



Michael Gambon as Uncle Vanya: 'He combines delicacy with bulk... a smugged canny smile tempers the force of the angry, sexy eyes... power is ominously held back.'

BOTH MICHAEL GAMBON and Jonathan Pryce have very large hands. In Michael Blakemore's production of Uncle Vanya (Vaudeville), sharply translated by Michael Fryn, they help to cut the shape of Chekhov's play.

The impulsive gestures and visionary dark eyes of Fryce's Dr Astrov propose the amplitude of an existence far beyond the confines of Russian provincial life they threaten to knock over everything in sight. Gambon's clumsy, liss, bunches of five with their power concealed, are those of a Vanya who craves invisibility in the household and seeks to edge himself out of the world, as surely as he is already burning from his cramped and raggedy flesh bulk. Both read, or sink their heads in their heads, hiding their eyes in sophisticated embarrassment or mild despair. They articulate a language of bravado and exhaustion.

After the somewhat cerebral impression of Peter Hall's Shakespearean Romance, reviewed last week, you could not wish for a more joyous and unimpeded display of English physical acting than these two marvellous performances. The prevailing native tradition, by which emotion is expressed principally above the neck, is exemplified this week by Greta Scacchi as Yelena, untidy object of Astrov and Vanya's infatuation and, more interestingly, by Penelope Keith in The Deep Blue Sea (Haymarket), a play about sex in which the word sex is never mentioned, given a performance whose sen-

sual expressiveness is virtually nil. More of that in a moment.

Fryce is tall, bearded and could pass for an Orthodox priest. Gambon combines delicacy with bulk. It is impossible to imagine him giving a performance where the whole of his body is not used: the bull neck is here averted in Vanya's stock-in-trade to reproach, turns like a startled dog at the sound of an unexpected voice. A smugged, canny smile tempers the force of the angry, sexy eyes; the feet ring themselves with a provoking indolence across the pattern of a long summer day. The power is ominously held back by the disciplines of family life and the rage, when it explodes, is both terrifying and absurd.

One performance matches Gambon and Fryce: Imelda Staunton plays Vanya's niece Sonia as a fervent, scrubbed, shining and humorous girl whose impromptu midnight feast with the adored doctor is the finest scene of the night. Blakemore's production allows the actors space to move, but lacks the kind of despatch we have come to expect in our Chekhov—Vanya's radical old mother, for example, (Rachel Kempson) is simply stuck in a corner with her pamphlets and left to get on with it—and Tanya McCallin's sets are awkwardly pitched between naturalism and allusion.

A Russian summer

THEATRE ■ Michael Ratcliffe

Gambon as Uncle Vanya, Branagh as Hamlet

The greatest puzzle remains Yelena. The least realised major character in Chekhov, she needs to be played by a woman of great beauty who is also a stage actress of commanding presence and technique. Miss Keanell is the first, but not, alas, the second: the voice flattens all before it. One minor horror should be removed at once: the merry intrusion of a bearded old cove in a cap, playing an ethnic concertina during the changes of scene, shows a patronising view of the audience expected to support all-star Chekhov in the West End.

Denis Jacobs's thoughtful production of Hamlet for the Renaissance Theatre Company (Birmingham Rep Studio, in rep until Saturday, thereafter touring) confirms Renaissance as the liveliest new mainstream ensemble for some time. It is less assured than their 'As You Like It' and 'Much Ado About Nothing', but it supports the argument—not invariably true, of course—that actors when left to themselves will generally allow one another to act. Jenny Tiramani said the play on a plain black-open space with scarlet curtain and gallery above; the

particular physical gift is long, expressive fingers through which she sifts sand, pebbles, driftwood and shells instead of rosemary, columbine and herb o' grace.

Branagh's first Hamlet is pale, passionate and unbalanced, shifting between gentle tenderness and shuddering, hysterical rage. At present he is running at some of the speeches too fast as if they would mow him down, but others ('To be or not to be', 'There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow...') are articulated with wonderful narrative clarity of sound and thought. Compared to his Touchstone and Benedick, the effect is uneven, but already full of very good things.

It would be unfair to dismiss Branagh's 'Deep Blue Sea' (1952) as unrevivable solely on the strength of Alan Strachan's Haymarket production because he takes an idiosyncratic view of the play and it has not worked. This seems to be that if you pass over its lapidary, tight-lipped surfaces with particular, painstaking slowness, some acute resonance—a hindsight affinity, perhaps, with 'Fister'—will emerge. It does not. In fact the play's tortuous, painful and prickly English evasions about love, lust, fidelity, marriage, possessiveness and mutual expectation, might yield a sharper edge if treated with greater briskness, not less.

The story behind Hester Col-

lyer's attempted suicide takes for ever to set up and almost as long to wind down. Miss Keith, courageously searching for roles to still her flitting fans, brings two voices to the woman who has exchanged dinner parties in Euston Square for adultery in Ludbrooke Grove (Oh, Fifties!); the grave, dignified and solemn, as though talking to difficult children who might step out of line and, very occasionally, the strangled sob-cry-quip. She dare not use her own fine cutting edge on the role (as Ashcroft must have done) because it is that which, above all, makes the fans titter.

Good support from David Yelland as pathetic, unspeakable Freddie, sozzled test pilot and Hester's *homme fatal*, Anthony Bate, all kindly granite as her formidable husband-judge, and John Normington as the tolerated, advising voice of Middle Europe, invited in off the stairs.

It looks as though the beautiful Playhouse—London's only true baroque theatre, albeit of Edwardian provenance—may have its first success. The Belgrade Coventry production of The Fibbers Streets, adapted from Catherine Cookson by Rob Berrington who, also directs, is sturdy, Tyndale soap, which is to say that it is a sturdily predictable and (occasionally) true. An efficient, fluent touring production, designed by Adrian Rees, is enhanced by a performance of great feeling and charm from Owen Teale as the young gaffer who falls in love with the poor young teacher, who leaves her parents and moves in next door.

Ratcliffe on Vanya

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