A failed attempt at "relevance"

The Three Sisters by Anton Chekhov, directed by Andrew Benedict

Stephen Griffith
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At first glance, stories and plays by the celebrated Russian writer Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) are deceptively simple. His play *The Three Sisters*, which was recently staged by the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) under the direction of Andrew Benedict, is no exception. There are no heroic deeds or grand tragedy in this four-act examination of the unrequited hopes of the Prozorov sisters—Olga, Masha and Irina—and their friends in a small provincial Russian town. But this beautifully crafted work, written in 1901, explores a range of universal themes and issues that can strongly resonate with contemporary audiences if sensitively staged and performed.

Olga (Melita Jurisic), the oldest, fears her youth and vitality is being sapped by her job as a teacher in a local school; Masha (Paula Arundell) is unhappily married to Kulygin (Anthony Phelan), a teacher she married early but whom she has now outgrown; and Irina (Rose Byrne), who aspires to a life of substance. Along with their brother Andrei (Steve Rodgers), who wants to become a philosophy professor, they all dream of returning to cosmopolitan Moscow and escaping the mediocrity and provincialism of their lives. These hopes, however, are not realised.

The play opens on Irina's birthday, which coincides with the first anniversary of the death of their father who commanded the local military barracks. The sisters celebrate Irina's birthday with some army officers from the garrison. Their guests include Baron Tusenbach (Marc Carra), an unexciting but well-intentioned army lieutenant infatuated with Irina, and Solyony (Bogdan Koca), a cynical and brooding subaltern.

The new military commander, Colonel Vershinin (Robert Menzies), who has known the sisters since their childhood in Moscow, also joins the gathering. Masha is taken with Vershinin who has a maturity and experience beyond her dreary existence. He understands that although contemporary life can be miserable, these tribulations can lay the foundations of a better life for future generations.

Natasha, a local girl, joins the party as well. Andrei is in love with her and the first act of the play ends with him proposing marriage while comforting her because she feels inadequate among the sophisticated guests.

The next two acts trace the gradual wearing down of the sisters' aspirations, which come to grief on the lack of opportunity and cultural deprivation of provincial life. Masha begins an affair with Vershinin; Irina works long hours at the telegraph office; and Olga eventually becomes school headmistress—a sign that this is all her life will ever amount to. Andrei has married Natasha and become a local government official. They have two children and Natasha, who gradually comes to dominate the household, pushes the sisters out of their rooms and eventually out of the house itself. The marriage suffers as Andrei retreats into himself, regretting his meagre accomplishments and Natasha's parochial outlook holds sway. She has an affair with Andrei's boss, a local power broker.

In the final act, Colonel Vershinin's regiment is transferred to Poland forcing him to leave Masha and the Prozorov family stranded in the town. Irina abandons all hope of returning to Moscow and agrees to marry Tusenbach who has given up his army commission. He is planning to manage a brick factory. Just as the regiment is about to leave Tusenbach is killed in a duel engineered by Solyony who has secretly loved Irina and vowed that if he cannot win her he will kill the man who has. The play ends with the three sisters confronting the reality that their drab lives will continue and wondering whether they will ever find meaning and purpose.

But Chekhov provides a ray of hope. As the regiment leaves the town, Olga declares: "We shall be forgotten, our faces will be forgotten, our voices, and how many there were of us; but our sufferings will pass into joy for those who will live after us, happiness and peace will be established upon earth, and they will remember kindly and bless those who have lived before. Oh, dear sisters, our life is not ended yet. We shall live! The music is so happy, so joyful, and it seems as though in a little while we shall know what we are living for, why we are suffering... If we only knew—if we only knew!"

STC director Andrew Benedict has attempted to stage *The Three Sisters* for modern audiences. While this sort of project should be encouraged, it requires a thoughtful approach. Regrettably Benedict only succeeds in confusing and fracturing the poetry of one of Chekhov's greatest works.

Benedict has every right to interpret Chekhov as he pleases but he also has a responsibility to present a coherent artistic conception of the work. Unfortunately one of the striking features of the STC production was its overall lack of cohesion and historical congruity. Individual performances were uneven and characters portrayed in such a variety of fashions that it seemed each actor had separately chosen his or her own context. This problem, however, resides with Benedict's direction.

Compounding this disjointed approach was a confusing mélange of stage settings. The first act took place in what seemed to be an inner city studio apartment, the second, a room in the same building (supposedly shared by two of the sisters), was furnished like a disused underground railway station, and the last act set outside a rundown 1960s modular apartment block.

In Chekhov's play the army officers, who belonged to the lower ranks of the privileged nobility, led a generally monotonous existence in the local army barracks, a life that would not have changed very much when they were relocated to another garrison. In the STC

production, by contrast, these officers leave town dressed in camouflage gear, as if they are about to break through a Chechen guerilla encirclement. No attempt is made to provide audiences with any reason for this rather incomprehensible interpretation.

This cavalier approach to historical context undermines the essential content of the play, whose characters are grappling with the value of their lives and their place in time. Acutely conscious of their personal emptiness and lack of fulfillment, the sisters try to overcome their plight by working in order to make a worthwhile contribution to society as a whole. This work, however, saps them of the strength required to fulfill their dreams. But as Colonel Vershinin and then Olga optimistically explain, even if contemporary life is miserable at least their efforts contribute to a better world for their descendants.

These conceptions seem to have escaped Benedict's production, which presents history as a jumble and regards progress as a rather strange notion. Rose Byrne's mangling of Irina's call for fulfilling work to provide purpose and meaning to her life highlighted Benedict's approach.

"You say life is beautiful," Irina declares. "But what if it only appears to be. For the three of us, my sisters and I, life has not been beautiful yet. It has choked us like a lot of weeds. I've started to cry. I mustn't. We must work. It's because we've never worked that we're so miserable and take such a gloomy view of life. We are the children of people who despised work." Byrne delivers these lines in a semi-hysterical fashion, as if Irina's conceptions are simply idiotic.

In considering the essential problems of the STC production it is necessary to contrast the different cultural and political conceptions that dominated the end of the 19th century and those prevailing today. For many in Russia, as with the rest of Europe at the end of the 1890s, the new century heralded a future of change and possibility. Advances in technology paralleled the development of critical social theory which demonstrated the possibility of overcoming age-old privilege through the application of rational thought and action. While Chekhov was not linked with the Marxist movement—the most powerful component of the broad movement advocating radical social and political change at this time—his outlook was imbued with the prevailing optimism of his age.

Chekhov's life straddled two epochs of Russian history. He was born in 1860, one year before the formal liberation of the Russian peasantry from feudal serfdom and died months before the outbreak of the first Russian revolution of 1905. His grandfather had been a serf who bought his freedom from his feudal master. While studying medicine in the early 1880s, Chekhov began to write for humorous popular magazines to help sustain his family. The editor insisted on a limited number of words per story and, through this enforced discipline Chekhov became the first master of the short story. By 1888 he had established a name for himself as a writer and began to concentrate on more serious pieces.

Much of Chekhov's work deals with the irony and contradictions of life and society undergoing profound change. His last play , *The Cherry Orchard*, examines the demise of the landed aristocracy, overtaken by the growth of modern bourgeois society and epitomised by different attitudes to a cherry orchard. On the one hand, old wealth and privilege wishes to keep the orchard in order to appreciate its beauty during the brief moment of its spring flowering; on the other, new money plans to dig up the orchard and then sell the land to the city bourgeois for their summer retreats.

Chekhov's plays were not didactic; on the contrary, he fought against the idea that a writer must instruct his readers. But he directly challenged audiences with an uncompromising determination to explore life for what it was. He attempted to make the world appear neither better nor worse and was always ready to see the humour in a situation, even if it was at times a sad, ironic humour. This put him at odds with writers like Leo Tolstoy, who tended to idealise or smooth over the rough elements of peasant life, and some accused Chekhov of writing stories that did not fit with "civilised society".

In response to such accusations Chekhov said: "Requiring literature to dig up a 'pearl' from the pack of villains is tantamount to negating literature altogether. Literature is accepted as an art because it depicts life as it actually is. Its aim is the truth, unconditional and honest... The writer should be just as objective as the chemist ... and acknowledge that manure piles play a highly respectable role in the landscape and that evil passions are every bit as much a part of life as good ones."

Chekhov's approach, which he attributed to his medical training, was, in fact, a product of the prevailing progressive ideas of his time that encouraged artists to honestly examine the world around them based on the understanding that rational thought and determined struggle could change society. At the beginning of the 21st century a very different view prevails—one that regards the future pessimistically, with fear and trepidation.

Constantin Stanislavski, the famous Russian actor, wrote that "in order to discover the inner essence" of Chekhov's plays "one must engage in a kind of excavation of his spiritual depths". For *The Three Sisters* this means exploration of Chekhov's stubborn and insightful determination to look at the world as it was and a work that ultimately pays tribute to the resilience and hopefulness of humanity. This approach would have elicited a different and ultimately more satisfying production than the STC's adaptation to "modern" confusions and prejudices. Contemporary relevance is not just a question of updating references or discarding period scenery but of capturing anew the essentials truths contained in a work of art.