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Torn Space Theatre's 'Uncle Vanya' is a highlight of Infringement

By Colin Dabkowski

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There always will be incurably miserable people moping around in the world, so theater companies will always produce plays by Anton Chekhov, the Russian master of depression and despair.

As part of the Buffalo Infringement Festival, Torn Space Theater is mounting a brief run of Chekhov's masterwork "Uncle Vanya" in an ad hoc theater space inside the Dnipro Ukrainian Center on Genesee Street. The play is a snapshot of the tortured lives of a group of terminally woebegone Russians, each of whom is trapped in his or her own peculiar state of manic desperation.

This production, directed by Megan Callahan (who was also behind "He Who Gets Slapped," the company's Infringement offering last year) moves swiftly along through a story about wasted potential, wasted time, wasted energy and wasted passion. But one thing that won't be wasted is your time. Despite some quibbles, the show is sure to be a festival highlight.

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The show tells the story of a creaky old Russian professor and his beautiful second wife who have taken a sojourn to the country estate that makes their life back in the city possible. That estate, a drab and isolated place that seems to inspire a slightly different brand of simmering madness in each of its inhabitants and visitors, is managed by the utterly depressed and borderline suicidal Uncle Vanya.

Vanya is played by James Luce, whose extremely affected performance sits somewhere between John Malkovich and Buddy Cole, the martini-sipping barroom wit portrayed by Canadian actor Scott Thompson. It doesn't remotely work for the character, who is supposed to be in love with the professor's wife (Diane Gaidry), but boy is it ever fun to watch.

Luce sinks his teeth into Chekhov's words, delivering certain lines with a sarcastic glee that only thinly masks his roiling unhappiness and sputtering out others with a feigned exasperation that never quite works for him. Still, the delivery is memorable and his comic timing elevates the performance.

Excellent work comes from James Heffron, who plays the alternately idealistic and world-weary young doctor Astov and from Morgan Chard as the bright-eyed Sonya, whom Chekhov dooms as he dooms the rest of his characters to a long life of constant disappointment.

The setting for the play, on an upper floor of the sprawling Ukrainian Center, may be the real star of the show. During the first act, the characters gaze out of the large, unblocked windows over the gritty landscape of Buffalo's East Side. It's not exactly the sweltering Russian countryside, but the setting works well, especially in its use of natural light. For the more troubling and troublesome second act, the seating is

completely rearranged and we enter a sort of psychological dream space more familiar to Torn Space regulars, in which digital projections of several characters attempt to heighten our awareness of their internal struggles.

There seems to be no particular reason for this switch other than as an excuse to employ projections, and it seems almost certain that the straightforward approach, which worked so well in the first act, would have been more effective if it were carried through the entire production.

Even so, the performances, especially from Heffron and Chard, takes us firmly into the lives of these tortured characters, each of whom continues to grasp at some form of happiness even as the world outside seems determined to keep them from finding it.

ReVIEW

3 stars

What: "Uncle Vanya"

Where: Dnipro Ukrainian Center, 562 Genesee St.

When: Through Sunday

Tickets: \$15.

Info: 812-5733 or **www.tornspacetheater.com**

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