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### Theatre Talk

#### **Anatol: Seven Brides for One Austrian**

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This is James Taylor with *Theatre Talk*.

Eight years ago, the English-speaking world was subject to a sudden shock of Arthur Schnitzler adaptations. First, London and Broadway audiences saw David Hare's *The Blue Room*, an update of Schnitzler's most famous play, *La Ronde*, starring a briefly nude Nicole Kidman. Then that summer, Schnitzler's story *Traumnovelle* was filmed by Stanley Kubrick as *Eyes Wide Shut*--also starring Kidman and her then-husband, Tom Cruise.

As the turn of this century came and went, so too did these dramatic adaptations of Schnitzler. In the years since, a fine series of new English translations of the Viennese author's short stories have been published; but for the most part, Schnitzler has not been seen much on English-speaking stages or screens.



The exception to this has been the 310 area code, where not one but two productions of Schnitzler's early work, *Anatol*, have been staged of late. The version seen at the old Powerhouse Theatre a few years back was largely forgettable, but the production that opened last week at Pacific Resident Theatre--while not entirely successful either--does allow one to see why Schnitzler is a necessary literary and theatrical companion these days.

Director Dan Bonnell keeps the characters and events in 19<sup>th</sup> century Vienna. The set consists only of a few pieces of Biedermeier furniture in front of two colorful homages to Viennese artists like Klimt and Hundertwasser: a patterned wall and a long blanket falling from a door above the stage. Between scenes, a series of women--in various states of undress--appear in this door, which is the production's nod to the practices of our own less censorious times.



The rest of *Anatol* is talk, lots of talk, between the title character--a young, handsome professional, and his seven different love interests--each one presenting a different challenge to Anatol's neurotic masculinity. Schnitzler once wrote, "I spent the whole winter on a row of scenes which are totally unprintable, of no literary value, but if disinterred after a couple of hundred years, may illuminate in a unique way aspects of our culture." He was speaking of *La Ronde*, but as *Anatol* is really a sort of prototype for that play, the description is also apt.

*Anatol*, like most of Schnitzler's writing, presents a vivid and intimate portrait of Imperial Vienna--and, despite the author's modesty, is of immense literary value. His characters speak words that show remarkably little dust. Whereas his more famous continental contemporaries, Ibsen and Strindberg, often sound trapped in the old world, Schnitzler helped usher in 20th century modernism with dialogue that's short and casual in length but long on subtext.



In this way, his dramatic work offers great roles for modern actors. *Anatol* is a difficult part--he's on stage for almost of the play--but mainly, all he requires is the charm and bluster that most young actors already possess. The trick is not getting in the way of the words and Matt Letscher does that well. He and the rest of the cast don't have the verbal precision to evoke the true sparkle of that era, but they all waltz dutifully through Schnitzler's scenes. Ginna Carter earns special mention for bringing the right tone of farce to the "Farewell Supper" episode.

Director Bonnell and his cast don't try to pick up the pace of Schnitzler's scenes. *Anatol* can run long--on opening night, it pushed the two-and-a-half-hour mark. Still, the impact of Schnitzler's writing is unmistakable and indeed watching *Anatol* illuminates the unique (and all too familiar) ways of an affluent yet fading imperial culture.

Arthur Schnitzler's *Anatol* runs through May 27 at Pacific Resident Theatre. This is James Taylor with *Theatre Talk* for KCRW.

