

Intellectually demanding play pays with superior acting

By Adrian Chamberlain
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What: A Month in the Country
Where: Langham Court Theatre
When: To May 7
Rating: Three-and-a-half stars (out of five)

One has to admire the Victoria Theatre Guild. This season, the community theatre has tackled some challenging plays such as the jumbo-cast Laramie Project and Alan Bennett's curious *The Lady in the Van*.

Now, under the direction of Guild veteran Toshik Bukowiecki, the Langham Court gang offers an intellectually rigorous, whopping whale of a tale. It is Brian Friel's adaptation of *A Month in the Country*, taken from the 1872 play by Ivan Turgenev.

Turgenev isn't as well known as fellow Russian writers Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, but is highly regarded (Henry James was especially big on Turgenev). *A Month in the Country* is a precursor to Anton Chekhov who, like Turgenev, was fascinated by the inequities of the class system and also perfected the bittersweet art of comedy rooted in tragedy.

I hate to say any production "isn't for the faint of heart," which seems the kiss of death (sort of like describing a blind date as having a "terrific personality"). Certainly, *A Month in the Country* is a long night at the theatre, but don't be afraid — the rewards are there.

There's some superior acting in this show, particularly that of Odile Nelson. She stars in the rich and juicy role of Natalya, a narcissistic, manipulative woman married to a wealthy, dull landowner. Nelson's Thursday night performance was highly accomplished, confident yet nuanced.

A Month in the Country — a drama with peppered with comic elements — is an examination of how romantic relationships develop, moulded by the circumstances of class, wealth and the colliding tectonic plates of intellect and physical desire. At the play's heart is Natalya. A woman losing the bloom of youth, she's lost interest in her older husband Arkady (Michael Romano).

And she's now moving away from an affair, likely unconsummated, with Michel, who's quite nicely played by Jared Cowen. Michel is sophisticated and intelligent but lacks passion, like poor old Cecil in E.M. Forster's *Room With a View*.

Natalya develops the hots for handsome newcomer Aleksey (Ben Sutherland), hired as a tutor for Natalya's adopted teenage daughter Vera. There's something distinctly distasteful about

this. Aleksey and Vera already have a sweet, coltish relationship which Natayla tears apart in a horrible manner.

The intensity of the drama is leavened by funny scenes. For instance, there's a goofy German guest, played by John Roebuck, who keeps spouting risqué malapropisms.

Act II kicks off with a subtler scene between two underlings, a clownish inept doctor (Randy Parker) and a paid companion (Linda O'Connor). Both played this very well Thursday, particularly O'Connor, who displayed an delicate, acutely observed comic knack.

This production is almost three hours including intermission. *A Month in the Country* is wordy and moves at a deliberate pace that some will find slow. If you believe the best theatre is of the Kraft-cheese-slices variety — instant gratification, little nutritional value — you will find this tough sledding.

However, the thoughtful theatre-goer — oh yes, I know you're out there — will find this ambitious effort worthwhile. The cast has put oodles of hard work into the play and it really shows.

With *A Month in the Country*, Turgenev (via Friel) probes deeply into aspects of human condition. His observations are never easy. As in real life, the characters make fundamental compromises — sometimes terrible, sometimes perplexing. Unsavoury characters occasionally behave well; nice folk sometimes reveal warty underbellies. Natalya is ultimately left in stifling domestic limbo, however, there is hope for the others.

Bill Adams has designed a cleverly two-sided set. The façade of a clapboard house, with a painted forest of birch trees in the background, is especially effective. Costumes by co-designers Susan Ferguson and Di Madill are well-cut and attractive.

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