Three Sisters: All in the Family

A play that showcases solid performances in a turbulent love story about one woman's search for happiness

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By C. Kevin Smith Wed, Nov 09, 2011  A  A  A  0 Comments  Email  Share  19  Tweet

Anton Chekhov opens his brilliant play Three Sisters with a trick. Irina, the youngest daughter of the Prozorov family, is celebrating her Saint's Day with family members, townspeople and soldiers. Irina is young, fresh-faced and beautiful, and the house and garden are garlanded with pink and white flowers. Everything about the occasion points to a spirit of youth and renewal. Yet Irina's mother and father are both in the ground; her brother-in-law gives her the same gift he gave her last year, a useless volume from the school where he teaches; and Irina's deepest wish is to return to Moscow—the magical place where she believes her real life will begin. Time is marching on, but Irina, like the rest of the Prozorovs, feels left behind.

Chekhov employed a famously naturalistic style in his plays to explore the workings of loneliness and longing and the search for happiness. Light on plot, Three Sisters is mostly about the Prozorovs' relationships—with the past, with an imagined future, with others and with themselves. At Cabrillo College's versatile Black Box Theater, director Sarah Albertson has mounted a handsome production that emphasizes the dimensionality of these relationships and the turbulent emotions that lie under the surface. Working with a large and varied cast and with excellent technical support, Albertson's intelligent direction keeps the action moving, even as Chekhov's text reveals the stagnation underlying his characters' lives.

The central drama is the sisters' quest for happiness. Olga (Judith Wellner), works unhappily as a schoolteacher. Her colleague Kulygin (Bill Peters), is married to Olga's sister Masha (April Green). Irina (Crystelle Reola) also wants to work, lamenting at the outset the dull life of well-off women who rise at noon. Their brother, the violin-playing Andrei (Mark Bilovsky), shows promise as a scholar, but after marrying Natasha (Dina Silva), he settles into the colorless routine of a petty bureaucrat.

The arrival of Vershinin (the charming Erik Gandolfi), a dashing lieutenant colonel, is a breath of fresh air, and the melancholic Masha, weary of her older schoolteacher husband, falls hard. Green is excellent as the sad middle sister, conveying with an economy of gesture and expression the sorrow and need of a woman who feels betrayed by her marriage, even as her husband (sensitively portrayed by Peters) remains steady in his love.

Yet can love really be love if it is not returned? Adam Stanton and David Jackson turn in solid performances as two rival soldiers interested in Irina, men who seem not to care that she is not interested in them.

Chekhov's play offers the texture of real life, in which even secondary characters have their own stories and value. Jean Weisz as the 80-year-old nanny Anfisa, Jim Schultz as the near-deaf and limping Ferapont and Chad Davies as the drunken doctor Chebutykin each imbue their vivid scenes with poignant realism and depth.

As time passes in the Prozorov household, Andrei's wife Natasha becomes increasingly dominant and
grasping for what little power there is to be had in this small corner of the world. On opening night, Silva was appropriately manipulative as Natasha; perhaps as the play’s run continues, she will dig even deeper into her character’s steely intent to rule her domestic kingdom.

Other pleasures of this production include the superb costumes, the wonderful moments of piano-playing and dancing and the evocative set design by Skip Epperson. The entire theater is surrounded by a forest of birch trees, painted onto hanging strips of translucent fabric. People come and go, time passes, while the Prozorovs spend their days in an atmosphere of enclosure and confinement. Yet a kinetic quality informs the clever multi-level use of the stage, as if the seeming busyness of daily life could obscure a deeper truth.

And what is that truth? “If only we could know!” Olga cries at the end, determined to carry on with the business of living yet without knowing why.

_Three Sisters_
Through Nov. 19 at Cabrillo Black Box Theater
Tickets $12-$18 at 831.479.6154

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