Chekhov play at Centaur Theatre

Uncle Vanya's moment of magic

By ZELDA HELLER

For one moment the performance exploded into real life. In the great climactic scene in the third act, there was one moment of complete magic.

Uncle Vanya (played by Maurice Podbrey) has realized since before the beginning of the play that at 47 his life has been a total waste. He has spent it supporting his stupid, empty-headed professor brother-in-law, whom he had taken for a genius. The professor finally demands a last, all-inclusive sacrifice of Vanya and of the rest of his family, who have already given him everything. At this Vanya explodes.

He screams, he yells, he weeps. There is confusion and upheaval. The scene is terrifying, melodramatic and marvelously funny. As Vanya Podbrey's cries of anguish are close to unbearable emotionally. At the same time, as he vainly pursues the professor, firing at him, he shouts "Bang!" to help his gun along.

If you have ever known anyone of that gentle, sensitive type, subject to violent rages, you will recognize at once the truth and the terrific double impact — comic plus painful — of the scene, and of Podbrey's performance in it.

But at no other time does the current production of Chekhov's **Uncle Vanya** by Centaur Theatre, which opened officially on Friday, capture the deeper qualities of the play as thoroughly.

The essential fault is that the conception of the production is complicated. Chekhov is not complicated. Complex, perhaps; profound, certainly. But not complexified.

Germain's set is a good example of what I mean. The director, Jean-Pierre Ronfard, obviously wanted to get away from a strictly naturalistic approach to the play. Nothing could be more laudable.

But this is translated in terms of setting by what look like a considerable number of poplar trees wrapped in burlap sacking, which rise from among the salon, library or garden furniture right up to the ceiling. It would not be hard to give a dozen symbolic reasons for their presence, which the performers seem simply to ignore, making their ways casually between or around them. But the play can do quite adequately without this complication.

Its reality (and I don't mean surface realism, but artistic reality is so strong that superficial visual adjuncts are simply an excrescence. So are the electronic sounds, not unlike the growling of malfunctioning plumbing, that are heard off-stage at moments of emotional ten sion.

It might conceivably be possible to do a very contemporary version of this play — though how one would isolate it from the details of its epoch, which are so wound into its substance, is hard to see. But then it would have to be really contemporary, not just show a few modern frills.

Ronfard, possibly because he is directing in a language not his own, is at his strongest in visual blocking. There are groupings and counter-groupings, which seem to occur almost spontaneously or even accidentally, and which as pure image, carry considerable impact.

The way that this pictorial element is organized in the course of the whole play, growing tighter or looser with the emotional tension, and translated into wide, wild criss-crossings during the strongest scenes, denotes a serious insight into those elements of the play's structure.

But the details within these pictures are often rough and unfinished. For instance over and over again characters express intense feeling by rubbing their hands over ther faces, or hiding their faces in their hands. When four of five different people have expressed themselves in the same way, the movement begins to seem pretty silly.

Then there is the matter of accents. No two people talk alike. One could perhaps accept Fred Doederlein's German accent as the professor and partly because he so much looks the part, partly because of the beautifully comic effectiveness with which he says his final lines; and besides, one can easily accept the idea of a Germanic professor. But among the other characters the accents range from Paul Craig's clipped British tones, as Astrov the idealistic doctor, through all shades and variets of Atlantic and middle-Atlantic dictions. Enought to make the joy of a phoneticist, but hardly condusive to unity of expression in such a play.

The individual actors handled their roles professionally, on the whole. But given the overall tone of the production, it is obvious that deeper insights are consistently lacking.

The indolent, phlegmatic siren's nature of the professor's wife, so explicitly detailed in the text; the passionately attractive idealism of the doctor; the luminous weakness of the professor's daughter; and the qualities of Uncle Vanya himself — "soft, elegant, poetic, like the enchanting Tchaikovsky" is how Stanislavsky described him after discussing him at length with Chekhov — none of these elements are present in anything like the required strength.

And yet — talking to a friend who had not seen it immediately after the show, I told him, "There is this one terrific scene in it; it's actually worth going for that alone."