

Michael Billington on Chekhov's might-have-beens triumphantly realised in Uncle Vanya

Glorious rage

MICHAEL BLAKEMORE'S production of Uncle Vanya at the Vaudeville shines like a good deed in a naughty world: it is a gem amidst the fake jewellery of the West End. For me it misses total perfection because of details of interpretation but, as should happen with Vanya, I found myself watching the end through a mist of tears.

Oddly enough, one of my doubts centres on Michael Gambon's Vanya. He is, of course, mesmerising to watch. A bulky figure in a crumpled linen suit, he presents us with a 47-year-old emotional adolescent. One of his first actions is to plant himself on a garden swing and, whenever Yelena waves into view, he gazes at her with adoring eyes set in a lolling head.

Gambon has inherited Ralph Richardson's ability to exist in two dimensions at once. Half the time he seems to be living in a private dream: there is a magnificent moment when he is accused of being drunk and cries "possibly, possibly" in a voice so alien and remote it might be coming from a man under hypnosis.

Gambon offers a brilliant monument to ineffectuality: a man crippled by unrequited love and professional futility. But I am reminded of something Eric Bentley once wrote: that Chekhov's elegiac note is moving "because the sense of death is accompanied with so rich a sense of life." It is the element of might-have-been in Chekhov's characters that makes their waste so tragic. Gambon's Vanya for me just misses greatness because he is directed to play defeat from the start: all hope and dignity have been shredded. But Astrov points out that he and Vanya

are the only two people of culture in the district; and although Gambon, brushing his hand across his thinning hair and erupting into childish fury, is wonderful to watch he needs more of that Chekhovian thwarted rage for life.

There is, however, the sense of a real, tangible relationship between him and Jonathan Pryce's Astrov: it is summed up in the superb moment when Astrov essays a drunken dance and crashes into Vanya, landing them in a tangled, jocular heap on the floor. But Pryce's magnificent Astrov also has that crucial sense of life's worth which is what makes its fulfilment so moving.

He presents us with a damaged idealist who is quirky, eccentric, sensual and used to burying his pain in vodka: there is an unforgettable moment when he complies with Sonya's request not to drink and then, suddenly remembering the patient who died under chloroform, his eye steals longingly towards an unclaimed glass. Pryce gives us the might-have-been; and there is an exact psychological truth about the way he fondles Sonya with the thoughtless familiarity one exhibits to those one does not love.

At its best, Blakemore's production grasps the essential point that Chekhov's characters are painfully alive: there is intensity in their lassitude. That is why Imelda Staunton is the best Sonya since Plowright: she is a woman who is quite desperately in love, parroting Astrov's opinions as if they were her own and giggling over their midnight feast in sheer pleasure at getting him to herself. And the brave, falsely heroic smile she puts on at the doctor's departure is one of the most moving examples of a breaking heart I have ever seen.

It is also a sign of the production's merit that it rediscovers an almost forgotten character in Telegin, the impoverished landowner who lives on the estate. Jonathan Cecil plays him as a bright, buoyant man in middle-age permanently affronted by the fact that people cannot remember his name. He gives you the man's whole history; and when he rushes from the room in terror at Vanya's explosive anger, you sense exactly the merry vulnerability that led his wife to desert him.

But two performances need more Chekhovian intensity. Benjamin Whitrow's Serebryakov has a tetchy amour-propre but little of that sense — communicated by Lebedev in the Leningrad production at Edinburgh last year — of an arrogant peacock who treats the universe as if it were created for his convenience. And although Greta Scacchi is radiantly beautiful as Yelena, she doesn't use her body to the full: the character should have an offensively swaggering indolence which Astrov (in Michael Fry's needle-sharp translation) actually describes as "inadmissible."

These are cavils, however, at a production which is strongly cast, excellently designed (Tanya McCallin's set has the right feeling of people thrown together in a cramped house outside which the landscape stretches to infinity) and which subsumes the comedy into the tragedy. At the end, with Vanya and Sonya together at the work-table and with her cradling his great baby's head in her arms, you feel the poignancy of starting life again on the flat when, as Desmond MacCarthy said, "a few hours before it has run shrieking up the scale of pain." I know of no more moving climax in world drama.



Family gems . . . Jonathan Pryce and Elizabeth Bradley

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Billington on Vanya

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