

Coupling, Uncoupling Told With Grace and Flair

By [John Freedman](#)

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"#shakespearessonnets" uses the bard's work as a foundation for a beautifully erotic performance in spirit.

Love as death, death as love.

No, Timofei Kulyabin's production of "#shakespearessonnets" at the Theater of Nations is not a satire. Although some of the humor is so dry it puckers. For the most part, however, this cool, austere performance employing 13 of Shakespeare's sonnets gently and respectfully alights here and there on the themes of love, lust, life and the loss of them all.

Choreographed with understatement by Yevgeny Kulagin and Ivan Yestegneyev, and designed in deteriorating gray by Oleg Golovko, it is, with one or two exceptions, a quiet, subtle, thoughtful piece about what attracts, and fails to hold, human bodies together. It plays out as a dream of past encounters in a now-empty room that someone may be preparing to renovate. Here where flesh once met flesh, there is nothing but peeling walls and the ghosts of former

lovers.

Extremely chaste, in fact, "#shakespearessonnets" is a beautifully erotic performance in spirit.

A man's bared torso versus a woman's dropped shoulder strap or a dress lifted to the waist are about as daring as things get. But the five principle actors are so graceful in their movements, so willingly intent in their gazes, and so indifferently natural in their interactions that even the slightest brush of a hand or lip on a bared shoulder generates electricity.

You notice that I say "five principle actors." For, aside from the three women and two men coupling and uncoupling in ever new combinations, there are four others that sometimes accompany the pairings, but often enough hinder them. They include the piano player who increasingly hits bad keys on his instrument as the performance progresses, the singer who struggles to maintain her vocal resonance despite the deteriorating piano, and two stage hands who sit just off stage, munching lunch, sending text messages and snickering between themselves when they are not rearranging the set.

It's a wonderful division of labor. By undercutting the solemnity of things through these peripheral characters, Kulyabin is freed to be as earnest as he pleases with the actors enacting Shakespeare's sonnets. It is a clever way of buying back the right to be serious about love and sex in a world that has turned both into kitsch and commerce.

On the down side Kulyabin and his choreographers allow a few tired stereotypes to creep into their visions of modern sexuality. This is especially true in the big, central scene in which two men at length throw women around like potato sacks until they come eye-to-eye and nose-to-nose, nearly squeezing the breath out of the woman who is unfortunately stuck between them.

Am I saying this doesn't happen or that it's not a topic fit for art? Not in the least. The problem as I saw it was that it offers no insight, no intimation that, by showing us still another picture of women slammed around by men and left damaged by the wayside, we might approach a new attitude toward this maddening social phenomenon.

Kulyabin is excellent at providing and using signs of modernity. The hash mark in the title and the use of a cell phone as a source for recorded music in a Shakespearean setting are obvious cases of quick and easy ways to look hip. Why not also apply a modern attitude in your look at men, women and violence?

But aside from this scene — which, I hasten to add, is performed beautifully by the actors — this is a moving and subtle portrayal of the insurmountable obstacles that face any human attracted to another. I was especially impressed by the choreography of scenes that are not danced — and they are the majority. For much of the show we are treated to attractive, emotionally engaging scenes that affect us through a bare minimum of devices. The actors are often almost static, holding poses at length or only making the slightest of carefully calculated movements — the twist of a hand or the turn of a head.

Shakespeare's words in "#shakespearessonnets" are important, of course. But their wisdom and wit primarily create a foundation for more important or, at least, more accessible, visual

aspects. This show grabs and holds you by the way it looks and feels. Kulyabin has a genuine flair for creating theater of style and substance.

"#shakespearessonnets" (#sonetyshekspira) plays Oct. 4 and 5 at 8 p.m. at the Theater of Nations, located at 3 Petrovsky Pereulok. Metro Chekhovskaya. +7 495-629-3739, theatreofnations.ru. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes.

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