

TUTA gets a lot out of a little in 'Vanya'

By Chris Jones
TRIBUNE CRITIC

It's been 14 years since Louis Malle made his famously minimalist "Vanya on 42nd Street." Perhaps somebody should now roll some cameras into the basement of the Chopin Theatre and dub TUTA's new Chicago-style Chekhovian excursion as "Vanya on Milwaukee Avenue." Or "The Wicker Park Vanya."

But don't hold your breath — dramatic depictions of people stuck in an existential rut aren't at the top of major studios' priority lists. But Zeljko Djukich's current voyage into Chekhovian tragicomedy is striking for its contrasts with the movie. The two might share that bare-walls aesthetic, but whereas Malle had a conceptual agenda, Djukich is the kind of director who just throws his typically loyal actors into a room and works a scene to within an inch of its life.

As its many fans well know, TUTA's great strength is the theatrical representation of intimacy. And, because we're here talking Chekhov, that intimacy is of course unable to effect any actual change in anyone's circumstances. If you see "Vanya" as a series of pointlessly intimate moments — and you'd have a good case — you'll love this take.

In part due to fiscal necessity, Djukich minimalizes the visuals — reducing the design elements to their skeletal frames. He hangs his show on live connections between skilled actors. Although there's a skillfully toned performance from Andy Hager, who's far more disciplined as Astrov than I've ever seen him in the past, this "Vanya" mostly relies on its women.

'UNCLE VANYA'

When: Through April 13

Where: Chopin Theatre, 1543 W. Division St.

Running time: 2 hours, 25 minutes

Price: \$25 at 847-217-0691 or www.tuta-to.com

The best scene of the night is the encounter between Stacie Beth Green's classy Elena and Jacqueline Stone's carefully emotional Sonya, wherein both women get a sense of their unchanging place in this hopelessly hierarchical world. In this and most other scenes, Djukich has his actors adopt a hyper-colloquial style — it kept reminding me of a more vulnerable version of "The Gilmore Girls" — and it's both apt and arresting.

I wouldn't claim the individual scenes are perfectly integrated. Nor is everyone perfectly cast — Trey Maclin, who plays Vanya, is a talented actor, but he reads here as too young to fully capture the bleakness of middle-age ennui.

But while the show could use more pace, many of the two-person encounters have that rare sense of unpretentious spontaneity that always enhances Chekhov. And Djukich's unusual use of proximity and distance is fascinating.

The playing area is much deeper than the audience section. One minute the actors are right in your face and then they retreat far away — almost as if they'd headed off down Milwaukee, without knowing they were on a diagonal street.

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Jacqueline Stone (seated) is Sonya and Stacie Beth Green is Elena in TUTA's production of "Uncle Vanya," an existential story presented with a minimum of visual elements.