

Gogol Center Starts New Season With 'Fear'

By [John Freedman](#)

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Yevgeny Sangadzhiev and Svetlana Bragarnik are starring as Abu and Lida in Nastavshev's adaptation of "Fear."

The new season at Moscow's newest theater, the Gogol Center, kicked off where the last one ended — with performances of the theater's latest production, "Fear."

Based (very) loosely on Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1974 film "Ali: Fear Eats the Soul," it winds up a brief but powerful cycle of productions based on important European films of the late 20th century. Preceding it, and still playing in repertory, of course, were "Brothers," based on Lucvino Visconti's "Rocco and His Brothers," and "The Idiots," based on the film by Lars von Trier.

"Fear," directed by Vladislav Nastavshev and radically adapted by playwright Lyuba Strizhak, is, like its predecessors, a kick in the face. It doesn't just take on important current social issues, it grabs one by the neck, wrestles it to the ground and pummels it.

I hasten to add that it does this with intelligence, understanding and wisdom. Maybe that's why the impact is so great. This isn't just someone flailing at full voice, it is a group of artists identifying a sore spot in the social fabric, isolating it and working on it with surgical precision over the course of two hours. It is powerful, moving and beautifully done.

The story follows Abu (Yevgeny Sangadzhiev), a young Tajik who has migrated to Moscow to work, and Lida (Svetlana Bragarnik), a much older Russian woman who makes ends meet by working as a cleaning lady. They meet in a cafe one day during a downpour and he walks her home afterwards to make sure she arrives safely.

Over a short period of time a bond grows between them. This exasperates neighbors, officials and family members, but nothing infuriates them as much as the news that the two are to marry.

One of the beauties of this piece is that it is not a melodrama and it pays virtually no attention to the details that the usual love story would glom onto. It is something else entirely. It is an exploration of people stepping outside the ordinary and challenging the limits and prejudices that most individuals hold with or without thinking about it. It is a tiny experiment in creating a new society.

We are not encouraged to think about or imagine the peculiarities of this union. Just as it is no business of Lida's neighbors or family, Nastavshev and Strizhak see to it that it is none of ours either. They examine the roots and consequences of blind hatred, and present us with a specific, fragile model of a couple that, for a time, is free of that burden.

The opening scene, performed with nuance and muscle by Sergei Muravyov, depicts the problem of the play in miniature. A man tells a story about how his relatives once sheltered an abandoned Tajik gastarbeiter then kicked him out when he trashed their home. The story goes from kindness — and, it must be said, condescension — to fury and hatred in a few moments' time. It's precisely the way prejudice works.

Muravyov has another stunning few moments later as a store owner who refuses to serve Abu because he doesn't like the way he speaks Russian. His profane, abusive, frenzied attack on the young man is utterly revolting and cathartic for that very reason. Here we experience theater's power to heal by wounding.

Sangadzhiev's Abu and Bragarnik's Lida are a touchingly awkward pair. There is something about them that is utterly inscrutable. She seems primarily motivated by loneliness, a deep sense of goodwill and gratitude. He — by gratitude and an inner sense of dignity.

When the pressures society heaps on the two begin to crack their resolve you understand just how vulnerable kindness and good are before hatred, fear and evil.

Nastavshev wrote the music and designed the simple set himself.

A row of chairs stand on one side of the stage that splits the audience into two equal groups. On the other side stand a dozen or so white, plastic garden tables. Most of the cast sit on the chairs throughout the performance whether they are participating in scenes or not. The garden tables are pulled out and used to create a myriad of locations, including elaborate

apartment rooms, tram cars and a cafe. They also create unstable surfaces that may send anyone who steps onto them crashing to the ground.

"Fear" is another impressive outing from this mighty theater that is only seven months old. It's a great way to start the season.

"Fear" (Strakh) plays Oct. 15 and 16 at 8 p.m. at the Gogol Center, located at 8 Ulitsa Kazakova. Metro Kurskaya. Tel. 499-262-9214. gogolcenter.com. Running time: 2 hours.

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