

A Russian story for the early '90s

BY JOHN FREEDMAN

She is Irina Rassadina, a typical middle-aged woman almost satisfied with her typical job in a typical Russian morgue. He is Yury Zvonaryov, her high-school flame who emigrated to Israel 20 years ago, and has now come to "save" her by taking her back with him.

"How come you started drinking so much after you returned?" Irina asks him.

"Wait a minute," Yury cuts her off abruptly. "I didn't return and I never will."

It doesn't take a Russian specialist to see that playwright Alexander Galin has isolated a nerve center of contemporary Russian life in his play, "... sorry." Does Russia want to be Eastern or Western? The theme has been recurring in various forms every since the first century B.C. when Princess Olga tried, unsuccessfully, to import Christianity to Russia.

Director Gleb Panfilov, a famed filmmaker working in the theater for the second time, has teamed up with designer David Borovsky to create a deceptive veneer of normalcy in the setting and in the behavior of the two characters. But he has illuminated age-old Russian problems, not slices of modern life.

As is often the case with life in Russia, the tapestry of details in "... sorry" acquires flashes of the surreal.

Yury, a Russian, lied about being Jewish in order to leave the Soviet Union, and is now a "Russian here and a Jew there." Irina is begrudgingly ready to leave with him, but wants to

keep her citizenship so as not to lose her "perfectly good job."

The pair get married in an Orthodox Church, but celebrate their union at Irina's work place in the morgue. Yury afterwards reveals that he is already married and has a child back in Israel. Irina gets a fake document that says she is pregnant to help with her citizenship problems, while Yury gets a fake document declaring him dead to help with his psychological problems.

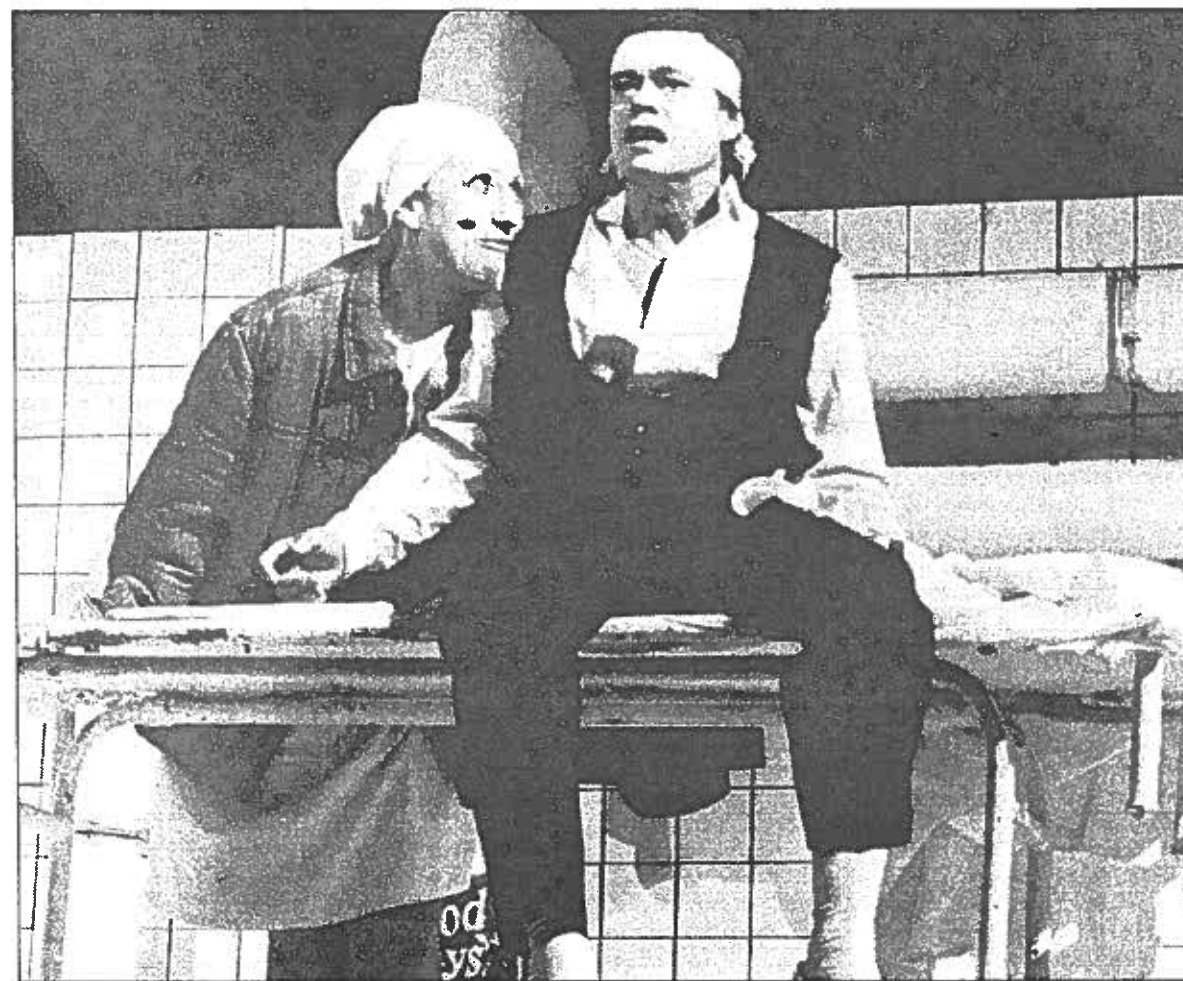
Sounds over-baked? Well, it's not. Even the play's title warns that nothing is as it seems. Written in English by the playwright, the sounds of the word "sorry" immediately conjure up the Russian word for quarrel. And it is this society's time-honored quarrels that emerge predominant in the play.

But don't get the idea that this is just another interesting problem play. One thing alone would make this play a must-see no matter what it was about: the bewitching Irina Churikova in the role of Irina.

Churikova's morgue-dweller, like every role this actress has played on stage or screen for 25 years, is a rolling sea of emotions filtered through a kaleidoscope of nuances.

Meek and pliable at moments, she can also be stubborn or cruel. Plain, even invisible at the beginning, she emerges later as a charming beauty, especially in those rare moments of total accord when the pair slide into a waltz or harmonize in a Russian folk song.

But whatever her moods, she slings her prodigious arsenal at Yury with the skill of a master archer.



Irina Churikova and Nikolai Karachentsov in Gleb Panfilov's production of "... sorry," a play by Alexander Galin. Courtesy M. Guterman

The more Nikolai Karachentsov's Yury loses his conviction that his life in the West is ideal, the more the velvety-throated actor fills out the darker recesses of his character.

At play's end, he admits bitterly that he has become little more than a merchant, all the while staying one step ahead of the emotions welling in his breast. It is the peak of his performance.

But the play's center is Churikova's Irina. Act One ends as she mutters

about going to Israel pretending to be pregnant, accompanied by a legally deceased husband. Suddenly a harsh spot shines from above and she stares into the audience with a mad fire in her eyes.

A funny story about real people suddenly takes on the ghastly feel of a horror film.

The line separating the real and the unreal in this play, which requires of its audience more than a superficial feel for the peculiarities of life in Russia, is

virtually invisible.

The play creates an indivisible universe where almost anything is possible except finding satisfactory answers to the hardest questions. What could give a more veritable picture of Russian life?

"... sorry," a production of the Lenkom Theater, the Russian Theatrical Agency and Producer David Smelyansky, runs Sept. 15, 16, and 22 at the Lenkom Theater, 6 Ulitsa Chekhova. Tel. 299-0708.

It's a great town for theater, with or without the language

BY JOHN FREEDMAN

"Why should I go to the theater?" people often ask. "I don't speak Russian well."

Others confess they seldom go to the theater at home and have never even considered seeing a play in Moscow.

But living in Moscow means living in what is arguably the greatest and most diverse theater town in the world. Would you ignore the Eiffel Tower or the bouquinistes in Paris?

For starters, there is seldom anything stuffy about a play in Moscow.

Russian theater, which has often had to find ways other than the spoken language to make its point, is known for its extremely expressive, visual style.

The languages of movement, ac-

tangible sense of that tradition even in the smallest, newest theater. The theater is an ideal place to get a glimpse of the past meeting the present.

It may also be the best possible place to get a glimpse of the future. A prominent director once told me, "If politicians want to find out what is waiting for them down the road, I would suggest that they go to the theater. Artists are always one step ahead of politicians."

These days there are more chances to get a jump on politicians than ever before. Rough estimates set the total number of theaters in Moscow at around 400, including studios. There are more than 30 major state-funded theaters.

That means there is a style to suit every possible taste. If you like the old-fashioned, declamatory style, try Russia's oldest theater, the Maly. If you prefer traditional psychological per-

formances, your choices are almost endless. That style, as we know it today, was founded by the Moscow Art Theater and its traditions are carried on, in one form or another, in almost every theater in the country.

For those seeking something more eclectic, there is virtually every kind of avant- or dernière-garde style one can imagine; expressionism, symbolism, eroticism, performance art, political and anti-theatrical theater. You name

it and you can find it.

If you don't have the chance to glance through the text of a play beforehand, or if you haven't seen any press accounts that might help orient you, don't let that keep you from the theater. Take a plunge, and trust your intuition. Twenty minutes into the action you may be at a total loss. But you will be amazed by what you have understood by the time the curtain drops.

Gorbatschow and Bush together! at Moshaisk

Having a business conference?
Need to provide your staff

Want to impress an important client with a gourmet dinner