



## Review: *Black Snow* at Salvage Vanguard Theater

Here's a fun rainy afternoon game: Go to IMDB.com, and type in a movie that you can't imagine that anyone really *hates*. Something like *It's A Wonderful Life* or *The Shawshank Redemption* or *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Then go to the user comments and choose "Hated It". An example excerpted from "[theelusiveshadow's](#)" review of *Groundhog Day*:

"this movie is so bad!!! i think the writer must have run out of ideas. Again and again and again, the same thing was like watching a terrible movie over and over and over."



This is the sort of thing you run the risk of sounding like when attacking a classic play by one of the great dead Russians of 20th century literature.

**Mikhail Bulgakov**, whose *Black Snow* is currently in the midst of a run by Tutto Theatre Company at the Salvage Vanguard Theater, is one of those figures it's hard to criticize on his work's merits, which is unfortunate. It's much safer to insist that the work's author is fully deserving of his exalted status, and that the flaws in the production belong to Tutto and director **Dustin Wills**. But the fact is that it's hard to imagine a *better* interpretation of Bulgakov's cranky, cartoony piece about what a bummer working in the theater was for him.

*Black Snow* stars **Gabriel Luna** as Sergei Leontievich Maxudov, a penniless novelist on the verge of suicide before a note slid under his door transforms him into a star playwright at the Moscow Independent Theater, an analog for the famous Moscow Art Theater. (There are stand-ins throughout the piece, in fact, like **Smaranda Ciceu's** Ivan Vasilevich, in for Stanislavsky.) The play doesn't so much feature a plot as it just piles embarrassments and setbacks on Maxudov as he clashes with Ivan over the direction his play will take as its produced.

If you're a long-time theater person, there's a certain thrill in watching while a figure who looms as largely over the artform as Stanislavsky is dismissed as a ridiculous old crank, and Ciceu's interpretation of the character as a daffy, confused, charming goofball is a lot of fun. If you're not, though, it's really kind of confusing, exhausting, and, ultimately, tedious - there's not exactly a *point* to *Black Snow*, and once the gags wear thin, that starts to become a problem. As it is, the play, which was adapted from Bulgakov's unfinished novel, mostly just exists to give theater people a chance to draw eyepatches and funny mustaches on their figureheads. And regardless of which camp you fall into, the joke stops being funny before long.

That's not Wills' fault, though. He's a powerhouse director, and his Tutto Theater Company, whose most recent work, *Ophelia*, cleaned up at the Austin Critics Table awards, elevates the Austin theater community just by showing up. He works hard throughout *Black Snow* to keep things moving at a steady - often frenetic - clip, and it's clear that he's got a vision for his production that's rarely seen on stages in Austin, or anywhere else. It's honestly not hard to picture Tutto's production of *Black Snow* being transplanted directly to a stage like The National Theatre's in London - like the best productions in world-class theater cities, Wills' show is impeccably timed and leaves no detail unattended to and no prop or set piece out of place: If Maxudov is working at a typewriter, that typewriter is period- and location-appropriate. If a poster is displayed announcing Maxudov's play as part of the Independent's new season, that poster is printed on quality paper and designed in a style consistent with post-revolutionary, pre-WWII Soviet sensibilities. If a joke involving a contract negotiation requires a continuously unspooling roll of paper to drive home the visual gag, that paper appears not just on the stage, but

distressed and aged to appear as though it's been sitting in a box in some disorganized Russian theater's supply closet. The actors wander in and out of the scenes frantically, with exaggerated, constantly animated motions, and for at least the first half hour, the fact that you're watching a live-action cartoon is pretty much the point.

It's everything that comes after that makes *Black Snow* hard to appreciate. The theater-specific nature of the piece - the fact that every joke and every visual gag is meant to reference an experience that only people who've spent a good amount of time making or studying theater have had - starts to feel self-indulgent after a while. The play doesn't explore the dynamics of its setting or its historical context very deeply - while the program includes several pages of notes about Bulgakov's place in the 1920's Soviet Union, none of that translates to the stage, ostensibly because spending any time offering any substantial content would mean that there's less opportunity for the Bugs-and-Daffy routines we get instead. These are the choices made by Bulgakov (and Keith Reddin, who adapted it for the stage) about what's important, but it's hard not to contrast their decisions with the ones made by the Rude Mechanicals, whose recent *Method Gun* dealt with a number of the same themes and ideas as *Black Snow*, but in a considerably more thoughtful way.

All of which means that *Black Snow*, ultimately, occupies a weird place among recent Austin productions. It may be the most competent and professionally-directed and performed piece among the city's many impressive recent productions, and it's hard not to overstate just how much good there is to say about Wills' direction. This is a play in which 29 characters are portrayed by just seven actors, most of whom are on stage for the bulk of the play, and yet the costume changes and entrances move like clockwork. Wills may be working to establish himself as the most impressive director in Austin theater - it'll be really exciting to see what he does when he chooses to put on a show with more substance.

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By [dansolomon](#) in [Arts and Entertainment](#) on July 7, 2009 11:46 AM

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