

ROMULUS KILGORE'S

“snake oil,” with traveling hucksters bottling anything

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Photo 18: Kourtnei Gouche in Romulus Kilgore's *Mobile Happiness Bazaar*.

and preconceptions. As we continued working, I realized that my assumption that the “snake oil” man with the fancy name and fancier patter was running a scam—I realized that cynicism was exactly what the play was attacking. As Romulus explains at the climax of the show, as much as he might fear his own unhappiness, he is “more afraid of a world without happiness. A world where we think joy is a lie.”

Over and over during rehearsal, Fisher and Prudencio reiterated the importance of honesty and truthfulness. The setup for the show—Romulus Kilgore and his troupe of street performers have scoured the world for the secrets of happiness and now travel around selling these secrets—is fictitious, but other than that, it is one of the most truthful plays I have ever seen. Over the course of the 45-minute running time, three audience members are brought onstage to have their various problems—tiredness, worry, and loneliness—diagnosed and treated. Fisher insisted that these customers not be plants. He refused to call on people he knew, wanting the interactions and responses to be genuine and uncalculated.

Once the Festival began and the company was doing two shows a day in UCSD's Revelle Plaza, it became less and less of a play and more of a group therapy experience. Despite the “treatments” being choreographed and rehearsed, Romulus and his minions (played by Carlos Barajas, Brian Bose, Kourtnei Gouche, and Dennis Procopio) interacted with each customer as an individual, allowing the scripted conversations to feel organic and genuine each time. The three customers left the stage happier than when they started, and the whole crowd left the show lighter and less burdened, because of that honesty.

The term “snake oil” has an interesting history. Originally a Chinese folk remedy consisting of oil rendered from the body of the Chinese water snake, the genuine stuff is high in omega-3 fatty acids and was used to treat all kinds of joint pain. (Interestingly, current research shows that those fatty acids can also be used to treat depression—maybe Romulus Vespasian Framingham Kilgore is on to something!) Chinese laborers brought it to the United States in the 19th century, where our traditional ingenuity and salesmanship transformed snake oil into

it as a scientific panacea before skipping town. This later version is what got passed on linguistically, so that any reference to “snake oil” invokes cynical assumptions of deception and opportunism and scams. But even in those outer trappings of the showman and traveling

bazaar, with repeated reference to legal troubles, Romulus Kilgore rejects the deception and manipulation, and it's with an honest desire to help others that Romulus bursts onto stage. WoW is all about authentic connections with an audience, and Romulus Kilgore's *Mobile Happiness Bazaar* truly delivered.

### Fourth Wall Permeability in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*

by William Given

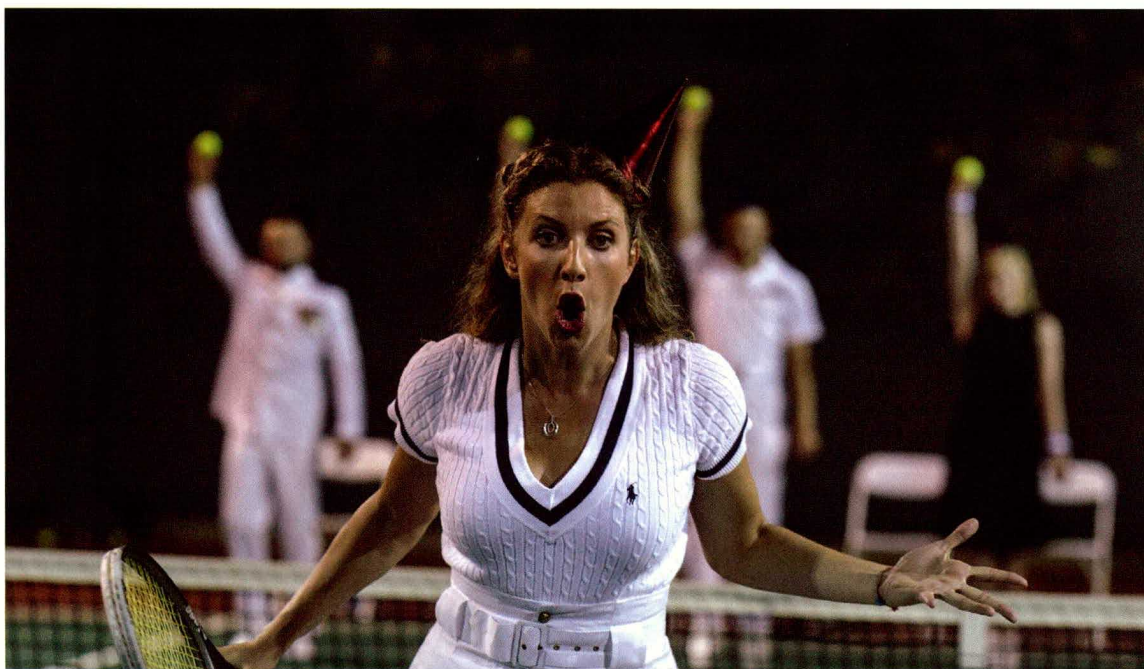
THE TRIP, a San Diego-based theatre company founded by Tom Dugdale and Joshua Kahan Brody, is dedicated to staging performances that challenge traditional boundaries of narrative and space. For their eighth production, the ensemble presented Chekhov's 1900 play, *Three Sisters*, on an outdoor tennis court overlooking the Pacific ocean. While on a cursory level it may seem an interesting choice of venue for a play that has nothing to do with tennis and that makes no mention of the sport throughout its four acts, the dramaturgical decision soon becomes apparent by instilling within the spectators a similar feeling



**Photo 23: The cast of *Three Sisters* at the WoW Festival.**

of isolated longing that drives the tonal undercurrent of the play. Just as the Prozorov sisters, Irina, Masha, and Olga, yearn to break free from the small outpost town they are living in and once again return to their idealized Moscow, audience members as well become increasingly aware of the barriers that contain and constrain them throughout the course of the

**Photo 22: THE TRIP'S *Three Sisters* at the WoW Festival.**



performance. With the audience seated at one end of the tennis court, the net itself seems to be the obvious representation of the proscenium of the site-specific stage, but the longer one observes the space, it becomes clear that the painted lines on the playing surface itself also immediately delineate alternative possible indicators of the perceived fourth wall separating performer and spectator. During the preshow, the audience views only barriers (baseline, service line, net,

opponent service line, and opponent baseline) and boxes (left and right service boxes and no man's lands on both sides of the court) that are each imbued with strict rules that govern the course of play in tennis. From the onset, the space itself influences precisely how the spectators will be engaging with the story.

Dugdale begins the blocking of the show with the performers entering and taking seats at the baseline on the other end of the court, facing the audience and directly mirroring them, establishing that both sets of

participants, actors and spectators, will be engaged in playing the play; *Three Sisters* will not be a performance then to simply be witnessed, but rather one that must be experienced. At the 2013 WoW Festival, Dugdale likewise involved the audience in his

production of *Our Town* by immersing them in a backyard barbeque before later moving them into a “traditional” four-walled theatre for the final act of the show. Creating the experiential and immediately challenging the audience to abandon passivity in order to take an active role in the actual creation of the performance is something that THE TRIP does exceptionally well, and the distance that is created between the audience and the actors at the top of the show indicates the tone that *Three Sisters* will take; the audience yearns to be closer to characters who yearn to be elsewhere.

Even with the empty expanse of the tennis court itself providing a chasm within the theatrical space, the spectators soon realize that they are in actuality directly linked to the actors, all contained within the imposing chain link fences of the tennis court that completely surround and encapsulate everyone participating in the performance. So even though there was a beautiful sunset taking place out over the ocean in which the venue provides a spectacular vantage point, it is still seemingly just out of reach and obscured by yet another barrier.

Once Dugdale establishes that both character and spectator alike are distanced and thereby isolated from a desire, be it Moscow or a sunset on a southern Californian beach, he dismantles any of the perceived barriers within the enclosed theatrical space and eliminates the fourth wall by staging scenes both in front of and behind the audience. Watching the spectators at a show by THE TRIP is remarkably theatrical in itself; spectators aren't sure at times if they should turn around to see the characters speaking the dialogue behind them or to continue watching the action directly in front of them. Dugdale instills his audiences with the power of choice and never tries to disrupt or usurp that choice throughout the course of the show; he allows the audience

to thus become more personally and emotionally invested in what is taking place by enveloping them in the world of the play.

In THE TRIP's contemporary adaptation of Chekhov, though, the reality of the audience's experience in the narrative space is never trivialized in favor of the world of the fictional play. At one point, an actor directly tells the audience that, “This is Miranda [Dainard]. She will now be playing Chebutykin,” immediately disrupting any established suspension of disbelief by stating the actress's actual name in order to remind the audience that the actors themselves, who likewise have their own yearnings and desires that can take their thoughts out of the performative moment, are also contained and constrained by yet another framework on a meta level. This is best evidenced by Dugdale's decision to show the entirety of the third act of the play as a movie on a screen that his company sets up on the tennis court. As Dugdale explains, “The film is a respite from live performance, a moment the actors might have escaped. To Moscow? To Hollywood, for all of us as actors really just want to be making film, since we'd be richer and more famous. The fact that the actors return for Act 4 is both triumphant and unbelievably sad to me. Triumphant in that we restart the art form I love, theater, with living bodies before us, sad in that they're still stuck here. Their getaway plan didn't work.” Through this conscious balancing act of exploring all of the frameworks that confine us and hold us back from that which we truly desire, and the subsequent roles that we find ourselves playing, whether it be actor playing a character or spectator playing the assumed part of audience member who follows social mores and decorum conventions, Dugdale is able to show the true power the theatre is able to have, if only one is brave enough to challenge the permeability of the fourth wall in the theatrical space.

## Chalk Rep's *In Case of Emergency*

by Bryan White

The first thing that registered to me about *In Case of Emergency* was that I, as an audience member, was on precarious ground. After walking approximately a block from UCSD's campus into a suburban enclave of million-dollar homes, I stopped in front of a house with an opened garage door and three rows of folding chairs set up in a driveway that sloped gently toward the street. There was a fourth, and front, row of seats which was comprised of overturned milk crates with pads on top; at the performance I attended, no one sat there. By virtue of the seating arrangement, I was immediately made an uneasy spectator, worried both about balance and sightlines. As the performance ran, I realized that balance and clear-sightedness were two key issues addressed by the production.

As a set, the space was made to look like a typical suburban garage; it looked as if it had been a place of benign neglect as so many garages do. The garage contained a long ramp intended for a wheelchair user that extended from the door that led into the home to approximately three-quarters of the way to the garage door (a remnant, we were told, of a previous owner) and several large stacks of brown cardboard boxes. Many of the boxes were emblazoned with Amazon.com logos, though a couple were from Zappos.com, an online shoe store—an odd production choice given that we eventually find out that most of the boxes contain items that are meant to be used, as the title says, *In Case of Emergency*.

The performance opened with Meredith (played by Amy Ellenberger, a founding member of Chalk Rep), a tightly-wound investment banker and owner of the property, having a conversation with Alex Cardenas (Daniel Rubiano), a person whom she has hired to