

Theater: Peter Dinklage At Home in the 'Country'

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A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY ** 1/2 out of ****
CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY

Chekhovian before Chekhovian was cool (or even existed, actually) Ivan Turgenev's play *A Month In The Country* is new to me, but familiar in the best possible way. Seeing Russian aristocrats bored in the country feels as natural as seeing some locals in New Orleans getting drunk or workers in New York getting unionized. Here, the wife of an older and boringly dependable man (Anthony Edwards of *ER*) is filled with ennui, but not to the point of stifling inaction a la Anton Chekhov's plays, which followed long after this one was first written and published. Happily, Natalya (Taylor Schilling of *Orange Is The New Black*) takes a great deal of action. She flirts and teases along her "friend" Rakitin (the very appealing Peter Dinklage of *Game Of Thrones*), who is clearly and deeply in love with her. It passes the time. Then Natalya falls hopelessly head over heels in love with her son's handsome young tutor (a miscast Mike Faist).

Unfortunately, Natalya intimidates this upright, seemingly uptight young man of depressingly impeccable character. He remains at military-like attention whenever she's around. But what's this? The tutor noticeably relaxes in the presence of her ward, Vera (Megan West). Vera is pretty and, while Natalya is young, Vera is younger still and more along the social lines of the tutor. Natalya takes more action: she tries to marry off Vera, she flies kites and giggles and spends as much time with the tutor as possible and all the while she lets poor Rakitin suffer at her feet.

A Month In The Country was originally a five act play but this significantly trimmed version translated by John Christopher Jones keeps things moving along at a brisk, even indecent pace. A good deal of talent is onstage and the chance to see this work in the intimate space of CSC is welcome. But the successes here seem individual ones. Director Erica Schmidt hasn't brought many of the minor characters into focus or given the show any overall cohesion. That coupled with the young lovers being the weakest performers here keep this a modest pleasure.

Still, there are pleasures to be had. Rakitin is a rather passive character in this telling, but Dinklage brings a full complement of passion and intelligence to his portrayal. One can't help thinking Natalya is making a big mistake. Schilling -- who I've never seen on stage before -- doesn't have the same nuance but she felt fully in command of this broad brushstroke of a character and remained a compelling presence throughout. (The striking and lovingly detailed costumes of Tom Broecker certainly helped in that regard.)

Thomas Jay Ryan however stole the show as the cynical but sweet doctor. As so often happens, you'll be forgiven for thinking the play is really about him. His wooing of Annabella Sciorra is the highpoint of the evening.

Still, Schmidt's lack of insight on the play lets most minor characters suffer. The servants ran around in the background but it was hard to get a grasp on their relation to one another or their masters. Elizabeth Franz brought great presence to the role of the mother in law but again I'm darned if I know what her actual relationship is to her son or daughter in law or anyone else for that matter. And the two young lovers prove missed opportunities. Faist never seems to connect with the role he's supposed to be playing while West connects too much. She's over-the-top as the giggly teen in act one (her head and hands are constantly moving) but does better when bitter and reserved in act two.

The show has so little sense of what is really going on in this central romance that we could be told almost anything and believe it. He doesn't love either of the women who yearn for him but will happily take what's offered? He loves the woman but knows he can't have her? He loves the girl but feels unworthy? He is indifferent to them all? Take your pick; watching this production, I haven't a clue.

That confusion extends to the set. Rather strikingly for the intimate space of CSC, there's the shell of a room suspended over the stage -- we see three walls with windows and doors and a front with just a scrim so we can see into it. I was initially captivated but as the show progressed, I kept wondering exactly why this unavoidable production design choice loomed over the stage and the proceedings. I could take a stab at several different reasons but none suffice. Nor was it appealing enough on its own not to demand a reason for being. Surely every element of a show must serve a purpose or be eliminated so as not to distract.

The central stage by Mark Wendland was serviceable and trim, with actors bringing in and removing modest pieces of furniture as needed. But above them, always, was this shell of a room hovering over their actions. A room without a purpose, it didn't enclose them or open up their world to new perspectives. It was much like this production without a purpose -- lucky enough to have some very talented actors deliver what they could from the text, but without any new perspective on the play as a whole.

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[A Month In The Country](#) ** 1/2

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.