***Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov**

(Marshall University Francis-Booth Experimental Theathre,

remaining performances November 20-22, 2014, 7:30 pm)

 Good theater is when you feel yourself a member of the family you see onstage. I am glad to say that for a long and enjoyable evening I wasa part of the Prozorov family recreated by young Marshall students. As an expatriate Russian who teaches at Marshall for the last 20 years I am proud that our student actors carry classical theater tradition with skill and passion. Under a dynamic direction of Lenny Banovez (New York), the Prozorov children, and their small circle of friends and retainers, speak to us directly, in a very good English version (by Brian Friel). Set, costumes, everything is authentic, done with love and attention; one sits through almost three hours of dialogue that sounds modern and not at the least boring. Above all, I applaud the seriousness of this performance which left many, including myself, deeply moved.

 Arguably the best Russian playwright ever—and a practicing medical doctor—Anton Chekhov created characters, which keep living—and talking—on many stages for over a century. *“Since the tea is not forthcoming, let's have a philosophical conversation”*, says a dreamer Colonel Vershinin (Ethan Lyvers). The time is 1901, and table talk is still the main occupation—but a city fire that strikes in the last act portents coming of the new times.

 Unhappy and sensitive Masha (Erica Toderic), married to a Latin schoolteacher Kulygin (Tyler Smith), falls in love with unhappily married Colonel. Masha, her sisters Olga, the oldest (Cheyenne DeBarros) and Irina, the youngest (Grae Greer), and their brother Andrey (Michael Ross) are children of the late General Prozorov. Trapped in an unnamed provincial town on a big river, 15 miles away from a railroad station, they yearn to go back to Moscow, a symbol of their childhood and aspirations. The military officers stationed in the city were their only company for 11 years.

 What carries the characters along is not the fate or a suspense (Tolstoy complained that *nothing happens* in Chekhov’s plays) but the shapeless, ordinary humanity: kindness, confusion, care, desperation, boredom, excitement, and, quite often, love. It is clear early in the play that dreams will remain dreams, and a kind old doctor Chebutykin (Jeremy Wright) suspects that even life itself is not real. Dreams are suspended, crushed, consumed but Chekhov, far from sentimentaly, gives everyone a chance—at least a chance to dream.

 Chekhov’s enemies are rude and insensitive people who subsume and destroy: in this play, Solyony and Natasha. A local girl, vulgar and aggressive Natasha (Jordan Marx) marries a feeble-willed Andrey and takes over the Prozorov house. Captain Solyony (Montana Rock) is a joker in the deck of generally good Chekhovian characters, a jaded cynic and eventually a murderer of his rival, Baron Tuzenbach (John Marks), a naïve and easygoing fellow in love with Irina.

 It was Chekhov who said—tongue-in-cheek, for sure—that if in the first act of a play a rifle is hanging on a wall, it must go off in the last act. There are no rifles on Prozorovs’ walls, and no military action—but Tuzenbach is killed in a senseless duel. Violent duels, indeed legalized murders, were common among the Russian upper class. Two greatest Russian poets were killed this way in their prime: in 1837, Alexander Pushkin, aged 37; and in 1841, Mikhail Lermontov (whom Solyony eerily resembles), aged 27.

 Anton Chekhov died of tuberculosis, aged 44, in 1904—the time of a rare, precarious peaceful spell in European history. Ten years since, officers and soldiers leaving town in the final scene of *The Three Sisters* will march onto the fields of the senseless, bloodiest Great War. Those who survive will see their dreams ruined again by the Russian revolution, civil war, and communist terror and slavery for three generations. After we have lived through the 20th century well into the 21st, there is less and less hope that the humankind will heed the dreams of Colonel Vershinin (first played by the great Stanislavsky himself).

 Still, I value dreams as much as Chekhov did, so I repeat after Vershinin: *“In two or three hundred years life on earth will be unimaginably beautiful, amazing, astonishing. Man has need of that life and if it doesn't yet exist, he must sense it, wait for it and dream of it, prepare to receive it, and to achieve that he must see and know more than our grandfathers and fathers saw or knew.”*

 Again, I am thankful to our wonderful actors and everyone who was involved in this classical and vivid production—which, as I could see, clearly engaged the audience. There is nothing like live theater where real emotions and words are born in front of you.

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