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A SMASHER OF A MASHA

Finely-acted 'Three Sisters' at Ealing

THE spotlight falls, first of all, upon a girl dressed in white, with a turquoise sash and ribbon, gaily celebrating her birthday in a Russian provincial villa circa 1900, and recollecting with her friends the life she had led in Moscow, eleven years before, when her father was alive. She is called Irina: but immediately our attention is drawn away from her, to another young woman with deep brown hair who sits, like Hamlet, detached from the merriment, dressed in "nighted colour"; a young woman who sits on a sofa reading, indifferent to her companions' chatter, breaking silence only by a brief, careless whistle, though across her dark-eyed, red-lipped, peach-blossom face fleet from time to time expressions of boredom and sadness.

Then, suddenly, at last, she snaps shut her book, straightens, stares musingly into space, and recites, in an instant of surrounding quiet, "An oak tree green by the winding shore,

Upon that oak, a chain of gold" . . .

This is how Frangon Whelan appears to us as Masha, the second of Chekhov's "Three Sisters," in the opening minutes of Alfred Emmet's presentation currently running at the Questors Theatre until May 12. It is a mesmeric appearance, and enough to justify a trip. But Mr. Emmet and his star both repeat and intensify its mesmerism, its sense of isolation, privacy and emotional intimacy derived from subtle variations of physical repose, in the Act Two scene following Lt.-Col. Vershinin's speech of love. The piece, I am told, has been

rehearsed for a hundred and sixty hours. At least a hundred of these must have gone into perfecting such an achingly beautiful, musical counterpoint between the talk of the rest of the interrupting household and the mute communion of the couple in the corner.

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Kenneth Conington's Vershinin looks and sounds throughout (for once the cliché has meaning) "an officer and a gentleman." Here he is a married suitor too, paying illicit court to a married lady: yet how freely, how happily does he lean in his chair and drink in the sight of the person opposite him whom he worships with his heart and soul! With what tender possessiveness does he rise and stand behind her chair, gazing down at her; while Miss Whelan's Masha, try as she may to join in the conversation, can't prevent her head turning slowly back or upward to meet his regard, her initially disturbed flutter of lids and quiver of mouth replaced, as moment stretches into moment, by a frankly welcoming, answering adoration in her warm-enveloping glance and wide-glowing smile. As they raply watch each other, the room about them seems to fade from our consciousness, and we can do nothing but share their luxuriant pleasure in an unexpected, secret passion no less thrilling for being without real hope. We surrender, in fact, to a spell of exquisite romantic magic and melancholy unattained by Chekhov in "The Cherry Orchard" or "The Seagull": the spell of Turgenev's "A Month in the Country."

In the poetically contemplative passages of statuesque grouping where reaction is distinct from action matters, Mr. Emmet's handling is seen at its best. Those requiring a fluid continuity of entrances, exits, stage movement and business—in particular during the play's latter half—find him a shade unequal to a challenge that might baffle a West End

director. Still, his is a devoted effort. True, he has been helped by Juliette Howard's costumes, rich but not gaudy as Polonius counselled; and by Jane Kingshill's stuffily respectable interiors, redolent of the bourgeois stagnation from which the sisters long unavailingly to escape. But to him alone accrues the credit for imposing on his cast, despite their occasionally disconnected manoeuvrings, a unified interpretation of the author, temperately blending the serene humour emphasized by Soviet producers with the wistful elegance favoured by our own.

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The result is a consistent excellence of portrayal. Everyone gets his or her chance, and takes it: Dorothy Boyd-Taylor's Irina, delicately aristocratic as a Dresden figurine, in her bursts of trapped despair; Elizabeth Oddie as the eldest sister Olga, when she patiently resigns herself to never visiting the capital; their brother's wife Natalya (Una Chapman), who changes with her new conjugal power from a pseudogenteel spinster into a matronly virago. Roy Montgomery brings an appealing simplicity to Baron Tusenbach's farewell to Irina, even if Stuart Hartley, as his rival for her affections, fails to persuade us of the fanatical jealousy which causes him to kill Tusenbach in a duel. (Mr. Hartley strikes one rather as an "eternal student" in the tradition of Trofimov.) Francis Smith discreetly communicates the pathos in the old army doctor Chebutykin's confession of medical inadequacy. Ned Gethings, remembered from "The Birthday Party," responds similarly to the brother Andry's forlorn dreams of intellectual eminence. And Paul Imbusch, remembered from "The Drunkard," gives perhaps the evening's most professional Chekhovian performance in the role of Masha's placid, modest, kindly husband. As for Frangon Whelan, she didn't attract my notice in "The Beggar's Opera." (Incredible, after this Masha, to think of her doing a doxy.) But I shall remember her now.

DOUGLAS McVAY.

Questors

Romeike & Curtice Ltd

Telephone
HOL. 8171-2



88-90
CHANCERY LANE
LONDON WC2.

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THE plays of Anton Chekhov, the centenary of whose birth was celebrated four months ago, are marked by an odd mixture of humour and sadness. His characters are usually moody members of the Russian intelligentsia who everlastingly talk of their hopes and desires but never achieve them.

"The Three Sisters," which the Questors have been presenting at their theatre at Ealing, was the last but one of his five full-length plays. In it he foreshadows the changes which were to come over Russia in a very short time.

Alfred Emmet, in his production, has not only brought out the atmosphere exceedingly well but has maintained a delicate balance between the humour and the tragedy of a society in decay. There is a wistfulness in the drama of the three sisters who have seen better days and are left to face a drab future. But there is humour in many of the characterisations and in the relationships between the characters.