



Ryan Primm, Braden Coucher and Rebecca Morus in *The Good Doctor*

Chekhov, Simon and Slapstick

UO mixes unlikely ingredients for potent *Good Doctor*

A sparse, sepia toned stage greets the viewer with the bleak message "This space to let, inquire within" stenciled across the playing space. Off to one side sits a tall, wry writer who has just stepped out the late 19th century to join us for the evening. Over the next two and a half hours, he invites the audience into the unpolished world of his well-worn notebook, featuring half-completed character sketches set in situations so far-fetched they must be real, blending humor and sadness in a somewhat modern, truly Russian way.

The Good Doctor is Neil Simon's vaudevillian adaptation of Chekhov stories. Modern audiences know Chekhov for *The Cherry Orchard*, *Uncle Vanya* and other great Russian dramas, and Simon for huge hit comedies like *Brighton Beach Memoires* and *The Odd Couple*. Most people don't know much about vaudeville except as some vague collective image etched on the American brain, composed of slapstick comedy and saccharine melodrama. As unlikely as is this trio of Chekhov, Simon and vaudeville, you can find a solid staging of it at the UO's Hope Theatre. *The Good Doctor* is a rare play that true connoisseurs of the theater should relish the opportunity to ingest.

The press release claims that *The Good Doctor* is a Broadway hit with something for everyone. A 6-month run in the early '70s and a 1-month revival in the late '90s doesn't quite qualify as a Broadway hit, but that representation is unfair in other ways as well. *The Good Doctor* is

decidedly not commercial, exactly the reason we are lucky to have a university theater. Director Theresa Robbins Dudeck helped her students pull meaning out of the smallest of moments, like an ill-timed sneeze or a postponed cup of tea. The play can be completely nonsensical, but if I was perplexed one minute, I found myself laughing or even guffawing the next.

With the exception of *The Writer* (talented Braden Coucher), each actor played a series of roles, some over the top, some sweetly real. I enjoyed everyone and was particularly impressed by Jacob King and Kathleen Leary. Rarely have I seen a cast interact with an audience so comfortably. It felt like the audience had been invited in for the evening, and the cast had an honest desire to entertain and make us feel welcome. When an audience member dropped a program or an errant cell phone rang, an actor would help out and pause the action until all was settled. It was like the Reduced Shakespeare Company, only nice.

In his reflections, *The Writer* laments that critics slay his work with the word "charming". He's constantly compared to other great Russian writers — and it's anyone's bad luck to be publishing in an age of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. When I compare *The Good Doctor* to Simon or Chekhov's other great works, this one turns out to be ... charming. In the end, this laugh-out-loud, slapstick comedy is a little sad, a little long and very Russian. **EW**

The Good Doctor continues through Jan. 30. Tix at tickets.uoregon.edu/ut or 541-346-4363.

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