



## New England Entertainment Digest

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### Intriguing Traces of a Period

Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky, Russian, is neglected by Americans. He wrote before, during, and after the Russian revolution, and as a Bolshevik, he supported it. He's best known for his terrific poetry, but he's of interest as well for his bold plays. One of them, a short verse play in two acts, was produced recently by Polybe + Seats, a company in Brooklyn (very off-off). The production was a delightful oddity. The play's title is *Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy*. It first opened in Moscow in 1913 with VM himself in the title role. It portrays the writer himself as hero, towering over other writers, with the public fawning over him. The characters number at least fifteen, with Mayakovsky dominating throughout. The other characters have names like "The Man with One Ear". It's a hyperbolic, flippant symbolism.

It's a difficult script, and the director (Miriam Fenton-Dansky) has analyzed it carefully, making sense of the dense verse while keeping the staging simple on the tiny stage. One character approaches the poet saying "Here's one more tear for you", and leaves an elaborate chandelier at his feet. Two actors play the many smaller roles; the play keeps its pattern, but the characters lack specificity. In several moments, the production is accompanied by passages from Stravinsky's *Le Sacre de Printemps*. It premiered in the same year as the play and was equally bold.

In the title role, M. Ryan Purdy deals with the verse with a moment-to-moment life, reading his highly stylized lines with apparent spontaneity. He animates the poetry while retaining its elevated style. He shows us a character with depth, who grows in the course of this half-hour play. The poet begins without the confidence that the verse exudes, smaller than his poetry, saying:

*If you wish,*

*a remarkable poet will dance for you right here and now.*

But he doesn't dance. He withdraws his foot in the middle of the first step. As the play proceeds, however, he becomes the character he's invented, the self-conscious show-off. The play ends:

*...what pleases me*

*more than anything*

*is my own name:*

*Vladimir Mayakovsky.*

When the poet stands on a box to recite his poetry, Purdy snaps into performance mode by assuming the mannerisms of the rap artist. Later, when the convention has been established and the character has gained self-

confidence, he *segues* into these same gestures: the man and the poet have merged. The use of rap gestures shows a lack of reverence – nothing could have made the playwright happier.

We recognize ourselves in this intense commie poet. We've worked with him in readings at bars. We recognize ourselves when he rolls his eyes at another poet's hyperbole and then throws himself into hyperbole of his own.

Politically, the futurists were horrific. They introduced a violent utopianism into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But their art rose above their politics. Mayakovsky's play is a lot like the theater we like to think we developed. It's performance art in verse, with the author playing himself, as performance artists do. It reminds us that we didn't invent difficult theater, or iconoclastic theater. We didn't invent personal freedom: VM lived in a ménage à trois with playwright Osip Brik and his wife. And we didn't invent despair – VM killed himself in 1930 after both his life and the revolution had gone badly. He left behind intriguing traces of his period.

- Steve Capra