Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

It’s a Spirited F*ng Chekhov Summer

Sylvie · Wednesday, July 30th, 2014

Ridiculous, I know.

There was no planned correlation, no ganging-up, no coordinated effort, no prize-winning contest and no joint commissions offered — nothing but some apparently weirdly coincidental Chekhovian inspiration. And I am hardly the first person to remark that Southern California has seen a remarkable display of very different, mostly scintillating takeoffs on or send-ups of the plays of Anton Chekhov this year. You don’t even have to read them or know him to enjoy these derivations, though a little knowledge of the plays is not a dangerous thing.

It all began with Christopher Durang’s benign ***Vanya and Masha and Sonia and Spike***, a broad mash-up of the general frustrations and unfulfilled desires of its titular characters weathering the comical winter of their varied discontents. That play hit Broadway as such a refreshing surprise that despite its funny, featherweight premise, it picked up the Best Play Tony® Award for 2013. It was promptly pounced on by the usual regional theatre suspects who are perpetually hunting for that can’t-miss, one-set, comic hit, especially one with such a pedigree: Chekhov, Durang and a Tony. Southern Cal saw productions at The Mark Taper Forum and San Diego Old Globe. Another takes shape this fall at The Denver Center Theatre Company…

But it turns out that this was just the beginning of a longer trend. If anyone reading this needs a point of reference, Pacific Resident Theatre in Venice recently opened a more traditional staging of Chekhov’s ***The Seagull***, almost in counterpoint to the recently closed Donald Margulies’ contemporary satire about egos, actors and Arkadina-like mothers and sons that populated his ***The Country House*** at the Geffen Playhouse. It is now headed to a projected run at New York’s Manhattan Theatre Club.

But as a fitting dessert to this Chekhovian feast of sorts, let me encourage you to check out the West Coast premiere of Aaron Posner’s ***Stupid F* Bird***, now on stage at Pasadena’s Theatre @ Boston Court in a co-production by Boston Court and Circle X Theatre Co. Posner (whose touching but very traditional ***My Name Is Asher Lev*** played The Fountain Theatre a couple of months ago) has come up with yet another wildly different “sort of” (his words) accommodation of ***The Seagull***, certainly in form if not entirely in content. Just when you thought there couldn’t be any ways left with which to expand on or satirize this play, here comes the fiercest radicalization of all of them (so far…?) — one that marries the many emotional and comic layers of *Country House* with the addition of a deliciously self-conscious metaphysical edge to the presentational form itself. It leaves you amazed at the scope of the inventiveness Posner manages to apply to his very-

far-from-***Stupid F* Bird.***

Starting with the slapstick premise that “Life sucks and then you die,” the production mocks it gently, digging deeper and wider into its existential conundrum, with all of life’s ironies and overwrought contradictions in *flagrante* view — perhaps to expose that root comedy Chekhov insisted was at the core of his plays?

Michael Michetti has staged this serious fun, taking enlightened liberties with a gentle hand and very strong cast — from Will Bradley’s intense and lovelorn Conrad (“I tried, I failed, I didn’t fail better, I failed *more*.”) to Amy Pietz’s arrogant embrace of his indifferent actress mother, Emma Arkadina.

But I can’t single them out exclusively. There is not a flawed performance in the bunch, which includes Arye Gross as the wise and conflicted Dr. Sorn, a some time narrator and a kind of Jaques, dealing with those smart, sad intuitions of age; Matthew Floyd Miller in a contained performance as the famed author Doyle Trigorin, who mostly keeps silent, adding to the intentional mystique that Zarah Mahler, as the naïve young Nina, finds so alluring. And then there is Adam Silver as the slow-on-the-uptake but innately good Dev Dylan, whose benevolence wins both the day and his beloved Mash (Charlotte Gulezian), who surrenders to Dev when her dogged pursuit of the oblivious Conrad fails. Posner’s daisy-chain effect of Dev loves Mash, who loves Conrad, who loves Nina, who loves Trigorin, who also loves Trigorin but lives with Emma, is lost on absolutely no one.

If Stephanie Kerley Schwartz’s set design is simple to the point of utilitarian, Sean Cawelti’s projections on the back wall impress and tantalize. But it is Posner’s play and Michetti’s staging of it that remind us that the theatre’s golden rule is that there is no golden rule. Anything goes, sometimes beautifully.

Stupid F* Bird

Tickets: (626) 683-6883 or https://web.ovationtix.com/trs/pr/935171

The Theatre @ Boston Court • 70 N. Mentor Ave., Pasadena, CA 91106 Ends August 10

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And what can one say about ***Buyer & Cellar*** at the Mark Taper Forum?

It’s puff pastry performed by an engaging and energetic young man some of you will recognize from his performance as Marc St. James on television’s *Ugly Betty*. But Michael Urie is not just another pretty TV face trying his hand at theatre. He has solid theatrical credentials and awards with which to back them up. ***Buyer & Cellar*** was written by Jonathan Tolins, whose ***Twilight of the Golds*** at the Pasadena Playhouse I remember with fondness. But this entirely imaginary one-person exercise that supposedly takes place in the basement fake-mall of Barbra Streisand’s Malibu mansion (Streisand had nothing to do with the production) is a seriously overextended bit of stand-up comedy—a sort of inside joke for lovers or admirers of Streisand, or of Michael Urie,

who plays the fictional role of a young gay man employed to “run” it. Urie, who can be ingratiating, works entirely too hard at… being ingratiating. Everything takes off from there, sometimes at breakneck speed, up or down hill, depending on your level of interest in such fare.

You can go along for the ride and enjoy its brushing-up-to-celebs trivia with the proliferation of tics, shrugs and winks Urie delivers. The outbursts of laughter at the opening performance would indicate there were plenty fans in the audience ready for a lovefest, but when all is said and done, there is not much of a *there* there. Not even a colorful fake-mall. The entire affair takes place on a box-like white proscenium set by Andrew Boyce. Nothing to distract, apparently, from this non-encounter with La Streisand.

Buyer & Cellar

Tickets (213) 628-2772 or www.CenterTheatreGroup.org, or Center Theatre Group box office at the Ahmanson Theatre.

$25 – $85 (prices subject to change). Ends August 17.

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