

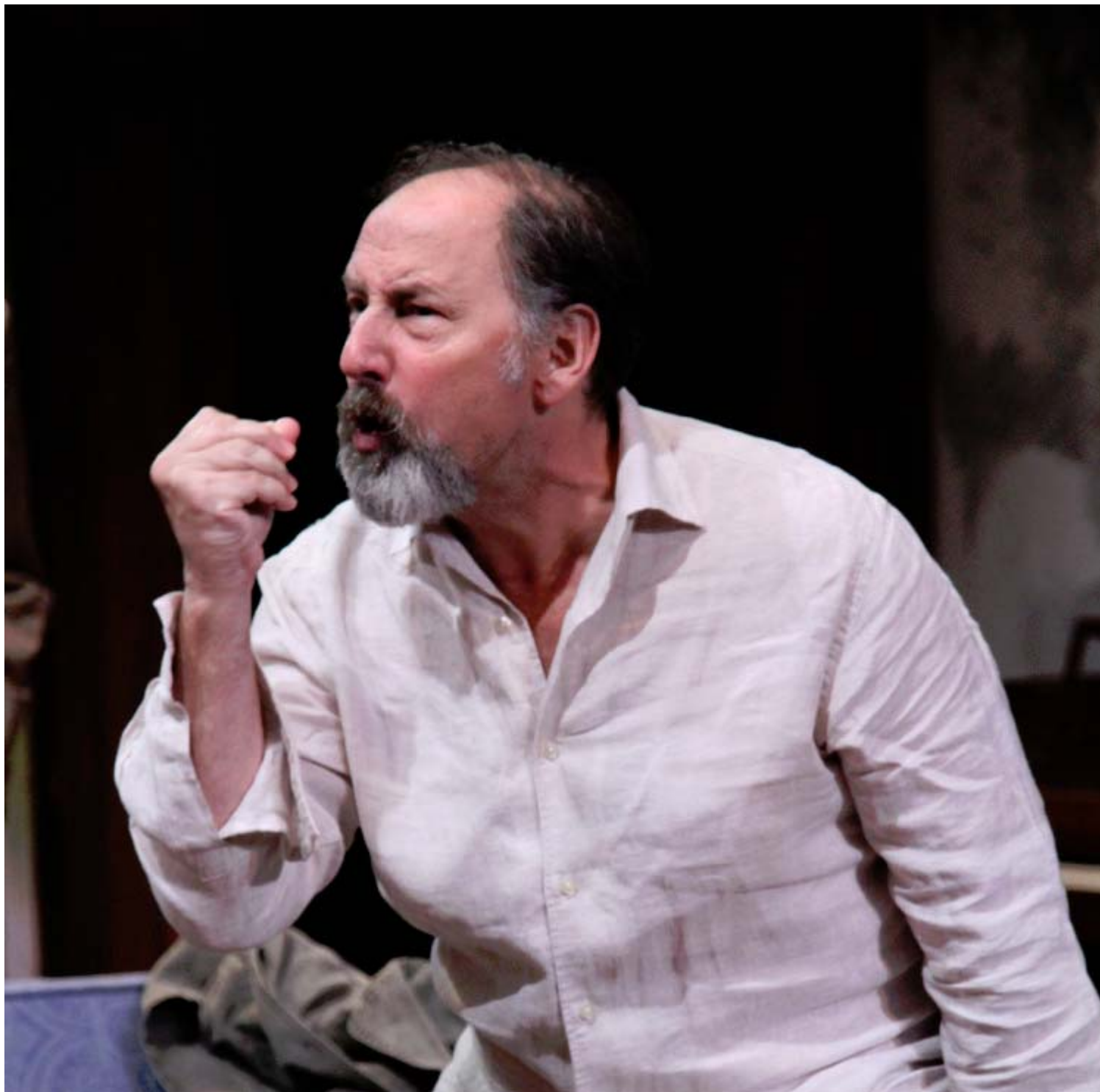
Paul Myrvold's Theatre Notes

October 16, 2015 October 16, 2015

“Uncle Vanya” at Antaeus Theatre Company – Vixen Cast

Anton Chekhov called his plays comedies and so they are. On the page it might not be obvious, but on stage in the hands the very best players, the boredom, ennui and angst of the characters becomes absurd and deliciously, giddily funny. And this is just the case in Antaeus Theatre Company’s achingly brilliant production of “Uncle Vanya.” This is not to say that the audience doesn’t feel for the plights of the characters. Their situations are in many ways pitiable. Shattered dreams, unrequited loves, the feeling of lives wasted, the inability to actually do something about their situations is simultaneously sad and funny, the living embodiment of the Janus-faced conundrum of life, tragic and comic in the same moment.

On an agricultural estate in the Russian hinterland, life has been upended with the arrival of the noted, retired Professor Serebryakov (**Harry Groener**) and his beautiful, much younger wife, Yelena (**Rebecca Mozo**). Ivan Voinitsky (**Arye Gross**), the Uncle Vanya of the title, and Sonya (**Shannon Lee Clair**), his niece, the daughter of the professor by his first wife, Vanya’s sister, have been operating the estate to benefit the professor for years. The great man, in poor health and crotchety, has ruined the order of the estate with his ceaseless demands. Yelena, in the grip of boredom, is indolent, but her beauty has sparked feelings of love in Vanya and, eventually, in the neighborhood’s doctor, Astrov (**Andrew Borba**), much to the chagrin of Sonya, who has deep feelings for the doctor. The characters play out their obsessive boredom, fueled, in the case of Vanya and Astrov, by the copious consumption of vodka.



(https://paulmyrvoldstheatre.com/files.wordpress.com/2015/10/uncle-vanya_vixens_4.jpg)

Arye Gross in “Uncle Vanya” at Antaeus Theatre Company through December 6.

Photo: Karianne Flaathen



(https://paulmyrvoldstheatre.com/files.wordpress.com/2015/10/uncle-vanya_vixens_5.jpg)

Rebecca Mozo in “Uncle Vanya” at Antaeus Theatre Company through December 6.

Photo: Karianne Flaathen

As the title character, Mr. Gross is a whirlwind of passion and regret, pacing the stage relentlessly, his words delivered with an abject spontaneity. Andrew Borba’s Astrov, a vigorous outdoorsman and fervent ecologist, is no less passionate in his love of nature and his devotion to restoring the plundered forests of the district. Both men bemoan the passing of years and the feeling that the best of life is behind them and the future bleak. Through no fault or design of her own, the men fall under the spell of Yelena’s languid beauty, made irresistible by the alluring Rebecca Mozo. With an old, sick, demanding husband, she is an intelligent, educated woman who has nothing to do but languish in her boredom and respond to her husband’s demands. As played by Mr. Groener, Professor Serebryakov is a petulant, self-ab-

sorbed, charismatic tyrant.

The noblest, most sympathetic character in the play is Vanya’s niece, Sonya, her importance honored by Chekhov in the title. Vanya is no one’s uncle but hers. Shannon Lee Clair aches poignantly in her hopeless desire for Astrof. Her strength and resolution in the play’s final scene with her Uncle Vanya is profoundly affecting.



(https://paulmyrvoldstheatre.com/files.wordpress.com/2015/10/uncle-vanya_vixens_3.jpg)

Andrew Borba and Shannon Lee Clair in “Uncle Vanya” at Antaeus Theatre Company through December 6.

Photo: Karianne Flaathen

The Antaeus production has a fine cast with a depth of experience. Reading through the program, every player has major credits, most of them from theatres all over the country. This means that a consummate, Equity professional plays even the smallest roles. As the house-

hold’s nanny, Marina, **Dawn Didawick** is an all-soothing believer in the efficacies of routine, good food, tea and vodka and the belief that all will be better. **Mimi Cozzens**, as Vanya’s mother, Maria, creates a woman at once icy with the staff and sycophantic in the presence of the professor. As family retainers Telegin and Yefim, **Clay Wilcox** and **Paul Baird** have limited stage time, but make a big impact as musicians playing and singing swell original songs composed by **Marvin Etzioni**. Mr. Wilcox, with a mandolin strapped over his shoulder, starts the show, quickly joined in appealing harmony by Mr. Baird playing an accordion as the cast sets the stage. The pleasing duo appears a few times more during the evening.



(https://paulmyrvoldstheatrenotes.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/uncle-vanya_vixens_1.jpg)

Arye Gross and Shannon Lee Clair in “Uncle Vanya” at Antaeus Theatre Company through December 6.

Photo: Karianne Flaathen

The play, with script adapted by **Annie Baker** working with a literal translation by **Margarita Shalina** and the original Russian text, is impeccably directed by **Robin Larsen**. The production boasts a handsome set designed by **Michaehal B. Raidford** with lighting by **Leigh**

Allen. Costumes by **Jocelyn Hublau Parker** are excellent as is the sound design of **Christopher Moscatiello**.

Antaeus Theatre Company is unusual in that the shows are double cast with each cast appearing on alternating dates. The casts are given names derived from the text of the play. I saw the Vixens cast's opening night and will see the Mermaids cast this coming Sunday. However, after opening weekend, the casts of the Thursday and Friday performances are called Madmen and comprised of players from both casts selected, as I understand it, at random. Makes for pretty fresh theatre, I am thinking.

“Uncle Vanya,” an exquisite production of an acknowledge masterpiece, runs through December 6 at Antaeus Theatre Company, 5112 Lankershim, North Hollywood.



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