Mayakovsky's first play after 1917, a celebration of the Russian Revolution in the peculiar form of a farce mystery play, puzzled its original audiences and presents such enormous challenges in staging that it is rarely revived. Perhaps only a theatre like the Volksbühne, which combines major technical resources, a willingness to put these at the disposal of demanding and unconventional directors, and an ongoing commitment, even in this late-capitalist era, to the ideals of the Russian Revolution, would today undertake such a revival.

Mayakovsky's sprawling work is fundamentally a retelling of the story of Noah and of the Last Judgement, full of contemporary and historical references and metatheatrical jokes. It begins with a flood covering all of the earth except the North Pole, where an odd assortment of characters take refuge in a modern ark. Like the Biblical animals they are divided into the Clean and the Unclean, that is into the Haves and the Have-Nots. On the Ark they come to blows over how power is to be shared, and the Unclean triumph over their adversaries. They move on from this victory to take their message of emancipation first into Hell, then into Heaven, and finally establish a workers' paradise on a redeemed earth.

Sebastian Hartmann, one of Germany's most ambitious and imaginative directors, has given this modern mystery play a spectacular staging, with the powerful aid of designer Susanne Münzer. Their production begins quietly, with a prologue at the North Pole on the forestage, against the dark backdrop of what appears to be the theatre's fire curtain. Two Eskimos (Angalan Baasanjov and Woo-Chung Lee) bang unproductively on this curtain and then open several circular holes in the "ice" of the stage floor. From one a hand emerges, but before they can respond to this, revolver shots ring out in the auditorium (a gesture perhaps to Mayakovsky's ties to the futurists). They are being fired by the "author" himself, Vladimir Majakovsky (Hagen Oechel), who does not appear in the original play, but who pops up regularly in this restaging. In this, as in many of Hartmann's directorial decisions, one can see a desire to follow Mayakovsky's own advice in the preface to the second edition of the play:
Mayakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffe*, directed by Sebastian Hartmann at the Volksbühne, Berlin
Mayakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffe*, directed by Sebastian Hartmann at the Volksbühne, Berlin

"In the future, all persons performing, presenting, reading, or publishing the *Mysterium Buffo* should change the content, making it contemporary, immediate, up-to-the-minute." After introducing himself to the audience, Mayakovsky works his way down to the stage, while delivering the prologue to the play, originally given to one of the Unclean. Onstage, he takes over the action, pulling the Clean and Unclean actors out of the holes to in turn introduce themselves and argue about how to react to the impending flood, which is suggested by panels falling out of the dark iron curtain behind them, each causing further panic.

Finally the shattered curtain rises upon a stage filled with billowing smoke, and it clears to reveal the survivors, including Mayakovsky, gathered in their ark, which in this production is a modern if dirty and much damaged minibus, all its windows gone, hanging upside down in mid-air above the stage, a memorable theatrical image. After the ark sinks out of sight amid the broken wreckage of the stage floor, the stage again fills with smoke, but this time shot through with red lights. This is the Hell sequence, but instead of the variety of devils and damned figures with which Mayakovsky peoples this scene, Hartmann focuses on a single member of
the Unclean, a Soviet soldier carrying a red flag who makes his way boldly through the smoke until he is stopped by two female devils who try to confuse and impede him. He resists them but is unable to move forward until others of the Unclean appear, also with red flags, to form a heroic tableau. Upon this tableau a group of white, obviously fake cut-out clouds descend, to signal a transition to heaven. Mayakovksy appears in front of a white cloud to introduce the act, then apparently dies, but his spirit, in the form of an image projected on the cloud, arises to witness the subsequent proceedings. The apparently reborn Unclean appear as babies with pacifiers, but find no more satisfaction in Heaven than elsewhere. They begin to construct their own reality, in Mayakovksy’s “Land of Chaos.” Frantic activity fills the stage, hammering, sawing, painting, the construction of a huge banner that is spread across the stage, “We will never be overcome.” Mayakovsky is covered with a white sheet, stapled to the stage, and eyes and mouth painted on it like a cartoon ghost. While all this activity proceeds on the stage, the audience also is brought into the turmoil. Actors take orders for coffee from audience members, run out into the lobby and return with trays of coffee that they distribute in the house, crawling over seats, occasionally spilling coffee, and apparently ad libbing lines to add to the general confusion.

At last, however, calm is restored. Mayakovsky frees himself from his ghostly sheet and moves up the stage to look into the pit from which arises whispered echoes of all that has past. Descending into the pit, he re-emerges with a huge red flag and a girl in white, who begins to sing *The Internationale*. Stepping down center, he slowly waves the flag in sweeping arcs, while on the ramparts behind him, overlooking the pit of history, other red-flag bearing figures appear, joining in the triumphant tableau. It is an image which simultaneously evokes the revolutionary kitsch of Soviet poster art and thrills with its theatrical power. It can hardly be called immediate and up to the minute in any serious historical sense, as Mayakovksy seems to have wished, but it nevertheless rather surprisingly gives to a early twenty-first century audience something of the thrill of revolutionary exultation in certain Russian circles a century ago. Through emphasizing the kind of immediacy that is unique to the theatre, with its utilization of the bodies of the living, it achieves its own surprisingly evocative power.