

# The Barnstable Patriot

## CHEKHOV'S CHERRY ORCHARD BLOOMS IN ORLEANS

Written by Bethany Gibbons, *Barnstable Patriot*

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 family 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 Chekhov'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 Spatzeck-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.



## ‘CHERRY ORCHARD’ IS TRIBUTE TO CHEKHOV IN ORLEANS

By Ellen Petry Whalen, *Cape Codder*

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 Spatzeck-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.



# 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.