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# Confronting Chekhov

nytheatre.com review by Chris Harcum

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The Brooklyn Playwrights Collective presents two evenings of short works inspired by Anton Chekhov. This is the third installment in an annual series of new short works influenced by the Collective's favorite playwrights in alphabetical order. Previous years focused on Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht. After attending the first night, "If Chekhov Were in America," I recommend hopping on this ride as they cruise to the letter Z.

This five-pack of plays presents a spectrum of comedy and drama. Occasionally, there is a foot firmly planted in both. The pieces feel as modern as this afternoon but simultaneously have echoes from the turn of the last century. A couple of the plays make it seem as though Chekhov has come in a time machine, while others have their own voices fueled by the themes of the source material. The simple design aesthetic for the pieces keeps the night's focus on the acting and writing. I suspect this comes from the work being developed by this organization in biweekly workshops. The enthusiasm and support from the audience was palpable throughout the night. Could that also be attributed to their ongoing work?

Phillip Kaplan's *The Bear 2.0* is first on the bill. With deft direction by Julia Goldstein, this situation comedy brings together a young man and women (played with charm by Sean Conroy and Rachel Fine) through fate and technology. While enjoyable, it also gives an idea of what Chekhov, a serf-turned-doctor as well as a dramatist, might have done if he lived in a world comprised of our technology. *Biggest Break* by Les Hunter overlaps complex relationships and themes. This piece combines the old and new with a few dashes of the angry-young-man films of the 1960s. There is a lot to this little play and, while good, it feels like a two-hour story compressed into 15 minutes. The result is one of great impact but also a bit of confusion, even though director Dan Winerman and the cast bring a lot of clarity and levels to the piece. A potentially great work is percolating here, one I hope gets developed. In Allan Lefcowitz's *Philodendron*, we see the dissolution of a 20-plus year relationship unfold with poignancy and humor. Betsy Sanders and David Lloyd Walters provide more depth and pathos than the fashionable cringe humor going around nowadays.

The second half of the evening gives us two "ripped from the headlines" comedies. *Gone with the Masha* by Jerry Polner is a farce about commerce, finance, and how close we all are to going off the deep end. Director Lexie Pregosin and an uninhibited cast knock the zaniness out of the park. Tom Miller's *Fin de Circle* ends the night with a generational comedy that uses the "one world ending, what the hell is next?"

theme and interweaves family holiday stress with political and religious conflicts. The cast, under Cara Scarmack's direction, feels like a real family. I slumped a little in my seat while watching this, knowing Christmas is drawing nearer.

Sometimes theatre is enhanced by the real estate and this was one of them. The Williamsburg Art and Historical Center, originally built in 1867 as The Kings County Savings Bank building, made an excellent home for this evening of works inspired by the Russian who is considered to be the master of the short story as well as the father of modern drama. If only all drama inside banks were of this variety rather than the kind presented in today's news we would live in a happier world.

The light, wet snow that greeted audience at intermission and after the show added to the atmosphere. Accidental providence but also a strong case that Chekhov's work is best served in the colder months.

*Confronting Chekhov* is going on a mini-tour with stops at the Brecht Forum in Manhattan and Under Minerva in Park Slope. The combination of exposure to new work investigating a great writer by talented local artists and the convenience of having the event come close to you make it a winner. Clearly, the Brooklyn Playwrights Collective has a talented stable of writers who I commend for taking on Anton Chekhov without bogging things down in dreariness and despair. One of the company's slogans is "Support your local playwright." After seeing this evening of plays, I most certainly will.

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