

Revival of banned Russian play proves that suicide can be funny

By LOREN ARDUINI

Most people wouldn't think of suicide as being funny, but as the subject of a serious misunderstanding it can prove to be comical. The play *The Suicide* not only takes this morbid subject and places it in a humorous context, but in the process also expresses social criticisms of a country undergoing radical change.

What was witnessed in Burton Auditorium before Reading Week was an elaborate and well thought out production of a play which has been banned in the USSR since 1932, and reincarnated by the Theatre Department at York.

The Suicide, written by Nicolai Erdman in Moscow in 1928, and set in Russia in that period, portrays the life of a Soviet peasant during a time of turmoil and confusion. The play focuses on a young, unemployed husband who feels he has been cheated by the revolution, and the events which lead to the subsequent suicide he never intended to commit.

Off to the side of the stage, before the lights went up, a trio of musicians in Russian costumes played a sweet yet dramatic piece with a Russian flavour, to warm up the audience. It was a nice touch and the music effectively produced a near-hypnotic effect, creating a Russian ambience from which the play then emerged.

As the scene opens, we are introduced to the small flat owned by Semyon Podsekalknikov and his wife Maria. The set was well designed and constructed, and served to reflect the meagre income of the couple.

The play begins with Semyon waking his wife in the middle of the night to demand that she serve him liverwurst to satisfy his hunger. Angrily Maria submits to his request but, when she returns with the liverwurst,



SUICIDE IS PAINLESS: Villagers choose the method of suicide for Semyon (Sandy MacMaster, far right) as he points at clowns and generally balances the page.

an argument follows. It escalates and provokes Semyon to reveal the frustration he feels due to his lack of employment which he blames on the economic crisis and confusion in the country.

The argument is what sets the ball rolling in the play because it is here that Semyon proclaims that a man is worth nothing if he cannot be of any use to his country. Maria misinterprets this as a reason for Semyon to end his life.

The play then unfolds in a satirical and humorous manner as it leads the audience through a sequence of events which end with Semyon's fake suicide, a burial and his subsequent denial of the whole act.

The lead roles, played by students in fourth year, were well-executed and their impressive performances could only have come from long hours of rehearsals. The supporting cast, filled by students from first to third year, also did a job well done.

What tended to be irritating, however, was the heavy makeup application on some of the characters. The effect created a theatrical phoniness which should have been eliminated for a more realistic portrayal of the play. The matter was made worse due to the fact that only some of the supporting cast had the overdone makeup. The lead characters were naturally made-up. This apparent unevenness in the make-up application distracted the viewer from the substance of the play.

Also disappointing was the absence of any Russian accent. The actors sometimes "Canadianized" their words to a point where one would expect someone to blurt out "eh" at the end of a sentence. Russian accents would have added much to the flavour of the play.

Besides these minor setbacks, what was enjoyable was the creative use of intermission time for a banquet scene. During this time, a long

table was set up with many of the characters around it singing, dancing and feigning to consume a vast quantity of homemade Vodka.

But what remained after viewing the play was the feeling that generations of people were deprived of this educational and artistic piece because of its ban by the Soviet censor board and destruction of the original script in 1932. What was presented by the York theatre students was an adaptation of a French version of the script with an added Russian emphasis by Yanina Gotsulsky, a first year theatre student at York.

Overall the performance was entertaining and the polished finished product reflected the hard work and dedication put into it by all members involved in the production.



Clown ballet d'amour parodies mating ritual



CLOWNING AROUND: Robin Patterson and Michele Smith (in baby carriage) wear old dresses and tickle the funnybone.

By KEN KEOBKE

In the lobby of the Poor Alex Theatre, people eyed each other with amused suspicion, trying to decide who was and wasn't a lover. The occasion was *Rites of Spring, A Clown Ballet for Lovers Only*. The Valentine's Day performance included a free love-potion punch, served up to everyone who attended.

Rites of Spring, the title of an Igor Stravinsky symphony, was also made into a ballet by the Russian master Nijinsky. In the clown version, the characters performing are Emma and Pauline Rasputin, and Rudolph, Herschell, Charlie and Nina Nijinsky.

Nina Gilmour, daughter of two of the performers, is only two years old. When she makes her first appearance, many aspects of the nature of the clown begin to make sense: she has fun, is delighted with everything she does, gives every moment deep concentration, and is equally delighted with the audience and her fellow actors. Gilmour proves that children are natural clowns.

All the clowns wear red bulbous noses. It's a levelling factor that makes each of them part of the same family. In the case of the actors in this production, Terry Judd, Robin Patterson, Charles P. Schott and

parents Dean Gilmour and Michelle Smith, they are also fellow graduates of the prestigious Ecole Jacques Lecoq in Paris. Jacques Lecoq presides over the teaching of an international pilgrimate of disciples who learn mime, commedia dell'arte and a variety of other techniques.

The result, as seen in *Rites of Spring*, is hilarious. Robin Patterson, an obviously talented ballet dancer, parodies the art, and Michelle Smith, when opening the imaginary door of an imaginary car, confides to the audience "It's mime!"

Rites of Spring is a about love, and various degrees of infatuation and passion are explored along with examples of different kinds of flirting and how to pick up a member of the opposite sex. Included in the show are several playful exchanges with the audience. Several patrons, obviously old clown-show hands, weren't in the least embarrassed when asked questions from the stage and they eagerly shouted out their replies.

The only disappointing aspect of the evening was its brevity. The performance took the subject matter to the limit, but it would have been nice if the end had been an intermission with a different show following.

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