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Ingeborga Dapkunaite Stars in Pulinovich's Latest Play 'Zhanna'

By John Freedman

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Dapkunaite plays Zhanna, a self-made woman who runs her business and her personal life with an iron fist.

Yaroslava Pulinovich has been a leading Russian playwright for half a decade yet her 27th birthday arrives only next month.

Her fame — which has spread worldwide from her hometown in Yekaterinburg — is founded for the moment on a single play — the subtle and harrowing monologue of a teenage girl called "Natasha's Dream." In Moscow it has been produced at the Playwright and Director Center, the Meyerhold Center and the Taganka Theater since it appeared in 2009.

Ilya Rotenberg's production of Pulinovich's "Zhanna" at the Theater of Nations gives us a chance to see the writer's work in a different light. It is a full-fledged play featuring six characters and about as many episodic supporting figures. Whereas the melodramatic aspects of "Natasha's Dream" are usually buried in the stark form of the monologue, "Zhanna"

emerges as a relatively straightforward melodrama.

As is customary of this writer, however, a rather cruel twist upends the story at the last minute.

Movie star Ingeborga Dapkunaite was cast in the title role especially for this production. She appears to relish the opportunity to perform on stage, and the pleasure she takes in her work is contagious. You can feel the heat of her joy even sitting in the far corner of the last row. This creates an added torque in that last moment when Dapkunaite's character takes a running leap beyond what, I think, any of us would consider to be acceptable behavior.

Zhanna is a self-made woman, rich, powerful in her own circles, and, perhaps, overly self-confident. She made her fortune in the early 1990s by buying a truckload of macaroni, slapping "Made in the U.S.A." stickers on them and selling at a huge profit to unsuspecting customers. She occupies a slick, spacious, modern apartment styled by designer Polina Grishina in blacks, whites and grays.

As the evening advances, one can't help but see, in fact, that Zhanna's insecurity and fear of being alone are at the basis of her fierce independence. She runs her chain of stores with an iron fist and bosses around her men and girlfriends as though they were employees. In fact, most of them are.

This causes especial complications for Andrei (Alexander Novin), Zhanna's latest live-in boy toy. The play begins as Andrei prepares to leave Zhanna for his true love Katya (Nadezhda Lumpova), who is pregnant, as he recently learned.

Zhanna, rather like in one of those Facebook memes, resolves not to get mad, but to get even. She fires the unfaithful lout and sees to it he'll never get another job again. From that moment on Pulinovich takes us back and forth between the two vectors of the play — Zhanna struggling to keep an even keel, and Andrei battling to keep from going under.

In Rotenberg's production this provides plenty of opportunities for stereotypical humor. We see Zhanna bullying girlfriends into enjoying the company of a bunch of male prostitutes, and we watch her fade of boredom one evening when she entices Vitaly (Andrei Fomin), a married colleague, over to her apartment for what she expects to be a bout of recreational sex. Instead, he can talk about nothing but his beloved little girl.

Vitaly's windy monologues about his lack of interest in women and his undying love for his daughter stand as large road signs, indicating just how empty Zhanna's life is. She has no connection to anyone, good or bad, strong or weak, as is made doubly clear during a visit she makes to her father's grave. She hated the man but insists on maintaining his grave plot richly, as much out of spite as anything else.

Meanwhile, Andrei's life gets harder and harder until he is pushed to the ultimate indignity. Broke and unemployed, with an unhappy wife and a newborn child on his hands, he can only turn to Zhanna to ask if she will take the young family in.

At first blush Zhanna appears to agree to take in the wayward family out of a grudging sense of propriety. However, the last phone call we see her make indicates she is as vindictive as

ever. To learn exactly what that means, you'll have to see this show yourself.

"Zhanna" plays Thursday and Friday at 8 p.m. on the small stage of the Theater of Nations, located at 3 Petrovsky Pereulok. Metro Chekhovskaya. Tel. 495-629-3739. theatreofnations.ru*. Running time: 2 hours.*

Contact the author at jfreedman@imedia.ru

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