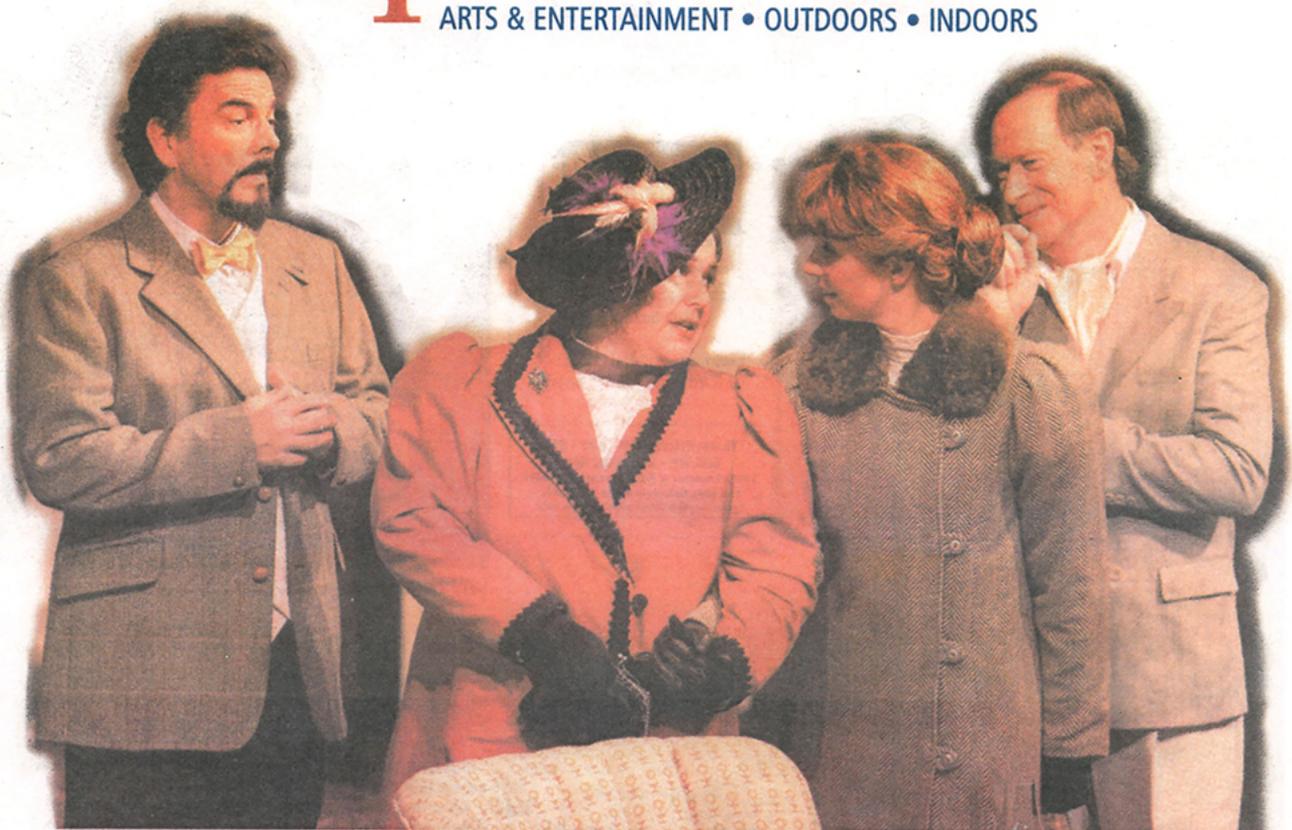


Cape Experience

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT • OUTDOORS • INDOORS



Danielle Dwyer, Christopher Kanaga, Rachel McKendree and Brad Lussier in "The Cherry Orchard"

A fitting tribute to Chekhov

"The Cherry Orchard" blooms in Orleans

By Ellen Petry Whalen

Attention to detail can make all the difference between a great work of art and an average one. In Elements Theatre Company's dramatic rendition of Anton Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard," no detail is overlooked, from lively Russian folk dancing to the perfect pronunciation of tongue-twisting Russian names. In fact, the whole production is a spectacular web of details, perfectly woven together to create a dazzling tapestry of emotion, color, movement and sound.

The theater company's journey into turn-of-the-20th-century Russia started a year ago when Chekhov's last play was chosen to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the playwright's birth. Trying to understand and capture what director Danielle Dwyer calls Chekhov's "tongue-in-cheek" approach to tragedy, the theatrical troupe spent a month in New York City, studying at the Michael Chekhov Acting Studio (Michael Chekhov was Anton Chekhov's nephew).

Elements' multitude of dramatic preparations and pure hard work brings pre-Revolution Russia to life on its stage. The story revolves around the many changes of the time, focusing on social class, relationships and money. It spotlights the self-indulgences of the aristocracy as they blindly run their coffers dry while hard-working peasants try to find meaning in their new material goods and intellectual pursuits.

Dwyer expertly plays the spendthrift and guilt-ridden Madame Ranevskaya. She is the owner of her family's ancestral estate and beautiful cherry orchards, which are to be auctioned off if financial arrangements are not secured. As Lopakhin, a wealthy

merchant who cannot escape the memories of his poor upbringing, Chris Kanaga is magnificent. He tries to help the crumbling aristocratic family, yet Madame Ranevskaya is stuck in denial, resistant to change. Brad Lussier comically plays Madame Ranevskaya's brother who is no better able to make a decision, preferring the playing of billiards to reality.

Each member of the cast of 27 gives a meticulous performance. The highly professional troupe gives its heart and soul to the production producing a dramatic masterpiece. Although the play is two-and-a-half hours long and covers heavy emotional material, the show went off flawlessly on opening night.

The breathtaking and impressively large set (Amy Mitchell and Hans Spatzek-Olsen) with its grand appointments of intricate staircases, paneled walls and beautiful furnishings surpasses Elements' already high bar from past sets. The rich costume designs, produced by a busy crew of 14, highlight the distinction between the classes, from basic, beige tunics to elaborate gowns with flowing trains.

The only flaw in Elements' "The Cherry Orchard" is the limited number of performances. With six planned and three down, there are only three shows left to enjoy this perfect tribute to Chekhov.

If you go...

What: "The Cherry Orchard" by Anton Chekhov

Where: Elements Theatre Company, Paraclete House, Rock Harbor, Orleans

When: Friday - Saturday at 7:30 p.m., Sunday matinees at 3:30 p.m. until Jan. 3.

Tickets: \$30 adults, \$25 seniors, free 18 and under, call 508-240-2400



Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard* blooms in Orleans

Company balances Elements of comedy, tragedy

By Bethany Gibbons
arts@barnstablepatriot.com

Orleans' Elements Theater Company has brought *The Cherry Orchard* to the salt marsh with their six-performance run of Anton Chekhov's final play, set amidst the social and economic upheaval of turn of the 20th century Russia. While the subject matter includes the freeing of the serfs, the action centers on a more familiar event: the foreclosure auction of an aristocrat's estate. Elements' portrayal is both beautifully constructed and superbly acted, and the company pulls together a seamless depiction of a fam-



HANS OLSEN/PARACLETE PRESS PHOTO

SPLASHY ENTRANCE – Madame Ranevskaya (Danielle Dwyer), center left, is welcomed home by Lopakhin (Christopher Kanaga), Varya (Rachel McKendree), and Gayev (Brad Lussier) in Elements Theater Company's *The Cherry Orchard*.

ily falling apart.

Originally performed at the Moscow Theater in 1904, *The Cherry Orchard* was written in the last year of Chekhov's life as a comedy, and

some might see it as a farce intended to lampoon the idle rich. The show's first director, Constantin Stanislavski, insisted on developing the work as a tragedy, despite

Chekhov's protests, and ever since audiences have been treated to a more "weepy" version, to paraphrase Chek-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12

12 • January 29, 2010 | The Barnstable Patriot • ARTS • LEGAL NOTICES

Cherry Orchard blooms in Orleans...

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

hov's description.

Elements manages to bridge the gap between comedy and tragedy, bringing both into focus. The confusion and distress of the heartbroken aristocrats is clearly translated even as the playwright pokes fun at their general ineptitude. Joyful ribbing takes place throughout the performance; Elements lets the zingers fly and keeps the laughs coming, even as the estate heads inexorably toward the chipper.

The cast is large and boisterous, with 16 characters and a dog, and Elements adds an original touch with nine dancers performing as cherry trees and axe-men bookending the show. A hidden quintet of The Community of Jesus' masterful musicians provides accompaniment in the form of reeds, strings and piano.

The set is a carefully-constructed interior with stairs and balconies leading to doorways at stage right and left and more doors at the back of the stage, and the scenery is perfectly appointed with matryoshka and toy soldiers for the nursery, and a giant chandelier for the drawing room. A meadow is created with only a scrim draped over large lattice panels during the first act. Designers Hans Spatzek-Olsen and Amy Mitchell benefited from a 33-member construction team and a six-person interior decorating ensemble. Fifteen people put together

the period costumes, and 13 handled make-up for the performances, and all the hands together crafted a piece of beauty.

Chris Kanaga is convincing as Yermolay, a merchant and son of one of the estate's former slaves who finds himself in the fortunate position of having much more money than the estate's owner. Danielle Dwyer carries the show with her impassioned portrayal of the down-on-her-luck widow and estate owner, Lyubov, who returns from her lover in France to watch helplessly as her property is forced into auction.

Ellen Ortolani plays a refreshing Anya, Lyubov's daughter, who pines for a free-thinking life with her perennial-student love interest Pyotr. Kyle Norman provides an earnest performance as Pyotr. Norman's student gets some of the best lines when Chekhov waxes Bolshevik philosophy through him. The unemployed penniless student asks, "Should a man be proud?" and goes on to answer that he should not, but instead should work. "Intellectuals don't know how to work. The intelligentsias philosophize and play while the workers live in poverty and filth." He then declares, "I mistrust serious conversations." He also discusses the spiritual debt the family must repay and atone for having owned slaves.

Rachel McKendree is delightfully frustrated as Lyubov's adopted

daughter Varya, a more serious young woman who oversees the estate and hopes for a proposal from Yermolay. Chekhov draws wonderful portraits of the servants and employees of the estate, and they are all very well depicted by this company. Brother Stephen Velie is particularly likeable and funny as Yepikhodov, the orchard's clerk. Peter Haig is a delight as the broke landowner Simeonov, who constantly borrows from Lyubov, even as they despair at the estate's fate.

Chekhov pulls from his own life to create this tableau. Yermolay describes his father's inebriated violence and cruelty, a description suited to Chekhov's own father. Lyubov's financial bankruptcy mirrors Chekhov's mother's financial, emotional and physical brokenness. His parents' home in Taganrog was sold to pay the mortgage. Chekhov also had planted his own cherry orchard at a home outside Moscow, but later found most of it cut down by a new owner.

While his last play is not autobiographical, there is an echoing of themes, characters and scenes from both his work and his own life that makes *The Cherry Orchard* a must-see for anyone interested in the life and work of Chekhov.

The Cherry Orchard is at Elements Theatre Company at Paraclete House, Rock Harbor in Orleans, through Jan. 31, with shows Jan. 29 and 30 at 7:30 p.m. and Jan. 31 at 3:30 p.m. For tickets (\$30; \$25 seniors; 18 and under, free), call 508-240-2400.



‘CHERRY ORCHARD’ IS TRIBUTE TO CHEKHOV IN ORLEANS

By Ellen Petry Whalen, *Cape Codder*

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THE CAPE COD CHRONICLE • JANUARY 21, 2010

Elements Theatre Company Honors Chekhov's 150th With 'The Cherry Orchard'

ORLEANS--- Elements Theatre Company will open the New Year with "The Cherry Orchard" by Anton Chekhov. Performances will run Jan. 22 to 24, and 29 to 31, Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30 p.m., and Sundays at 3:30 p.m., at Paraclete House, Rock Harbor. Elements offers this production of "The Cherry Orchard" as a celebration of Chekhov's birthday, particularly the performance on Jan. 29, which marks the 150th anniversary of his birth.

In preparation for "The Cherry Orchard," Elements Theatre Company studied for a month in New York City with Lenard Petit, the Artistic Director of the Michael Chekhov Acting Studio. Michael Chekhov was a star pupil of

Stanislavsky, and directed productions of works by Anton Chekhov, his uncle. Elements also worked with Daniela Varon, who has continued with the company as an acting coach. To help find and express even more of "the Russian soul" of "The Cherry Orchard," the production includes elements of dance and Russian folksong, and the costumes and set décor have been designed to be authentic to the period.

Tickets are \$30, \$25 seniors, 18 and under free. For tickets call 508-240-2400. Visit the company online at www.elementstheatre.org. For more information or interviews contact Belinda Schmitt at 774-722-1458 or e-mail at publicity@gdaf.org.

Experience ARTS & ENTER

'The Cherry Orchard' in Orleans marks Chekhov's 150th birthday



The cast of "The Cherry Orchard."

Elements Theatre Company will stage "The Cherry Orchard" by Anton Chekhov Jan. 22-24, and 29-31, Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30 p.m., and Sundays at 3:30 p.m., at Paraclete House, Rock Harbor, Orleans. The Jan. 29 performance marks the 150th anniversary of Chekhov's birth.

This performance of "The Cherry Orchard" is Elements' first encounter with Chekhov, and the culmination of a year of study.

"From the Western or American perspective, there is something different about the Russian psyche that is palpable in Chekhov's work. His response to suffering and tragedy is almost tongue-in-cheek. Chekhov wrote 'The Cherry Orchard' as comedy, and was very disappointed that Stanislavsky (director of the Moscow Art Theatre, and Russian theatre and acting innovator) made it tragic. Our objective for 'The Cherry Orchard' will be to find the Russian soul in this piece, and be faithful to it," said director Danielle Dwyer.

In preparation for "The Cherry Orchard," Elements Theatre Company studied for a month in New York City with Lenard Petit, who is the artistic director of the Michael Chekhov Acting Studio. Michael Chekhov was a star pupil of Stanislavsky, and directed productions of works by Anton Chekhov, his uncle.

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A Russian revolution

Orleans theater troupe presents Chekhov's final play as comedy, not tragedy

By KATHI SCRIZZI DRISCOLL

STAFF WRITER

January 28, 2010 4:00 PM

The best birthday present? Maybe a few laughs.

Elements Theatre Company is staging Anton Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard" in a two-weekend run that includes Jan. 29, the 150th anniversary of the Russian playwright's birth. And director Danielle Dwyer hopes he would have been pleased at how it's chosen to produce the play: as a comedy, rather than a tragedy.

From her research, Dwyer knows that Chekhov intended his final play, the story of an aristocratic family on the verge of losing its estate and orchard, to be a comedy and was incensed when director Constantin Stanislavsky premiered the script in 1904 at Moscow Art Theatre as a tragedy.

The play is often interpreted that way, but Dwyer says, "We're trying to honor (Chekhov's) wishes." Dwyer acknowledges that many tragic things happen for the characters, but the play "is not tragic for everyone. ... It is hopeful for some characters, just not all of them. ... It's not just about loss, but about new beginnings."

She says the story involves "some really funny things," and playing those up can make the other material more powerful. "You're able to accept tragedy and able to see their choices more clearly because there's a rhythm to it, more ups and downs."

The Orleans-based company has been working on the piece for about a year, since going to a key source to learn about Chekhov, his emphasis on the importance of movement and the "psychological gesture," and how to interpret Russian theater. Actors studied for a month last year in New York City with Lenard Petit, artistic director of the Michael Chekhov Acting Studio. Michael Chekhov was the nephew of the famed playwright and the star pupil of Stanislavsky.

"I've wanted to do Chekhov for several years — it's great to have him in your repertoire. But it's not something you go into lightly," Dwyer says of the training. Learning the writer's style and approach, as well as his view of human nature and how that tied into Russian literature, "has been very good for our company in terms of growth."

The play, with 12 speaking parts, hadn't been cast before New York, and Dwyer was glad. "If you've got a part, that's what you focus on. But if you're not nailed down to one perspective, you get a different and richer view of the play."

To further emphasize the Russian setting, Elements has added period costumes, folk songs and dance — including dancers as cherry trees for the opening scene and a Cossack number at a party.

The party spirit extends to cake and celebration for the Jan. 29 birthday performance. The show, though, wasn't originally scheduled with such key timing. A planned fall production had to be moved because of scheduling conflicts, and Dwyer now believes the new dates were meant to be.

"I thought he did that for us," she says of Chekhov. "It was a little hat-tipping to us."

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Chronicle Theater Reviews



Elements Theatre Company's 'The Cherry Orchard' Blooms

by Jennifer Sexton

In celebration of the 150th anniversary of Russian playwright and author Anton Pavlovich Chekhov's birthday, Elements Theatre Company has created a production of the master's final play, "The Cherry Orchard," that is as fresh, funny and poignant as the author intended.

Originally conceived by Chekhov as a comedy, "The Cherry Orchard" travels some serious ground.

In early 20th century Russia, scant decades after the abolition of serfdom and the sinking of the aristocracy, the descendants of a wealthy family return to their family's crumbling ancestral estate as it is about to be auctioned off, beloved cherry orchard and all, to pay their massive debts. It's no coincidence that the play opens in the nursery where siblings Lyubov and Leonid grew up; the middle-aged sister and brother are as directionless as overgrown children as they are presented with options to save the estate and choose to do absolutely nothing but wander in dreamlike memories and try to relive the past with one last party. As the estate is finally bought by the wealthy,



Clockwise from left: Br. Stephen Velie as clerk Semyon Panteleyevich Yepikhodov, Kate Shannon as governess Charlotta Ivanova, Sr. Phoenix Marcella as maid Dunyasha and Br. Anthony Kanaga as valet Yasha.

self-made grandson of a serf who worked the cherry orchard in years past, the settling of karmic debt seems to fall flat somehow. The purchaser seems puzzled and empty as he can't seem to find anyone to celebrate with, and the dispossessed aristocrats trail off to the sound of falling cherry trees.

In classic Chekhovian style, the characters, who hail from all social strata, ages and philosophies, seem to speak their truths and wonder aloud at life to themselves, rather than to each other. The result is a fascinating harmony of inner voices as they find their way through their lives in the here-and-now as well as in the larger scheme of the socio-economic turmoil of the time.

Director Sr. Danielle Dwyer, who portrays the estate owner Lyubov Andreyevna Ranevskaya with a balance of depth and irresistible, bubbly naïveté, brings the comedy of Chekhov's work to the forefront in this production. Though the storyline is a tragic one, the characters enter

Continued on Page 32

Cherry Orchard

Continued from Page 30

brimming with enthusiasm and good humor in spite of it all, and visual humor delights throughout.

Lyubov's brother Leonid, played by dramaturg Brad Lussier, is hilarious as the fey, aristocratic man-child who wanders the halls of his youth making imaginary billiards shots and retreats to the care of his ancient valet, Firs, played with grouchy, stiff-legged humor by Luke Norman, when the going gets too rough. Technical director Chris Kanaga is by turns earnest and slippery as the merchant Yermolay Alexeyevich Lopakhin who tries to help the family save the orchard and swoops in to undo them eventually, all while skillfully ducking any commitment to the woman who loves him. Assistant director Br. Stephen Velie is very funny as clerk Semyon Panteleyevich Yepikhodov, known throughout town as "The 22 Misfortunes" for his abysmal bad luck. His announcement after yet another misstep, "Yes, this is exactly the kind of thing that hap-

pens to me," is a perfect moment of Chekhov's hapless, what-can-you-do comedy.

Ellen Ortolani is fresh and likeable as Anya, 17-year-old daughter of the estate's owner who seems determined to escape her past at any cost. She hitches her cart to Pyotr Sergeyevich Trofimov, well-played by Kyle Norman, a career student who proclaims himself "above love" and wishes to dedicate his life to hard work and purity of purpose. Rachel McKendree portrays long-suffering adopted daughter Varya whose brittle emotional armor is her only protection against the spurning of merchant Lopakhin, whom she sees as her only hope of escape from a life of servitude. Sr. Phoenix Marcella is very funny as the self-proclaimed "very sensitive and fragile" maid Dunyasha, pursued by "The 22 Misfortunes" but captivated in turn by the cultured and haughty young valet Yasha. Yasha, played by Br. Anthony Kanaga, is brutally cruel as he laughingly passes judgment on each and every person he comes into contact with. The family's bizarre governess, Charlotta Ivanova, an amateur magician who sometimes totes a rifle, is played with comic spookiness

by Kate Shannon. Peter Haig is funny as down-at-heel landowner Simeonov-Pishchik, always available with a request for another loan. He thinks of nothing but money, as "a hungry dog believes in nothing but meat."

Elements Theatre Company studied for a month with Lenard Petit, artistic director of the Michael Chekhov Acting Studio in New York, in preparation for this production, and their preparation has served them well. Michael Chekhov was the nephew of Anton Chekhov, and through his acting techniques, the actors worked to develop the skills and insights that enabled them to understand and approach Chekhov's work so successfully in this production.

The production begins and ends with dance, with a third sequence in the party scene in Act II. The dance sequences, choreographed by Laura McKendree, Br. Richard Cragg and Karen Minster, blend naturally with the action onstage and contribute to the tone and tenor of the production as a whole. The costumes of the dancers, as with the rest of the cast, are well conceived and beautifully executed. The music, which employs the works of 19th and 20th century Russian composers Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Arensky, Scriabin, Prokofiev and Amirov, creates and supports the atmosphere of "The Cherry Orchard," performed by Br. Patrick Clark on flute, Sr. Chris Helfrich on clarinet, Charity Spatzeck-Olsen on violin, Sr. Agnes Whichard on cello, music consultant David Chalmers on piano and vocals by Sr. Phoenix Marcella Catlin.

Elements Theatre Company's "The Cherry Orchard" is tragic, funny, bittersweet, poetic, absurd, tense and dreamy, without a clear-cut good guy or bad guy to be found; a lot like life, as Chekhov intended.

Details:

"The Cherry Orchard"

By Anton Chekhov

Translation by Jean-Claude Van Itallie

Directed by Sr. Danielle Dwyer

Elements Theatre Company at Paraclete House

Jan. 29 through 31

Friday and Saturday at 7:30 p.m., Sunday at 3:30 p.m.

Tickets \$30 general, \$25 for seniors and free

for those 18 and under.



CAPE COD TIMES

‘CHERRY ORCHARD’ BITTERSWEET COMEDY

By Kathi Scrizzi Driscoll, *Cape Cod Times*

They’ve been all over the news in the past year or so: People who have spent or lost money freely and injudiciously as if the boom times still existed.

They ignore the mounting pile of debts and aren’t willing to see how family, economic and social circumstances have changed. So they face the loss of their home and, even then, can’t recognize the hard choices they must make, instead holding on for some kind of bail-out.

Twenty-first-century recession, yes, but hello Lyubov Andreyevna Ranevskaya.

In Anton Chekhov’s final play, she’s the owner of “The Cherry Orchard,” come back to her childhood home after a disastrous romance, with family and servants in tow. It’s early 1900s Russia and class rules are changing rapidly. The expansive house and famous (though un-money-producing) orchard is about to be auctioned off for debts and she is thoroughly incapable of facing the present, much less the future.

Sister Danielle Dwyer, who also adeptly directs, plays Ranevskaya with a mix of desperation and tired coquettishness, trying to retain an air of entitlement and good memories while only occasionally giving in to unsettling truths. Her deep sense of denial exasperates adopted daughter Varya, simmeringly played as practical and plain-spoken by Rachel McKendree, who has had to try to keep the estate afloat. Varya keeps being presumably paired off with clever, but emotionally repressed merchant Yermolay Alexeyevich Lopakhin (Chris Kanaga), whose family has risen from servitude and who tries, with little success, to get Ranevskaya’s family to change their myopic ways.

Sounds bleak, doesn’t it? While there are certainly tragic events, Elements Theatre Company has worked carefully to honor Chekhov’s intention that this be a comedy as the group celebrates the 150th anniversary of his birth. Chief among the comic relief is the slow-moving, hard-of-hearing valet Firs (Luke Norman); the condescending, kooky governess Charlotta Ivanovna (Kate Shannon); and Ranevskaya’s brother Leonid Andreyevich Gayev (Brad Lussier). Ellen Ortolani’s sunny Anya, Ranevskaya’s daughter, adds a joyful and optimistic air to any scene she’s in, and one knows that there is the most hope for her future happiness.

While the acting level varies among the cast — the servants generally seem less natural and comfortable in their portrayals than the family members — the show is impeccably produced on several levels.

A variety of Russian music plays throughout, and the action takes place on one of the widest stages on Cape Cod (in Paraclete House on Rock Harbor), a size that suits the story well. The design by Amy Mitchell and Hans Spatzeck-Olsen creates a vast nursery, a vast lawn and a vast drawing room. The characters are dwarfed by these surroundings and it's clear the home is too large to be practical in these changing times.

The period costumes, which extend to ushers, are lovely and Dwyer's choice to add dancers, particularly ones playing cherry trees in a prologue and epilogue, add a key sense of the beauty being lost with this need to sell. Only some sound cues, particularly of men chopping trees as the family departs, prove ineffective in the show design.

Dwyer has said Elements chose Chekhov to stretch the acting experience and repertoire of the company. Except for some short comedies, Chekhov hasn't been produced much on Cape Cod in recent years and this "Cherry Orchard" is a top opportunity for local audiences to stretch, too, and experience classic Russian theater done well.