TDPS Production of “The Cherry Orchard” looks gorgeous, thoughtfully entertains

“The Cherry Orchard” was first performed in January 1904 – the same year of the playwright Anton Chekhov’s death. The characters of this classic play are situated after the 1861 Russian emancipation of the serfs, an event that altered the divisions of the previous upper class and lower class. The tragicomic play successfully comments the historical with the personal.

The play concerns an upper class family and the potential loss of their home estate, where its beloved cherry orchard stands. Led by matriarch Lyubov Ranevskaya, the family includes her brother Gayev, daughter Anya and adopted daughter Varya. The family is burdened by bankruptcy – it cannot even afford to properly feed the serfs who still work for the family members. Instead of opening the play with the noble family, Chekhov begins the play with the maid Dunyasha and the self-made Lopakhin, the son of one of Ranevskaya’s serfs. Both are outsiders frequently reminded of their outsider status, even though Lopakhin is the wealthiest character.

In UC Berkeley’s theater, dance and performance studies’ production, director Lura Dolas’ set immediately draws attention to this coexistence of the working class and upper class – an evocative memory of a past Russia, and yet still very urgent strife. Although minimalist in design, the set, designed by Annie Smart, is gorgeously crafted and expansive. With three interconnected walls on the left, upstage and right sides, the home nearly takes the form of a triptych. Most noticeable are the ceiling-high sliding doors upstage and the sense of open space. Instead of placing the serfs (who also serve as stagehands during transitions) physically below the main cast, Dolas strikingly places the serfs’ living and work spaces to the left and right side corners of the stage. The serfs are always visible.

Before the audience sees any of the serfs or the family in action, the stage, doused in ethereal blue light, comes alive when the Ghost Mother and Ghost Son — dressed in immaculate white clothing — walk onstage. Any reader of the play knows that these characters do not exist in the original text. Dolas’ rendition of “The Cherry Orchard” is full of captivating additions such as this introduction.
The set lends itself to both freeform movement and tension. The young actors, faced with the daunting task of portraying these older multifaceted characters, are given space to confront one another or to remain physically, and therefore emotionally distant. This is an important aspect of Chekhov’s work, wherein characters often refrain from saying what they really want.

Trofimov, played by James Lewis, is often blocked between the noble family and Lopakhin. He was the tutor of Ranevskaya’s child, who has died before the play begins. In the second act, the family is intimately blocked to the right, Lopakhin alone on the left, and Trofimov center stage. He is positioned in the middle of the faltering aristocracy and upcoming industrialism.

In one of the strongest monologues of the production, Lewis passionately speaks of the past Russia and the ambiguous future while he takes advantage of the spacious set. At a later point, in a moment of self-consciousness, he quickly falls to his knees and then, just as quickly, stands tall and moves upstage, away from the cast.

Jessica Slagt’s portrayal of Ranevskaya is strong and vulnerable. Always dressed in lovely romantic colors – a silk pink blouse, baby blue fur coat or an outstanding red lace dress – Slagt carries Ranevskaya’s romantic and tragic life with her. In the second act, Slagt slowly and painfully recalls her son’s death. As she talks of her life’s history to Trofimov, she is nearly reduced to tears. Yet, Slagt plays the comedic and charming aspects of her character with equal prowess.

There are smaller moments that are just as worthwhile. Tori Schniedewind’s depiction of Charlotta, a governess who lacks a family history, releases tension through her comedic delivery. While Charlotta tells the servant Firs of her unknown past, she chomps on a cucumber. Her role also points to important themes of identity and absurdity. After all, Charlotta’s life’s purpose is to entertain the noble family by performing card tricks.

For both longtime Chekhov enthusiasts and those unfamiliar with his work, “The Cherry Orchard” offers compelling aesthetics and thoughtful direction. The lush and exquisite period costumes and set design are equally breathtaking, while the fresh and interesting directorial choices vividly themes of hope, time and loss.

“The Cherry Orchard” is playing at Zellerbach Playhouse until Sunday.

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