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CRITIC'S CHOICE



ELAINA MCBROOM

THE ENTIRE COMPANY: *Members of the Antaeus Company strike a Chekhovian pose.*

REVIEW

A prescription for pleasure

Laughter and loss share the stage in 'Chekhov x 4,' a quartet of early works by the doctor turned playwright.

By **ROB KENDT**
Special to The Times

Is this a theater or a sick ward? Characters in "Chekhov x 4" — four early one-acts, presented on the Antaeus Company's cozy new North Hollywood stage — can't go long without complaining of gout, palpitations, foggy vision or assorted aches and pains.

In Chekhov, of course, these are never purely physical maladies but symptoms of some deeper distress. In "The Proposal," a high-strung suitor (Arye Gross) asks for the hand of a neighbor's daughter (Angela Goethals) and loses feeling in a leg. In "The Bear," a fearsome creditor (Harry Groener) is pushed to his wit's end — not a

long journey, in his case — by a stubborn, self-dramatizing widow (Dawn Didawick), before both recognize that they share more than the urge to kill each other.

Using droll, pitch-perfect new translations by Nicholas Saunders and Frank Dwyer, and employing an excellent singer-guitarist (Eugen Alper) to cover scene changes with plangent Russian folk tunes, "Chekhov x 4" seamlessly blends the work of four directors (Sabin Epstein, Michael Michetti, Stephanie Shroyer and Andrew J. Robinson) and a dozen actors into a program marked as much by Chekhovian delicacy as farcical relish; at times it's like cartoon music played by a string quartet.

One dramatic sketch, "Swan Song" — in which an aging actor (Lawrence Pressman) rages bitterly at the diminishing returns of an ephemeral art — is a tough sell after three acts of disruptive hilarity. But under Robinson's direction, it makes an elegiac, involving epilogue — a kind of curtain-dropper.

It's also a helpful clue to the evening's richness. While these youthful sketches are practically vaudeville routines — an affinity Neil Simon exploited in his Chekhov anthology "The Good Doctor" — they benefit immeasurably from a company, like Antaeus, as versed in gnarly depths as glittering surfaces. A good doctor himself, Chekhov knew that among human ailments a cleft heart and a throbbing funny bone aren't all that far apart.

'Chekhov x 4'

Where: Antaeus Company at New Place Theatre Center, 4900 Vineland Ave., North Hollywood

When: Thursdays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 7 p.m.

Ends: March 21

Price: \$20

Contact: (818) 506-5436

Running time: 2 hours, 40 minutes