

Michael Billington on Trevor Griffiths' would-be revolutionary fantasia

The pinking of Chekhov

I ENJOYED Trevor Griffiths' *Piano* at the Cottesloe while still feeling it rests on a shaky premise: that the British swathe Chekhov in elegiac sentimentality. What we have seen in my time as a critic is a stripping away of class-ridden nostalgia and phoney atmosphere to explore the comic self-absorption of Chekhov's characters: in that sense, Griffiths is kicking at an open door.

His play is itself easier to respond to than define. It is based on a 1980 Soviet film, *Unfinished Piece For Mechanical Piano*. That in turn was based on Chekhov's earliest surviving play, *Platonov* (known to us through Michael Frayn's *Wild Honey*) with elements of the short stories thrown in. So what we see at the Cottesloe is a fantasia on Chekhovian themes but one which constantly reminds us that the peasants are at the door awaiting the inevitable collapse of the ruling-class.

The keynote is sounded early on. Two peasants are lugging a mechanical piano across the countryside towards an estate. Pausing on a bridge, one of them reflects, "Grass dies, iron rusts, lies eat the soul and everything is possible." And when the two workers arrive at the estate, they find themselves largely ignored by a group of feckless, partying, would-be

progressives. Anna Petrovna, the widowed estate-owner, is up to her eyes in debt; Platonov, the local schoolmaster and her former lover, causes such sexual mayhem that he eventually tries to drown himself in a shallow pool.

Griffiths' point is clear: that Chekhov was a realistic writer dealing with a rural landowning class that was egotistical, irresponsible and doomed. But the play also confirms that Chekhov was a passionately objective writer whose stance was more that of recording angel than political moralist. His characters may be heedless but they are also indisputably alive. The contradiction is perfectly caught in the character of Sergei, Anna's stepson. On one level, he is an earnest rationalist who calls his dog Voltaire and plans to give his discarded clothes to the peasants; on another, he is an adolescent romantic who hurls himself into a trunk when he discovers his wife is Platonov's ex-lover. He is not judged: simply observed.

In fact, I suspect something curious has happened in the writing of this play. Mr Griffiths, I deduce, set out to prove that Chekhov was a radical critic of the social order. But Chekhov himself wrote in 1890, "Of course, it would be gratifying to couple art with sermoniz-

ing but, personally, I find this exceedingly difficult." In the end Griffiths' own judgmental tendencies are invaded by Chekhov's comic detachment: what you get on stage is more a vivid description of, than a diatribe against, these paralysed progressives and screwed-up liberals.

You also get a good production by Howard Davies played on a comprehensive set by Ashley Martin-Davis that occupies the whole Cottesloe floor space. A first-rate cast also grasps the point: that Chekhov's characters are foolish and funny because they are locked into their own egos. Stephen Rea's Platonov is a provincial Byron. Penelope Wilton's Anna is a bored enchantress metronomically waving a crossed leg up and down when Geoffrey Palmer's limp landowner seeks to propose to her. Balancing the self-preoccupation of Duncan Bell as the deceived stepson and Philip Voss as a snooty aristocrat, we have the surly watchfulness of Peter Caffrey as an abused servant and Keith Bartlett as a piano-lugging peasant.

Sometimes it feels more like pastiche Chekhov than the real thing. But it is still an entertaining, instructive evening: one that proves moreover you can never quite appropriate Chekhov to the revolutionary cause.

Billington on Piano

Clipped By:



ianharris

Sun, Jan 3, 2021