

'Sisters' fails in displaying character growth

■ The slow-paced, watered-down production doesn't use humor well enough to counter the dramatic scenes.

BY SHELLEY MIKA
Staff writer

Anton Chekhov is often renowned for his ability to blur the lines of comedy and tragedy. His plays can be interpreted as either, or they can present comedy and tragedy back to back.

The Department of Theatre Arts' production of Chekhov's "Three Sisters," which continues tonight, did the latter. But instead of accentuating the two genres, this version only dabbled in each, eventually ending in a watered-down form of tragedy.

Sunday's performance of "Three Sisters" ran three hours in length and was slow-paced at that. The play isn't action-packed by nature, as it contains many brooding monologues. However, the script offers many opportunities for comic relief and drama as well. Without these, the play tends to drag.

And drag it did. Though subtle humor was used, most was found in the first act. The play would have been more successful if the humor had been emphasized and taken to a more absurd extreme.

The other option would have been to add more dimension to the dramatic scenes. But most of these only came close to being tragic or moving.

The actual "three sisters" of the play were well chosen for the most part. Each had the look of her character: Olga (Sasha

Dobson) looked matronly and gentle; Masha (Amy Rafa) looked strong and shrewd; and Irina (Amy J. Johnson) looked young and naïve.

The range of Dobson's expressions was limited, though her character seemed to demand only a small number of emotions. Overall, her presentation was well done, though not particularly moving.

Johnson's character was allowed more depth. The audience saw a definite change in Irina from her beginning naïveté to her worn down and unfulfilled persona at the end. Johnson showed this transition well, coming off as sweet in one scene and sad in another. She was one of the only characters who helped the audience recognize the time lapse between scenes, which otherwise was hard to distinguish.

The third of the three sisters was Masha. Though each sister faces her own triumphs and pitfalls, Masha is the most developed character of them all. Rafa was superb in the role. She recognized the intricate subtleties of comedy and tragedy present in the play and performed them expertly.

Another superb performance was that of Jude Thaddeus Hickey, who played Vershinin. Hickey brought his character alive with a vibrancy on stage and a command of subtle body language. Both Hickey and Rafa knew more than just their lines; it seemed they truly understood the play as well.

On the other hand, John Elsener as the sisters' brother, Andrey, left more to be desired. Elsener delivered most of his lines in the same relatively flat tone and needed clearer diction. This deprived the character of the depth possible.

Another undeveloped character was Ivan, played by Dana A. Wheatley. The doctor has many opportunities to deliver cutting lines but also seems one-dimensional in nature.

The same goes for Masha's husband, Fyodor (J. Eric Lauritzen). At one point, he says repeatedly, "I'm content," when he obviously is not. However, Lauritzen delivered the line as though he really were content, selling short the satirical possibilities.

All three of these characters seem the same from beginning to end, despite changes in their lives. Much was missed in terms of character development.

However, the performances of both Aaron Foster DuPree (Solyony) and Moira Mangiameli (Natasha) were notable for marked changes in personality. Without giving anything away, the changes in their characters were clear, and both were effortless and believable in their roles.

The minor characters of the play were all up to par, though the character Ferapent (Michael Semrad Jr.) stood out among them. Semrad had a small role but provided a sprinkling of much needed comic relief and was convincing as an elderly man.

Middle of the road may work for politicians at election time but not for a Chekhov play. Unfortunately, that is how I would describe the Department of Theatre Arts' production of "Three Sisters."

If risks had been taken and the extremes of comedy and tragedy toyed with, more of the artistic spectrum would have been covered. The play would have done more than teeter back and forth at the point of mediocrity.

Theater Preview The Facts

What: "Three Sisters" by Anton Chekhov
Where: Howell Theater, Temple Building, 12th and R streets.
When: student preview 7:30 tonight, 7:30 p.m. Saturday and Nov. 17 - 20, 3 p.m. Sunday
Cost: \$5 student preview, all other shows \$6 for students, \$9 for faculty/staff/senior citizens, \$10 for all others
The Skinny: Play explores feelings of lost dreams and forgotten desires.



MATT HANEY/DN

Exhibit to display African artifacts

BY JOSH NICHOLS
Staff writer

The most complete collection of valuables from the heart of Africa's past is coming to Omaha next week.

The exhibition "Soul of Africa: African Art from the Han Coray Collection," currently on a national tour, opens Nov. 20 at the Joslyn Art Museum and will run through Jan. 23.

The exhibition includes approximately 200 African art pieces compiled in the 1920s by Han Coray, one of the first and foremost European collectors of African art.

This tour is the most extensive display of this group of artifacts that has been shown since the 1930s, when many of the items were seized from Coray because of financial debts.

The display, which represents a broad range of Central and West African art, includes small carved cups, musical instruments, jewelry, textiles, weapons, masks, ceremonial furnishings and rare bronze sculptures.

Amy Krobot, media relations coordinator at the Joslyn, said several rare pieces will be on display.

Sculptures, as well as items used for ceremonial purposes, will be shown, she said.

"This exhibit will give people a chance to see art and learn about a different culture."

AMY KROBOT
Joslyn media coordinator

Krobot said Coray collected the pieces in series, and most of the objects are represented several times over. The extensive exhibit will fill approximately two to three galleries.

"Soul of Africa" is not the first collection of African pieces to be shown at the Joslyn.

This is the second African exhibit to be displayed in two years, although this one is more extensive than the one in 1997, Krobot said.

Sponsors of the exhibit are Joan Gibson and Donald Wurster, along with additional sponsorship by the Millard Foundation.

"This exhibit will give people a unique chance to see art and learn about a different culture," Krobot said.

Tobacco company refutes 'Insider'

LOS ANGELES (AP) - Cigarette maker Brown & Williamson Tobacco is accusing The Walt Disney Co. of maliciously distorting the truth in a new movie chronicling the struggles of a tobacco industry whistleblower.

In a full-page newspaper ad, Brown & Williamson contended "The Insider" wrongly suggests the company threatened the life of former Brown & Williamson executive Jeffrey Wigand.

"They said we committed a crime - threatening someone is criminal activity," said Mark Smith, a Brown & Williamson spokesman. "We're very concerned about it. We're considering our options, in terms of a lawsuit."

The film, released last week, focuses on Wigand and a battle with CBS over whether to air a "60 Minutes" story about his allegations that tobacco companies manipulated nicotine levels in cigarettes and lied about their addictive power.

The ad in Friday's Wall Street

Journal was partly an attempt to counter appearances by Wigand and others promoting the movie, Smith said. The other motive was to get the attention of Disney executives, who ignored the company's attempt to get the script changed, he said.

A Disney spokesman said the film was a responsible telling of Wigand's story and includes a disclaimer saying there is no known connection between Brown & Williamson and the threats against Wigand.

Brown & Williamson's ire is focused primarily on two scenes. In one, Wigand finds a bullet in his mailbox and a note threatening him and his children. In the other, he is trailed by a menacing figure.

Filmmakers have acknowledged that the second scene is fiction, created for dramatic effect.

Wigand actually reported finding a bullet and threatening note in his mailbox. An FBI agent who investigated the incident suggested in a federal affidavit that Wigand might have

put it there himself.

Even so, Brown & Williamson probably would have a tough time winning a libel action against Disney, legal experts said.

The company would have to prove that the events depicted in the film were false and that Disney knew they were untrue and published them with "reckless disregard for the truth," said Doug Mirell, who teaches libel law at the University of Southern California.

Another problem is that writers and filmmakers generally are given license when dealing with historical events and large institutions such as Brown & Williamson - which, under law, is considered a public figure.

Last weekend, company representatives went to "The Insider" screenings in eight cities, handing out cards asking patrons to answer questions about the film. Such tactics indicate the company may be unsure of its chances of winning a lawsuit, Mirell said.

Julianna Margulies refuses 'ER' contract

LOS ANGELES (AP) - Quick, get the oxygen: "ER" star Julianna Margulies has rejected an approximately \$27 million deal that would have kept her on the medical drama for two more years.

In February, the actress announced her intention to leave the NBC series and her role as nurse Carol Hathaway after this season and return to New York.

Executive producer John Wells

and Warner Bros. were unsuccessful in trying to change her mind despite the hefty contract offer, which included movie work, Daily Variety reported.

A source close to the actress, speaking Friday on condition of anonymity, confirmed she rejected the contract.

Wells told Variety he credited Margulies with contributing to the success of the top-rated program and

said he hoped they would work together in the future.

Margulies is not the only "ER" defector. George Clooney, who played Hathaway's lover, Dr. Doug Ross, left last season. Gloria Reuben made her last appearance as HIV-positive physician's assistant Jeanie Boulet on this week's episode.

Reuben will be performing as a backup singer and dancer on Tina Turner's upcoming world tour.