

Time Tells



John Allee and Morlan Higgins in *Uncle Vanya* (Photo by Karianne Flaathen)

“Those who come 200 years from now, will they say nice things about us?”

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 an 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."

Among the reasons that Chekhov was a revolutionary playwright, and not a classicist in the classic sense, is that the driving force of his plays is not so much trauma as time passing, which is almost invisible, so invisible that when finally recognized, it feels like a dream. How does a play express what can't be seen? How does it say what can't be spoken? How can a drama be centered, even structured, on something as ethereal as the passing of time? Despite all his words and images, this is 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."



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 is a blessing, keeping them and Chekhov alive, despite the crushing march of time.

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>