

EUGENE ONEGIN

Alexander Pushkin's novel in verse, known to most theatergoers in its opera and ballet forms, gets new life in a dramatic stage version.

By Diane Nottle

What does a white rabbit have to do with *Eugene Onegin*? Has Tatyana followed Alice down the rabbit hole?

It may be theatergoers who feel they're on a strange new adventure when the Vakhtangov State Academic Theater brings its *Onegin* to City Center May 29 to June 1. This production by Rimas Tuminas, the Moscow theater's artistic director since 2007, also has dancing bears and teddy bears, furniture twirled and hurled, a corps de ballet and the cream of society swinging in midair.

What with white rabbits and multiples of characters, scenes chopped up and reordered, the Vakhtangov production might seem to be *Onegin* as viewed through a prism. But Tuminas defends his production—billed as the story's first dramatic stage version— as “faithful to the original text.”



“Not ‘based on,’ not ‘inspired by,’” he said by email from Moscow. “That’s our principal position. We stay true to the original. That means reading very closely, analyzing the text.”

Eugene Onegin began as Aleksandr Pushkin’s novel in verse, originally serialized from 1825 to 1832. The plot may be familiar from Tchaikovsky’s opera (a new production opened the Metropolitan Opera season last fall) or John Cranko’s ballet (performed on that same stage by American Ballet Theatre last spring). Worldly but jaded boy meets country girl. Boy rejects girl. Boy kills best friend in duel, goes away. Girl grows up, marries older prince. Boy meets princess, falls in love. Princess rejects him. One plot point might be seen as foreshadowing: Pushkin himself died after a duel in 1837. “*Eugene Onegin* reflects Pushkin’s genius in capturing all the grandeur of the Russian spirit and the high point of Russian

culture in the 19th century,” Tuminas said. That hasn’t stopped him from putting a 21st-century spin on the beloved classic.

Reviewing it in *The Moscow Times*, John Freedman called it “a remake of a classic work of literature that has all the hallmarks of a new masterpiece in new—this time, theatrical—clothing.” Last July the production received the Crystal Turandot, Russia’s the oldest theatrical award, as best production of the season, as well as the award for best scenography.

It was another Eugene who founded the Vakhtangov Theater: Evgeny Vakhtangov, an actor and teacher in Konstantin Stanislavski’s legendary Moscow Art Theater school. Vakhtangov dreamed of having his own small theater, and in 1920 he achieved it in the Art Theater’s third studio. The next year, the Vakhtangov’s permanent home opened on the Arbat in Moscow’s historical center. Lee Stras-



berg credited Vakhtangov's work along with Stanislavski's as being the foundations of the Actors Studio and the Method.

"Our theater, in the 90-plus years of its existence, has gone through different stages of creative vision," Tuminas said. "But it always stayed true to the original credo" of Vakhtangov: "There is no performance without celebration."

As a repertory theater, the Vakhtangov presents several different shows each week—sometimes as many as 11. "Because our troupe is quite large, and living by the laws of a repertory theater, I try to choose actors from our own home, from our theater," he said. "One can find everything one needs there. In choosing actors for parts, I look at their ability to distance themselves from their character, from what they go through onstage. It's important to take ownership of this distance, to play with it, and use it to play with the character."

One Russian émigrée in New York described Vakhtangov as "a little bit conservative," producing traditional interpretations of classic Russian literature. But this *Onegin* promises to be anything but conservative.

In Tuminas' version, *Onegin* is telling his story to friends 30 years after the fact, in a ballet studio in the provinces. "So there are two Onegin and two Lenskys," Tuminas said. "But there is only one Tatyana. That is how it should be." Westerners tend to associate *Onegin* with Tchaikovsky's Romantic music—the Waltz, the Polonaise, above all Tatyana's Letter Aria. Tuminas' production incorporates fragments into an original score by the Lithuanian composer Faustas Latenas. "I pay a lot of attention to the music," Tuminas said. "It accompanies me during the entire preparatory and rehearsal period, as well as in performance."

In the opera, dancing characters are



party guests, not ballet dancers. The ballet studio setting in the Vakhtangov production is a nod to ballet's prominence in Russian culture, "with roots that go back to serf theater," Tuminas said. "It's an indelible part of Russian noble upbringing, and it works well with the narrative of the play."

And that rabbit? It comes straight out of Pushkin's life. "According to the story, when Pushkin left his home to travel to St. Petersburg to take part in the Decembrist uprising [in 1825], a rabbit ran across the road in front of his carriage," Tuminas said. "Taking it as a bad omen, he turned back. This rabbit ended up saving Pushkin from repressions, and possible exile. Today, in his home in Mikhaylovskoe, there is a statue of 'the rabbit that saved Pushkin.'"

For all his dedication to text, Tuminas clearly looks beyond it, and so must his actors. An important part of the rehears-

al process is improvisation.

"Improvisation is not the goal," he said. "It exists in the rehearsal process, within a rigid framework. It has to do more with getting to know the time period, the culture, the traditions. But during the performance, during the play, there's no improvisation."

"This play is our everything, and we love and cherish this production," he continued. "So we are in a rush to share it with the rest of the world, while it's still fresh and new. And we hope to bring that sense of celebration to New York City Center."

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