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"Toronto Fringe Festival Review: "Elizabeth Bam" Review by Joanne Mackay-Bennett"
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For the adventurous Fringe-goer, "Elizabeth Bam" offers a rare opportunity to sample the work of writer Daniil Kharms. Kharms was an influential member of Oberiu, a Russian avant-garde literary and artistic group whose collective output is viewed as one of the last examples of Russian modernism before the government's imposition of Socialist Realism.

Reminiscent of both the earlier Kafka and the later Ionesco, Kharms' satire, like that of his colleagues, is a reaction against the repressive circumstances that typified Soviet Russia in the early-to-mid 1930's when language and rationality were daily being distorted and thousands of people were summarily arrested in the name of a political ideal. In particular, Oberiu's work was characterized by its use of *sdvig* - originally a geological term that here connotes the use of shock, black humour and the absurd - in order to jolt readers/spectators out of their complacency towards the injustices that were playing out before their eyes. Revolution Productions' Toronto fringe adaptation of "Elizabeth Bam" begins the moment the audience enters the theatre where two Soviet soldiers pace back and forth in front of the stage barking out orders to the spectators to obey the rules of theatre etiquette.

The simple set, composed of six small compartments with translucent curtains as dividers on an otherwise bare stage, reaches no more than three feet from the ground. It is completely visible as is one of the characters who lies in a lifeless heap on the floor in one of the apartments giving the appearance of disproportion to the set that surrounds her.

Some of the spaces contain an array of small toy-like domestic props on the floor. The play comes to life as characters peer through their windows and creep out of their apartments to eavesdrop as the title character is charged with an unknown and unspecified crime by two prosecutors. As Elizabeth Bam deflects the "accusation" back onto the prosecutors, their argument devolves rapidly into an atmosphere of childish bickering and name-calling where finger-pointing and the question of complicity suddenly take on a more sinister layer.

The repetition of the first scene as the last scene (with an additional horrific detail) is emblematic of the play as a whole: what first appears to be a “normal” set of circumstances is turned upside down by Kharms’ use of a number of theatrical devices – non sequiturs and false endings, as well as rapid-fire switches between slapstick, jousting, mimicking and pathos – that prevent any facile psychologizing on the part of the spectator.

Two years ago, director Aleksandar Lukac’s Glendon College students staged a production of “Elizabeth Bam” that they have remounted for this year’s Fringe Festival. Although the production’s reception would benefit from a short dramaturgical note in the program outlining the historical background of Oberiu, the student actors should be credited for their commitment to bringing Kharms’ work to a larger audience and for the endless energy displayed throughout the performance.

In particular, Melissa Major as Elizabeth Bam and Srimoyee Mitra as the Mother show admirable skill in the balancing act between the absurd and deadly-seriousness that Kharms’ work requires. “Elizabeth Bam” is not for Fringe tourists and Lukac’s timely exploration of Oberiu’s work (he has earlier directed a successful run of “Christmas at the Ivanov’s” by Vvedensky) deserves credit for consistently taking the road less traveled.

Early in his short career Daniil Kharms was prohibited from publishing anything but children’s stories. It is encouraging to see his work performed in 2003, though one cannot help but wonder whether current audiences in North America similarly banish the work of playwrights like Kharms, and directors like Lukac, to the fringe arena.

“Elizabeth Bam” runs at the Helen Gardiner Phelan Playhouse until July 12. For tickets and specific times call the Toronto Fringe hotline at 416-966-1062.