



Fokin's production intimately portrays the royal family's last days down to the children's diamond-inlaid underwear that thwarted their executioners' bullets.

# A Stellar Play Recasts the Tsar's Demise

By John Freedman

STAFF WRITER

The presence of Valery Fokin alone might be enough to vouch for the robust health of theater in Moscow.

He is not alone, of course, and shares the spotlight with a number of talented directors, some veterans, many newcomers. But Fokin, who turned 50 in the spring, is clearly in a category of his own. "Better" or "best" isn't the point. What is, is vision, individuality and style. Fokin has a surfeit of them, and when he is on, he is capable of creating great art and thrilling theater.

There are moments of greatness in Fokin's production of Edvard Radzinsky's "The Last Night of the Last Tsar." It has the same barrage of imagination which lifted the director's recent productions of "The Metamorphosis" and "A Hotel Room in the Town of N" to the status of theatrical events, but leaves you feeling as if you've seen nothing like it.

Once again, Fokin has taken total control of the environment. We gather outside a circus tent whence emanate the sounds of applause, motorcycles and drum rolls, and take our seats inside as acrobats do a trapeze act.

It is a brazen, maybe even reckless move to make a "circus" of the story of the murder of Russia's last royal family, although the justification is there both in Radzinsky's pliable if unspectacular play and Fokin's attitude to the historical event which provoked it.

Less the tale of the demise of the Romanovs, this is an exploration of the two men closest to the bloody act: Yakov Yurovsky, a former photographer who fired the bullet at the tsar, and Fyodor Lukoyanov, a.k.a. Comrade Maratov, the head of

the local secret police.

Yurovsky's utterly fantastic ability to disengage himself from conscience makes him quite like a clown, while Lukoyanov is something of a tight-rope walker balancing unsteadily between revolutionary dogma and moral responsibility.

The action commences with Lukoyanov (Yevgeny Mironov) visiting the dying Yurovsky (Mikhail Ulyanov) in the hospital. Lukoyanov, tormented by his grim role in history, has come to seek the truth about that last night. Yurovsky, dull and incapable of introspection, just wants a pill to help him sleep. It is in their conversations and arguments that the images of the tsar's family take flesh.

Nikolai (Alexander Zbruyev) and Alexandra (Irina Kupchenko) appear in a tranquil, idyllic light, as they find in their prison room the "luxury" of merely being a husband and wife. He lovingly recounts his daughters' flaws, she tells quietly of having sewed diamonds into her children's undergarments. That, incidentally, is why it was so difficult to kill the heirs — bullets bounced off them as if they were wearing armor.

The narrative lurches and surges as the focus shifts between Yurovsky's hospital room and the chamber holding Nikolai and Alexandra. The royal daughters appear as a quartet of lithe ballerinas. Alexei, the hemophilic son dressed in a sailor's suit, enters with a bit of circus flair, circling the ring as if acknowledging applause. As his sisters dance and sing a bit of nonsense, Alexei takes an agile leap over the bed of his father's killer. It is a moment of grace and triumph. But when that leap is repeated once the tale has become more macabre, it acquires stinging, emotional power.

This is Fokin at his best; masterfully manipulating unexpected and seemingly insignificant details

which deepen the action's impact.

Working with him hand in hand is Alexander Bakshi, whose alternately gasping, nervous and comical music — performed on and off stage by Tatyana Grindenko's Academy of Ancient Music, a string quintet — creates aural complements and counterparts to the visuals.

Mironov is the catalyst among the cast, giving a naive yet profoundly probing interpretation of Lukoyanov. Whether recalling his attraction to Anastasia with pain and disbelief at what befell her, or ripping out folk songs with resigned desperation, Mironov is fully in sync with Radzinsky's moral investigation and Fokin's unorthodox framing of it.

As Nikolai, Zbruyev maintains calm and personable dignity with tangible warmth. Kupchenko's Alexandra has a noble inner beauty which even the rare slip into theatrical hysteria cannot shake. Far more problematic is Ulyanov's Yurovsky. A much-honored actor and public figure, Ulyanov seems confused and ill at ease, neither getting inside his character nor creating the clown one suspects Fokin was after.

But this show, mixing drama, ballet, music and the circus, is bigger, broader and deeper than any single performance, with the possible exception of Mironov's. It is a compelling, thought-provoking look at the Russian legacy, and another gem from a director at the peak of his powers.

*"The Last Night of the Last Tsar" ("Poslednyaya noch poslednego tsarya"), a production of the Bogis Agency with the participation of the Anatoly Voropayev Production Company, plays Wednesday, Nov. 7, 9 and 10 at 8:30 p.m. at the Manezh Exhibition Hall, Manezh Square. Tel. 251-8784, 244-0344. Running time: 1 hour, 45 mins.*