



Review: THE CHERRY ORCHARD at Portland Experimental Theatre Ensemble

by Krista Garver Jul. 1, 2022

Funny, poignant, weird - Portland Experimental Theatre Ensemble's new take on THE CHERRY ORCHARD, translated by Štěpán Šimek, is a vehicle to showcase what both Chekhov and PETE do best. Chekhov was an expert in using tragicomedy to expose human frailty. PETE pushes situations to the boundaries of absurdity (and often beyond) to reveal deeper truths about human nature that a more realistic portrayal could never achieve. This production, directed by **Alice Reagan**, brings these elements together in perfect combination.

The play is an exposition of selfishness and denial...and their consequences. Luyba Ranyevskaya (played by Amber Whitehall), returns to the family home with her brother Leo (**Cristi Miles**) and daughter Anya (Olivia Mathews in the production I saw). The family used to be part of the aristocracy, but now because of their prolific spending, the home - and its adjacent cherry orchard - are set to be sold at auction to pay off their debts.

Only Luyba's adopted daughter, Varya (**Rebecca Lingafelter**), and Yermolai Lopachin (Jacob Coleman), the now-wealthy son of a serf who worked on the estate, see the catastrophe that's about to befall the family. But they can't convince Luyba and Leo to do anything about it - these are not people used to suffering or, indeed, taking anything seriously at all. So, rather than attend to the situation at hand, they revel in nostalgia and excess. This is Chekhov, so don't expect a happy ending or for the characters to learn anything at all.

PETE has set the play in the melting Arctic in the very near future - an apt setting for a story about ostriching in the face of impending disaster. **Peter Ksander's** excellent set places most of the action in a relatively confined area, surrounded by images of glaciers, enhancing the feeling of dancing on the edge of an abyss.

The whole ensemble is excellent. Each character personifies a different human trait, which the actors bring to vivid life in various mannerisms and actions: Yermolai - greed: always taking up too much space; Leo - gluttony: constantly inhaling sugar; Varya - practicality: quietly gutting a fish. These types of actions, and the way they evolve throughout the show, convey the emotions of the circumstances, more so than any particular plot point or bit of dialogue - save a beautifully gut-wrenching scene between Varya and Yermolai.

I loved THE CHERRY ORCHARD. I'm a Chekhov fan in general, and PETE's weird and wonderful approach brilliantly taps into the heart of his work.

THE CHERRY ORCHARD is on hiatus this weekend due to COVID, but they've extended the run through July 16. More details and tickets here:
<https://www.petensemble.org/cherry-orchard>