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Arts & Entertainment - Friday, September 28, 2007

A farce with flair

Dragon's 'Chekhov' is a witty spin on Russian drama

by Janet Silver Ghent

Anton Chekhov insists his plays are really comedies. The bombastic Konstantin Stanislavsky, father of method acting, begs to disagree. He wants to milk the melodrama for all it's worth. He's also dying to get his hands on "The Three Sisters," but Chekhov has his own game plan.

Then there's the proverbial sister who longs for Moscow, the actress who longs for offstage attention, the bodacious housemaid who will do anything to get onstage, and a bevy of literary lights in various stages of sobriety.

The result is "Chekhov in Yalta," a delightful country-house farce that runs through Oct. 14 at Palo Alto's Dragon Theatre.

Set in 1900, when Chekhov's consumption reportedly confined him to his Black Sea estate, the 1981 comedy by John Driver and Jeffrey Haddow revolves around an actual visit. Moscow Art Theatre director Stanislavsky and his feuding partner Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko descend on the Yalta estate along with leading actress Olga Knipper (for whom Chekhov has the hots) and several other actors. Their goal is to persuade Chekhov to let them produce "The Three Sisters."

(As a side note, "The Three Sisters" runs through Sunday, Sept. 30, at Mountain View's Pear Avenue Theatre, with Dragon founder Meredith Hagedorn playing the role of Olga.)

These "Chekhov in Yalta" characters join the houseguests, a wild-eyed Maxim Gorky (Manuel Rojas) and Chekhov friend and biographer Ivan Alekseyevich Bunin (William J. Brown III). The only one who seems to be missing is Dr. Chekhov's insufferable patient Leo Tolstoy, who lives nearby but mercifully remains offstage.

What's a farce without hanky-panky, battles of wit, and intrigue? Olga (Laura Jane Bailey) loves Anton (James Allen Brewer), but he's battling illness, as well as fear of commitment. Nemirovich-Danchenko (Bill Jones) covets Stanislavsky's wife, the much-neglected Lilina (Patricia Tyler). Stanislavsky (Dale Albright) cares only for himself and his art. Chekhov's sister Masha (Mary Lou Torre) loves Bunin, and Fyokla (Annamarie MacLeod) will take a tumble with whomever.

"Chekhov in Yalta" is an ambitious play, with 11 characters — nearly as many as a typical Chekhov drama. Nonetheless, director John T. Aney manages to pull it off and keep the audience entertained.

The fact that the Dragon Theatre is tiny, with only 42 seats, adds to the intimacy, as does Ron Gasparinetti's trellised garden setting. Not so coincidentally to Chekhov lovers, the play opens with the sounds of a seagull, and Sergei Rachmaninoff's piano music adds to the mood, with lighting and sound design by Andrew Custer.

Brewer is a physically and dramatically convincing Chekhov, alternating among several personae: physician struggling to face the illness that took the life of his beloved brother; conflicted lover; cynical observer, amused by the antics of those around him; and deeply misunderstood playwright. He has some of the best lines and is the most rounded character.

Albright, who enters with a dramatic cloak and long red scarf, is a parody of Stanislavsky, employing oversized gestures, Shakespearean intonations and bizarre makeup, in bold contrast to the quietly understated Chekhov, who utters: "The stage is not a barnyard."

Stanislavsky retorts: "Mark my words, Chekhov will not be remembered."

The legendary Stanislavsky is overacted to perfection, even when browbeating his long-suffering wife, Lilina, played admirably by Tyler, or coming to blows with professional partner and sometimes lecher Nemirovich-Danchenko, performed with comic flair by Jones.

Torre shines as the tragicomic Masha, the controlling sister who tries to run Chekhov's life but is unsuccessful at managing her own. "Poor Masha," one of the characters opines. "What a poor fate to be such a nonentity." But when she has too much to drink, all hell breaks loose. And MacLeod is delightful as Fyokla. Not quite as convincing was Bailey, who seemed a little too pleasant to be a Russian diva. But perhaps the fault lies in the script.

Meanwhile, Rojas plays Gorky with panache, and Kevin Hsieh, who has a much smaller role as the actor Moskvina, shows a real talent for mime, evoking laughter from the audience. Philip Levi is a charming Luzhki, another actor.

From the morning suit worn by Chekhov to the fanciful gowns of the actresses to the revolutionary garb of Gorky, Mae Matos' period attire helps define the characters' personae.

Some of the "Yalta" characters insist that nothing really does happen in a Chekhov play — after all, the three sisters never do get to Moscow — but it's the subtle gestures and nuances that make for greatness.

In "Chekhov in Yalta," by contrast, spoof overrides subtlety, which makes this play enjoyable even to those who've never seen a real Chekhov play. But as in all good comedy, there is a serious message — and the play provides insight into the mind of a great dramatist, through his own words.

What: "Chekhov in Yalta," a comedy by John Driver and Jeffrey Haddow

Where: Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St., Palo Alto

When: Through Oct. 14, with shows at 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sundays. A talk-back with the cast is set for Sunday, Oct. 7.

Cost: Tickets are \$13-\$20.

Info: Go to www.dragonproductions.net or call 650-493-2006.

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