

**A Reimagining of Chekhov, in German and English
by Jean Schiffman**



Among the 40 performances and three major art exhibits comprising the fifth San Francisco International Arts Festival is a small ensemble production that epitomizes one of the Festival's goals, to gather together "a world community of artists and audiences." Art Street Theatre's "Yes, Yes to Moscow," a radical reconstitution of Anton Chekhov's classic "Three Sisters," is a cultural and disciplinary hybrid, created by and for Germans and Americans.

Art Street writer/director Mark Jackson, one of San Francisco's most formidable theatrical talents, has been studying and working in Berlin intermittently for the past few years with actor and partner Beth Wilmurt. "Yes, Yes" emerged from the couple's ongoing involvement with German theater. The eponymous sisters are played by Wilmurt; American-born Berlin resident and choreographer Sommer Ulrickson, who also codirected "Yes, Yes" with Jackson; and Berlin actor Tilla Kratochwil. Ulrickson's partner, East Berliner Alexander Polzin, was the designer. Described by Jackson and team as "choreographic theater," the bilingual show was developed and premiered in Berlin. It combines the edgy experimentalism that dominates theater in Germany—where American stage realism was scrapped decades ago—with Jackson's own innovative approach to language and physicality.

In Chekhov's bittersweet comedy, the three provincial sisters yearn to return to their long-ago family estate in Moscow, but never do. "We wondered, what would happen if the sisters actually went to Moscow?" says Jackson. "They'd go insane, or something would happen to them psychologically if they actually arrived at this place they put on a pedestal since childhood. It couldn't possibly live up to their expectations."

Accordingly, the three confused siblings in Art Street's radically deconstructed production appear to be in a holding cell or mental hospital. Seated ringside, Jackson, as perhaps doctor or interrogator, queries them, trying to help the lost women separate their fantasies, derived from Chekhov's text, from the here-and-now. "All three react to their new reality in different ways, and that became interesting to us," says Jackson. "How people's ideas of happiness and what it should be for them are affected by the reality of the situation. And how that works on a local and also a national and international level."

The notion of home, and the impulse to move, are interwoven themes in "Yes, Yes." At one point the sisters sing a poignant and repetitive chorus of the quintessential hymn of homesick longing, "500 Miles." The repetition of elements, and the fragments of text, form a sort of memory play in which the characters skip mentally back and forth in place and time.

Jackson first wrote the script in his native English, then translated most of it into German with help from Ulrickson, who's fluent in both languages, and Kratochwil. When he and Ulrickson began codirecting, they realized that Jackson is very structured, looks for story, narrative and character development immediately, whereas Ulrickson is more dance-oriented, approaches the work more abstractly. Says Ulrickson, "Mark's background is more literal. I'm less linear." For his part, Jackson says he never thought of himself as a literalist, but in Germany he was, and to be confronted with that was fascinating. Ulrickson also thinks she's more comfortable with group collaboration, with being questioned, with leaving things unknown for a while. "Mark is used to working in a much shorter process. He'd tend to say, 'No, let's get to our script.' But," she adds, "we have a similar aesthetic and sense of humor."

The German actor, too, contributed. "Tilla insisted on knowing why we were doing what we were doing at any given moment," says Jackson. "At times [to do that] felt overintellectualized. But her constantly pushing for a level of detail in our thinking was a great benefit." On the other hand, he adds, "There are times when you just have to trust your gut and understand it later, and Beth, Sommer and I come more from that perspective."

"Theater is very different in Germany than America," observes Ulrickson. She says the team constantly wondered what would work in America, what would work in Germany—"and what is the piece we simply want to create? We tried to avoid pandering to either audience, and to allow it to be what it was. The style in America is very linear, narrative. That style is not done any more in Germany and parts of Europe. . . . Mark's quite progressive, more experimental than a lot of American theatermakers that I've known, and he knows that, but it's still different."

"You might never see a strictly naturalistic play done in Germany at all," agrees Jackson. "Even when they do realistic plays, they rely very much on imagination. What was new to them was our particular sense of showmanship. We have vaudeville in our blood, we want to get up and sing and entertain folks, and there's a buoyancy and enthusiasm behind that. . . . A lot of German theater has this kind of high-octane, violent, brooding quality." German audiences were so delighted with "Yes, Yes" that Ulrickson and Jackson were invited to create a new piece for a theater in Frankfurt in 2009.

How will American audiences react to a play crafted for two entirely different sets of sensibilities? Jackson is re-translating the script back into English, but keeping most of Kratochwil's lines in German. "The bilingual aspect was a horrific discussion for a while," says Ulrickson, "but it felt like a discussion that was going on outside of us. People in San Francisco thought you can't put German onstage without subtitles. Mark

and I have both seen theater in languages we didn't speak and loved the experience. We wanted to challenge people to get into it, not worry if they don't understand every word." She adds, "Languages carry an entire mood and sense and weight and aura with them. I'm curious as to what that small literal switch [from largely German to largely English] will do." The play's story, she says, is universal. Her hope is that even though the style is quite different for American theatergoers, it will prove that theater is a means of communicating across continents—"that we're capable of not being freaked out by the fact that something seems different at first."

Muses Jackson, "Having my expectations and normal way of doing things challenged by the German sensibility was just—enlightening." He says the creative process, with all its bumps and unfamiliar methods, worked its way into the fabric of the piece, right down to how the sisters relate. "To go through a process in which the process itself starts to gel with the original source material was an exciting thing to be part of," he says.

"Yes, Yes to Moscow," part of the San Francisco International Arts Festival, runs May 30-June 1, Dance Mission Theater, 3316 24th St. www.sfiaf.org; 1-800-838-3006.