

QUESTORS OUT OF TUNE IN ^{SEPT} 1965 CHEKHOV PLAY

THE Questors Theatre's current season has begun with a disappointment. "The Cherry Orchard" is easily the least rewarding and least satisfying of Chekhov's four major plays, but it is capable of a far more sensitive attempt at production than Colette King's at Mattock-lane.

This was Chekhov's last work, and it revealed a marked change in his theatrical approach: a change of vision, which one suspects would have altered further had he lived on.

Even in "The Seagull," "Three Sisters" and "Uncle Vanya," his characters exist less as family groups than as individuals standing, as it were, on isolated little islands, pouring out their own thoughts and problems, never really listening to anybody's else's.

This sense of unity cloaking disunity may, of course, be held to be a "realistic" quality of family life. But in "The Cherry Orchard" it is carried to new, extreme lengths.

Whereas realism basically depends on connection and communication in human relationships, surrealism derives its disturbing force from lack of connection and communication.

And it is possible to regard Chekhov in his last play as the pioneer of twentieth century surrealist drama, just as Ibsen's family portraits pioneered twentieth century realist drama.

MYSTERIES

For, besides the general absence of human contacts in "The Cherry Orchard," there are several mysterious or highly idiosyncratic touches. Gaev periodically lapsing into murmurings about billiards. Madame Ranevsky's sudden hallucinatory glimpse of her dead mother wandering in the garden.

Charlotte the governess's

mime of rocking a crying baby. And the famous "noise off," like a bird or a musical instrument or "a snapped bow-string," which fills everyone with such unaccountable foreboding.

Unfortunately, the play falls between these stools of realism and surrealism, and gets the best of neither world.

Colette King and most of her Questors cast, sad to say, don't appear temperamentally or technically equipped for even a goodish rendering of the piece, let alone a definitive one.

A MISTAKE

Yet Miss King perversely emphasises them, by interpolating historical footnotes archly read aloud to us by the actors. She has mistaken the Chekhovian (and Stanislavskian) insight into psychological alienation for the Brechtian, propagandist "alienation-effect."

And, more crucially, Doreen Shafran's haughty Madame Ranevsky, Wendy Jolly's gauche Anya, and Susan Mindelsohn's spinsterishly caricatured Varya, all fail to convey the requisite underlying poignancy.

Only two portrayals, in fact, catch the true Chekhovian roundness and complexity: David Gower's lugubrious, vague, pedantic Gaev, hobbling primly and darting suspicious glances from under hooding eyebrows, his pursed lips murmuring refined platitudes; and (less expected, and more striking) Michael Simpson's parvenu businessman Lopakhin, beamingly calculating, yet still oddly insecure and likeable.

CHEKHOV FUN AT 65 THE QUESTORS

LIKE Shakespeare, there are many ways of producing Anton Chekhov (and even more ways of spelling his name!). Colette King, in producing "The Cherry Orchard" for the Questors has chosen to emphasise the comedy. And so that no one shall mistake her intentions she has put in a prologue reminding us of the conditions in Russia which prompted Chekhov to write the play, quoting the author's own words, "And I shall call my play a comedy."

The result is a most entertaining evening. Not only are there some very funny moments, but, by force of contrast, they serve to bring the pathos into sharper relief. The treatment, however, does tend to shift the emphasis from Madame Ranevsky who, after all, is the central character.

Nevertheless, this treatment is certainly to be preferred to the slow plodding of some other productions I have seen. It is remarkable to notice how, by shift of emphasis, careful timing and the introduction of by-play, so much fun can be got out of this play about the disintegration of a nation and the birth of a new order.

The prologue itself, spoken by Michael Simpson and Dorothy Boyd Taylor in a series of short, sharp quotations, sets the tone of the play.

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MICHAEL SIMPSON plays Lopakhin, the self-made son of a peasant whose rise to riches enables him to buy the Ranevsky estate and so turn the tables on the old aristocracy. With a superb air of authority he displays the man's vulgarity and lack of scruple. His very condescension is funny.

Also very impressive, on a quieter note, is David Gower's Gayev, Madame Ranevsky's brother. He is a surprisingly young Gayev, but it is a beautifully restrained performance. Again and again, a subtle lowering of the voice brings a laugh to the most simple statement.

As with Gayev, so is Doreen Shafran's Madame

Ranevsky extraordinarily youthful. It is a more serious character and, as already indicated, she does not have as many chances as some of those in the lighter roles. But when she realises she has lost the home where she was born and brought up, the pathos comes over very well.

Susan Mindelsohn, as Varya, Madame Ranevsky's adopted daughter, looks little younger than her foster-mother. In accordance with the treatment, she has some very amusing moments in her fruitless pursuit of Lopakhin, and she evokes our sympathy in her frustration.

Wendy Jolly is a spirited young Anya, Madame Ranevsky's 17-years-old daughter. She makes her affection for her mother very touching.

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IT is on the servants that so much of the comedy turns and in this production they claim most notice. Dorothy Boyd Taylor is an impish maid and Ned Gethings, as Simon, the clerk, for whom nothing goes right, brings a laugh with his every entry. Simon's squeaky boot is not the least funny of the many comic bits of business the producer has introduced.

Among the most lasting impressions of this singularly original production, however, is of Clifford Webb's Firs. This doddering old manservant is a comparatively small part, but Mr. Webb gets every ounce of fun and pathos out of it. His final scene as he is left alone and forgotten in the old mansion is very moving.

Maynard Tweed makes the shiftless idealist, Peter Trofimov, very real and pathetic, and Barbara Hutchins has some funny moments as the governess with her ventriloquial and card tricks.

Patrick Bacon excels in the last act as an uncouth, money-grubbing landowner with a love of horseplay, and Edward Pitt is an immaculate manservant.

The last performance of this refreshingly original production is on Saturday.

Chekhov's finest comedy

"The Cherry Orchard", Chekhov's last, finest, and perhaps best-known comedy will open the Questors' autumn season, this year. The play, translated by Ronald Higley, is directed by Colette King and Paul Green-Armytage, is responsible for the design.

Performances of the play, last seen at the Questors Theatre, Ealing, in 1953, will commence on Saturday, September 18, and run until September 25, Monday of that week excluded.

Antonia y Marino Spanish Dance Theatre is performing at the Questors Theatre, Mattock Lane, Ealing, from Saturday, September 28, until Saturday, October 2. Led by Marino and special guest dancer, Tana Lopez, the company have a superb range of flamencos, the proud classical and the simple, colourful folk dances all of which are performed with the same precision and skill.

In November Shakespeare's "The Winter's Tale", last seen at the Questors 15 years ago, will be produced. This will run for two weeks and there will be a number of performances at reduced rates for schools.

Both productions are open to members and guests of members. There are still vacancies for new members and people interested in joining were invited to an open evening on Monday. Guides were on duty at the theatre to show people round, explain the benefits of membership, and a colour film was shown.

COLETTE KING has given a shrewd eye to both comedy and theatrical detail in her direction of Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard" at the Questors Theatre, Ealing.

From the squeaking of Yephikhodov's boot to the excellent performance by David Gower as Gayev, the production was treated with a fresh approach which the comedy must have to satisfy modern audiences.

Anya was given a full, buoyant personality by Wendy Jolly, and Doreen Shafran as Lyuba Ranevsky caught the mood of her role with a telling precision.

Michael Simpson, as Lopakhin, and Dorothy Boyd Taylor as Dunyasha, acted brightly and brought out the gentler tones of the other characters by contrast.

In an altogether impressive production Susan Mindelsohn (as Varya), Maynard Tweed (Trofimov), Patrick Bacon (Simeonov-Pishchik), Barbara Hutchins (Charlotte), Clifford Webb (Firs) and Edward Pitt (Yasha) were also outstanding.

It is questionable whether the prologue given at the beginning added to the enjoyment of the play, beyond putting the happenings in their historical context.

R.W.

CHEKHOV AT QUESTORS

The opening of the new season at the Questors Theatre, Ealing, will be marked by a production of "The Cherry Orchard," Chekhov's finest comedy, last seen at the Questors in 1953.

Performances begin tomorrow until Saturday, September 25th, at 7.45 p.m. There is no Monday