

Love Tale in a Time of Cockroaches

By John Freedman

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In London they'd call it fringe. In New York they'd call it Off-Off-Broadway. In Moscow, I'd just call it the Chelovek Theater Studio and be done with it.

Vastly different plays and performances have come and gone on the Chelovek's marquee since the mid-1970s, but they invariably have offered probing investigations of human nature and psychology (the theater's name means "human"). And while naturally some are better or more accessible than others, the unchanging, unifying factor at this theater — besides Lyudmila Roshkovan's presence as the founder and artistic director — is its conviction, its care and its trust, both in the artists making the shows and in the willingness of the spectators to be challenged.

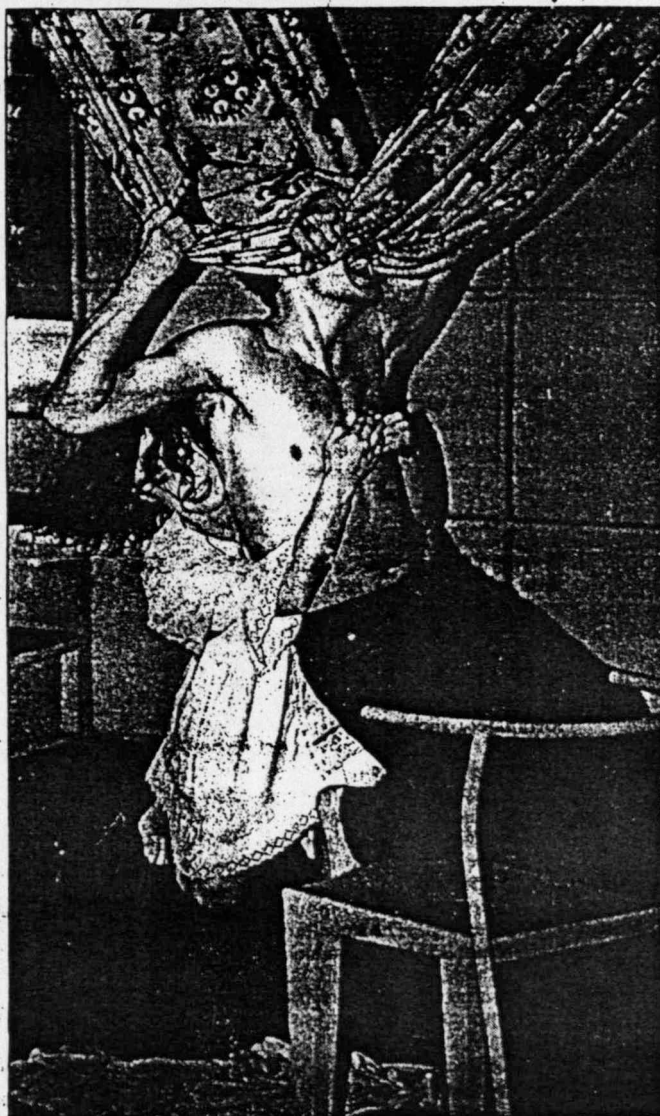
The Chelovek is a place you can go and be sure of one thing: You won't be cheated, you won't be deceived, you won't be manipulated and you won't be treated as a faceless consumer.

Roshkovan's new production of "The Exterminator," a play by Sergei Bodrov and Hanna Slutski, continues the tradition. It is offbeat, humorous, incisive and a bit obscure. And it features intricate work from leads who are as comfortable with the demands of acrobatics or dance as with the requirements of psychological acting.

"The Exterminator" flings together a young man and woman who essentially remain a mystery to each other and to us through to the end. It is a tragic story about love not being able to conquer in modern Russia, although we are left with more than a vague sensation that the possibility of love flaring up for even a moment is a good thing.

Bodrov and Slutski wrote an efficient and insightful play that works from the inside out. That is, it examines complex, intriguing individuals who happen to live in Russia in the 1990s, rather than taking the easier and less rewarding tack of illustrating contemporary problems through clichéd characters. For an example of that, consider Slutski's play, "The Emigrant's Position," performed by the Anton Chekhov Theater. Add Roshkovan's intelligent, minimalist and slightly skewed approach, and what we get is a highly engaging piece of non-mainstream theater.

Alexei Agapov is He, an enigmatic young man whom we first encounter as he wakes up in bed with his friend, the Neighbor (Dmitry



Gorbatova and Agapov wrestling with love in the Chelovek's new play.

Lyamochkin). The implications of their possible homosexual relationship are beside the point; what is important is the image of two gawky, face-making people who cannot even roll over in bed or walk across the floor without looking comically clumsy.

When She (Lyubov Gorbatova) arrives, He is alone and agitated. She is the exterminator who has come to fumigate his apartment, but despite, and perhaps through, their jittery talk and stiffly nervous behavior, a personal bond begins to grow.

He says he is deathly ill; She says her fiancé is a pilot. Both are lying, as it turns out, but that only

encourages their growing intimacy.

Agapov's motor-mouthed character, agile and furtive, remains just beyond comprehension at all times. He says he's rich, He says he's Jewish, He says he's loaded with sexual experience. But what comes through strongest is his underlying insecurity.

At the center of Viktor Platonov's set — a modern but empty apartment — is a hammock strung up from the ceiling. This swaying, undulating bed is almost the only place the athletic He seems at home.

The slight Gorbatova, intense, trusting and almost painfully responsive, has her character latch onto her new lover with a deadly seriousness that is both hilarious and touching. Being a virgin. She requires lessons in the intricacies of "incidental sexual encounters," and she is a diligent, patient student. Being a former schizophrenic. She is unusually sensitive.

After all the barriers have broken down sweetly, the fragile atmosphere of happiness achieved begins unraveling.

The Neighbor returns with an unsuitable, lascivious look at his friend's conquest and He himself, after giving his Neighbor a narcotic fix, prepares to escape to America. He assures his new love he will send for her, but the premonition of disaster is in the air. He steps out the door and is gunned down in the entryway; She splits into two personalities again, her double, Anna (Oksana Timanovskaya), emerging as a bluntly self-confident extrovert who always wanted to be a pop singer.

From beginning to end, transitions between scenes are accompanied by a tape of an English lesson translated into Russian. Through that, and through such comments as the Neighbor suggesting "We are beginning to look like people," this production openly addresses the confusion of the

contemporary Russian psyche. But it does not see that as something absolute or irreversible.

"The Exterminator" does not offer formulaic descriptions or easy answers. In large part, that is because its focus is not on the social shell its characters lug on their backs. This is a story about unique and interesting personalities conceived and performed with intelligence and refreshing ambiguity.

"The Exterminator" (Klopomor) plays Feb. 10, 12, 17 and 19 at 7 p.m. at the Chelovek Theater Studio, 23A Skatertny Pereulok. Tel. 291-1656/2668. Running time: 1 hour, 55 mins.