

# An Absurd Night in a Georgian Hotel

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***Before We Got to Know Each Other.* Author: Basa Janikashvili. Directed by Zurab Getsadze. Stage designer: Shota Glurjidze; composer: Erekle Getsadze; video by Giorgi Khositashvili. Cast: Nino Burduli, Goga Pipinashvili. Date of premiere Apr 5, 2018, at the hotel Ambassadors-Tbilisi, Georgia. The play was staged in October 2018 as part of the Frankfurt Book Fair Theatre Programme.**



Goga Pipinashvili (Gia), Nino Burduli (Nino) preparing for intimacy. Photo: Maia Odisharia

In Georgia, interest in the Theatre of the Absurd and other new directions began in the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, along with searches for new, different theatrical spaces, carried out by young directors and playwrights. A new generation of Georgian writers is trying to keep pace with international art developments, among them Basa Janikashvili (born 1974), a prolific playwright; many of whose plays have been performed on Georgian or foreign stages.

Janikashvili wrote *Before We Got to Know Each Other* using the techniques of Absurd Theatre. His play is intimate in nature: two lonely people, an estranged couple in their late fifties, decide to restore their broken relationship. In order to revive their feelings, they rent a hotel room and start playing a game. The rule is as follows: a woman and a man, who have met by chance, like each other and go to a hotel. Basa Janikashvili has built the play with dialogue and minimal action, characteristic of absurd dramaturgy. The same story is repeated several times in different variations. The goal of the couple is to get to know each other, to discover each other again. Their “fantasies” play out all possible versions of a marital relationship, or relations between a man and a woman just living together.



Nino Burduli as Nino after failed sex. Photo: Maia Odisharia

Zurab Getsadze (born 1971, actor, director, head of the Tumanishvili Film Actors Theatre) offered us an interesting interpretation of the play. He correctly determined that it should be performed in an intimate setting, and spectators should be not only viewers of the plot, but also direct participants.

The team began to search for a hotel and managed—even though the institution of patronage and sponsorship in Georgia is underdeveloped—to find a room which could be used for the performance several times a month.



Gia and Nino notice the author on the TV screen. Photo: Maia Odisharia

Performing personal stories in a hotel room has been a common enough practice in European theatre for some years, but in Georgia it was first implemented by Zurab Getsadze. He assembled a creative team of high-class professionals: stage designer Shota Glurjidze (born 1961, artist, theatre designer), music from Erekle Getsadze (born

1991, actor, musician) and, most importantly, two excellent actors, Nino Burduli (born 1958, theatre and cinema actress, director and translator) and Goga Pipinashvili (born 1961, theatre and film actor, director), for the roles of Nino and Gia.

The director shortened the text, added or removed dialogue in places and changed the finale. In Basa Janikashvili's play, the action develops in a hotel room. According to Zurab Getsadze, 22 spectators in room #2208 become witnesses of the tragicomic coexistence of the lonely, estranged couple.

The spectators gather in the hotel lobby. A member of the technical staff meets them and leads them to the room. They are placed on chairs and listen to recorded music at low volume. At this point, a woman and a man enter the room, a little drunk, talking loudly and laughing. They pay no attention to the spectators; they are only busy with each other. They begin to undress and find themselves in bed. At the moment when the spectators think that an intimate act will take place, the woman suddenly asks: "Do we know each other?" The man laughs and replies that he knows her: "Yes, sure. How are you?" The woman: "I'm fine." Then insistently: "Are you sure you know me?" The man: "Of course (laughs), of course." The woman: "If so, what is my name?" The dialogue repeats this as a refrain throughout the entire play.

The main problem of this once loving couple is alienation. The woman thinks that the man does not know her properly, and the man is not attracted to the woman any more.



Gia and Nino, the scene before the finale. Photo: Tako Robakidze

The moment of intimacy fails. Gia takes the TV remote control and starts watching TV channels (footage recorded especially for the performance). Nino gets up, puts on her robe and goes to the bathroom; after a while, she comes back and starts a dialogue with Gia. Then, they go back to intimacy. After a second attempt at sex fails, Gia almost repeats Nino's actions. They are, in turn, sometimes in bed, sometimes in the bathroom, and, in this case, the other is watching TV in the room, or looking out of the window. These actions are repeated several times before the performance ends.

The game they have invented and offer to each other is a fantasy based on their lifestyle. In it, they betray each other, kill each other's lovers, abuse one another, and so.

The story takes place over one night and covers the entire past lives of these two persons. Conditionality is embedded in this very realistic, even naturalistic plot from the very beginning. The playwright, director and actors reflect in the story-game of these two people the problem of alienation, isolation, spiritual loneliness—the problem that began on the verge of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and intensifies in the twenty-first century.



The spectators give applause. Photo: Maia Odisharia

The director has emphasised the grotesque moments in the play. This was reflected in the acting style of the actors. Goga Pipinashvili and Nino Burduli create dramatic, comical characters. To sculpt their characters, they use varying skills, methods, nuances and tonality: sometimes dramatic, sometimes farcical, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes grotesque, sometimes tragic. Most importantly, during 55 minutes they never “lose” the momentum of the play, characteristic for the Theatre of the Absurd. As if one story ends and everything starts anew. The director and actors follow the rhythm set from the very beginning—dialogue, pauses, silence, action—alternating, moving from scene to scene, from episode to episode, as if these were calculated with mathematical precision: the director and actors slowly head towards the so-called finale.

Zurab Getsadze uses video clips on the hotel room's TV screen between episodes in the play. These video inserts: commercials, excerpts from news programs, and so on, seem, at first glance, to fill in the blanks. The director made a conceptually different finale for the play. In the Theatre of the Absurd, nothing ever ends; after an ending, everything starts

anew. That is what happens here, too. But the director's finale is different. The author of the play, Basa Janikashvili, appears on the TV screen several times. Nino and Gia, as if understanding each other again, finally fall in love and, at that moment, they notice the author on TV. Gia runs off with a gun in his hand, Nino runs after him. The spectators see on the TV screen that the characters kill the author. The director has intensified the irony of an absurdly realistic story.

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