

Paul Myrvold's Theatre Notes

October 24, 2015

## “Uncle Vanya” at Antaeus Theatre Company – The Madmen Cast

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Upon experiencing Antaeus Theatre Company's remarkable production of Anton Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya," first with the Vixens cast, then the Mermaids cast and now with the Madmen cast, a selective blending of the two, I find that a direct comparison of the individual performances is of little use. Each cast necessarily has some differences, some major and some minor. One cast is distinctly funnier, the other is more dramatically intense. This is due to the playing of a few performers whose approaches to character differ in nuance and timing. The cumulative effect of the performances is essentially the same. The ennui, boredom, angst and frustrated desires of the characters reveal over time their essential humanity, all of which leads to an explosive climax and an extremely affecting dénouement.



In the Madmen performance of October 23, **Arye Gross** as Vanya (Vixens) was a stew of emotions fueled by his lust for Yelena (**Linda Park** – Mermaids), the educated, beautiful, bored young wife of the old Professor Serebryakov (**Harry Groener** – Vixens). Gross’s Vanya is man in nearly constant motion unable to control his frothy brain, which leads him to spew out his monologues in a seemingly haphazard way, hesitating and pausing to regroup his thoughts. He seems totally self-aware, realizing the absurdity of his passion for Yelena, acknowledging the impossibility of his “love” for her, moaning in regret over his lost past and dreading the future, sure that it will be empty drudgery, painful and bleak.



(<https://paulmyrvoldstheatrenotes.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/mermiaids-e28093-yelena.jpg>)

*Linda Park as Yelena in “Uncle Vanya” at Antaeus Theatre Company through December 6.*

*Photo: Karianne Flaathen*

**Jeffery Nordling** (Mermaids) as Astrov, the over-worked, alcoholic doctor, is consumed by the ceaseless demands of his profession, frustrated in his uphill battle to conserve the dwindling forests of the local district, and scornful of the plethora of “creeps” that surround him.

He, too, falls under the spell of Yelena’s physical charms and presses his case with masculine vigor. Neither he nor Vanya, in their shallowness, seem to care a bit about her mind and intellect. Vanya says to her directly that he doesn’t care for her philosophizing.

Once again, **Dawn Didawick** (Vixens) was a marvel in the small role of Marina, the household nanny. In the subtle use of looks, touches, intonations and gestures, she conveys love and the notion that everything will be all right. She is especially fine in the scene where she calms the hurting, resentful, pouty Professor Serebryakov, stroking and soothing him like a small child, then leading him off to bed.

The original songs by **Marvin Etzioni**, like all good music, become richer and more meaningful with each hearing. As played and sung by mandolinist **Clay Wilcox** (Vixens) and accordionist **John Allee** (Mermaids), songs like the whimsical “I Wish I Was an Apricot” and the simple, profound “My Ultimate Home” deepen the meaning of the play.

At intermission, an audience member wondered about the translation, particularly the term “creep” used by the doctor who maintains that he is “surrounded by creeps” and that he may be a creep himself. One translation uses “silly” and “odd;” “crackpots” was the choice of another. Other than human stupidity as a contributing factor in the degradation of the forests, Astrov says in one translation that, “the climate is ruined.” In another, he says, “...it is spoiled.” **Annie Baker**, in her adaptation, uses the modern term “climate change,” which is apt in communicating Astrov’s passion to a modern audience. In adapting “Uncle Vanya,” Annie Baker, “working with a literal translation by Margarita Shalina and the original Russian text” has done spectacularly well.

During the performance, the phrase, “a ‘Vanya’ for the ages,” sprang up in my mind. A grandiose thought, perhaps, but mine own.

Antaeus Theatre Company’s “Uncle Vanya” runs through December 6. Don’t miss it.



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