



From left to right, Jim Shelby as Vanya, Aleksandra Wolska as Yelena and Rush Rehm as Astrov in "Uncle Vanya," playing through July 27 at the Nitery Theatre.

An invigorating exploration of Chekhov

Stanford Summer Theatre gives masterful performance of the classic "Uncle Vanya"

by Gregg Andrew Hurwitz

There is indeed such a thing as bad Chekhov. Particularly with a play as complex and demanding as "Uncle Vanya," skilful pacing can make the difference between a graceful performance and one that is intolerably dull.

These difficulties make the Stanford Summer Theatre's success with "Uncle Vanya" all the more impressive, as the cast manages to infuse the production with an inspired and focused energy. Director Jarek Truszczyński steers the play masterfully on course, avoiding the currents that could all too easily detract from the play's quiet subtlety.

"Uncle Vanya" revolves around the summer visit of a cantankerous old professor and his beautiful young wife, Helene, to a rural Russian estate. The members of the household—the witty and cynical Vanya, the plain and rather simple Sonya, the cheery Nanny, the emotionally-blocked doctor and the obsequious Waffles (so named for his atrocious facial pock marks)—are all impotent in life and love, to be sure. But none have the intentional destructiveness of either the professor or Helene, who leave in their wake nothing but destruction and pain.

Vanya's beloved sister (long deceased when the dramatic action begins) was the professor's first wife, and the mother of the professor's only child, the shy and understated Sonya. Under the urgings of Vanya's elderly and domineering mother, the family was urged to put their faith and respect in the professor, who seems little more than a stuffed shirt. He is egotistical beyond words, drawing his money from a country estate (his first wife's dowry), which Vanya and Sonya tirelessly manage for him. His visit to the estate awakens in Vanya feelings of disillusionment,

Theater Review

envy and resentment, which are surely felt by the others, but which only he has the courage to articulate.

Helene, the professor's beguiling nymph of a wife, meddles in the affairs and hearts of the members of the household. Both Vanya and the doctor fall under her spell, bringing her flowers and praises, which they lay like sacred offerings at her feet.

The professor, the doctor and Vanya are all too keenly aware of the marching progress of time as they are reminded of how much they have lost, and how little they have lived. The doctor, who sublimates his own fear of aging into an ardent concern for the fading forests of Russia, is alive only in his imagined passion for Helene; he entirely overlooks the virtuous and quietly dignified Sonya, who loves him shyly from afar. The dramatic action unfolds as the characters feel a rising aggravation at their wasted years, their age, the others around them and most of all, themselves. Uncle Vanya is a play, ultimately, about stagnation.

The actors range from full-time professionals to drama students. Although the supporting cast is prone to the occasional bout of overacting, the performances overall are quite strong.

Especially magnificent is Lucja M. Kwasniak in the role of Sonya. She treats her character with such tenderness and empathy that on more than one occasion it brings tears to your eyes. Sonya is ner-

vously in love, and we feel through her all the frustration and disappointment of loneliness. Kwasniak brings us her awkwardness, hope and strength with stunning conviction.

Rush Rehm is solid and beautifully consistent as the doctor, and James Shelby is superb in the trying role of Vanya. Shelby weighs his words well, vacillating between charming boredom and neurotic pontification. "A lovely day," he sighs, voice laden with ennui, "to hang yourself."

Ada McDaniel plays the role of Nanny, the maternal peasant woman who, among other things, tends to the chickens and the kitchen. She has a wonderfully benevolent presence, wearing her character with astounding certainty and lending her language the cadence of poetry.

Theatrical lighting is usually like third base coaching in baseball—the highest compliment you can pay it is to say that it is not noticeable at all. But Dan Maidenberg's use of light (with creative input from Aleksandra Wolska, who plays Helene) is one of those rare instances when light is a formidable presence in the play but textures, rather than detracts from the performance. Working symbiotically with Truszczyński's sharp direction, the lighting gives us a few moments that are no less magical.

Under the leadership of Rush Rehm, Stanford Summer Theatre is another indication of the current renaissance enjoyed by Stanford's drama department. Other recent productions mounted by Wolska (Helene) and starring director Truszczyński have contributed to the creative ambiance surrounding the department in the past 12 months. If "Uncle Vanya" is anything of an indication, we have much to look forward to. ■

What: Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya," directed by Jarek Truszczyński
 Where: Nitery Theater at the Old Union on the Stanford campus
 When: Through July 27; Thur.-Sat. at 8 p.m.; Sunday matinees at 2 p.m.
 Cost: \$12 general; \$9 students/seniors
 Information: 725-ARTS