

5 One-Act Chekhov Plays for the Price of One

By [John Freedman](#)

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“Chekhov Gala” is a run-through of five one-act Chekhov plays. Ilya Isayev, above, plays the creditor in “The Bear.” **Yekaterina Menshova**

If you cannot get your fill of Anton Chekhov, the National Youth Theater has just the show for you: a full-course feast of Chekhov plays all in one evening, with a rich theatrical dessert tossed in for good measure.

Five Chekhov plays — count ’em, five! — go into the production that director Alexei Borodin calls “Chekhov Gala.”

These are most, though not all, of the popular one-act farces that Chekhov wrote before most people knew he could write plays. “The Wedding,” “The Bear,” “The Anniversary,” “The Proposal” and “On the Harmfulness of Tobacco” are often staged separately or in pairs. I don’t know that I’ve ever heard of all five being squeezed into a single unit.

It goes without saying that Borodin trimmed the plays to make them fit into one compact performance.

But one of his real accomplishments was to break each play into discrete scenes, which he shuffles like the individual cards of five different decks. The booming romantic intruder in “The Bear” stalks the stage angrily as guests gather noisily for the celebration in “The Wedding,” while the inept courting going on during “The Proposal” is repeatedly interrupted by the frustrated bank workers preparing for a party in “The Anniversary.”

All ultimately stand back in surprise as a confused lecturer steps forward to inform us why smoking is harmful to our health, but ends up confirming once and for all that it is marriage that probably offers the most dangers.

It's not so much that Borodin created a five- or four-ring circus, although, in a sense, four of the five plays unfold simultaneously. The trick is that he weaves the scenes together in a way that keeps the story-telling machine working on all cylinders. A scene from one play is performed briefly and then gives way to other scenes and other plays before the action swings back around again to its starting point.

Borodin worked closely with designer Stanislav Benediktov to create a welcoming space for all of this.

The stage is covered in a veritable forest of chairs and tables. Soon enough we realize that each bundle of furniture belongs to a specific set of characters, although anyone from any play can, and does, walk through “alien territory” to get where he or she needs to go.

A handful of design items suggest that these plays provide an entry into a stranger, perhaps less rational, world.

A wooden carving of the family horse in “The Bear” stands off to the side, a massive, motionless monument. A wide open space behind a long, bowed wall at mid-stage seems to offer occasional glimpses into a slightly different realm.

But for all of this, “Chekhov Gala” is a strictly conventional and highly accessible production. This isn't an avant-garde director's cut creating something new and challenging; it is a clever, enjoyable manner of delivering up familiar tales, characters and theatrical mannerisms.

Surely the most pleasant aspect of “Chekhov Gala” is the acting. In recent years, Borodin has fine-tuned his company, and any show he offers nowadays is bound to include excellent performances.

It may seem unfair to single out just a few individuals in a show featuring 31 actors, but, hey, we critics have no qualms about being unjust.

Ilya Isayev is blustery and rude and strangely sensitive as the creditor who, in “The Bear,” bursts into a widow's home to extract money from her but ends up on his knees ready to die for her love.

Darya Semyonova and Alexander Doronin in “The Proposal” make a delightfully ill-matched

pair of neighbors who may think they want to get married, but are so defensive of their familial pride that both are willing to go to war to defend it.

As the appropriately named Nyukhin — or Sniffer — in “On the Harmfulness of Tobacco,” Alexei Maslov is both hilarious and touching.

As all the characters from all the other plays stand by looking on in wonderment, he takes over the stage and turns it into a kind of clumsy courthouse hearing on life and happiness.

“If you only knew how I want to escape this life,” he whines, “my awful, vulgar, life. ... ”

Borodin created a brisk, colorful and enjoyable two hours of theater that reminds us — for we need to be reminded of this interminably — that the pursuit of life, love and happiness is constant, is never concluded, rarely makes rational sense and, for those who have a sense of humor, is often a fine source for a good laugh or two.

“Chekhov Gala” plays Dec. 26 at 7 p.m. at the National Youth Theater, located at 2 Teatralnaya Ploshchad. Metro Okhotny Ryad, Teatralnaya. Tel. 692-0069, www.ramt.ru. Running time: 2 hours.

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