

## First Night

### Michael Billington

#### Ivanov

Almeida Theatre

**I**VANOV is often referred to as Chekhov's Hamlet. But, ironically enough, Ralph Fiennes, who plays the title role in Jonathan Kent's breathtaking revival, seems closer to the great Dane than he did in Shakespeare's play. This is a performance packed with just the right emotional intensity, self-loathing and excoriating candour.

Written in 1887, Chekhov's first major play is closer to melodrama than to the symphonic realism of the later work. But in *Ivanov* himself Chekhov creates a memorable hero; a bankrupt landowner who, at 35, is tormented by his own lassitude and by his unhappy marriage to his tubercular wife. He seeks nightly refuge on the neighbouring Lebedev estate where the daughter of the house, Sasha, falls headily in love with him. But this only intensifies his guilt and anguish.

As David Hare's excellent new version insists, *Ivanov* is not really a Russian Hamlet. He is simply acting Hamlet. But the key to the role is that under the self-hatred and cruelty — and at one shocking moment he calls his wife "a dirty Jew" — you should sense what might have been. Fiennes catches precisely this

contradiction. He is full of despair and ineffectualness, yet he also implies that *Ivanov* has an honesty and intellect that has been despoiled by circumstance.

Melodrama the play may be in places, but it is also an exuberant social comedy that depicts the pettiness and vulgarity of Russian provincial life with Gogolian fervour. Kent's production releases the play's comic energy through a gallery of memorable performances.

Oliver Ford Davies plays *Ivanov*'s uncle as an embittered misanthrope who craves the excitement of abuse. Anthony O'Donnell is equally unforgettable as *Ivanov*'s mercenary steward. And Bill Paterson makes *Lebedev* a bulbous soak filled with residual kindness. The scene where the three of them get plastered and are reduced to beating

their heads against walls and tables as they are hijacked by an unstoppable card-bore is as riotous as anything on the London stage.

Melodrama and farce are juxtaposed, rather than seamlessly mingling as they do in Chekhov's masterworks. Yet the play has abundant theatrical vitality and touches deep emotional chords. *Ivanov*'s neglected wife, in particular, arouses our pity and Harriet Walter plays her beautifully as a wan, pale figure who cannot quite relinquish her love for her impossible husband.

We see Chekhov's four great plays often enough. What we have at the Almeida is a joyous resurrection of an earlier work that not only hints at what is to come but explores the absurdity of Russian life and the human condition with fizzing satirical energy.

# More i

## Ivanov, Billington, Guardian



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