

Downstage Center

Go behind the scenes with Kevin Selwyn



“The theatre is in a \$%#!#load of trouble!”

A bit candid, yes, but nonetheless this is the opening line of Jane Martin’s play “Anton in Show Business,” opening Friday evening at Shenandoah University.

While clearly not a show for the kids, “Anton in Show Business” is a wonderful dissection of, well, show business. The action follows a wacky production of Anton Chekhov’s “Three Sisters” being staged in San Antonio, Texas, but manages to address major issues about the purpose of theatre and the life of an actor.

Chekhov was a Russian playwright from the late 19th century who only wrote a handful of full-length plays, but all are considered classics and true works of genius. Don’t care about old Russians and their old and possibly boring plays? That’s OK.

“Even if you don’t know Chekov, it’s entertaining. It’s very meta-theatrical. It’s a commentary on theatre as well as being a piece of entertainment,” said director and Assistant Professor of Theatre and Humanities Carolyn Coulson-Grigsby.

“I think it actually can open peo-

ple’s eyes about the theatrical process. If you don’t get the in-jokes, that’s fine. You can still have your eyes opened about the lifestyle and challenges of performers.”

Besides being a play-within-a-play and commenting inwardly on the specifics of theatre, another interesting aspect about this production is that the cast is all women. Perhaps a bit more interesting to the casual reader than old Russians, yes?

This was not the doing of Coulson-Grigsby but is inherent in Martin’s play. The playwright addresses why she requires a cast of 14 women, some of whom play both male and female roles. “Eighty percent of the roles in American theatre are played by men and 90 percent of directors are men, the point of having a male director played by a woman is to readdress the former and satirize the latter,” writes Martin.

“I love working with an all-female cast. This is my first time working like this, and I feel like I’m going to a crazy theatrical sleep-over every night,” said junior Shannon Horton, who plays one of the actresses playing one of the three sisters. The other two are played by juniors Corinne Bupp and Erika Conaway.

“My character has to do a love scene with another character. I didn’t really know her that well and we both were just kind of like ‘OK, so now we’re really close friends,’” said Conaway, who is acting in both her first play and first all-female production.

“And it’s empowering, you know? We don’t need guys to do a show. Shakespeare used all men, Jane Martin uses all women,” said Bupp.

I sat in on a dress rehearsal of “Anton in Show Business” last Tuesday night. Coulson-Grigsby has a very hands-on style of directing.

While most directors may be content sitting out in the audience, barking out bits of direction, Grigsby is frequently up on her feet to work blocking or to discuss character. She settles in different areas of the audience to view her production from every angle.

“The way I work is to give very, very basic blocking, let the actors do something, and then respond to what they’re doing,” she said. “Even when I have pre-blocking, I don’t do it. I very much like to respond to the actor.”

On working with all women, Coulson-Grigsby said, “The dynamic is very different. There is a bonding that occurs. There’s a certain fun aspect to it. I tend to approach the whole process as it being fun.”

Members of the campus and Winchester communities are in for a treat in seeing “Anton in Show Business.”

“Everybody loves comedy,” said assistant director Paige Herschell. “This is such a fun show. You’re gonna come and laugh your head off. The actors are great, and the author’s point of view is wonderful.”

“Anton in Show Business” opens Friday, Sept. 18, for a three-performance run in the Glaze Studio Theatre. Show times are 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 2:30 p.m. on Sunday.

General admission tickets are \$8 for the public. Tickets are free for SU students and employees with I.D.

Contact the box office at (540) 665-4569.