

Gia On The Move
Curating Culture

Antaeus' Uncle Vanya is a Contemporary Hit

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by Tracey Paleo, Gia On The Move



Rebekah Tripp and Don R. McManus. Photo by Karianne Flaathen

this piece could potentially spark a deliberate “shying away” in a modern observer. The whole *idea* of it is enough to make a person feel chained and definitely not what a “fun-loving” Los Angeles theatre audience might consider a draw. Fortifying oneself pre-show at the bar with a glass of wine would be considerably, in order.

The play portrays the visit of an elderly professor and his glamorous, much younger second wife, Yelena, to the rural estate that supports their urban lifestyle. Two friends, Vanya, brother of the Professor's late first wife, who has long managed the estate, and Astrov, the local Doctor, both fall under

It's Uncle Vanya, right? And I thought, Ok, I'm gonna have to “buckle down”. It's gonna be a long, long, arduously, tiresome ride through emotionally downtrodden and only half understandable mires of text. (oh yea...looking forward to that!) Chekhov is not easy to sit through. It's kind of boring. A common perception. Even a bit frightening to attempt to dissect in performance. Deceptively simple. But so much to deal with. And although actors might desire to do it because of its importance, I can't imagine the process of pulling oneself inside-out or outside-in to penetrate the morose psyches of Vanya's characters, who deal hourly in unhappiness, frustrated hopes and wasted lives, is entirely without exhaustion.

Certainly, one of Russia's most cherished storytellers, had plenty of first hand experience in his young life, from which to draw (His father fled their home in Taganrog in 1876 to escape creditors and left a 16-year-old Chekhov to care for his mother and three younger sisters – later depicted in *The Cherry Orchard*). So the potent *realness* of what happens in

Yelena's spell, while bemoaning the *ennui* of their provincial existence. Sonya, the Professor's daughter by his first wife, who has worked with Vanya to keep the estate going, meanwhile suffers from the awareness of her own lack of beauty and from her unrequited feelings for Dr. Astrov. Matters are brought to a crisis when the Professor announces his intention to sell the estate, Vanya and Sonya's home and *raison d'être*, with a view to investing the proceeds to achieve a higher income for himself and his wife. ([wiki](#))

Chekhov insisted throughout his career that his plays were actually comic satire. However, from inception mounted in 1899, director Constantin Stanislavsky, imposed a certain heaviness on the tragic elements of the plays, asserting that heaviness into the public consciousness. It has stuck ever since. The poet however, describes himself best, in his own words:

"All I wanted was to say honestly to people: 'Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!' The important thing is that people should realize that, for when they do, they will most certainly create another and better life for themselves. I will not live to see it, but I know that it will be quite different, quite unlike our present life."

An incredibly forward thinking commentary, which brings us to the Antaeus Theatre presentation, directed by Robin Larsen, an interpreted, colloquial translation by Annie Baker adapted from a literal translation by Margarita Shalina and the original Russian text.

Culturally relevant and surprisingly fresh for today's audiences, it is truly astounding how, for the first time, sitting through a Chekhov play every moment is fully understood in delivery and tone, thoroughly illuminating Chekhov's intentions and at the same time appealing to contemporary eyes, ears and tempers. In fact, the vernacular is quite extraordinary and effective in its renovation. Gone is the burdening slowness. The story moves faster yet retains all nuance. I actually laughed at the comedy, had empathy for all of the characters, except for the professor, who is truly distasteful in his self-serving selfishness.

It is hands-down the most highly refreshing and anthropologically sensical update of a classical piece that has surfaced in Los Angeles and adapted for stage by an intimate house. This is the show for all people. It retains the reverence for Chekhov's literary and ethnic culture, and surely decodes the text for younger audiences for maybe even the first time, in a way they will be able to "get". Every bit of this production hails an uncomplicated grace upon the story from direction, to actors, to set design and the added musical elements that make this production absolutely special.

MERMAIDS CAST

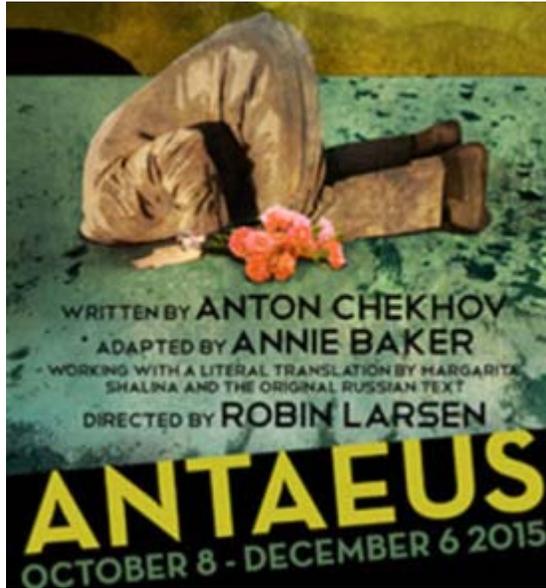


Now Playing until December 6, 2015

Thursdays at 8 p.m.: Oct. 22, 29; Nov. 5, 12, 19; Dec. 3 (dark Nov. 26)

Fridays at 8 p.m.: Oct. 23, 30; Nov. 6, 13, 20, 27; Dec. 4

Saturdays at 2 p.m.: Oct. 24, 31; Nov. 7, 14, 21, 28; Dec. 5 (no 2 p.m. perf. on Oct. 10 or 17)



Saturdays

at **8 p.m.**: Oct. 24, 31; Nov. 7, 14, 21, 28; Dec. 5

Sundays at 2 p.m.: Oct. 11 25; Nov. 1, 8, 15, 22, 29; Dec. 6

Written by **Anton Chekhov**

Adapted by **Annie Baker** working with a literal translation by **Margarita Shalina** and the original Russian text

Directed by **Robin Larsen**

Starring **John Allee, Paul Baird, Andrew Borba, Anne Gee Byrd, Shannon Lee Clair, Mimi Cozzens, Dawn Didawick, Harry Groener, Arye Gross, Morlan Higgins, Don R. McManus, Lynn Milgrim, Rebecca Mozo, Jeffrey Nordling, Linda Park, Lawrence Pressman, Rebekah Tripp, Clay Wilcox**

ANTAEUS THEATER

5112 Lankershim Blvd.

North Hollywood CA, 91601
(1½ blocks south of Magnolia)

PARKING:

\$8 in the lot at 5125 Lankershim Blvd. (west side of the street), just south of Magnolia.

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