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Dmitry Krymov's Mad, Mad World

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Maxim Sukhanov and Chulpan Khamatova **Viktoria Nazarova**

Riga was the first stop on a tour of a new play written and directed by Dmitry Krymov starring just two actors: Maxim Sukhanov and Chulpan Khamatova. It is called "Notes of the Mad," invoking the tradition of literary works about mad Russians that began two centuries ago with Nikolai Gogol.

The premiere began with some contemporary madness. The play was contracted to be performed on the stage of the National Latvian Theater, but in June the theater decided that it would not put on any Russian-language performances until the end of Russia's war with Ukraine. No other theaters were available on short notice. In the end the performance was held in a warehouse on the outskirts of the city where the troupe had been rehearsing.

Oddly enough, this might have been a better choice. The ticket holders had to take long car rides all the way across Riga's elegant city center, into an industrial district and then through a maze of factory buildings up to a warehouse with an enormous gaping entrance. Inside a bar and tables were set up on a concrete floor next to a makeshift stage and seating area. It all felt

a bit crazy before the play even began.

The play begins with the Sukhanov character waking up in a decidedly downscale, one-room, Soviet-era apartment, the kind you find everywhere from Riga to Kamchatka. He stumbles from the couch into the bathroom (curtain pulled discreetly as he empties his bladder) and then into the kitchen to fry a few eggs and dolefully eat them. It all seems desperately poor and depressed.

The Chulpan Khamatova character blunders in and out, first dressed as a ladybug, then a cockroach, then as a kind of cactus queen extolling the delights of an armful of cacti, and finally in a wig of frowsy white hair and schoolmarm clothes, explaining to children in perfect, rather old-fashioned Russian and a lovely lisp how to properly put together a model airplane. But it's all a bit mad and violent. Nothing works out right.

At some point the audience begins to understand that they are actors, and not, it would seem, very successful actors. Scripts come out, titles appear above the stage: Romeo and Juliet, Antigone, Anne Frank. The two actors read some lines. They perform a bit. They argue. Khamatova wants to play Antigone; she covers her face in dirt in mourning and quietly repeats one line: "I must bury my brother."

Khamatova disappears offstage and comes back transformed into the 13-year-old Anne Frank, reciting her diary entries in a thin, childish voice as she writes them on Sukhanov's white shirt, crawling around and over and under him, twisting inside his shirt and then out again, talking about her plans for the future until she is catches sight of military officers entering Sukhanov's apartment and conducting a search.

There are storms and explosions. Towards the end Sukhanov — a big man who seems to exude malevolence even when he smiles — comes out and appears to break out of character, lighting up a cigarette and jovially chatting with the audience. Through clever stagecraft the characters come in and out of stage life and real life. When it's over, there is silence until the actors and director come out for their bows. It was a rough two hours.

With Krymov's plays, it's easy to describe what happens on stage; but it's not always easy to say what it all means. Krymov described it as a play about "the problem of life not lived fully or to the end" that many people are experiencing today — "actors who haven't played the roles they long to play, who hide in costumes" who feel like this is their last chance. He called it a "phantasmagorical story about people who are lost in time and space."

A good part of the audience in Riga was made up of people who had fled Russia or Ukraine — that is, people "lost in time and space." The play, it seemed to us, was about the lives shattered in 2022, lives that didn't turn out as hoped, lives not being lived fully; about people trying on new roles, making plans that fall apart in storms or fly to pieces in explosions; about people watching as police search apartments, trying to put on a good face but falling apart, wondering if there's still a chance to succeed or if it's too late. And about some, like Antigone, who sit in mourning and quietly repeat: "I must bury my brother."

For updates on the show and performances, check the Krymov Lab Facebook page here.

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