Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Baker's Vanya After Chekhov's Heart

Sylvie · Wednesday, November 4th, 2015

One of the most impressive things about the production of *Uncle Vanya* at Antaeus Theatre Company is the script. Not just the Chekhov, but the lively Annie Baker adaptation created from a literal translation by Margarita Shalina.

It's notable on several levels. Baker's English idiom feels more spontaneous than most translations; it seems to sharpen Chekhov's humor (he insisted his plays were comedies) and it makes the flow of the action *feel* swifter, even if the production still clocks in at a little over two hours.

Most surprising is that while the drama is all about angst and — especially — the boredom of midlife crises in the middle of a somnolent Russian countryside, we sense the ridiculousness of all the human agitation within it, instead of being bored right along with the boredom that's lived in the play.

No small feat. So Baker, a bright young newcomer to the playwriting ranks, earns her due. But this Antaeus production also is alive and well thanks to talented performers who manage to be almost entirely engaging. Not having *read* the Baker adaptation, I'm not sure if the decision to keep the period loose, the costumes of an indefinite time and place, and adding American folk songs to Russian samovars and horse-drawn carriages was Baker's idea or that of director Robin Larsen. The point is, it works well.

As usual at Antaeus, the roles are all double or, as they call it, "partner" cast. The team I saw, dubbed The Mermaids, did a splendid job of keeping the *ennui* active and of outing the humor without sacrificing or diminishing credibility. The characters fill the long days and longer nights at this tsarist-era *dacha* with rue, indecision, yearning and humiliation — elements that, at least until the tamped down final scene or two, inspire more of the right kind of laughter than tears. It's a fine balancing act, but very well handled by Larsen's responsive staging.

Lawrence Pressman as the pompous professor Serebryakov in *Uncle Vanya*

Don R. McManus is a vital, almost flamboyant Vanya, chafing with repressed energy, so that when his anger at the mooching professor he has been supporting for years explodes (Lawrence Pressman is a suitably pompous and imperturbable Serebryakov), it exceeds expectation, adding to the real storm that is raging outside. Linda Park's Yelena, the professor's young second wife, caught between the two worlds of Moscow and the countryside, has the same trouble everyone

seems to have dealing with the laconic contradictions of the role — that of a weak, desultory if attractive woman, trapped in an idle, unrewarding life. A little more chemistry between her and the pining Dr. Astrov (Jeffrey Nording) would have added a bit of needed spice to those events.

l=r, Jeffrey Nording and Don R. McManus in *Uncle Vanya*.

Nording is smart and sexy as the doctor and the perfect foil for McManus' vigorous Vanya. The two men are matched in temperament, sarcasm and volatility, which jazzes up the sparks that fly between them. It makes it easy to see why Rebekah Tripp's plain Sonya is so tormented by her unrequited love for Astrov, while her timidity, drab choice of clothes and boyish haircut do nothing to promote her case.

On the periphery, Lynn Milgrim is a sweetly modulated old nurse as Marina and Anne Gee Byrd as Maria, Vanya's mother and Sonya's grandmother, is barely seen. But it is a testament to the company's philosophy of collaboration and solidarity that all actors appear in all parts, great or small.

The musical interludes that bridge scene changes and seamlessly include American folk songs that are closer to Kentucky than Krakov, are nicely rendered by Morlan Higgins and Paul Baird. All of the actors also serve as stagehands, rearranging furniture to alter locales, adding simplicity to the staging.

Rebekah Tripp and Don R. McManus in a tense moment in *Uncle Vanya*

Over the years, opinions and judgments — especially in the West — have varied greatly about this play that almost everyone really likes but cannot quite seem to define. Some think it's a tragedy, others a parody, still others a sardonic melodrama. And yet lines such as Vanya's comment on the fine, warm day, "a fine day to hang oneself," or his remark about "feeling sorry for the paper" on which the despised Serebryakov deposits his writings, make this adaptation a clearer comedy, almost a burlesque of human toil and existence. After all, Vanya tries to shoot the professor twice and misses both times. What, in the larger cosmic sense, can be more ludicrous and farcical and humiliating than that?

Top image: l-r, John Allee and Morlan Higgins in Uncle Vanya.

Photos by Karianne Flaathen.

WHAT: *Uncle Vanya*

WHERE: Antaeus Theatre Company, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood, CA 91601.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays 2 & 8pm; Sundays 2pm. Ends December 6. Call theatre for scheduled team performances.

HOW: Tickets $30-$34 available at www.antaeus.org or 818.506.1983.

… AND A HOME MORE SWEET THAN SAFE

On another stage, in far-away Venice — not Italy, but California, which is far enough — a delicious 75 minutes may be spent in the company of one Dallas Burrows, alias Orson Bean, alias simply O, who invites us into his cockeyed world. It's all magic tricks, terrible jokes, hellish tales of childhood trauma sweetly told, while Bean inimitably offers all of the good and some of the bad with such *bonhomie*, such a wickedly gentle demeanor, that it's impossible to emerge with anything but a glow and a silly smile on one's face.

The one and only Orson Bean in *Safe at Home*.

Safe at Home is the title of Bean's one-man confessional (it's also the title of his memoir of the same name on which the show is based), which is a bit mysterious for a performance that presents all the right reasons for *leaving* home, yet referring perhaps to the happy one created 20 years ago that he continues to enjoy with his second wife, Alley Mills. (When Bean first proposed to her, the 22-year difference in their ages gave Alley more than momentary pause; an assist from Dracula reinforced Bean's argument — persuasively.)

So the title is unimportant, but the monologue, nicely timed and calibrated by director Guillermo Cienfuegos, is a large and pleasant surprise. Also bittersweet: the tale of a boy growing up with a father who gave away the dog to animal services, then left home at a certain point never to return, plus leaving behind a mother who couldn't quite handle any of it.

It is a show rife with humor, often based in dark events and interrupted by the story of a fire walk that changed Bean's life, some prestidigitation, a little standup and the sharing of jokes that serve to deflect some of that life's more painful moments. It seems as if humor and comedy burrowed their way into Bean's consciousness as a way to diffuse the unbearable act of living — and isn't that the standard tale behind the work of so many comedians?

But don't misunderstand. The positive here far outweighs the negative. This, as Bean is happy to tell you, is a story of gratitude for a life that, in the end, has been very well lived. Any man who can walk on stage and say, "You may remember me; I was on screen under the name of Irene Dunne," or whose reaction, when he's told he looks "20 years younger" is a perplexed "…67…?" is entirely incapable of inflicting harm.

Bean is the improbable product of that highly combustible mix — a Jewish mother and a Catholic father — whose Irish grandfather "*poured* the shot that was heard around the world." This is the same grandfather, he tells us, who "died in his sleep, not screaming like the passengers in his car."

But enough of relating much more of this stuff. You really need to discover it from the man himself.

Treat yourself. You won't regret it.

Top image: The one and only Orson Bean.

Photo by Vitor Martins.

WHAT: *Safe at Home, An Evening With Orson Bean*

WHERE: Pacific Resident Theatre, 703 åVenice Blvd., Venice, CA 90015.

WHEN: Thursdays-Saturdays, 8pm, Sundays 3pm. Ends Nov. 29.

HOW: Tickets $25-$30, available at www.pacificresidenttheatre.com or at 310.822.8392.

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