

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Outsider Status: Rolling Stone, Moscow Moscow

David Sheward · Wednesday, July 24th, 2019

The Rolling Stone does not refer to the iconic American rock music journal, but to a very different publication of the same name. In 2010, the newspaper, based in Kampala, Uganda, began a series of sensational articles printing pictures, names and addresses of individuals known to be or accused of being gay. The African country's repressive laws against homosexuality and intense public homophobia led to acts of violence and harassment against those depicted. In his new play, now at Lincoln Center's Off-Broadway Mitzi Newhouse Theater, Chris Urch takes this tragic factual material and fashions a moving, if somewhat melodramatic and conventional drama.



Adenike Thomas and Ato Blankson-Wood in *The Rolling Stone*.

Credit: Jeremy Daniel

Urch creates believable characters, played with sensitivity by a well-tuned cast and directed with nuance by Saheem Ali. Dembe (appealing Ato Blankson-Wood) is a sweet, closeted gay young man about to take his exams to study abroad as is his devoted sister Wummie (the intense and unflinching Latoya Edwards). He is engaged in a secret affair with Sam (tender and moving Robert Gilbert), an Irishman with a Ugandan mother, working as a doctor. Dembe must choose between being honest to himself and loyalty to his family when his brother Joe (fiery James Udom) is elevated to pastorship of his financially strapped church and prepares to preach a virulently antigay sermon to drum up funds.



Ato Blankson-Wood and Robert Gilbert in *The Rolling Stone*.

Credit: Jeremy Daniel

Also in the mix is the pious neighbor Mama (fearsome Myra Lucretia Taylor) who is pushing her daughter Naome (eloquently silent Adenike Thomas), stuck mute for unknown reasons, on Dembe and advocating for Joe's harsh denunciation of the LGBT community. The emotions and issues are real and feelingly depicted, but the conclusion and the mechanics of the plot feel a trifle forced and artificial. No spoilers here, but at the final curtain, the characters seemed like figures in a melodrama rather than real people facing a genuine crisis and dealing with it believably.

Despite the mawkish ending, *Rolling Stone*'s overall impact is devastating as dreams, loves, and ambitions are crushed by the forces of economic hardship, family ties and unreasoning hatred of the other.

While Urch's divided family sometimes seem like protagonists in a play, the bored and whiny denizens of Halley Feiffer's *Moscow Moscow Moscow Moscow Moscow* are unabashedly depicted as exaggerations of recognizable reality. This lampoon of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* was commissioned for the Williamstown Theater Festival and is now playing MCC's new Off-Broadway Robert W. Wilson theater.



Matthew Jeffers (background), Rebecca Henderson, Tavi Gevinson, and Chris Perfetti in *Moscow Moscow Moscow Moscow Moscow*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

We know right away that we're not in Chekhov's early 20th century Russia when the eldest sister Olga opens the play with a profanity-laced monologue describing how ugly she feels and what a dreary life she leads (she compares every part of her body to feces). Masha and Irina answer her, employing contemporary vernacular like "BFF," "whatevs" and "bee-tee-dubs" (I had to look that last one up, it's a bastardization of "BTW," the social media abbreviation for "by the way"). The modern overlay jokes wear a bit thin after a while, but this *Moscow* times five is still a both a hoot and a insightful commentary on the original.

Like the sharp cartoons drawn by her father Jules in the cherished, defunct *Village Voice*, Feiffer's creations are satirical take-offs on neurotics, yet they maintain a degree of sympathy, evoking hilarious laughter and sighs of pity. As in the original, three sisters spend four acts moaning over being trapped in a provincial backwater, and longing for the Russian capital of their girlhood, romanticized into the answer to all their frustrations.



Tavi Gevinson, Rebecca Henderson, and Chris Perfetti in *Moscow Moscow Moscow Moscos Moscow*. Credit: Joan Marcus

Trip Cullman, Feiffer's frequent collaborating director, skillfully balances outlandish farce with heartbreaking pathos as the playwright manages to riotously parody Chekhov's self-indulgent siblings and their gloomy circle while offering new insight into their depression. I have seen countless productions of this classic, but this was the first time I actually felt sorry for the malicious Natasha, the grasping wife of Andrey, the ineffectual brother of the titular trio, and for the obnoxious Solyony, an unsuccessful suitor to the youngest sister Irina.

The production emphasizes outsider status by casting Masha as a man and Solyony with an actor with dwarfism. A gay subtext is brought to the surface as the sexuality of Masha, the clumsy baron Tusenbach and the insecure Solyony becomes ambiguous.

The game cast manages to combine the raunchy edge of the dialogue with a honest compassion for these desperate dreamers. Rebecca Henderson exposes the fragile heart underneath Olga's venomous wit. Chris Perfetti is both femininely alluring and pulsingly angry as Masha. Tavi Gevinson, an actress I have previously found cold, captures the spoiled yet charming appeal of Irina. As noted, Sas Goldberg and Matthew Jeffers manage to make the usually repellant Natasha and Solyony sympathetic as Ryan Spahn does for Kulygin, Masha's wimpy, show-tune-loving husband. Steven Boyer is a touching Tusenbach, Alfredo Narcisco a complex, sexy Vershinin (Masha's lover), Ray Anthony Thomas a comically tragic Chebutykin (the alcoholic doctor), and Ako and Gene Jones are a pair of full-fleshed-out servants.

Both *Rolling Stone* and *Moscow* offer rounded portraits of outsiders, but from radically different perspectives.

The Rolling Stone: July 15—Aug. 25. Lincoln Center Theater at the Mitzi E. Newhouse, 150 W. 65th St., NYC. Tue 8pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours including intermission. \$92. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

Moscow Moscow Moscow Moscow Moscow: July 18—Aug. 17. MCC Theater at the Robert W. Wilson MCC Theater Space, 511 W. 52nd St., NYC. Mon—Tue 7:30pm, Wed 2:30pm & 7:30pm, Thu—Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2:30 & 7:30pm. Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission. \$64—\$84. (212) 257-9125. www.mcctheater.org.

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