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# Moscow's Teatr.doc Explores Tangled Relations in '24 Plus'

By John Freedman

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Relationships, sexual and emotional, get tangled in Ugarov and Kurochkin's new play "24 Plus" at Teatr.doc.

Nothing less than the biblical tale of Sodom and Gomorrah suggests that when societies go into decline, the populace escapes into sex. What else can you do? You might as well have a little fun while the handbasket is on its way to hell.

At the tail end of last season Teatr.doc unveiled a show called "Forgiving Betrayal," a sometimes piquant look at two couples whose love lives are intertwined. This season's offerings begin with "24 Plus," an even saucier look at 2 1/2 pairs playing musical beds.

Is Doc, as its fans call it colloquially, trying to tell us something? Should we be looking out for falling ionic columns?

"24 Plus," whose title is a play on the age restrictions that the Russian government has put

on art and entertainment in recent times, is plenty explicit in the tale it tells. A happily married young woman finds herself having wild sex on a construction site with a stranger, who — after a lot of talk and a lot of different versions of what really happened among the five people drawn into shared stories — ends up sharing the same bed with the woman and her moderately jealous husband.

"24 Plus" was written by Mikhail Ugarov with help from Maksym Kurochkin, and it was directed by Ugarov with assistance from Alexei Zhiryakov.

Ugarov, the artistic director of Doc, kicks off the performance by asking if anyone in the hall is offended by off-color language, or, if anyone is easily offended by anything at all. If so, he intones to the laughter of many in attendance, please feel free to bail out now, before the performance begins.

The piece consists of a series of stories told by the various participants.

Nastya (Anastasia Slonina) stands forth and narrates her story of her happy marriage suddenly under challenge because she began having crazy good sex with a young hitchhiker. She also has crazy good sex with her husband, too, she assures us.

Her husband Anton (Anton Ilyin) rather grimly confirms this information by telling the tale as he experienced it.

Kolya (Nikolai Mulakov), the hitchhiker and lover, overturns much of what we have heard by sharing his interpretation of things. Nastya more than implies that she was drawn to Kolya by a magical erotic attraction that the universe would not possibly allow to be denied. Kolya hints he was virtually overwhelmed by a woman who would not leave him in peace until he gave her what she wanted.

The two men's ex-girlfriends, Marina (Marina Ganakh) and Liza (Liza Vitkovskaya), add their takes on matters, undercutting any efforts by Anton or Kolya to make themselves look like poor-me victims.

All the women's stories of love, lust, sex, betrayal and forgiveness are delivered by actresses wearing big smiles and speaking in soft, understanding, ironic tones. The men are more likely to grow confused and angry.

The narratives primarily remain hermetic. That is, they are usually cut-and-dried stories delivered by individuals who expect us to believe that they are telling us the truth, and nothing but the truth.

On rare occasion parallel tales slip into dialogue between characters, giving us an idea about how each of the stories are probably flawed. That becomes particularly clear when the three primary characters strip down to their birthday suits and hop into bed together.

The threesome aside, however, "24 Plus" is mostly talk, talk, talk. There are some clever lines here and there, but few have the power or insight of the dialogue in other sex plays by Ugarov ("Masquerade, Masquerade") or Kurochkin ("The Schooling of Bento Bonchev").

The authors fill their play with as many slang words, fashionable habits and pop references as

possible, grabbing laughs with punchlines about IKEA, iPhones, Facebook, the shaving of pubic hair and the sexual stimulant of scarfing.

At its best it can sound like a witty conversation overheard in the metro. At its worst it sounds like one of those ghastly relationship articles in Cosmopolitan.

True, there is an effort to turn the conversation to considerations of a new world order toward the end, but by this time "24 Plus" has settled into relatively routine superficiality.

That said, "24 Plus" provides lively performances by its entire cast. And it is another in a series of productions at Doc that explore people living lives outside of accepted social norms.

*"24 Plus" plays Sun., Sept. 27 and 28 at 8 p.m. at Teatr.doc, located at 12 Maly Kazyonny Pereulok. Metro Kurskaya. Tel. 916-653-0989.* teatrdoc.ru*. Running time: 2 hours.*

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