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The Cherry Orchard

by Winnie McCroy

EDGE Editor

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John Turturro and Juliet Rylance in "The Cherry Orchard" (Source:Carol Rosegg)

The Classic Stage Company stages Anton Chekhov's tragicomic play, **"The Cherry Orchard"**, featuring Dianne Wiest as an unhinged, bankrupt landowner and John Turturro as a newly-rich peasant's son who buys the titular orchards and cuts them down to build summer cottages.

The play features Wiest as Madame Ranevskaya, the matriarch of a family of Russian elites. The family returns to their beloved family country home to attempt to prevent the estate from being auctioned off to pay the mortgage.

"If we don't make a plan and do something, the house and orchard will be sold at auction," said Lopakhin (Turturro), the son of a former servant of the Ranevskaya family.

He lays out the plan: sell the cherry orchard and cut it down to build summer cottages, which can then be rented to the nouveau riche in 2.5-acre lots, netting 25,000 rubles in profit.

But Madame Ranevskaya avers; the orchards -- despite their lack of fruit -- are the "only thing remarkable in the area." In her mind, the idea of having poor people living near them is crass.

Madame Ranevskaya is a total mess. By way of explanation, she remains unnerved by a recent messy break-up, and the return to her ancestral home brings up memories of her young son, who drowned in the nearby river.

Nevertheless, neither she nor her entitled family members are equipped to deal with the brutal reality of poverty. Their only plan is a vague hope that a rich relative will die and leave them a fortune, and a half-cocked plan to get a bank loan to cover the interest due on the mortgage loan.

The aristocratic family ultimately makes no move to save their family home, and Lopakhin takes the money he has made selling his bumper crops of poppies, buys the house and lands, and puts his summer-cottage plan in motion.

Upon revealing how he outbid the contenders, Lopakhin cries and rends his garments (actually, he rends a seat cover, unleashing bothersome eiderdown throughout the audience). But at the same time, he remarks upon the changing face of Russian elitism, saying, "If my father and grandfather could rise from the grave and see how I bought the most beautiful thing in the world; my father and grandfather, who were slaves in this house, not even allowed into the kitchen!"

With the exception of Lopakhin, the only realist in the play is Madame Ranyevskaya's adopted daughter, Varya (a fabulous Juliet Rylance). Although she does not approve of Lopakhin, she loves him greatly. While the town talks of their marriage -- and he quietly concedes that he does need a wife -- as she notes, it is he who must do the asking. Toward the end of the play, he gets on bended knee, but is never able to ask her for her hand.

Slate Holmgren shines as Yasha, the footman to Madame Ranevskaya, as does Roberta Maxwell as the aging governess Charlotta, who entertains the guests with parlor tricks.

John Turturro shines as an upwardly mobile peasant still uncomfortable with his lowly origins. Dianne Wiest is unparalleled in her portrayal of a once-wealthy aristocrat who is simply unequipped to deal with her new position in this changing world.

Sisters Elizabeth and Katherine Waterston play Dunyasha and Anya. While Dunyasha, a chambermaid with dreams of being a lady, throws herself at the vulgar, predatory Yasha, Anya is virtuous, saving her love for perpetual student Peter Trofimov, a misguided young revolutionary who would believe that he and Anya are "above love."

But despite his fantastic costume, (courtesy of Marco Piemontese and complete with one red sock and one red-and-white striped sock) "Ugly Betty"



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F#*K'N Classy Thursdays at Score was hosted by Chyna Girl and Danny Ferro, with DJ Daisy

star Michael Urie seems miscast as Epikhodov, a stumbling, bumbling clerk deeply in love with an unsentimental Dunyasha.

In a move especially odd for a Chekhov play, the clumsy Epikhodov reveals that he carries a pistol in his vest pocket, yet by the end of the play, it remains unfired.

Although Chekhov intended the play to be a farce, most directors continue to stage it as a tragedy. However, CSC's staging is not without elements of the absurd.

Fiers (Alvin Epstein), the decrepit old butler who still rues the day the slaves were freed, spends most of the play mumbling incoherently. Madame Ranevskaya's brother Gaev, (Daniel Davis of "The Nanny" fame) is obsessed with a perfect pool shot he once made, and takes every opportunity to reminisce about it.

Ken Cheeseman as fellow landowner Pischik is almost a mirror image of the Ranevskayas, constantly badgering the lady of the house for loans, falling into a narcoleptic slumber mid-sentence, and spending his time relaxing and socializing rather than seeking a way out of his own financial perils.

And as absurdity goes, Madame Ranevskaya herself wins prizes. Like an ostrich, she buries her head in the sand, while her family estate flounders. Despite widespread poverty, she insists on drinking expensive coffee, doles out her rubles for parties while the servants dine on peas, and literally throws her money around, sending rubles scattering across the courtyard and several times losing her purse, which contains her only remaining funds.

Perhaps the most absurd turn of all comes at the end, when after the house and orchards are lost, Madame Ranevskaya, her brother Gaev, and the rest of her family seem overjoyed that they no longer have the stress of saving the house hanging over their heads.

Their priorities are so short sighted that it is no surprise that they let their holdings slip out of their hands. The play says much about the depreciation of the 1900s Russian aristocracy and its resultant class issues. As the old butler, Fiers notes during the family's final party, "Where we once had barons and lords at the ball, now it's the postman and stationmaster, and even they come only to be polite."

The set design by Santo Loquasto is charming and serviceable. This theater-in-the-round makes much of its small, circular stage. The opening act set evokes a child's nursery and drawing room; with a few changes, it becomes a serviceable drawing room, complete with an antique, ornate mirror. A park bench and a large haystack transform the stage into an outdoor locale.

"The Cherry Orchard" does a good job of portraying the emerging middle class in Russia. Turturro shines as an upwardly mobile peasant still uncomfortable with his lowly origins. Wiest is unparalleled in her portrayal of a once-wealthy aristocrat who is simply unequipped to deal with her new position in this changing world.

Although "The Cherry Orchard" may not be the most feel-good play of the holiday season, it certainly contains one of the most star-studded, talented casts of players, and is well worth a look.



"The Cherry Orchard" runs through December 30 at the Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. For info or tickets call 212-352-3101 or visit www.classicstage.org.

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she writes about local restaurants in her food blog, <http://brooklyniscookin.blogspot.com/>

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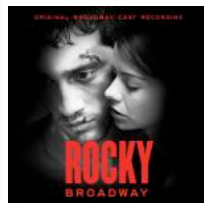


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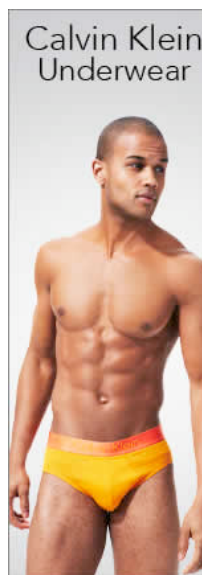


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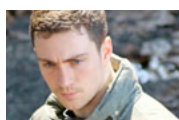
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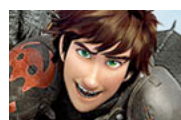
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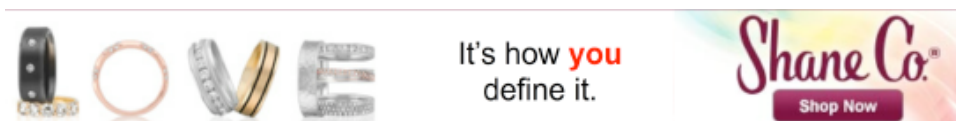
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