

HEDGEHOGS, WORMS AND OTHER ITEMS

[ALEXEY STRELNIKOV]
THEATRE CRITIC



The play "House Hedgehog" appeared in 2004, but few people noticed it in the Belarusian theater ...

There were no reviews, there were no senior comrades in the workshop or theater bosses at the screenings.

It's as if he didn't exist at all. For me, it became a kind of revelation: big theaters live by themselves, with their own performances, premieres, press conferences, officials in the boxes, and small



performances made "on the knee" that delight everyone in a row,

— somehow separately, without affecting the rest of the theater in any way.

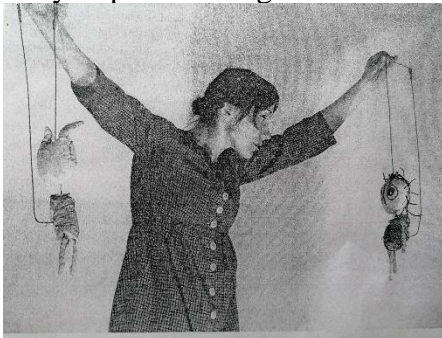
But with the "Domestic Hedgehog", it seemed that it was necessary. It is unlikely that he would look as great and be accepted at pompous theater venues as at concerts in clubs or apartment buildings. "Theatrical" seemed to break out of its definition in the dictionary and began to conquer new territories.

"The House Hedgehog" is an artless parable in the spirit of the St. Petersburg Mitki, told by their main ideologue Vladimir Shinkarev.

Here the hedgehog is friends with the cat, goes to live with her, here she falls in love with the ferret, and the hedgehog becomes homeless, here he is sheltered in the hospital, and already the cat, abandoned by the ferret, comes to him,

but the past cannot be returned, and the future cannot be built.

This story was told by a girl in a strange old coat and dress, with a bayan and a suitcase (a very important image for the work of this author as a whole), from which suddenly heroes are



taken out: a hedgehog, a cat, a ferret.

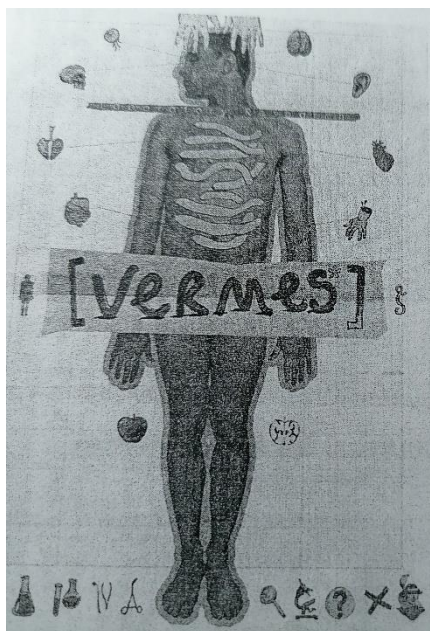
The performance was in tune with either the "Fairy Tale of Fairy Tales", or something made with his own hands in childhood with scissors and thread.

The feeling was intensified by the fact that the performer did not seek to "revive" the dolls, but seemed to play with them like a little one,

and then suddenly walked away, performed a passage on the accordion, told another twist of the story ...

*S. Ben in the play "Domashni" hedgehog".
Photo by L. Pogodina*

had so little of the usual scrubbed, washed theatricality in this, besides — a text unlike anything that sounded interested and precise in the mouth of the performer ...



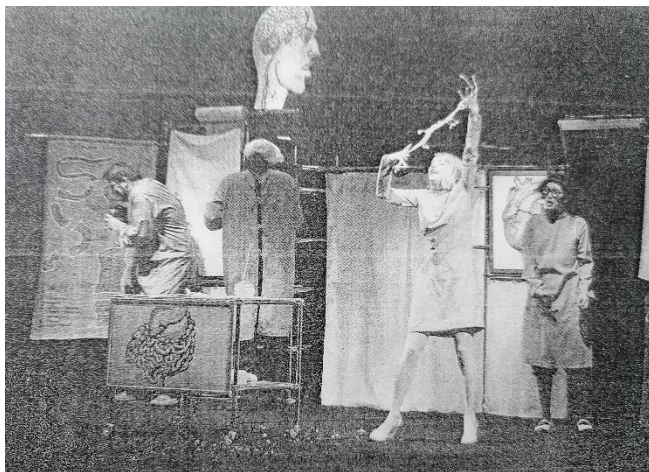
*The poster of the play "Worms".
The authors. Shabokhin*

The fate of the poor hedgehog touched, and it was even sadder from the realization that this was all life and there was no one to blame.

It was quite obvious to me that there was an encounter with a unique and original phenomenon. It turned out that the author and performer of the play Svetlana Ben (although no, it's not like that! Her name is Benka, but more often affectionately Benechka) graduates from our Academy of Arts as a director of the puppet theater with Alexei Lelyavsky and after studying she will go to work for him, at the Belarusian State Puppet Theater. But is this phenomenon possible on the theatrical stage, within the framework of a theatrical mechanism aimed at specific and narrow artistic goals? Or is his place only in the marginal conditions of the club, as an interlude to the concert?

In Belarus, it is very difficult for a puppet theater to get out of the Procrustean box of "entertainment for children" (this was very noticeable at the puppet theater festival last fall). And those children's performances of Sveta Ben, which I happened to see, at first confirmed my fears.

The graduation performance "Sonya the Dog" made according to the author's dramatizations at the Vitebsk theater "Lyalka" and "Terrible Uncle Au" (already as the next director of the Belarusian State Puppet Theater) did not become a breakthrough. These performances embodied the author's ideas about the children's theater as something bright, cheerful, groovy and by no means moralizing.



*A scene from the play "Worms".
Photo by T. Gavrilchik.*

But at the same time, there was some kind of misunderstanding between the director and the mysterious and uncompromising "young audience". Reviving in the scenes of chases and battles, this viewer instantly turned off as soon as the characters just started talking. This is typical for children's theater in general, but in the performances of Svetlana Ben, there was a desire to break through to this viewer, make acquaintance with him, involve him in the action. For example, for his new play "Pippi Longstocking"

Sveta asked to make sketches of the children themselves, but in action it already looks more like a New Year's matinee: children do not have to sit still at all, they are asked questions, they are involved in games.

Especially from this performance, it is clear that the director is not interested in mesmerizing his audience, that she is much more fascinated by theatrical oddities and miracles and it's more interesting for her to invite them to have fun together.

Outside the puppet theater, Svetlana Ben did not stop her experiments, which at first glance are completely different from the usual children's theater.

Also, the "Miracle of St. Anthony" was made as an educational work, electronic circuits and light bulbs were used instead of dolls, they seemed to exchange signals, which the author of the play translated for us. Maeterlinck's text thus came to life twice:

minimalism of execution (again, the text is not played, but on the contrary "the text is played" and the impassive intonation of the narrator.

One of the most interesting events of this theatrical season was the performance "Worms" ("Vermes"), made by a group of Belarusian

puppeteer actors together with artist Sergei Shabokhin and composer Alexander Liberzon within the framework of the European project "SONE/KALEIDOSKOP"

The first part of the performance is a lecture about worms. Sveta Ben in a white coat with medical instruments in her hands, He seriously quotes excerpts from biological encyclopedias, illustrating them with some primitive but visual theatrical techniques that are more like performances or Kavanaugh parodies ("foam worms are cut, cut pieces demonstrate their "vitality", when the head of a foam man is cut off, a trickle of blood suddenly begins to gush from the calf). There is laughter in the audience, despite the fact that from the stage, again, we are absolutely dispassionately informed that there are more advanced species on our planet (at least in the biological sense).



Photo by L. Pogodina

In the second part, the worms are already "studying" people: here they are crawling along the arm of the "prototype", here they have already dragged their hand somewhere, here they are imitating the theater (there are many Shakespearean allusions in the play). We should think that the worms themselves remain funny little creatures at the same time, suddenly, a huge ringed monster begins to crawl across the stage, and the man inside it wriggles, trying to find a way out...

They don't scare us on purpose, it becomes creepy precisely from understanding the limit of consciousness. Even endowing their characters with a kind of human irony,

The creators managed to show that worms are superior to humans in many ways (for example, they are immortal) and this is somehow strangely connected with their unreasonableness ...

For Svetlana Ben, as a theater director, it is still not the world of feelings, not the world of relationships, but the objective component of reality that is primary.

The world is decomposed into things, into the physical, into something that can be touched. And in her performances (even for children) there is an attempt to return objects to their true purpose, to make them talk to us and thus gain a true understanding of themselves.

There is one important omission in my article. It should have been said right away that Sveta Ben is the leader of the Silver Wedding ensemble.

In general, it is such a fashion for young Belarusian artists to gather in musical groups and actively realize themselves (you will not wait for your turn on the theater stage).

Even at the beginning of her creative career, after the play "House Hedgehog", Benka (in this context, her stage name is appropriate), as a rule, changed clothes and with the same accordion in her hands staged a show — a bright and groovy spectacle in the spirit of French cabaret. The confrontation of Life here also seemed to be in every song, but the lyrical heroine seemed to say — God forbid crying about it.

In one of the recent songs, this is formulated especially precisely:

She's alone in the restaurant
Dancing among drunken companies.
She's going to drink her entire salary today,
But he won't go back to that bastard.



Of course, all her theatrical work has acquired a clear musical accent, but the ensemble itself turned out to be good and remarkable precisely for its theatricality. In February 2008, Svetlana, along with her ensemble and Alexander Casello, a guest artist at the Kupala Theater, participated in Brecht's evening, performing several versions of his songs, and a year later the project grew to an entire program in the spirit of German cabaret.



As it should, it became not a concert, but such a quasi-theatrical act in which the performance of each song turned into a mini-performance.

The interest in Brecht is not accidental, the elements of the epic theater have long become familiar expressive means for Sveta Ben. However, in the near future we will definitely

we will not see her author's interpretation of "Mother Courage" and "Threepenny", except in the form of a

cabaret. In this brief creative reference about one of the most interesting figures of the modern



Belarusian theater, it was easy not to mention the main Belarusian

festivals to which she was not invited, large Belarusian theaters with which she did not cooperate, heads of theatrical unions who did not help her.

In general, the information that Svetlana Ben is leaving the puppet theater because concert and touring activities bring her more material benefits and creative satisfaction should not surprise ("The theater will become," she assures me - There is no

way without the theater! It's just that there's not much time right now") Mre has to wait for the space to create a new theatrical action in her busy schedule.

I admit, the temptation to retrain as a restaurant critic is so great that I'm not sure if I'll wait.

"The theater begins to excite me when I see or feel that people are really interested in what they are doing, when they have something to say, when they don't care if they are understood. Even if what I saw is incomprehensible to me, not close or unpleasant. Agitation and indifference are contagious things.

Alexey Strelnikov.