

**BRITISH FILM STAR TIPPED TO SHINE AT THE OSCARS PUTS HIS REPUTATION ON LINE AT LONDON FRINGE THEATRE**

**R**ALPH FIENNES stood glumly willing there, with shoulders stooped, hair dishevelled, fists clenched and eyes downcast. Almost every drooping, disconsolate inch of him bore the stamp of defeat. This English Shakespearean actor, who turned Hollywood film star in three or four startling leaps, last night faced up to the most difficult role in the Chekhov repertoire, as that maestro of self-pity Nikolai Ivanov, a land-owner who has lost his money and his *jolie de utere*. But Fiennes's engaging performance, in a surprisingly heavy-handed production by Jonathan Kent, fell several feet away from triumph.

The play is, though, a rousing antidote to those sentimentalists who tell you all Chekhov's plays are just full of lovable people who never mastered the business of life. David Hare, who has provided this eloquent new version of Ivanov, with none of the anti-Semitic remarks excised, reminds us that Ivanov is an exception to the usual Chekhov rule. Here the playwright paints his most savage, comprehensive portrait of 1880s bourgeois Russians.

Most of the characters — scheming go-getters, fortune-hunters, anti-Semites, drunks and hangers on — lack the saving Chekhovian grace of rueful self-mockery. They are exuberant and absurd — far from adorable.

Kent's production, though, does not take a very critical view of any of them. And there's no strong sense of atmosphere or detail. The satirical points are bluntly made. Rosemary McHale as Zinaida, the fanatically mean hostess at the drabky conveyed second-act party, is, for example, just a gross turn.

Designer Tobias Hohelsel feebly summons up the faded grandeur of this Russian world of gardens and drawing rooms with dust-sheeted chandeliers and pictures. The lighting is so sombre you are hard pressed to see if Fiennes is using one of his prime assets, his eyes.

Ivanov is the regional councillor who married Harriet Walter's bleakly quavering, Jewish Anna for the money he never acquired. He reacts to her slow death from TB by succumbing to the council chairman's 20-year-old daughter Sasha — a bland Justine Waddell.

This is not an everyday story of corruption, since the cash-strapped Ivanov's mind is always on higher things. He has a tyrannically developed capacity for masochistic self-abuse. A



Picture: DAVE BENETT  
Ralph Fiennes with Harriet Walter (left) and Justine Waddell after the performance

# Fiennes portrayal but short of triumph



On stage: Fiennes as Ivanov and Waddell as Sasha

**FIRST NIGHT**  
by Nicholas de Jongh  
Ivanov ★  
*The Almeida*

mustached hang-dog Fiennes varies his character's repertoire of emotional bore. There is nothing more cruel or terrible in all Chekhov than the chilling scene in which an enraged Ivanov reveals to his wife she has little time left to live. Shaking with emotion, voice raised to an exultant shout, Fiennes scales the heights of fury. In response Miss Walter's Anna, who

lays on the pain with a heavy touch, pales and quails. Yet, for all the finesse and power of Fiennes's performance the impact is strangely muted. His Ivanov has not got quite enough vulnerability or chronic self-absorption.

The nasty, go-getting society from which he springs is beautifully summoned up by Oliver Ford Davies as a blustering count with an eye for the main chance, while Bill Patterson represents the hen-pecked benevolent male. And Colin Fierney as a young doctor speaks out against this idle, intriguing unlovely society which Chekhov so memorably evoked.

Ratings: No stars — adequate; ★ good; ★★ very good; ★★★ outstanding; X poor

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Ivanov, de Jongh, Standard



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