

Backstage Comedy On Stage At Lee Center  
 Lone Star State Location Offers Three Stars  
 By Brad Hathaway  
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The Port City Playhouse has plucked a gem from the crop of new plays introduced thus far in this still-new century — and has given it a spirited, enjoyable production at the Lee Center on Jefferson Street. "Anton in Show Business" drew a Steinberg New Play award from the American Theatre Critics Association in 2001 after it was introduced at the Humana Festival of New American Plays. It's a comedic look backstage as a regional theater company prepares a production of "The Three Sisters" by the Anton of the title, Anton Chekhov. Each of the three actresses who will play the three sisters exhibit some of the traits of her character in Chekhov's classic, but you don't need to know that hundred-year-old drama to enjoy this six-year-old comedy. There is the soap opera actress trying to give her career a boost after the boost from her breast implant surgery has run its course. There is the older actress battling her own demons after her bout of breast cancer. And, there is the local actress whose thick accent tells you in a moment that the production is being mounted in Texas.

It is difficult to do "Anton in Show Business" unless you can come up with an actress for the soap opera star role who not only looks the part but who can also act with a comic sense of assurance. Port City has Amy Hard who is not seen nearly enough on local stages. When she is, it is almost always a notable occasion. There was the Little Theatre of Alexandria 2002 production of "Sylvia" which earned her a Washington Area Theatre Community Honors (WATCH) award for outstanding performance. Last year it was Port City Playhouse's "Stop Kiss" in which she impressed. Now she adds this energetic and assured comic performance to the list.

Letta Hall brings a subtle touch of sorrow and a nice dash of determination to the role of the oldest of the three actresses while Caitlin Brodnick makes the most of the potentially stereotyped role of the blond country girl with the thick Texas drawl.

THEN THERE IS the collection of back-stage characters, all the way from the demanding director — played to the hilt by Lori Muhlstein — to the pragmatic stage manager — played with a droll sense of assurance by Rhonda Carter. As with many in the cast, these two are called upon to do multiple roles. Katie Gentic has three roles and keeps them nicely differentiated while using her own stage persona to good advantage in each.

In addition to all the characters on stage, there is also a drama critic in the audience who gives the company a bad time - at least until her cell phone goes off. (Let me tell you, that is the nightmare of a professional theater critic!)

Veteran local actor and director Chuck Dluhy is at the helm of this production, and he keeps things moving right along without either losing the focus on the story or pausing overlong on any one comic bit.

The play itself derives its strength both from a solid comedy/drama construction and from its obvious affection for the world it is lampooning. Each of the characters may have frailties and quirks worth lambasting, but each has a love of theater that makes the entire package enjoyable for any theater lover.

Where and When  
 The Port City Playhouse production of "Anton in Show Business" plays through Feb. 3 at the Nannie J. Lee Center, 1108 Jefferson Street. Performances are Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. as well as Tuesday, January 30 at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$12 - \$24. Call 703-838-2880 for information.

