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Maksym Kurochkin Innovates Against the Odds

By John Freedman

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In Maksym Kurochkin's "Circuit Breaker," student actors portray old war veterans, grandparents, hapless writers, dueling lovers, an angel of termination and a hero of the universe.

Halfway through "Circuit Breaker" at Teatr.doc, I had a mini-revelation. Maksym Kurochkin may be the most fortunate playwright of his generation.

Now, before images of silver spoons and privileged sons blur your vision, let me explain.

Maksym Kurochkin is a playwright who seeks to create a new genre with every play he writes.

Kurochkin has not had the opportunity to do 10 percent of what he is capable of. Entrenched attitudes in theaters, misunderstandings with directors, and a general cultural lack of desire to consider seriously art that is challenging has often sabotaged his work. Even as old obstacles to new plays crumbled in the last 15 years, it still remains a struggle for any writer to move his or her work out of the tiny basements and experimental cubby holes that do provide some solace.

Were that not enough, Kurochkin was one of those recently singled out in an attack in Kultura newspaper as a propagator of sleaze and filth, to say nothing of a writer who pays insufficient attention to plot development.

All of this aside, however, Kurochkin has, little by little, forced his own unique artistic vision on the world. A quiet, self-effacing individual who is his own greatest critic, he is also tenacious, dauntless and as intellectually resilient as anyone I have ever met.

I often recall the words of Yelena Kovalskaya, currently the art director at the Meyherhold Center: "Kurochkin could be a fantastically successful commercial playwright if he wanted to be. But he refuses. He keeps writing plays that drive people crazy."

Kurochkin has had significant commercial success, but precisely with experimental plays such as the majestic "Kitchen" for Oleg Menshikov's 814 Theatrical Association in 2000, and the acidic "Repress and Excite" at Alexander Kalyagin's Et Cetera Theater in 2006.

He wrote "The Schooling of Bento Bonchev" on commission for a commercial producer who buried the play for years when he received the baffling text. Kurochkin salvaged it five years later and it was staged beautifully at the Playwright and Director Center.

Teatr.doc has been a friend to Kurochkin, staging "Homeless," a documentary play he co-authored, and "Vodka, F***ing and Television," a wicked parody of an author suffering from writer's block. Both were short-lived, but both were memorable and expressed a different side of this unusual, demanding and fertile writer.

"Circuit Breaker," a collection of seven short pieces, is another example of Kurochkin stretching his limits and having to push back to be heard. It was created as a student production at the Moscow Art Theater school, but was too brash to be performed there. Teatr.doc gave the group a stage to play on.

In short, despite the difficulties Kurochkin's work weathers to reach a public, the writer and those who are committed to him continue to find ways to get it out there. In "Circuit Breaker" he worked alongside Dmitry Brusnikin, Mikhail Mokeyev and Oleg Topolyansky to stage the piece precisely as he wanted it — dry, quick, ironic and smart.

The student actors playing old war veterans, grandparents, hapless writers, dueling lovers, an angel of termination and a hero of the universe are superb. There isn't a heavy hand among them as they breeze lightly through Kurochkin's often dense, richly intellectual and wildly satirical texts.

In a manic segment called "The Vorski are Near, But Not Enough," a professor of psychiatry literally battles his prize patient to the death. We are not privy to what makes this relationship so fierce, but the specifics of the friendship crashing move us to laughter and dread.

The final piece, "The Heavens," pits two long-suffering wives against their exalted husbands — one who would answer all the universe's questions and the other who would bring the whole thing to an end. In 10 minutes Kurochkin and his actors take us on a rollercoaster ride from the ridiculous to the sublime and back again, leaving us feeling challenged and uncertain of our beliefs.

Even in their worst, most offensive moments, these characters possess a bold, tangible confidence in their inner worth and personal value. They are colorful, convincing and provocative. Rather like their author.

"Circuit Breaker" may not last long. See it now to witness one more aspect of a writer who has a way of creating his own good fortune out of persistence, faith, stubbornness and talent.

"Circuit Breaker" (Vyklyuchatel), a production of the Dmitry Brusnikin Studio, plays May 2 and 3 at 8 p.m. at Teatr.doc, located at 11/13 Tryokhprudny Pereulok, Bldg. 1. Information at: teatrdoc.ru*. Ticket reservations: 915-199-6129. Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes.*

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