

## Maturity of feeling in Chekhov's early work

### First Night

Ivanov  
Almeida, Islington

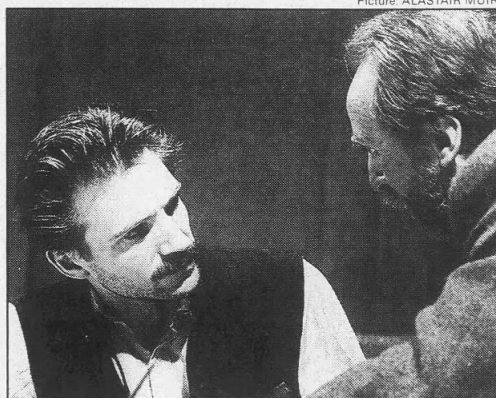
THE playwright and translator Michael Frayn, who probably understands Chekhov as well as anyone in Britain, has described *Ivanov* as "possibly the most lowering thing Chekhov ever wrote".

I can only report that it doesn't feel like that at the outstanding, indeed revelatory, production which opened last night.

It is true that there are scenes which are so piercingly painful that you can hardly bring yourself to watch. But there are others so blissfully funny that you find yourself physically helpless with laughter.

One readily understands why David Hare, who has provided the fine new translation, is impatient with those who have patronised *Ivanov* as mere apprentice work (Chekhov was 27 when he wrote it in 1887). It is indeed different from the four great plays of his maturity, but in a production as excellent as this, it can easily stand comparison with them.

*Ivanov* is a mixture of farcical comedy, unashamed melodrama, and a psychologically-acute analysis of a man in the grip of what we would now call clinical depression. It is no coincidence that Ralph Fiennes, a famous Hamlet for the Almeida,



Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

Ralph Fiennes and Bill Patterson: superb acting

should now be starring as Ivanov. Ivanov repeatedly and bitterly compares himself to Hamlet and, like the Prince, he has come to see the world as "weary, stale, flat and unprofitable".

There are good reasons for this. His Jewish wife, who has been disowned by her family, is dying of TB and Ivanov is consumed with guilt because he has ceased to love her. His estate is in decay, he's short of money, and at 35, his idealism has given way to a sense of exhaustion.

There is, however, something deeper troubling Ivanov. He is overwhelmed by despair and futility which

he cannot understand. Before Freud put pen to paper, Chekhov, a doctor, clearly understood psychological illness.

Fiennes gives a remarkable performance in this harrowing role. Anyone who has had any experience of clinical depression will recognise the listlessness of his voice, the sudden bursts of pettish temper, the restlessness and the self-contempt.

He is superb too at sardonic humour, while the scene in which he turns on his loving, desperately-ill wife (a heart-wrenching performance from Harriet Walter) and screams that she's a "dirty Jew" makes the audi-

ence flinch. One readily understands why Frayn finds the play "lowering". What makes it a masterpiece is that Chekhov knows what all depressives know — that elsewhere life is going on as normal. The play is filled with beautifully observed supporting characters, all brought to life with wonderful detail and freshness in Jonathan Kent's superbly acted production.

The suffocating boredom and spiteful gossip of provincial life are brilliantly captured in the Act Two party scene, in which the guests are given nothing to eat or drink by their miserly hostess. And with extraordinary daring, Ivanov's final confrontation with his wife is immediately preceded by a raucous, blokish booze-up.

It is one of those evenings when you want to salute almost the entire cast. Oliver Ford Davies offers hilarious value as Ivanov's misanthropic uncle, growling like a bear with a sore head, Anthony O'Donnell gives a delightfully Tiggerish performance as the amiable steward, while Bill Paterson is one of the most entertaining and touching drunks I've ever seen on stage.

The ending is shattering and you leave the theatre in no doubt that you've seen a great production of a great, and unfairly neglected, play.

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Thu, Feb 10, 2022