



Writer/director Joyce Henderson plays the lead, Margaret Dietz, alongside Eric Ricketts as Luis Castillo, in *The Almond Orchard*. PHOTO BY JOE HILSEE

# Fragile roots

## Local adaptation of Chekhov classic examines struggle of a modern farming family

Can a classic Russian play set on a country estate at the turn of the 19th century be successfully transposed to today's Sacramento Valley?

That's the question asked—and answered—by the Blue Room Theatre's current production of *The Almond Orchard*, based on Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*.

Adapted and directed by Joyce Henderson, *The Almond Orchard* works hard to find equivalency between Chekhov's brilliant 1904 portrait of Russian society during a time of profound social and political upheaval and what it suggests are similar conditions in the Sacramento Valley.

by  
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**Review:**  
*The Almond Orchard*  
shows Thursday–  
Saturday, March  
28–30, 7:30 p.m.

**Blue Room Theatre**  
139 W. First St.  
895-3749  
blueroomtheatre.com

*The Cherry Orchard* premiered in 1904, when Russia was still reeling from the emancipation of the serfs 43 years earlier. Industrious former serfs were gaining status and becoming rich, and many aristocrats, unable to care for their farms without the slave labor they had enjoyed, became impoverished.

Henderson, who also plays the main character, Margaret Dietz, has carried over class and wealth distinctions in her adaptation. As *The Almond Orchard* begins, Margaret is returning to the family estate on the Sacramento River near Chico. For several years she has been living in New York City, to which she fled following the drowning death of her young son.

Henderson, who is truly a force of nature in local theater, plays Margaret as a madly loving and lovable woman who is also hopelessly naïve and impulsive when it comes to managing money. She's fallen behind on the mortgage, which is why the estate is about to be auctioned off and, with it, the family's large and beautiful almond orchard.

Margaret's brother, Peter (an excellent Bruce Dillman), is even more foolish. He keeps coming up with harebrained schemes to make money, but like his

Chekhovian counterpart, Leonid Andreievitch Gayev, and others among the landowner class, he lacks drive and determination.

The man who does have drive is Luis Castillo (played by Eric Ricketts), a wealthy local businessman of Latino heritage whom everyone calls Louis. He is willing to lend the Dietz family money to pay their debts, but family pride gets in the way—as well as the long-shot hope that an eccentric aunt in San Francisco will come up with the money.

Luis also insistently argues that, by developing part of the estate, including the almond orchard, into summer rental cottages, the Dietz family could maintain ownership.

There are an even dozen roles in Henderson's adaptation, and all but one—a transient veteran who passes through and talks Margaret into giving him the last of her money—are involved in one or more subplots, including a couple of love stories.

The characters form three groups: the Dietz family (Peter, Margaret and Margaret's daughters, Maria and Elizabeth); their local friends, including Luis; and the "servants" (i.e., employees) who keep the Dietzes and their estate functioning. All would be greatly affected, one way or another, if the almond orchard were sold.

The decline of the Dietz estate is attributed to the family's weakness in the face of outside pressures. Whether that's realistic is debatable, but it's certainly true that many farm families today are fragile. As their children become adults and, aware that farming is relentlessly hard work, decide they don't want to follow in their parents' footsteps, conflicts over inheritance sometimes occur.

*The Almond Orchard* is a big play being staged in a small theater, but overall it works well. The acting is generally quite good, and the set (designed by Amber Miller) is left open to accommodate a dozen actors, who sometimes are all on stage at once.

Miller is also responsible for the huge painting of a blooming almond tree on the stage's back wall. More than any other single element, it establishes what is at stake in this story—and in our valley. □

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