

# Old Philosophy Finds New Stage

By Marina Blagonravova  
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You might think it impossible to turn a book written in 1805 by a German idealist philosopher into a viable contemporary play.

But that's exactly what Lyudmila Roshkovan, artistic director of the Chelovek Theatre Studio, has done, staging her own bewitchingly appealing, funny and elegant adaptation of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling's novel *Nachtwachen* (Nightwatches).

In his novel, the author presents himself as a night watchman wandering around the city, then as a poet, then as a patient in a lunatic asylum. His reflections and descriptions of the scenes convey his ideas on human nature, God, the state, art, poetry and philosophy.

Taking only a few of the novel's 16 stories, the dramatisation concentrates on Schelling's view of the world and of man's fate in it.

Plots and images of different stories freely flow into one another, echoing and shading each other in the fanciful fabric of the play and interweaving romantic tenderness, wistfulness, despair, paradoxical irony and hearty laughter.

In one scene, three actors move rapidly up and down in a dance on the narrow stage ground between the two rows of spectators, their stiff figures and mincing steps to a mocking rhythmic melody suggesting mechanical dolls.

After this prologue, one of them, the Jester, starts playing with three marionettes whose naked wooden bodies and gestures are amazingly life-like, making them act out a heartbreaking love story.

Later, this story is humorously echoed in the love scene between a living actor and actress — the metaphorical portrayal of Schelling's idea that all of us are no more than play things in the hands of some superior force.

Schelling's original text finds expression in the play, but its meaning is given not so much by the script, as by



Photo by Vladimir Suvorov/The Moscow Tribune

Camille Cayol, as the Girl, in the theatrical adaptation of Joseph von Schelling's *Nachtwachen* (Nightwatches).

the strikingly expressive movements of the participants. With the help of this visual language — supported by the graceful musical interventions from the Homo Ludens chamber ensemble — the four cast members convincingly project different states of mind and soul.

The most impressive performance is given by Camille Cayol, who plays the Girl. The refined spirituality, depth and exactness of the acting by this young Frenchwoman, an actress at the Tabakov Theatre, touches the viewer's soul. At first, she appears as a delicate young girl, both bewildered by and infatuated with the life that opens before her. In her fancifully twisting body and in the changing expressions of her beautiful spirited face, we see a silent question and intense expectation, then incon-

solate sorrow or delight.

As she mutters the words of a poem over and over, trying to extract their hidden essence, she suddenly is struck by the awareness that human life from the very start carries in itself an inexorably developing embryo of death.

Life is transient, death is imminent. Human existence with its ludicrous illusions and futile searches for truth and sense is equally a theatre and a madhouse. But Schelling's novel and Roshkovan's play seem to suggest that we take things as they are and laugh at what we can.

*Nachtwachen* plays March 31, at the Chelovek Theatre Studio, Skateriny per. 23a (nearest metro Barrikadnaya), tel. 291-1656.