



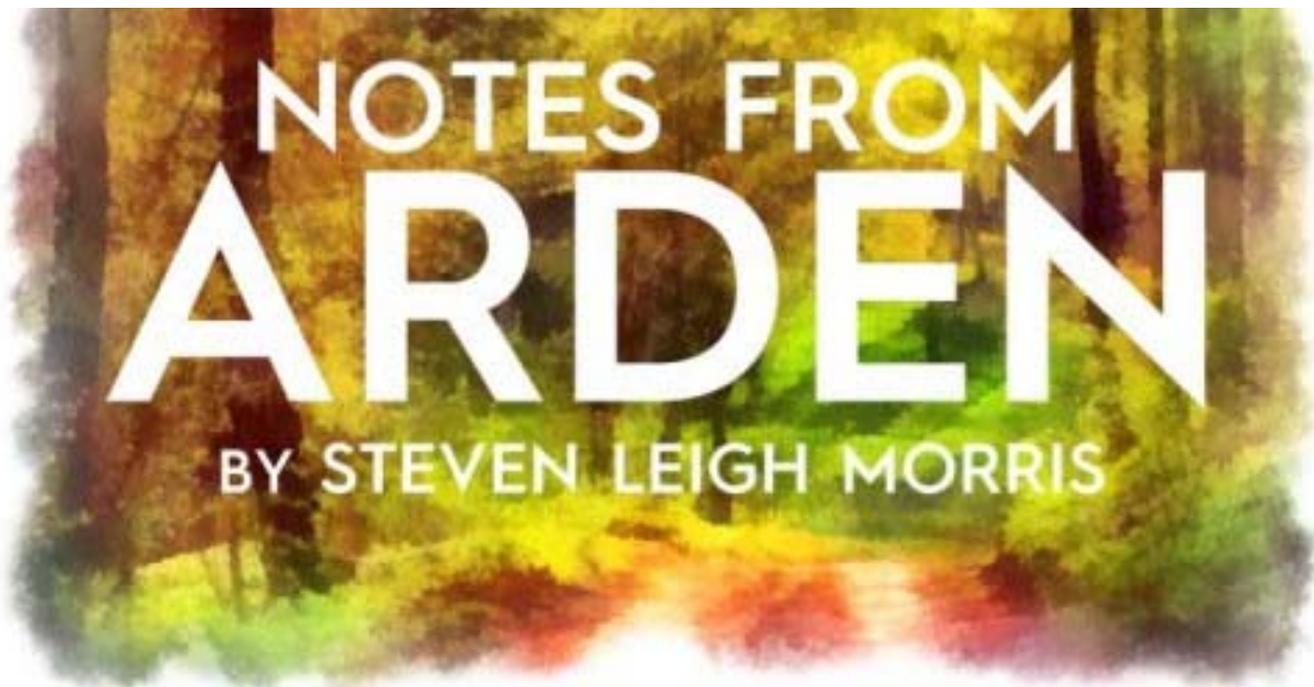
Time Tells

Keith Mills, Anton Chekhov, and Seven Spots on the Sun



Menu

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Keith Mills was an actor. He was other things, too. He ran, or was part of, a soft-water company in the San Gabriel Valley. He was a husband, father and grandfather. But mainly, he was an actor, from Toronto. He lived for decades in Claremont – that’s about 40 miles east of downtown L.A., at the edge of the county, and he worked a bit in Los Angeles, on stage and in TV. Until he didn’t. That never stopped him from being an actor.

Keith’s youngest son, Jim, wrote me that his dad had died earlier this year, and he asked if I’d like to stop by for the memorial, at the family home in Claremont. One point being that during my senior year at Claremont High School, and through much of my undergrad college years at Cal Poly, Pomona and Pomona College, I lived with my family directly across the street from Keith’s family, which included his wife Ann, and their two boys, Mike and Jim. Though Keith had been a key player during those formative years, I hadn’t really kept up with him much in the almost four decades that had passed since I left that street to enter bona-fide adulthood. You might imagine the surreal aspect of returning to a once-familiar neighborhood after all that time.

Album photos reveal that Keith was a slim, bearded guy in his youth. There are stories of how he used to stand on his head and, from that position, recite from “Jabberwocky” while gesticulating with his legs and feet, in place of his arms and hands, which were, I guess, tucked under his head. By the time I knew Keith, he was too rotund for such antics. He was Falstaff reinvented, gregarious and portly, prone to bursts of shrill laughter that could be heard for blocks, and a penchant for argumentation for

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On one occasion, he wandered across the street into our home, pontificating about I don't know what. My mother offered him a seat in the living room and served him tea. My parents both listened to his stories and ruminations until my dad left for work, and eventually my mother also drove away to get on with her business. I recall emerging from my bedroom to find Keith quite happily chatting away, all by himself, with impressive good cheer and animation. Keith needed an audience, but did not require that said audience actually be present. They could be wood sprites, for all he cared. He was an actor.

On one occasion he was chastened – the only occasion I ever saw him emotionally rattled -- by an incident of the night before. The story he told was why he left the acting company of the Colony Studio Theatre, back in the days when it was on Riverside Drive, north of downtown L.A. After a performance, he explained, he was pulling away from the theater in his car when another car pulled alongside his and the driver, from his car, aimed a gun directly at Keith's head. Keith said he floored the gas so that his car screeched down Riverside Drive. He heard gunshots ring out and bullets strike the back of his car. After that, he said, he quit performing in L.A. theater, claiming it was unsafe in such neighborhoods to drive at night.

I heard the story, absorbed it, and questioned whether the problem was really with the neighborhood. "Is it possible," I posited, "that this was because the gunman had seen the play?"

I was waiting for, hoping for, that familiar squeal of laughter, but it never came. Instead, I got the actor's classically trained deadpan glare, and realized, perhaps for the first time, that flippancy has its limits.

And so, about 40 years later, I walked back into that house, into a kind of dream, and was greeted by an amiable, bearded fellow with a high-pitched voice. "Are you Steven Morris?" For a moment, I could have sworn it was Keith, reincarnated as a middle-aged man, but it was actually Keith's eldest son, Michael, whom I remembered from when he was a child, and who then introduced me to *his* two sons, one of them a bearded fellow. Keith was all over the garden, still living through his sons and grandsons, the same vocal timbre, the same gestural idiosyncrasies.

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when Keith's grandsons spoke, in agreement or to clarify some detail, Keith's voice was contained in theirs, in their cadences and pitch, in their eloquence and in the arch linguistic structures they employed.

We are, I suppose, the sum of the people who came before us. This is both humbling and comforting, to imagine that we will be followed in life and in death by shadows of ourselves, through our DNA and/or through the people who remember us, in the stories we tell through the stories they tell. That's all that's left of us, really, but as one afternoon in Claremont revealed, we're not quite as mortal as we might have imagined.



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This is from Annie Baker's adaptation of Anton Chekhov's play, *Uncle Vanya*, which Robin Larsen has directed for a currently running production by The Antaeus Company. It's "partner cast," per this company's methodology. (Baker used Margarita Shalina's literal translation.)

Baker has introduced a couple of new words – "creeps" in place of the oft-used "cranks" or "eccentrics" – as Doctor Astrov (Jeffrey Nordling) opines in Act 1, about the residents of Chekhov's rural outpost. And there's a "goddammit" and a few "sweetie-pie"s thrown in for good measure and, most tellingly, the phrase "climate change" emerges as a colloquial phrase. But for the most part, this is a easy-on-the-ear, contemporized and fluid adaptation, faithful to the original's tenor, and really not so different in tone or ease from David Mamet's adaptation in Louis Malle's 1994 film, *Vanya on 42nd Street* with Wallace Shawn, Jeffrey Pine and Julianne Moore, among yet another superlative cast. Because the Antaeus ensemble is also quite grand.

Is it necessary, once again, to point out the indisputable value of having union actors volunteering in public to perform Chekhov in 99-seat theaters such as this, for audiences' sakes as well as their own, and the folly of forbidding them from doing so unless they're paid what's for most theaters a production-busting minimum wage for rehearsals and performances, on the grounds that they're otherwise being exploited? Because, honestly, who does Chekhov is the commercial arena anymore? Who does Chekhov if not for the sheer love of the literature, and of theater history.

This isn't Chekhov innovated or re-invented, just slightly modernized, as in Malle's film, with costumes (by Jocelyn Hublau Parker) that blur the early 20th and 21st century and accompanied by Morlan Higgins's wistful Telyegin, who wanders the stage playing a mandolin in bluegrass style, and, together with John Allee on accordion, crooning Marvin Etzioni's lyrics such as "You are the salt of the land" and "I'm gonna miss this world when I go."

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Seven Spots (Photo by Ed Krieger)

Like *Vanya*, Martin Zimmerman's *Seven Spots on the Sun* (through November 1 at the Boston Court Performing Arts Center), homes in on a doctor (Jonathan Nichols). In this instance, the doctor questions whether or not to use sudden, inexplicably magical powers of healing in order to save the child of a soldier (Christopher Rivas) responsible for the doctor's unbearable personal grief in a war zone. From Zimmerman's ancient Greek aesthetic temperament, you'd think, as did the classicists, that tragedy derives from trauma, and from the compulsion to make impossible decisions. Zimmerman's doctor dwells on the past and its horrors. Chekhov's, who plants forests as a volunteer avocation (rather like these actors) imagines the future.

Among the reasons that Chekhov was a revolutionary playwright, and not a classicist in the classic

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what Chekhov does, and the magic of that accomplishment flourishes like Astrov's woods in a desert, on the tiny Antaeus stage. You can't see them grow, or die, and yet their growth and death is the point.

That point resides in the slivers of affection between Lynn Milgrim's nanny and Lawrence Pressman's once famous and now isolated hypochondriac professor. He roars like Lear, aware and unaware at the same time that somebody, or something, removed his crown when he wasn't looking.

His gorgeous, young, second wife (Linda Park) mentions that he blames the rest of them for his growing old. "Don't worry," she comforts him with a twist of mockery, "In a few years, I'll be old, too."

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Nordling and McManus in Vanya (Photo by Karianne Flaathen)

Don R. McManus's wiry, bespectacled and pony-tailed Vanya, resembles a dropout from the 1960s who never had the wherewithal to sign up with a corporation and thereby redeem his reputation, as so many did, until "reputation" got re-defined in the new century. Some resisted, while some just complained. This Uncle Vanya belongs to the latter camp. And now he finds himself old.

There are so many plays about aging, and the loss of memory. Few of them have this degree of economy and breadth of perspective. How can something so small feel so large? This isn't a play, it's a prayer.

I was weaned on this play, and on Chekhov in general. Like for many people in the theater, his characters are like family. And to see them re-interpreted so lovingly, wistfully, and by such fine actors

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And this is what The Antaeus Company offers. In a play largely about coping with the prospect of mortality, the troupe gives Chekhov the last laugh.

Uncle Vanya is being performed by The Antaeus Company through Dec. 6. <http://antaeus.org>

Seven Spots on the Sun is being performed at the Boston Court Performing Arts Center through Nov. 1. <http://bostoncourt.com>



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