



Wily pragmatist ... Michael Williams

NEIL GIBERT

Lost in the woods

Review

Michael Billington

The Forest
Lyttelton Theatre, London

It's Russian week in the London theatre. After Gorky's *Vassa* (1999) at the Albany we now have Ostrovsky's *The Forest* (1870) at the National. Both plays offer a vivid portrait of a money-worshipping female autocrat. But where Howard Davies's *Vassa* has an ultra-theatrical exuberance, Anthony Page's production of *The Forest* is weighed down by a dogged naturalism.

Page starts with many advantages. Ostrovsky's play itself, rediscovered by the RSC in 1981 and adapted by Alan Ayckbourn, is a cracker. Gennadiy, a stumpy vaudevillean, together they expose the false values of the world they have invaded: in particular the widowed Raisa's crazy infatuation with a Volga opportunist and her stilted meanness to a loveless, downy-deprived female relative.

Ayckbourn captures exactly the play's satiric attitude towards the moneyed classes. Arkady, describing a visit to his shopkeeper relative, claims "It was as if they'd died and nobody had broken the news to them." And Michael Feast and Michael Williams turn the raggedy actors into a classic Beckettian double-act. Feast, whose speech is stuffed with Hamlet and Lear quotations, has a wonderfully dotty fake-grandeur. Williams, with his cropped carrot hair and spitting consonants, is a superb foil, a wily pragmatist who regards the rich as a source of plunder.

But Page's production seems to have learned nothing from recent British ventures into Russian drama. Declan Donnellan and Richard Jones's versions of Ostrovsky, Jonathan Kent's *Ivanov* and Davies's *Vassa* have all shown that there is a constant thread of demonic, Dickensian satire on the merchant and landowning classes. Their productions have been filled with the hectic vitality of caricature. Page opts, mistakenly, for a sober, post-Stanislavsky naturalism. You see the consequences in Frances de la Tour's strongly uncertain performance as Raisa. The character has two

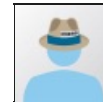
clear objectives: money and sex. But unlike Barbara Leigh-Hunt in Adrian Noble's RSC revival, she makes nothing of Raisa's obsessive attachment to her money-hex. And even the comedy of an ageing tramp's *Revolutions* carnal appetite misses its mark, since De la Tour is one of the sexiest actresses in Britain; you feel every virile Volga peasant would be after her.

Page also squanders Ostrovsky's point that the criminals are, in many ways, more theatrical than the impending actors. Raisa's love-stricken relative, Alesyushka, is so over-the-top that Gennadiy wants her to join his company, nothing in Niamh Cusack's performance, however, suggests wild romantic excess. Only Winsor Davies as a deaf ex-cavalryman has the heightened selfhood Ostrovsky demands.

William Dudley's sets, with their overstuffed interiors and arboreal exuberance, share the production's staid, realism. Ostrovsky's marvellous work has the exuberant madness of the best Russian comedy: here, with the vital exception of the two Michaels, it gets watered down to the level of Somerset Maugham.

In rep at the Lyttelton (0171-4523000)

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Sat, Feb 10, 2024