

THEATER REVIEW

How we live in the meantime

Brazilian director Christiane Jatahy's 'Moscow' aptly spins Chekhov's 'Sisters.'

CHARLES McNULTY
THEATER CRITIC

In Anton Chekhov's "Three Sisters," Olga, Masha and Irina, richly cultivated siblings languishing in a provincial military town a year after the death of their general father, long for their old life in Moscow. "To Moscow," they perennially cry, as though dreaming an impossible dream.

Why doesn't someone get a carriage and drop them off at the train station? This question leads to the artistic heart of Chekhov, a writer who was drawn to the gap between the idealized futures we concoct for ourselves and the much shabbier reality that is our lives.

Brazilian director, writer and filmmaker Christiane Jatahy explores this discrepancy to ingenious effect in "What if They Went to Moscow?" The production, which runs through Sunday at REDCAT, is part of a trilogy of multimedia investigations of classics that includes "Julia" (inspired by August Strindberg's "Miss Julie") and "The Walking Forest" (loosely based on Shakespeare's "Macbeth").

The audience for "What if They Went to Moscow?" is divided into two groups: one that witnesses the actors perform this 90-minute deconstruction of Chekhov's play in the theater, another that experiences a carefully orchestrated live feed of the performance on screen.

The groups switch places after a lengthy interval that turns this offering into a four-hour event. The time not wasted in the logistical break is well spent. Moving with bubbling vigor, the production has the ingredient that even the most audaciously postmodern "Three Sisters" requires: a trio of actresses who can lure you into the



at, waits in line, pushing us forward
the time keeping us from diving.

VANESSA CROCI/

IN A RE-IMAGINING of Chekhov's "Three Sisters," Isabel Teixeira, from left, is Olga, Julia Bernat is Irina and Stella Rabello is Maria. The show is at REDCAT.

'What if They Went to Moscow?'

Where: REDCAT, 631 W. 2nd St., L.A.

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday, 1 p.m. Sunday

Tickets: \$30

Info: REDCAT.org

labyrinths of their inner selves. (The production uses supertitles when the cast members, who are fairly adept in English, speak in Portuguese.)

Isabel Teixeira plays Olga, the eldest daughter who, not having a husband or children of her own, assumes the role of the sisters' late mother. Julia Bernat is Irina, the youngest and most plaintively restless, whose 20th birthday has occasioned the festive gathering that turns tumultuously soul-searching. And Stella Rabello portrays unhappily married Maria, a romantic thunderclap of a woman, neurotic yet savagely loving.

I first experienced the

piece in the theater, where the atmosphere (though meticulously organized) lends an impression of improvisational looseness. The activity onstage is overlapping, dispersing our attention. Orange juice is poured; bottles of vodka, champagne and red wine are opened. Irina strums a moody number on an electric guitar. Cake is cut. Olga, ever catering to her guests onstage and in the audience, serves homemade snacks. Maria, brooding in a corner, threatens to leave early. Dancing breaks out. Theatergoers are invited to join the party.

Time passes as though nothing consequential is happening, but in Chekhov this is precisely when existence asserts itself. We may recount our lives as though they are a series of narrative climaxes, but it's in the interstices that we mostly live. Waiting... for the future to arrive, for promises to be realized (or definitively dashed), for transformation to miraculously materialize.

While largely confining the action to the first act of Chekhov's drama, Jatahy plays catch-up in the final movement of her free-form riff. The

men in the sisters' lives, a reliable source of distress, are portrayed with quiet finesse by company members who move around video equipment and help keep the show technically and musically on track. The plot, however, is less important than the internal processing of the women, whose affectionate bonds with one another allow them to withstand the disappointments that rain down on them.

The theater performance regularly underscores the immediacy of what's occurring. The date and time at the start and the end of the piece are announced. There's mention of contemporary Brazilian politics (and the rise of fascism on the world stage). Characters wonder aloud about the present-tense quality of the past. The elusive nature of change — how do we stop talking about it and finally initiate it? — is taken up as a collective quandary.

None of the temporal philosophizing, however, has the power of the physical presence of the actors, their soulful earthiness, the shadowy light of their inhabited bodies. It is the felt life that Chekhov brings us, the living the-

atrical record of emotion that says these characters are once again here among us, eating, wishing, loving, crying, enduring.

The cinematic version of the piece, presented in REDCAT's gallery space, focuses the storytelling by tuning out activity, making us privy to conversations not visible or audible in the theater and homing in through closeups on the tears and furrowed brows of the actors. Details are filled in even as larger connections (among the entire cast and between the company and the spectators) are sacrificed for specificity.

These are complementary rather than competitive experiences. What's astonishing is the lack of redundancy in the nearly exact halves, a credit to the fresh vitality of the acting and the rich discipline of Jatahy's scripted coordination.

Richard Gilman, perhaps the most incisive American critic of Chekhov, argues in "Chekhov: An Opening Into Eternity" that just as Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" is about how the tramps fill up their time while waiting for the title character who never arrives, "Three Sisters" is about "how the sisters live while not getting to Moscow." "Why they don't get to Moscow is, then, a question only to those for whom everything in art, as in life, is utility, satisfaction, recompense, and everything not seized and exploited, all that doesn't work to our ostensible advantage, is defeat."

The play, Gilman writes, "proposes other values," chief among these an "acceptance of mystery" in this "drama of inconclusiveness." Jatahy recognizes this wisdom while sharing the desperate longing of Chekhov's characters to make a better world than the one that currently exists. The production maintains the metaphysical long view while administering the gentle reproach that Russian writer Maxim Gorky heard in Chekhov's compassionate art: "You live badly, my friends. It is shameful to live like that."

Artistic force makes a move

Naima J. Keith leaves the California African American Museum and heads to LACMA.

BY DEBORAH VANKIN

Naima J. Keith, the California African American Museum's deputy director and chief curator, is headed to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art as vice president of education and public programs.

"It's a great time of change for LACMA, and I'm really excited to be a part of it," said Keith, who takes her post April 1.

Keith joined CAAM in February 2016 and is credited with transforming a then-sleepy museum in L.A.'s Exposition Park into a must-visit destination known for popular, spirited art openings. Visitorship has doubled from nearly 55,000 in 2015 to more than 100,000 in 2018.

The museum's collection went through growth spurts as well under Keith. In 2016, collector and Art + Practice co-founder Eileen Harris Norton donated 10 works by artists including Gary Simmons, Yinka Shonibare, Kianga Ford and Albert Chong. In March, it received a gift of 32 paintings, sculptures and mixed media works from L.A. collector, scholar and artist advocate Gordon W. Bailey.

"And just CAAM's visibility in the city, and press wise, has grown," said Keith, who previously had been a curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem and also worked at the Hammer Museum in L.A. "It wasn't nonexistent before, but it wasn't this consistently reviewed."

So why leave?

"I was brought into