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Sweet Bird of Youth (review)

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PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Awam Amkpa and Louis Scheeder, Editors

SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH. By Tennessee Williams. Sovremennik Theatre, Moscow. 31 March 2003.

The sex and sin of Tennessee Williams's plays were—until the breakup of the USSR—either banned by prudish censors or diluted by jittery translators. Despite this, Williams has been a popular playwright, and today the repertoire of Moscow theatres includes not only his best-known works—*The Glass Menagerie*, *The Rose Tattoo*, and *A Streetcar Named Desire*—but also Williams's experiments in language, character, and form—*Small Craft Warnings*, *The Two Character Play*, and *A Perfect Analysis Given by a Parrot*. Audiences and artists are returning to the plays with fresh expectations and excitement now that new translations and productions have restored the playwright's corporeal concerns.

At Moscow's Sovremennik Theatre, the young iconoclast Kiril Serebrennikov has staged an athletic and visually arresting production of *Sweet Bird of Youth* (*Сладкоголовая птичка юности*). Serebrennikov mines the darkest and most violent aspects of the play, transforming Williams's parable into a ritualistic tragedy. An explosive and hypnotic performance by the diva Marina Neyalova makes this *Sweet Bird of Youth* a compelling event.

Adapted by poet Nina Sadur, Serebrennikov's production is blatantly theatrical: offstage characters look on from the sides, choreographed movement sequences abound, and an onstage cello player underscores much of the early action. Designed by Nikolai Simonov, the set resembles a Santa Fe motel more than the grand hotel of a Gulf Coast town suggested in the original text. The design is rendered rather simply and abstractly with few props, thereby forcing the actors to move pieces of furniture as needed.

In Sadur's prologue, three women—one ostensibly the mother of the itinerant gigolo, Chance Wayne—give birth to the story about to unfold.

These strange creatures herald the doom that awaits Chance (Yuri Kolokolnikov) at the end of the play and alert us to Serebrennikov's scheme: though Time is the Enemy (says Williams), it is circular, and hence these events can be predicted and enacted as rituals. The setting is, we learn, not a hotel but an asylum for the aged, from which these Weird Sisters eventually move to inhabit Williams's play as townspeople, hecklers, and, at the very end, grotesque bacchantes ready to castrate and devour the sacrificial Chance.

This self-conscious enacting of rituals and of role-playing dominates the production. Serebrennikov takes his cue from Williams's occasional use of direct address and expands it to all aspects of his interpretation. Onstage, the three women don grotesque fat suits, which are covered at first by hospital garb and later by other costumes. A seductive and violent dance—of a corps of thugs dressed in almost identical suits and ties—introduces us to Boss Finley's entourage. Simple plywood laid across saw horses serves as Finley's podium. The characters in the scenes acknowledge the onstage cellist.

The most interesting aspect of the production is the dual performance of Marina Neyalova as Princess Kosmonopolis (a.k.a. the aging star Alexandra Del Lago) and the young Heavenly Finley, Chance's onetime lover. It is an extraordinary display of emotional highs and lows, of unexpected turns and athletic choreography, by a star of the Russian stage. As the Princess, Neyalova uses the bed—the only real piece of furniture in the first scene—as trampoline and stage, as the place for lovemaking and wrestling. The entire Princess/Chance scene is an extended pas de deux of sensual acrobatics, revealing the Princess to be strong, changeable, violent, and, at times, gentle and wise. At several points, a large circle flies in from above, suspended in the air and outlined by bare bulbs. When dark, it is an ominous suggestion of a clock or wheel of fate; when lit, it serves as the marquee lights for Kosmonopolis's bedroom performance.



Marina Neyalova as Heavenly, Vladislav Vetrov as Boss Finley, and Alexander Oleshko as Fly in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, directed by Kiril Serebrennikov at Moscow's Sovremennik Theatre.
Photo by: Nikolai Mescheryakov.

Designer Elena Stepanova costumed Neyalova's Heavenly as a contemporary schoolgirl. During the interview with her father and brother, she carefully places tall reeds into the floor, creating a thin cage around the playing area, moving with the deliberation of a ballerina on a tightrope. Upon completing her task, she begins to take the reeds out again. In juxtaposition to the brusque male movements and speech of her father, she is an enigmatic, pathetic figure. If this Princess seems unexpectedly agile and this Heavenly a bit long in the tooth, both are forgiven as Neyalova explores the extreme differences in the two characters. Where her Princess is energetic and explosive, Heavenly is controlled and precise; where the Princess is quick and mercurial, Heavenly is methodical and tired. The Princess is full of life, energized, and all consuming—an aging star who refuses to die. Heavenly is the shell of a girl, an automaton, a completely dead soul in a barely animated young body.

The end, in which the Princess leaves and Chance must face his Easter Sunday castration at the hands of Finley's men, is choreographed as a ritual. A crescendo of sound and atavistic music overtakes the dialogue and Chance's last plea for under-

standing from the audience. The three witches return to take part in the bloodletting, as murder turned into ritual equals tragedy (as Jan Kott suggested). But this Chance evokes little sympathy and even less interest as a tragic hero. Our focus is on the enactors of the ritual, the real warriors against time: the women. Sadur's chorus and Neyalova's dual roles are the primary characters here.

Neyalova's performance in particular stands out as the white-hot center of this production. Perhaps it cannot be any other way. The Princess (based in part on Tallulah Bankhead and on the author himself) is a character that demands our attention, and attracts actresses who do the same—from Geraldine Page's and Irene Worth's performances on Broadway to Elizabeth Ashley's recent portrayal at the Shakespeare Theatre. In March 2004, the Sovremennik will bring *The Cherry Orchard* to the Kennedy Center. With Marina Neyalova as Madame Ranevskaya, it is sure to demand our attention as well.

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