

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Three Days, Two Casts, One Comedy

Sylvie · Wednesday, August 1st, 2018

British playwright Patrick Marber's delightful adaptation of Turgenev's *A Month In the Country*, now on stage at Antaeus, is a seductive twist on a lot of familiar Chekhov. Aside from accentuating the irony of the central situations, i.e. boredom in the countryside and its tragicomical consequences, Marber shortened the time frame to *Three Days In the Country* — although for the characters involved, those three days still feel like a month. Or even three.

Referring to this Turgenev play as Chekhovian, is an inside joke. Chekhov's mother gave birth to little Anton when Turgenev was fully 42 years old and an established writer. To be correct, we should talk of Chekhov's plays as being Turgenevian. But that's too hard to pronounce.

Turgenev wrote several plays, although *Three Months In the Country* seems to be the only active survivor. If the mood and humor of *Three Days* feels Chekhovian, it's because on the whole Chekhov was a much better playwright than Turgenev — another reason why we're so much more familiar with Chekhov than with his predecessor.

(Parenthetical trivia: in 1909, actor/director Konstantin Stanislavski who staged so much Chekhov in his lifetime, mounted a revival of *Three Months In the Country* in which he also performed as Rakitin. The production was not well received, but it did revive interest in Turgenev's languishing play.)



Peter Mendoza & Nike Doukas in *Three Days In the Country* at Antaeus.

Marber's clever adaptation is good reason to rejoice. Not that it's perfect; few plays are. It is still a little longer than it needs to be, though not nearly as long as the original, which ran to an excruciating four and a half hours. And the tender scene that ends it leaves many loose ends untied. But so does life. Many other plays, including Chekhov's, do the same. Think of *The Three Sisters* with their impossible yearning to go to Moscow. Or the terrible sound of axes cutting down *The Cherry Orchard*, leaving it with a future as bleak and uncertain as that of the people who once owned it...

For those who don't know, Antaeus is a membership company that famously double casts most of its productions, a practice they democratically call "partner casting." The production of *Three Days*, beautifully directed by a seasoned newcomer to Los Angeles by the name of Andrew Paul, is fine enough to have encouraged me to do something I had not done before: see the second cast.

Why partner casting? The easy answer would seem to be the chance to give all members of this company a turn on stage. But no, said artistic co-director Bill Bochtrup (one of three), who generously took time out while trekking through northern Portugal to respond to my questions by email.

“Most of our members make their living in film and television,” he wrote, “and we needed a way to protect the show when an actor suddenly gets a high-paying gig and has to, say, fly to Vancouver on short notice. With two fully rehearsed actors in each role our audiences never had to see a perhaps poorly rehearsed understudy or face a cancelled show. It allowed actors to take a play at Antaeus without sacrificing [their] income.”

And some unforeseen artistic benefits accrued in this answer to a logistical problem: “When actors shared a role they often were able to discover aspects of the character they might not have thought of on their own,” wrote Bochtrup. “Plus, by watching your partner rehearse, you’re able to see the play and the role in a more objective way that can help an actor better understand his or her thread in the tapestry that is the play. So that’s the reasoning behind partner casting, and the benefits we found through it.”



Peter Mendoza & Anna Khaja in *Three Days In the Country* at Antaeus.

My second incorrect assumption was that staging the play in this manner would require two directors.

“The director doesn’t direct two casts,” Bochtrup explained. “He or she directs *one* cast with two — sometimes one, or even, once or twice, three — actors in each role. Partners are both called for all rehearsals of scenes in which their character appears. We rehearse as one cast, with actors switching in and out, tag team style, taking turns, one partner ‘on’ and one partner watching, taking notes, potentially throwing out ideas from the sidelines.

“Then we switch. And so on, constantly mixing it up. We arrive at one set of blocking [the theatrical blueprint for movement on stage]. Only when we arrive at [the technical rehearsal] do we split the cast into two groups. The director makes the decision of how best to [do it] evenly, based on chemistry and a variety of other factors.

“We then rehearse as two separate casts through tech, previews and opening, giving each cast a name solely for marketing reasons, so audiences know who’s on which night. But with folks’ busy schedules these two casts are constantly mixing and changing — again, really one big cast that has worked together from day one.”

According to Bochtrup, the biggest surprise is how much actors who are unsure of the process at first come to love it. “It’s a wonderful experience,” he said. “I love it when actors begin to refer to ‘*our* character’ rather than ‘*my* character.’ ”



l-r, Lily Knight, Marcelo Tubert & Lorna Raver in *Three Days In the Country* at Antaeus.

Bochtrup concedes, however, that having one director (“because it’s one show with one cast”) can be tough on directors. They sometimes feel like they’re staging every scene twice. But it also allows actors to discover that the “truth” or heart of a play can be arrived at in more ways than one.

That proved to be the case in my own viewing of each cast about a week apart. What was striking is how slight or significant those differences can be.

The play unspools — where else? — on a 19th century Russian country estate and offers more than first meets the eye. It is a convoluted tale of love and lust, most of it unfulfilled, some of it young, some middle-aged, some elderly and some a mix of all of the above.

The estate is owned by middle-aged Arkady, a loud and insecure landowner, his restless wife Natalya, and their young son Kolya. Their freewheeling household serves as a refuge for a motley collection of visitors, relatives and hangers-on. Among them is Rakitin, an old friend of Arkady's and ardent suitor of Natalya's, still deeply in love with her; Dr. Shpigelsky, a raffish country medic who, for a fee, is not past arranging a marriage of convenience for Natalya's pretty young ward Vera with a doddering but wealthy neighbor, Boltshintsov. The two Boltshintovs — Alberto Isaac and Gregory Itzin — were very different and very good, Itzin's with one foot in the grave, and Isaac's rather comically spry.

In the play's most delicious scene, the aging Shpigelsky proposes to Kolya's elderly music teacher Lizaveta, by describing to her in some detail what a terrible husband he would be. In return, she presents him with a few unexpected demands of her own. Again, the two Lizavetas, played by Dawn Didawick and Lily Knight, who are as different as night and day, were both utterly winning in the role.



Harry Groener & Dawn Didawick in *Three Days In the Country* at Antaeus.

At the center of this fretfully aimless existence is Belyaev, Kolya's handsome young tutor, who manages to create absolute havoc by capturing the heart of several of the women in the house. The mayhem only heightens the behavior of the household's eccentric, impulsive, emotionally inflated and immature denizens, who are at once charming, selfish and complicated and therefore really difficult to portray. Important to uncover are the exquisite crossovers of anguish, irony, melodrama and humor that materialize, and Marber's splendid manipulation, so smartly directed by Paul, manages to nail them almost all.



Peter Mendoza & Ellis Greer in *Three Days In the Country* at Antaeus.

The blocking, of course, is the same for both casts, as is the set (by Se Hyun Oh), the lighting (Jared A. Sayeg), the sound design (Chris Moscatello), and the terrific musical score that supports and sometimes even propels the action. But the different personalities of the actors playing the same roles influence the performance of each version of the play with minor and sometimes major nuances that confirm everything Bochner had to say.

As Arkady, Antonio Jamarillo's is all overdone bluster, while Daniel Blinkoff plays him as more of a sentient fool, a mediocre husband and father to Kolya, fearful that his wife doesn't love him (she doesn't). Groener's Shpigelsky is an offhand, funny fraudster, who might even have a mean streak somewhere within, while Armin Shimerman's Shpigelsky is more serious and appealing in his approach to the proposal, but still unavoidably funny in his self-deprecation.



l-r, Jeanne Syquia & Nike Doukas in *Three Days In the Country* at Antaeus.

Of the two Natalyas, Nike Doukas is the more intellectually aware, controlled and well bred, while Anna Khaja is deliberately high-strung and at moments capable of something close to hysteria. Of the two Rakitins, Leo Marks is the fragile, easily wounded one, while Corey Brill puts up a strong front that is nonetheless painfully punctured by Natalya's marked indifference.

These performances are not better or worse, but simply different, enough to give each version of the play a slightly different hue. The tutor Belyaev, the focus of all the turmoil, was nicely delivered by the undeniably attractive Peter Mendoza at both performances I attended. You get my drift.



Anna Khaja & Daniel Blinkoff in *Three Days In the Country* at Antaeus.

A final note from Bochtrup, however, hinted at possible changes to this *modus operandi*. An apparent desire (need?) to increase compensation for the artists may mean that partner casting could become "financially difficult." Shorthand: unsustainable. (Could it have anything to do with Equity, the actors' union, and its recent demands...? Another story.)

"We're experimenting with new models," Bochtrup said, without elaborating. "[Our production of] *Native Son* was single cast and we will probably single-cast two [more] shows this year. But the lessons of partner casting will stay with us no matter how we end up moving forward."

So enjoy this partner casting while it lasts. You don't have to attend a performance by both casts every time, but if what's on stage satisfies you enough to spur thoughts of a return visit, do it with the second cast.

You won't be disappointed.

Top image: l-r, Daniel Blinkoff and Elijah Justice — a Cupid? — in Three Days In the Country at Antaeus.

Photos by Geoffrey Wade Photography.

WHAT: *Three Days in the Country* (a version by Patrick Marber of Turgenev's *A Month In the Country*).

WHEN: Thursday, 8pm: Aug. 23 ONLY; Fridays, 8pm, Aug. 3, 10, 17, 24; Saturdays, 8pm., Aug. 4, 11, 18, 25; Sundays, 2pm, Aug. 5, 12, 19, 26; Mondays, 8pm, Aug. 6, 13, 20. Ends Aug 26.

WHERE: Antaeus Theatre Company, Kiki & David Gindler Performing Arts Center, 110 East Broadway, Glendale, CA 91205 (between N. Brand Blvd. and Maryland Ave.)

HOW: Tickets for Mondays, Thursdays, Fridays, \$30; Saturdays & Sundays, \$34, available at www.Antaeus.org or at 818.506.1983.

PARKING: Various public lots. First 90 minutes free, then \$1 per added half hour.

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