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Shakespeare's 'Dream' is Magic at Fomenko Theater

By John Freedman

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It is no secret that following the death of founder Pyotr Fomenko in 2012, the Fomenko Workshop Theater drifted a bit.

Make no mistake. It remains one of this city's most popular venues. Its hall is packed with appreciative audiences every night. But the venue's creative mojo slipped. Its shows have often seemed to be shadows of former greatness.

But now comes Ivan Popovski's production of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream." And the old magic snapped back in place.

Light, airy, romantic, energetic and funny are just a few words that come to mind to describe it. Those are words we used to apply to productions by Fomenko himself.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" is a stylistic and spiritual homecoming for the theater. It is fitting that Popovski staged it.

If you have forgotten, Popovski could be said to be the one who had the idea for the theater in the first place.

It was way back in 1991. Fomenko was working with his first group of students at the State Institute of Theater Arts, and Popovski, a Macedonian citizen who was one of those students, staged a show with his classmates in a corridor. This tiny production of Marina Tsvetaeva's "The Adventure" hit Moscow like a hurricane.

Popovski was hailed as a star, Fomenko was crowned the "great teacher," the actors were compared to Russia's top veterans, and people began suggesting this group needed to remain together as a professional company after graduation.

And so it did happen; the Fomenko Workshop became one of Moscow's most beloved theaters. Not all of it was thanks to Popovski, perhaps, but all of it started with his beautiful little "Adventure."

"Midsummer Night's Dream" is every bit as beautiful, but there is nothing little about it. Popovski embraces every space on stage, including the flies under the ceiling, the corridors in the hall among the spectators, and even the balconies above.

He casts a handful of his old classmates in key roles, and all respond with excellent performances. But this show is carried by a quartet of actors who may not even have been born when "The Adventure" knocked Muscovites off their feet.

Irina Gorbachyova unleashes fireworks of humor and female fortitude as Helena, the young woman, whom young men oddly avoid. As her best friend Hermia, who plans to defy her father and marry her sweetheart Lysander, Serafima Ogaryova is a wonderfully headstrong pepper pot.

Alexander Michkov's slightly dreamy, slightly haughty Lysander is the quintessential youth who loves with abandoned, but inconstant, passion. Yury Butorin's Demetrius is more the opportunist among the group, the kid who quietly will always end up doing all right no matter what.

Thrown together in the "woods of Athens" — which Popovski depicts by the use of hanging silks and strategically placed spotlights — these four epitomize young hormones running wild. Love is everywhere in the air — it is confusing, it is painful when it bites, and nothing is more thrilling than when it is met with love requited.

Of course, the quartet's shenanigans are caused largely by the hobgoblin Puck (Ambartsum Kabanyan) who overdoes the orders of his master Oberon (Karen Badalov) to wreak some havoc by sprinkling love dust on a few pairs of sleeping eyes.

Oberon wants to teach his queen Titania (Galina Tyunina) a lesson by making her fall in love with a monster, but the overeager Puck turns the whole wood into a world of affections turned topsy-turvy.

Badalov and Tyunina, who starred in Popovski's debut 24 years ago, play both the fairies of the wood and the royal Theseus and Hippolyta, who rule over all. They do so with the dry wit and irony that always marked the best of Fomenko's work.

Another Fomenko veteran, Rustem Yuskayev, leads the hilarious group of craftsmen putting on a play to celebrate all the weddings that happen at play's end. It is the kind of loving parody of theater that can be done only by actors who know all the screwy ins and outs of the theater art.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" is the best show the Fomenko Workshop has offered in some time.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" plays Thurs., Fri. and July 26 at 7 p.m. at the Fomenko Workshop Theater, 29 Naberezhnaya Tarasa Shevchenko. Metro Kutuzovskaya. 499-249-1921. Running time: 3 hours, 40 minutes.

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