

Poignancy Takes Center Stage in TDPS's "The Cherry Orchard"

By: Katie Berlin, *Caliber Magazine*

The audience buzzed anxiously as the intense energy emanated from the dimmed stage, void of any signs of humanity except for a bookcase, a trunk, a rocking horse, and a rocking chair. Silently, the actors from the UC Berkeley Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies (TDPS) prepared the stage and took their places to breathe life into Anton Chekhov's complex classic, *The Cherry Orchard*.

Set in the inception of the Russian revolution, the play unravels the inner and outer struggles of an entire household as the estate and its cherry orchards go up for auction. Lyubov Ranevskaya, the wealthy estate owner, tries to save her beloved home, and her brother Leonid Gayev vows to help her. However, not everybody shares this sentimentality toward the estate, as Lyubov's daughters Anya and Varya wish for liberation and new lives outside of the cherry orchards. When a family friend, Yermolai Lopakhin, suggests that they tear down the estate and create summer cottages to save the property, Lyubov is devastated. The landowner and her servants fear turmoil as their livelihoods depend on the auction's outcome.

As has come to be expected from TDPS, the acting contains the finesse and professionalism of a play performed by long time theater veterans. Admittedly, there are a few scenes that feel like they are merely rehearsed, pre-determined lines, rather than dialogue full of emotion. This could be a result of the complex overarching themes represented in Chekhov's play, like economic decline, that many college students have not experienced. The deeply flawed characters--for example, one character wrongfully went to jail in the past--also present challenges for the actors. While these challenges did not seem to fully pay off for some of the characters, they did reward majority of the cast directed by Berkeley theater aficionado Lura Dolas.

Jessica Slaght, who took on the intimidating role of Lyubov Ranevskaya, holds herself with poise and contains a strong-willed stage presence that demands every eye on her. A perfect mixture of economic frivolity, humor, and innocence, Slaght encapsulates the flaws of Lyubov and gives her imperfections a sense of humanity, rather than a one-dimensional facet for an author to criticize these human attributes. "Though the circumstances she faces are very tragic and admittedly very different from my own experiences, she still needs something from the other characters in the play, be it attention, affection, comfort, etc. and those are all things that I can understand and play more easily," Slaght admits about her character. And she does a phenomenal job of portraying this dependency on others throughout the production. An enigma, Slaght knows just when to throw a sideways glance and a one-liner or when to take a solemn knee and submit to the tragedy of Lyubov's situation. This genuinity comes solely from the heart of Slaght

herself: “Beyond [Lyubov’s] demeanor, I’m trying to utilize as much of my own voice, tone, and sense of humor as possible.”

While most of the other characters provide a challenge to Lyubov’s desire to keep the estate, her eccentric brother, Leonid is one of the only characters who helps to salvage the property and disperse her debts. Leonid, played by Eddie Benzoni, adds comic relief to the otherwise grave setting of this drama. Through his charm, wit--including comments about billiards shots to describe life events--and devotion to Lyubov, Leonid provides a sense of hope that seems to be otherwise lost on the other characters. Benzoni perfectly executes this critical role in the play, using subtle mannerisms throughout the production to prove just how much he immersed himself in his role. From gesticulating while delivering his witty lines to trying to make that imaginary billiard shot, Benzoni excels at bringing his character to life not just through words, but through actions. “I used the Laban technique, which is an analysis of movement used for dancers that we learn in our acting classes at Berkeley to help me find Leonid’s expression through movement,” Benzoni states.

Other notable mentions include Firs (Roger), who also provides some much needed comedic relief as the old butler. Watching Firs waddle along the stage is what I imagine I look like walking up the hills of Frat Row to get home. In a play highlighting so many of the flaws of the human relationship with other people and material items, it is a gentle reminder from Chekhov that life is not always so dismal. Tori Schniedewind, who plays Charlotta, also provides laughs with her puppet dog, superb violin skills, and Russian accent. Together, these two share a scene of both laughter and sorrow, and are a perfect example of Chekhov’s message that life is not compartmentalized into good or bad things, but that life is a balancing act of the two.

Emon Elboudwarej, taking on the role of Yermolai Lopakhin, providing a strong performance as well, going deeper into Chekhov’s subtle distinction between societal roles. Starting as a serf but ultimately buying the property in the auction from Lyubov and her family shows the rise of the serf class and the decline of the wealthy. It is an interesting shift that foreshadows the imminent social changes about to occur in Russia during the revolution. While Lyubov represents the economic disregard of the wealthy class, Yermolai Lopakhin represents the distaste and dissatisfaction with the livelihood of the lower classes, and together they clearly show the vast separation between these two classes.

While Dolas directs her cast skillfully, bringing Chekhov’s ideals and messages to the limelight, the scenic design (Annie Smart) and costume design (B. Modern) truly reflects the strength of this production, and that is the subtle humanity that each of its characters is bestowed. I was particularly fond of the set design, with the bulk of the stage containing the wealthy estate, but on the left and right were the serfs quarters. While the aristocratic characters recited their lines in

their silks, suits, and laces, the serfs sat in the darkness of their quarters in rags attempting to entertain themselves until needed. This dichotomy so clearly present perfectly executes Chekhov's messages of social and economic separation between the classes. But what was even more telling than that was a scene where the estate room was transformed into the backyard and orchards, and the serfs were out enjoying the sunlight, drinking, and socializing with one another. Dolas and her crew made a poignant remark that no matter what social class one falls in, people all enjoy the same things.

Chekhov wanted this divide to be evident in his work, and Dolas, her crew, and her cast emphasize this point expertly. But they also did more than that. They brought human relationships to the forefront through the flaws of their characters and questioned how these flaws shape who we are and where we're going in life. "The characters in this play love deeply, but are held back--by fear, by society. I can't help but see this cast of characters as a group of people who have been traumatized by tragedy--a tragedy they couldn't face--and now, on top of that, they are faced with the problem of what to do with their lives. Every Berkeley student is going through something, and I feel that most of us go through it alone. Imagine if we didn't have our screens to distract us," Mary Isabel Cruz, who plays Varya, states about the idea of inner struggles versus outer ones. A recurring theme in the play is the idea that while everything may seem alright on the outside, everyone is fighting their own battles internally. The image of 'shutting up' in the play is utilized to portray that if we don't talk about issues, then they don't exist.

This idea of suffering alone--whether through love, desire, hope, fear, sadness, or anger--is unfortunately one that many college students, including Berkeley students, face today. But *The Cherry Orchard* finds a way to stop shutting up and starts opening up instead, challenging this idea by acknowledging its existence.

"I think this play and all of Chekhov's works are relevant to Berkeley students and all people because the reason Chekhov is done to this day and will continue to be is because human nature hasn't changed . . . Every character in *The Cherry Orchard* is personable and real. The audience can connect with anyone of these characters because they encounter fear, love, joy, and other universal human emotions. It is a show about real people," Benzino states. And he's right, because so many of Chekhov's ideas in this play are ones that many of us still struggle with today.

Another of Chekhov's messages that Dolas and Slaght elegantly bring into question is how the past affects our future. The play forces audience members to contemplate if they are held back by their own past and if this leads to a fear of the unknown in days ahead. "As college students, many of us exist in this odd space of being away from home while also working to build a new

home somewhere else. But who knows how long we'll be here or how much will we be able to take away from these four years that will supposedly fundamentally change our prospects and paths," Slaght comments. The play does an outstanding job of challenging this idea, making it relatable to students, as it makes us wonder how much our experiences will hold us down or help us get ahead in our future.

Chekhov's genius production tackles so many of life's greatest challenges so gracefully and eloquently, that you don't even realize how intertwined these problems and joys are. TDPS and Dolas' rendition does exactly the same. Fear, love, joy, and other human emotions barely scratch the surface of the overarching themes of *The Cherry Orchard*. With superb actors gracing the stage, expert craftsmanship on set production, and a director so invested in the prevalence of this play in today's society, *The Cherry Orchard* does not disappoint. Both light and heavy hearted, this poignant production allows audiences to connect to the reality of imperfections in ourselves and in our relationships. It allows us to question our space in this world and what it all means. *The Cherry Orchard* strips bare the prosperity to lay the reality of the world at our feet, and the cast of TDPS helps us navigate Chekhov's world so gracefully that it makes me wonder if it's time to stop 'shutting up' about our flaws and start acknowledging them instead.