

Chekov's "Cherry Orchard" to be performed

November 2, 1976

Anton Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard," first performed in Moscow in 1904 less than six months before the playwright's death, will open the 1976-77 University of California, San Diego theater season at 8 p.m., Thursday, Nov. 11 in the UCSD Theatre.

"Cherry Orchard," says its director, UC San Diego Department of Drama Chairman Arthur Wagner, is about "the implication of change, the ongoing of life, arrivals and departures, leaving things that were long established and the new taking over."

The UC San Diego production, says Wagner, reaches back to the essence of what the Russian writer had in mind when he wrote the play, which he insisted upon calling a "comedy," despite its melancholic aspects.

Chekhov was very critical, Wagner explains, of director Konstantin Stanislavski, whom the playwright accused of oversentimentalizing his plays. Stanislavski was the first director of "The Cherry Orchard" and, says Wagner, "He took Chekhov's plays to be absolutely serious and devastating and Chekhov was always quite unhappy about that,"

The orchard of the title is still beautiful, but unproductive, overflowing with memories and meaning for its owners -- the Russian landed gentry about to be toppled by the turmoil of the early 20th century. Madame Ranevskaya and her brother, Gayev, are under pressure from Lopakhin, one of the "nouveau riche bourgeoisie," to sell the place and make way for progress. Despite their resistance, their desire to ignore the reality of their financial dilemma and their frantic attempts to recapture the romance of their past glory, the landowners finally allow the choice to be made for them.

The wave of the future sweeps them aside. Lopakhin, the son and grandson of former serfs on the estate and now a wealthy entrepreneur, not only prevails over the protests of the characters symbolizing the past but it is he who purchases the land and the orchard.

The play closes to the sound of the sighing of the orchard -- like "the sound of a broken string, slowly dying away" -- as it is chopped down to make way for "vacation cottages" and the new masters of Russian society, the middle-class merchants and clerks.

"The characters are neither nobles, people of high stature, nor do they have a great fall in the Aristotelian sense," says Wagner, explaining why the play must be considered a comedy, rather than a tragedy.

"What the characters do is lose a piece of property which has been in the family for a long time. It's certainly not as devastating as losing one's life or punching one's eyes out with a brooch. And if you take a really close look at the characters," Wagner continues, "for all of their seriousness and for all of our empathy with them, there's a ludicrous quality to each one of them. This is what we have been trying to make sure is in the performances."

One of the most striking characters is a slightly over-aged student Trofimov, who, says Wagner, prates of revolution, criticizes the idle rich, but is mostly enamoured of the rhetoric and position of being a radical. What this pose does is enable him to avoid the threat of emotions and entanglements. He says he is "above love."

Another character, Yepihodov, a clerk, is "a klutz, a shlemiel," Wagner explains with glee.

"He's the kind of guy," smiles Wagner, "who knocks over your ashtray and trips on everything and kicks over chairs. Yet he's educated, so there's fun in him that is perfectly obvious."

Ranevskaya's youngest daughter, Anya, is as much of a romantic as her mother. At the end of the play, as the family prepares to leave the estate, she exults that "a new life is beginning" and, earlier, reassures Ranevskaya that they will plant "a new orchard, an orchard more splendid" than the one they have lost,

The cast is composed of undergraduate and graduate students and one Department of Drama faculty member, associate professor of voice Mary Corrigan, who portrays Ranevskaya. Susan Lewis is Anya; John Wesley Houston, Jr., Yepihodov; David Jensen, Lopakhin, and Gerry Edwards, Gayev.

Costume designer is Deborah Dryden. Scenic design is by Dan Dryden and the lighting designer is Amarante Lucero.

Single ticket sales for "The Cherry Orchard," which will be performed Nov. 11-14 and 16-21, begin Wednesday, Nov. 3. General admission tickets are \$3.50 and all student tickets are \$2. Ticket office hours for the UCSD Theatre are noon to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday,

Series tickets may still be purchased for the entire five-play season. For ticket information, telephone 452-4574 or 452-3791.

For information call: Barbara Ann Firger, 452-3120

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