

THE THEATRE

UP AGAINST IT

Russians and renegades at the end of their rope.

BY JOHN LAHR



As a stagestruck boy, Anton Chekhov defied school regulations to attend the local playhouse in Taganrog. (He and his friends disguised themselves with false beards and glasses to sit in the gallery.) Later, he came to see Russian theatre as “the venereal disease of the cities.” “I don’t like the theatre,” he wrote. “I quickly get bored—but I do like watching vaudevilles.” Over time, Chekhov invented his own form of drama, which blended gravity and hilarity, complexity and mystery. His plays are magisterial constructions of tone and texture; his antiphonal dialogue is the bittersweet music of ambivalence. As a practicing physician, Chekhov viewed *Homo sapiens* with a clinical eye; as a playwright, he reported on the rueful symptoms of mankind’s malaise and offered neither diagnosis nor remedy. “My job . . . is to be able to distinguish important phenomena from unimportant

ant, to be able to illuminate characters and speak with their tongues,” he wrote to a friend, insisting that his characters’ ideas must be “examined like objects.” Chekhov’s satiric detachment is often confounding, both to the players and to the audience, who are moved to tears by his tragic situations and confused by his classification of these landscapes of loss and regret as “comedies.”

“The Cherry Orchard” (revived, under the suggestive direction of Andrei Belgrader, at the Classic Stage Company) was Chekhov’s last and most Expressionistic play. (Less than six months after its debut, in January, 1904, he died, of tuberculosis, at the age of forty-four.) Chekhov insisted to the play’s first director and star, Konstantin Stanislavsky, that “The Cherry Orchard” was “not a drama but a comedy, in places even a farce”; in the play, he winks at his own

po-faced comic strategy. When a character tells Madame Ranevskaya (the vulnerable and resolute Dianne Wiest), who is as sensationally blind to her predicament as she is to herself, that he saw “a very funny show at the theatre last night,” she snaps, in John Christopher Jones’s crisp, tight translation, “People shouldn’t be going to plays. They should be looking at themselves. Lives are so gray . . . gray, and you talk about things that don’t matter.” This, of course, is a perfect description of the play we’re watching.

Although Chekhov won’t interpret the map he draws for the audience, he does give some indication of where to locate his characters’ internal geography. Here, as the actors enter Santo Loquasto’s elegant circular arena, where canvas is spread across the floor as in a circus ring, spotlights isolate a toy train, a hobbyhorse, and a miniature table and chairs. Madame Ranevskaya and her entourage recall their former bliss on their soon-to-be-lost estate (“Happiness and I would wake up together,” she says) while sitting on the miniature furniture, like giants in a child’s universe. Chekhov began the play in a nursery for a reason: the adults before us are unwilling to take responsibility for the lives they are lamenting; they are infantile and unformed. “I feel young. As a child,” Charlotta (Roberta Maxwell), the governess, says, adding, “Where I’m from, who I am—not a clue.” Cluelessness is the essence of Chekhov’s comedy. Some characters, like Fiers (the brilliant Alvin Epstein), the ancient ex-serf, have been infantilized by slavery and don’t know how to think. “My life’s happened without me. It’s as if I’d never been born,” he says. Some, like the politically minded “perpetual student” Trofimov (Josh Hamilton), struggle to bridge the gap between thought and action. Others, like the scatterbrained but seductive Madame Ranevskaya and her feckless brother, Gayev (Daniel Davis), who gives a nonsensical speech in honor of his nursery bookshelf (“Your silent call to productive effort has not wavered over the century,” he says), simply refuse to think. Chekhov’s characters lack the moral courage to face their problems, and they pay an awful price for this absence of will.

The pushy but compassionate Lopakhin (John Turturro), who grew up on

Wiest, as Madame Ranevskaya, and Turturro, as Lopakhin, in “The Cherry Orchard.”

the estate as a peasant and is now himself a landowner, has a sound suggestion: in order to liquidate their debts and keep their property, which otherwise will be auctioned off, Madame Ranevskaya and Gayev must cut down their enormous cherry orchard, divide up the land, and lease it out in small parcels, on which summer cottages can be built. "It's all just so vulgar," Madame Ranevskaya says. After days of coaxing the family to take action, Lopakhin implores Gayev, "Tell me what you want to do!" "About what?" Gayev says, yawning. He and his sister cannot see what's right under their noses. Lopakhin, who represents the new economic order, on the other hand, recognizes an opportunity and, finally, buys the estate himself. (Turturro does a fine high-stepping, boot-tapping cakewalk around the stage in celebration of this social and financial coup.) Lopakhin, however, is blinkered in matters of the heart. In a superb, devastating scene with Madame Ranevskaya's daughter Varya (the excellent Juliet Rylance), who wants to marry him, Lopakhin lets love pass him by.

Belgrader's vivacious staging gets the right pace but not always the right definition of the characters. For instance, Trofimov's political idealism and his equally idealized love of the bland Anya (Katherine Waterston), Madame Ranevskaya's other daughter, lack a specific gravity, which blurs, it seems to me, both the humor and the larger thematic thrust of the play. The lapse doesn't spoil the evening, but it does mute the play's ironic music. In Chekhov, obsession, not action, is what controls the momentum of the farce and sends the characters into a kind of moral and emotional daze. In their passionate nostalgia for the past and their concern over what the future holds, they miss the present. The finale underscores this point. As the house is closed down, the characters prepare to bustle off on their various trajectories: Lopakhin to make his fortune; Trofimov to make a better world; Gayev and Ranevskaya to begin their half-lives. In all the planning, worrying, and leave-taking, they forget Fiers, the loyal retainer, who is locked inside the house as it is boarded up and who, in the freezing cold, has no chance of surviving; he is absurdly and cruelly overlooked by history. Fiers's last word, and

the final word of the play, is "bonehead." "The Cherry Orchard" is an anatomy of human caprice, which turns every life into a slapstick tragedy.

The second act of "The Cherry Orchard" was a particular challenge for Chekhov, because, as Stanislavsky noted, "it was essential to show the boredom of doing nothing in a way that was interesting." By contrast, "Bonnie & Clyde" (directed by Jeff Calhoun, at the Gerald Schoenfeld), a musical retelling of Arthur Penn's iconic 1967 film about the Depression-era gangster lovers, shows a lot of exciting events—jailbreaks, murders, robberies, car chases, sex—and manages to make them boring. You know you're in trouble when the on-stage projections of historical footage and of Walker Evans's photographs of rural Americans (well designed by Aaron Rhyne) are more interesting than the hardworking actors in front of them.

As the musical (book by Ivan Menchell; lyrics by Don Black; music by Frank Wildhorn) tells it, Bonnie (Laura Osnes) and Clyde (Jeremy Jordan) are united in grandiosity: she wants to be a movie star like Clara Bow; he wants to be an outlaw like Billy the Kid. Together, they make music and infamy, compounding their barbarity with poetry, which Bonnie writes and sends to the newspapers. If you read the titles of the musical numbers, you can more or less figure out the plot, since the lyrics illustrate rather than illuminate the action: "How 'Bout a Dance?" They dance. "Too Late to Turn Back Now." They don't turn back. "Dyin' Ain't So Bad." They accept death as the price for their murderous little joyride.

If the musical were worse, like, say, Leon Uris's "Exodus," in which concentration-camp victims danced over barbed wire, it might be fun; instead, it's merely earnest, proficient, and dull. "Bonnie & Clyde" doesn't try to think about the issues; it just sells the franchise. There's no playfulness in the lyrics, no memorable melody in the songs, no social or psychological insight in the story. The young leads are attractive and strong-voiced but without a whiff of the renegade between them. The musical pretends to be a walk on the wild side, but it's really a stroll down the middle of the road. "Bonnie & Clyde" aims low, and hits the mark. ♦