

Menshikov Low Key as Yermolova Reign Begins

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Vladimir Andreyev plays a prompter and Valentin Gaft an old comic actor in this adaptation of a Chekhov story. **Vladimir Maikovsky**

If he had wanted to, Oleg Menshikov could have done it very differently. One of the few actors in Russia who commands genuine star power, he could easily have called in all the cameras, all the celebrities, all the glossy magazines and all the wannabe glossy people, and they would have come running.

He didn't do any of that Saturday night when he reopened the doors of the Yermolova Theater for the first time since taking over as artistic director half a year ago. As I approached the theater on Tverskaya Ulitsa I even wondered if something was wrong — the lights weren't even on in the outdoors entry.

Talk about anti-glam and low key!

And that is exactly what everything was geared toward on that big opening night. That and demonstrating that Menshikov is all business in his efforts to turn around the fortunes of one of Moscow's storied theaters, a major house throughout most of the 20th century, but one which fell on lean times in the last two decades.

Six months was hardly sufficient to rebuild this venerable old venue fully, but it was enough for Menshikov to put his stamp of quality on it. The newly polished dark wood floors, the brilliant chandeliers in the foyer pockets on either side of the hall, the newly-painted bourdeau walls with matching bourdeau matting in the frames of historical posters hanging on the walls all speak of understated but unmistakable elegance.

There is a sense that plenty is left to do, but there is a stronger sense that style, taste and purpose have now found a home at the Yermolova Theater.

Menshikov himself sneaked into the hall shortly before curtain time to take a seat on the center aisle, and he rushed out as the applause began 90 minutes later. But it wasn't to run on stage and accept the plaudits of the crowd, it was to hide in a loge at stage left. When someone found him there and ran to give him a bouquet, he laughingly accepted it, threw it back on stage and disappeared altogether.

Even the choice for the theater's reopening was low key.

"The Biggest Little Drama" is an adaptation and expansion of the early Anton Chekhov story "Kalkhas," about an encounter between an aging, alcoholic actor and the old prompter who works with him. The roles of the two old theater rats are handled by beloved veteran actors Valentin Gaft and Vladimir Andreyev.

The show is so simple that director Rodion Ovchinnikov virtually ignores designer Akinf Belov's cluttered set full of backstage theater junk. The actors invariably sit or stand downstage and carry on their bantering exchanges. Following the spirit of Chekhov's story, if not the letter, the two men trade accusations, praise and challenges as they express two very different methods of loving the life of the theater.

Andreyev's prompter is reverent, sensitive and thoughtful. He is easily wounded and quick to defend his sentimental and deeply-felt love of the theater world that has given his life meaning.

Gaft's old comic actor is crusty, uncouth, cynical, sarcastic and bitter. He epitomizes the kind of actor that encourages the prompter to mutter, "You actors are rarely people in real life, but I love you on stage!"

Still, the old codger flatters the prompter that he could have been a great tragic actor had he wanted to, and he suggests they do some rehearsing together. Much of the show transpires as they trade scenes from "Hamlet," "Cyrano de Bergerac" and "Boris Godunov." Gaft's grizzly old actor, incidentally, is especially touching in the role of the sweet young Roxanne from "Cyrano."

Also added to the tale are heated discussions about Chekhov himself, the nature of theater, and the fame and influence of the great Maly Theater actress Maria Yermolova, who lent her

name to the theater where the actors are performing.

In short, the small, intimate "Biggest Little Drama" comes across as a well-considered inside joke. You see and hear in it the conflicted but respectful attitude to theater that Gaft, Andreyev and Menshikov surely share with thousands of others lovingly trapped in the profession throughout the world.

Rather than kick off his tenure as the head of the Yermolova with a big bang, Menshikov chose to begin with a slow but steady burn. It was a wise and admirable decision. It suggests big things are in store ahead for this renewed playhouse.

"The Biggest Little Drama" (Samaya Bolshaya Malenkaya Drama) plays Sunday at 7 p.m. and resumes performances in January at the Yermolova Theater, located at 5/6 Tverskaya Ulitsa. Metro Okhotny Ryad. Tel. (495) 629-0594. www.ermolova.ru. Running time: 1 hour, 25 minutes.

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