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## Working Very Hard for Very Little

A new Chekov adaptation that you don't want to miss!

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Oct 27, 2015

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## FROM THIS EPISODE

This is Anthony Byrnes *Opening the Curtain* on LA Theater for KCRW.

The challenge with Chekhov, or frankly any 'classic' playwright, is how do get past the idea of the thing to what's really happening? At its worst, bad Chekhov is all beard stroking and hissing samovars.

The Antaeus Theater Company's production of [Uncle Vanya](#) has both beards and a samovar but happily escapes that Russian otherness to discover an essence that's far more profound.

The strength of the production begins with the beautiful adaptation by playwright Annie Baker. Ms. Baker won the 2014 Pulitzer for her play *The Flick*. Her plays are deceptively simple affairs where nothing much seems to be happening; dialogue that feels almost offhand but somehow becomes

surprisingly moving. Perfect for Chekhov, right?

Ms. Baker has stayed true to the underlying text but smoothed out some of the "otherness." One still travels twenty versts and lives on a country estate but subtly the text feels less distant, the characters a bit more modern. She helps us recognize how much we share with Chekhov. Dr. Astrov's ecological arguments about the decimation of his native forest have always been there . . . but here they seem more frighteningly topical. Such is the invisible alchemy of a good adaptation.

It comes as no surprise to theater folks, how indebted we are to Chekhov for so many of our modern family dramas. With this production, it's easier to trace that lineage back. Through Baker's translation and director Robin Larsen's insightful direction -- the caricatures of the drunk country doctor and hapless Vanya give way to something more visceral. A doctor who drinks vodka becomes less comic device and more a painful, relatable truth.

Antaeus collective acting chops are on full display perhaps most tellingly in the minor roles. It's a small detail, but I can't ever remember seeing Vanya's mother included in a production. She's an easy cut, she has only a couple of lines and is far from critical to the plot. Yet when it comes to Vanya's climatic breakdown, there's something terribly powerful about having his mother there - doing nothing. Chekhov tells us so much by what's not there, what's not said -- and it's all too easy for that to get lost.

Given the current economics of the American theater, you're not likely to see Vanya's mother on stage anywhere else. Or frankly actors quite this good in a space that's this small. If you're wondering what all this hubbub is about 99-seat theater and what's really at stake, Antaeus' *Uncle Vanya* is as good an argument as any. Like Vanya and Sonya, Antaeus is working very hard for very little in the shadow of an empty celebrity.

Perhaps I'm too much of a dreamer but I long to see this production in rep with last year's adaptation of *The Seagull* -- *Stupid Fucking Bird* on stage at the Kirk Douglas or the Geffen.

Till that dream comes true, don't miss this one.

*Uncle Vanya* plays at the Antaeus Theater Company in North Hollywood through December 6.

This is Anthony Byrnes *Opening the Curtain* on LA Theater for KCRW.

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FOR THE WEB: running time 2 hours and 30 minutes with an intermission

Arye Gross and Shannon Lee Clair in *Uncle Vanya* (Karianne Flaathen)



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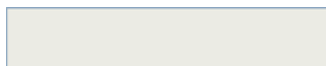
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