



**MOSCOW MEWL**  
Coon, Neff and Jones, from left, face plenty of tears.

## SHOW OF THE WEEK

### Three Sisters

Audiences who first encounter Tracy Letts this summer onscreen, via his violent, vulgar *Killer Joe*, may question the author's chemistry with Chekhov. But Letts, of course, has gentler modes. His new adaptation of *Three Sisters* contains a handful of well-placed vulgarities among its modern colloquialisms, but more important, his script, stripped of some era-specific elements that can serve as stumbling blocks for contemporary audiences, shows a tremendous empathy for Olga, Masha, Irina and the men in their lives. Letts and director Anna D. Shapiro put the characters' very human longings at the forefront.

The sibs' yearning hope to return from their provincial home to Moscow—or really, to the time of

★★★★★

**Steppenwolf Theatre Company** (see Resident companies). By Anton Chekhov. Adapted by Tracy Letts. Dir. Anna D. Shapiro. With ensemble cast. 2hrs 30mins; one intermission.

more abundant possibility that Moscow represents—still goes unfulfilled, of course. Chekhov's delicate play is steeped in existential, unmeetable desires for love, happiness and the meaning of it all (there are multiple, increasingly despondent conversations among the characters about what people 200 years on will think of them). Steppenwolf's cast finds nuance in both the big, bold declarations and

the moments of quieter wistfulness. Among the men, Usman Ally stands out as Solyony, painting him as a man whose social anxieties manifest in wry aggression; Scott Jaeck is warm and moving as Chebutykin, the physician who can't heal himself. On the other side, Alana Arenas's fiery take on increasingly cruel sister-in-law Natasha might walk away with the show if she hadn't so successfully turned us against her. Ora Jones, Carrie Coon and Caroline Neff each deliver fine performances as the titular trio. Neff in particular opens up beautifully in her first turn on the big stage, her Irina balancing pensiveness with a spark of optimism that, in the play's final moments, is tragically snuffed.

—Kris Vire

### Butley

★★★★★

**Hubris Productions** (see Fringe & storefront). By Simon Gray. Dir. Michael Graham. With ensemble cast. 2hrs 20mins; one intermission.

What is it about academia that drives British professors to the bottle (in theater, at least)? Of all the romanticized character archetypes, the boozy, genius, middle-aged humanities tutor has been as recurring as it is confounding. One would think a white-collar gig reciting history's greatest literature, seated in one of the world's architectural and cultural meccas, would be more a luxury than a burden. Is it artistic disillusionment? Is it the premature satisfied resignation that comes with cushy tenure? Maybe it's all that T.S. Eliot.



**YOU MAKE THE CALL** Green, left, reaches out to Zuber.

Whatever it is, British playwright Simon Gray's titular *Butley* has it bad. Quick with a joke and slow with a hint, Gray's antihero loses his wife, male lover and handle on reality over the course of this 1971 dark comedy. Part of Hubris Productions' "Season of Envy," director Michael Graham's capable production explores the frustrations of aging and the practical limitations of a bluesy *c'est la vie* attitude. *Butley*'s greatest delights

come from Eric Zuber as the officemate and handsome, maturing object of the titular professor's affection, conveying a subtle pity and sentiment known to anyone who's shared a space with a former lover. Less layered is Hubris artistic director Jacob Christopher Green's turn as Butley, whose lack of physical or romantic chemistry with his castmates makes him more of a one-note grating annoyance than a wilted hero. —Dan Jakes

### Gruesome Playground Injuries

★★★★★

**Rasaka Theatre Company** (see Fringe & storefront). By Rajiv Joseph. Dir. Lavina Jadhvani. With Tim Martin, Mouzam Makkar. 1hr 30mins; no intermission.

Doug and Kayleen are lifelong friends who get hurt a lot. Like, a lot. In the 30 years covered by Rajiv Joseph's 2009 play—spanning the protagonists' lives from ages 8 to 38—Doug rides his bike off a roof, loses an eye in a fireworks accident, falls off a telephone pole and gets struck by lightning, among other misadventures. Kayleen, meanwhile, is prone to psychic and emotional injuries: She cuts herself on purpose, has cruel parents, pops pills and drinks too much. Clearly, the two of them are a match made in the ICU. Skipping back and forth in time, Joseph depicts their halting and frequently thwarted attempts to heal each other.

This could all get very emo, but Joseph (best known for *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, which was short-listed for the Pulitzer Prize in 2010) maintains a buoyant tone throughout. He displays a special talent for blending heavy themes with a playful quirkiness that stops just short of being too cutesy. His script is well-served by Lavina Jadhvani's fleet and funny production, which features a spare, blue-and-white scenic design (by Roger Wykes) that alternately suggests a hospital room and a hockey rink.

Mouzam Makkar's Kayleen has too much poise to be convincing as either a kid or a basket case, but she does have lots of chemistry with Tim Martin's Doug. It's Martin who stands out, subtly conveying the masochistic streak underlying Doug's boyish daredevilry. —Zac Thompson



**STICKS AND STONES** Martin and Makkar nurse their wounds.