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THE CHERRY ORCHARD AT CSC **
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THE CHERRY ORCHARD **
CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY

Why oh why is Chekhov so hard to mount? His characters are vivid, his dialogue piercing, his settings specific and true. And yet time and time again one sees a Chekhov play that doesn't satisfy. Last season CSC

mounted an excellent *Three Sisters*, the rare exception. But more often one walks away unsatisfied. I recently saw Zoe Wannamaker, Simon Russell Beale and an excellent cast in London fail to bring to life *The Cherry Orchard*. Much the same happens here with Dianne Wiest and John Turturro. Since the cast -- including Juliet Rylance and Josh Hamilton, both good -- is top-notch, one has to look at director Andrei Belgrader for not overcoming the difficult task of making it work.

As often happens at Classic Stage Company, the intimate space and limited funds bring out the best in the set designer. Here Santo Loquasto creates a circular stage with a faded white covering, stained and dirty looking. Huge billowy curtains contain the space until each act begins, with drapes that had been billowing out into the audience (and making it difficult to walk to your seat) lit from within to capture a poignant image and then whipped away. Sadly, these are the dramatic high points of the evening.

Ranevskaya (Wiest) is returning from Paris, where she was frittering away the last remaining bit of money in her possession. Paralyzed by her fading fortunes and a fading way of life, she is simply incapable of responding to the pleas of the successful businessman Lopakhin (a solid Turturro). The son of a former slave of hers, Lopakhin has a plan to "save" Ranevskaya. It involves demolishing her ancestral home and chopping down her beloved cherry orchard to build weekend getaways for the burgeoning middle class. Yes, it means ending everything she's ever loved, but that will happen anyway and at least she'd have a substantial income out of it.

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Of course, she doesn't, she can't act. The play is filled with people who fail to see their own best interests or at best fail to act on them. Lopakhin can't bring himself to ask for the hand of Varya (Rylance) or even look at her very much, even though she seems ideally suited to him. The servant Dunyasha (a flat Elisabeth Waterston) ignores the bumbling Epikodov (Michael Urie) in favor of the rascal Yasha (Slate Holmgren). And so on and so forth.

Wiest has a nice, unmoored feeling about her and Turturro handles the blunt practicality of Lopakhin with ease. Moment to moment, most of the cast is fine but it never coheres into a singular, piercing vision of the desperate straits we are witnessing. The marvelous actress Rylance for example is positively unhinged by the pratfalling of Epikodov. Yes, of course she's letting her frustration with Lopakhin get the better of her and taking it out on the poor fool, but still her tirades feel out of proportion. That humorous figure is always a good sign of the play's health. When the humor feels forced or out of place as it does here, it's likely the show is out of whack as well. (It will be nice to see Urie in *How To Succeed* soon).

Should I use a cooking metaphor or some other elaborate explanation of how tricky Chekhov is and how one must get it just right or it doesn't work at all? Discuss the difficulty of dramatizing boredom (or ennui or lethargy or whatever you want to call it)? This *Orchard* simply doesn't work. Roberta Maxwell has fun as the eccentric servant Charlotta, interacting with the audience in a casually playful manner, doing card tricks, sharing a pickle, taking someone's seat and so on. It works and yet it has nothing to do with the world that Chekhov has created and so ultimately it's a distraction. Something is wrong when Charlotta is what you remember best from *The Cherry Orchard*.

Wiest is certainly up to the task. She says her goodbye to that beloved nursery, exits and then quietly returns to peek back one last time, packing more emotion into that final desperate glance than we've felt all night. But what should have been the heartbreaking final moment was in fact the first realization that something of import was happening at all.

THE MAN WHO CAME TO DINNER ** THEATRE AT ST. CLEMENT'S

People keep tackling *The Cherry Orchard* because it's so hard. And surely they keep tackling the hoary comedy by Moss Hart & George S. Kaufman because it's so easy. Plus you've got some two dozen speaking parts so everybody -- and I do mean everybody -- gets to play a role. No need for anyone to feel left out when mounting *The Man Who Came To Dinner* around the country in high schools and community theater. That doesn't change the fact that it hasn't aged well in the least. It's the sort of boulevard comedy where name-dropping famous people and ritzy places is the height of sophistication. If a gigantic, empty Egyptian sarcophagus appears in one scene, you can be certain someone will be bundled into it by the next.

Jim Brochu plays Sheridan Whiteside, the man of letters who slips on a front doorstep and finds himself marooned for weeks in the wasteland of Mesalia, Ohio. Whiteside is rude, arrogant, insufferable and famous, with the fame part getting him a pass from the easily cowed people of the town. Brochu has been playing Zero Mostel in the one-man show *Zero Hour* so he's not afraid to chew the scenery. But his Whiteside is a pussycat. After an opening scene where he mocks one and all, Whiteside proves basically sweet, charming the servants, making nice with the children and so on. His only fault is in trying to stop his girl Friday Maggie Cutler (Any Landon) from falling in love with a local (Jay Stratton's Bert Jefferson) and leaving him.

Hijinks most definitely ensue, including a doctor who has written an imposing memoir about his career that he'd love Whiteside to read, a battle ax of a nurse suffering under Whiteside's unimaginative insults, wacky showbiz friends like Banjo (Joseph R. Sicari doing his best Jimmy Durante whether you want him to or not), a bunch of convicts, a choir boy, local busybodies, and much more.

John Windsor-Cunningham strikes the right foppish note as the actor Beverly Carlton but no one is particularly good or bad. The comedy is too generic and indifferent for that. Like other Hart & Kaufman shows (namely the tiresomely eccentric *You Can't Take It With You*), this star vehicle is simply too rickety and unstable. It inspired a very nice set by Harry Feiner and the cast is having fun. Unfortunately, they're having more fun than you will.

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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to these shows with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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