

What's with Tennis? It's Playing on Stage

by John Martin

First it was La Jolla Playhouse moving Anton Chekov's *Three Sisters* to a tennis court off Torrey Pines Road. That was October.

Then the Old Globe Theater scheduled a play called *The Last Match* for next month in Balboa Park.

Rarely has tennis played such a prominent role in the arts — if you set aside the Hollywood movies where earnest actors hit poorly fashioned strokes that sap our confidence in the film. This is different. Jenni Putney, the actor playing Irina in *Three Sisters*, knows her stuff. She capably tapped forehand and backhand volleys fed rapid fire by a fellow actor, then comfortably smashed a few overheads into the back court. A former high school tennis player and coach in Palo Alto, Putney is the real deal as a tennis player and a performer.

Chekhov's play is a mordant look at life. The sisters feel desperation and pain. So why did Tom Dugdale, the co-artistic director of the theater company called The Trip, move the play to a tennis court, where his actors frequently jump the net, dance along the baselines and forecourt, inflate and cavort with a huge tennis ball, and talk to the spectators?

Two reasons, he suggested. First, to evoke a sense of leisure (from another time; everybody wears white). Second, to exploit tennis's intensity. "Tennis really boils because of how much energy is contained in a smaller space. The whole thing is even further intensified by the fact there is a net between these two opponents."

Dugdale took lessons and played tennis as a child and young teenager. "I loved Agassi and Sampras," he said, "that rivalry."

Seemingly intrigued by the woes struggling players face today, he cites another Anton Chekhov who quit the ATP tour after earning only \$450 and ranking far beyond 1,000th. "It would seem his career was a failure and his dreams of being a champion were unrealized," Dugdale wrote in the playbill. Playwright Chekhov, of course, would have feasted on such misfortune.

Next month, the Old Globe stages the world debut of *The Last Match*. Playwright Anna Ziegler laid out the plot. It's the US Open semifinals. "Russian phenom Sergei Sergeyev and American superstar Tim Porter do battle," she writes.

The audience soon finds itself "inside the minds" of the two players, exploring "the lives and the relationships that led to this defining moment." Before the final shot, she explains, more than just a match will be won and lost. The audience will learn what each player sacrificed to come this far.

As players, we can only pray they hit their shots as capably as Jenni Putney did as the totally credible tennis-playing Irina in *Three Sisters*.

If so, what's next? How about *Death of a Salesman* staged at Wimbledon?