

The Times

by Sam Marlowe at Cambridge Arts Theatre, 30 April 2007



I cannot imagine a more delicate, luminous and emotionally piercing production of Chekhov's drama than *Cheek By Jowl's*. Performed by the company's Russian ensemble, it is directed by Declan Donnellan with utter precision, while Nick Ormerod's design, with its tiny symbolic doll's house and oppressive backdrop of perilously tilting walls and windows, conveys the way in which the Prozorov family home is both prison and sanctuary. And the acting is nothing short of sublime.

Donnellan never neglects the underlying playful girlishness, born of a shared sibling history, that continually bobs to the surface, buoy-like, to keep the sisters afloat even at their most anguished. After the fire of Act III, the trio cling tearfully together as Nelly Uvarova's huge-eyed Irina grows almost hysterical. When Ekaterina Sibiryakova, as Natasha, appears, it is as if she has stumbled upon a conspiracy, and the sisters' distress dissolves into illicit giggles. It's little wonder that Natasha, so entirely excluded and who begins in Sibiryakova's performance as pretentious and ambitious, yet touchingly gauche, turns as spectacularly nasty as she does here.

The lightness that illuminates the production lies partly in the sisters' childlike spontaneity and sense of the absurd, and partly in the characters' observance of social convention. Evgenia Dmitrieva's lonely, exhausted Olga busies herself, smilingly, with domestic details; and even as Irina Grineva's Masha wonders how she can continue to bear her "wretched life" she laughs, politely, helplessly. Yet when she meets Alexander Feklistov's Vershinin, balding, kind and sensitive, part lover, part father-figure, she slyly and appreciatingly flicks her eyes over his body while his back is turned. It's deliciously naughty.

The characters' frustrated connections stack up with a mounting sense of dread. Conversations are interrupted by a yawn, a guffaw or a sottise. Andrey pours out his heart to a deaf servant; Solenyi's unwelcome attentions to Irina culminate in actual sexual assault. Kulygin places a cushion against the belly of Masha and buries his head in it for comfort, as if yearning for the children and happy home she might give him were she not filled with boredom and contempt.

And when Irina is given a spinning top as a name-day present, the entire household wordlessly watches it pointlessly revolve, an economically eloquent image of their futile lives. Heartbreaking simplicity; simply heartbreaking

The Independent

by Paul Taylor at Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry, 4 May 2007



Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, the artistic directors of *Cheek By Jowl*, are in the unusual position of being considered national treasures in two countries - their native England and their adoptive Russia. The company's visiting productions had so impressed Moscow and St Petersburg that in 1999 the

Theatre Federation took the unprecedented step of inviting them to form a Russian counterpart to Cheek By Jowl. This luminous version of *Three Sisters*, brilliantly performed by that ensemble, constitutes a complete explanation of why the Russians have taken Donnellan and Ormerod to their hearts.

I have never seen a production of the play that moved with such expressive fluency or that communicated its volatile, contradictory moods with a more piercing precision. We first see the three sisters and their brother Andrei grouped as if for a family portrait - civilised, harmonious and in a pose that, while it would have gratified their father, the General, is simply unsustainable since his death, which has left them stranded as over-educated, self-doubting misfits in this remote, crashingly dull provincial town.

The staging gives itself a marvellous freedom of manoeuvre by eschewing fussy realism. There's a doll's-house, a wind-up gramophone, a scattering of chairs and tables: changes of setting are swiftly evoked by arranging these items in various configurations. In the second scene, where a visit from the mummies is awaited, the tables become a kind of inner stage with candles as footlights and thus can act as a platform for the philosophising bout between Vershinin and Tuzenbach.

Throughout, you get a strong sense of people striving to rouse themselves from depression. True to Chekhov, the production underlines how tragic feeling can erupt in desperate laughter and playfulness. You see this in a splendidly handled sequence in the scene after the fire. On her usual fault-finding rounds of the house, the usurping sister-in-law Natasha (Ekaterina Sibiryakova) crosses the stage with a candle, too absorbed to acknowledge the sisters. A comment by Masha that "the way she goes about you'd think that it was she who started the fire" reduces the trio to convulsions of mirth. Their contentious sibling intimacy, the humour that can bubble up even in extremis because of long family history, and their snooty conspiratorial bond against the vulgar, awkward Natasha: all of this is beautifully revealed.

Nelly Uvarova is the most haunting Irina that I've encountered. She projects to perfection the confused, fearful yearning of a girl who, at 24, feels that the capacity to love has become imprisoned within. Evgenia Dmitrieva is an unusually attractive Olga - lonely yet stoic, fanning herself with a handkerchief as if trying to whisk away the unwelcome news of Masha's adulterous passion but matter-of-factly throwing a glass of water over Irina when the latter succumbs to hysterics. You learn volumes about the sad, hopeless marriage of Irina Grineva's Masha and the schoolteacher Kulygin here when he beseechingly plumps a pillow against her womb and lays his head on it like a little boy anxious to be comforted. Not that you feel that their union would have been any happier had she given him children.

It's never occurred to me before to speculate about what happens to Bobik, the sisters' sickly and much cosseted baby nephew. But here, because of the Russian cast, I fell to wondering how he fared in that country's future. Were his mother's genes dominant or those of his father? Did he become a Soviet apparatchik or was he purged?

The Sunday Times

by John Peter, Cheek by Jowl tour, 6 May 2007



This is a great production, and a thrilling rediscovery of a great and familiar play. Declan Donnellan has lifted from it the bittersweet mist of gentility and melancholy. The Prozorov girls are young, beautiful, playful and sophisticated: not provincial dreamers, but confident Moscow girls from a good family. They laugh a lot and, as the play darkens, the laughter becomes mocking, ironical, angry, desperate, a form of self-defence and relief. The tragic side of the play becomes more deeply painful: they are proud in defeat. The play is in Russian; most of the actors reached maturity in postGorbachev Russia, and their

work has a defiant self-assertion. Alexander Feklistov's middle-aged Vershinin is masterly: sweet-natured and a little awkward, he's never been handsome, but he has a boyish eagerness that warms the play.