The Diary of a Madman

Case study in insanity

By JUDD HOLLANDER

BROOKLYN, N.Y.—In a performance more true to the highest order, actor Geoffrey Rush offers a hilarious and tragic example of one man falling into the abyss of insanity in Nikolai Gogol’s "The Diary of a Madman.”

The piece is adapted by David Holman, with contributions from director Neil Armfield and Geoffrey Rush, and is set in early 19th century St. Petersburg in Russia.

Rush plays Aksentii Ivanovich Poprishchin, a pompous Civil Service Clerk of the Ninth Grade whose main job seems to be sharpening his pen. When he realizes Medji and Fifi are writing together on this play in Australia in 1989, to fit the delusions in his mind.

At first Poprishchin's daily musings, which he writes in his journal, are the complaints of a man unhappy with his job, his living conditions, his landlady, and soon. All these changes when he spots a beautiful woman entering for soup. His one companion is her dog, Medji, talking to another dog about her, he tracks Sophia's movements, she is unable to realize facts obvious to everyone else.

As things progress, Poprishchin's delusional states become more outrageous. He has only occasional instances of reflection and sanity, making those moments all the more powerful and poignant. One such moment occurs when he realizes what Sophia thinks of him. At the same time, Rush is able to evoke both feelings of pity and sympathy for the character, a man struggling to get out.

One interesting question the play raises is just how much insanity resides in each of us. This point is brought home when we see newspapers crammed full of stories in Poprishchin's room. He is either a very learned man or one who obsessively collects things—a point worth pondering in this exemplary production.

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