

# Sharp, hard turn of the screw on Chekhov

## Theatre

**Michael Coveney sees gems in Trevor Griffiths's reworking of classic tales.**

WHEN Trevor Griffiths talks of the 'recovery job' still to be done on Chekhov, he sounds foolish and out of touch. But in *Piano* at the Cottesloe, he has concocted a flinty, nagging meditation on Chekhov that recasts conversational flashpoints from the short stories in the setting of Chekhov's first play, *Platonov*.

The Royal National Theatre

has already reconstructed *Platonov* as a spectacular farce in Michael Frayn's *Wild Honey*. Here, Griffiths starts with a 1980 Soviet film, *Unfinished Piece for Mechanical Piano*, and presents the hero's bungled suicide attempt as a sour footnote to a survey of social arthritis.

This process is beautifully controlled in Howard Davies's production, laid out across the entire floor of the Cottesloe and haunted by the jangling interventions of the pianola delivered to Anna Petrovna's estate by a couple of glowering, prophetic workmen. That event, and its metaphorical reverberations, have been similarly

reworked in August Wilson's latest play in New York, *The Piano Lesson*.

Griffiths tightens the screw on the characters, so that Penelope Wilton's voracious hostess is more crudely skittish than in Chekhov, and the idealistic newlyweds (Duncan Bell and Suzanne Burden) more risible. Other *Platonov* stalwarts — the doctor (Oliver Cotton) and the old colonel (Basil Henson) — have been entertainingly revamped.

An exchange in the story 'At a Country House', about the social consequences of absorbing the peasantry into positions of influence, becomes a pivotal dramatic confrontation: Philip

Voss's smug, liberal-baiting reactionary is quietly reminded by Stephen Moore's otherwise virtually silent paterfamilias that his own father was a worker and his grandfather a serf.

Platonov himself in the scowling, tousle-haired figure of Stephen Rea, patrols the garden like a restless, vitriolic gamekeeper. This is indeed a far cry from Rex Harrison's ill-tempered womaniser, or Ian McKellen's merciless poseur. Rea turns the failed schoolmaster inside out, so that his Byronic romanticism becomes a weapon of attrition. Distant rumbles of thunder, and the ungoverned music of the piano, are premonitions of Platonov's explosive hopelessness; this erupts in the unexpected sound of Caruso singing 'Una furtiva lagrima' as Rea rushes around like an unleashed maniac.

Chekhov has long ceased to be the sleepy theatrical palliative imagined by Griffiths, both in mainland Europe and, especially, in the Irish theatre. But his exercise in reclamation has its own rhythm and validity, and the National is surely doing its job in matching the master with an important contemporary playwright of whom we had nearly lost sight. Griffiths's text is a gem — diamond-bright, hard, unsentimental and funny.

Michael Hastings's *A Dream of People* for the Royal Shakespeare Company in the Pit is also shot through with an anger at the way things are. A civil servant (Peter McNery) fails to interest the Prime Minister in his report on pensions in the twenty-first century. He throws a punch, suffers demotion, and responds by mixing with the tramps and wrinkles whom rational Tory politics will very soon dispossess. His 'dream' takes the form of illicit policy

meetings where the caring philosophy of the Beveridge era is unceremoniously lamented. McNery cracks up and sends all his furniture to Ethiopia, while his wife (Judy Parfitt) suffers a parallel breakdown in recalling a wartime lesbian fling.

The play is persistently interesting, though it fails to congeal in any convincing way. Janet Suzman is the director, and the clever designs are by Johan Engels. McNery finally fades out with a dream of suicides in Frinton-on-Sea ('We didn't want to be a burden'), a haunting sequence that suggests a play much better than this merely promising ragbag by another of our dangerously disappearing talented contemporary playwrights.

Meanwhile, the Old Vic, in reviving Jean-Paul Sartre's *Kean* (1953), meekly turns back the clock for no very good reason. In a mish-mash of backstage farce and theatrical low camp, we see Kean embroiled with high society, subsiding in debt and a codpiece in his dressing room, carousing in a smoke-filled dockside pub with old mates, and performing the last act of *Othello* with a besotted neophyte as Desdemona. This Drury Lane charity show, 'a benefit for old Bob', is overrun by prompts, interruptions, an ungovernable onset of real jealousy, a stand-up row with the Prince of Wales, and an act of actorish self-abasement ('To act you have to think you're somebody else; I thought I was Kean').

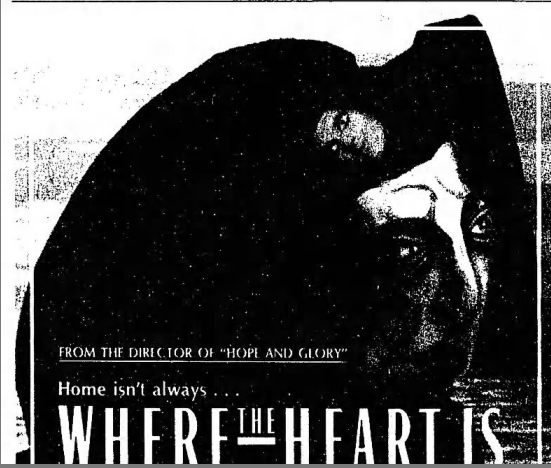
Kenneth Tynan suggested that John Gielgud was Kemble to Laurence Olivier's Kean, the aesthete opposed to the animal. Today, you might draw similar comparisons between Derek Jacobi and Michael Gambon. (Twenty years ago, in this same prickly-sharp translation by

Frank Hauser, the inimitable Alan Badel was glintingly and neurotically hilarious, neither Kemble nor Kean.) At the Old Vic, Jacobi tries vainly to banter his Kemble-ness for Kean-ness, resorting to fits of boyish petulance and precious inflections that betray a surfeit of good breeding in a parvenu rascalion. What Hazlitt called the hoarse burst of thunder in Kean's voice becomes the glottal spluttering and whinnying in Jacobi's.

Missing the persona of Kean matters less than missing the demonism of his reputation. This Kean is not a tempestuous clown but a tarnished matinee idol. Jacobi compensates a little in brilliantly invoking Olivier's *Othello* (to whom he played Cassio) with its early preview of the Viv Richards leonine amble, palms played like those of a priest at the Offertory, the reddened inner mouth, the glistening, dark coffee body make-up and the tight black wig.

It is a clever and technically adept performance, but it does not justify the play, any more than does Sam Mendes's disappointingly rhubarby production. The initial effervescence of Jeremy Sams's musical interludes, beautifully played by an Arlecchino quartet on violin, accordion and clarinets, tends finally to pall, as do the expensively-not-quite-effective sets of Simon Higlett.

A lot of the support playing is crude, and Eleanor David's Danish pasty-face, the object of Kean's wild passion, far too introverted. But Nicholas Farrell is a splendidly supercilious Prince, Sarah Woodward fiercely pert and precise as the determined Anne Danby (the role that made Felicity Kendal's name opposite Badel), and Ian McNeice admirably siothful as Solomon, the devoted dresser.



## Coveney on Piano & Hastings

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