

Review: Chekhov knew ‘Life Sucks.’ Aaron Posner’s *Vanya redo* turns it into an invigorating question

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John Ross Bowie and Anne Gee Byrd star in the Interact Theatre Company’s L.A. Premiere production of “Life Sucks.” (Jason Niedle)

“Life Sucks.,” the title of Aaron Posner’s frolicsome riff on Anton Chekhov’s “Uncle Vanya,” contains a period. But a question mark might be more in keeping with the spirit of this invigorating play.

Not that the modern-day characters of this winning comedy are in any doubt about the losing proposition known as existence. The evidence they have individually amassed is overwhelming. Dreams never come true for this sorry lot.

But could the notion that life sucks be a starting point for discovery rather than a terminal epiphany? This possibility is playfully examined against a background of kvetching woe. The pathos is high, but laughter always manages to rise above despair.

Posner struck gold several years ago with [“Stupid ... Bird.”](#) his post-modern romp inspired by “The Seagull.” (The full title, containing an expletive, is still unprintable.) That work is more of a Chekhovian mash-up, drawing freely from the Russian playwright’s body of work.



Erin Pineda and Lily Rains star in “Life Sucks.” (Jason Niedle)

“Life Sucks,” an Interact Theatre Company production at the Broadwater Main Stage, is more strictly devoted to reimagining “Uncle Vanya.” “Our play transpires in four succinct acts... just like Chekhov’s original, superior play,” the Professor (Steve Vinovich) dutifully informs the audience early on. Posner toys with plot points and character names, but the basic storyline is the same and the essential Chekhovian angst over squandered potential and irretrievable loss is preserved.

[“Uncle Vanya”](#) is named after one of literature’s great whiners, a character who not only doesn’t get what he wants but has to suffer the indignity of watching other people enjoy what they don’t deserve. Vanya considers himself a loser, but in [Chekhov](#) there are no winners, only survivors, some with more grace than others.

The play, perhaps the greatest work on the malaise of middle age ever written, reveals that it’s possible to endure beyond even the obliteration of hope. Vanya and his niece Sonia will not realize their dreams of love, but they will work diligently in obscurity and bear their suffering for the sake of each other if not themselves.

This may sound depressing, but truth is refreshing when administered in Chekhov’s soulfully humorous manner. Posner ups the ante on the comedy in his remix, which breaks the fourth wall repeatedly to allow the performers to address the audience directly.

“Life Sucks.” conducts a spirited group-think on the spiritual meaning of “Uncle Vanya.” The comedy is antic, sometimes to a fault. But the play’s intentions are serious, never frivolous. And how could they be when the souls of the characters are on the line?

Vanya (John Ross Bowie, a nebbishy delight) has been slaving away for years on his family’s country estate. He lives with his niece Sonia (Olivia Castanho), who’s desperately in love with Dr. Aster (Marc Valera), an idealistic doctor with a drinking problem, who’s been hanging around more than usual lately because of the bewitching presence of the Professor’s wife, Ella (Erin Pineda).



Erin Pineda, Marc Valera and John Ross Bowie (in window) star in "Life Sucks." (Jason Niedle)

The Professor, Sonia's father, is a selfish and pompous prig who hates Vanya as much as Vanya hates him. He and Ella have come to stay for one of their regular visits, upsetting the staid routine of the household, which also includes Babs (the evergreen Anne Gee Byrd), a friend of Sonia's dead mother who has become a member of the family, and Pickles (Lily Rains), a daffy relation with the kindest heart.

Vanya, like his friend Dr. Aster, is insanely infatuated with Ella, who is tired of everyone falling in love with her, even though she waltzes around the house like a languorous sexpot. Aware that Sonia is angry with her for being the object of Dr. Aster's affections, Ella tries to bond with stepdaughter over rum and Cokes. But no one is going to come out of this romantic tinderbox unscathed.

Especially not Vanya, whose dejection turns to fury after the Professor announces a plan to sell the estate, which doesn't even belong to him. Babs sees that Vanya is about to combust, but nothing can stop his vengeance except his own ineptitude.

The production, spryly directed by Barry Heins, takes place on a gemütlich set by Evan A. Bartoletti that looks like Vermont through a Laura Ashley filter. A guitarist (Emilio Moyao substituted for Dylan Gorenberg at the reviewed performance) and a violinist (Madison Leinster) lend lyrical accompaniment from the sidelines. The music, by turns meditative and frisky, reminds us that for all the madcap high jinks, something vital is at stake.



John Ross Bowie, Marc Valera, Anne Gee Byrd, Olivia Castanho, Lily Rains, Erin Pineda and Steve Vinovich in "Life Sucks." (Jason Niedle)

The ensemble is first-rate, with each and every actor comfortably inhabiting Posner's hyperactive imagination. Castanho is especially good as a 21st century Sonia, a young woman who knows that she is no beauty and is desperately unhappy as a result but whose fundamental loveliness shines through nevertheless.

The play sometimes tries a little too hard to entertain. Pickles' ditsy act veers incongruously in the direction of the old variety show "Hee Haw."

Vanya fumbles for wisdom in a way that casts more doubt on the writing than on the speaker. The scene in which Vanya tries to unpack the source of his misery to Ella could use a rewrite, though the actors make it work by living so agilely in this whirling theatrical world.

The scenes have titles that are projected onto the stage. One of them is called “Three Things I Love.” Here, the characters share what makes them happy, listing such personal favorites as childish jokes, Nina Simone and “tiny, meaningless, random acts of kindness,”

In a scene called “Grey Nose Hairs,” the Professor has a startlingly candid speech about the vicious circle of aging. (Vinovich breathes frustrated life into the sequence by which pain, weight, indulgence and depression lead inevitably to disengagement.) At one point, Ella (in a galvanizing no-holds-barred performance by Pineda) canvasses the audience to see how many in attendance would care to sleep with her. A flock of hands goes up, as she had rightfully expected.

Vanya’s despair reaches such a point that the other characters eventually have to stage an intervention. The scene is entitled “What, Am I Supposed To Feel Sorry For You?” One by one, family members and friends speak this line to Vanya before inventorying their own monumental unhappiness.

The point is to get Vanya to realize that his misery doesn’t make him special. It makes him human. But then doesn’t that prove that life really does suck after all? Pickles, for one, refuses to surrender to such a bleak worldview.

The question is opened up to the spectators, and some of the most moving words of this exhilarating production are spoken by audience members on the fly. We’re all in this together is the takeaway of Posner’s play — and that doesn’t suck in the least.

'Life Sucks.'

Where: Broadwater Main Stage, 1076 Lillian Way, L.A.

When: 8 p.m Friday-Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday. Ends Sunday.

Tickets: \$32-\$38

Contact: our.show/life-sucks or www.interactla.org or at the box office

Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes