

'Immersion' Inspires With Honesty

By John Freedman

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When the Bogis Agency independent production company first appeared on Moscow marquees two years ago it served notice that its credo would be quality. Its "Nijinsky" was one of that season's best shows, and the following year it came in with another big winner called "Bashmachkin." Both shows raked in prizes, rave reviews and full houses.

Bogis's newest will not match its predecessors. "Immersion," Natalya Boiko's first play, is too modest theatrically and too personal to inspire large numbers. Furthermore, Irina Borodulina's direction (she also plays the female part in this two-actor show) is self-effacing to a fault.

Still, "Immersion" is an admirable piece of work, mainly because of its makers' tangible sense of sincerity and commitment. They have the energy and undisciplined talent of youth, and that alone makes them interesting.

The show's three scenes run just over an hour, touching briefly and obscurely on a few moments in the uneasy relationship of a young woman and man. Unable to stay together, they are equally incapable of making a break. Often — especially in the first scene with its voices coming out of the ether, its fragmented memories and its image of the young man as a bear — the setting may be the interior of one of the young woman's dreams.

Most important, as already tipped off in the title, "Immersion" is a journey into its heroine's unguarded thoughts.

Borodulina nicely captures the feel of a young woman wandering in the blank spaces between hope and resignation. Wearing a charming smile and speaking in her uplifting, half-laughing voice, the actress in her best moments also saves room for a nagging sense of doubt. We see the consequences of her being simultaneously tugged in different directions: She is attracted by happiness, wanting to believe in it, but she does not really believe it is possible, and does not even know what it is.

We never quite learn who this woman is. We know that she cherishes a toy train she has kept from childhood, we know she corresponded with a man she has not seen for 10 years, we know she is writing a tragic novel about skindivers, and we



M. GUTERMAN / FOR MT

Irina Borodulina and Dmitry Pavlenko performing in Bogis's "Immersion," a new play by Natalya Boiko.

know she is 30 years old — although she says she's just 27. But none of that really brings us any closer to understanding her.

Also at a loss to make sense of her is her lanky boyfriend. As played by Dmitry Pavlenko, he is sensitive and gentle at heart, if also an imposter. He claims in the first scene to be a harmless bear, while we learn in the second that he is an ex-con. After his wife left him, he began sneaking peeks at the letters his neighbor kept receiving from a far-off admirer, and that is how he fell in love with the mysterious woman.

Naturally, nothing is that straightforward in this story that largely consists of unspoken thoughts and unfinished conversations. And since the performance lacks a sense of dynamic movement or

rhythm which might have made things more coherent, it has a tendency to drift aimlessly, relying solely on charm to keep the audience's attention.

"Immersion" is primarily attractive for its honesty and freshness. That refers not only to Boiko's sketchy but intriguing play, and the unassuming performances by Borodulina and Pavlenko, but the Bogis Agency itself. It has shown once again that a key component of quality is having the courage to take risks.

"Immersion" (Pogruzhenie), a production of the Bogis Agency, plays April 28, May 3, 7 and 10 at 7 p.m. at the Moscow Municipal Theater on the Arbat, 44 Sivtsev Vrazhek, entrance in the courtyard. Tel. 203-4480. Running time: 1 hour, 10 mins.