

[| go to index of reviews](#) | [| go to entry_page](#) | | [| go to other departments](#) |



New York Theatre Wiresm
Theatre Dance Performance Art Music
Alternative and International Theatre

Beate Hein Bennett

The Pity of It All "All Roads Lead to the Kurski Station"



Rivers Duggan, Elliott Morse, Mia Vallet.

October 9 – 21

HERE Arts Center, 145 Ave. of the Americas (enter on Dominick, 1 block south of Spring Str.)

Presented by Varda Studio. Part of the SubletSeries@HERE.

Tue – Sat @7 pm, Sundays @ 2pm

\$25 general admission, for tickets: <http://here.org/show/kurski>, or call 212-352-3101

Company website: www.vardastudio.org

Reviewed by Beate Hein Bennett October 9, 2018

There was post-war Odysseus roaming the seas for legendary ten years until he came to his violated home and patient Penelope. There was his comrade-in-arms, Philoctetes, banished all alone in exile, ranting about the miserable injustice of the gods and his festering wound. And there was Dante's journey through the Inferno, mirroring war-torn corrupt Florence and his own exile—it was only in Paradiso that he found his Beatrice!

And now at HERE, Vienya, a poet drunkard endures a nightmare journey, soaked in vodka, from Moscow's Kurski Station to Petushki, a real Moscow suburb and his hoped for paradise "where the jasmine never stops blooming and the birds always sing" and where he hopes to be saved by his love. He never makes it to Petushki because he sleeps in a drunken stupor through the station and ends where he started, in Kurski station. The 70 minute performance takes us on a wild romp through the underbelly of Soviet-Russian life with all its horror and absurdities—the laughter gets stuck in our craw.

Emil Varda, the director, adapted the play from a satirical prose poem "Moscow-Petushki" by Russian dissident Venedikt Erofeev (1938-1990). Erofeev was born near Murmansk, in the Arctic Circle, where his father was station master in a small railroad station but having fallen afoul of Stalin, he spent his life in the gulag, and his sons were placed in "state care." Erofeev, talented and intelligent, careened through life, in continuous trouble with the Soviet system. His wife Galia said in a BBC documentary about him: "His wasn't a life, it was vagrancy. He went from bench to bench, ditch to ditch, station to station." His semi-autobiographical prose poem "Moscow-Petushki," (1969) first circulated as samizdat, was published in Jerusalem (1973) and in Paris (1977), and finally in Russia after perestroika in 1989, shortly before his death from throat cancer in 1990.



Rivers Duiggan, Elliott Morse, Mia Vallet.

Varda created a compact script that contains the rich dark tapestry of Soviet life as Erofeev wove it from the tatters of all-too human existence, Russian cultural and religious vestiges, and his own sorrows and fears—all mixed with a keen sense of absurd humor and irony. Varda's direction drew from his own Polish experience with life under communism as well as his theatrical training (Grotowski) and knowledge of modern Polish dramaturgy, notably Witkiewicz and Gombrowicz whose wildly imaginative dramatic concoctions provided models for metaphysical surrealist richly gestural theatre.

The verbal and physical dexterity of the three actors, Elliott Morse as Vienya, and the two Angel/Fury figures played by Mia Vallet (Megaera) and Rivers Duggan (Tilphousia) brings the dense text to life in the intimate downstairs theatre of *HERE*. The space is left mostly empty, except for two chairs, and an array of red wine and vodka bottles scattered in batches around the periphery. On the black back wall vague Russian lettering in red can be deciphered as CCP [Soviet Socialist Republic] with some red streaks below. The lighting, designed by David Palmer, much of it from the side, sculpts the stage action. The recurring musical motif, introduced as a preset and marking the intervals between the segments, is a solo trumpet rendering of the popular 20th century Russian song "Ochi Chernye" (Dark Eyes)—emblematic of Russian romantic sentimentality. The music credit belongs to Scott Griffin.



Rivers Duggan, Mia Vallet.

The two female Erinnyes/Eumenides/Angel figures, Megaera and Tilphousia (aka Tisiphone), accompany, challenge, and persecute Vienya on his journey. They are modeled after the Greek mythical figures, alternately called "the Kindly Ones" or "the Furies," who prod the conscience of mankind.

Tilphousia, in blue dress with a huge flowery shawl in blue, and Megaera, in a red dress with an equally gorgeous flowery shawl in red tones, invite him with a ritual baptism "to get up and go" quoting the biblical "talitha cumi." The faces of both actresses are in white make-up—they sing, they dance, they taunt him and drape their shawls to become huge wings, as they hover over him, at times kindly, at times threatening. They change shape, at times being seductive young sirens and then suddenly turning into hags,

their vocal registers ranging from sweet singsong to harsh cackle.

Elliott Morse as Vienya avoids all possible histrionics of a drunkard; with tremendous physical stamina and precision he presents us a character that embodies the entire range of human depredation caused by political repression, social dysfunction, poverty, and a lifetime of alcohol—a compendium of the Soviet anti-hero. However, there are segments that go beyond the depression of the Soviet man and ring true of any time and any place when and where politics have utterly undermined human dignity, including our present state. Mr. Morse with his sweet face and expressive eyes, his beautiful young tortured body elicits our empathy ("sorrow and fear"—the classic cathartic effect) while undercutting any sentimentality by a mischievous sharp sense of the ironic. The three actors together are a well tuned ensemble.



Elliott Morse.



Standing: interesting figure. Below: Elliott Morse.

An interesting figure makes repeat appearances during Vienya's *via dolorosa*: he is like an escaped inmate from an asylum, in a hospital gown (open in the back), white clown make-up with huge black eyes ("ochi chernya" [black eyes!]) carrying a trumpet, meandering across the stage, mumbling unintelligible words (in Russian?); no actor is mentioned in the program. Is there a point to the anonymity? I think so—but we'll leave it for the individual spectator to figure it out.

Behind: Rivers Duggan.



| [home](#) | [reviews](#) | [cue-to-cue](#) | [discounts](#) | [welcome](#) |
| [museums](#) | [NYTW mail](#) | [recordings](#) | [coupons](#) | [publications](#) | [classified](#) |