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Dodin's Larger-Than-Life Plays Grab 2 Golden Mask Awards

By John Freedman

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Sergei Kuryshev acts in Lev Dodin’s production of “An Enemy of the People,” an Ibsen play that feels like a response to the turmoil in Ukraine, about a man crushed for standing up to society.

Lev Dodin's two productions playing at the Golden Mask Festival this year grabbed two awards out of 10 nominations. The director's rendition of Friedrich Schiller's "Love and Intrigue" grabbed best large-scale dramatic production, while designer Alexander Borovsky was named best designer for his work on this show.

But awards are awards and art is art and quite often the twain between them doesn't meet.

Lev Dodin. One of the greatest theater directors of our time.

In any case, Dodin is one of those rare artists whose work justifiably takes on an aura that is larger than life, larger, even, than the huge, swirling maelstrom of contemporary artistic activity that surrounds him. Styles, fashions, trends and modern manners passed this storied director by long ago. And, yet, we keep looking back through the haze to see what he is up to.

Some may misinterpret me and think I am being harsh or even dismissive. On the contrary. Yes, it's true that Dodin is a throwback to another era. His work has deep roots in the straight-laced realism and unironic approach of the Soviet era — a relatively direct descendant of what is perceived to be Stanislavskian theater. But when I say we keep looking back at what Dodin does, I mean we continue to be amazed at how powerful that increasingly outdated kind of art can be when created by someone with Dodin's gift.

That doesn't mean Dodin always plays by the same old rules. Far from it. In "Love and Intrigue" and in Henrik Ibsen's "An Enemy of the People," both of which can be seen over the next month at the Maly Drama Theater in St. Petersburg, he applied a fine-tuned economy to these large, classic plays. In his hands "An Enemy of the People," especially, can almost be said to be a monologue enhanced with a few hard-edged group scenes.

Ibsen's "Enemy" tells the story of a principled man being crushed for standing up to weak, spineless members of society and overbearing politicians. Dodin turned it into a blistering political pamphlet, a howling rebellion against conformity, censorship, corruption and lies.

Premiering almost a year before the beginning of the information war surrounding the current Russian-Ukraine crisis, it now sounds like a bold, direct response to it. The main thrust of the play is that a doctor wishes to warn his community that a factory is poisoning the waters of the spa where he works, even if it damages his family and friends financially. But in Dodin's interpretation, the aspects of ecology and industrialization are pushed to the margins, leaving primarily a white-hot battle between truth and lies.

So pointed were the arguments made by Sergei Kuryshev, playing Doctor Stockmann, that Moscow audiences were mostly overwhelmed. Stony silence often greeted fiery, righteous speeches that one would have expected to elicit applause. One could almost hear spectators holding their breath — and sitting on their hands — wondering how they should respond.

This "Enemy" was a vivid portrait of courage, cowardice and — as Tennessee Williams might have called it — mendacity. If its style of heavily mannered acting had an old-fashioned ring, its message had a clear and piercing resonance.

In a similar fashion, Dodin recalibrated Schiller's "Love and Intrigue" as a portrait of predators (primarily President Von Walter, played by Igor Ivanov), those who would do their bidding (the courtesan Lady Milford, played by Ksenia Rappoport) and those who will perish because of them. The lovers in the tale—the lowly Luisa (Yelizaveta Boyarskaya) and the high-ranking president's son Ferdinand (Danila Kozlovsky) — are mere pawns in a game much bigger than they, no matter how hard they try to break free.

A sense of doom dominates from the first moments, even as Luisa and Ferdinand enjoy a love tryst, and it all culminates in lonely, nasty deaths among the rich, elegant surroundings of a celebratory banquet hall.

"Love and Intrigue" and "An Enemy of the People" are theater as theater used to be made decades ago, solid, nuanced, serious and psychological. Both shows are also bursting with rare, timely relevance. There is no mistaking what Dodin thinks about current events.

"An Enemy of the People" plays May 24 at 7 p.m., "Love and Intrigue" resumes performances

in the fall at the Maly Drama Theater in St. Petersburg, located at 18 Ulitsa Rubinshteina. Metro Dostoevskaya. Tel. 812-713-2078. mdt-dodin.ru. Both shows run 2 hours, 30 minutes.

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