

Anton's all-stars

A talented ensemble does Chekhov the right way in an evening of one-act plays

CHEKHOV X 4 ★★★1/2

Where: NewPlace Theatre Center, 4916 Vineland Ave., North Hollywood.

When: 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, 7 p.m. Sunday; through March 21.

Tickets: \$20. Call (818) 506-5436.

In a nutshell: If you knew Chekhov like these guys knew Chekhov.

By **Evan Henerson**
Theater Critic

THEY MAY MAKE IT on to the classics shelf more often than not, but the works of Anton Chekhov are, in many ways, as much an acquired taste as chocolate-covered rattlesnake. Anyone who has sat through a truly awful production of,

REVIEW

oh, name your comic misery of choice, will know whereof I speak.

The Antaeus Company, the Valley's venerable classical theater company, has long since made it its business to serve less easily digestible meals. The company celebrates the opening of its permanent new NoHo home with a production of four Chekhov

one-acts that they've labeled "Chekhov X 4."

And if you've got a Chekhov-favoring strand of DNA in any of your chromosomes, the Antaeus quadruple feat is for you. If you're on the bubble, stay far away from 4916 Vineland. The mannered malaise, the heart palpitations, the genteel despair, will have your flesh crawling, particularly by the evening's endurance-testing final segment.

Overall, it's a rich evening, not least for the unique thrill of seeing performers like Emily Bergl, Arye Gross, JD Cullum, Martin Ferrero and Harry Groener — actors you're just as likely to see on screen or at much larger houses. Witness also the skill with which directors Michael Michetti, Stephanie Shroyer, Sabin Epstein and Andy Robinson have crafted their tales and the care with which overseeing production supervisor Jeanie Hackett has assembled the collection.

Before a word is spoken, the entire cast comes on stage, converges around a table to re-create a portrait of Chekhov reading "The Seagull" aloud. The actors get into position, fire off the quickest of glances to the audience before the lights black out. Then Epstein's rendition of "The

Proposal" gets under way, and we're off to the races.

Yes, the scenario's a little demented. A hypochondriacal land owner (played by Arye Gross) comes to ask for the hand of his neighbor's daughter (Emily Bergl) only to have the entire deal nearly go sour once the couple-to-be starts arguing about property rights and who owns the better hunting dog. "Your Sniff," Natalya primly informs her suitor, "is no Snuff."

"The Proposal" highlights the polish of Nicholas Saunders and Frank Dwyer's contemporary new translations. Bergl's proud but contrary Natalya melts away in anguish when she discovers she might have driven away her best chance at a husband. Gross' Lomov really looks like he might expire on his neighbor's couch and Martin Ferrero is superb as Natalya's father Stepan, torn between principles and the proposition of finally finding a son-in-law.

With "The Anniversary," director Michael Michetti has found a way — like Epstein before him — to conclude his one-act with a burst of darkly comic anarchy. Before we get the blowup, we see disgruntled and overworked bank clerk Kuzma Nicolayevich Khirin



Dawn Didawick, Jeremy Lawrence, center, and Harry Groener star in "The Bear," one of four one-act plays by Anton Chekhov playing at the Antaeus Company's new space in North Hollywood.

(John Apicella) seethe as he tries to get work done in time for his boss Andrei Andreyevich's (JD Cullum) company party. Making Kuzma's job even more Atlas-ian are the respective entrances of Andrei's chattering wife, Tatyana (Tamara Krinsky), and a customer (Anne Gee Byrd) with an insoluble problem.

Kuzma's no great lover of the "fairer sex" anyway and these two ladies won't leave the office. The explosion and its consequences are no less effective for their predictability. "The Anniversary" is a squirmer, but a sizzling one.

In "The Bear," Chekhov examines another kind of opposite sex warfare. Estate owner Yelena Ivanovna Popova (Dawn Didawick) is still deep in mourning for her lout of a husband when she is visited by Grigory Smirnov (Harry Groener), her husband's oat supplier. Yelena says she will

pay the 1,200-ruble debt in a day or two. Grigory needs it now, and he won't take no for an answer. A peculiar little love story this turns out to be, and both Groener and Didawick — neither performer a shrinking violet — play their roles with gusto.

Though he has Gross to play off, Lawrence Pressman is basically delivering a monologue in segment 4: "Swan Song" directed by Andy Robinson. Pressman's convincing enough as a dissolute gasbag of a thespian, but "Swan Song" is the slowest and least dynamic of the quartet. Placed, as it is, at the evening's conclusion, it's not the easiest of sits.

Eugene Alper adds more vibrancy to the evening as a strolling singer. Chekhov would have felt right at home. In more ways than one.