

The New York Times

A Lie of the Mind

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The Michael Chekhov Theatre Company, founded three years ago by artistic director Michael Horn, has just opened its doors on its own performance venue, the Big Little Theater, way out on the Lower East Side. And little is little; at only about 40 seats and a small stage crammed into a former retail space (in its former incarnations also a bordello and an after-hours club—insert your own joke about its appropriateness as a theater here), you won't find spectacle. What you will find, at least this week, are three actor-centered productions of Sam Shepard plays, part of a new festival of his work. If Kathy Curtiss' production of *A Lie of the Mind*, which closes next weekend, is any indication, each one of those 40 seats deserves to be filled for every performance. The ambitions of the company reach high and strike home.

A Lie of the Mind is a tale of two families, shattered by the frustrated animal violence of uncontrolled masculine roles, their definitions traumatized by a changing social and cultural dynamic. As the play opens Jake (Curtis Nielsen) has beaten his wife Beth (Anna Podolak) nearly to death in a fit of jealousy (she has chosen to be an actress to give voice to her burgeoning imaginative life, and he is threatened by her new-found imaginative freedom); Beth's family takes her in as she recovers from temporary brain damage, and Jake seeks refuge in the bosom of his own family. The rest of the nearly three-hour play is a means of realigning conceptions of male-female relationships within traditional family structures that can no longer contain imaginative freedoms, the ability to explore the "lie of the mind" (in both senses: the psychic landscapes of love and sensuality and the constrictive ideals of marriage, gender roles and the traditional nuclear family).



Dr. Curtiss' production is of necessity spare and performer-centric, and the excellent cast does more than its share to bring these characters to life. The problem with Shepard's individual creations is that they rarely attain to a full three-dimensional status; instead, they are collections of linguistic and psychic traits and tics, demonstrative rather than internalized. That the performers here internalize these traits in themselves is some miracle of physical and emotional exploration. Anna Podolak as Beth and Curtis Nielsen as Jake, married perhaps too young and too early in their maturation as individuals, are remarkable to watch as their characters find that they must divorce themselves from the insidious, possessive and infantilizing dynamics of simplistic American attitudes to sexual relationships within the family for any future growth or health; Ms. Podolak finds a new strength of character as she recovers from her injuries and her tenderness is infused with imagination and passion, while Mr. Nielsen journeys the long road from masculine delusion to sacrifice his own internal urges of violence and possession to the new kind of mature sexual relationship he sees in his wife and his brother, the feverish and confused, but on the verge of his own epiphany, Frankie (a very funny and textured performance from Adrian O'Donnell).

"SAM SHEPARD FESTIVAL Youve got to hand it to the Michael Chekhov Theater Company: all of Sam Shepards 40-plus plays in a little less than two years? What are they thinking? But based on their revival of *A Lie of the Mind* last season, prospects for this new downtown theater are excellent. The full-length *Shaved Splits*, *Seduced and Unseen Hand* are due later this season. The immediate double bill is *Forensic and the Navigators and States of Shock*. Opens Wednesday. Through Oct. 6. The Big Little Theater, 141 Ridge Street, Lower East Side. SmartTix; chekhovtheatre.com."

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Dr. Curtiss' direction foregrounds these accomplished performances in the small space of the brand new Big Little Theatre on Ridge Street with spare props against a functional black background; the simple and uncredited light and sound design make an evocative most of the space's to-date limited resources. It is something of a wonder, this very distilled production of a very realistic play. More congratulations, then, to the Chekhov Company, and I am particularly excited to see what the company does with Shepard's sparer, more abstract works like *The Rock Garden*, which contrasted with *A Lie of the Mind* seem like bare-bones schematics for these later, fuller explorations of American sexuality and culture.

The company's *A Lie of the Mind* closes this weekend, with final performances on Sunday at 2 and 7 and Monday at 8; tickets are available online at Smarttix. (The other plays in this repertory cycle are *Buried Child* and the 1994 drama set in the world of horseracing *Simpatico*.)

Presented by the Michael Chekhov Theatre Company
at the Big Little Theatre, 141 Ridge St., NYC.