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HER HAIR STYLE DANGLED LIKE A HANGMAN'S NOOSE

COLETTE KING'S production of Turgenev's "A Month in the Country," running at the Questors Theatre until February 6, puts me in something of a critical dilemma. For it is, I can see, quite legitimate to interpret the piece as alternatively:

(i) a satire on the romantic agony, in which a high-class heroine experiences an improbable passion for a gawky Gorki, while the supporting characters (Teutonic tutor, Shavian surgeon, shy spinster, bashful bachelor, moony manservant and mischievous maid) execute parodies of the affair.

Equal weight

or (ii) a profound study of life's continual contrasts, with tragedy and comedy afforded equal weight, in the way they stage Chekhov at the Moscow Arts.

And at Mattock-lane Miss King may be said to get the best of both these worlds. But my memory stubbornly clings to a television version in 1955, directed by Robert Hamer and

John Clements, where the comic interludes were either toned down or cut altogether, and Laurence Harvey played not a dandified young Woodleyvitch seeking vodka and sympathy, but a tensely adoring, virile youth who made Natalia Petrovna's desire instantly credible.

An hour-and-a-half

You might protest that this was not "A Month in the Country" as Turgenev wrote it; that it was, in fact, merely "An hour-and-a-half in the Country". And of course you would be right. Yet, as I saw it seven years ago, it seemed to me among the world's great dramatic expressions of that "morbid and consumptive relationship" we call sexual love.

At the Questors, it only seems so in shreds and patches. Once alone is the humour keyed to a note of wistfulness, when the servant (Ned Gethings) plaintively courts the maid (Carol Adams).

Bill Rudderham, as Natalia's good-hearted, gradually suspicious husband, shares two duologues which achieve the proper degree of taut emotion: one with his mother (Ruth Tremayne Smith); the other with his wife's rejected suitor, Rakitin (Kenneth Conington). And it is from Mr. Conington that the evening's most sustainedly forceful portrayal comes.

The description of love I quoted above is Rakitin's; this actor's bitterly devoted eyes and smile, his eloquently measured speech, convince us of its essential truth.

Dorothy Boyd-Taylor, by nature a shade genteel for the role of Natalia's amorous rival, nonetheless gives a performance of cumulative power. In the end, though, the play stands or falls by Natalia herself.

'Don't turn away'

Ffrangcon Whelan has to cope with several extraneous hindrances. The "in the round" system too often leaves us with little more than an admittedly charming view of the back of her neck; causing us to echo her appeal to Rakitin, "Don't turn away!"

Worse, she is burdened throughout by a hair-style which dangles on each side of her face like a hangman's noose; and almost throughout by a costume reminiscent of a wine-stained dressing-gown.

She still looks the part, since she would look the part if she wore sackcloth and ashes. But only for a few minutes just before the interval, and in the second-act "big scene" where she's thankfully permitted a change of wardrobe, does she really hit her stride.

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