

Flawed Choir

A Review of a Brilliant New Play by Russian playwright Slava Stepnov

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Lucky for us, Russian playwright Slava Stepnov is now being produced in New York City. Trained as a director in the legendary Russian theater community, his latest work *Flawed Choir* is a masterpiece.

But can his work find a receptive audience in a city where art is routinely commodified on Broadway?

The answer is a resounding *yes!* The Off-Off Broadway scene is where the most stimulating plays are being produced today, and I saw a staged reading of an English translation of Stepnov's *Flawed Choir* on February 9, 2024.

Staged readings don't usually hit audiences with the full impact of a production, but in this case, the opposite was true. The result was theatrical dynamite.

Like Chekhov, Stepnov's work embodies the best of the naturalist approach, with actors in a radio studio congregated to record some commercials. We hear their everyday speech and learn of their social conflicts. But the recording of advertising spots lends the play a comical and almost absurdist element reminiscent of the plays of Ionesco, Pinter, and Beckett. At the same time, the very fact that the voice-over artists must work together begins to develop the major premise of this seductively brilliant work.

We quickly see the emerging romantic entanglements between the actors, as well as the conflicts between them. One married young woman, for instance, agrees to go to dinner with another actor, a playwright who wants to continue having an affair with her that started some time ago. Just as Konstantin in Chekhov's *The Seagull* is distraught because of his unrequited love for a young actress, Stepnov's

playwright suffers because of his illicit love for this voice-over artist.

Stepnov's playwright character also raises the issue of the way money is usually not available to artists, saying, "Why are those brimming with ideas always impoverished?" This financial theme also echoes the premise of the play, highlighting the fact that many artists are passionately devoted to their work despite being poor. This theme of people being basically good and passionate about their worthwhile goals and occupations is subtly contrasted with the horrors and difficulties of living and working together. As another experienced actress says, "I feel sorry for everyone! . . . I don't understand how normal people suddenly turn savage and are ready to tear each other apart!" In other words, the play brings into clear focus the struggle people experience in trying to work together—like a choir must do to produce beautiful music.

As Tolstoy says of the sixteen-year-old Natasha in *War and Peace*, "In Natasha's eyes all the people at the ball were good, kind, splendid people, loving one another and incapable of offending one another, so they ought to be happy." Below the surface, however, Tolstoy continually plucks the strings of a minor chord—for tragedy will result from Natasha's ultimate betrayal of her admirable husband Prince Andrei. Like Tolstoy, Slava Stepnov allows the audience to see a species of idealized happiness like slow-moving rays of sunshine breaking through a partly cloudy sky—and always following quick on the heels are the anxieties, difficulties, and incompatibilities of the human condition.

Highly amusing is the talk about playwriting in *Flawed Choir*, for dramatic writing is a mirror of the human condition. When one of the men in the recording studio suggests that the playwright's script needs revision, the playwright indignantly raises his voice to say,

“Go screw yourself! I won’t let anyone touch my play!” Again this interchange resonates with the theme of *Flawed Choir*, namely that we each want to do our part in human society, but like cogs enmeshed in a complex machine, we don’t always turn in concert with others, and yet despite all our striving and mistakes, we are working together, even if not perfectly.

Last but not least, Slava Stepnov adds a modern existential element to the work as the actors in the studio talk about the recent and unexpected death of one of their beloved associates, named Maestro. He died on Halloween, adding an almost mystical element to his absence as his spirit and thoughts seem to haunt the other characters.

The experienced actress reminds them of Maestro’s having said: “You can search endlessly, but the key is to find what you’re looking for in time.” At the moment she utters these words, they are busy looking for the playwright’s misplaced briefcase. But this line—

like so many lines in the play—harkens back to the theme of people needing to be patient with the foibles and flaws of fellow travelers on life's highway—for in the final analysis we're all in the same boat.

Even more poignantly than Sartre's *No Exit*, Slava Stepnov regales us with an existential message about the value of patience and working together. The cumulative effect of his writing generates its emotional impact slowly and subtly, bringing it to an overwhelming finale. In the concluding scene, the choir of artists attempts to sing a song together and their lips move without uttering a sound. This is the flawed choir of the title, and we in the audience must certainly recognize ourselves as having been lovingly but mercilessly dissected in this amazing play.

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