



Marina Zudina and Yulia Sharikova, foreground, play Actresses C and D in Kunio Simizu's "The Dressing Room."

More Than Their Share Of Fantasy

By John Freedman

Theater is a house of make-believe and few things fascinate playwrights and directors more than an opportunity to play around with people at play. This makes children, actors, dreamers and the insane particularly popular on the stage.

Elements of all of this are evident in "The Truth About Don Quixote and Sancho," a dramatization of Miguel Cervantes' novel at OKOLO, the Theater Near the Stanislavsky House and in "The Dressing Room," a backstage play by Japanese writer Kunio Simizu at the Chekhov Art Theater.

"The Dressing Room" is a semi-original drama — more closely resembling a director's collage than a full-fledged play — that relies on copious quotes of entire scenes from the works of Anton Chekhov, primarily "The Seagull." It is set in a theater's dressing room where two ghosts of actresses past interact with two living actresses, at least one of whom is on her way to the other world herself. All are obsessed with the role of Nina Zarechnaya in "The Seagull" and they either rehearse the

lines incessantly or play out whole segments of the play.

Actress A (Galina Kindinova) has long been a ghost, apparently since she was killed during an air raid. Actress B (Yanina Kolesnichenko) is much younger than her cohort, though just as dead ever since she took her own life. Both had dreams of playing Nina Zarechnaya but never got beyond being the off-stage prompter for other actresses. Actress C (Marina Zudina) is in the middle of a performance of "The Seagull" when the play opens and Actress D (Yulia Sharikova) returns from a mental hospital to inform Actress C that she is now ready to take over the role of Zarechnaya.

Perhaps the most interesting and effective aspect of this production is the set by Anastasia Glebova and Vladimir Martirosov. The paper lanterns, butterfly wallpaper and natural floor mats, as well as the richly pleated costumes by Svetlana Kalinina, give the environment a distinct and attractive Japanese flavor. At the center is an enormous angled mirror that reflects half of the audience but, occasionally, when the lighting changes, reveals the ghosts living behind it. A strange bicycle-

like contraption rigged with a bellows, springs and pipes plays Japanese-sounding music when it is moved back and forth.

Director Yelena Nevezhina used the play primarily to create a gallery of typical theatrical personalities. Actress A is the reluctant mentor type who at least had a few opportunities to play men as walk-ons during her life. Actress B is caustic and impatient, while Actress C is a survivor, tough enough to beat out the competition, but sensitive enough to play her role even if she doesn't know her lines sufficiently well to work without a prompter. All of them do a great deal of prolonged primping before the mirror as they clear their throats, warm up their voices, have powder fights and repeat selected lines from "The Seagull" ad nauseam.

Sharikova's Actress D is the one who brings a sense of life and perspective to the goings-on. She is a dreamer, perhaps a crazy, who returns from an asylum to take over Actress C's place. This leads to an altercation in which C kills her accidentally, sending her over into the world of the ghosts. There she overcomes the initial hostility of the ghosts to convince them to perform

"Three Sisters" with her. Sharikova's gentle, nuanced performance adds an occasional third-dimension to a show that is usually handled in two.

In "The Truth About Don Quixote and Sancho," Alexander Pomaryov enlisted designer Sergei Yakunin to emphasize the links between imagination and child's play. The set resembles a child's nursery. The primary building materials for a wall of books, a ladder that transforms into the blade of a windmill and the armor that Don Quixote wears are construction paper, corrugated cardboard and plywood. The imitation brick walls on either side are painted in bright "kindergarten" pastels. Even the crude, functional musical instruments are made by hand.

Visually, this is a make-believe world, and the key notion this production leaves us with is that our dreams and even our delusions are among our most valuable possessions. Andrei Kochetkov, who also plays Don Quixote, created the relatively straightforward dramatization of Cervantes' novel. Holding to the tale's canonical events — Quixote's being "knighted" at an inn; his battle with a windmill; his final defeat at the hands of one of the town's students who pretends to be a knight himself — Kochetkov accentuated his hero's status as an outcast in a crass society, both as an author and as a performer. His Quixote cannot hide the fact that he is horrified by the uninspiring townspeople surrounding him. Until he is able to break free of them by imagining himself as a knight errant, he is on the verge of expiring from despair. And once he is forced to admit he is not the victorious warrior he claims to be, it is not long before he dies.

Life's finest qualities — believing in oneself, having a sense of purpose and engaging in a task of significance — snap into place for this Quixote when he pretends he is defending truth

and honor in a cynical and sated world. The fact that the horse he rides is a spindly fold-up toy only reinforces the power of his convictions. He is scornful of the efforts by his niece Antonia (Yelena Kolkhina) and others to have him cured of his dementia. Perhaps one of the reasons none succeeds is that they are equally scornful as they ridicule him. He can only be overcome by the terrible Knight of the White Moon (Vladimir Vorobyov), a local scholar in disguise, and the only one capable of realizing what Quixote will lose when deprived of his illusions. It is he who reads Cervantes' words in the finale — "Don Quixote was born for me alone, and I was born for him," as if he might now be tempted to carry on the dead man's prevarications.

Quixote's sidekick Sancho, as performed by Nikita Logimov, is more than the usual grumbling, materialistic squire. He has none of his master's high-minded aspirations, but has an innate understanding that his life is enhanced by Quixote's aspirations. He stoically accepts the abuse that comes with his job and does what is expected of him almost without question.

This is a production with its heart in the right place. It does run long and its heavy sense of melancholy can be oppressive. But when Don Quixote justifies his actions by declaring simply that "people choose different paths" — you can't help but be on his side.

"The Dressing Room" (*Grimyornaya*) plays at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, Wednesday and June 27 on the New Stage of the Chekhov Art Theater, located at 3 Kamergersky Pereulok, Metro Okhotny Ryad. Tel. 229-8760.

"The Truth About Don Quixote and Sancho" (*Pravda o Don Quixote i Sancho*) a production of OKOLO, the Theater Near the Stanislavsky House, resumes performances in the fall.



Kochetkov, left, stars as Don Quixote in "Truth," which he also wrote.

