



## ON NAKED SOIL: IMAGINING ANNA AKHMATOVA

*at Theater for the New City*

Anna Akhmatova's words are simple yet strong, jarring but undeniably poignant. The same can be said of playwright and actor Rebecca Schull's portrayal of the renowned Russian poet as she looks back on her life in *On Naked Soil* at Theater for the New City.

At Akhmatova's modest home, where her manuscripts are hidden, she and a young woman, Lydia Chukovskaya, bond over poetry. They try to avoid talk of Chukovskaya's missing husband or Akhmatova's late husband and her son, who has been arrested three times and travels in and out of prison camps. Nadezhda Mandelstam, Akhmatova's friend and the wife of the poet Osip, visits as well.

Fearing for their safety and the protection of Akhmatova's poetry, Mandelstam and Chukovskaya memorize her work. The play depicts the preservation of her legacy as well the two world wars, the Stalinist terror, and Akhmatova's personal experiences. Schull employs some contrivances to get poems and facts out—"recite your poetry," "remember when"—and it's hard to understand why she doesn't present the material chronologically: 1957, 1917, 1938 flash across a screen along with text and photographs. But Schull's performance is worth seeing.

As the once wild and carefree poet of love lyrics describes the brutal tragedies of war-torn Russia, she is alternately cool and hot. Schull often slips into a trancelike state as she recites the lines she has written, though her voice shakes recalling the "black marias" carrying people to prison, and she dips into madness thinking about her son. Schull's eyes shine, and she is virtuosic and completely credible. As Chukovskaya, Sue Cremin adds energy and considerable support, though her speech often sounds affected. Lenore Loveman as Mandelstam brings refreshing levity, a quality that the play has in just the right measure.

*Presented by and at Theater for the New City,  
155 First Ave., NYC.  
April 12–May 4. Wed.–Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.  
(212) 254-1109 or [www.theaterforthenewcity.net](http://www.theaterforthenewcity.net).*

**Reviewed by Ronni Reich**

*Published on BackStage.com on April 18, 2008.*

*Copyright 2008 The Nielsen Company. All rights reserved.*