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PETE's 'Cherry Orchard,' laughing through the apocalypse

In a bold new take, Chekhov's characters are stuck in the Arctic and beset by all sorts of disasters – but they still know how to have fun.

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By Max Tapogna

There is a moment in Portland Experimental Theatre Ensemble's new production of *The Cherry Orchard* that makes a poignant omission from Chekov's original. Following an ear-splitting screech—the source of which is mysteriously unknown—Firs, the estate's aging valet, says the sound had appeared once years ago, before a "great disaster." When Firs is questioned about which disaster he refers to, he clarifies: the emancipation of the serfs in 1861.

In the PETE production, playing at the Reed Performing Arts Center through July 9, the historical context is left out and the character Firs is cut from the script altogether. Instead the line goes to Varya (Rebecca Lingafelter), the adopted daughter of Luyba Ranyevskaya (Amber Whitehall), who is lady of the house and the delicate hub around which Chekov's characters frantically turn. Yet when Varya is asked to name the disaster, she says nothing. There is a brief pause, and audience members are left to fill the silence with a disaster of their own imagining.

If there is a message that this production—adapted and directed by Alice Reagan after a translation by Štepán Šimek—is attempting to convey, it might be a reminder (in case anyone needed it) that our country and the rest of the world are facing what can feel like a never-ending catalogue of disasters. In her director's note, Reagan says the play is "practice" for the approaching time of floods, fires, and other natural disasters that are the result of the earth's changing climate. To highlight this, the program tells us the setting of the play is "the melting Arctic," and the time "soon."

Perhaps by “practice,” Reagan means emotional preparation? I personally will not be taking any advice from the characters of *The Cherry Orchard* on how to prevent a disaster. Staring down the barrel of an encroaching deadline—the auctioning of the family estate and the beloved orchard—the play’s characters drink and dance and exhibit all the symptoms of aristocratic ennui until it’s too late. The only person who attempts to change course is Yermolai Lopachin (Jacob Coleman), a former peasant turned affluent businessmen. But his proposed solution, to cut down the orchard and convert the area into summer vacation cabins, is mocked by Luyba and her brother Leo (Cristi Miles), who cannot seem to grasp the concept of actual *work*.

PETE’s new “Cherry Orchard”: A good despairing time is had by all. Photo: Owen Carey

One of this production’s pleasures is watching the characters (and actors) find sources of joy amidst a bleak backdrop (to give an example of how bleak, whenever a door is opened, a gust of Arctic wind blows onstage, momentarily pausing the action). The show begins with a scantily-clad Lopachin—who looks to have just completed a night of epic carousing—waking up to music that sounds like it was lifted from the *Borat* soundtrack. At first tentative, like a bear emerging from hibernation in spring, he begins to dance to the music, and eventually we are treated to a bonafide hoedown.

The production includes several numbers like this, as well as other moments of Dionysian disarray, as when a stranger approaches the house (in Chekov’s script the

character is a vagabond come begging for money, but it's left ambiguous here) and the whole ensemble transforms into a pack of snarling wolves. Later, after Lopachin reveals he has bought the estate at the auction, Coleman embodies such an exaggerated state of happiness that he begins to lick the floor in glee.

Chekov described his play as a comedy, and I was laughing throughout the show. But in Chekov the border that separates comedy and tragedy is treacherously thin; oftentimes nonexistent. An example in this production is the staging of a failed proposal between Lopachin and Varya. Lopachin decides to back out of the proposal halfway through and begins to talk to Varya about the weather: the problem is, when he does so he is already on bended knee! The exchange is simultaneously hilarious and heartbreaking. Instead of marrying Lopachin, as is her desire, Varya must move fifty miles from her home to serve (for the rest of her life, one assumes) as a household maid.

Near the end of this production, after the estate has been sold, a change in the way the actors enter the set—a boxed-in living room—suggests that the margin between the house and the outdoors has dissolved. The characters are thrust into a changing world they might not be equipped to live in. In the play's final moments, that unsettling screech returns, only this time the source is less ambiguous. We hear what we realize is the Arctic breaking apart, the pieces set adrift in a warming sea.

For all the comedy this show exudes, the underlying reality is one of despair. That the play is filled with so many moments of love and laughter is remarkable. Now that I think about it, I may take a page out of Reagan's (and Chekov's) book, after all. Considering all the disasters the play's characters face—social, financial, environmental—they still know how to have fun.