

# Presnyakov Brothers Add Gloss to Jonah, Bible

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Max Shakhmet as Jonah, left, and Lera Gorin as the merchandiser discussing an important packet of Lay's chips.

What is it that makes a new play interesting?

You have to assume that the Presnyakov brothers know. They have had numerous international hits over the last decade and their name is synonymous with what some call the “new drama” movement in Russia.

The latest play written by these two siblings from Yekaterinburg and to be staged in Moscow is “Seven Days Before the Flood.” As directed by Vladimir Petrov at the Stanislavsky Drama Theater it is slick, glib and occasionally funny.

To what extent it remains interesting is a more difficult question.

Yes, the Presnyakovs are playing with the Bible. The main character’s name is Jonah. And

while there is no talk about a whale, there is talk about a boat, about gathering up some animals, and of a rotten civilization that will be wiped out in a deluge.

But that's an old tale not many can relate to anymore. So the Presnyakovs spiffed it up and gave it a new look.

In their vision, Jonah is your average Joe. He has a wife, a son, an ex-wife and a healthy sense of skepticism that protects him from them all. When a merchandiser at a grocery store tries to force him to buy a specific pack of potato chips, he is suspicious. He doesn't want that pack, and he surely doesn't want that brand.

No matter that the merchandiser — who informs Jonah that “freedom is my greatest invention in this supermarket” — has an authoritative, even omnipotent, air about him. No matter that the merchandiser (Lera Gorin) hints heavily that if Jonah buys this very pack of chips, he will win a contest: a yacht that could serve him well in the event of a flood. But Jonah (Max Shakhet) doesn't believe in contests. He's never won a thing.

Never underestimate the power of the merchandiser, however. He has one of his guards toss the pack of chips back in Jonah's cart when he isn't looking.

Meanwhile, Jonah's son (Ilya Bocharnikov) is getting ready for a birthday. He's no fool, and he explains to his stepmother (Polina Raikina) that it will cost 160 euros to buy food and booze for his party, but only 12 euros to buy four kilos of coca leaves — and it will be a lot more fun, he says.

That sets us up for what, in Petrov's production, is easily the funniest scene of the entire show. A couple of policemen come to break up the party, but end up heading off into another plane of consciousness when they start chewing on the coca leaves, thinking that they're eating green salad.

Alexander Gorshkov turns in one of the most deliriously controlled and most seamlessly unhinged performances I have seen as the policeman who gradually loses it while in the line of duty.

“Seven Days” is filled with the unexpected. A vulgar scene between an estranged husband and wife (Yury Duvanov and Lyudmila Lushina) turns out to be a scene actors are rehearsing for a play. A gorilla (Konstantin Bogdanov) emerges as the most sensitive of everyone gathered here. One of the

characters is murdered.

As has become their tradition, the Presnyakovs load down their play with references to real products. The Lays potato chips brand is plastered all over the set designed by Vladimir Kovalchuk. Other brands whose names are dropped include Remy Martin X.O., Baileys Irish Cream and Electrolux.

Each spectator will make up his own mind whether this is humorous or crass. It is easier to be categorical about things like Jonah and his wife arguing over whose underwear stinks the most — this is where you wonder what happened to the brothers' internal editor.

The dialogue in “Seven Days” is often clever, although in a way that makes me wonder whether the Presnyakovs recently spent time reading Nikolai Erdman’s “The Suicide.” Not only do both comedies observe crowds of people trying to make a man do something he doesn’t want to, but the structure of the comic phrases often sounds as if it were grafted from Erdman’s style.

Erdman was a master of repetition, rolling, three-pronged puns, rhythmic language and the use of proper names in the service of laughter. The Presnyakovs employ these very devices throughout their play.

“Seven Days Before the Flood” is sometimes funny, sometimes lame. It bears the mark of a writing duo that knows its craft, but doesn’t always have a firm grasp on its art.

“Seven Days Before the Flood” (Sem Dnei do Potopa) plays Thurs. and Nov. 21 at 7 p.m. at the Stanislavsky Drama Theater, located at 23 Ulitsa Tverskaya. Metro Pushkinskaya. Tel. 699-7224, [www.teatr-stanislavsky.ru](http://www.teatr-stanislavsky.ru). Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes.

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