

Some mothers do 'ave

Theatre

by Susannah Clapp

Vassa Albery
The Forest National Theatre
Certain Young Men Almeida

THE BRITISH IDEA of the Russian dramatic repertoire was expanded a little last week. That enterprising revivalist of classic texts, the Almeida, brought Maxim Gorky's *Vassa* to the Albery, while the National Theatre staged Alexander Ostrovsky's *The Forest*, in a new translation by Alan Ayckbourn, at the Lyttelton. There wasn't a shimmer of silver birch, not a whisper of melancholic lassitude in either play. Both dealt in action, snarling and bad character. Both showed isolated households buzzing with spies and suspicion—and governed by fierce women.

Gorky, whose life was divided almost equally between tsarist and Soviet Russia, wrote *Vassa* in 1909. The story of an ageing woman who is prepared to murder in order to keep her family together and her business afloat, it featured melodrama, grim comedy and an attack on petit bourgeois materialism. In 1935, he rewrote it, introducing the character of a social revolutionary who gave the play a

more focused political dimension. Now Howard Davies has adapted a translation by Tania Alexander and Tim Suter of the early version. What emerges most forcefully is a world seething not so much with commercial greed as with sexual secrets.

Vassa contains a husband who is dying, it is hinted, of venereal disease, a daughter whose most hardy children are probably not by her husband, a son who years ago impregnated a servant, an uncle with a hidden child; even the apparently continent little wife is revealed as harbouring a baroque fantasy life. There are echoes of Ibsen, though the plot is more barnaced, less driving. There are loud echoes of Chekhov—at the end of the play, three women look to their future together—but there is scarcely a moment of languor or reflection.

There are well-turned lines: 'That's not very lady-like,' the mother chides her cigarette-smoking, striding daughter. 'It's like this lady,' snaps back the daughter. There are vivid performances from a scurrying, flustered Debra Gillett, and from Adrian Scarborough as her complacently prancing, scheming husband. But these are the only two characters who give the impression of being bound up, however disagreeably, with each other. Most of the produc-

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tion, though full of lively detail, doesn't hang together. As a formidable daughter, and future matriarch, Aisling O'Sullivan glowers like Bette Davis and mouths her words. As a crushed son, David Tennant sneers like Rik Mayall. For the first half of the play, until she assumes a more caustic mantle, there is a hole at the centre in the shape of Sheila Hancock, who plays the matriarch with a restrained, weary, almost casual air which drains away tension.

The most unified aspect of the production is the design. It's hard to go to the theatre these days without being struck by the boldness and versatility of Rob Howell. For *Vassa*, he has supplied a lofty, beautiful, snug space—part living-room and part business centre—which is patterned with shadows and squares of light. It is penetrated by doors which are continually being flung open to show acres of space, often with a listener crouching at the keyhole; shutters are folded back to look on to a forest that looks like the

Kremlin. It is both evocative and helpful.

The same can't be said of William Dudley's obtrusive design for *The Forest*. His wood—which needs to serve in the play as a metaphor for a predatory society teeming with voracious underground life—has bristling trees that look like climbing poles in an adventure playground, and a folksy dado. His interior scene is fussy with finials and squiggles. It takes too long to change between the two.

Too much of Anthony Page's production is creaky, and too much of the acting is uninflected—particularly damaging in a play which, written in 1870, 24 years before *The Cherry Orchard*, features actors among its characters. But it flares into comic life whenever these actors—a nonchalant Michael Feast and engaging Michael Williams—appear. As it does when Frances de la Tour comes on as Ostrovsky's matriarch. She is in succession unguarded, droll, callous. She plumps up a phrase with insinuation: 'ample' becomes an infinitely suggestive adjective. She refreshes a straightforward line with an unexpected pause. When she turns to seduction, she uses her shawl as a schoolgirl imitating the dance of the seven veils might flourish a team scarf.

Peter Gill's new play opened at the Almeida last week, with the author direct-



Michael Feast and Michael Williams.

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