

Theater

# True to Chekhov, Even With the Robot

The Arlekin Players continue to take creative leaps.

By ELISABETH VINCENTELLI

When the director Igor Golyak began working on a staging of Chekhov’s “The Cherry Orchard,” he had an idea in mind. “There was a concept,” he said, then interrupted himself. “I’d rather not talk about what it used to be, if that’s OK. The war started, me being from Kyiv and having this affinity for the Russian culture. . . .”

Golyak’s voice trailed off. He was speaking in a coffee shop a block from the Baryshnikov Arts Center, in Midtown Manhattan, where his show, now titled “The Orchard,” is set to begin previews on Tuesday with a cast headed by the busy stage and screen actress Jessica Hecht as the estate owner Lyubov Ranevskaya. Also onboard is Mikhail Baryshnikov, whom the center is named for, as the old servant Firs.

Golyak was born in Kyiv and his family landed in the United States in 1990, part of a wave of Jewish refugees. He finished high school in Boston then studied theater in Moscow — you might say Chekhov is in his bones. But although he felt he had a handle on the Russian writer’s work, the war in Ukraine made him reconsider his approach.

“How do you do theater and Chekhov when there’s bombings and killings?” he said. “I keep asking ‘How and why and why is it important?’ But not on the theoretical level — on the level that really touches me. For me, every show is very personal. The idea in ‘The Cherry Orchard’ is the loss of a world, loss of connection, loss of each other, loss of this family.”

In the play, a family in financial straits must decide whether it should sell its beloved orchard. In “The Orchard” this will be starkly visualized in a parallel virtual version that complements rather than merely captures the physical one — though streaming viewers get to watch parts of the version being performed live. (Audience members can attend either or both.)

The virtual world is a post-apocalyptic dystopia in which the Baryshnikov Arts Center stands in for the orchard. There, the building, now a husk of its former self, is for sale, and virtual audience members can tour it as if they were doing a walk-through of a home on a real estate website.

“It’s almost as if you’re inside this build-

‘The idea in “The Cherry Orchard” is the loss of a world, loss of connection, loss of each other, loss of this family.’

Right, the director Igor Golyak with the 12-foot robotic arm that sits at the center of his new adaptation of “The Cherry Orchard.” Below, Jessica Hecht, center, with Nael Nacer during a rehearsal. Bottom, Mikhail Baryshnikov, center, on the set at the Baryshnikov Arts Center.



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The company quickly earned plaudits on the community-theater circuit, but it took the pandemic to give the company a decisive push into greater recognition.

In June 2020, Golyak staged the interactive virtual show “State vs. Natasha Banina” from home, starring Denisova. The production started the Arlekin Players’s virtual-theater initiative, Zero Gravity (Zero-G) Lab, and attracted critical acclaim and influential new fans to the company.

One of them was Hecht, who had logged on to “Natasha” on her brother-in-law’s recommendation. “I thought it was going to be one of those Zoom shows that we all were, ‘Oh my God!’” she said, mimicking pointing a gun to her temple. “It wasn’t. I was cooking dinner and I stopped cooking within a minute. I was like, ‘This is amazing.’”

Another was Baryshnikov. “There were innovative technical elements and I was intrigued by Igor’s confidence to try such a thing,” he wrote in an email. He and Hecht appeared in Golyak’s next project, the meta-commentary “chekhovOS/an experimental game/,” which incorporated scenes from “The Cherry Orchard.”

In January, the company presented the virtual show “Witness,” which was set on a ship transporting hundreds of Jewish refugees fleeing Germany in 1939.

Clearly there was no going back from the creative strides Golyak had made during the peak of the pandemic: If you have made something like “chekhovOS/,” do you really want to stage “Masterpiece Theater”? And so unlike many other companies, which fled back to the familiar ways of the Before, Arlekin Players is returning to in-person performance but not to business as usual.

Golyak was only carrying out the lessons imparted by his Moscow teachers, who saw theater as an ever-evolving, protean art form.

“One of the interesting things I was taught is that a director needs to develop a language or an aesthetic for each show,” Golyak said. “Chekhov was a revolutionary because he spoke about something that’s in the air with the rhythms that are there.”

Perhaps counterintuitively, though, Golyak uses the high-tech bells and whistles to expose the play’s beating heart.

“He has this whole image conjured in his head about the visuals, but he says, ‘Just try to start on this emotion,’” Hecht said. “And he knows that if he tells it very simply, he’ll capture it visually.”

“So you really trust him. I do.”



ing and you find these magical rooms, and in each room, it’s like you’re finding a lost world,” the producer Sara Stackhouse said. “You’re discovering a letter or a memory, then you discover this theater where a play is in progress and you join it.”

This grounds the show in a historical reality — Baryshnikov portrays the playwright in the digital version, and Hecht is Chekhov’s wife and his mistress — while nodding to our troubled current circumstances.

“The miracle of Chekhov’s writing is that, no matter where it’s performed, it feels local to the culture,” Baryshnikov wrote in an email. “How that translates in Igor’s version remains to be seen. Obviously he speaks the language the play was written in, but he’s taking a lot of risks — technical and artistic — and avoiding clichés.”

Something that definitely can’t be called a Chekhov cliché is a 12-foot robotic arm, which sits in the middle of the physical stage — it is part of the family and tries to understand humans — and was painstakingly programmed to execute such tasks as serving coffee or sweeping the floor.

The juxtaposition of past and future (typically, Oana Botez’s costumes for the physical version are a hybrid of period and modern), human and robot feels like yet another leap for Golyak’s Arlekin Players Theater, which is based in Needham, Mass., and has

been the rare company to use the pandemic as a creative spur.

Until then, it had been a bit of a tough slog. As Golyak, now 43, learned the hard way, a young Russia-trained director was not a hot commodity in the American theater scene of the early 2000s.

“Nobody wanted me,” he said. “For an immigrant, it’s very difficult: Where do you go? How do you start? I had an accent — and I still do, of course. I would send résumés but nobody would call me back. At some point I decided that I’m going to stop doing theater because it’s just not possible to make a living.” His day jobs included selling ads for the Yellow Pages.

Eventually Golyak befriended a group of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, who asked him to help them work on scenes. He requested a nine-month commitment, and they agreed. Arlekin Players Theater emerged from that initiative, in 2009, and the troupe, which then mostly performed in Russian, developed an esprit de corps.

“We are like a family,” said Darya Denisova, 32, an actor with Arlekin, and Golyak’s wife. “We celebrate holidays together, we support each other when there are emergencies. Now that there’s this awful war going on between Russia and Ukraine, we are all trying our best to support people in Ukraine.”

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