LEGIT REVIEWS

LINCOLN CENTER FESTIVAL

INNOCENT AS CHARGED
(FORHAM H U THEATER, POPE AUDITORIUM; 336 CAPACITY; $55 TOP)

NEW YORK A Lincoln Center Festival presentation of the Russian (Valdiczky Theater) production of the play by Alexander Ostrovsky is in two acts. Directed by Petr Fonkenko, Seva, Tatiana Nikitina, obrise, Olga Minato, with lighting, Valdir Anunci (director) and Tatiana Agostina, set design, seen July 15, evening time 3:00 p.m., 10 minutes, Pietr Fonkenko, Tatiana Nikitina, Olga Minato, Seva, and Tatiana Agostina.

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

Somewhere near the close of the Valdikuy Theater’s seemingly interminable production of Alexander Ostrovsky’s “Innocent as Charged,” a character raises a toast to all who serve the cause of art. A fine sentiment to be sure, but I’d rather raise my glass to all who serve the cause of art in less than three hours. At three and a quarter, the Valdikuy show is only half the duration of the Moly Theater’s “Brothers and Sisters,” the Lincoln Center Festival’s prior entry in its “celebration of Russian theater,” but it feels as long as it must. As in that production, there is much fine acting to be observed in “Innocent.” The cast includes several beguiling Russian theater and film stars, all of whom were greeted with enthusiastic ovations by the largely Russian-speaking audience. But director Petr Fonkenko’s laborious and ultimately indigestible production gradually builds and finally delivers the play’s dramatic impact.

Indeed, at times Ostrovsky’s all but disappears in the whirl of Fominenko’s directorial efforts and the energetic, if at times overripe, performances. It’s a pity, since the play’s weighty, moving themes are hinted at in the history of Russian theater and the author of more than 80 plays, is not often staged in the West. (Innocent) is a perfect adaptation of Ostrovsky’s play “The Storm,” probably more commonly seen outside Russia than any of Ostrovsky’s plays.

At least one of the problems of Fominenko’s staging is merely staging. While “Brothers and Sisters” employed supertitles, the “inclusive-national” staging of “Innocent as Charged” at the Pope Auditorium at Fordham University requires that audiences wear epirelies to receive a simultaneous translation into English. This automatically inserts a layer of distance between the performers and those in the audience who don’t understand Russian.

It proves to be a particularly unhelpful layer in this case, since one woman speaks the voices for all the characters, rendering the entire play in a hardworking but senseless monotone. The effect might be compared to that of an audience attending on the back of the overburdened translator’s occasional exasperated scream. “Please do my angels” becomes “Please, Do my angels.”

Ironically, the distance between audience and performer is apparently what Fominenko was seeking to eliminate in this staging. The play’s brief first act is performed with a satirical, narrow-minded stage setting featuring a few rows of chairs at the actors’ feet. Here unfolds a sad, self-contained drama of a young woman’s betrayal: Lyubov, played with sweet simplicity by the luminous Elena Solunlova, through to page 5B.

There is much fine acting to be observed.

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE: Alla Katsakaulova, left, and Yulia Borinovskaya appear in the Valdikuy Theater’s production of “Innocent as Charged,” by producer Yuliya Borinovskaya, whose work is rarely seen in the West.

STYLISH THREADS: Marco Rodriguez stars as El Pacheco in “Zoot Suit.”

ZOOT SUIT TAILORED FOR CONTEMPO AUDS

RESIDENT ZOOT SUIT
(GOODMAN THEATER, 663 SEATS; $10 TOP)

CRITICISM A Goodman Theater presentation of a play with music in two acts by Luis Valdez. Directed by Henry Godinez, Choreography, Ricardo Dean, Scs, Christopher Arreola costume, Nan Zeltzer, lighting, Michael Phillips sound, Michael Bond music, Bod, and Daniel Valdez. Production, stage manager, Allen Vanvicki. Assistant director, E. J. Ponce. Opened, performed June 14, 2000, running time 2 hours. 40 MIN.


LATIN DANCE: Angeline Novarro, center, leads the Zoot Suit Gang in dance to the Goodman Theater’s production of Luis Valdez’s “Zoot Suit,” set in post-WWII Los Angeles.

This is an arresting, entertaining and lively piece of theater refreshingly unfilled and confident, a well-tuned ensemble that’s also a winner with the audience. Since dramatic genres have become more fluid — and styles less rigid — in the last two decades, the constantly self-referential “Zoot Suit” is far better suited to today’s audiences, especially in the often soporific sector.

This is also the first Latino play ever to be seen on the Goodman’s mainstage. Given the rapid rise in the Mexican-American audience across the country, it’s worth remembering that legit producers (and nonprofit institutions) have too often ignored an audience increasing greatly in size and influence.

Inspired by the so-called “Zoot Suit” riots in the Los Angeles of 1943, Valdez’s play is a fictionalized version of events surrounding the Sleepy Hollow Murder Case, in which a group of young Chicano boys were tried in a kangaroo court and sent to San Quentin for a murder they almost certainly did not commit. The title refers to the popular wartime Chicano garb (long jacket, baggy pants) that became a symbol of Chicano pride during the war years.

Valdez tells his tale through El Pacheco, the play’s best-dressed character, who has the power to control events at will. Even as he takes the comical role of Chicano youth upon himself, El Pacheco also controls whether the show will have a happy ending or a dissonant one. His tricky figure from the point of view of dramatic structure, his presence gives this show a unique necessity.

The central conflict in the play takes place between the two narrators, one a Chicano narrator who finds his back up against the wall. After dramatically recounting events that led to the murder, the play follows Reyna’s wrongheaded interpretation of events and his feelings of ambivalence about George Shearer and Alice Bloomfield, the two non-Latino characters who are leading the attempt to overturn the verdict. El Pacheco, we eventually learn, is Henry’s alter ego, offering him the chance to embrace or reject the imposed stereotypes of others.

By realistic standards, at least, the play seems overly simplistic in places and relies on that old standby — villainy — the conspiracy of police, press and politicians. Still, the intrigue California at least, there was considerable foundation to those suspicions — and Valdez’s

This is an arresting, entertaining and lively piece of theater refreshingly unbound to pack some political wallop.
TWO SUICIDES

From page 5a

Two suicides give a sense of the importance of suicide in the novel. The first is the suicide of Mrs. Drouet, who is a weak character and a burden to her husband. The second is the suicide of the young girl, who is a victim of circumstance. These suicides highlight the moral and social issues of the time and raise questions about the meaning of life and death.