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# Moscow's Ten Theater Puts Shakespeare on the Menu

By John Freedman

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A puppeteer sees to the dead bodies in a performance of Shakespeare's "Richard II" at the Ten Theater.

John Freedman reminisces about the first extraordinary productions he saw at this theater 18 years ago.

It sounds like one of the worst cliches you can imagine: "one of a kind," meaning the only one like it. Anywhere. Anytime. Yeah, right.

But when that phrase is applied to the Ten (Shadow) Theater, it is the plain, unadulterated truth. This puppet theater located on the second story of an apartment building in the shadow of the rather menacing Russian Army Theater is, quite simply, a wonderland unlike any you or I have ever experienced.

It was founded — gulp! — 25 years ago by the husband and wife team of Ilya Epelbaum and Maya Krasnopolskaya. In that quarter century they turned their creation into one of the most innovative, respected little playhouses in the world. I use "little" as an affectionate diminutive, believe me. Only a handful of Moscow's theaters can, in fact, compete with

the accomplishments of Ten.

It frequently tours its unorthodox shows in Europe and, if I am not mistaken, it has won more Golden Mask awards for excellence and experimentation than the storied Valery Gergiyev at the Mariinsky Theater. That should give you some idea.

Not surprisingly, Ten's latest project is a world unto itself. It is called "Cook Cafe. W. Shakespeare." Fifteen customers sit at five tables in front of a gorgeous old armoire that has been lovingly restored and transformed into a tiny theatrical stage; are served a spectacularly attractive four-course meal; and select from a detailed menu which five of Shakespeare's plays they wish to see tonight.

That's right, five. You see, Epelbaum and Krasnopolskaya may make grand art, but they do it in miniature. In this case spectators eat well, enjoy good company and watch performances of five of Shakespeare's greatest creations, each running five to ten action-packed minutes.

The plan for the future is to provide a complete menu of all 37 Shakespeare plays. At present eight are on tap — "Two Gentlemen of Verona," "The Taming of the Shrew," "Richard II," "Othello," "Love's Labors Lost," "Titus Andronicus," "Pericles" and "The Winter's Tale."

As always, the performances are witty, wistful and beautiful. Prepare for a few sleights of hand, a bit of flying and twirling, some really fast plot advancements and — this is Shakespeare after all — plenty of corpses. In this case the dead bodies are made of wooden blocks that sometimes come together on the fly and always move deftly around the tiny stage at the end of sticks controlled by Olga Diyeva, Alexei Roslevich, Anastasiya Demikhovskaya and Artyom Chetverikov.

The occasional human hand descends rather divinely to help the mere puppet humans do what humans cannot usually do — such as soar high to the sun to give it a kiss.

Each performance is introduced by the inimitable Krasnopolskaya doing hilarious imitations of a scholar providing us with the information we crave to appreciate the great Bard's work. Whether she is telling the truth or not is irrelevant. What matters truth when delivered with such winning winks and smiles?

Now comes the time for a full disclosure. The fact is that my wife Oksana Mysina and I recorded the voices for one of two available versions of "Othello."

The good news there is that the other cast consists of Konstantin Raikin and his wife Yelena Butenko, which means I can now, forever more, say with blustery pride that I performed Othello in pairs with the great Raikin. The bad news is that, according to Epelbaum — who had the nerve to grin knowingly while telling me this — audiences rarely choose my "Othello" over Raikin's.

Well, harrumph to that. All I have to say about that is the last time I recorded the voice for a show at this theater, "The Epic of Lilikan," we won a Golden Mask. So if we repeat that next year, Mr. Raikin will still trail me two awards to one. At least on this hallowed stage.

Anyway, if you think I am biased, I dare you to see "Cook Cafe" and fail to experience delight. Go ahead. Make my day.

*"Cook Cafe" (Kuk Kafe) plays periodically to April 18 at 7 p.m. at Ten Teatr , located at 5 Okyabrskaya Ulitsa. Metro Dostoevskaya. All communications are handled through the theater's website, including the reservation of tickets at* tttttttttt.ru*. Running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes.*

Contact the author at jfreedman@imedia.ru

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