

# Review: Actors Bridge spins provocative tale with 'Fairytale Lives'

**Amy Stumpff, For The Tennessean** 11:34 a.m. CDT April 20, 2016



(Photo: Sam Frawley)

Once upon a time, there was a daring professional theater company known as Actors Bridge Ensemble. And this company was widely respected for its thought-provoking works and commitment to artful collaboration.

And while ABE's current production of Meg Miroshnik's "The Fairytale Lives of Russian Girls" cannot promise any "happily ever afters," it does mark another fine chapter in the company's excellent 20th anniversary season.

Set in 2005, this dark comedy offers a clever mash-up of traditional Russian fairy tales and the gritty reality of post-Soviet urban life. The story follows 20-year-old Annie, who has returned to her native Russia in an effort to brush up on the language and reclaim her heritage. But she soon discovers that the "Enchanted Motherland" is overrun with evil stepmothers and wicked witches. And if Annie is to survive, she must become the heroine of her own story.

"Russian Girls" brings together the considerable talents of two university theater department chairs, with nimble direction by Leah Lowe (chair of the Vanderbilt Theater Department), and scenic design by Paul Gatrell (chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance at Belmont University). It's a winning combination, and I was especially struck by the versatility of Gatrell's graffiti-covered set. Belmont's Jessica Mueller also deserves mention for her marvelous costume design.

But the performances are key to unlocking the intricate layers of Miroshnik's script, and Lowe secured much of the success of this production in the casting process.

ABE ensemble member Rachel Agee leads the way as the mysterious Yaroslava, who may actually be the villainous Baba Yaga of Russian folklore. It's wonderful to see Agee back on stage in such a juicy role, and she draws the audience in with a mesmerizing blend of charm and menace. Likewise, ABE favorite CJ Tucker creates a number of distinctive characters, including Annie's mother Olga and the evil Valentina.

Belmont performance majors Madeline Marconi, Johnna McCarthy and Ashley Joye provide ample support as the streetwise young Muscovites, all struggling to survive their own harrowing stories.

Finally, Austin Williams, another outstanding Belmont theater student, captures all the naiveté of Annie, while demonstrating exceptional comedic instincts. Williams is quite fearless throughout, but watching her outwit a basket of potatoes ("They have eyes, you know!"), is an unexpected treat.

Edgy, provocative and thoroughly entertaining, "The Fairytale Lives of Russian Girls" uses ancient folklore to spin a very modern tale — and it's one you won't soon forget.

## If you go

**What:** Actors Bridge Ensemble presents the Nashville Premiere of "The Fairytale Lives of Russian Girls." Intended for mature audiences.

**When:** Through April 23. Performances at 7:30 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays; 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays.

**Where:** Belmont's Black Box Theater, 1575 Compton Ave.

**Tickets:** \$25 advance; \$30 at door; \$15 for Belmont faculty/staff/alumni; afternoon matinees and Thursday night performances only are free for Belmont students.

**Contact:** <http://actorsbridge.org/the-fairytale-lives-of-russian-girls/> (<http://actorsbridge.org/the-fairytale-lives-of-russian-girls/>)

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