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'Summer Wasps' Are Entertaining in February

By John Freedman

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Alexei Kolubkov, Ksenia Kutepova and Tomas Motskus play a married couple, Robert and Sarah, and their friend Donald in Ivan Vyrypayev's play "Summer Wasps Bite Us Even in November."

The title is a bit clumsy and it takes a good while before it begins making sense. One character in the play on the old stage at the Fomenko Studio uses the phrase over and over again — "Summer wasps bite us even in November" — until even he admits he doesn't know what it means.

Actually, the meaning has begun to sink in by the time he makes that little confession — life, this production suggests, will get you no matter what you do.

"Summer Wasps Bite Us Even in November" is a recent play by Ivan Vyrypayev, and the production of it at the Fomenko by Sigrid Strom Reibo is swift and perky. Maria Mitrofanova set it under a low, artificial ceiling that hangs over a raised, empty platform that turns yellow under the lighting of Vladislav Frolov. A row of red chairs and a water cooler behind the stage

are crucial to the action.

Robert (Tomas Motskus) and Sarah (Ksenia Kutepova) are a married couple riding out a rocky period in their relationship. Their friend Donald (Alexei Kolubkov) is, for some reason, always present to help and to hinder them as they hash out their differences.

All three are exasperated by a question that will not leave them in peace: Did Robert's brother Marcus visit Sarah on Monday or not? Sarah swears he did and she proves it by having Robert call Marcus himself. Donald swears he did not, and he proves his point by making two telephone calls — one to his wife Martha and another to his neighbor Gertrude, both of whom insist that Marcus was at Donald's house on Monday.

The whole Marcus-Monday thing is, as you probably gathered, what is usually called a red herring, a smoke screen. Although it's almost all anybody talks about, it ain't the point — if you'll pardon my substandard English.

The point, if there is a single one, comes together slowly and only as a result of repeated clashes, conversations and personal confessions.

Sarah accuses Donald of forcing his wife to have an abortion years ago, thus undermining his claim that, as a vegetarian, he never hurts anyone. Donald, for his part, constantly seeks to force Sarah to admit to her husband that she is having an affair. Robert bemoans the fact that everything worthwhile in life, like his little toy boat in childhood, floats away and never returns.

There are, in other words, plenty of accusations, grievances, resentments and sins to go around.

All of this is played out in Strom Reibo's production with a great deal of irony. Each of the phone calls is made to a specific member of the audience, to whom all the actors appeal as they argue their various points of view. Later on, when searching for just one good man who might justify her trust and loyalty, Kutepova's Sarah heads into the middle of the crowd. Full of hope, she climbs over spectators as she attempts to reach the man of her dreams.

That, too, however, fails, as she finally nears the man she had espied: "Oh, no!" she warbles in fright and turns to run.

Ultimately the three unhappy friends find solace in their mutual love, no matter how deeply they have hurt each other. Strom Reibo stages a triumphant, cleansing dance beneath rain that each character creates by flinging cups of water at the ceiling.

In "Summer Wasps," Vyrypayev seems to have taken on the challenge of writing a feel-good play that tweaks our foibles and points an occasional accusatory finger at us, but which primarily provides a warm conclusion that redeems everything without distressing anyone too much.

It's written well, if somewhat formulaically, although I can't help but think it falls significantly short of his best plays — the bold adaptation of the Ten Commandments in "Oxygen," the amalgamation of the Bible and folklore in "Genesis No. 2," or the audacious look into the mind of a serial killer in "July."

Unlike those plays, "Summer Wasps" wraps up loose ends and presents characters and situations in neat packages. It doesn't make for especially challenging theater, but it serves quite well as entertainment.

"Summer Wasps Bite Us Even in November" (Letniye Osy Kusayut Nas Dazhe v Noyabre) plays March 8, 19, 24 and 25 at 8 p.m. at the Fomenko Studio old stage, located at 30/32 Kutuzovsky Prospekt. Metro Kutuzovskaya. Tel. 499-249-1921.

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