

## LEGIT REVIEWS

LINCOLN CENTER  
FESTIVALINNOCENT AS  
CHARGED(FORDHAM U THEATER, POPE AUDITORIUM;  
336 CAPACITY; \$55 TOP)

NEW YORK A Lincoln Center Festival presentation of the State Academic Theater of Russia (Vakhtangov Theater) production of the play by Alexander Ostrovsky in two acts. Directed by Petr Fomenko. Sets, Tatiana Solovinskaya; costumes, Olga Ahmatovskaya; lighting, Vladimir Amelin; music direction, Tatiana Agaveva. Opened, reviewed July 19. Running time: 3 HOURS, 15 MIN. Elena Ivanovna

Kruchinina ..... Yulia Borisova  
Nina Pavlovna .....  
Korinkina ..... Liudmila Maksakova  
Nil Stratonyeh Dudukin ..... Touri Iakovlev  
Grigory Lvovich .....  
Murov ..... Viacheslav Shalevich  
Grigory Neznamov ..... Evgeni Kniazev  
Petya Milovzorov ..... Victor Zozouline  
Shmaga ..... Mikhail Uliyanov  
Arkhypova Gatchikha .....  
Arina ..... Alla Kazanskaia/Inna Alabina  
Ivan ..... Anatoli Menchchikov  
Lyubov Ivanovna .....  
Otradina ..... Elena Sotnikova  
Taisa Ilyinichna .....  
Shelavina ..... Nonna Grishaeva  
Grigory Lvovich Murov ..... Iouri Kraskov  
Annushka ..... Olga Gavrilouk

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

Somewhere near the close of the Vakhtangov 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 Vakhtangov show is only half the duration of the Maly Theater's "Brothers and Sisters," the Lincoln Center Festival's prior entry in its "celebration of Russian theater," but it feels almost as long.

As in that production, there is much fine acting to be observed in "Innocent." The cast includes several leg-

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endary Russian theater and film stars, all of whom were greeted with enthusiastic affection by the largely Russian-speaking audience. But director Petr Fomenko's laborious and ultimately indulgent production gradually blurs and finally obliterates the play's dramatic impact.

Indeed, at times Ostrovsky all but disappears in the whirl of Fomenko's directorial flourishes and the energetic, if at times overripe, performances. That's a pity, since the playwright, a towering figure in the history of Russian theater and the author of more than 50 plays, is not often staged in the West. Janacek's opera "Katya Kabanova," adapted from Ostrovsky's play "The Storm," is probably more commonly seen outside Russia than any of Ostrovsky's plays.)

At least one of the problems of Fomenko's staging is merely logistical. While "Brothers and Sisters" employed supertitle translations, the "environmental" staging of "Innocent as Charged" at the Pope Auditorium at Fordham U requires that audiences wear earphones 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 provides the voices for all the characters, rendering the entire play in a hardworking but affectless monotone. The effect might be compared to hearing an Aeroflot flight attendant describing emergency exit procedures for three hours. (Inadvertent comedy is also provided by the overburdened translator's occasional oddly scanned lines. "Please do, my angel" becomes "Please. Do my angel.")

Ironically, the distance between audience and performer is apparently what Fomenko was seeking to eliminate in this staging. The play's brief first act is

performed on a wide, narrow, slightly raised stage with the audience sitting in a few long rows 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 Sotnikova,

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'ZOOT SUIT' TAILORED  
FOR CONTEMPO AUDS

## RESIDENT

## ZOOT SUIT

(GOODMAN THEATER; 683 SEATS;  
\$42 TOP)

CHICAGO A Goodman Theater presentation of a play with music in two acts by Luis Valdez. Directed by Henry Godinez. Choreography, Randy Duncan. Sets, Christopher Acebo; costumes, Nan Zabriske; lighting, Michael Philippi; sound, Michael Bodeen; music, Bodeen and Daniel Valdez; production stage manager, Alden Vasquez. Artistic director, Robert Falls. Opened, reviewed June 28, 2000. Running time: 2 HOURS, 40 MIN.

El Pachuco ..... Marco Rodriguez  
Henry Reyna ..... Andrew Navarro  
Della Barrios ..... Sandra Delgado  
Smiley Torres ..... Eric Aviles  
Joey Castro ..... Edward E. Torres  
Tommy Roberts ..... Joe Sikora  
Elena Torres ..... Stephanie Santos  
Bertha Villareal ..... Sandra Marquez  
Rudy Reyna ..... Lakin Valdez  
Lupe Reyna ..... Shana Montanez  
Swabie ..... Seth Hoff  
Manchuka ..... Mary Ann de la Cruz  
Rafas ..... Joel Maisonet  
Ragman ..... Salvatore Ingurgio  
Zooter ..... Parrish Collier  
Guerra ..... Arlene Dolan  
Hoba ..... Kristin Pichaske  
Little Blue ..... Chavva Ariel Smith  
Sergeant Smith ..... Thomas Vincent Kelly  
Lieutenant Edwards ..... Neil Friedman  
Press ..... Steve Pickering  
Dolores Reyna ..... Carole Gutierrez  
Enrique Reyna ..... Gustavo Mellado  
Alice Bloomfield ..... Amy Landecker  
George Shearer ..... Kevin Gudahl  
With: Keely Vasquez, Robyn Payne, Kate Stroben.

By CHRIS JONES

Revised and revived in Chicago some 20 years after it flopped on Broadway, Luis Valdez's "Zoot Suit" remains a singularly curious hybrid of Brechtian agit-prop,



STYLISH THREADS: Marco Rodriguez stars as El Pachuco in "Zoot Suit."



LATIN DANCE: Andrew Navarro, center, leads the Zoot Suit Gang in dance in the Goodman Theater's production of Luis Valdez's "Zoot Suit," set in post-WWII Los Angeles.

conventional courtroom melodrama and hip-hop musical. Nevertheless, with the addition of material culled from Valdez's screenplay (penned after the show's demise on Broadway), this is an arresting, entertaining and lively piece of theater

refreshingly unafraid to pack political wallop. 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 safer nonprofit 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 Chicanos 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 Pachuco, the play's zoot-suited narrator, who has the power to control events at will. Even as he takes the composite role of Chicano youth upon himself, El Pachuco also controls whether the show will

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have a happy ending or a dismal one. He's a tricky figure from the point of view of dramatic structure, but his presence gives this show a lot of the necessary force.

The central conflict in the play takes place between this narrative figure and Henry Reyna (Andrew Navarro), one of the innocent young Chicanos who finds his back up against the wall. After dramatically recounting events that led to the murder, the play follows Reyna's wrongful imprisonment and his feelings of ambivalence about George Shearer and Alice Bloomfield, the two non-Latinos who are leading the attempts to overturn the verdict. El Pachuco, 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 villain — the conspiracy of police, press and politicians. Still, in wartime California at least, there was considerable foundation to those suspicions — and Valdez's

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FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE: Alla Kazanskaia, left, and Yulia Borisova appear in the Vakhtangov Theater's production of "Innocent as Charged," by prolific playwright Alexander Ostrovsky, whose works are rarely seen in the West.

## THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK

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An initial glimpse of Bob Crowley's brightly colored sets — in scenic terms, "Witches" riffs on the New England minimalism first explored in Crowley's work on "Carousel" — sets us up for a vivid Norman Rockwell-style cartoon, until the action shifts to Darryl Van Horne's sex palace, here merrily reimagined as a small-town Rhode Island Playboy manse.

Howard Harrison's gaudy lighting is as brash and bold as Eric Schaeffer's direction, which mostly eschews implication and innuendo — except of the salacious sort built into the show's book. (With Arnaz playing a sculptress specializing in the female anatomy, the climate is doubly ripe for quips about "balls" and "boobs." A tennis court scene helps, too.)

And why not settle for fun? After all, not everything can be Sondheim. Indeed, this may be the first major new American score in years not to sound semi-immersed in America's reigning composer-lyricist, despite a dazzling first-act patter song ("Words, Words, Words") that must rank in difficulty with "Another Hundred People" from "Company." More often than not, the show's aural forebears are Frank Loesser, Jerry Herman, Cy Coleman and Jule Styne in songs ranging from the anthemic ("Look at Me") to the torchy ("Another Night at Darryl's") and the plaintive ("I Wish I May," the wistful tune to which the women take flight).

"Witches" bears not a trace of the megamusical revolution of the last few decades that its producer, Mackintosh, had pioneered. Yes, "Witches" has its effects, but they tend toward the human sort, with the aerial ascent of the ladies a visual grace note far more emotionally gratifying than any number of helicopters, barricades and plunging chandeliers. Even choreographically, the show is a throwback, with Bob Avian and Stephen Mear's steps seemingly oblivious to the dance revolution that has awakened Broadway of late. As a result, for all its technological demands (Schaeffer's staging finesses them notably well), "Witches" harks back to a now-vanished era when musical comedy proliferated — "Bells Are Ringing," "Bye Bye Birdie" and even "Grease" are the recognizable antecedents (so, too, is "The Wizard of Oz," in ways too bizarre to mention).

Dempsey's book characterizes the women far more deftly (and economically) than the movie, and it may simply be in the nature of the material that the victimized Felicia continues to seem the plot's hateful fall gal, notwithstanding the deliriously shrill brio with which Rosemary Ashe attacks the part.

The score doesn't put a note wrong in the first act, establishing from the outset (in "Eastwick Knows") the workings of a town turned on by gossip. "Make Him Mine," a rousing trio for the female fantasists, comes next, followed by a succession of songs

that release the rapacious woman in Arnaz's artist, Friedman's wordsmith and Riding's teacher-cellist.

Revelations of character all, the numbers possess such variety (given their frankly erotic context, one is tempted to call them "orgasmic") that it seems a double cheat when Friedman's Sukie, for instance, must settle later for the mawkish "Loose Ends," a supposed song of consolation to the newly orphaned Jennifer Gabriel (Caroline Sheen, sounding like Betty Boop).

One could argue "Witches" loses its way the more it strays from its central women. That's certainly true of juvenile leads Sheen and Peter Joback, the creepily miscast lovers saddled with "Something," a love song.

An apt physical match to the "bearish dark man" of Updike's novel, a paunchy McShane acts the book scenes with genuine flair, and he's an oasis of calm compared to the movie's Jack Nicholson.

But the production unwisely has him leading two second-act ensemble numbers with all the vigor of a Vegas lounge lizard who has seen better days. Surrounding him is the plumpest male chorus in memory, whose female counterparts get Crowley's more extraordinary clothes. (Eastwick may be stuck in time, but its denizens apparently love their outre togs.)

Despite the worrisome second act, there's too much theatrical savvy not to save the best for last, with the women forsaking Darryl for a bravura embrace of self-affirmation that may do for single girls what "I Am What I Am" from "La Cage Aux Folies" once did for gay men.

The finish may be too full-throttle for British audiences, unaccustomed as they are to stage anthems of an unironic sort. But watch Arnaz, Friedman and Riding stride forward, their voices a heavenly study in harmony, and you find three nightly travelers to the theater's roof depositing a rapt audience right there.

## INNOCENT AS CHARGED

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implores her lover Murov (the aptly gray Iouri Kraskov) to marry her and take responsibility for their son, who has been secreted away to avoid scandal.

Murov offers vague excuses and mentions a last-minute trip to St. Petersburg. He is about to escape when his exit is blocked by the arrival of Lyubov's flighty, newly rich friend Taisa. Murov is forced to hide behind a screen. The fluttery Taisa, played with wicked sparkle by Nonna Grishaeva, is full of news about her wedding plans; no prizes for guessing who the groom is to be. A desolate Lyubov is bidding a bitter farewell to Murov when an old woman arrives announcing the dire

illness of the little boy.

For the remainder of the play, the audience moves to another part of the auditorium and sits on three sides of a long playing space. Seventeen years have passed, and Lyubov

has become the celebrated actress Kruchinina (Yulia Borisova). A tour takes her to the provincial town where her heart was broken, and Ostrovsky's gentle melodrama is now mixed with backstage comedy as Kruchinina consorts with the town's resident thespians as well as the ghosts of the past. The plot turns — very slowly, alas — on the ques-

tion of whether the hotheaded young actor Neznamov (Evgeni Kniazhev) is in fact Kruchinina's son (she'd been told he died).

Borisova is simply magnificent as Kruchinina. She has an effortless, radiant charisma and the noble bearing of a grand 19th-century actress. But beneath Kruchinina's plush, successful exterior is a deep sadness that is always glittering in Borisova's tender eyes and in the motherly tones of her voice.

All the finest moments in the play are fueled by Borisova's utterly natural and captivating performance, with perhaps none more arresting than the brief, beautifully calibrated scene in which Kruchinina interrogates her former wet nurse, now a beggar woman (and faultlessly played by Alla Kazanskaya), about the supposed death of her boy.

It's a significant achievement that Borisova's performance remains entirely compelling and emotionally coherent through all the vagaries of Fomenko's staging. Chief among these is blocking that seems more attuned to the actors' interaction with the audience than the characters' relationships to each other. The actors wander up and down the elongated playing area and the aisles, stretching the distance between the performers in a scene, destroying intimacy. Nor is the scale of the performances always in balance.

Liudmila Maksakova plays the jealous actress Korinkina with no holds barred, barreling about in odd hats and full skirts, wild-eyed and belting like some extra-mad Madwoman of Chailot. Also at the top of the frequency is Kniazhev's Neznamov, robust to the point of overwrought. More modulated are the appealing, mostly comic turns of Iouri Iakovlev as the wealthy local Dudukin and Victor Zozouline as a wily old actor.

The long last scene, which takes place at a party hosted by Dudukin during which the secret of Neznamov's birth is finally revealed, becomes increasingly surreal. The players don multicolored satin capes and lark about giddily; the action switches from naturalistic, Chekhovian chat to slapstick wrestling to archly theatrical tableaux, while off-stage a pianist repeatedly plays the introduction to an aria from Verdi's "La Forza del Destino" (A thematic motif? An in-joke referencing that opera's 1862 St. Petersburg premiere? Who knows?)

Fomenko is presumably seeking to approach a revered playwright's most famous play with a liberating air of irreverence. The results were warmly appreciated in Russia, apparently, but here, where Ostrovsky is rarely served at all, it would have been nice to have him served

All the finest moments in the play are fueled by Borisova's captivating performance.

straight. The simplicity and sincerity of Borisova's immensely touching performance as Kruchinina gives us a glimpse of the more rewarding production that might have been.

## FILAO

(DAMROSCH PARK TENT; 550 CAPACITY; \$55)

NEW YORK A Lincoln Center Festival presentation of a performance in one act by Les Colporteurs. Artistic directors, Antoine Rigot, Agathe Olivier. Directed by Laszlo Hudi. Music, Carl Schlosser. Costumes, Cissou Winling; lighting, Fred Richard, Michael Serejnikoff; sound, Gregoire Chomel; tent hands, Jean Luc Lecorre, Laurent Grauer. Opened July 12, 2000. Reviewed July 17. Running time: 1 HOUR, 15 MIN.

With: Kathleen Reynolds, David Dimitri, Sophie Kantorowicz, Xavier Martin, Thierry Suty, Miquel De La Rocha, Linda Peterson, Carl Schlosser, Antonin Leymarie, Franck Jaccard.

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

Cirque du Soleil has a lot to answer for, namely "Filao," a tiresomely arch and minimally distinguished "nouveau cirque" performance that has set up shop in a tent in Damrosch Park as part of the Lincoln Center Festival.

The interior of the big top is painted the unappetizing color of dried blood. It is rigged with a few tightropes and trapezes, along with various oversized pieces of wrought-iron furniture and, eventually, lots of tree branches. (Not since "The Blair Witch Project" have twigs been deployed to such portentous and ultimately anticlimactic effect.) Cavorting among these oddments of furniture are an equally odd assortment of performers, some distinctly more talented than others.

David Dimitri, a tightrope specialist with an engaging grin and a frosted Jean-Paul Gaultier buzz cut, is the main attraction. He performs some arresting free-form dancing atop the wire inspired by the fluttering of a flute. The trapeze segments are also ably performed, although the anticomic shenanigans that accompany many of them soon grow wearisome.

But even the best segments are longer on duration than inspiration, and too much of the show piles whimsy and cryptic mooning on top of minimally entertaining and often laborious feats. More attention seems to have been paid to elucidating the aesthetic sources of this strange brew: The program gives us a surfeit of information on its background, including supplying the dozen poems written by the performers that supposedly inspired its 12 "movements." These are unwittingly more amusing than the performances themselves. Here's No. 9, "Dance of the Fragile Promenade": "Sweet soul/Like walking on air/Spring from here to there/Taste the charm of being/Face to face/A sacred fire."

We further learn that the whole shebang was loosely inspired by Italo Calvino's novel "The Baron in the Trees." (Which is a funny coincidence — my workout routine is loosely inspired by Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment.") All this high-minded conceptualizing aside, "Filao" doesn't deliver much in the

way of traditional circus thrills. It also lacks the stylishness and Pandora's box of surprises that audiences savor in the Cirque du Soleil shows and have come to expect from all newcomers in this burgeoning genre.

And fifty-five bucks is pretty steep for an hour and a half on bench seating that's murder on the spine. Talk about your tightrope!

## STOLEN

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games and songs to show parents hiding children and children being separated from and denied contact with their families.

Set allows for variety and pace. Moveable beds become cages and jail cells, while an ever-present large filing cabinet is emblematic of misguided bureaucracy ruining lives. Such techniques allow for a rich weaving of lives and experiences, each different but similar enough to suggest disturbing patterns.

At the end, the actors step out of character to discuss their own family and childhoods. After play's presentation of this appalling chapter of Oz's history, this coda is incredibly moving. Miraculously, after a tale of such cruelty, play still communicates a sense of optimism and hope for reconciliation, despite Oz government

refusals to apologize for the policy.

"Stolen" is an important addition to an impressive body of indigenous theater, including "The Seven Stages of Grieving," "White Baptist Abba Fan," "Box the Pony," "Bidenjarreb Pinjarra," "Black Mary," "Ningali" "Seven," "Fish" and "The Sunshine Club," that emerged during and after 1997's Olympic-funded Festival of Dreaming. This lifting

of the so-called white blindfold from Oz theater has seen many innovative and inventive Aboriginal plays find eager audiences of Aussies who have been moved by these portrayals of an Oz history they knew little about.

## ZOOT SUIT

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politically committed style of writing never pretends to be balanced.

In many ways, one wishes that Henry Godinez's very earnest and respectful Goodman revival had let loose a lot more. Although the cast is uniformly competent when it comes to the prosaic issues in the play, they appear less comfortable in the dance numbers (choreographed with style but insufficient zest by Randy Duncan). Thanks to the lack of a live band, the music in the show (penned by Daniel Valdez, the playwright's brother) never turns the event into the promised summer-fest of Latino rhythms. If this piece is to have commercial prospects, it will need to move further in that direction.

Although Navarro is excellent as Reyna, Marco Rodriguez's stylish El Pachuco is still more restrained than necessary. And as Alice, a well-meaning political agitator, Amy Landecker tries much too hard. It's as if the heavy themes of the piece got in the way of some of the requisite humor and fun — which is a vital part of "Zoot Suit" and all of this playwright's important work.

David Dimitri performs some arresting free-form dancing atop the highwire.