

The Moth at the Fomenko Studio is an emblematic production for the current season which is not yet half finished. It is a contemporary play written on a contemporary theme staged at a theater that, in its ten years of existence, has shown only passing interest in new plays. But, one way or another, that is the banner of this season - new plays of all kinds are everywhere to be seen, even where you would least expect them.

The Moth, by Pyotr Gladilin, is notable for another reason: It is a rare play, even in these days, that attacks head-on a pressing political or social problem. Most important, and this is praise indeed, it does so without being heavy-handed or preachy. The Moth is equally entertaining and thought provoking.

Like most of Gladilin's plays, it is a comedy with more than a tad of the fantastic to it. In this case, the supernatural occurrence is one of literal transformation - a 19 year-old soldier who has no inclination for the belligerence of military life amazes everyone one day when he shows up to take his bath in the bathhouse: as a woman. When grilled by her flabbergasted superiors to say whether she did it on purpose or not, she admits that, perhaps, she did.

The clever trick is that Gladilin ignores the fantastic turn of events entirely once he has introduced it. From that moment on, the play essentially becomes a straight dialogue between two points of view - the idealism of the unorthodox rebel Private Lebyodushkin (now Lebyodushkina) and the grizzled realism of the military brass. Lebyodushkin is as stubborn as a brick wall - he wonders if he may be a genius and has no intention of risking death playing at other people's war games. He is an actor and writer and all he wants in life is to create art. If he must become a woman in order to do that, he considers it a natural and obvious choice.

This simple but witty play was given a clear and sensitive reading by director Yevgeny Kamenkovich. Using Vladimir Maximov's basic set of a stage on the stage, and Valeria Kurochkina's realistic military garb for costumes, Kamenkovich backed off and let the charm of the play speak for itself. This works well not only with Polina Kutepova, who delivers an endearing portrait of the reluctant soldier, but also with Yury Stepanov, who renders a brilliant interpretation of the Colonel, Lebyodushkin's commanding officer.

Stepanov, in fact, comes close to making his character the one of central focus. His colonel, a meticulous officer who personally makes sure the red star on a lectern is properly polished, is a man ripe to be struck by doubt. He is haunted by the memory of a friend who was killed in action and, as it later turns out, an unhappy old love is still eating him from the inside out. Slow to move, slow to react and slow to speak, Stepanov catches the Colonel on the serrated edge separating his certain belief in his professional mission and his personal suspicion that life is bigger and more complex than he has allowed until now.

Despite the world-weary Colonel's avowals that he will "make a man" of the newly-female Lebyodushkin, we clearly see he is more than intrigued by this inexplicable incident - he genuinely is touched by it. And so, when the intractable soldier enlists him in acting out scenes from Othello and a play she has written, the Colonel embarks on his own path of self-realization

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even if he does not know it yet.

Kutepova brings humor to her role by playing Lebyodushkin as a person so sincere, so sensitive and so in tune with his (or her) inner self that he is utterly bereft of humor. He is undiluted truth, naivete and honesty personified. This is, after all, no laughing matter: A young man, a teenager, has resolved to stand up to the state and say "No, I will not fight; not at any time, not for any reason."

What is left is for us to laugh - not only at the numerous comic complications that arise in the plot, but also at the idiocy of governments destroying their people and of people letting that happen without raising a finger, let alone a voice. That, of course, is the laughter of dark humor and Gladilin knows it well. He leads the story to a tragic end, for it could have no other.

There is nothing ground-breaking about The Moth. It is, at heart, a plain story told plainly and well. And that works to its considerable advantage. It affects us because its people do. In an age when individuals are increasingly encouraged or forced to act in ways counter to their own best interests, you have to love someone like Lebyodushkin, who simply and flatly says "No." Call this modern dissent, call it protest, call it what you will - at the Fomenko Studio it makes for excellent theater.

By John Freedman