

'Three Days in Hell' Condemns Material Lives

By [John Freedman](#)

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Pavel Chinaryov and Alexei Userdin perform silently as Pryazhko's original text is played back in a recording. **Sergei Petrov**

As the calendar year ends, the theater season enters mini-hibernation. It is not for long, just three weeks of blissful oblivion along with the rest of the country.

To be honest, the majority of Moscow's playhouses continue working uninterrupted throughout the holidays. What is different is that the fare is pretty much kiddie culture and big, pop successes. I call it the fluff factor. You don't get a lot of new or experimental shows running between what locally is called Catholic Christmas on Dec. 25 and what is called the Old New Year on Jan. 13.

I understand why the Theater of Nations scheduled the next performances of Pavel Pryazhko's "Three Days in Hell" precisely for Jan. 13 and 14. It's because they didn't want to waste a fascinating show on bleary-eyed spectators and because they couldn't wait to get

the show running again.

If you're coming off your holiday diet of "The Nutcracker" and its epigones, "Three Days in Hell" might irritate. But I am here to say that this is just one more reason to believe that playwright Pavel Pryazhko and director Dmitry Volkostrellov comprise the most innovative, provocative pairing of theater artists we have seen in Russia in a long time.

Pryazhko, to some extent, is doing for Russian drama what Samuel Beckett did for English and French-language drama half a century ago. He is stripping it back to basic components, looking for ways to make it new and unexpected. Not long ago he "wrote" a play called "I Am Free." It consisted of 535 photographs. The text of his "Angry Girl" is split down the middle — 50% stage directions, 50% dialogue.

Considered with those plays, "Three Days in Hell" comes across as the third part of a trilogy. It has no dialogue but consists entirely of seemingly banal, repetitive narrative statements. There probably aren't many directors who would call this fodder for theater. But Volkostrellov is not just any director.

In four years, Volkostrellov has staged eight Pryazhko texts. And in that time the writer's work has increasingly taken more and more chances. It seems fair to speculate that Volkostrellov's sensitivity to Pryazhko's objectives has encouraged the playwright to challenge himself even more.

Working with designer Ksenia Peretrakhina, one of this city's hottest and most thoughtful designers, Volkostrellov splits the small audience of 90 into three groups and seats them in small military-type tents. I don't know what the other tents looked like, but mine had a sink and a cheap folding table groaning under the weight of kitchen detritus.

The action begins as a recorded voice struggles to be heard over crackling static. It is followed by a voice rattling off a mundane description of everyday life. That voice is followed by another and then another. In all, 28 voices narrate the "story" that lasts just one hour.

Numbers are at the heart of this text — prices, quantities, percentages, sums, aggregates. How much do oranges cost? How many minutes are wasted in a route taxi at rush hour? How much does produce weigh? Numbers overwhelm tales about harsh conditions in a hospital, tripping in the snow and sending text messages, not quite burying them, but nearly burying one's hopes of escaping into a realm of light and spirituality.

Pryazhko's text is a crushing, devastating condemnation of contemporary material life with its constant distractions, obstacles and trivialities.

As the recorded text cascades down upon us from speakers in the tent ceilings, Volkostrellov sends two silent, impassive actors back and forth among the three tents. They observe, they stop, they sit. They ignore us. It is as though the lives described in the text and the realities of these individuals are utterly divorced. Or are these people already dead inside from living such a life?

"Three Days in Hell" is anything but your average piece of theater. It is something of a theatrical installation, a genre that is expanding rapidly in Moscow of late. It is powerful,

inventive and challenging. This is true new theater for any New Year.

"Three Days in Hell" (Tri Dnya v Adu) plays Jan. 13 and 14 at 8 p.m. on the small stage of the Theater of Nations, located at 3 Petrovsky Pereulok. Entrance around the right side of the building. Metro Chekhovskaya. Tel. 495-629-3739. theatreofnations.ru. Running time: 1 hour, 5 minutes.

Contact the author at jfreedman@imedia.ru

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