

Alan Ayckbourn has written a new version of the comedy by Alexander Ostrovsky, the mid-19th century Russian dramatist, and the cast couldn't be more user-friendly. Settle back and enjoy the ride as one famous TV face after another floats nostalgically past.

There's Frank Windsor (*Z Cars*, *Softly Softly*), playing a stooped white-haired family servant.

He's taking orders from Frances de la Tour (*Rising Damp*) as the fluttery, manipulative head of the household, who's trying to ensnare a young husband with enticing hints. Dropping in to pass the time of day is Windsor Davies (*It Ain't Half Hot Mum*), as the local wealthy neighbour with red face, white beard and bad hearing. In the second act, and there's Michael Williams (*A Fine Romance*) as a wheezily bedraggled comic actor, down on his luck.

You'd assume that *The Forest* opened last week at the Haymarket, produced by Bill Kenwright or Duncan Weldon, and each of the actors had their faces on the poster. But no. This is one of those very nice, very pleasant National Theatre productions that might have been sponsored by Saga Holidays.

Written in 1870, *The Forest* offers a version of the backwater country house play, after the emancipation of the serfs, with a middle-aged woman in charge of an ailing estate, a local businessman wanting to buy up land, and impoverished young men and old servants hanging around the house. See *The Forest* and you see the tradition out of which Chekhov wrote *The Cherry Orchard*.

And this is where Anthony Page's production gets it terribly wrong. He gives us a posh version of rough material. We sense this from the moment William Dudley's high semi-abstract forest, with

thick brush strokes that run across the trees, breaks into two and revolves, bringing in the main room of the country house. As a showy hi-tech device for distancing us from the stage conditions with which Ostrovsky would have been familiar, it couldn't be bettered. We remain stuck in the smart, expensive world of subsidised theatre.

For example: when you cast Frank Windsor as the servant Karp you send out the wrong message. Karp should be played by someone we've never heard of and will probably never see again (this isn't *Carry On, Jeeves*). Or when you cast Windsor Davies as the neighbour you create an expectation that he's going to have a good scene to do. He's wasted here. Or when you ask Ayckbourn to do a new version of a comedy you assume it's going to tap in to his own particular gifts as a comic dramatist.

The plot has two main threads. One is a version of *Wild Oats*, with an actor nephew, Gennadiy (the tirelessly energetic Michael Feast), returning to his aunt's house on a country estate in the Volga district, accompanied by an older colleague (Michael Williams). Gennadiy pretends to be a wealthy and successful figure and Arkady, reluctantly, has to play his valet. If there's one joke in the evening that they overrate it's the idea that it's funny to watch actors on stage delivering lines

It ain't half Russian, mum



ROBERT BUTLER

THEATRE

The Forest
Lyttelton, SE1

Vassa
Albery, WC2

In Flame
Bush, W12

about what absolute riff-raff actors are.

The other, more promising, plot-line centres on Frances de la Tour's long-range seduction of the dull Aleksey (David Bark-Jones). Frances de la Tour is on top form, giving an exquisitely nuanced performance as the mean, flighty and sensual lady of the house. Any highlights in the evening belong to her. Elsewhere, this early version of a Chekhov ought to be boisterous, quick and funny. Whereas it's only smooth, leisurely and mildly amusing.

Fast forward 40 years, and there's another middle-aged Russian woman in charge of another ailing concern, in Maxim Gorky's *Vassa*. It's hard to pin down what business exactly Sheila Hancock's *Vassa* is running. In Rob Howell's soaring office set there are rows and rows of drawers beneath the high windows and a typewriter that is used sparingly. A management consultant would not have to spend long here to spot the main problem with the business is that no one does any work. The family's business is the family.

Howard Davies's production fluctuates in tone between sitcom and pathos. Sheila Hancock's *Vassa* dispenses wreathed feline smiles and curt dismissals. She struggles to hold her world together, brushing away an imaginary fly as a nervous tic, and sharing her view that all the things we fear will happen.

As Anna, her daughter, Aisling O'Sullivan gives an overheated performance. But there are neat comic cameos from Adrian Scarborough as a stiff, pompous and ineffective son, and Debra Gillett as his prim, defiant wife Natalya, her face permanently braced, as if for chilly wind. As the other son, with a hump and a limp, David Tennant screws up his face with self-pity and announces that his family will never see him again, only to return seconds later to collect his shoes. These characters are rapidly

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