

# The Emigrants

By **Madeleine Shaner** | Posted Dec. 18, 2002, midnight

The two men sharing a rather squalid basement flat on New Year's Eve seem to have very little in common, except neither is particularly happy in his current situation. We quickly see that this is a very odd couple unfamiliar to American audiences except through adaptations and politically driven productions. Slawomir Mrozek's play takes the differences between the two men and convinces us they're a lot more alike than they think. AA (Tim Choate) is an intellectual, a political exile from an unnamed Eastern European country; XX (Zoran Radanovich) is a displaced laborer intent on saving his currency to build a grand house for his family back in his homeland. AA is a realist soured by experience, without the luxury of a dream to sustain him, but his coping skills have been well tuned and he's not about to switch his politics to change his status; indeed his choices are very limited. XX is a dreamer, light in the brainpower department, with a tendency to make up elaborate lies to convince himself he's having a great time slaving away at a job that keeps him away from his family and penniless in a noisy basement flat shared with a semi-depressive.

Like any relationship depressed by circumstances, this one has its fair share of irritation, petty misunderstandings, and general bitchery. XX finds it hard to understand what makes AA tick; AA all too fully understands what XX is up to but doesn't approve on principle, which is the guiding force in his life and which will never let him admit to the flaws in his lifelong reasoning. XX is all too easy to bait; he has no ready answers for AA's constant needling, reinforcing his own zombie state, which will probably be all he can legitimately hope for: cash stuffed in a toy dog that

will never be enough to let him step down from the treadmill society has built for him.

The eternal discussion between intellectuals, ideologues, and simple slob is in full flower here. Mrozek plays the cynical humor of impossible circumstances to its hilt. His characters are as funny as they are ludicrous, as blind as they are earnest, as tortured as they are fooled into thinking life might possibly be something they know it can never be.

Choate and Radanovich are terrific: brash, loud, very European, full of conviction, and ineffably sad in the obviousness and futility of lives wasted, maybe for all the wrong reasons. Director Neno Pervan keeps this rushing train on track, holding its train watchers in thrall. Lada Pervan's set and costumes are impeccably right, Samir Besirevic's sound and music, and Goran Ilic's lighting help make this a tightly crafted, totally absorbing piece.