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Playwright: TUTA Ensemble. At: The Utopian Theatre Asylum (TUTA) at Chicago Dramatists, 1105 W. Chicago Ave. Tickets: 847-217-0691; www.tutato.com; \$30. Runs through: March 25

These are not post-adolescent Second City/SNL-wannabes trudging through exercises now as formalized as Kabuki. No, the actors of The Utopian Theatre Asylum (TUTA) are accustomed to stewing in Chekhov, Brecht and Eastern European gloom, not fizzing over with hit-and-run ebullience. Knowing this, it's only reasonable that a different kind of "improvisational" theater emerge when such an ensemble is turned loose without scripts.

This doesn't mean that their process simply abandoned them to drift unanchored. Their embarkation point (as they explain during a "rest break" in the 80-minute presentation) was the 2011 blizzard—specifically, the isolation imposed upon the population by the aftermath of that meteorological disaster. This is physically illustrated at the top of the show with a bewildered man first given a cold bath, then swaddled in layers and layers of winter gear. Despite this cumbersome wardrobe, however, he soon ventures forth to communicate with his fellow citizens. Indeed, one of the most exhilarating scenes proposes a group of shivering strangers uniting in spontaneous harmony for a robust street-concert rendition of "I Just Called To Say I Love You" before shyly redispersing.

An episode where a choirmaster withdraws with a chorister for some reinvigorating private time (leaving the remaining vocalists to continue gamely with "Nearer, My God, To Thee") displays an intuitive accessibility, as does a company member's account of bedding a transsexual (the surgical details of which quickly put his companions to rout) . Other scenarios suffer from an excess of enigma, like the pushing war with an old-fashioned safe—a metaphor of snow-shoveling neighbors encroaching on each other's boundaries?—or the connection between an African-American folk song featured early in the show called "Black Betty" and the later appearance of a pivotal character named Betty (who is not Black) .

Whatever your interpretation, the results are a welcome relief from the hackneyed conventions nowadays defining this genre of thespic experimentation. If the subtexts are often elusive (what's the significance of the offstage party projected on the floor by hidden camera, or the chandelier that swings down from the ceiling?) , we can all bask in TUTA's trademark musical interludes, performed with professional panache by the cast and concluding with a springtime madrigal reconfigured to the rousing, foot-stamping, hand-clapping, drum-beating tempo of a Klezmer orchestra to send us home through a winter not yet fully departed.



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