

THE INDEPENDENT TABLOID FRIDAY 21/02/97

Rue with a difference

THEATRE *Ivanov*
The Almeida, London

The eponymous hero of Chekhov's first-performed play *Ivanov* has been called "Hamlet of the Steppes" and is himself several times moved to invoke Shakespeare's hero. On the face of it, then, not a role calculated to extend the range of Ralph Fiennes, who gave a famous high-romantic account of Hamlet for the same director, Jonathan Kent, a couple of years back. Such an assumption, though, badly underestimates both Chekhov's drama (played here in David Hare's robustly persuasive new translation) and the leading actor.

Until quite recently an energetic idealist, the 35-year-old Ivanov has sunk under the weight of his problems into a fagged-out despair. His state is running into ruinous debt; his wife (who cut herself off from her family to marry him) is dying of tuberculosis. As Chekhov wrote to his friend Suvorin, people in this position "usually place all the blame on circumstances and enroll in the ranks of

superfluous people and Hamlets". But the dramatist, wanting to put a stop to literature that celebrates "whining, despondent" folk, here created a hero who has an active horror of falling into this stereotype. This may only succeed in making his mood worse but in *Ivanov* there's at least a candour and acceptance of responsibility.

Fiennes's excellent performance piercingly brings home to you the fact that the hero's problem is what we would now call clinical depression. At once burning with shame and self-contempt, and festering with anger and suppressed violence, a restless, dishevelled Fiennes lets you see the depressive's ultimate torture – the knowledge that there is nothing remotely ennobling in depression and that the sun "shines regardless" in the parallel world of the well.

It's a very curious role because, in terms of what he actually does, there is little to distinguish *Ivanov* from the coarse

provincial society that Kent's fine production farcically exhibits in all its grasping materialist grotesquerie. At a soirée where a terminally plodding piano tune epitomises the insufferable boredom, we witness Ostrovsky-like vulgarities guffawing at witless anti-Semitic jokes, plotting mercenary marriages, and having to go on the hunt for food because of the miserliness of the rich hostess. Whether *Ivanov* himself is above marrying for money is the question reopened in the course of the play, while his willingness to resort to loutish racism is shockingly demonstrated in a row with his wife (an infinitely moving Harriet Walter).

It is Fiennes's achievement to give you an unsparring look at the unloveliness of the hero's behaviour (the sudden spurts of petulance, the lapses into inward-staring listlessness) at the same time as sensitively suggesting an innate and ineffable superiority of spirit. His key saving grace is that he excoriates himself even more

savagely than he is by his main detractor. Colin Tierney's splendidly priggish young Dr Lvov. If *Ivanov* resembles Hamlet, Lvov, who is glaring officiousness in a stiff collar, may put you in mind of Malvolio. His creepy tale-telling throws a flattering light on the hero's doubled-edged honesty.

In a first-rate supporting cast, Bill Paterson beautifully hints at the thwarted humanity in the puce-faced, wife-dominated lush, Lebedev, while, standing in at short notice for an indisposed actor, Ian McDiarmid delivers a hilarious cameo as Kosykh, an elderly monothematic prima donna who bores people to near-suicide with blow-by-blow accounts of the card games he's played. Perhaps best of all, Oliver Ford Davies, growling like a bear with a sore head as *Ivanov*'s uncle, gives vent to cascades of misanthropy that you can tell are his way of rousing himself from an even profounder despair.

To 5 April. Booking: 0171-359 4404
Paul Taylor



Harriet Walter, infinitely moving as *Ivanov*'s dying wife, with Ralph Fiennes Geraint Lewis

Ivanov, Taylor, Independent



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