

Audiences Invited Into Kharms' Bizarre World

By [John Freedman](#)

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Oleg Rebrov and Sofya Slivina's roles as a married couple provoke viewers to see the absurdity of their own lives. **Yelena Lapina**

Daniil Kharms is one of the great wonders of Russian literature. His poems, stories and dramatic dialogues were funny, irreverent, thoughtful and bizarre. The vast majority of his works, written in the 1920s and 1930s and comprising the bulk of what is commonly known as the "Russian absurd," are two pages or less. Sometimes they are just a few lines long.

His anecdotes about revered Russian writers are among the funniest and best-known pieces of literature in Russia. My favorite, if you'll pardon my taking a detour, is a brief dramatic dialogue about Nikolai Gogol and Alexander Pushkin tripping over each other as they try walking across a stage. It is courageously pointless, aggressively wacky and, when you let the picture that Kharms creates sink into your consciousness, absolutely hilarious.

This particular scene has nothing to do with Pavel Artyemyev's production of "The Four-

Legged Crow” at the Theater Yunogo Zritelya. Kharms does, however, because this delightful, thought-provoking piece is based on several of his tales.

The title work — it seems an exaggeration to call it a “work” — is a brief story of an even briefer altercation between a four-legged crow and a fox that insults the crow by calling it a pig. The offended crow waddles off down the road on his five legs because, the author informs us, “he really has five legs, but that’s not worth talking about.”

Artemyev’s production toys with some of this tale’s basic elements: the insults individuals are wont to visit on others and the absurdity of the lives some of us live.

It begins outside a store that is closed for inventory. A line of customers hoping to buy their daily staples forms on a bench by the door and, well, life happens. A boy meets a girl and takes her home for vodka (her choice). A group of Kyrgyz immigrants sings songs and makes jokes. A local man takes offense at the happy-go-lucky Kyrgyz immigrants. He doesn’t like the songs they sing, he doesn’t like the way they sit on the bench, he doesn’t like the way they talk. He basically just doesn’t like them.

Later he will get his comeuppance, however. He comes home to a wife some might consider a living nightmare, although maybe she is that way because her husband is such a pathetic loser. It is hard to tell.

What isn’t hard to tell is that nobody has an easy time of it in Kharms’ crazy, mixed-up world.

The short tales are acted out with long silences filling in the spaces among the spare text. There are lots of shared gazes, glowering stares and shy glances that reveal character without a single word being said.

Artemyev offers up numerous visual jokes, as in the one that begins the action. A man sits impassively, his feet are buried to his shoelaces in a mountain of shells from the nuts he cracks and eats. Enter a young woman whose first words are “have you been here long?”

The acting is as subtle or as assertive as the situation requires.

Sofya Raizman is sweet, soft, slinky and tender as Galya, the pristine, though coquettish, young lady who makes eyes at Petya (Alexander Pal), a young man whose head is clearly full of ideas but maybe not so much common sense.

As the local resident unhappy with the immigrants and his wife, Oleg Rebrov is thunderously antagonistic until he reaches his bed, where he curls up and whimpers like a child.

Ruslan Bratov plays the leader of the Kyrgyz clan with impeccable comic timing, responding instantaneously to threats or calls to celebrate with the requisite obsequiousness or devil-may-care abandon.

Designer Polina Grishina placed a hard-shut door in the middle of a cracked but hugely foreboding gray storefront. Something about it suggests that a mystery may lay behind it, but to learn whether that is true you will have to see the show.

“The Four-Legged Crow” began its life as a student production at the Russian Academy of

Theater Arts and was restaged and reset for its new life as an entry in the repertory of the Theater Yunogo Zritelya. It still maintains that energetic student feel, which, for a rendering of the writings of Daniil Kharms, is a fine fit.

It is funny and lighthearted even, usually, when it raises pointed questions about the hostility and aggression that people tend to foist on each other without thinking.

“The Four-Legged Crow” (Chetveronogaya Vorona) plays Wed. and March 6 at 7 p.m. at the Theater Yunogo Zritelya, 10 Mamonovsky Pereulok. Metro Pushkinskaya. 8-495-699-5360. www.moscowtyz.ru. Running time: 1 hour, 25 minutes.

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