

PLAYS

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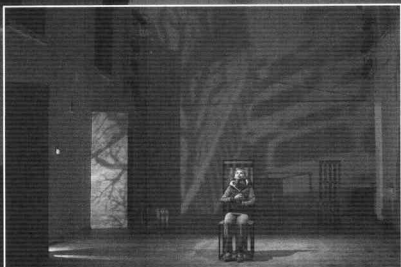
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JOHN FREEDMAN

in Moscow

Pulya by Natalya Moshina at the Playwright and Director Centre is the latest in a long line of Russian-language plays about teenagers. Moshina is a writer from Belarus who has had international success with plays such as *Techniques of Breathing in an Airlocked Space*, produced by London's Sputnik Theatre. *Pulya*, the title of which refers to a young woman's name but is also the word for 'bullet' in Russian, consists of dialogues for an actor and an actress. But there is a delicate arc to the journey on which Pulya embarks that sets this play apart from others similar to it.

Director Viktoriya Zvyagina and designer Anna Perezhogina did a fine job tapping into the work's delicacy. They covered the entire stage in tiny scraps of paper, which probably indicate a snowfall but also suggest the frailty and gentleness of a world inundated in feathers. Props are hidden beneath the paper snow, and actors pull them out as if by magic when they are necessary. Playing with deeply colored lighting of blue and green, Zvyagina gives an unearthly feel to the goings-on of the play. Indeed, most of what we see is probably taking place in another realm.

Alexei Usoltsev, Vanya Moiseev and Pavel Ilyin in Alexei Burykin's Others' Windows, a joint production in Moscow by the Boris Agency and the Open Stage Project. Photo: Nikolsi Zvyaginsteve.



Pulya (Anastasia Marchuk) is reliving her life in her mind, perhaps after death. But whatever the character's reality, the play observes Pulya's recollections from her earliest experiences in the womb through into young adulthood, when she meets a man who may be of dubious character but who initiates her into sex and passion.

There is a man (Yevgeny Antropov) alongside Pulya at almost all times. He may be her father, her first lover or the fateful man she eventually falls in love with. In all cases, they are her foils, a background, of sorts, against which her life unfolds.

Pulya's life is not easy. There are indications of heavy drinking, suicidal tendencies and violence done to her — both physical and mental. Her first awareness of herself occurs in early childhood when a boy calls her 'ugly, with crooked teeth.' It is a devastating revelation — she had always considered herself utterly charmed and charming.

Marchuk is superb as the introspective and sensitive Pulya. She has an inquisitiveness, a strength and a vulnerability that make her character irresistible. Her most touching moments are spent with her father, although it's not until she crosses paths with the nameless, pistol-packing man that she blossoms as an adult. It is no easy task for an actress to travel the distance between a foetus and a female of sexual maturity in less than 90 minutes. Marchuk does it with ease and assurance.

Others' Windows, produced by the Bogis Agency and Open Stage Project, is another work that reaches beyond life's known limits to tell its tale. In a short prologue playwright and director Alexei Burykin adapts parts of William Saroyan's *Coming through the Rye*, a play about four unborn souls discussing what will happen after birth. The bulk of Burykin's play, however, is what takes place after those souls receive life on earth. At the centre of attention is the troubled Alexander (Alexei Usoltsev), who encounters a homeless but jovial man (Pavel Ilyin), a boy with maths problems (Vanya Moiseev) and a woman who is just passing through (Anastasia Zykova), although she appears exactly at the moment when Alexander utters, 'Lord, have mercy.' Still everyone Alexander meets, everything he thinks and everything he tries to do, is overshadowed by an event that haunts him — he once killed someone, or, at least, considers himself guilty of not preventing a death.

The changes that occur in each character following their transition to the real world give the play a stereophonic feel. Before birth, the homeless man knows life will be hard, even tragic, but he is eager to take on what life will bring. Alexander's pre-birth soul is already shaken by horror and does not want to be born. Perhaps this is an indication of Alexander's future sin — his failure to stop an abortion. It is this act, or this lack of action, that in life brings him

to the brink of a breakdown.

Almost none of this is given clarity until the final moments of the play. What is clear is the sense of alarm that grips Alexander. Burykin plays effectively with the ambiguity of his story, leaving details to the spectator's imagination. The contrast between the worried, even frenzied, Alexander and the happy-go-lucky street person is stark and dramatic. As a result, what we know, and what we sense strongly in an emotional way, is Alexander's need to confess and be absolved. The specific reasons for that are less important than his impulse to seek absolution.

Designer Akinf Belov set the action in an empty white space where a few crate-like, high-backed constructions serve as chairs or park benches. Lighting designer Olga Ravvich created gorgeous swathes of color that give substance to the air surrounding the characters. Arseny Epelbaum provides shadow images which place the action in a bustling city or in a wooded park. A clever director's trick at the last moment has a beautifully coloured umbrella suddenly rise to the heavens as if on divine command. It follows the phrase, 'The first day of spring is like the first day of creation', and it reminds us of the connection between the real and the supernatural.

The House at the Contemporary Play School is an all around unusual project. Instead of director, Iosif Raikhelguz is listed in the program as the 'author of the production'. The well-known playwright Yevgeny Grishkovets is not alone, but is listed as having written the text 'with the participation of Anna Matison'. The action takes place not on a stage, but amidst the audience members whose seats are chaotically strewn throughout the hall. The lead role of Igor, a man looking to buy a new house, is played by Alexander Gordon, a popular Russian television talk-show host.

Gordon is superb in this strange, amusing and entertaining show. As he wanders among the spectators, encountering his wife (Anzhelika Volchkova), his daughter (Yulia Skirina) and several friends, Gordon easily exploits the persona he has developed in his TV shows. Slightly cynical but not without charm, intellectual but not aloof, he has a way of inspiring trust, understanding and respect.

The story, as is common in a Grishkovets play, is extremely simple. Igor found a house for sale and he wants to buy it and move his family into it. Tired of living in an apartment, he wants the freedom and dignity that would come with owning his own home. The problem is that, despite his decent earnings as a doctor, he doesn't have enough to swing the deal. So he goes to friends for a loan.

Igor's friends Misha (Maksim Yevseyev), Savoyolov (Vladimir Shulga) and nameless others have many reasons not to lend him the money. Misha bought a house himself

and bitterly regrets it. The work, the expenses, the hassles have driven him crazy. Savoyolov has worked out a complex philosophy as to why friends should never allow money to intrude on their relationship. 'Don't you feel like you ruined our friendship just by bringing this topic up?' he asks Igor.

The trump comes in the form of another of Igor's nameless friends, a haughty and wealthy businessman. This wheeler-dealer is the first who is not only ready to lend Igor the small sum, but actually offers to pay out a larger amount to buy him a bigger and better place. Why? Because he has his eye on the same house Igor wants and he is not about to lose it. Ivan Mamonov is excellent as the friendly bully, a man whose generosity is a not-so-subtle form of psychological violence.

Grishkovets and Matison created a story about a doomed search for happiness that is recognizable to the last detail: the phrases friends catch each other with, the complaints daughters have, the loving charity a wife exhibits to support even her husband's wildest dream. That said, this play works because of what Raikhelguz and his cast did with it. I can't imagine this text being spoken in a traditional setting — on stage with a fourth wall separating the actors from the audience. With the actors moving around amidst the spectators, however, Igor's personal anguish is literally able to touch everyone in attendance.

ON IN MOSCOW

All That Fall by Beckett, Okolo, the Theatre Near the Stanislavsky House; *Betrayal* by Pinter, Stanislavsky Theatre; *Classmates* by Yuri Polyakov, Russian Army Theatre; *Exhibits* by Durnenkov, Teatr.doc/Playwright and Director Centre; *Gaft's Dream Retold* by Viktyuk by Gaft, Sovremennik Theatre; *The God of Carnage* by Reza, Sovremennik Theatre; *Here I Am* by Nikolai Khalezin, Stanislavsky Theatre; *The House* by Grishkovets and Matison, Contemporary Play School; *Kizhe* after Tynyanov, Chekhov Moscow Art Theatre; *Krechinsky's Wedding* by Sukhovo-Kobylin, Yermolova Theatre; *Life is Grand* by Pavel Pryazhko, Teatr.doc/Playwright and Director Centre; *The Man from the U.S.S.R.* by Nabokov, Sfera Theatre; *Opus No. 7* by Rubinshtein, Krymov, Bakshi, School of Dramatic Art; *Others' Windows* by Burykin, Bogis Agency/Open Stage Project; *Pulya* by Moshina, Teatr.doc/Playwright and Director Centre; *The Putodan River* after Platonov, Studio of Theatrical Art; *Repress and Excite* by Maxim Kurochkin, Et Cetera Theatre; *Roberto Zucco* by Koltes, Young Spectator Theatre; *Three Years after Chekhov*, Studio of Theatrical Art; *The Threepenny Opera* by Brecht, Chekhov Moscow Art Theatre; *Trash* by Durnenkov, Playwright and Director Centre; *Ulysses* after Joyce, Fomenko Studio; *We after Zamyatin*, Simonov Theatre.