

British Theatre Guide

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Dying for It

Moira Buffini, a free adaptation of Nikolai Erdman's *The Suicide*
Almeida Theatre, Islington
(2007)

If laughter is as good for the health as they say, then *Dying For It* must inevitably belie its title. Throughout its two-and-a-quarter hour running time, this new version of Nikolai Erdman's absurdist political farce *The Suicide* is packed with comic gems.

It starts with five minutes of pitch darkness during which a domestic comedy over a black sausage develops. The selfish Semyon Semyonovich, played with wicked glee by the really excellent Tom Brooke, bickers late at night first with his wife Masha (Liz White) and then her terrifying mother, Susan Brown's Serafima.

As the unemployed man threatens suicide, his grieving neighbour, the bull-like Alexander Petrovich (Barnaby Kay), becomes embroiled, as does his late night guest, 1920s Russia's equivalent to Anna Nicole Smith, the strident, barely-dressed Margarita (Sophie Stanton). This hard as nails lady keeps a bar that seems most useful for nefarious purposes involving young women and spends little time with her 83 year-old husband. Eventually, the would-be suicide is talked around and given purpose by a tuba.

From there, the play opens out into a rich satire on Stalin's Russia once Semyon Semyonovich announces his impending suicide more publicly. Suddenly, the grim, grey space - not even a room - designed by Lez Brotherston with an Escher-like spiralling staircase, is awash with symbolic visitors.

Each of them wishes to take advantage of the opportunity offered by what they see as the "meaningful heroic death" of an ordinary man.

The Church and the State, together with the Party, have similar political aims, and writers, idealists and even a society beauty all wish to use the corpse to convey their own messages to the country. As the representative of the intelligentsia sums it up, "Nowadays, only the dead may say what the living think".

In a society where free speech is suppressed, and state spies represented by the seemingly ever-present Paul Rider as jumped-up postman Yegor abound, this is the blackest type of comedy. It is no surprise that the play was banned at home so that its world premiere took place in Sweden. Even as late as 1982, over fifty years after it was completed, it received another Moscow ban.

That may be hardly surprising since Erdman so unerringly hit his targets through the medium of his wonderful comic anti-hero.

There is far more to *Dying For It* than the political element. Moira Buffini has given it modern robust language packed with wit and her director, Anna Mackmin, who took over from Kathy Burke, ensures that the evening has the pacing of a farce. Arguably that is what it is but there are no

slammed doors and the physical humour is relatively limited, although Tom Brooke does get to clown around, particularly when his character manages a messianic resurrection.

The supporting cast all have great fun, with Tony Rohr hilarious as a vodka priest with more earthly than eternal interests and a great line in fire and brimstone sermonising; and Michelle Dockery sexy as romantic flirt Kiki, particularly memorable.

It seems amazing that *The Suicide* is so rarely performed in the UK. It is extremely funny, politically charged and, in addition to offering the leading actor a gem of a role, gives good opportunities for most of the cast to shine, as they do on this occasion.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)