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New Age Philosophy for the Masses in Vyrypayev's 'UFO'

By John Freedman

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Director Ivan Vyrypayev performs a one-man show in his piece “UFO,” in which he purportedly reads edited excerpts from interviews he has conducted.

It has been awhile since Ivan Vyrypayev opened a new play in Moscow, but now we have had two premieres of new works at two different theaters. "Summer Wasps Bite Us Even in November" was recently unveiled at the Fomenko Studio and now, with Vyrypayev directing and acting at his own Praktika Theater, we have a piece called "UFO."

"UFO" is probably a case of a preacher preaching to the converted. If you are a fan of Vyrypayev's increasingly conspicuous New Age-styled positivism, "UFO" will likely delight you. A woman next to me at the show I attended rocked back and forth throughout the entire performance, muttering and moaning, "Yes! Yes! Oh, yes!" She was not alone in her enthusiasm.

As both actor and director, Vyrypayev takes care to make this show seem like no performance

at all. He walks on stage and sits down next to an advertisement for an oil company. A glass of water stands on a table to his left. He holds a typescript in his hands and, after a short impromptu introduction, he begins to read page after page.

Ostensibly he reads us "slightly edited" transcripts of interviews he conducted with people all over the world. He planned, he says, to make a film of the interviews but nothing came of it and, so as not to let the material go to waste, he chose to read it to audiences at his theater.

I will not go much farther than to say that if you take the playwright Ivan Vyrypayev at his word, you do not know the playwright Ivan Vyrypayev very well. I will leave it up in the air exactly as to why that is true here. You can go see this piece play out for yourself.

As for the stories Vyrypayev tells, they introduce us to the voices of common people from all over the planet. An Australian yoga fanatic, a German car dealer, a business teacher from London, an American housewife in South America all have one thing in common. They say they encountered extraterrestrial life.

Actually, that is one of the first elements that makes Vyrypayev's claims begin to fall apart. Because speaker after speaker says nothing whatsoever about UFOs or extraterrestrials. Instead, they share thoughts on moments when they experienced various revelations.

Yes, it is true, one interviewee finally brings up the topic of spacemen, but by this time it is all quite tongue-in-cheek. You can see Vyrypayev grinning as he hides his eyes and reads.

In fact, "UFO" exposes us to a series of monologues on the basic human qualities, without which, in Vyrypayev's estimation, a person cannot live. A tree hugger from Detroit tells us his great revelation was that his life lacked simplicity. A Facebook user from Ireland insists that we lack gratitude.

"Editing" the words of each interviewee, Vyrypayev spins the "pearls of wisdom" — I can't help but put those words in quotation marks — as though they were poetry, employing literary repetition and circular narrative.

At times the message can become murky indeed, as when the Irish Facebooker attempts to explain that the Jews were also to blame for Auschwitz because they, like Hitler, lacked gratitude.

This may be the low point for "UFO," but, frankly, others come close to it. The play's overall message of "chill out and be cool because everything is connected" ultimately begins to sound like metal grating on metal. Each story sounds the same, is constructed in more or less the same fashion, and arrives at the same basic conclusion — as the Swedish travel agent tells us, "all is one."

Vyrypayev tosses in a few obscenities for humor and titillates a large part of his young audience with stories of doing drugs that — sort of — come out proclaiming that maybe doing drugs is not the best way to engage with the world.

Despite the repetitiveness of the text, Vyrypayev is a compelling, watchable figure on stage. However, if you are not already a convert to his way of thinking, you might suspect you are not in a theater at all, but rather have come to a lecture on the ABCs of New Age philosophy

for teenagers.

"UFO" plays April 12, 18, 23 and 26 at 8 p.m. at Praktika Theater, located at 30 Bolshoi Kozikhinsky Pereulok. Tel. 495-544-5545. Metro Mayakovskaya, Pushkinskaya. praktikatheatre.ru*. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes.*

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