



THE SOVREMENNİK THEATRE COMPANY'S PRODUCTION OF *THE CHERRY ORCHARD* AT THE MARTIN BECK THEATRE

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In the final moments of the Sovremennik Theatre Company's production of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, the aged manservant Firs walks slowly downstage, through the now-barren nursery of the Ranevsky estate, illuminated only by the feeble glow of a flickering candle. "Life's slipped by . . . just as if I'd never lived at all." In mechanized, rote-like fashion, the Ranevsky/Gayev family, former inhabitants of the vacated manor, file on stage and, with robotic precision, don their overcoats. They march upstage in a neat row before disappearing into the cold, flat darkness, as loyal Firs, oblivious to their ghostly presence, extinguishes the strained flame.

These concluding images were haunting but rare instances of high stylization in this otherwise staid, assured, and hypnotic production. Absent was the stiff formality of many American productions of Chekhov—productions often held captive by inadequate translations. Performed in its original Russian—with a simultaneous, spoken-English translation available through headsets—the Sovremennik's *Cherry Orchard* showcased the Moscow-based Company's prodigious ability to create a Chekhovian milieu with grace, clarity, and unflinching honesty.

The Cherry Orchard, Chekhov's last play, revolves around the impending sale of Lyuba Ranevsky's beloved, debt-ridden estate. Conceived by the playwright as a four-act comedy, the original Moscow Art Theatre production of 1904 caused great friction between Chekhov and director Konstantin Stanislavsky. Stanislavsky insisted upon employing what Chekhov believed to be the plodding, heavy-handed style of more traditional forms of Russian Theatre. Chekhov had envisioned a much lighter, off-hand tone, free from the bathetic weightiness he found prevalent in Stanislavsky's earlier production of *Three Sisters*.

Under Galina Volchek's deft direction, the Sovremennik Company has bridged the chasm separating the seemingly antithetical interpretations. Without ever degenerating into the farcical, the production maintains a light, fresh, casual feel, embracing both the play's comic possibilities and biting, ironic flourishes. Yet the play's inherent pathos is never diminished, rising rapidly and unexpectedly from seemingly innocuous situations. As a dramatic illustration of a diminishing epoch being eclipsed by a usurping

force, *The Cherry Orchard* is lent a new thematic resonance with the emergence of a post-Soviet Russia. Volchek allows the obvious parallels to surface organically, without relying on any anachronistic “modernizations,” opting instead for a fresh, unencumbered reinterpretation of the text. Her faith rests in the words themselves.

The overall effect is, ultimately, an intense, prodding wistfulness, born from an unsettling ambivalence. For even as we feel compassion for Madame Ranevsky, we unconsciously, zealously, impatiently judge her myopia and naïveté. Her predicament is heartbreaking, but frustratingly avoidable. We watch helplessly as she squanders money, wallows in nostalgia, and refuses shrewd advice from Lopakhin, her potential savior who, ironically, becomes the predatory usurper.

The ease and confidence with which the *Sovremennik* actors inhabit their respective characters is refreshing and comforting. Most impressive is Sergei Garmash who, as Lopakhin, is a charismatic and engaging presence. The sincerity and desperation of his repeated pleas to Madame Ranevsky and Gayev, in attempts to help them save their estate, reveal a profound concern for their happiness and well-being. Garmash's Lopakhin is not a conniving schemer, but a genuine and compassionate friend whose hand is regrettably forced. As Varya, Elena Yakovleva is poignantly stoic, awaiting an expected marriage proposal from Lopakhin—a proposal that is never offered. Igor Kvasha's Gayev is brimming with gaiety and good humor, and an unspoken determination to navigate his impending misfortune. Surprisingly effective in a smaller supporting role is Valery Shalnikh as Yasha, the young butler. His uninhibited, aggressive, youthful energy is magnetic and seductive. He completely entralls Dunyasha (Darya Frolova), the young chambermaid, much to the dismay of Epikhodov (Avangard Leontiev), her hapless suitor. Despite the ensemble nature of both the play and this production, it is, inevitably, Madame Ranevsky who emerges as the centerpiece of the proceedings. Marina Neyolova's Ranevsky is grand, formidable, and striking, with a well-disguised vulnerability revealing itself sporadically, but forcefully. While her spirit is being exhumed, this wounded matriarch remains the force around which all else revolves.

The slightly raked stage supports a simple, utilitarian set, designed by Pavel Kaplevich and Peter Kirillov. The selected set pieces remain immovable in the wall-less space, ominously framed by a series of cutout trees, whose omnipresent silhouettes betray a dark foreboding. It is Efim Udler and Vladimir Urazbakhtin's nuanced lighting effects which transport us, gracefully and subtly from interiors to exteriors. Vyacheslav Zaitsev's

costume design is conservative and historically accurate, in alignment with Volchek's spirited but respectful recreation of turn-of-the-century Russia.

Chekhov, the physician, drew his characters with an unwavering, clinical eye. The depth of his psychological excavations produced a potent precision. In the hands of the Sovremennik Theatre Company, the strangeness of *The Cherry Orchard* is eclipsed by a disturbing familiarity; not the banal familiarity contaminating many naturalistic plays, but the piercing familiarity of reflected truth. The weight of that truth is stirred by Simeonov-Pishchik's haunting lament, "It doesn't matter . . . it doesn't matter." What remains is a mysterious, but palpable resonance.