

'Slavs!'

Through May 14 European Repertory at About Face Theatre, 3212 N. Broadway Tickets: \$18-20; (773) 248-0577 **** Highly recommended

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BY HEDY WEISS theater critic

It takes Tony Kushner just 85 minutes to drive his theatrical troika through a century of modern Russian history in his remarkable, tragicomic vaudeville, "Slavs!" Kushner is the playwright who also gave us "Angels in America," an epic-length two-part history of our own country in the 20th century. But while "Slavs!," which opened Monday night in a galvanic production by the European Repertory Company, comes in a more highly distilled form, it doesn't miss a trick. And by the time it's over, you may want to phone Vladimir Putin on the White House hotline and demand that he board the next Aeroflot flight for Chicago--just to be reminded of what he has inherited.

In fact, you might even be tempted to shine a harsh spotlight on Putin as he listens to the eerily prescient lines spoken by a character bearing the Dickensian-Slavic name of Yegor Tremens Rodent (sharp work by Richard Edward Frederick). Yegor is a Russian bureaucrat-turned-nationalist who proclaims that what the country needs in the wake of the fall of communism is "a man of iron and will." Theater can, after all, promote self-knowledge, especially when it bristles the way this piece does.

Kushner's play is the very model of how to turn history into magic. And director Yasen Peyankov (recently seen in his acting guise as Freud in Steppenwolf's "Hysteria"), has the personal experience to make this magic just black enough; he grew up under a communist regime in Bulgaria.

"Slavs!" was written in the heady years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, but at the moment in the early 1990s when the cracks in the rough-and-ready transition were already apparent. Chaos and farce are at work at every turn. As the play opens, two babushkas are sweeping snow from the steps of the Kremlin while talking in an absurdly highminded, conspiratorial fashion about the death of Marxism. It's not long before the blind and ancient Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov (Kirk Anderson is full of ferocity and rheumy fire), the oldest living Bolshevik, expires before our eyes. And when his cataract-clouded cohort, the grayer than gray apparatchik Serge Upgobkin (Steve Walker, perfectly loony), attempts to leap into the new, still undefined post-Leninist world, he follows--the victim of a fatal heart attack. The transition will *not* be easy for anyone.

The young are desperate, too. Take Katherina Serafima Gleb (Jennifer Kern in a blast of raw appetite and anger), the punked-out lesbian whose job is to guard the carefully pickled brains of Russia's leaders in a musty scientific archive. She rejects the pathetic

advances of Popolitipov (Steve Cinabro, deftly ineffectual), the most ordinary apparatchik, and plunges into an affair with Dr. Bonch-Bruevich (searing work by the splendid Lusia Strus), a pediatric cancer specialist. The doctor still clings to the socialist dream, yet rages against its abuses. One of the last of those to be sent to Siberia, she ends up ministering to children deformed by decades of toxic waste and radiation, as well as to their bitter, helpless parents as exemplified by Shastlivyi Domik (a ferocious turn by Carolyn Ann Hoerdemann).

It is Domik's 8-year-old daughter, Vodya (absolutely remarkable work by Susan Wiltrakis), who supplies the play's coup de theatre in a scene that takes place in heaven. Kushner is that wonderful thing--a writer at once politically caustic and romantically fearless. And he gives us an ending that contains both despair and the seeds of a dream. He knows there are no answers, but he offers a shard of hope and a sense of the impossible sweep and sadness of a 100-year-long story.