

# Smile Upon Us, Lord

CAPTURED LIVE ON STAGE AT MOSCOW'S VAKHTANGOV THEATRE



**Stage Russia Academic Advisor Michael Earley:**

Michael Earley is Dean of the Faculty of Performing Arts at LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore. Previously he was Professor of Drama, Principal and Chief Executive Officer of the prestigious Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance in Sidcup, London, where he led the institution from 2009-17. In addition to his university teaching, Professor Earley has had an extensive career in UK and US publishing. He worked as Editorial and Publishing Director of Methuen Drama publishers in London and as Chief Producer of Plays for BBC Radio Drama, where he edited scripts and directed over 50 productions for broadcast. His book *How to Act Shakespeare*, written for Chinese performers, teachers and students, will be published in 2019 by Huazhong University of Science and Technology Press.

*Smile Upon Us, Lord*, directed by Rimas Tuminas and adapted from two novels by Lithuanian-born writer Grigory Kanovich, marks the fourth appearance by the Vakhtangov State Theatre of Russia in the Stage Russia series. Why? Well, the Moscow-based Vakhtangov Theatre has fast secured a place of prominence among the larger state theaters of Russia and produces some of the most strikingly visual, well acted and consistently contemporary work that you can now see on the Russian stage.

An epic, sweeping tale of three men — a water carrier, a bankrupt grocer and a stone cutter -- on a road journey from their shtetl to the 'Jerusalem of Lithuania' in search of redemption, they are on a mercy mission to save a son accused on State crimes. *Smile Upon Us, Lord*, is both Tolstoian in its ambitions to mine the suffering, humor and forbearance of the Russian soul and character and theatrically innovative in ways reminiscent of Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths* ('Scenes of a Russian Life') as first staged by the nascent Moscow Art Theatre in 1902.

Both religious and social in its depiction of layers of Russian society and its endless battle with the State and an unforgiving God, the play also has a special Lithuanian flavor that touches on life in a vanished Eastern European Jewish world. In that regard the production is like a theatrical dream for a lost world untouched by the modern. But equally there are touches of Yiddish Theatre, the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* and character portraits that seem drawn from Marc Chagall's dreamy and surreal paintings of Jewish life before it was subsumed in destruction from pogroms and holocaust.

During the course of their journey the three protagonists encounter other equally oddball characters, adversities, setbacks and crises of fate which form the centre of the play's actions. In a manner reminiscent of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* they find things to do to pass the time. The similarities with Beckett are unmistakable. As a 21st century stage director, Rimas Tuminas's productions are saturated with both a Beckettian austerity

and a Beckettian black humor as characters face the dilemma of an absurd life that has no beginning nor end, and an uncertain future.

The world of the stage takes on magic, too, as everyday objects (logs, for example) are transformed into stage pictures that fill out Adomas Jacovskis' scenography. In the simplest ways a sense of place is established, deconstructed and reconstructed as the next scene. This is a world on the move, pacing from place to place, sometimes swiftly and sometimes slowly. The music moves the action on as well. Faustus Latenas' musical choices has, like a film score, the ability to transport us. Likewise, by taking one step forwards, and two steps backwards, direction and misdirection become keys to the production's movement. As one character says: "We are going to our children and they are going in the opposite direction."

What marks any Vakhtangov production under the direction of Tuminas is the sheer power and animation of the ensemble — here a cast of some 40 made up almost entirely of men. Acting and reacting in a disciplined and choreographed way, the cast shift and shape a labyrinthine stage set that seems always in half light. What does all their endless talk add up to? A memorial to a dying past, the sacrifice and near-loss of children, the power of families, the resilience of the human spirit, a Russia that has survived and continues to survive, a past that looks very much like the present in the way disappointment, trials and travails come not in single file but in battalions. And all of this conveyed by actors who tell tales in different moods, configurations and forms. Skill is always on display. What you take away from this production is undiminished belief in human spirit facing adversities that we all face each day. The Lord smiles on everyone.



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Now in its third season, Stage Russia HD features productions from Russia's most renowned theater companies, staged by its greatest directors and selected to showcase the full breadth of Russian theater's styles and ideas.