

# British Theatre Guide

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## My Mocking Happiness

Leonid Malyugin, based on the letters of Anton Chekhov

Kiev's National Academic Theatre of Russian Drama Lesya Ukrainka

St James Theatre

11–12 September 2015

If only the glossy programme accompanying the Ukrainian Culture Today season at St James Theatre included actors' biographies. For instance, one of the three actors in *My Mocking Happiness* was within a few years of knowing Nemirovich-Danchenko, the founder, with Stanislavsky, of the Moscow Art Theatre, MXAT with its iconic seagull symbol.

In 1943, Nemirovich-Danchenko founded the MXAT School. Nikolai Rushkovsky, the actor playing Alexander, Chekhov's brother, graduated from it in 1952. Olga Knipper, Chekhov's wife, died in 1959.

Chekhov and his wife Olga Knipper, in Leonid Malyugin's 1965 dramatization of Chekhov's letters from 1884 to 1904, are played by seventy-four-year-old Vyacheslav Yezepov and seventy-eight-year-old Larisa Kadochnikova. As part of the festival, you can also see a youthful, beautiful Kadochnikova in Sergei Paradzhanov's 1964 film, *The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*.

"Structurally similar to Jerome Kilty's 1960 play *Dear Liar*, *My Mocking Happiness* has been staged at the National Academic Theatre of Russian Drama Lesya Ukrainka for more than fifty years." The first line is "Why did he die?" And on he walks, stooped, aged, grey, sickly, back from the dead, immortal. Hard to believe Chekhov was only forty-four when he died in 1904.

Chekhov's letters, light-hearted and profound musings on life, people and art, to his brother, wife, sister, Gorky, and the vivacious Lika Mizinova (young Ukrainian actress Natalya Dolya), the prototype for his Nina in *Seagull*, feed seamlessly into passages from his plays, life imitating art, art imitating life. He is Vershinin and Olga is Masha.

Against what the director Mikhail Reznikovich (associate directors credited are Irina Barkovskaya and Leonid Ostropolsky) calls "a pipe organ made of birch trees" (designer David Borovsky) the evolution of Chekhov's "deeply hidden private drama" plays out in chamber quartet.

His success and failures, his life-threatening trip to the prisoners' colony in Sakhalin ("we must all work towards common good, all of us"), his pining for Moscow in Yalta, his cruel flirtation with Mizinova (he's a slippery fish in affairs of the heart), his concerns, sharp observations, ironic comments, quotes that amused him, insights into his plays, and descriptions of his life are told in a hundred minutes with no interval.

Minimum props: parasols, prisoners' shackles, bentwood black chairs, table, hat, overcoat, umbrella, pince-nez, and a white hospital trolley wheeled on and off by his brother anticipating the next TB attack.

Few props are needed. Peter Brook's dramatization of Chekhov's letters from 1899 to 1904 to his wife, *Ta Main Dans la Mienne*, at the Barbican Pit in 2005 with Michel Piccoli and Natasha Parry, used subtle lighting on a carpeted empty space.

It is all in the delivery of an amazing feat of memory—and undying memory is what it is all about. I'd like to see the animated Natalya Dolya play Chekhov's young heroines: tonight is a perfect audition for Nina. "I love you like a tiger", he says.

Kadochnikova, a skittish Olga, an actress through and through, reminds me of the late Coral Browne; Rushkovsky, drink in his hand, slurs and staggers about as the intemperate Alexander; and soft-voiced Yezepov has obviously lived with Chekhov for many years. Lucky man. "My happiness is not good. It mocks me".

Russian and Ukrainian ex-pats love it, and how can you not love Chekhov's *aperçus*? Just close your eyes and listen to these ghosts from the previous centuries. "They are leaving us and we must start over. We must live."

"What is life? Same as a carrot. A carrot is a carrot, nothing more". "Tolstoy came and we talked about immortality. And I had a flow of blood after he went". "Don't believe our intelligentsia, it is stupid and lazy. Believe the ordinary people".

"If you don't want to be lonely, don't get married". "I'm a right *nedotyopa*" ('duffer' doesn't quite do it justice), a word used to describe Firs in *Cherry Orchard*. "Did I really live?"

Even my companion, who knows no Russian though has picked up knowledge about Chekhov by osmosis from me he says, recognises the many quotes and anecdotes from this entertaining epistolary recital. I am told the earpiece translation is good.

**Reviewer:** [Vera Liber](#)