

Pushing Pushkin's Borders

By John Freedman

A show such as "Eugene Onegin ... Pushkin" is a show after my own heart. You will understand why that is true literally if you read on, but I also mean that in the common, conversational sense.

I like directors who take chances; actors who don't take themselves too seriously on stage; and shows that surprise me.

Directed by Mikhail Krylov and ably produced by the ever quality-conscious Bogis Agency, "Eugene Onegin ... Pushkin" does that and more. It also features a young cast of three that brings excitement, energy and a splash of contemporary irony to their work, while doing a fine, respectfully irreverent job of updating a classic novel.

Krylov did what any good artist knows to do: He latched onto the obvious and worked from there.

Alexander Pushkin's Onegin is a self-centered dandy, a gadfly flitting aimlessly from party to ball. He is the type who looks into a pretty woman's eyes in order to see his own dashing reflection. Perhaps that is why he never sees the fascinating Tatyana until it is too late — because she was ready to give him herself, not just an ego rub.

Krylov, who plays Onegin himself, throws at us a

marvelously multilayered character.

But he is primarily a wild caricature, a parody of such exaggeration that he could have dropped in from a comic strip.

Onegin's shiny black costume designed by Anna Buravtsova hangs loosely on top of an unbuttoned white shirt with collars so fat and long they seem to have been growing since the 1970s. And under the guidance of choreographer Mikhail Lavrovsky, Onegin never makes a move that doesn't shriek, "I am *too cool!*" He is a cross between the John Travolta of "Saturday Night Fever" and "Pulp Fiction" with the advantage of having popped an extra handful of amphetamines.

Krylov is a scream, jerking around the stage, striking poses, shaking his tail, slicking back his hair and wiggling his extended thumbs with icy self-adoration. When combined with Pushkin's luscious, ironical verse text, this hilarious image does exactly what good theater should: It retrieves Onegin from the age in which he was created, the 1820s, and makes of him a hero of our time.

The actor's triumph,

however, is not only that he pulls off a masterful parody, but that he is also a charmer. He so adores himself, we suspect he has reason to.

As in love, however, it takes two to tango and Krylov's main partner is a gem. Playing Tatyana, Tatyana's vacant sister Olga and even briefly assuming the persona of Onegin when Krylov takes on the part of the pompous romantic poet Lensky whom Onegin will blithely kill in a duel, Galina Kashkovskaya radiates a fresh-scrubbed innocence, a quirky sense of humor and an alluring sexuality so chaste it almost aches.

When sharing the text of Pushkin's narrator with Krylov, Kashkovskaya occasionally slips into that modern drawl no Moscow girl could live without today. And she punctuates her speech perfectly with that trademark Moscow jackknifed hip, rolling eyes and lazy, bored sneer.

Krylov personalizes the show by having his actors often speak directly to the spectators. This sets the stage for something I soon will not forget.

Pushkin's Tatyana, when she realizes she has fallen in love with Onegin, wastes no time. She sits down immediately to bear her soul to him on paper. To make the spectators squirm under the force of her emotions, Kashkovskaya selects one man from the audience and passionately addresses her entire love letter — some consider it the greatest passage in all of Russian literature — to him and him alone.

I am still swooning as I write, for Kashkovskaya poured Tatyana's heart out to me.

As a hardened professional critic I'll declare that Kashkovskaya played this scene brilliantly; as a weak-kneed non-professional, let me tell every male reader to ask for front-row center — it's a great seat, men.

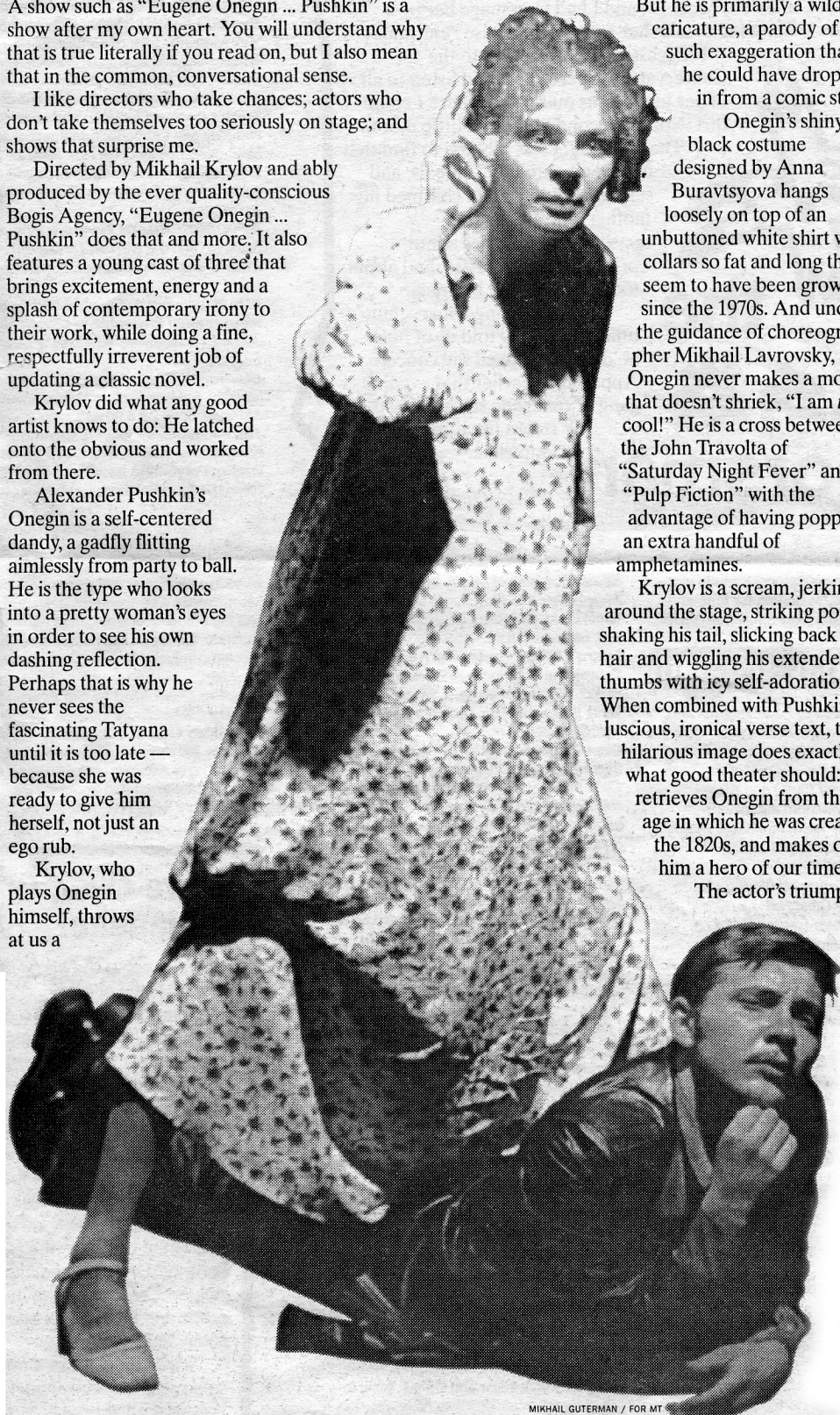
Joining the splendid duo of Kashkovskaya and Krylov is Alexander Kochubei. This all-purpose, muscle-bound figure dressed in a black body stocking plays anything ranging from elements of nature and dream images to the pompous general Tatyana marries before Onegin realizes his error.

Kochubei's versatility makes it possible for the entire performance to be conducted on an empty stage whose only significant prop is a mobile brass bed on wheels. This keeps our attention focused where it should be — on the characters and on the relationships between them ... and us.

"Eugene Onegin ... Pushkin" is a delightful example of theater bringing literature to life.

And now one final word for the enchanting Ms. Kashkovskaya, I mean Tatyana: Galya, I mean Tanya, give me one more chance to be your Onegin and this time I won't blow it. I swear. To hell with Pushkin.

"Eugene Onegin ... Pushkin," a production of the Bogis Agency, plays Oct. 1, 2 and 3 at 7 p.m. at the Manezh Exhibition Hall, located at 1 Manezh Square. Metro Okhotny Ryad. Tel. 290-3239. Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes.



MIKHAIL GUTERMAN / FOR MT

Kashkovskaya and Krylov are splendid as Tanya and Onegin in Krylov's inventive take on Pushkin.