

Vytoptov Dramatizes Chekhov Tales in 'Seryozha'

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Manyusa falls in love with Sergei Nikitin, a schoolteacher, but love never runs smoothly in Chekhov's "Seryozha." **Sergei Petrov**

The very first moments of "Seryozha" at the Sovremennik Theater say much about the production that is to come.

All along the huge expanse of the back wall of the small Drugaya stage hand-scribbled text in chalk runs left-to-right, top-to-bottom. A candle flickers on a small table. Images of musical notes are projected over the text, and an actor races into the space and does a flip right into the waiting comfort of a sofa.

The quiet contemplation of literature, music and the unexpected, acrobatic antics of a human being.

This is what director Kirill Vytoptov has in store for us in this thoughtful, unusual

dramatization of two short stories by Anton Chekhov — “The Teacher of Literature” and “Fear.”

From the start there is something unclear about this performance. At first that is a minor irritant, or, at least, it creates a subtle sensation of confusion. A gaggle of girls dressed in white run in giggling. They are students. Their teacher is reserved. They whisper, they rustle, they toss about quiet gazes. But soon enough one of the young women — she who did the running flip — transforms into an old woman, and a whole new story kicks in.

In fact, several stories kick in.

In general, we follow the adventures of the Shelestov family, the father (Vladislav Fedchenko), his two daughters Varya (Polina Rashkina) and Manyusa (Darya Belousova), their old nanny (Yelena Plaksina) and the men who court the young women.

But the lives of these people take them in different directions, break the story down and splinter it emotionally. Gaiety gives way to sadness and suffering. Friends and lovers become foes. Confidence turns to doubt. Moral stability shatters and leaves characters standing before an abyss.

Designer Anastasia Bugayeva actually renders this abyss in a concrete, physical way. The floor of the stage at one moment falls away leaving behind a gaping hole into which some characters descend with ease, as if it were their home. Others hover above it like tightrope walkers risking a hard fall.

On one level, “Seryozha” is a tale about love.

Varya’s courtship with Captain Polyansky (Ilya Lykov) is a rocky one. Manyusa, on the other hand, falls in love with the schoolteacher Sergei Nikitin (Nikita Yefremov), and the happy couple is married almost instantly. Of course, the speed of love has little to do with its fortitude, and, as quickly as love happened once, it happens again — this time between Sergei and a married neighbor named Marya (played by Plaksina).

But more than love, Vytoptov staged a show about the fragility, the brevity and the enigma of human life.

The flying leap that Plaksina takes in the first moments of the performance speaks volumes: A young woman takes a running jump, flips once head-over-heels and lands on the sofa already an old woman caring for young girls like she once was ages ago. That’s what there is to life: a running jump and a flip.

By casting the same actress in the roles of a schoolgirl, the old nanny and the mature, sexually active Marya, Vytoptov suggests that all these stages of a woman’s — or anyone’s — life are present at any given moment. Memory, anticipation and experience in real time interweave to create a multilayered portrait of a life.

This production constantly shifts its primary focus. For a time we are deeply involved in the lives of the two Shelestova sisters. Later the seductive relationship that grows between Sergei and Marya takes center stage. That, too, however, gives way to a close-up exploration of the state of mind of Marya’s husband Dmitry (played by Lykov).

His sufferings are deep. At one moment he uses a wet rag to write on the wall the reason for his pain: His wife once told him she did not love him, but would be faithful to him for life. The wet letters disappear, and the message is gone as if it never had existed.

The frequent shifts in the storytelling and the doubling-up of the actors in numerous roles give this production of “Seryozha” a vagueness that at moments can confuse and mislead.

That is not a criticism, however, for in this ever-changing and occasionally obscure tale we recognize a raw nerve and a beauty that strike us as real and recognizable. Daunting at moments, “Seryozha” emerges as a moving and deeply heartfelt exploration of the kind of events that carry a person from innocence to knowledge, from youth to old age, from ignorance to wisdom.

“Seryozha” plays July 28 at 7:30 p.m. on the Drugaya stage at the Sovremennik Theater, located at 19 Chistoprudny Bulvar. Metro Chistiye Prudy. Tel. 621-6473, www.sovremennik.ru. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes.

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