyerhold Center**

It sounded like an interesting pairing — Maxim Kurochkin, the wildly imaginative playwright, and Talgat Batalov, a director with a fine sense of deadpan humor.

Kurochkin tends to turn the world upside down in each of his plays, tossing out cascades of linguistic pearls and wickedly subverting concepts of reality and drama.

Batalov, at least in his art, is somewhat Kurochkin's opposite. He tends to balance on the differences separating understatement from irony. As an actor he deeply and convincingly underplayed the flamboyant figure of Jimi Hendrix in "Light My Fire," while as director/actor in "Uzbek" he soft-shoed a whole range of hot-button political topics, such as racism, false

patriotism and rampant nationalism.

What brought the two together was "Herbivores," a kind of fairytale on steroids that Kurochkin first unveiled at the Lyubimovka new play festival in 2012, and which is now up and running at the Meyerhold Center. No matter how you look at it, the results are underwhelming.

I do not think I have ever heard less laughter at a performance of a Kurochkin play. And I find it hard to believe that the play is the culprit. I attended the original reading and everyone in the packed house at Lyubimovka shared a collective mirth-induced bellyache by the time the reading was completed.

Batalov and his cast chose to play the piece with extreme cool. Actually, nonchalance or total indifference are probably closer to the point. Somewhere in there the spark of the play was lost.

Alexei Maslodudov and Oleg Kamenshchikov play something along the lines of separate halves of a split personality. The latter's I Myself repeatedly answers for, explains or undermines the actions and comments of the former's Character I. They — or he, to be more exact — are pushed into action against their will by a visit from a neighbor, a "Mongoloid and herbivore" named Ham Nyam Nyam, played by Mikhail Rudenko, who is charged with guarding the Asian princess Hom Vi Zde, played by Olga Nikitina.

Toss in a wingless dragon, played by Sergei Ovchinnikov, a so-called hero of the British empire, played by Pavel Mamonov and a few others and you have a typical Kurochkin stew. He runs roughshod over reality, physical possibility and reasonable expectations. It is what makes him an exciting and unique writer.

"Herbivores" runs through a few tricks before getting its plot engine revved up. It toys with the politically-incorrect notion that "women, as a concept, have failed," while, in fact, putting forth the incompetent Character I who is incapable of, or at least not interested in, teaching Hom Vi Zde the finer points of sex.

That is revealed to be just an appetizer, however, when the real event of the play comes to light — some thugs stole "all the gold in Asia" and Hom Vi Zde must get it back. Once again Character I is enlisted to help, and once again he is helpless.

Being helpless, not to say hapless, is at the core of "Herbivores." The modern cool cat kid Character I, bantering with his alter ego as he dithers around on his computer, calls out for pizza and has difficulty leaving the confines of his cramped apartment, is virtually a worthless being. When he runs into a neighbor woman, played by Natalya Dyomina, he is only vaguely concerned that no one has found either the princess or the missing gold.

"Have you tried looking for her?!" the neighbor spits at him angrily. She does not know much about the problem, but she knows all she needs to about the men around her — they can try on all the superhero costumes they want, but they are as futile as they are filled with excuses.

Batalov makes generous use of video projections that range from the sartorial Kurochkin himself attempting to bring order to chaos, an entire scene of the princess confronting a thug

on a stairwell, and pictures of military parades in an eastern dictatorship.

In addition to playing the attractively expressionless Princess, Olga Nikitina designed the set, which shows a cutaway of two tiny Russian apartments with a stairwell landing in between them.

"Herbivores" leaves you wanting much more than you get. Tossed off by a cast that really does not seem to care about anything but maintaining hip reserve, the balloon of the play never fills with air.

"Herbivores" (Travoyadniye) plays March 3 at 7 p.m. at the Meyerhold Center, located at 23 Novoslobodskaya Ulitsa. Metro Mendeleyevskaya. Tel. 495-363-1048. meyerhold.ru. Running time: 1 hour, 10 minutes.

Contact the author at: jfreedman@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/02/19/underwhelming-fairytale-on-steroids-gets-few-laughs-a32264