



Serve up the Suffering

The Trip's inventive, clever *Three Sisters* takes it to a new place

by Jeff Smith, October 15, 2015 / *San Diego Reader*

In Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (1900), Lieutenant Vershinin wonders what the world will be like in 200 years. I wonder if Chekhov could imagine that, 115 years after it opened, a company would mount his masterpiece on a corporate tennis court, overlooking Torrey Pines South, and the Pacific beyond.

By all accounts, the La Jolla Playhouse's recent Without Walls Festival was a huge success (the only criticism: next year, run it at least two weeks). Its purpose: remove theater from the four-wall box that's contained it for centuries. *Three Sisters* must rank as one of the most "boxed" plays of all. It's usually treated as a solemn, sepia-toned museum piece, rather than one of the most lively plays in theater.

But the long-suffering Prozorov sisters playing tennis? Yes. And Irina (Jenni Putney) has a killer overhand smash. The Trip's inventive piece, adapted and directed by Tom Dugdale, serves the play, even restores much of its humor.

It's definitely irreverent: a giant balloony tennis ball; Chebutykin, the army doctor, is a life-sized cutout leaning on the net; there are songs,

some funny, one starkly moving (“And We Go On”), and dances. The cast sometimes whines and moans in actual — not acted — ways. The new site breaks the old physical walls; the irreverence clears the psychological pallet, like a sorbet, and provides a refreshing look at the familiar.

The sisters are still stuck in a nameless town too many miles from their beloved Moscow. Since their father died, a year to the day, they’ve lost an ordering principle. Life goes on, but shaken loose. Brother Andrey, for example, is gaining weight and has a growing penchant for gambling.

Into this malaise of anomie drifts Natasha Ivanovna (Claire Kaplan). At first she’s an outcast — check out that green belt on her tennis outfit; I mean, have you ever? Then she gradually takes control. In the end she’s so dictatorial they could subtitle *Three Sisters* “The Rise of Natasha.”

The site erases notions of a proscenium. The performance begins at sundown. The audience sits on the tennis court; two rows of black folding chairs run across the forecourt service line. Tennis balls bounce and bound, highlighted by Solyony (Matt Bradley) dumping a box of them on his head and Irina’s volley practice. Typical Trip humor: she returns about 15 in a row — pure machine, brain on hold — and she’s asked, “What are you thinking?”

Another boundary broken: the text is supposed to quote Lermontov, the dour Russian poet. No can do, Chebutykin shouts, looking at the audience in dismay, “that’s a lost reference.”

The location made for a one-in-a-gazillion moment. Near the end, as the soldiers leave the town, four Miramar jets roared overhead. Andrey (Patrick Riley) froze, a la the Starlight Bowl. Then, as if on cue, he said, “the town’s emptying out.”

The Trip’s ensemble work is up to its usual high standard. To a person, the cast is fluid and flexible. They perform in two styles: one wide enough for the outdoors; the other, in a splendid video reminiscent of

Ingmar Bergman via Woody Allen's *Interiors*, combines stark moments with stillness in long, close-up takes.

The piece is also "Chekhovian." In Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, saintly Prince Mishkin "always felt sad at moments of great joy." Chekhov's play unfolds like Mishkin's heart: in the midst of despair, there's always someone who couldn't possibly be happier.