

THEATER REVIEW

'Huddersfield' helps playwright find his place

By Chris Jones

tribune theater critic

If you're a dissolute youth in the East End of London, the slums of Dublin or on New York's affluent Upper West Side, the Chicago theater long has held a place for your whining. But if you're stuck in the provinces of Serbia? Different story. Or no story at all.

Until now. The fascinating and intensely stimulating new play "Huddersfield" — in its American premiere at the Victory Gardens from TUTA Theatre Chicago and a must-see for fans of edgy, risky, contemporary drama — is the work of the leading young Serbian scribe, Ugljesa Sajtinac. His work plows some of the same territory as British nihilists such as Mark Ravenhill or Irving Welsh, or that of Kenneth Lonergan, the American chronicler of the young, the smart and the bored stiff.

"Huddersfield"

When: Through July 8

Where: Victory Gardens Theater, 2257 N. Lincoln Ave.

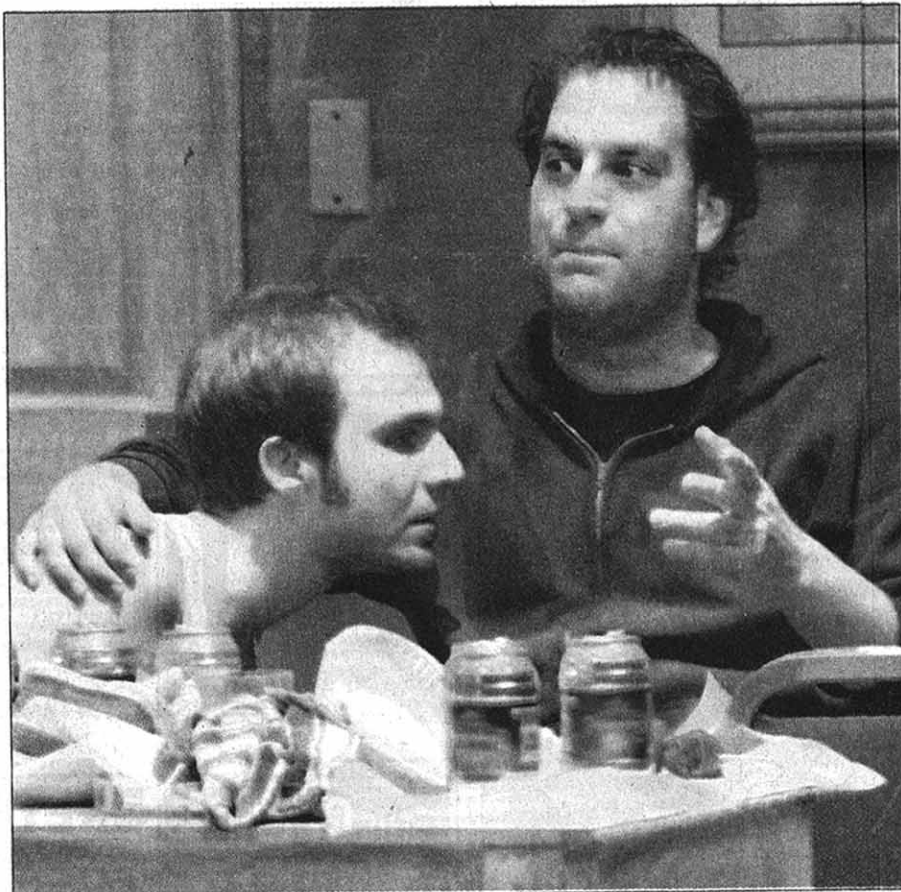
Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes

Tickets: \$15-\$20 at 773-871-3000

ern Chekhovian picture of the Serbian slacker and a dissection of the complexities of the Serbian place in a post-Soviet world shorn of obvious historical references. And thanks to the intense direction of Dado in a tiny space, this powerfully realized and superbly acted show has received the kind of Chicago-style American premiere that one could easily imagine traveling to New York.

The central character here is a dude named Rasha (the driven and empathetic Greg Beam), an eternal grad student living with the kind of alcoholic dad (Peter Defaria) who'll remove the bathroom door to make a point about who really runs the apartment. Rasha uses the body of his cute teenage girlfriend, Mila (Kim McKean, in a gutsy performance), for escape. And he hangs out with his strange pal Ivan (Andy Hager), a bizarre and sad intellectual going nowhere. But when one of Rasha's émigré pals, Igor (the superb Matthew Van Colton), returns for a visit home from Huddersfield, England, where he's a big success, Rasha's head pretty much explodes. Ironically, Huddersfield is also a backwater. Just a backwater in a more culturally

powerful place. Or so these young men think.



The central character in "Huddersfield" is Rasha, played by Greg Beam (left), who hangs out with his strange pal Ivan, played by Andy Hager.

This script is so good in part because the adapter is Caridad Svich, a terrific American playwright in her own right. But still, Sajtinac's writing is that rare beast that combines personal angst with nationalist dissection. These characters evoke the international malaise wherein young adults love to delay adulthood. And it captures the feeling of living in any backwater, anywhere. But it's also a play specifically about Serbia — and its inhabitants' constant need to define themselves in some other nation's terms.

The show's not perfect. It needs an intermission. It's about 10 minutes too long. And the ending, or rather endings, is and are something of a mess. The addition of a fiddler doesn't entirely mesh, either.

But the theatrical fundamentals fire on all cylinders. "Huddersfield" is a powerful, memorable night spent with a stellar new work that Chicagoans are the first Americans to experience. It's done darn well, and it's one of the best new scripts staged here all year.

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