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Deeply Human Touch Brought to Erdman's 'The Suicide'

By John Freedman

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Yevlantyev excels as he plays the potential suicide Semyon who is sensitive, easily hurt and easily influenced.

I have written about Nikolai Erdman's tragicomedy "The Suicide" for 35 years and I have rarely seen it done with the deep, devastating understanding that Sergei Zhenovach brings to it at the Studio of Theatrical Art.

That doesn't mean this show is an unqualified success from beginning to end. It starts slowly and occasionally fumbles the tempo. That is dangerous for comedy, which needs tight rhythm as much as the surprises of language and ideas.

But whatever it lacks at a few given turns, Zhenovach's interpretation of Erdman's tale about a despairing, unemployed man who nearly commits suicide against his will has something truly valuable. It has a deeply human touch. It is tender and intimate. It usually avoids throwing Erdman's finely wrought dialogues around like slogans, so that when it does present

a loaded phrase or monologue as a major pronouncement, the audience hears it well.

Any crusty old theater rat will tell you that casting is half of a show's success. And Zhenovach struck gold with his leading couple — Vyacheslav Yevlantyev as the potential suicide Semyon, and Yevgenia Gromova as his suffering wife Masha.

I'm tempted to call Yevlantyev's Semyon cherubic. He is daisy fresh and sunbeam bright. He is sensitive, easily hurt, easily confused and easily influenced.

That proves nearly deadly for him, for he sees the logic when an unthinking neighbor tells him why he would rather commit suicide than struggle on living. He becomes even more enamored of the idea when another describes the spectacular hero's funeral he will have if he leaves a suicide note blaming all the right people.

Dazzled by thoughts of glory, Semyon steps onto the road to death.

Gromova's Masha is sweet and smart and always sympathetic to her hapless husband. These aren't stock comic characters; you see what made them fall in love sometime in the past and you see what holds them together even now, when life has gone hard. There is a real connection here and it helps us, as spectators, connect to the human — though some may say inhumane — story that unfolds.

Aside from Masha's mother Serafima, played with comic bravado by Anastasia Imamova, the young pair is surrounded by neighbors and strangers, all of whom want to play on Semyon's depression to their own gain.

The upstairs neighbor Kalabushkin (Alexei Vertkov) charges money from a gaggle of people wishing to reap benefit from Semyon's death. Among the takers are the intellectual Grand-Skubik (Grigory Sluzhitel), the writer Viktor Viktorovich (Alexander Proshin) and the Marxist mailman Yegor (Sergei Kachanov). All are slightly eccentric and slightly mannered, though never to the point of losing their humanity. They always remain people seeking to use another man to death.

Designer Alexander Borovsky walled up the stage with two stories of raggedy doors. It allows for slapstick chases and gives Zhenovach the opportunity to play entire scenes offstage. This allows him to keep the stage free of realistic details — no beds, tables or tea cups — and keep the focus on people and predicaments.

Once the production builds up a head of steam, the laughs come fast and furious.

It's another thing that Erdman has us howling at topics that are deadly serious. Some may feel awkward laughing at some of the jokes. And with the murder of Boris Nemtsov still fresh in our minds, to say nothing of the ongoing, frantic discussions about who that murder is most advantageous to, there are definitely moments when art, life and death come painfully, awkwardly close to one another.

But this production rises to the challenge, offering an ending that turns everything around.

In good faith I can't describe it, but I can say this: Watch Yevlantyev's Semyon when he and everyone else on stage hear utterly unexpected news. He has just delivered a heart-

wrenching speech about his right to live a decent life in a whisper. He appeals to audience members personally and drives his message home with sincerity.

Then, wham! That news arrives. And it changes everything. Two or three words and, suddenly, the hapless hero turns anti-hero. What does he do now? What does this say about us?

See "The Suicide" to find out.

"The Suicide" (Samoubiitsa) plays Fri., Tues., April 9, 24, and 29 at 7 p.m. at the Studio of Theatrical Art, located at 21 Ulitsa Stanislavskovo, Bldg. 7. Metro Taganskaya. Tel. 495-646-7459. sti.ru. Running time: 3 hours, 35 minutes.

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