



OREGON ARTSWATCH

ARTS & CULTURE NEWS

DramaWatch:

More sugar in the Chekhov tea

PETE's "Cherry Orchard" is an energizing jolt of the sweetly unexpected.

JULY 1, 2022

MARTY HUGHLEY

DRAMAWATCH, THEATER



PETE's adaptation of "The Cherry Orchard" is, among many other things, a visual feast.

Photo: Owen Carey

Long ago in the 1990s, when I was a music critic for *The Oregonian*, I once met the jazz pianist Andrei Kitaev for lunch at The Heathman. When our coffee arrived shortly after we sat down, Kitaev scooped a couple of spoonfuls of sugar into his cup. And then another. And another. And another. And – as my eyes began to bulge and my mouth to fall open in disbelief – another. At last noticing my reaction, he shrugged and said simply, “I’m Russian.”

I was reminded of that lunch by a delightfully odd moment – one of many – in Portland Experimental Theatre Ensemble’s new adaptation of *The Cherry Orchard*. In an early scene, the owner of a grand estate and its orchard, Luyba Ranyevskaya, played by Amber Whitehall, has just returned from several years abroad. As she greets friends and family and takes in the familiar surroundings, someone brings her a cup of coffee, which she holds at her side for a moment. Her brother, Leo Gayev, played by Cristi Miles, sneaks around and behind her, and while she’s not looking plops several spoonfuls into her cup from a large bag of C&H sugar. In the same scene, Miles eats spoonfuls directly from the bag – a riff on Gayev’s habit, in standard versions of the Anton Chekhov classic, of regularly popping hard candies into his mouth.

But I don’t take from that scene – any more than I did from Kitaev’s coffee – that Russian character is defined by a sweet tooth. I always took Kitaev’s offhand explanation to be less about loving sugar than about a tendency toward eccentricities and extremes, an embrace of the irrationality that seems to thread through life whether we want it to or not. In the same way, that moment in *The Cherry Orchard* struck me as both characteristically Russian and tellingly human.

A few years ago, when PETE and the Lewis & Clark College theater department collaborated on a multi-day Chekhov symposium featuring readings of translations by LC professor Štěpán Šimek, he talked to me about why he felt compelled to create new versions.

“There’s always been something about Anglo-American interpretations: this soulful, slow, tragic vision of these plays,” said Simek, a native of Prague. “And I’m not saying that they’re not soulful and tragic, but that sense of the characters as these incredibly sad Russians, as people of another time, all this stuff about boredom and ennui ... it’s like an Orientalism about the Russian soul.”

I wouldn't guess that the nature of the Russian soul was too much on the minds of PETE and guest director Alice Reagan, who adapted Simek's version into the streamlined script for this production. But a certain idiosyncrasy – by turns winsome and stubborn and disconsolate – flavors this show like sprinkles of nuts and swirls of syrup in a sundae. Whether or not it's particularly Russian, you could argue that it's at once very original *and* very Chekhovian. *The Three Sisters* in 2014 and *Uncle Vanya* in 2018 were inventive and engaging, to be sure, but this *Cherry Orchard* is the most wonderfully strange and affecting PETE Chekhov yet.

Unfortunately, you'll have to wait a bit to see it. In yet another Covid-related setback (the production originally was scheduled for the summer of 2020, postponed twice, and opened on June 24 with a last-minute understudy in one of the roles), this weekend's performances are off.

“Sadly we need to cancel all four of this weekend's performances of *Cherry Orchard*, June 30-July 3, due to a positive COVID case on our team,” read a June 30 statement from PETE. “We are currently planning to extend performances so that everyone with a ticket to this weekend can see the show in the next few weeks. Please bear with us as we work out the details of our new performance dates! We should have details in place by this Saturday July 2, and we'll reach out then with more details and options. Stay tuned, and thank you for your patience.”



PETE's "Cherry Orchard" is an ensemble tour de force. Photo: Owen Carey

Patience will be rewarded. [A fine review for ArtsWatch by Max Tapogna](#) outlines the way the production underlines the epochal aspects of the play through allusions to climate change, as well as the deft dance it does between the tragic and the comic.

I, too, loved the many ways the performers here – especially Whitehall, who gives Ranyevskaya a gauzy distracted quality that's both whimsical and fragile – stretch moments of both mirth and melancholy past normal limits into an uncanny resemblance of each other. The show is stuffed with gags (characters flailing their arms to the sound of roaring winds whenever a door to the outside is opened), odd juxtapositions (while the student Trofimov discourses on human dignity, Ranyevskaya's dutiful adopted daughter Varya cleans and salts a fish) and unexpected flourishes (when Lopachin, an *arriviste* former peasant, announces that he's bought the estate, balloons drop from the ceiling), all of which subtly enhance character or theme. And there's witty/ingenious design work throughout, especially in Peter Ksander's jewel box of a set and Jenny Ampersand's anachronistic-jumble costumes.

Productions of *The Cherry Orchard* often depend on a fulcrum between laughter and tears, and how things are weighted around that point. But I've never seen a production perform as wild a balancing act as this one. Take my favorite example:

For all *The Cherry Orchard* can be made to say about human folly, about the shifting of social and economic orders, or, in this version, about the dire denouement of our current climate crisis, it's most resonant as a study of people muddling through their lives. And in that, it's most touching in an ostensibly romantic plot thread regarding Lopachin, that wealthy businessman, and Varya, who is part of the leisurely landowning family but is more like an unpaid household manager. They care for each other and are destined to get married. Or so everyone tells them.

And so a quietly poignant highlight of any *Cherry Orchard* of merit comes when everyone's preparing to lock up the now-sold estate and leave for good, and Ranyevskaya encourages Lopachin to propose to Varya at long last. As is the way in a Chekhov play, the two talk past each other, unable to articulate what they feel or even to stay on topic. The moment passes, with no proposal, only awkwardness.

So it is here. But then Rebecca Lingafelter – whose Varya is more relaxed than the dour taskmaster she's often played as – stands alone onstage. She looks out at the audience with a tender, disappointed expression, just for a second, before quietly asking, “Does anyone know that song, ‘All the Single Ladies’?”

On opening night, at least, there was a pause of several long seconds as we looked back at her, until someone started to tentatively sing Beyonce's “Single Ladies.” A few others, now emboldened or just reminded of the tune, joined in, and then so did Lingafelter: “If you liked it then you shoulda put a ring on it.”

I am very far from being a Beyonce fan, but seldom have I been so surprised and delighted by a moment in the theater. Like so much about this show, it was an energizing jolt of the sweetly unexpected.

Kind of like a cup of joe with six sugars.