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Le Suicidé, Théâtre Gérard-Philipe, Saint-Denis, Paris — review
An admirable performance from the Berliner Ensemble of this once-banned Soviet farce

Par Laura Cappelle



Paris is hosting three productions by the Berliner Ensemble this autumn, and it is a welcome opportunity to get to know the modern iteration of Bertolt Brecht's company. As well as two Robert Wilson stagings, the ensemble has also brought *The Suicide*, its first collaboration with a French director, Jean Bellorini; this turns out to be a satirical gem, one that plays to the troupe's historical strengths.

Created in by Brecht and his wife in 1949, the Berliner Ensemble was one of East Germany's rare theatre troupes. So there is a special pleasure in seeing it tackle for the first time Nikolai Erdman's 1928 Soviet farce, which was deemed so subversive that it was banned in the USSR until nearly half a century later.

The Suicide gives us a jobless anti-hero, Semyon Semyonovitch, whose wife suspects that he is about to end his life. Various characters become aware of the hypothetical suicide and attempt to exploit it for their own purposes, spinning it into a statement of support for the intelligentsia, the church or the arts.

Directors face an uphill battle when staging a play in a language they don't speak, but Bellorini's instincts align with the Berliner Ensemble's. The first half is superbly paced, with a slapstick quality that suits the actors' larger-than-life delivery; criss-crossing stairs also provide opportunities for physical comedy. But the production sags near the end, after the Russian-style banquet (complete with song and dance) that celebrates Semyon's upcoming suicide. His reaction when he wakes up from an alcohol-induced coma veers uneasily between clowning and real despair, and Erdman stretches some characters thin.

The Berliner actors gave an admirable performance regardless, and remained unflappable even when a medical emergency in the audience halted the performance. Georgios Tsivanoglou, an excellent Semyon, dispelled the unease afterwards with a flourish, breaking the fourth wall in true Brechtian fashion.

Bellorini's production makes a strong case for Erdman, whose career was scuppered by censorship and deportation. The *Suicide* ends with Semyon's plea for independence — a plea that was never heard, in the case of the playwright.