

STAGE REVIEW

Love among the ruins in the Chekhov-inspired ‘Uncle Jack’



KALMAN ZABARSKY

From left: John Kooi, Nancy E. Carroll, Timothy Spears, and Madeleine Lambert in “Uncle Jack.”

By Terry Byrne | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 17, 2015

When you step into the Lane-Comley Studio 210 for “Uncle Jack,” Courtney Nelson’s lush set is so enchanting it transports you instantly into the world of the play: in this case, a theater company on an old estate in the Berkshires.

Rooting the audience so deeply in the action allows playwright and director Michael Hammond to focus on the emotional heart of his characters and craft an extraordinarily moving adaptation.

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Based on Anton Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya," "Uncle Jack" is set on the crumbling estate owned by the Fox Hollow Theater Company. You can substitute the Edith Wharton estate owned by Shakespeare & Company, where Hammond was a longtime player, but you don't need to know anything about that company to feel the deep loss and laugh at all the sly humor on display. Instead, by drawing on his own experiences, Hammond makes these characters' reactions and desires feel honest and sincere, and it is easy to empathize with their plight.

All of Chekhov's romantic and often pitiful characters are here. Jack (John Kooi) is the long-suffering "factotum for a charismatic émigré" named Derek (Will Lyman), the theater company's artistic director. The aging Derek is moody and resentful despite the attentions of his beautiful young wife, Elena (Madeleine Lambert), who is bored by him but remains loyal. Jack and Sonia (Maria DeCotis), Derek's daughter from his marriage to Jack's sister, have worked hard to hold the company and the estate together, enduring Derek's egocentric whims, even as Jack lusts after Elena.

The scene is completed with the appearance of Wolfe (Michael Kaye), the doctor Jack calls "not a guest, a fixture" for his constant visits; Clare (Nancy E. Carroll), the company's longtime dramaturg who seems to be the only one who can soothe Derek's savage breast; and Tug (Timothy Spears), the caretaker of the property.

UNCLE JACK

Lane-Comley Studio 210, 264 Huntington Ave.,
617-933-8600. <http://www.bu.edu/cfa/bcap>

Writers: Michael Hammond

Director: Hammond

Other Credits: Set, Courtney Nelson. Costumes,

Nicole Angell. Lights, Paul Timmel. Sound,
Edward Young.

Presenting organizations: A co-production of
Boston Center for American Performance and
Boston Playwrights' Theatre

Date closing: March 1

Ticket price: \$30

Director Hammond has gathered a superb ensemble, so he can attend to those intimate moments between characters, focusing on the little details that reveal so much about the subtext in a scene. When Jack arrives with a bouquet of flowers for Elena and catches her in an embrace with Wolfe, Kooi's reaction is an exquisite blend of heartbreaking disappointment and a hilariously absurd and inappropriate gesture. When Elena confronts Sonia with the knowledge that Sonia is in love with Wolfe, DeCotis, as Sonia, fairly crumbles before our eyes. When Jack bemoans his wasted theatrical talent, we acutely feel those fearful moments on stage when he went blank, relying on sheer nerve to find his place in a scene.

While Hammond focuses on the awkward and melodramatic love triangle of Jack, Wolfe, and Elena, Spears, as the caretaker everyone dismisses, provides an enormous amount of levity without taking anything away from the tale. His passionate speeches about the land provide a perfect balance for Wolfe's rages against the destruction of the woods, as everyone on this estate struggles with the shifting of the once-solid ground beneath them.

In a beautiful bonus, DeCotis and Spears provide a charming distraction during scene changes with solo snippets and duets on the ukulele. The music is plaintive and endearing, the perfect complement to the action on stage.

Ultimately, this production of "Uncle Jack" represents one of those thrilling moments in the theater when script, direction, performances, and design all work together to create an evening of theater that is truly transforming. Chekhov would be proud.

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