

Chekhov X4

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Didiwick, Lawrence, Groener

Photo by Elaina McBroom

By Dave DePino

Besides the darker side of Anton Chekhov's writing -- the side that usually presents the dreary, angst-filled version of the painfully churning social aspects of life in turn of the century Russia -- there was also a very bright and comical side to the playwright. As a matter of fact, comedy -- "vaudevilles" and French farces -- was the genre of his choice. Even some of his so called "heavier" works were supposed to be comedies, but the director of the famous Moscow Art Theatre, one Constantin Stanislavsky to be specific, preferred to give the work a darker tone. I don't suppose anyone quibbled with Stanislavsky even back then. No harm, though, as fame was won for both, a win-win. And if the public needed a whiff of reality, then he gave it to them on the stage. He wrote, "All I wanted was to say honestly to people:

"Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!" hoping that then, perhaps, they would do something to make things better.

Under the umbrella title of *Chekhov x 4*, the Antaeus Theatre Company presents an evening of some of the writer's lesser known works: four one act plays. As an added attraction, they call on the talents of four award-winning directors and have them each take one play and interpret it as they will. Another plus is the crisp adaptation, which is celebrating its world premiere and earning much attention for Antaeus Company scribes Nicholas Saunders and Frank Dwyer. The writing duo shows Chekhov's flair for zany humor without losing the familiar flavor that is the author's alone.

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 looms large and loud, 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 that would be his audience. Dakin Matthews is dynamic as the classical thespian questioning what a life's dedication is all about. Arye Gross offers solid support.

"The Proposal" is the curtain raiser and is hilarious in all respects. This is by far Chekhov's funniest, and director Sabin Epstein gets some wonderfully weird and wacky -- in the classical sense -- performances from his players, especially 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 flustering 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.

Next up is "The Anniversary," directed by Michael Michetti. A cast of seven scrambling zanies, appearing a much larger group as they come in and out of doors, is busy buzzing around a bank. The day is to celebrate the bank's anniversary. Trying to keep his sanity while his business and personal worlds are being shaken around him, a bank official juggles people, money, figures, and lawsuits in this fast moving farce. JD Cullum is terrific as he tries to hold it all together. His wife (Laura Russell, alternating with Tamara Krinskyh) and a strange widow lady (Anne Gee Byrd) seem to be heading the team who is trying to drive him nuts. Alternating in several roles are Tony Amendola, John Apicella, Ralph Drischell, Philip Proctor, Nick Cagle and Michael Kirby.

Stephanie Shroyer directed the third, "The Bear." Here, a man, Grigory (Harry Groener), comes to collect a debt from a widow, Yelena (Dawn Didawick). The tenor of their encounter goes from bad to worse to dueling pistols to a bit better to -- well you'll see. Drischell (alternating with Philip Proctor) is wonderful as the dutiful servant, Luka.

Chekhov x 4 is a wonderful new look at the classic playwright and an evening well spent in the theatre.

The Antaeus Company is now performing in its new home at the New Place Theater Center, 4860 Vineland Ave., in North Hollywood; Friday and Saturday at 8:00pm; Sunday at 2 & 7:00pm; through May 16; \$20; (818) 506-5436.