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Stanislavsky Electrotheater Opens With 'Bacchae'

By John Freedman

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Terzopoulos uses stylized costumes and makeup in his dramatization of Euripides' tale of Dionysus, god of wine.

Moscow this week lost one of its most prominent theaters, founded originally in 1935 by Konstantin Stanislavsky, the co-founder of the famed Moscow Art Theater. But as the curtain figuratively fell on the old Stanislavsky Drama Theater, located a stone's throw from Pushkin Square on Tverskaya Ulitsa, a spectacular new playhouse took its place. Welcome, Stanislavsky Electrotheater!

The transformation of the Stanislavsky into the Stanislavsky Electrotheater has been in the works for 18 months. It began when Boris Yukhananov won a competition to become its artistic director in the summer of 2013. It culminated Monday in a dazzling, edgy light show projected on the facade of the building, followed by the premiere of Euripides' "The Bacchae," directed by Greek master Theodoros Terzopoulos.

Five more shows are planned for what is left of the current season, which ends in the summer. Three shows will be directed by Yukhananov, two by others, including famed avant-garde Italian director Romeo Castellucci, who will direct "The Human Exploitation of Human Entities." It will open in mid-July.

"This theater will not represent a single point of view," Yukhananov told The Moscow Times in an exclusive interview in November. "No! I don't want that. My mission is to present this city with many different kinds of art."

Terzopoulos, the founder of the Attis Theater in Delphi, is no stranger to Moscow. He staged Heiner Muller's "Quartet" at the Taganka Theater in 1993, and Attis Theater has performed at numerous local festivals over the years. He makes ritualistic theater that employs a chanting delivery of text, finely-tuned choreographed movement, and the subtle use of music.

At least for the current block of performances of "The Bacchae" Terzopoulos himself concludes the performance by walking slowly across the stage, singing a lament in Greek.

"The Bacchae" relates the story of Dionysus, god of wine and revelry, taking revenge on his city and family for sending him into exile. In the hands of Terzopoulos it is a relatively swift, white-hot, tragic tale.

Actors, their bodies shuddering constantly as if experiencing convulsions, speak, shout and chant in a manner that is not always intelligible. The style is a combination of declaration and garbling. That is intended, of course, as Terzopoulos and his cast work their way towards a visceral and visual, rather than verbal, interpretation of human and divine justice. It might also be a tale of injustice, since justice is quite apparently in the eyes of the beholder.

Whatever the case, it is a fact of Euripides' tragedy that the young king Pentheus pays with his life for banning worship of Dionysus in Thebes. What is most galling — at least in the context of Terzopoulos' production — is that Pentheus is murdered by his mother Agaue when she is in a state of Dionysian intoxication.

Alla Kazakova turns in a searing performance as the doomed mother who realizes too late what she has done. Her long, extended shriek upon making that discovery takes her and the audience on a journey from horror to despair.

Other standout performances on the blank white stage include Yelena Morozova as Dionysus and Anton Kostochkin as her nemesis Pentheus. As do most in the company, they easily assimilate Terzopoulos' strict, formal manner of acting.

This is particularly true of the chorus consisting of four men and four women. Their crisp precision in everything from movement to speech and facial expressions establishes and maintains the visual and energetic structure of this production.

The costumes and makeup designed by Terzopoulos are as stylized and as striking as everything else. Red eyes and pasty skin are tactfully covered by futuristic-looking black garments made of coarse, finely creased material. Each actor wears a curving red line that appears to drip down their body from an ear to their belly. Is it merely effective decoration or

is a hint at blood spilling after some violent encounter?

Like much in this performance, it is up to the audience to answer to that question.

Catch "The Bacchae" while you can. Once the current performances end on Saturday, the Electrotheater turns to its next productions, Yukhananov's interpretation of Maurice Maeterlinck's "The Blue Bird," which plays from Feb. 25 to March 4, and Alexander Ogaryov's production of Cuban-American playwright Nilo Cruz's "Anna in the Tropics," running March 16 to 19.

"The Bacchae" (Vakkhanki) plays Thurs., Fri. and Sat. at 8 p.m. at the Stanislavsky Electrotheater, located at 23 Tverskaya Ulitsa. Metro Pushkinskaya. Tel. 495-699-7224. stanislavskydrama.ru*. Running time: 2 hours.*

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