

Dense Poetry Becomes Unintelligible on Stage

By John Freedman
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Avant-garde performances, no matter how intriguing, require more than good intentions and an impressive grasp of the material. They also

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need to translate intellectual complexity into an intelligible stage language. Failing that, they wander off into the realm of the inside joke. At any rate, that is the conclusion Alexander Ponomaryov's recent staging of "Zangezi" for the Chyot-Nechet Theater leaves us with.

Velemir Khlebnikov, a "poet's poet" associated with the Futurists, wrote the dramatic poem "Zangezi" shortly before he died of malnutrition in 1922. This strange and imaginative work summed up his ambitious notions about the "language of the stars," the mystical arithmetic of time and the exalted mission of the Poet. Composed in what he called "transsense" language, much of it remains gibberish even to those familiar with his theory that sounds are more meaningful than words.

The plotless play, subtitled a "supersaga," consists of 21 scenes which the author called "planes." In them, gods and humans gather to contemplate, imbibe or reject the enigmatic wisdom of the visionary poet Zangezi. Like a Christ-figure wandering amid skeptics, the lonely Zangezi is the only one who understands the truths he speaks.



The gods doing battle in the Chyot-Nechet Theater's production of "Zangezi," on stage at the Hermitage Theater. M. GUTERMAN

Aided by Rudolf Duganov, Ponomaryov tried to air out the density of the poem by appending excerpts from other Khlebnikov works, including theoretical treatises. He probably would have done better to stick to the text or, better yet, hone it down to the elements best suited to the stage.

The reader who has the luxury of pondering Khlebnikov's curious obser-

ventions has fun deciphering that Zangezi's status as a visionary is reflected in his name. According to one of the appendixes added to the performance, the letter "z" — which determines the significance of Zangezi's name — "is a ray reflected in a mirror. The angle of incidence is equal to the angle of reflection (vision)." Spectators who are confronted by

strings of such riddles in a theater simply drown.

The promise of the production's striking beginning makes the director's overintellectualizing even more lamentable. There is a play here worth staging and Ponomaryov started out on the right track.

The first scene depicts a girl in white against a pitch-black back-

ground, speaking to nature in its own language. Anna Torkiani's flowing motions and easy mastery of tongue-twisting bird calls and bee-like buzzing dovetail nicely with the sounds of dripping water and chirping birds. It is a thoroughly accessible introduction to Khlebnikov's deconstruction of man-mad language.

Soon patterns begin emerging against the black background. They are soon revealed to be the figures of gods who continue the dialogue in an exotic language of their own. Their spectacular costumes and masks, reflect the set of abstract Futurist paintings. In the absence of conventional "meaning," the visuals, combined with the score by Mikhail Korzin and Boris Repetur, give the audience a concrete orientation: We are witnessing something of a pagan mystery play.

But as the performance develops, it relies more and more on words to break the "fettors of words." It is a vicious circle. By the time Zangezi propounds his theory of the meaning of the letters "r" and "l" in the eighth scene, the play has descended into an impenetrable fog.

Dmitry Pisarenko, as Zangezi, makes a valiant effort to breathe life into the poet's pronouncements. But, like the rest of the cast, he most often appears to be pointlessly reciting the sounds of a lost language.

"Zangezi," plays Nov. 17, 23, 24 and 30 at the Hermitage Theater, Karetny Ryad 3, Hermitage Garden. 209-6742.