

# A Fabulous Chekov Feast

BY DAVE DEPINO

Everyone thinks of Anton Chekhov as a playwright of dark, turn of the century, Russian tragedies and social dramas, but he was quite the comedy writer. Early in his career, he penned several successful one-act pieces in his favorite genres, those of "vaudevilles" and French farces. Even some of his classic, full-length plays,

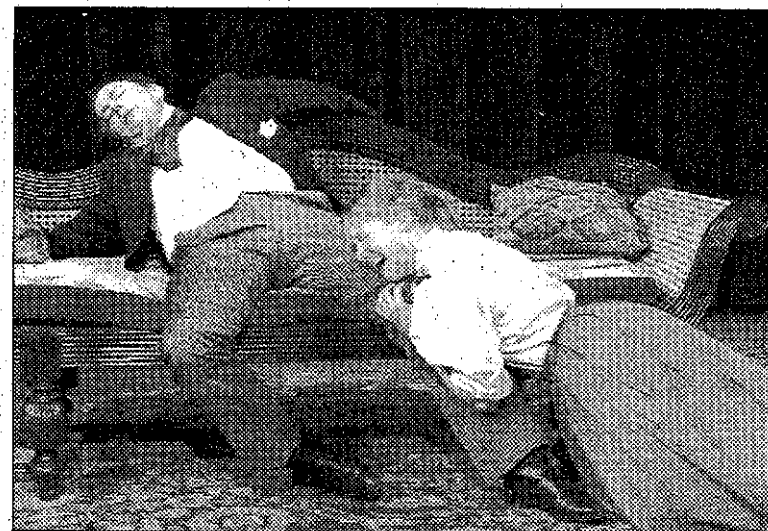
"The Seagull" for instance, is finally being presented as the comedy it was intended to be. But not all his work was aimed at comedy, and even his comedies contain different amounts of social darkness, as he reasons in a poem about his work, "All I wanted was to say honestly to people: 'Have a look at

yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!' The important thing is that people should realize that when they do, they will most certainly create another and better life for themselves." Finding most of his success at the Moscow Art Theatre, the comedy/drama identity of his intentions often caused differences with the theatre's director, Constantin Stanislavsky, who opted for the dark while Chekhov preferred the light.

The outstanding Antaeus Company, in its new digs at the New Place Theatre Center, presents an evening of four seldom-produced, one act plays under the umbrella title of "Chekhov x 4." These plays are presented in their world premiere translations by company members Nicholas Saunders and Frank

Dwyer. This quartet of short pieces stands as a perfect example of the closeness of comedy and drama in Chekhov's work. To make the production even tastier, Antaeus utilizes the talents of four award-winning directors, who each take one of the plays and interpret it with his/her own vision. In the first three offerings one might be a bit surprised by the laugh-out-loud hilarity and farcical situations presented by an author we normally think of as quite serious, but in the final piece, "Swan Song," directed by Andy Robinson, drama blares loudly and the comedy takes its usual back seat as emotional relief. Taking the last first, "Swan Song" is a somewhat surreal self-evaluation of an aging man's career on the stage; his life lived on the stage staring out into the darkness. Dakin Matthews is dynamic as the classical thespian questioning what a life's dedication is all about. (Lawrence Pressman is also amazing, playing only Sunday matinees during the exention of this production.) Arye Gross offers solid support.

The show's opener, "The Proposal," directed by Sabin Epstein, is by far the funniest, with wonderfully bizarre performances by Gross as a suitor of his neighbor's (Martin Ferrero) daughter (Angela Goethals). As in all four plays presented here, characters experience major, imagined, emotional or physical, humorous agonies when challenged. The suitor, treading very near coronary, lung and limb destruction, and the flus-



Four one-act Chekov plays comprise the delightful "Chekov x 4."

tering lady get into a battle about who owns a 15 acre piece of land separating the two properties, forgetting that the land will all be one if nuptials commence.

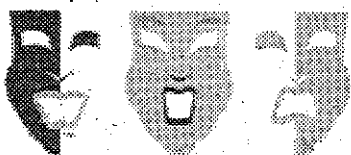
The second, "The Anniversary," directed by Michael Michetti, has a cast of seven zanies buzzing around a bank's celebration of its anniversary. Trying to keep his sanity, while events magnify and stack up against him in this fast moving farce, is a bank official played by a wonderfully frazzled JD Cullum. His wife (Laura Russell alternating with Tamara Krinskyh) and a loony widow lady (Anne Gee Byrd) are incessantly annoying. Alternating in several roles are Tony Amendola, John Apicella, Ralph Drischell, Philip Proctor, Nick Cagle and Michael Kirby.

Number three, "The Bear,"

directed by Stephanie Shroyer is probably one of Chekhov's better-known, smaller works. Here, a bear of a man, Grigory (Harry Groener) comes to collect a dept from a man's widow, Yelena (Dawn Didawick). Their encounter goes from nice to nasty and back to nice, then nasty and so on. There are guns and a planned duel between the two, but they decide to settle in other ways. Drischell (alternating with Philip Proctor) is wonderful as the dutiful servant, Luka.

"Chekhov x 4" is four times the enjoyment, and an evening well spent in the theatre.

The Antaeus Company at the New Place Theater Center, 4860 Vineland Ave., North Hollywood; Saturday at 8:00pm, Sunday at 2:00pm; through May 23; \$20; (818)506-5436.



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