

Contemporary Play School Does People-Watching

By [John Freedman](#)

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The play's most captivating characters include a pathological liar and an aggressive Russian businessman. **John Freedman**

If I had to choose the one thing that has haunted the minds of theater artists most over the last century it would have to be "authenticity." Making it real.

There are a million ways of doing it — or, at least, of trying to. After all, everybody's idea of reality is a little bit different from the next person's. Still, you can see that effort to be "lifelike" or to "capture life" coming through in so many diverse approaches.

"Heard, Seen, Not Jotted Down," a new show put together by director Iosif Raikhelgauz and playwright Yevgeny Grishkovets, has its own method. The two authors created a set of scenes that take place in a summer cafe and then let the actors run with them. Few of them are tied in any substantial way to the others.

Life is random and "Heard, Seen, Not Jotted Down" has a sense of random development too. Just as if you were to take a seat in the corner of one of Moscow's cafes and sit and watch the people come and go over a couple hours of time. In your café, just as in this performance, waiters are the only real unifying factor. As played here by Ivan Mamonov and Dmitry Satiriadi, they are as properly distant and quietly scornful as you would expect from a good waiter.

Designer Alexei Tregubov split the hall at the Contemporary Play School in two, placing a raised platform between two sets of spectators. Lining both sides of the platform are small tables where small or large groups of people sit for awhile before leaving or coming back. This is particularly witty in terms of the reality factor since what we now know as the Contemporary Play School was once the famous Hermitage restaurant in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

What we encounter are snippets of various people's lives. Some, like a quiet prostitute (Anna Skainer) waiting patiently for work at a corner table, remain enigmas to us. Others, like the nameless female pathological liar who annoys the waiters and crashes the failed party of a man trying in vain to celebrate his anniversary, can be read like open books.

As played by Yekaterina Direktorenko, the liar was a highlight of the show I attended. Aggressive and harmless at the same time, she was marvelously and entertainingly creative in her ability to lie to everyone at all times about everything. So charming was she in her lies that she ultimately saved the crashing birthday of the man who was abandoned by every single friend he had. He was smart enough finally to recognize that personality and originality are far more important than truth and took solace in her company.

Playing the jilted birthday boy was Albert Filozov. He arrives at the cafe expecting to be joined by numerous famous friends. One by one, however, they call to apologize that they cannot make it. Through video projections we see such real life celebrities as actors Armen Dzhigarkhanyan and Lia Akhedzhakova make elaborate excuses as to why they can't come. Filozov's birthday boy grows increasingly long in the face until saved by the witty prevaricator.

At other tables various family dramas are played out.

One young man (Kirill Yemyelanov) invited his mother (Anzhelika Volchkova) to meet his new girlfriend (Tatyana Vedeneyeva). What mom doesn't realize is that her boy's new girl is probably old enough to be her mother as well.

One table away from that disaster sits a couple haggling out their differences. What we don't know until it's time for the humor to come out is that this is actually a daughter (Daniella Selitska) and a father (Maxim Yevseyev) at odds about her intentions with her boyfriend (Yegor Morozov).

The scene that generated more laughs than any other, aside from the charismatic liar, pitted a pushy Russian businessman (Alexander Ovchinnikov) and his translator (Nikolai Golubev) against a well-mannered Hindu client (Alexander Tsoi). This scene, played out in several episodes, trots out just about every cliché that exists about Russians and foreigners and the two trying to find common ground.

"Heard, Seen, Not Jotted Down" doesn't really go anywhere, nor does it try to. It is intended as a theatrical snapshot, which means it provides a more compact picture of people acting out in a restaurant than you might see in real life. If you enjoy the sport of people-watching, this show may be right up your alley.

"Heard, Seen, Not Jotted Down" (Podslushannoye, Podsmotrennoye, Nezapisannoye) plays Wed. at 7 p.m. at the Contemporary Play School, located at 29/14 Neglinnaya Ulitsa. Metro Trubnaya, Tsvetnoi Bulvar. Tel. 694-0756. www.neglinka29.ru. Running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes.

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14