



BWW Reviews: Romanovs at the Brink: OTMA at UMBC

[Back to the Article](#)

by Jack L. B. Gohn



OTMA, [Kate Moira Ryan](#)'s 2002 play about the last summer of the four doomed daughters of Tsar Nicholas II, is a Masterpiece

Theatre-ish show, and I mean that in the best possible way: it realistically recreates a historical moment with believable and likeable characters while addressing some larger issues. And University of Maryland Baltimore County's Theatre is giving it a fine setting, worth catching during its one week of production.



Most of us know the general outline of these events: The Bolsheviks had seized the Tsar and his family and were sequestering them in a house at Ekaterinburg while deciding whether and how to liquidate them. Eventually, on July 17, 1918, they were all shot in the basement of the house. Playwright Ryan trims and molds these events to raise some interesting questions, principally among them how we should feel about such a spectacle. Is there any justice or any hope in these executions?

Ryan makes it clear that, while the young grand duchesses are not perfect, any more than anyone else, they are no worse. Tatiana, age 20 (Jessica Baker), carries a nasty but not virulent case of anti-Semitism, and a reflexive but unreflective Christian piety. Marie, age 18 (Erin Hanratty), is naïve and flirtatious. Anastasia, age 17 (Sarah Arroyo), takes flight from the realities of her situation by somewhat seriously drafting an application for admission to [Vassar College](#). Only Olga, the oldest, at 23 (Brandi Sheppard) seems completely admirable: brave enough to confront the big picture, both the reasons for the family's immurement and its likely outcome. Olga considers whether there is some kind of larger social justice in the fate she sees probably awaits her and the others.

The answer to Olga's unflinching inquiry is partly framed in terms of a production of Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard* the young women mount for their own amusement and, they hope, that of their family. In 1904, over a decade earlier, Chekhov had observed the decline of the old aristocracy in light of the end of serfdom, and opposed to it the excited optimism of a young radical of a sort who would be deemed a Bolshevik a decade thence. Through the young radical, whose speech is recited by one of the young duchesses, Chekhov articulates a vision of a better future achieved through redemptive work. Olga foresees a different and more personal kind of sacrifice being demanded to achieve that future. And she addresses two questions, based on the limited information available to her: will that sacrifice be deserved, and will it bring about the desired result? Her bleak conclusion is a yes to the first question and a no to the second.

Olga owns up to the recent atrocities that have kept her own family in power, most notably the Bloody Sunday massacre of 1905, and to the role of Rasputin, and to the parasitical nature of monarchies in general. But the brutality and dishonesty of the Bolshevik guards and their murder of a family attendant tell her that, in *The Who's* memorable phrase "the new boss" is likely to be essentially the "same as the old boss." And she is resigned to the fact that the individual niceness of herself and her sisters, and the somewhat more nuanced niceness of their father the Tsar, will have nothing to do with the outcomes at this point. The tides of history are flowing, and the Romanovs are about to be swept out to sea, and though they do not entirely deserve that fate, it is not completely without desert either.

At least as directed by Eve Muson, whose work I've admired in the past as well, this is especially Olga's play, and Brandi Sheppard convincingly portrays a young woman facing existential and Tolstoyan questions that concern her far more personally than they ever did Tolstoy. Jessica Baker's Tatiana, with her unattractive dislike of Jews and her controlling ways, is the least likeable of the characters, and Jessica Baker is good at conveying this without making her a monster. Hanratty and Arroyo have less to work with in their roles, but make the most of them. The ensemble work of the four actresses flags a little in the early going, but once we get past the exposition, it seems to hit the correct rhythm.

OTMA (a collective acronym of the four princesses' first names they used in correspondence) continues UMBC's bent towards training its students with the staging of challenging works by contemporary playwrights. The play is a thoughtful and well-staged addition to the program.

***OTMA*, by [Kate Moira Ryan](#), directed by Eve Muson, at UMBC Theatre, through October 23. University of Maryland Baltimore County, 1000 Hilltop Circle, Baltimore, MD 21250. Tickets \$10, \$5 for students and seniors. 410 455-2917. <http://www.umbc.edu/theatre/OTMA.html>.**