

# New Masquerade Remakes Lermontov's Masterpiece

By [John Freedman](#)

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Director Mikhail Ugarov was not impressed by Lermontov's masterpiece, "Masquerade," and made his own version of the play, keeping the basic tragedy with some unexpected additions.

"Masquerade Masquerade" is not quite a play so nice it had to be named twice. Actually, playwright and director Mikhail Ugarov has made it abundantly clear in the media that he re-read Mikhail Lermontov's play "The Masquerade" and wasn't impressed. As a result he wrote his own version in order to make sense of it.

The basic stuff of Lermontov's tragedy is still there in Ugarov's own production at the Meyerhold Center. The hotshot Alexei Arbenin (Yegor Koreshkov) is placidly married to the beauty Nina (Anna Kotova-Deryabina) who loses her bracelet at a masquerade ball. Meanwhile, a woman cruising for sexual adventure beds down Arbenin's friend Dmitry (Alexander Molochnikov) and gives him a bracelet she just found as an enigmatic keepsake.

Oops. Trouble ahead.

This all leads to suspicions, accusations, a questionable bowl of ice cream and murder. But very little of it in Ugarov's rethinking of the tale shakes down as it did in the original 180 years ago. Ugarov couldn't care less about the plot or the intrigues engaged in by society lions and lionesses. Instead he wrote a play that explores the thoughts, the mores and the philosophy that a handful of men and one woman hold in regards to sex.

Note that I wrote just "sex," not "sex and love." Because love is something that, for all intents and purposes, does not rear its head in "Masquerade Masquerade." It occurs to no one, and does not arise in conversations except in the most banal, generic and, essentially, meaningless form.

Marriage is certainly no place for love, that is a place for warm slippers and boredom. Parties are a place to make quick conquests and then forget them. And should it happen that you cannot forget that mysterious one, it is surely not about love — it is all about having and possessing and repeating and losing.

Ugarov builds his play on a series of dialogues and monologues. Let's not go so far as to call it Platonic, but there is something in it of the philosopher challenging pupils and himself to make sense of what he thinks.

As such there are some lovely phrases.

Yevdokia Germanova, playing Lidia, the extravagant woman on the prowl, has the pleasure of saying, "I have exhausted all possibilities. The time has come for impossibility."

Playing a mysterious character who corresponds to Lermontov's Stranger and is called John Doe, Vladimir Bagramov tosses off pithy phrases about how the Russian language is capable of driving you out of your mind, although inmates in insane asylums are not treated for problems of language but rather beaten with sticks.

Perhaps more ordinary but none the less pointed is Alexei's cool admission that murder "destroys the fabric of society, but returns us to primal freedom."

Designers Maria Utrobina and Anna Utrobina gave the show a slick, modern visual feel. A black raised platform is scattered with two dozen chairs that eventually play a rather risqué role. The actors are dressed elegantly — the men in black, the women in evening gowns. It is all civilized and hip, even as the men inadvertently reveal their weaknesses, their ignorance and, I would suggest, the emptiness that hides behind an ability to turn a phrase well.

From time to time the conversations are interrupted by three performers engaging in increasingly lewd dances, the final one of which depicts an orgy involving a huge pile of chairs. I found the dances choreographed by Ivan Yestegneyev to be rather juvenile, and I thought they added little but hindered much in this otherwise sharp, witty play.

Ugarov tosses a lovely decoy at all the hardnosed literary sleuths in the hall. Everyone knows Lermontov's Arbenin kills his wife by poisoning her ice cream. Well, Ugarov's couple cordially shares a bowl of ice cream before the dastardly deed comes from another angle.

Without a wife, without love, without attachment to anything of value, Ugarov's Alexei has recourse only to that timeless male avenue of escape — but you will have to see the show to find out what that is.

The dances aside, "Masquerade Masquerade" is beautifully written, staged and acted. Riffing on an old literary chestnut, it nails the contemporary mentality.

*"Masquerade Masquerade" next plays April 11 and 16 at 7 p.m. at the Meyerhold Center, 23 Novoslobodskaya Ulitsa. Metro Mendeleyevskaya. Tel. 495-363-1048. Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes.*

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