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An English Tour de Force at Moscow's Meyerhold Center

By Andrei Muchnik

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Stephen Ochsner performs in English on Wed. at the Meyerhold Center.

In a rare instance of an English-language theater performance in Moscow, the Meyerhold Center (TsIM) is staging "The Maxims of Peter Pockets," an adapted version of "Sentensii Panteleya Karmanova," one of the first stories written by prominent Russian playwright and director, Ivan Vyrypaev.

Vyrypaev started out as an actor in his hometown of Irkutsk and other Siberian cities, but then he moved to Moscow and started a career as a theater director and soon became quite well-known as one of the most cutting-edge contemporary directors in Russian theater. He also directed several successful movies, including "Kislorod" (Oxygen) and "Eiforiya" (Euphoria), which won the Little Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. His latest film, "Spasenie" (Salvation) was released last September to critical acclaim.

Sentensii Panteleya Karmanova, originally a story rather than a play, was first staged a couple

of years ago by Armenian director Zara Antonyan. The entire play is performed by a single actor, American Stephen Ochsner. It's the story of an eleven-year journey that the main character, Pantelei, takes from Siberia to Moscow in post-Soviet Russia. But it's not your typical road trip. It's more a quest for the meaning of life and love.

Ochsner was born in Colorado Springs. After reading all of Anton Chekhov's plays, he became fascinated with Russian theater: "There was something in the atmosphere of Moscow theater that seemed mysterious to me, while at the same time seemed like a sort of key that would help me open my understanding of the profession I had chosen." He studied at the American Studio at MKhAT for a semester and later came back to study at MKhAT in Russian. After a while he started rehearsing at the Meyerhold Theatre Center, where he met the future director of Maxims, Zara Antonyan. Now they live together in Armenia, and Ochsner works at the Yerevan State Institute of Theatre and Film and the Yerevan State Puppet Theatre.

After performing Sententsii for a couple of years, Ochsner sought and received an agreement from Vyrypaev to adapt the story for an English-speaking audience. The journey now takes place in America, and the main character's name has been changed to Peter Pockets. The adaptation, "The Maxims of Peter Pockets," has already been performed in Colorado and New York City.

Ochsner explains his reasoning for doing an adaptation rather than a translation: "All references to literature, history, geography and social life need to be instantly recognizable for the audience. If someone is stuck on the words "syrok Druzhba," for example, because I translated it as "Friendship cheesecake," they will (a) begin to miss the next few seconds of text and (b) miss part of the code that Viripaev wrote into it. There are quite a few of these moments, so we decided to adapt it. It is a kind of experiment about cultural identification and universal questions that maybe every human being has."

Ochsner and Antonyan are planning to organize a U.S. tour of "Maxims" in the spring of 2018.

You can watch the trailer here.

Meyerhold Center. 23 Novoslobodskaya Ulitsa. Metro Novoslobodskaya. meyerhold.ru*. Wed. at 7.30.*

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