A metaphor for post-Soviet Russia

Review of Alexey Slapovsky's The Little Cherry Orchard

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The Little Cherry Orchard *by Alexey Slapovsky, translated by Anatoly Frusin and Alex Menglet, directed by Anatoly Frusin, at Company B Belvoir in Sydney, Australia until December 19*

An English-language version of Alexey Slapovsky's *The Little Cherry Orchard*, a play about post-Soviet Russia, recently premiered at the Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney.

The drama, written in 1992, was first produced at the State Theatre in Kassel, Germany in 1995. In 1994 it won the inaugural European Drama Award. Slapovsky, born in 1957, is one of a group of newer Russian writers. He studied at the Faculty of Philosophy at the Saratov State University and has worked as a schoolteacher, a storeman and a journalist for television and radio. In 1996 his novel *The First Second Coming* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. His other plays include: *In the First Place, Beware of Memories, The Gospel According to Judas, Dialogues about Love* and *The Shoelace*.

The Little Cherry Orchard is set in an attic, once the place of childhood dreaming, but now disused and in ruins. A metaphor for post-Soviet Russia, the attic is set to hold a wedding. Through the 11 characters portrayed in *The Little Cherry Orchard*, Slapovsky examines a people who have been forced to endure decades of betrayal and bureaucratic domination, only now to face the reality of capitalism—corruption, ruthless opportunism and a lack of human compassion.

The set, constructed from wooden beams, is quite extraordinary. The beams crisscross the stage, forcing the actors to continually watch their step, physicalising the insecure nature of existence in modern-day Russia. No one can move freely, and the characters teeter from one beam to another, sometimes slipping or falling over. Outside the back door of the attic is a small, fragile cherry tree, which has managed to survive for decades.

The play begins with a young couple sneaking into the attic, unaware of the planned ceremony. The young man, Sasha, is nostalgic for the old society. He pines for history and idealises the past. He tells us he loves the old songs from the period of collectivisation because “people used to listen to these songs and they loved them. How many of them died.” Looking around the attic he says, “We created our own little corner of paradise ... what we had here was a palace.”

Unable to restore the past, Sasha says we must look at the present as if from the future. Yet his view of the future is bleak. He predicts that his fiancée, Masha, will betray him and marry a millionaire. They go off to a cosy corner of the attic to talk about their future.

Another couple, Azalkanov and his prospective bride, arrive at the attic. Azalkanov appears wealthy and the young woman appears to be marrying him for his money. Part of a newly emerging entrepreneurial class, Azalkanov has a connection with the attic—it is where his father hanged himself. Azalkanov used to come here when he was younger; he grew up in the area but tells us, “I don't remember, I don't want to ... it's too distracting.” We learn that he used to be a math teacher, before he became an alcoholic and his previous wife threw him out of the house. While he has embraced the new free market culture, he is uncomfortable in his new position. There is more to this man than we may have at first thought.

While they go off to make arrangements for the wedding, the mother of the bride, Ranyayeva, enters the attic. She is wily, cynical about life and looking for a way to secure a comfortable existence—yet everything is unsure. The guests at the wedding include Azalkanov's ex-wife, Elena; his old friends, Minusinsky—also his business associate—and Rozov, once a surgeon but now an alcoholic. Then there is Azalkanov's neighbour, Votkin, whose kind words stopped the former from killing himself many years ago. Also present are an American entrepreneur, John Dowe, a financial backer for Azalkanov's and Minusinsky's dealings, and Vasen'ka, a waiter who later reveals himself to be a gangster with fascistic leanings.

During the ceremony, as things begin to break down, Minusinsky tells everyone that Azalkanov is broke and his credit has run out. The bride declares that she is no longer interested in Azalkanov and the marriage blows up. Her mother is devastated and insists Minusinsky marry her daughter because he has money. Ranyayeva then forces the American, Dowe, to agree to a marriage, by threatening to say he raped her. Masha tells Azalkanov that she was his pupil when he was a math teacher and that she has always loved him and dreamed of being with him forever. It seems he returns her affections, but then abruptly declares that there is nothing worse than dreams coming true. He thereupon goes back to Elena, his ex-wife, realising that he loves her.

Everyone is angry and frustrated by his or her own impotence in the face of disaster. “The twentieth century is tired ... it is dying to come to an end. We must help it,” says young Sasha as he places a bomb in the attic and pushes the plunger ... but nothing happens.

In the end, Dowe and Vasen'ka take advantage of the confusion and stage a violent takeover of the attic. When they start to renovate the place they discover it is rotten inside and decide to tear it down. In the final scene Azalkanov searches the ruins of the attic for what is left of the little cherry tree—some remnant of the past. Azalkanov is trying to embrace the new order, but is held back by a consciousness that something quite precious is perishing in the new Russia—the ability to care and show pity for another human being—the same qualities that saved him from suicide as a young man.

Elena comes in and offers to help him find what he is looking for, but she is unable to help. “I don't remember anything ... there wasn't anything. I remember nothing,” she says. These are the final lines of the play. The attic is destroyed, as is the old Russia. What lies in its place? A country in ruins, and a people with no hope.

This reviewer was left wondering—where to from here? One can't help but feel that Slapovsky has lost his bearings. He is dissatisfied with the past, horrified by the present and ambivalent about the future. While this is understandable, given the prevailing conditions in Russia, the author's confusion gives the play a frantic and at times aimless quality.

There are moments in *The Little Cherry Orchard* that are profoundly moving, but sometimes we were laughing when really we should have been crying. Perhaps this is not so out of place, and indeed Slapovsky has every right to use this dramatic device as a means of awakening our senses to the plight of his characters. Yet it seemed to me that the author felt a certain bitterness or resentment towards them. At times, it seemed he was mocking them for their naiveté and mistakes, as if they were solely responsible for their predicament.

Much of the style and atmosphere of this play reminds one of the works of the great Russian dramatist Anton Chekhov, in particular, obviously, *The Cherry Orchard.* In fact the director, Anatoly Fusin, explains in the program notes that he sees Slapovsky's play as “a farewell to the old century, a salute to the new one, and a thank you note to Chekhov.”

It is worth comparing Slapovsky's play to Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard,* which so perceptively captured the relationship between different generations of Russians living on the brink of tremendous social upheaval. Written in 1904, the year Chekhov died, his play provides a remarkable picture of the first years of the century when Russia was on the verge of revolution and the painful winds of change were sweeping throughout the social superstructure.

The two plays have something in common: both are tragic comedies, blending tears with laughter, and both create a mingled nostalgia for something that is perishing. But whereas we leave a production of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* with some hope for the future or at least a belief in the possibilities of human existence, the spectator leaves Slapovsky's play conscious more than anything else of the shattered hopes of a generation.

This is not surprising. Slapovsky's drama is written at the end of the twentieth century, following the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the restoration of capitalism in Russia and the political and social disorientation resulting from past betrayals, disappointments and historical falsifications under the Stalinist bureaucracy. His play depicts the naïve aspirations for a better life under capitalism, and captures the anger and bitterness of a people who feel they have been duped.

All in all, this is an intelligent play and well worth seeing. The fact that such works are being produced is an indication of the critical attitude that has developed toward the restoration of capitalism in Russia and suggests that artists are beginning to turn toward the more complex issues raised at the end of this century.

The Belvoir Street Theatre production of *The Little Cherry Orchard* is highly engaging, energetic and committed, and the director and actors have worked hard to achieve some honesty in their performance. Attempts to “Australianise” the dialogue in the production, however, were unnecessary and at times irritating. Such innovations often disclose a lack of confidence by the producers in the audience's ability to grasp the significance of the issues raised. A play is not made more relevant to its audience through the use of the native idioms, but by its artistic content and by whether or not it reveals something about the human condition in general. Perhaps the director would have done better to concentrate on more consistently and firmly placing the style of acting and dialogue in the play's actual setting—Russia in the 1990s.