

Glorious swoop of comedy steals the show



FIRST NIGHT

by Nicholas de Jongh

The Forest ★
Lyttelton Theatre

THEATRICAL larceny on the grand scale was committed last night at the National. Michael Feast and Michael Williams, as itinerant, Russian actors down on their luck, seized Alexander Ostrovsky's nineteenth century satire upon sex and financial greed in the mercantile classes and ran away with the entire play in a glorious swoop of vintage comedy. This was not so much scene-stealing, as wholesale theft. Yet Feast and Williams were vitalising rather than unbalancing Anthony Page's astutely cast but sluggish production.]

This revival of prolific Ostrovsky, who has classic status in Russia but is virtually unknown here, marks the latest phase of discovering a lost world of Soviet drama. *The Forest*, premiered in 1870 soon after twenty million serfs had been freed, sets up mercenary and romantic conflicts, with eager graspers for generous piles of sex, land and money. Justice is at last squeezed from the grabbing contest which gives the play its comic animus.

The scene is that familiar location for much Russian drama – the grand country estate. But the ugly, crudities of



William Dudley's stylised sets are strangely anonymous. Dudley has provided stencil-like back-cloths to represent the forest, with a wasteland of tree trunks. This makes an odd location for the play's moonlit lovers – Niamh Linehan's poor relation murmuring sweet somethings unintelligibly to Darren Tighe as the son of Peter Gowen's crooked merchant. The estate's two-tiered exterior facade looks like it's made of cardboard while the interiors appear cut-price.

Alan Ayckbourn, who's responsible for this new, velvet-smooth version, does not rank himself among 'life's natural adaptors'. So it's no surprise that though the costumes are nineteenth century Russian, the characters often talk as if they are exiles from Ayckbourn plays. Words, phrases and sentences such as "I've got everything nicely sorted", "grammar school", "lifestyle", "squire" and "family values" do not exactly have a Soviet ring. To draw obvious parallels between

Frances de la Tour and David Bark-Jones in *The Forest*, set in that familiar location for Russian drama – the nineteenth century grand country estate. Alexander Ostrovsky's work is revered in Russia but little known here

contemporary middle-Englanders and nineteenth century counterparts spoils the potential fun of enjoying the particularness of Ostrovsky's Russians.

Frances de la Tour's black-garbed Raisa a rich, fifty-something widow, is the play's prime example of greedy self-interest. Prowling the estate in furtive pursuit of David Bark-Jones's underpowered Aleksey, who, at less than half her age, is young enough to be a total mistake, Miss de la Tour cuts a delightful figure of absurd, coy hankering. But she underplays Raisa's avaricious, tyrannical aspects, regularly appealing over the play's head to the audience for undeserved sympathy.

It's when Michael Feast, as Raisa's long and gladly lost actor-nephew, Gennadiy arrives together with Michael Williams, in the role of a drunken, down-at heel comic thespian, that the play takes joyful comic flight. The impoverished Gennadiy is *The Forest*'s richest character – a master of dramatics and soaring passions, of attitudes struck and quotations mouthed. He and Williams's exquisitely doleful and bibulous Arkadiy, who wears a worn-out face and a voice so cracked you can almost hear the splits, make gorgeous satirical mockery of actors. They are antidotes to the greedy materialism Ostrovsky condemns.

Ratings: – ○ adequate

★ good,

★★ very good,

★★★ outstanding,

★ poor

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