

## Who is Anton and what is he doing in show business?

**Robbie Thornton**

The first question is easy, the second not so much. Let’s make this easy, though. *Anton in Show Business* is the funniest, most technically coordinated show we have seen at Port City for many years.



The premise of *Anton* is that three young women, one a television actress, one a sweet little neophyte from Texas and one a cynical veteran of too many unpaid stage roles, are auditioning and ultimately rehearsing a production of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* for a small community theater in Texas. While *Three Sisters* is not a knee-slapper, familiarity with the play is not requisite for understanding *Anton*, an allusion to the playwright. In fact, the play is unimportant, and the playwright is unimportant; show business is the thing. If any prerequisites are necessary, they are a keen sense of play and a love of the theater, because this show skewers the theater savagely and lovingly, as only a playwright who loves and knows the gritty underbelly of community theater where people of varying degrees of competence engage in savage competition for plum unpaid roles could do. While it doesn’t address the motives of unpaid actors and crews who live and breathe to act, to paint sets, to run the rickety fog machine, the play does explore why a successful television actress would join their ranks: Acting in classics such as Chekhov or Shakespeare, no matter whether it is on Broadway or in a warehouse at the edge of town, lends authority and credibility to an actor that television never can. TV might pay well, but it is the bottom of the artistic heap.

There is an acknowledgement of the pecking order of respect, with television at the bottom and theater at the top, but ironically, often a necessary stop on the way to the magic of film where respect and big money merge in a most attractive package. Speaking of which....

Amy Hard (Holly) is gorgeous. Not only physically, but she was so made to play this role that it fits her like a slinky evening gown. So does the slinky evening gown. She is self-absorbed, self-centered, vain and very human. Center stage is wherever she happens to be. As the egocentric television actress, she is ambitious, smug and acutely aware of what she wants.

She becomes a person when she stands up for two would-be actresses who have been badly used by an arrogant director with precious ideas about auditioning actors without reference to the play for which they are auditioning. Who among us has not been there?

The two actors are Casey and Lisabette. Casey (Leta Hall), a cynical veteran of 200 shows without being paid (and she also has a “yeast infection that really pisses her off,”) is the perfect foil to Lisabette, the third grade teacher with a honeyed Southern accent who became a teacher because she was afraid of the actor’s life (pronounced *lahf*). Of course her accent evokes belly laughs when she says that she broke into theater with a role in *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Of course that allusion only works for those who are familiar with theater, as does so much of this play.

*Anton in Show Business* is not about Anton so much as it is about show business, from the time that the audience enters and begins playing *Name that Tune*, or more accurately, Name the Show that the tune comes from. We entered to a tune from *Pippin*, one of the first shows we ever saw on Broadway, back in the days before Ben Vereen was a blind Star-Trekker. Some of the tunes were less identifiable, but members of the audience continued trying to guess.

So it was that the first scene, an homage to Thornton Wilder, was a spot-on parody of the Stage Manager’s monologue at the top of *Our Town*. Again, the parody was funnier to those in the audience with pancake in their veins.

The three leads, each of whom played a single role, were surrounded by an excellent troupe of women who played multiple roles. Among them, Katie Gentric stood out with her portrayal of such characters as the gorgeous Cher-ish Kate and the convincingly appealing country singer, Ben.

Rhonda Carter also played several memorable roles, male and female created she them, and Lori Muhlstein who sashayed through a male role played by a woman playing a woman playing a man. On purpose. And several other larger-than-life roles.

One of the best attributes of this production is that the women appeared to genuinely enjoy working with each other. Their roles, characters/personalities complemented each other and the fun that these women had with their roles translated into tremendous fun for the audience.

*Anton in Show Business* is fun. Theater buffs, especially those of us who have slogged through summer stock and worked in local theater, before being demoted to the cheap seats to opine about the relative merits of people actually doing it, will recognize types and situation that bring guffaws and nods of recognition.

The first Port City show that we remember seeing was *South Pacific*, about thirty years ago, in the Richmond Theater, then known as the Puppet Theater, on King Street. To our mind, this is the most enjoyable and polished production in their history.

At Lee Center for the Performing Arts  
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