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# Zombie Chekhov Play Leaves Audience Bemused

By John Freedman

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“Mertvyanov” is a zombie version of Chekhov’s “Ivanov.” The title can roughly translated as “Corpse-anov.”

It is not the best of times for Nikolai Roshchin's ARTO Theater.

Roshchin and his company are always outside the mainstream. That has been their unwavering choice. Taking their name from Antonin Artaud, the famous French theorist, they cling faithfully to his notion of the "theater of cruelty."

There is no need to overreact. Nobody sticks themselves with pins, and spectators are not taken hostage. Although at one show spectators were locked in a cage and were instructed to raise their hand if they wished to be escorted out.

City authorities recently moved ARTO out of its small venue near Chistiye Prudy to carry out renovations, and ordered it to share space with whatever is left of the former Playwright

and Director Center.

That was definitely a shotgun wedding. It's no surprise it didn't work.

Uncle Vanya and Zombies

The good news is that the reconstruction of ARTO's own space has been put on hold. That means the troupe will again perform in its own digs at least for awhile.

The bad news is that the long-term picture is muddy indeed.

I don't know if this situation influenced the making of ARTO's latest production, "Mertvyanov," a zombie-like interpretation of Anton Chekhov's early play "Ivanov." But it's true that "Mertvyanov" — which might be translated as "Corpse-anov" — could easily be subtitled "Fifty Shades of Black."

I don't know the extent to which this production was supposed to be funny. By my tastes it is very funny and surely was intended to be. None of the notations on the program indicate that, however. There we read words about "no exit," "trapped," "disgusting" and such.

It makes me wonder if director Oleg Gerasimov doesn't entirely appreciate the little gem he created.

Only the lazy don't stage zombified Chekhov these days in the United States. Google it. You might be surprised. Everybody is so sick of Chekhov, and Chekhov remains such a perfect, challenging playwright, that some artists express their admiration through parody and potshots.

I will say this: The Moscow audience with whom I watched "Mertvyanov" did not — I repeat, did not — see any humor. They watched as the blackened figures dragged their own coffins after themselves, staggered around like mini-Frankensteins, spoke in guttural, post-burial voices, and never, no never, cracked smiles as black, blood-like stuff dripped down their faces, hands and arms.

The vast majority of folks sitting around me stared on in frozen horror. As if the rigor mortis infecting everyone on stage might be contagious. I chuckled quietly so as not to offend the feelings of anyone who might be deeply attached to the dread they were experiencing.

Walking Dead actress Sarah Wayne Callies on "Chekhov and Zombies; A Match Made in Heaven."

But what I saw was a precisely conceived and rigorously executed performance that outwardly expressed a notion most observers will admit is an internal construct of this play — all of Chekhov's characters are spiritually dead. They have lost contact with whatever once made them living, feeling individuals.

Ivanov can't love either his wife or his mistress anymore. No one around him has the power to change that, or the willingness to condemn it. Only the local doctor spouts platitudes about love and duty, but that only further anesthetizes everyone's moribund ethical sensations.

Instead of going through an entire performance of this play that might lead audiences to draw this conclusion about Chekhov's characters, Gerasimov and his actors simply laid it out

immediately for everyone to see.

It is as if they are saying: "How can you not have seen this all these decades?! Everybody in Chekhov's 'Ivanov' is dead!"

The tight choreography of coffin lids snapping shut and popping open as blackened bodies lunge and jerk in deathly dances around the stage is simply too exact to be anything but funny. Humor, as we know, is all about rhythm and tempo, and this production's moves are calculated down to the smallest lurch.

I could be wrong. It wouldn't be news. But I think "Mertvyanov" is one of the funniest, boldest Chekhov experiments I have seen in some time. See it while you can. If you have a sense of humor.

*"Mertvyanov" plays Sat. and Sun. at 8 p.m. at ARTO. Theater, located at 6/1 Sretensky Bulvar, Bldg. 2. Metro Turgenevskaya. Tel. 926-811-1839.* artoteatr.com*. Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes.*

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