

Durnenkov Succeeds With Sensitive, Probing 'Victory Day'

By [John Freedman](#)

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Dmitry Vysotsky, left, plays a writer writing a script for a Victory Day celebration in Durnenkov's latest drama.

It has been quite a season for Mikhail Durnenkov.

It began in September when the playwright took over the running of the Lyubimovka festival and breathed new life into this institution of Russian play development. Shortly thereafter his play "The Tale of What We Can and What We Can't" was staged at the Moscow Art Theater. As the season nears its end, we have the premiere of another work, "Victory Day," at the Taganka Theater.

And what self-respecting artist these days avoids attack by representatives of the state, or, at least, their allies? Durnenkov can boast of that distinction, as well. In March, well before "Victory Day" was finished as a text, it brought down the wrath of Russian Senator Oleg Pantalejev, who declared that a certain "Mikhail Grinkov" in his new play planned to parody

and insult Russian history and official institutions.

No one knows where Pantaleyev got his information, but his confusing of "Grinkov" for "Durnenkov" was a good sign that his intelligence was bad.

"Victory Day" is a sensitive, psychologically probing work that looks not at the real Victory Day in 1945, but rather at a group of contemporary individuals seeking to understand what the historical event means today.

It is directed by Yury Muravitsky, who has had a memorable season himself. His brilliant dramatization in September of Fabienne Yvert's "Papa Leaves, Mama Lies, Grandma Dies" at the Meyerhold Center remains one of this year's best productions.

Both Muravitsky and Durnenkov borrow from their own work a bit in "Victory Day." As in "Papa Leaves," Muravitsky places an enclosed room on stage where some of the action takes place. And as Durnenkov did in his highly successful "Trash," he posits a writer at the center of the story who is trying to write and think about the tale that is unfolding before our eyes. There is nothing derivative about their work here, but it is interesting to see how artists sometimes spin their webs using tried-and-true building blocks.

The premise of "Victory Day" is that the hapless writer Semyon (Dmitry Vysotsky) has been hired by a thick-skinned producer (Roman Staburov) to lead a team of three writers, whose job it is to pen the script for a big public commemoration. We see the process of this collaboration not in real time, but in snippets as the frazzled Semyon unburdens his jumbled thoughts to a doctor (Alexander Frolov).

One aspect of the job that gives Semyon no peace is the fact that no one in the project has a living connection to the event. How can they have a true opinion or relationship to it? How can they know anything about it? When he sees a silent old man (Felix Antipov) lurking in the shadows of the apartment belonging to his friend Grisha (Mikhail Lukin), he has the idea of "borrowing" or even "stealing" him to gain access to just such a living link.

Things begin with a series of monologues. One man suggests that war may be the only thing that makes you a killer but doesn't let you go crazy afterwards. The producer — for whom the celebration of victory is nothing but a way to make money and climb the social ladder — praises the war as the only thing the country has ever done well and "the thing that brought a great nation together."

Semyon is more pensive. He admits he has no dreams and that he is incapable of looking at, and seeing, his hometown.

This same monologue, in an expanded version, is repeated near show's end when Antipov's old man steps to the microphone to speak. This powerful moment gives this quiet, episodic, purposefully disconnected work real grounding.

"Victory Day" shows us a world that is subtly defined and traumatized by the Great Patriotic War. In it, the characters work, make plans, swindle, fight and make love, while over time everyone but Semyon ends up wearing military khakis. The whole society becomes militarized without anyone ever noticing.

Designer Irina Korina sets the action in various discrete locations — the closed box of the producer's office, a stand-alone sofa that serves as Semyon's and Grisha's apartments, and lots of dark, empty space around them.

"Victory Day" (Den Pobedy) plays Fri. and Sat. at 7 p.m. at the Taganka Theater, located at 76/21 Zemlyanoi Val. Metro Tagankaya. Tel. 8-495-915-1217. taganka.theatre.ru. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes.

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