

## Theater review: Chekhov sequel 'Yes to Moscow'

Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic

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**Yes, Yes to Moscow:** Movement drama. Created and performed by Mark Jackson, Tilla Kratochwil, Sommer Ulrickson and Beth Wilmurt. Directed by Jackson and Ulrickson. (*Through Sunday. Art Street Theatre, San Francisco International Arts Festival at Dance Mission Theater, 3316 24th St., San Francisco. One hour. Tickets \$16-\$20. Call (800) 838-3006 or visit [www.sfiat.org](http://www.sfiat.org).)*)

So what would have happened to Chekhov's three sisters if they'd ever got back to Moscow? The graveyard of theatrical bombs is littered with the corpses of speculative sequels by lesser talents, from the further adventures of Falstaff or Sherlock Holmes to a late-life reunion for Huck and Tom or the fate of Ibsen's Nora after she slammed that "Doll's House" door.

Mark Jackson and his international collaborators avoid all the usual pitfalls in their wry, allusive, funny and surprisingly touching "Yes, Yes to Moscow." Rather than attempt to devise futures for Chekhov's Olga, Masha and Irina Prozorov - whose immortal poignancy is defined by their yearning futurelessness - the "Yes, Yes" team uses dance, reiterated passages from "The Three Sisters," song, clinical inquiry and sharply focused acting to probe the sisters' futures within their eternal present. As seen at Thursday's final dress rehearsal, with an invited audience, it's a strangely absorbing piece that leaves an afterglow.

"Yes, Yes" was to open Friday in its American premiere at Dance Mission Theater as one of the anchor presentations in the fifth San Francisco International Arts Festival. First staged last fall at Deutsches Theater Berlin, it's a German-American collaboration between Jackson and co-creator Beth Wilmurt's local Art Street Theatre, Berlin performer-choreographer Sommer Ulrickson (a former San Franciscan), German stage and film actor Tilla Kratochwil and three German designers.

Wilmurt, Ulrickson and Kratochwil appear as the three sisters, sometime after the events in Chekhov's play, dressed in loose hospital gowns (costumes by Ute Grenz). The stage is bare except for a small folding screen with a birch-tree pattern and three Papa, Mama and Baby Bear-size

chairs. Stark lights turn soft or shadowy, or cast the glow of a raging fire, as the women's minds shift from the sterile present to their past (production design by Suna Elbasi and Alexander Polzin).

The past, now fondly remembered - until they get inside it once more - was their life stuck in the provincial town to which their military father had been posted, abandoned by his death and the departure of his unit, and their longing, in the phrase taken as this piece's title, to return to the metropolis of their childhood. The more ambiguous present seems to be a hospital ward, where the women are being interrogated in professionally neutral tones by Jackson, seated at a table on the edge of the audience.

Skittery movement patterns give way to the increasingly well-defined idiosyncratic characters of the three sisters. The forced optimism of Wilmurt's Olga, the eldest, develops ever deeper cracks as she tries not to confront her looming spinsterhood as a provincial schoolteacher in her late 20s and clings to hope in the possibly radiant future of Irina, the youngest. Ulrickson inhabits Irina with a physicality at once flowing and fierce, a steely determination at times breaking through her sunny youthful expectancy.

Kratochwil, often working in German, keeps mining deeper layers of the resentful, unhappily married Masha. Her giddy, adulterous courtship with the newly arrived soldier Vershinin, in which she plays both parts, is a gem. So, too, is the titillated reaction of the sisters when he arrives, a sharply choreographed trio of flirtatious excess erupting from a military march.

Incisive or frenetic movement passages resonate with the interrogator's questions or the sisters' re-enacted memories in Jackson and Ulrickson's stagings. Songs punctuate the action, some solo, others in gently layered three-part harmony, accompanied by acoustic guitar or body percussion. As Masha absents herself from the present, and Olga settles into Malvina Reynolds' "Don't Talk to Me of Love" and a wistful "500 Miles," Ulrickson's Irina fixes her gaze defiantly on what may be an illusory ray of hope. With that, "Yes, Yes" strikes the same poignant chord that resonates at the close of Chekhov's masterpiece.

E-mail Robert Hurwitt at [rhurwitt@sfnchronicle.com](mailto:rhurwitt@sfnchronicle.com).

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