

'Uncle Vanya' fares well in Louisville

By Tom Carter

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LOUISVILLE — January is a month for classics at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Moliere's *School for Wives* is in the Pamela Brown Auditorium, and Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* is in the more intimate Victor Jory Theater.

In *Uncle Vanya*, as in all Chekhov plays, the physical action is minimal. The feelings of the various characters for one another — often told to all but the person who should hear them — create the conflicts, the suspense and the resolutions.

The drama, set in a middle-class Russian household, works toward a pivotal moment in the life of Uncle Vanya (portrayed by Frederick Major). Vanya has given up his own pursuits and dreams to manage the family estate and to get it out of debt, all to support the life and studies of his brother-in-law Alexander (Andy Backer), a professor whom Vanya hates.

The scenario is ripe for intrigue, as long as it occurs within an easy distance. In that regard, Vanya is in love with Alexander's second wife, Elena (Lee Anne Fahey); Alexander's daughter, Sonia (Lili Flanders), is in love with a visiting doctor, Astroff (Thom Christopher); and Astroff would like to have a quick affair with Elena.

Chekhov plays, in their own curious way and their glorious language notwithstanding, resemble contemporary soap operas, except that hardly anyone ever has any fun.

Alexander, to the surprise of the other characters, decides to sell the estate on which all of them live and to move to more manageable quarters.

The decision leads Vanya — who has dedicated his life to keeping Alexander at his books and away from physical work — to make an unsuccessful attempt on his brother-in-law's life, possibly the first overtly antagonistic act that Vanya has committed in years. But Vanya must then accept the sobering humiliation of not being prosecuted for the murder attempt.

As with other Chekhov works, *Uncle Vanya* is largely a mental adventure, full of thoughtful prose, broad pauses and subtext that fuels the nature of the relationships between the characters. *Uncle Vanya* is popu-

Review

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lated by characters who are accepting whatever life has dealt them.

The intimate nature of the Victor Jory Theater demands that the audience share the pace of the play, most of which seems to occur in real time.

The set furniture is formal and authentic. Leafless tree limbs jut up from the back of the set — can't anybody do a Chekhov play without them?

Uncle Vanya features a solid cast. Flanders, particularly, always seemed at the emotional breaking point as Sonia and was the audience's favorite. Major's restrained demeanor as Vanya fit the character well and made his moments of slight comedy and brutal violence all the more effective.

Christopher was perfect as the man who could pass up Sonia's love and accept Elena's rejection with equal ease. Fahey has a strong, haunting presence as Elena and could control a scene with the movement of her eyes.

Rankin, most often a leading man in Actors Theatre shows, did a fine job in the role of the farmer, Ilya, who continues to support his family even after his wife, no longer able to bear the sight of his ugly face, leaves him for another man.

Performances of *Uncle Vanya* will continue daily except Monday through Jan. 26 at Actors Theatre of Louisville, 316 West Main Street. For reservations and information, call (502) 584-1205.

