

Enigmatically Titled 'London Show' Is Immaculate

By [John Freedman](#)

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The headstrong Eliza getting acquainted with Osipov's Henry Higgins, who seeks to transform her "into a lady."

Konstantin Raikin plays games with the title of his new "London Show" at the Satirikon Theater. "Show" is the way Russian writes and pronounces the last name of George Bernard Shaw, and London is where Shaw's most famous play, "Pygmalion," is set.

So, in Raikin's cleverly cryptic code, "London Show" is Moscow's "Pygmalion." And, believe me, Raikin's "Pygmalion" will stand proudly alongside anything London's West End might throw at us.

Irrepressible as he is, Raikin could not limit himself to staging this production with just one cast. His company is blessed with so many great actors and he himself burns with such an abundance of energy that he took that old advice to heart: Anything worth doing once is worth doing twice.

As such, "London Show" is performed alternately with two different casts playing most roles — and all of the leads. I had the extraordinary good fortune of seeing Yelizaveta Martinez Cardenas in the role of Eliza, Artyom Osipov performing Henry Higgins, and the extraordinarily ebullient Grigory Siyatvinda impersonating Eliza's father Alfred Doolittle.

Oh, my! What a cast!

Siyatvinda's Doolittle is a firestorm of comic business and cosmic timing. I don't think I have ever seen a performer find so many different ways to scratch an itch. And yet his performance of the dirty, drunken and greedy old man is anything but a one-trick pony. Siyatvinda's Doolittle is easily smart enough to outwit the learned Higgins and quick enough to stay one step ahead of him at all times.

Siyatvinda's scenes are full productions within this production, comic journeys with the full arc of any great work of theater art.

Still, "Pygmalion" rides on the relationship between the lowly flower girl Eliza and Higgins, who, goaded by his friend Colonel Pickering (Sergei Bubnov), resolves to turn Eliza "into a lady."

Shaw himself was adamant that Higgins' actions were less than honorable and that Eliza was a strong-willed woman who would not surrender her independence for anything. That is the tack Raikin takes in his production, thus raising the question as to who is teaching whom in this duel of wits.

In fact, what Raikin staged is an exploration not of the teaching, but of the learning process. Who makes the most of the lessons offered them, Eliza or Higgins?

Osipov's Higgins can be characterized by any number of epithets — arrogant, unhinged, rude, self-centered, uncaring and unthinking. The picture, however, would not be complete without some counterweight. He is also intelligent, energetic and not entirely lacking in charm. It's an explosive combination, one that justifies Eliza's interest and even trust in him. It also explains why she is livid when he lets her down.

Martinez creates a rich, full-blooded and fetchingly ornery Eliza who, when bursting into song at an ambassador's ball, does a rock 'n' roll, guitar-slinging, Chuck Berry duckwalk that truly gets the party started. This Eliza, in fact, has everyone but Higgins eating out of her hand. The housekeeper Mrs. Pearce (Yelena Butenko-Raikina) takes her side; Higgins' mother (Agrippina Steklova) is enchanted; and the Higgins family friends Clara (Polina Shanina) and Freddy (Vladimir Nadein) are jaw-drop impressed with her style.

With many of the scenes played at the speed of light and with the volume metaphorically cranked to 11, Raikin paces things beautifully with a host of lighter segments played as if they were plucked from a silent film. Lights flicker to make the actors' movements have that jerky silent cinema feel, and spoken words are projected as texts on one of three screens at the back of the stage.

Continuing the connection to the silent film era, Raikin employs music drawn from the films of Charlie Chaplin. And in one scene Osipov's Higgins emerges from the darkness with

a mustache, a hat and a waddle that can only refer to Chaplin.

But if you watch Osipov and Martinez carefully, you'll see the Chaplin influence is present at all times, albeit in more subtle ways.

Boris Valuyev fitted the stage with an attractive and changeable set that transforms swiftly from the ceiling-high bookshelves of Higgins' study, to the pastel-draped windows of his mother's home, to the screens that back up the silent scenes.

Watching Martinez, Osipov and Siyatvinda at work in "London Show" is a little like watching a newly buffed locomotive race down the track. All the myriad parts are in furious motion, but every one, even the smallest detail, works in perfect precision with all the rest.

"London Show" plays July 26 and 31 at 7 p.m. at the Satirikon Theater, located at 8 Sheremetyevskaya Ulitsa. Metro Marina Roshcha. Tel. 495-689-7844. satirikon.ru. Running time: 2 hours, 55 minutes.

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