

Review: 'Radio Culture' by TUTA: Arts on the radio provide a tiny escape for a workaday foreman in Belarus



Wain Parham, Huy Nguyen and Kevin V. Smith in "Radio Culture" by TUTA Theatre Co. (Austin D. Oie photo)

By **Kerry Reid**
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Belarus Free Theatre is best known locally for stunning deconstructions of classics, such as their mind-blowing [production of "King Lear"](#) at Chicago Shakespeare in 2016. But the company, which has mostly operated in exile from Belarus and the repressive regime of dictator Alexander Lukashenko in recent years, also champions new writing that anatomizes contemporary life in the former Soviet state.

Maxim Dosko's 2014 play, "Radio Culture," now in a U.S premiere with TUTA Theatre Chicago, is a fine example. Performed in a tiny room in the company's home space (seating is extremely limited), the show takes us through a day in the life of Volodya (Kevin V. Smith). He's a supervisor on construction sites who lives in Minsk with his parents and sister and finds solace in the radio program of the title, which offers bits of classical music and other cultural tidbits — a change from the "Radio Rocks" he used to listen to.

Tellingly, Volodya's story (translated and adapted for TUTA by Natalia Fedorova and director Amber Robinson) is told in third person throughout — a marker of the anomie and alienation he feels in the grinding sameness of his days. But the radio provides a respite. As Volodya tells us “He's never been particularly dispositioned towards, or interested in culture, especially the arts, he's not from some bohemian surrounding. He's ordinary. Normal.”

But as his day unfolds, we see the nightmare of what “normal” means in Volodya's world. The housing projects his crew builds are thrown up quickly, with little regard for structural soundness. The crews numb themselves with booze and other drugs. He wrestles with whether or not he can afford a new meat grinder for his mother's birthday and new sneakers for himself, while ruminating on the food products available in Belarus.

These range from Russian sausage that goes green as soon as you cut into it to overpriced German cookies with pretty packaging — a fine metaphor for Belarus itself, situated geographically and psychologically in the limbo between the old Soviet planned economies and the E.U. That sense of limbo haunts Robinson's spare evocation of this world, rendered in Eleanor Kahn's scenic design as a box of drywall, with one moving piece of scaffolding.

It's not exactly a solo show — Huy Nguyen and Wain Parham provide silent but memorable support as two workers on Volodya's crew. In a cunning interlude, Smith's foreman introduces the rest of the crew, all represented by cement blocks of varying sizes and all suffering from problems ranging from addiction to violent tendencies to chronically ill spouses.

Later, the blocks return as stand-ins for the buildings in a small town Volodya visits. Smith steps nimbly from one block to another, a working-class Colossus astride a small controlled world. Yet despite Volodya's attempts to think “easy, everyday thoughts,” reality keeps crashing in. A late-breaking crisis with one of his workers shows him the fragility of his own state. And yet when he tries to discuss his newfound love of art and culture — at least as filtered through the radio — with his old school friends, they scorn his taste as pedestrian, driving up one more wall of isolation.

The text's use of third person feels a little contrived at points. But Smith's controlled performance is often mesmerizing. He's capable of projecting great distress with the smallest gestures and expressions. And despite the grim surroundings (also captured by Keith Parham's unforgiving lighting and Jeffrey Levin's soundscape), Smith also animates small moments of joy and humor with equal skill.

When his Volodya leans back to listen to the radio (the only happy part of his day, aside from his Snickers bar), there is a sense of communal exhalation in the room. We've holding our breath with him as he goes through this completely “normal” day as it turns into another waking nightmare of sameness and hopelessness.

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Review: “Radio Culture” (3 stars)

When: Through Dec. 2

Where: TUTA Theatre Chicago, 4670 N. Manor Ave.

Running time: 70 minutes

Tickets: \$25-\$30 at tutatheatre.org

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