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Chekhov Chuckles

Dragon Productions' 'Chekhov in Yalta' looks back in amusement at playwright's final years.

By Marianne Messina

JOHN DRIVER and Jeffrey Haddow's play *Chekhov in Yalta*, looks on the last few years of Russian playwright Anton Chekhov's life and smiles—a bold premise considering Chekhov's slow death from tuberculosis. This background fills the comedy with a mist

of melancholy that is devilishly Chekhovian. Set designer Ron Gasparinetti's outdoor garden, while it tingles with bourgeois elegance (lace curtains on French doors) is overcast in dun tones from beige walls to brown brick. Starting with the teapot as central prop, Dragon Productions Theatre director John T. Aney underscores that this play about Chekhov is constructed like a play by Chekhov: intellectual, artistic, high-positioned—and dissatisfied—guests mingle over tea, champagne and oysters, while unhappy spouses philander.

In the play, producer Nemirovich-Danchenko (Bill C. Jones) makes fun of how the only action in a Chekhov play comes from people having affairs. Since Danchenko is busily trying to seduce the wife (Patricia Tyler as Lilina) of his partner, actor/director Konstantin Stanislavsky (Dale Albright), Jones follows the comment with an ironic break. The plot is a galaxy of unfulfilled desire circling the actors, authors and playwrights who just want to make art and party. Lead actress Olga Knipper (Laura Jane Bailey) wants to marry Chekhov (James Allen Brewer); Chekhov's "spinster" sister, Masha (Mary Lou Torre), wants a husband; and Danchenko wants to produce Chekhov's next play—Chekhov is waffling—in order to keep his Moscow Art Theater afloat.

With a less-than-flashy personality, Brewer's Chekhov radiates kindness, often from the distance of someone nursing a hidden ailment. Other performances stem from similar Victorian notions of reserve. Torre makes Masha's fastidious concern for her brother insistent, but not domineering. Bailey seats Olga's energy in the woman-in-love, not the grand lady persona. And Tyler's Lilina is a confusion of timidity, desire and spite flashing out in fleeting expressions.

When the festivities get going, the Dragon costumes get exciting: silvery vests; plumes, flowers and bangles on grand hats; chiffon dresses and jeweled lace (Mae Matos, costumer). The play is funny, though much of the humor relies on a well of myths, if not facts, about the characters—that Chekhov believed that Stanislavsky's work bowed to melodrama, that the life-hardened Gorky was a brooding, socialist trouble magnet ("Why should God control the weather?"). Looking très Gorky in his bushy black hair and thick black mustache, Manuel Rojas, gives a standout performance. The hint of a smile around his otherwise hard-set eyes allures by suggesting secret depths. Gorky's brawl, from which he staggers, crimson-mouthed, happens offstage like the most dramatic events in Chekhov's plays. According to the Chekhov in this play, big events are "not the point." The production presents humor as Chekhov would have liked it: refined.

Dale Albright's dramatic Stanislavsky remains controlled even through an impressive verbal duel between Stanislavsky and Danchenko. Albright's eyes bulge, Jones' face fumes and neither overshoots lines timed to slam right up against each other without overlay. With Chekhovian emphasis on humanity, the eternal debate between moneyman and artist boils down to the age-old argument over a woman.

CHEKHOV IN YALTA, a Dragon Productions presentation, plays Thursday–Saturday at



Photograph by J. Kaysen

ANTON, YOU DEVIL: Anton Chekhov (Allen Brewer) dallies with Olga Knipper (Laura Jane Bailey) in 'Anton in Yalta.'

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8pm and Sunday at 2pm through Oct. 14 at Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St., Palo Alto. Tickets are \$13-\$25. (800.838.3006)

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