



Chekhov Times Four - New Place Theater Center

reviewed by Jose Ruiz

The Antaeus Company inaugurates its new permanent home with four short plays by the legendary Chekhov, continuing its long commitment to classical theater in Los Angeles. Nicholas Saunders and Frank Dwyer provide the most recent translations of "The Proposal," "The Anniversary," "The Bear" and "Swan Song," giving the actors a broad platform of dialogue to display their talents.

Chekhov's cynicism is alive and well in the presentations, especially during "The Proposal" where a man wants to propose marriage, but instead, argues bitterly with his beloved over a parcel of land. Her father is eager to marry her off, even as the beau begins to realize she might become a handful in the future. This is the most comical piece, churning a good mix of greed, pride and love resulting in a true laugh fest. The actors are in top form and the wonderful set fits the era perfectly. Ayre Gross and Emily Berl are hilarious as is Martin Ferrero as the father.

Equally absurd is "The Anniversary" where a bank executive is expecting a meritorious citation but instead has to face a nagging woman who insists that her husband's back salary should be paid, though he never worked for the bank. Pure chaos erupts with the wife, the woman, the executive and the harried accounts clerk who can't balance the books with all the mayhem. JD Cullum and John Apicella play off Anne Gee Byrd and Laura Russell with great comic timing.

The next two did not fare quite as well. Chekhov's early masterpiece, "The Bear" has an oats dealer demanding payment of a debt from a widow, but he becomes so enchanted by her convictions they eventually get together. The oats dealer is a bit long winded, and the widow isn't altogether convincing. It had several comic moments, however, which justify the small glitches. Harry Groener and Dawn Didawick duel in this one.

The final presentation was a great soliloquy where a has-been actor reminisces about his life and career. Lawrence Pressman is compelling in the role, but the piece lags longer than necessary, causing a few yawns across the room.

Forgetting the minor problems, the entire presentation is classy and carefully mounted, with a special touch by singer-guitarist Eugene Alper who appears between scenes singing Russian folk songs. The huge ensemble cast is excellent in what is an obvious portrayal of pride in this opening salvo.

Plays through March 21. Reservations at (818) 506-5436.