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Vladimir Pankov Shows 'The Yard' at Gogol Center

By John Freedman

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Vladimir Menshov and Valery Garkalin play Sasha and Gena, two old friends reunited after Sasha's return from many years spent living in Australia.

John Freedman illuminates Isayeva's past successes, especially in collaboration with director Vladimir Pankov.

It took a year, but Vladimir Pankov, whose SounDrama Theater is one of the resident companies at the Gogol Center, has finally unveiled his first new show on the center's large stage.

It is an ambitious piece absolutely jam-packed with crowd-pleasing elements that draws its biggest inspiration from nostalgia for a rich, long-lost world of experience and emotions. "The Yard," based on a text by Yelena Isayeva — it is not really a play and it is not quite a musical — is a misty-eyed look back at life in the 1970s and early 1980s.

The episodic story of a whole community of people living in the same building comes to life when two old friends run into each other and get to thinking about the good, old days.

Vladimir Menshov plays Sasha, a man who emigrated years ago to Australia but who has returned to Russia to seek a connection with his past. Valery Garkalin is Gena, a handyman mechanic who was once Sasha's friend and is now married to his old sweetheart.

Dramatically speaking, these two are not much more than low-key engines that set other stories in motion. Each gets his own moment in the sun, so to speak, but for the most part they work as touching reminders of how fast time passes. Their aging, grizzled visages are surrounded in memory by young, healthy, energetic people getting into and out of all the messes that are intrinsic to youth.

Of those, the most prominent is Nina (Alyona Babenko), a rambunctious, adventurous, golden-throated woman with a flair for attracting man-trouble. When she was married, she tells us with disarming honesty and coquetry, she was equally faithful to both her husband and her lover.

Also providing plenty for the neighbors to talk about are Nina's friend Olga (Alina Estrina), a single mother with two patient, understanding children, and a nosy neighbor Ivan (Pavel Akimkin) who has a fondness for vodka and a penchant for violence.

Ivan's much-suffering wife Zoya (Irina Olshanskaya) is mostly trapped in her apartment, trying either to keep her wayward husband at home, or trying to keep him out when he is violently drunk.

But "The Yard" never takes things as far as tragedy. Neither the enraged Ivan nor even a scene in which a young man comes perilously close to rape are plumbed for much more than humor or sentimentality. The girl who is forced to accept the young man's affections at knife-point eventually sees the romance in his actions.

At heart "The Yard" is akin to a soap opera running for nearly three hours without a break. The characters are fun and their problems are many, most of them revolving around love lost or found. All of it is wrapped up in, and held together by, the music performed by a dynamic on-stage band, the members of which wander in and out of the action.

The music, supervised by Alexander Gusev, includes a lot of Euro pop and a taste or two of rock and prog rock, such as a lively rendition of the Pink Floyd anthem "The Wall." The thundering delivery of "Teacher! Leave the kids alone!" shakes the stage and gets one of many good rises from the audience.

Designer Maxim Obrezkov built a multi-tiered set on stage that, without illustrating anything, provides the impression of a multi-story Moscow apartment house and the space around it. The building's inhabitants exist on various levels in various niches and cubbyholes, sometimes hanging out laundry to dry from one end to the other, occasionally breaking out into dances, fights or aerobics classes choreographed by Yekaterina Kislova and Sergei Zemlyansky.

Sitting in the hall one senses how deeply these images of childhood and youth affect an audience whose average age is probably early to mid-40s. Songs that mean nothing to this listener — I would even say they tested his patience — are enough to send almost the entire mass of spectators in the Gogol Center's large hall into paroxysms as everyone melts

into smiles and begins wiggling in their seat.

Similar are the images of laundry and dances, stolen kisses and fistfights, lonely nights and public carousing. For many in the audience at the show I attended this was a welcome, wonderful opportunity to wade in the warmth of cherished memories.

"The Yard" (Dvor) plays May 18 and 19 at 8 p.m. at the Gogol Center, located at 8 Ulitsa Kazakova. Tel. 499-262-9214. gogol-center.com*. Running time: 2 hours, 40 minutes.*

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