

4-Plus-Hour Show Drags Out Moments of Wit

By [John Freedman](#)

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"The Ideal Husband" features clever satire on contemporary Russia, like a parody of singer Filipp Kirkorov. **Yekaterina Tsvetkova**

Imagine a show that runs four-plus hours and you responded well to about half of what it threw at you. Now consider what that says about your state of mind the other half of the time.

Konstantin Bogomolov's production of "The Ideal Husband. A Comedy" at the Chekhov Moscow Art Theater rambles on for four hours and 20 minutes. There is some damn good theater in there, well made and cleverly imagined. But there are also times when you want to run out screaming — at least I did.

Take the unbearable first half hour — that's a third, or even half the time it takes most contemporary performances to run in their entirety. In Bogomolov's mash-up of Oscar Wilde's "The Ideal Husband" and "The Portrait of Dorian Gray," excerpts from major Chekhov plays, and a pinch of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," that's barely a finger

sandwich during hors d'oeuvres.

The director and his lead actor Igor Mirkurbanov treat us — if that is the proper phrase — to a seemingly endless concert of purposefully horrible chanson music. You see, the "ideal husband" of Bogomolov's tale is a former assassin and now a fashionable pop singer named Lord. How ideal he might be as a husband is debatable, but his romantic entanglements with government minister Robert Ternov (Alexei Kravchenko) and his former girlfriend Mrs. Cheveley (Marina Zudina) keep him busy.

As for his musical exploits, I am compelled to quote a phrase bequeathed to us decades ago by the great British songwriter Richard Thompson — shoot out the lights!

Yes, yes. I know it's supposed to be bad. But why for so long? And why so often? This guy keeps coming back with more "music" throughout the evening. But I'm only barely skimming the surface of this big and complex show.

It is, after all, a wicked, intricately constructed parody of contemporary Russian society and politics.

You might be excused for not seeing Olympics star-turned-politician Alina Kabayeva in Darya Moroz's interpretation of Ternov's wife Gertrude. But if you don't recognize the abominable male pop diva Filipp Kirkorov in Lord, you haven't been paying attention for 20 years. And if you don't espy a spoof of the President Vladimir Putin-Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev tandem in the tender affair between Lord and Ternov, then I am surprised you are reading a newspaper published in Moscow, Russia.

Still, I only scratch the surface.

Most of Act Two (there are three with two intermissions) is turned over to a barbed adaptation of "Dorian Gray." Here Sergei Chonishvili plays an aloof authority figure who is accustomed to abusing power and people the way some individuals brush their teeth in the morning.

There are numerous other characters in this hydra-headed story, including a neglected adopted son named Mabel, a hyper-hip trio of "three sisters" from the provinces who dream of working someday and pontificate on what life will be like in the future, a 70-year-old actress who plays the role of Juliet and doubles as the artist who painted Dorian Gray's portrait, a priest who is always at hand to justify anything a thug may need and a slinky butler-designer who really wants to keep things stylish, no matter what.

Through it all Bogomolov rewrites, reconsiders and really hams up the original texts by Wilde, Chekhov and Shakespeare. He sprinkles the dialogue liberally with topical references, getting in digs at Pushkin restaurant, the pop poet Vera Polozkova, rich people with "Uzbek slaves," the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi and ever so much more.

Designer Larisa Lomakina placed the action in a sparkly white environment. A bed, a toilet and a bath stand at center stage, visible at all times through glass walls. Other objects are moved in and out, but the visual impact, often enhanced by live video feeds, is always super stylish.

Did I like this show? Half of it, no. It often wallows in what it purports to satirize. It doesn't

always illuminate what is phony, but noisily occupies that dubious territory.

But how could I not respond to Bogomolov's wit and wisdom? His "Ideal Husband" is surely the most comprehensive comic attack I have seen on the excesses and deceptions of contemporary Russia. His bold use of the Chekhov excerpts alone won me over. They are hilarious and beautifully integrated into this wild, messy, maddening piece of socially and politically-engaged theater.

Like it or not, this show has the distinct feel of Moscow, late winter, 2013.

"The Ideal Husband. A Comedy" (Idealny Muzh. Komediya) plays Saturday, March 17 and 25 at 7 p.m. at the Chekhov Moscow Art Theater, 3 Kamergersky Pereulok. Metro Okhotny Ryad, Teatralnaya. Tel. 495-629-5370, 629-8760. www.mxat.ru. Running time: 4 hours, 20 minutes.

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