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# Kirill Serebrennikov’s 'Little Tragedies'

## At the Gogol Center, the show goes on — with an edge

By Andrei Muchnik

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"Burn" the text reads, "Burn your word into human hearts." **Ira Polyarnaya**

At the end of the show at the Gogol Center when the initial round of applause begins to fade, actors carry a large screen onstage. After a moment, the familiar face of Kirill Serebrennikov is projected onto the screen. One of Russia’s leading theater and film directors makes funny faces and smiles. Unfortunately, he cannot attend “Little Tragedies,” his latest premiere at Gogol Center, in person. Serebrennikov spends the evening in his apartment, under house arrest — which was just extended for another three months until mid-January.

The director was able to do most of the preparatory work before his highly theatrical arrest in St. Petersburg and all-night drive to Moscow for interrogation on charges many deem “Kafkaesque.” The last rehearsals took place without Serebrennikov, but “Little Tragedies,” based on four short dramas in verse penned by Russia’s greatest poet, Alexander Pushkin,

were ready for the stage.

“Little Tragedies” is not the first time Serebrennikov has tried to tackle a Russian classic. Some of his best productions have been based on such works as “A Common Story” by Ivan Goncharov, “Dead Souls” by Nikolai Gogol and "Who Lives Well in Russia?" by Nikolai Nekrasov. In “Little Tragedies” Serebrennikov stays close to the words of the classic, but updates and sometimes revolutionizes the meaning.

## Angels and Train Station Waiting Rooms

The opening scene is classic Serebrennikov: a waiting room, probably at a small town’s train station full of the usual suspects: a saleswoman behind a dirty food stall, a couple of women with huge checkered bags, a policeman eating instant noodles, and a panhandler playing an accordion. Under the ceiling there’s a TV broadcasting news about Putin, but it’s just a coincidence. It’s live TV and the news could have been about Serebrennikov himself. While this is going on, the audience is entering and taking their seats.

Meanwhile, “The Prophet,” a famous poem by Pushkin, appears line by line on a screen on stage. When the words “With his sharp sword he cleaved my breast, and plucked my quivering heart out” appear on the screen, a seraph — a six-winged angel — appears and does exactly that to one of the people in the waiting room (Filipp Avdeyev). The encounter is shown in a horror movie style, with plenty of blood and gore. Then the angel replaces the heart with coals and the screen shows the word “burn,” which corresponds to the words of the poem “burn human hearts with words” and becomes a common theme of the whole production.

That’s the moment when the rapper Husky (Dmitry Kuznetsov) appears and starts rapping one of the tracks from his latest album “Favorite Songs of Imaginary People” (Lubimie pesni voobrazhaemikh lyudei). Husky’s appearances are in between the “little tragedies.” One might say that Husky’s character on stage is meant to represent today’s Pushkin. Sometimes he raps together with Avdeyev, another incarnation of the Poet in this production.

Husky’s recent rise to stardom with his low-fi, black-and-white videos and patter of a simple guy who grew up in a “panelka” (panel house in Russian, as well as the name of one of Husky’s hits) reflects Russians desire to listen to more meaningful lyrics than the adapted Western tropes that mainstream local rappers like Timati are known for.

## Four Little Tragedies

After “The Prophet,” the “Little Tragedies” start, first with “Mozart and Salieri,” Pushkin’s take on a well-known legend that the genius Mozart was poisoned by his mediocre colleague. They are played, respectively, by Filipp Avdeyev and Nikita Kukushkin, arguably the best actors raised by Serebrennikov and his “Seventh Studio,” the company currently under criminal investigation. Then comes “The Miserly Knight,” with one of the most memorable performances of the show by Alexei Agranovich as the Baron. In Serebrenninov’s version, the Baron hoards not gold but books — a sign of the times.

This is followed by “The Stone Guest,” the familiar legend of Don Juan, spelled by Pushkin as Don Guan. The lead is played by Semyon Shteinberg. It is generally believed that Pushkin’s retelling of Don Juan’s story is at least partially based on the poet’s own wild youth. Finally, “A Feast in Time of Plague” gathers all the “old guard” of the Gogol Center (before Serebrennikov came to the theater), with the one exception of the “younger” Agranovich, who plays the Chairman.

Without revealing all the brilliant twists Serebrennikov put in “Little Tragedies,” it’s not a spoiler to mention that the Baron’s son Alber takes part in motorcycle races instead of jousting tournaments, Don Guan reminisces about his trysts with a tape recorder, and the guests at “A Feast in Time of Plague” get together at the retirement home for actors.

Serebrennikov sprinkled “Little Tragedies” with cameos of other poems by Alexander Pushkin with sly references to current events. For example, there are quotes from the poem “October 19,” which coincidentally was the date of another of Serebrennikov’s appearances in court, where his lawyers tried to repeal the house arrest to no avail.

But probably the most moving and memorable poetic cameo was “Presentiment” at the very end of the production. Highlighted on the closing curtain, the lines are addressed to an angel, but read as a message to Serebrennikov himself:

“But divining separation –

That appalling, fateful trice –

I squeeze your hand with such passion

As if this time were the last.”

Check the
site of the Gogol Center for January productions.

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