



**'THREE SISTERS':** (left to right) Maggie Gyllenhaal, Juliet Rylance, Jessica Hecht in tepid revival of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*. Photo: Joan Marcus

*Theater Review*

## ***Three Sisters* revival: 'The Sisters Grim'**



***Three Sisters***

**Written by Anton Chekhov**

**Translated by Paul Schmidt**

**Directed by Austin Pendleton**

**Through March 6, 2011**

**Classic Stage Company**

**136 East 13th Street**

**(212-352-3101), [www.classicstage.org](http://www.classicstage.org)**

**By David NouNou**

“Bored, ” “in despair, ” “all this suffering ”—and a shriek by the youngest sister, Irina (Juliet Rylance), toward the end of act two—“what an awful night.” How perceptive of Irina to realize what the audience is feeling and sensing from this dreadful translation by Paul Schmidt of Anton Chekhov’s classic *The Three Sisters*, now titled simply *Three Sisters*. Where does one begin in mentioning all that went wrong in this version of *Three Sisters*? Let’s start with the translation. Was it supposed to sound more up-to-date, like in the 21st century vernacular, to make it more accessible for modern audiences—instead of early formal 20th century Russia, where it is set? Mr. Schmidt has kept the narrative intact, but put his own spin on the translation. *The Three Sisters* premiered in 1901 and is set in a provincial garrison town in Russia. Formality and refinement were the course of the day in upper-class society. People called each other by formal names; as many as three or four names were used in speaking to someone. Even if a nickname, as a term of endearment, was used in the case of Andrei, the brother (Josh Hamilton), he would be called “Andryusha.” He wouldn’t be jarringly called “*Andy, Andy, Andy*” throughout the play by his wife, Natasha (an abysmal Marin Ireland).

Starting on a festive occasion, Irina’s 20th birthday, and the one-year anniversary of their father’s death, *The Three Sisters* is a poignant classic about the decaying life of a noble family. Set outside of Moscow, it chronicles the lives of Olga, the eldest (Jessica Hecht); Masha, the middle (Maggie Gyllenhaal); and Irina, the youngest (Juliet Rylance) of the sisters; and their brother, Andrei (Josh Hamilton), whom they dote on with sisterly concern. As in any Russian drama, things always take a turn for the worst. Andrei marries Natasha, a harridan for a wife who takes over the household; Masha is unhappily married to an older man who dotes on her while she is in love with Vershinin, (Peter Sarsgaard), a married Lt. Colonel, Battery Commander with two daughters. Olga is a spinster school matron, and Irina yearns to be in Moscow, full of dreams and aspirations. Needless to say, everything sours and all their dreams, hopes and desires are dashed. One does not go to see Chekhov expecting to see frivolity, humor, or a happy ending. After all, this is a Russian play where sadness, suffering, hopelessness, misery, broken hearts, and unfulfilled dreams prevail—the stuff that mere mortals face on a daily basis, even today.

However, one does go to a Chekhov play expecting excellent acting, or at the very least, good to fair acting. Headed by a stellar cast, which includes two of the movies' brighter and younger talented stars: Last year's Oscar nominee for *Crazy Heart*, Maggie Gyllenhaal as Masha, and Peter Sarsgaard (star of last year's excellent *An Education*) as Vershinin, come off best. They actually *do* have chemistry in their scenes together.

As for the rest of the cast, including Jessica Hecht, Josh Hamilton, and Marin Ireland, all of whom have done excellent work in previous New York outings, they leave one wondering: What the hell were they thinking? Ms. Hecht's Olga is spineless and whiny. Mr. Hamilton's Andrei is tantrumy and ineffectual. As for Ms. Ireland's performance as Natasha, she gives the worst of the evening—let me correct that, of the season, on or off Broadway, in either the male or female category. We know that Natasha has no redeeming qualities. However, Ms. Ireland has added a few more: shrill, jarring, and obnoxious. And the remainder of the cast? They are, literally and figuratively, all over the place.

One must ask where or who was the director of this travesty? The blame indeed would have to fall on Austin Pendleton. His direction (or lack of it) is mind-boggling. There is no cohesion and no interaction, and each cast member does his or her own thing—and in their own time period. People come shrieking on to the stage and go screaming off the stage, with hysterics and hamming overflowing in abundance. The quiet scenes are stilted, and the crowded scenes are aimless. It reminds me of the beleaguered high-school drama teacher who has the futile task of directing unruly students in a school play—helplessly throwing her arms up and letting them do what they want, just to get the whole thing over with.

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