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The Cherry Orchard



Anton Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard" can be condensed into one scene: the one in which different personalities emblematic of various elements of society sit around in the woods discussing the future. Suddenly a mysterious noise is heard, and the world for each person is changed irrevocably, albeit symbolically. Theatricum Botanicum's new production, directed by Heidi Helen Davis and Ellen Geer, sets the Russian play in 1970s Virginia, and delivers that change as the emancipation of the slaves, as well as a more symbolic individual emancipation from the constraints on ideas placed by the old world.

The old order is represented by Lillian Randolph Cunningham (Ellen Geer), the equivalent of Madam Ranevsky in Chekhov's original, and her brother Gates Randolph (William Dennis Hunt). Facing the impending auctioning off of their property to absolve their debt, Lillian and Gates behave as if the old aristocratic regime shields them from cares. Lillian gives a \$100 bill to a passerby because she feels sorry for him, while Gates claims he has a job at the bank and does nothing but play billiards all day. (Ironically, Gates announces that he's "a man of the modern age.") They are pushed aside by the son of an ex-slave Lawrence Poole (Steve Matt), a character akin to Lopakhin for Chekhov who takes over the estate and uses the grove for a development project.

The transformation from Russian feudal society to post-war American South is poignant and fitting. Every performer donned the proper accent, even with Buck Yankins (Matt Van Winkle) throwing in the occasional French. The freeing of the slaves in Russian is translated not to the Civil War in America, but rather to the Civil Rights movement, and parallels are drawn between the aristocratic South and the Russian elite. Small details such as the banjo music played by the band at the party put us firmly in America, even for some of us who have seen the original Chekhov version. Even the names are transliterated: Yancy Ogelsby for the bumbling Yepikhodov, Dolores Hughes for the maid Dunyasha, and Fred Jasper for the aging servant Firs.

If Lawrence Poole represents the new wave of economic change sweeping Charlottesville, Virginia, then Terrence Moses (Marc Ewing), a reincarnation of Chekhov's "eternal student" Trofimov, identifies with the new philosophical outlook among the intellectuals in that town, or any other town. An over-30 year old virgin, Terrence sees the Civil Rights movement as an necessary evolution of human society towards a more enlightened state. At the end, he is helped symbolically by Velina Cunningham (Tippi Thomas), who finds his galoshes, so that he may fulfill his vow to "get there or show others the way." Terrence's rambling gets annoying very quickly, but he is clearly a caricature, just as Chekhov had intended.

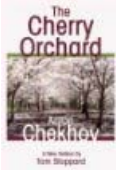
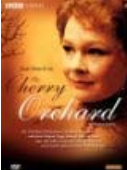
Chekhov's caricatures extend to every major element of society, as each character is given a different focus. For example, Buck Yankins (Matt Van Winkle), who is Chekhov's Yasha, is given the hilarious task of courting the maid Dolores Hughes (Emma Fassler), then abandoning her for greener pastures when the estate is sold. Playing the dashing aristocrat, Buck too experiences a transformation when the mysterious noise in the forest is heard. He escapes from the constraints set by his former self to live freely once again.

Chekhov's only comedy is made funnier by Davis and Geer. There's Gates's pathetic admiration of a 100 year old bookshelf; Buck drinking piss-like alcohol and holding a rubber ducky; and Carlotta playing magic

tricks and throwing out nonsense witticisms like “who I am is why I am.” The makeover is complete with Southern accents for everyone except Terrence, as well as a scene in the forest that actually takes place in the woods of Topanga, perhaps just as Chekhov had envisioned it with sounds of owls screeching and birds chirping amongst the noise of traffic coming close to supplanting the sounds of nature.

Perhaps most poignant is the change we as audience members experience in viewing this play, which Chekhov must have had in mind when he wrote that scene in the forest. At the end, one figure, that of Chekhov’s Firs, is left behind, as the society he has lived in has passed on beyond him. After understanding where each character comes from and where each’s ideals lead them, we too feel like we have moved beyond this play as the cherry orchard is being chopped down.

You can dance to the music of the forests at Theatricum Botanicum in Topanga (www.theatricum.com) before the “The Cherry Orchard” comes down for good after September 26.

 <p>The Cherry Orchard Anton Chekhov, Tom...</p> <p>Best Price \$6.98 or Buy New \$11.20</p> <p>Buy from amazon.com</p> <p>Privacy Information</p>	 <p>The Cherry Orchard Judi Dench</p> <p>Best Price \$13.98 or Buy New \$19.99</p> <p>Buy from amazon.com</p> <p>Privacy Information</p>
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