

Berkshire Theatre Group, Pittsfield, MA
Rachmaninoff and the Tsar, by Hershey Felder. Directed by Trevor Hay.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

"I became a monkey."

A traveling performer, principally of his own music, Sergei Rachmaninoff was a popular attraction in America from 1918 until his death at home in Beverly Hills in 1943. He had written very little new music for years and was, literally, a performing monkey. Aristocratic, intuitively musical, the man produced early works that have lasted long beyond his lifetime. After World War I and the Russian Revolution he created only six new works. But his reputation as a composer and conductor persisted throughout his lifetime.

Pianist, author and actor Hershey Felder, an admirer of Rachmaninoff, has created a two-man play about the composer which has been brought to the Colonial Theatre for only two performances. In it he plays portions of many of the man's most popular works along with a few of the more obscure pieces. In this play Rachmaninoff is in his house, dying, and in his mind he has summoned the long-dead last ruler of Russia, Nicholas II, to talk with him about the Tsar's failings and of his own attempts to honor the royal family.

Nicholas is played by Italian actor Jonathan Silvestri whose work is wonderful in this play. In full uniform the former Tsar questions, complains and commiserates with the composer. He speaks about his favorite child, Anastasia, and learns of Sergei's attempts to help the woman who claims to be the princess (a revelation to me) now known as Anna Anderson. Silvestri appears to have been born to play this part and he and Felder are a dynamic team of players.

Felder has the charisma of a superstar whether acting or playing the piano. His musicality is never in question and all of the composer's works, along with a few pieces by other musical geniuses, make this a remarkable 93 minutes. As a playwright the man shows himself to be the equal of other, better-known writers. In total, the work is a treasure, entertaining and gripping as the truths of Rachmaninoff's life are revealed. I highly recommend this work to anyone with an interest in good theatre or great music.



Hershey Felder, Jonathan Silvestri;
Photo: Stefano DeCarli

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There is only one more performance today at the Colonial Theatre.