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Three Sisters

by Winnie McCroy

EDGE Editor

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Elena Kalinina (Masha), Irina Tychinina (Olga), and Ekaterina Tarasova (Irina) in "Three Sisters" at BAM (Source: Pavel Antonov)

They say that we only regret those things we don't do. But for the titular sisters in Anton Chekov's "Three Sisters," playing through April 28 at BAM's Harvey Theater, life is full of more regrets than simply not returning to the idyllic Moscow of their youths.

The Maly Drama Theater of St. Petersburg presents the play, with a run time of more than three hours, in Russian with English subtitles. As directed by Lev Dodin, the ensemble does a stellar job with the acting; all of the actors are beyond reproach, simply spot-on in their portrayal of the characters. As noted by a theatergoer sitting behind me, "The director is extremely famous in Europe."

Among Chekov's most complex plays, "Three Sisters" is the story of an aristocratic family of three girls and their scholar brother who leave Moscow at a young age for the country with their father, a brigadier general dead for a year when the play begins.

As the clocks chime in the opening scene, the youngest sister Irina (Ekaterina Tarasova) is celebrating her name day. Although she insists she is grown up, she is still thrilled with all of the gifts she receives, enchanted by even a spinning toy top.

The middle sister, Masha (Elena Kalinina) married early unhappily to Fyodor Ilyich Kulygin (Sergey Vlasov), an older high school Latin teacher. She begins an affair with Alexander Vershinin (Igor Chernevich), a lieutenant colonel who knew her father.

When Vershinin first arrives from Moscow, he tells the girls, "I don't really remember you, only that you were three sisters." He bemoans his crazy, suicidal wife and his two daughters, which only serves to endear him to Masha. As their affair progresses, it is clear that he makes Masha happy, as she is often depicted singing. The most hopeful of all the characters, she also provides the most comic relief. But when his company is transferred away, she is heartbroken and returns to her husband, who has become sympathetic to her plight.

The oldest daughter, Olga (Irina Tychinina) has taken a job as a schoolteacher. Her face already shows the toll life has taken; throughout the play, she remains unscathed for the simple fact that she has nowhere left to go. She has stopped dreaming, if she ever did. The one show of emotion she is allowed comes when she shares a steamy kiss with Masha's husband, who admits that he almost married her. Olga's joy is palpable, but nothing more is ever made of it. (Note: the seasoned theatergoers sitting behind me were compelled at this point to exclaim, "That wasn't in the play!")

And then there is the brother, Andrey (Alexander Bykovsky). In the beginning of the play, this cherub-faced boy views philosophy as his meat and drink, playing violin and rejoicing in the "superfluous knowledge" that their father pressed upon him. He hopes to be a professor, but his dreams are soon thwarted.

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Andrey's fiancée, local girl Natasha (Ekaterina Kleopina), starts out as an insecure, poorly dressed woman seeking the approval of Andrey's sisters. By the second act, she has become controlling and abusive toward them and the elderly nurse Ansifa (Natalia Akimova). She cuckolds her husband by having a flagrant affair

with Protopopov, the head of the local council, while Andrey serves as his underling, kowtowing to Natasha and woefully minding the children, which the Doctor hints may be Protopopov's. His gambling debts grow and he is forced to mortgage the house, although it supposedly belongs to all of the siblings equally.



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As the play progresses, the characters grow further away from the idea that they will ever return to Moscow. Irina agrees to marry the Baron Tuzenbach (Sergey Kuryshev) and gets her teaching degree, but her husband-to-be is shot by Solyony (Alexander Koshkarev) in a meaningless duel.

Sub-lieutenant Alexey Fedotik (Danila Shevchenko) is also in love with Irina, bringing her lots of gifts, taking family photos, and keeping his cheer, despite that he loses all in a late-act fire. Sadly, he is a singularity.

Early in the play, the jolly old doctor Ivan Chebutikin (Alexander Zavyalov) provides comic relief and friendship, lavishing upon Irina a silver samovar. But by Act III, he too is defeated and drunken, suffering an existential crisis. When he breaks a clock, he posits that perhaps he has not broken it, for perhaps it, and himself, do not really exist.

In "Three Sisters", the feeling of regret is woven through as palpably as if it were its own discrete character. Olga's final lines, "If we could only know, if we could only know" fall on deaf ears, as life's sufferings have done their dirty work. There is no room left for dreams at the end, as they have invested them in the childhood ideal of perfect Moscow, never seeking out attainable goals.

The set design by Sergey Ivanov is spare but effective, featuring the front of a wooden A-frame house with open windows revealing a long dinner table. In the foreground, a makeshift porch brings the actors into the audience. As each new act opens, the set moves forward to the lip of the stage, effectively pushing out the family while simultaneously inviting the audience to look deeper within.

The costume design, by Rafael Mamalimov, is excellent, suitably drab for the proceedings, and very fitting, although every soldier's boots squeak.

As scandalized as the savvy theatergoer sitting behind me may have been with the minor changes to the production, he was certainly correct in his high estimation of the director. Dodin and his cast of players have presented a profound -- and profoundly sad -- view of the decay of Russia's privileged class.



"Three Sisters" runs through April 28 at BAM Harvey Theater, 651 Fulton St. in Brooklyn. For info or tickets call 718-636-4100 or visit <http://www.bam.org>

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she writes about local restaurants in her food blog, <http://brooklyniscookin.blogspot.com/>

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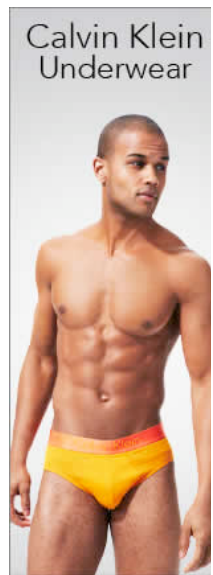


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