

Chekhovian tone to Spanish elegy

Review

Michael Billington

Dona Rosita, The Spinster
Almeida Theatre

LORCA in English often presents a problem: how do you convey his poetic lyricism and thwarted sensuality? But both Peter Oswald's new version and Phyllida Lloyd's production of *Dona Rosita, The Spinster*, capture the Chekhovian qualities of this delicately moving play, dating from 1935, about fading beauty and passing time.

The setting is a Granada villa between 1890 and 1910. At the play's centre is the orphaned *Dona Rosita* lovingly tended by an aunt and uncle, like one of the latter's greenhouse flowers, and herself dotting passionately on her cousin. When he is summoned to South America she keeps alive the memory of his love and the dream of his constancy only to confront, as the years pass, her solitude and disappointed hopes.

Realism mixes effortlessly with symbolism. *Dona Rosita* is a touchingly accurate picture of a woman sustained by an illusion. But she also becomes an emblem of Spanish womanhood victimised by men. And, as Ian Gibson intriguingly suggests in the programme, she stands for Granada in its decline from centre of civilisation to backwater.

The difficulty lies in capturing the play's specifically Spanish mood without tourist-brochure cliché. In this Lloyd is aided by Anthony Ward's set which starts as a gaily bedecked greenhouse alive with roses, anemones and chrysanthemums and which ends up as a starkly stripped room battered by wind and rain: the transition from opulent fertility to echoing emptiness astutely mirrors the transformation in the heroine herself.

Lloyd also makes good use of colour and movement. The evening starts with a fan-waving dance by a group of sensually undulating women. Later a trio of black-clad spinsters supervised by their mother descend on *Dona Rosita* like a flight of ravening crows. And by the end, the heroine's rose-hued dress has given way to a simple white gown.

In short, this is a subtly intelligent and very well acted production. Phoebe Nicholls lends the heroine exactly the right melancholy dignity. And there is outstanding support from Celia Imrie as a plain-speaking housekeeper, from Kathryn Hunter as a voracious visitor wolfing down all the passing snacks, from Eleanor Bron as *Dona's* lady-like aunt and from Clive Swift who doubles as her rose-fixated uncle and a minor poet who dreams of Parnassus and ends up doing the school plumbing. After triumphing with *Ivanov*, the Almeida now gives us a delicately touching evening of Hispanic Chekhov.

Billington Guardian Dona Rosita



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