

'Mitya's Love' Pays Beautiful Attention to Detail

By [John Freedman](#)

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Filipp Avdeyev and Alexandra Revenko playing the two besotted, but incredibly different lovers in "Mitya's Love." **Alex Yocu**

I missed this show when it opened in February because I was out of town. Then I missed it again because of festivals and more travels. Excuses, excuses. All I can say now is: better late than never.

If you have any interest in theater I recommend you don't do what I did — don't miss "Mitya's Love" at the Gogol Center.

"Mitya's Love" is Vladislav Nastavshev's own, personal brainchild. He directed it, designed it, wrote the music and created the stage adaptation of Ivan Bunin's tale about first love going haywire.

He could have done none of that, however, without Philipp Avdeyev and Alexandra Revenko,

the two actors who bring his ideas to life on stage.

Bunin's tale
of two lovers,
taken to the
stage
by Vladislav
Nastavshev, is
a dreamy,
touching
and unusual
adaptation.

Now, to be exact, I just allowed myself a little falsehood in that last sentence. In fact, Avdeyev and Revenko do very little "on stage." The reason for this is that their director has them perform almost the entire show in midair. Aided by 15 iron pegs sticking out of a wall, the performers do everything — chat, argue, kiss, make love, talk on the telephone, listen to the record player, sleep and dream — hanging suspended above the stage.

When the lights first came up on Avdeyev and I saw him lounging comfortably on a couple of pegs two meters above ground, I thought, "That's clever." What never occurred to me was that, but for one brief, important, moment, neither he nor his sweetheart would come down from their love-induced aerial sortie.

Forget the fact that this is a lovely way visually to portray two people in the throes of love. That's a given.

What truly astonishes is the ease with which the actors exist in this unusual space. I hesitate to call them acrobatic, because it hardly enters the mind that they are straining to execute acrobatic maneuvers. Even as they struggle comically and awkwardly to fit the proper parts of their bodies together for that blissfully intimate first sexual encounter — you don't think about the actors' crazy gyrations, you merely recognize the sad, hilarious truth of the moment.

Mitya is besotted, befuddled and bewitched by his girlfriend Katya. She likes him plenty, too, but in Mitya's eyes she has one minor flaw — she loves art and wants to be in theater. Her stories about an acquaintance who wants to make a nude sculpture of her are enough to make Mitya lose his mind, maybe even take his life.

Let me say that Bunin's story is pretty clear. Mitya does seek solace in suicide. Nastavshev's production of it is less categorical, even though he depicts the act twice — once at the beginning and once at the end.

But is this something Mitya imagines or actually does? We don't know and Nastavshev doesn't clarify.

What we do see is a remarkably warm, affectionate and affecting portrait of a fine young man and a charming young woman whose mutual emotional bond crashes against the corrosive

reality of their individual needs and impulses. Utterly enchanted by Katya, Mitya sees only her in everyone he meets — mothers, maids, friends, passersby and a gold-digging girl he is set up with while Katya is out of town.

Avdeyev informs Mitya with a delicate and wounded magnetism. He is the definition of "steady" and "constant." His pouting eyes and gentle gestures are always directed only towards Katya, no matter who may be before him.

Revenko's Katya, on the contrary, is a maelstrom of a woman, quick to laugh, ready to challenge and eager to chart new territory. She doesn't doubt her love for Mitya, but refuses to let herself be deprived of all life has to offer.

Katya's dynamism and changeability are reinforced in this production by the fact that Revenko plays everyone that Mitya encounters. She is superb as a jaded chambermaid and as a young lady of loose morals, but her turn as a gruff old man who rudely keeps grabbing his crotch is the pinnacle of her acting caricatures.

Nastavshev's use of details is superb. These include a teacup on a string that becomes a pendulum marking time; a miniature train forging through the Russian countryside; and a magnetic doorknob that can be moved anywhere to create a door where none was to be found.

"Mitya's Love" is one of those rare shows that renew your faith in the power of theater to surprise and delight. This is a gem.

"Mitya's Love" (Mitina Lyubov) plays Thurs., Fri. and Tues. at 8:30 p.m. on the small stage of the Gogol Center, located at 8 Ulitsa Kazakova. Metro Kurskaya. Tel. 499-262-9214. www.gogolcenter.com. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes.

Contact the author at jfreedman@imedia.ru

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