

Theater Review

3 Chekhov farces comical, thoughtful

Stanford Repertory Theater opened three short, amusing farces on Thursday, written by Russian playwright Anton Chekhov.

The farces are followed by a performance piece created by the Stanford

actors who perform the Chekhov plays, in honor of Vsevolod Meyerhold, who staged the same three Chekhov pieces in 1935 in Moscow, in a disastrous modernist production, deemed anti-Soviet, that led to his execution by Joseph Stalin.



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The Chekhov farces are funny and well performed. In the first, “The Bear,” a widow dressed in black (Lillian Bornstein), histrionically mourns her husband, dead now seven months. She speaks of her endless love and pledges to wear black the rest of her life. The fact that her dead husband philandered and beat her does not diminish her enthusiasm for mourning.

When a visitor (Matthew Libby) shows up, demanding she repay money her husband borrowed, an argument ensues. The widow and visitor grow increasingly frantic as their shouting match escalates. The visitor decides to camp in the parlor until he is paid. Stuff happens.

The play, in part, is about the differ-



MATTHEW LIBBY and Lillian Bornstein star in “The Bear.”

ence between external reality and the stories in our heads. The farce style opens up a clear conflict between those two perspectives. It’s a wonderful production, well performed and well directed.

‘The Proposal’

The second play, “The Proposal,” is equally zany. Here a young man visits a neighboring father and daughter to ask for her hand in marriage. When the father leaves the two young people alone, they begin to argue about a property line. Before long, they are

screaming in rage. After the young man leaves in anger, the daughter learns that his original intention was to propose marriage. She calls him back and concedes the property line issue. Soon, however, they begin to argue over whose dog is better, and end up again hollering in rage. Lea Zawada is a particular standout as the angry young woman who does not tolerate fools.

‘The Anniversary’

In the third Chekhov play, “The Anniversary,” a bank chairman shows

up at work to celebrate his anniversary. He can’t stop talking to his assistant, however, who is on a tight deadline to finish writing a report the chairman will present shortly.

Soon the chairman’s wife shows up chattering nonstop about her recent holiday.

Add to this mix the unexpected intrusion of the wife of a recently laid-off man, appealing for his salary renewal. Everybody is talking about something different. All heck breaks loose.

‘33 Swoons’

The last piece, “33 Swoons,” is a bit of an odd fish. Here the actors have created their own “montage” that comments on the 1935 staging of the three Chekhov plays produced by Meyerhold, for which he was executed.

It’s a loose-fitting performance art piece, with the actors out of character and in street clothes, talking to audience members and among themselves, looking for meaning in their Chekhov productions — a reaction to Meyerhold’s efforts to do the same.

“The Many Faces of Farce” is an entertaining and thoughtful evening of theater. I think you’ll enjoy this one.

For tickets and information, visit stanfordreptheater.com.

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