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Review Antaeus Company's 'Uncle Vanya' is a sharp execution of midlife drift

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As a child, I couldn't understand why anybody would attend a production of Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya"; surely not even the most pretentious adult would choose to watch gloomy Russians with interchangeable names hurt each other's feelings and complain about having wasted their lives for as many as three hours at a stretch.

But deep into adulthood, at Antaeus Company's latest "Uncle Vanya" last weekend, I had the urge to join the characters onstage, adding my own litany of disappointments to theirs.

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Of all of Chekhov's plays, "Vanya" speaks perhaps most poignantly to midlife crisis: the recognition that age and experience enable us to perceive and deride our own foolishness, but not to stop it. It's a play to grow into.

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Chekhov once wrote of his own dramatic intentions, "All I wanted was to say honestly to people: 'Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!'" He imagined that this recognition was the first step in creating a better, more meaningful future.

But as this "Vanya," sensitively directed by Robin Larsen, suggests, we haven't changed as much in the intervening century as he hoped. Except for their country estate, their samovar and their Slavic patronymics, these characters could be our own family and friends, caught up in passionate grudges, missions and griefs we bemoan but don't understand: One's in love with another one's wife, one works too hard, another drinks excessively and worries about the environment.

Larsen chose a new adaptation by the Pulitzer- and Obie-winning playwright Annie Baker. Baker's dialogue is naturalistic, full of

breaks and stammers, and her colloquial word choices are punchy -- even occasionally jarring, as when Astrov calls himself a “creep” rather than (as he does in some translations) “silly.”

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The performers have a wonderful time with her lines, and their pleasure is infectious. (Like all Antaeus productions, “Uncle Vanya” has two separate, alternating casts of actors. I saw “The Vixens.”)

Two gunshots notwithstanding, nobody dies in the famously anticlimactic plot, in which epigrammatic folktale dualities (beauty versus ugliness, duty versus pleasure) are interwoven with unsparing realism.

An idle, beautiful woman, Yelena (Rebecca Mozo), and a hard-working, plain one, Sonya (Shannon Lee Clair), love the same man, the alcoholic doctor Astrov (Andrew Borba). Neither triumphs; Chekhov portrays them as equally sympathetic, equally pitiable. Sonya's Uncle Vanya (Arye Gross) resents his famous brother-in-law, Serebryakov (Harry Groener), covets Serebryakov's new young wife and frenziedly tries to kill him.

Nothing changes: The glamorous, disruptive visitors depart, leaving Vanya and Sonya with their account books, looking forward only to the rest they'll find in the afterlife.

The tone hovers in a mysterious territory between tragedy and comedy, where laughter is always mixed with tears; Larsen often hits the perfect frequency.

While the quirky songs by Marvin Etzioni, performed by Telegin (Clay Wilcox) and Yefim (John Allee), are enjoyable, they possibly add a distancing quaintness to an otherwise fresh and relatable vision.

“Uncle Vanya,” Antaeus Theater, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. 8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays. Ends Dec. 6. \$30-\$34. (818) 506-1983 or www.antaeus.org. Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes.

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