

Russian roulette

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by MARY C. CUSACK

MSU's reveling repertory shows win with highbrow drama, meta humor

If the 20th century Russian elite had Red Bull to mix with their vodka, they might have enjoyed their bleak existences more. The Michigan State University Theatre Department's two shows playing in repertory, Anton Chekhov's "Three Sisters" and "Anton in Show Business," explore and satirize the decay of the privileged class. In a feat of daring — and maybe self-destruction — MSU Professor Rob Roznowski took on the challenge of directing both plays simultaneously.

It's a maximally efficient plan. Both plays utilize the same set, costumer, lighting designer and crew, and share some cast members. It also gave Roznowski the opportunity to use undergrad assistant directors to produce these two very fine, yet very different plays.

"Three Sisters," while depressing, is stylish and satisfying. Russian existentialism can be hard to appreciate for modern American audiences. Watching the elite wring their hands and muse about their unhappiness is annoying enough, but accepting their idea of "working" as a means of philosophical fulfillment instead of a financial necessity is downright laughable. Still, the frustrations of the characters' romantic relationships are still relatable and heartbreaking.

Scenic designer Shannon Melick utilizes every square inch of the Arena Theatre, creating a warm home that is fully inhabited by the Prozorov family and associates. While many of the cast members are far too young and attractive for their roles, their commitment and sincerity overcome physical appearance.

"Three Sisters" & "Anton in Show Business"

Michigan State University Department of Theatre Through Sept. 30 7:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, 8 p.m.

Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday Auditorium Arena Theatre, East Lansing \$20 adults/\$10 students (517) 353-1982 whartoncenter.com

While the play is dark, Roznowski works in some humorous rewards for the observant. Keep a sharp eye on city council errand boy Ferapont (Michael Barbour), who racks up compounding, unexplained injuries that require much bandaging.

After experiencing the decline of the Russian upper class, reward yourself with "Anton in Show Business," a post-modern, uber-meta production about a production of "Three Sisters." "Anton" pokes fun at regional theater, America's obsession with celebrity and creative types who call themselves "artistes" instead of artists.

Television star Holly (Michelle Serje) wants to break into blockbuster films. Her agent suggests doing a serious theatrical production to build her resume, so she chooses "Three Sisters." The play moves through the production process, as the cast is assembled, directors are hired and fired and Holly tries to bed a hot cast member. Not only does the cast acknowledge the audience, they draw them into the selfreferential jokes. The fourth wall isn't simply broken — it's blown to bits.

In overall fantastic casts, two stand out the most. As the beautiful common girl who marries up and slowly loses her mind in "Sisters," Lydia Hiller begs for empathy but soon becomes repugnant. And Serje is absolutely perfect as Holly in "Anton." She is every bit the gorgeous mess we expect in headline-grabbing Hollywood starlets, down to her surgically enhanced toes.

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