

The Boston Globe

Theater & art

STAGE REVIEW

Snore of the crowd a sign of the success of 'Oblomov'

By Sandy MacDonald | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 03, 2012



MICHAEL AND SUZ KARCHMER

Michael Pemberton (left) and Michael Samuel Kaplan in Kevin Rice's "Oblomov" at Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater.

WELLFLEET — A theater where you're actively encouraged to fall asleep? Or, failing that, to participate in a snoring chorus? Welcome to Oblomovka, ancestral home of Russian napper extraordinaire Ilya Ilyich Oblomov, the fictional subject of Ivan

Goncharov's 1859 novel and now Kevin Rice's delightfully capricious dramatization at the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater.

As the play opens, we find Oblomov (Michael Pemberton) in a dream state — his favored habitat. His father (Michael Samuel Kaplan) enlists our aid in protecting and prolonging this hallowed idyll, as his bossy, cosseting mother (Valerie Stanford) waits on her fully adult — and then some — baby hand and foot, proffering sweetmeats in his rare moments of wakefulness. Pies and blintzes are on the menu; at one point she invites the audience to partake of warm rolls — “from the Stop & Shop!”

Rice blurs eras throughout the play, perhaps because Oblomov — originally envisioned as a satirical take on the Russian nobility — is a type that never fully goes out of style. In fact, there's probably a little Oblomov in all of us. In our heart of hearts, are we not all to some degree self-absorbed, inclined to hypochondria, with utmost laziness lurking in potentia as a default setting?

Oblomov fully indulges in these proclivities. The early scenes in Rice's play are, it turns out, century-leaping flashbacks to Oblomov's privileged childhood, and also a clever framework from which to view his current state. Every time he snoozes, we are transported back to the nursery, relishing the rosy glow of parental pampering.

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But by the cold light of day, Oblomov's Moscow room is a high-ceilinged hovel, its verdigris walls dripping water stains, the clutter clearly too much for his put-upon servant Zakhar (Kaplan again) to quell.

Crisis looms — Oblomov is behind in his rent and about to be kicked to the curb — but stasis reigns. It takes all the energy he can muster to subject Zakhar to a habitual rain of abuse and to refuse invitations from a parade of concerned acquaintances. He submits to a

Oblomov

508-349-9428.

Writers: Kevin Rice

Director: Daisy Walker

Other Credits: Set, Kevin Judge and Alexander Woodward; Lights, John R. Malinowski; Costumes, Carol Sherry; Sound design, Toby Jaguar Algya

half-dozen visitors (all played by Kaplan) all told. They're busy, busy, busy — you know the drill, because it's the story of our daily life.

When Oblomov at length accepts an invitation to a private club from the palpably sleazy Stolz, he falls asleep in the steam room, there to awaken to his vision of the ideal woman: the singer Olya (Stanford, thoroughly transformed), who does a bit of escorting on the side. It's love at first sight for Oblomov, who almost — almost — breaks his pattern, bestirring himself enough to pursue her.

Rice's script unfolds rather like a dream, delving into past and present seemingly haphazardly. A lightness of spirit pervades, enhanced by Daisy Walker's equally open-handed direction.

All three actors are superb. Pemberton never acts overtly infantile; he simply radiates the look of a satisfied babe in arms, development permanently arrested at the oral stage. He even manages to lend Oblomov's life choices a certain dignity. Others, the unrepentant layabout claims, "sleep driving in their cars, they sleep at work, they sleep on their cellphones. At least I'm honest about it and sleep in my bed."

Kaplan is constantly awlirl in his multiple roles, and earns bonus points as audience cheerleader, drawing us into the story. And Stanford is impressive in antipodal roles that somehow meld into one: oversolicitous Mama and Olya, the sultry chanteuse who's actually touched by this recessive nonconformist.

"Bad dresser? Drinker? Druggger?" she grills Stolz, before consenting to a meeting.

"Dreamer," says Stolz.

"Rare breed," Olya muses.

Indeed. The same could be said of this highly original and timely update on a classic.

Performing company: Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater

Date closing: Sept. 22

Ticket price: \$15-\$35

Company website: www.what.org

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