

Theatre

Intimations of upheaval

The Cherry Orchard

Cottesloe Theatre, London

★★★★

This, by my reckoning, is the fourth Cherry Orchard that the National has given us in 27 years. But, even if Trevor Nunn's new production does not efface memories of its predecessors, it is a good, well-cast version that gives us Chekhov's concrete particularity. Played on a sparse rectangle with the audience on three sides, it also gains from the Cottesloe Theatre's revealing intimacy.

The most intriguing performance predictably comes from Vanessa Redgrave as Ranevskaya. Conventionally the character is played as a heedless romantic. Redgrave instead offers us a restless, tactile, highly sexed and deeply maternal woman forever guided by her instincts. She genuinely loves her old house, as you can see by the way she swoops on the nursery sofa to shower it with kisses.

But she is also the victim of her uncensored passion. Her dream of saving the family estate by marrying the buyer, Lopakhin, off to her adopted daughter, Varya, comically backfires precisely because it is she herself who enchants the upwardly mobile businessman.

Redgrave's highly intelligent performance — and Nunn's production — reminds us that Chekhov's play is about class as well as money, property and misdirected passion. This Ranevskaya's privileged

upbringing leads her to remember the nursery furniture but not the housemaid's name. Corin Redgrave's fine Gaev is not just an arrested adolescent but a rank snob. Class is also the key to Roger Allam's excellent Lopakhin: it accounts for his lifelong fascination with Ranevskaya, his incredulous delight at buying the estate and his paralysing inhibition. There is a truly Chekhovian piece of comedy when, in the abortive proposal to Varya, Allam prepares to go down on bended knee and scoops up a bottle of champagne instead.

At times the production succumbs to old-fashioned atmospherics: when the departing Ranevskaya lays a floral tribute on a music-box, Nunn treads a delicate line between irony and sentimentality. And although David Lan's new version is very direct, I can't help wondering what's wrong with the dozen other existing translations. But it is a clear, soundly conceived production that reminds you that, beneath the imperishable beauty of Chekhov's play, lay intimations of revolutionary upheaval.

Michael Billington

In rep: Box office: 020-7452 3000.

Theatre

Mad, bad and sad

On Line and Paranoid in the Sentimental City

Finborough Theatre, London

★★

London, the ever-changing city, is the nervy star of Chris Lee's play. It is a hyper, unset-



The Cherry Orchard ... Vanessa Redgrave and Corin Redgrave in Trevor Nunn's well-cast production Photograph: Tristram Kenton

tled place where every new construction is also destruction and the past melts into the present which is in turn enfolded by the future. It is a place built on plague pits and dotcom businesses and the river that snakes through its middle, its own super highway.

In King's Cross, Carla dallies with a boyfriend who wants to make a fortune by showing himself and Carla having sex on the net: "Why work when you can fuck?" Carla's brother, David, flirts with the BNP as

well as his black neighbour Tim, a walking, talking history man who knows that out of decay can come new growth. In their condemned short-let flat Carla and David's mother, Fatima, rails against the police, fire brigade and government who she believes are united in a conspiracy to harass her and pull her home down. "Illness," a social worker advises Carla when she tries to get help, "is just an interpretation we can give our situation."

Lee's play may be small in

size but it's big in scope and its failing is that it never succeeds in pulling together its disparate elements of drama, social geography and historical lecture. It has a wonderful magpie quality as it muses on this giant shared space with its nooks and crannies, secret inclusions and exclusions. But it suffers from an insufficiently solid centre. At the moment it is a collection of ideas.

The characterisations can be sketchy. But even when his characters are at their most

absurd, such as the wine swilling local MP who gets his secretary to defecate into his mouth, Lee writes with an aggressive beauty. With more work on the script this could be a play that you would actually want to go and see.

Director Mervyn Miller has not paid enough attention to the performances, although in the best written and most deeply explored characters of Tim and David, Patrick Regis and Luke Jardine excel. But like the play, the production —

Cherry Billington Guardian

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