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The Theatrical Act Remains: The Cherry Orchard
A Performance Review

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The Cherry Orchard

Based on the play by Anton Chekhov

Adapted by Dmitry Krymov in collaboration with the Wilma Hothouse Company

Directed by Dmitry Krymov

April 12–May 1, 2022 at the Wilma Theater

The Wilma Theater’s 2022 production of *The Cherry Orchard* by Anton Chekhov gives new meaning to the phrase “laugh until you cry.” The script for this particular version was adapted and directed by Dmitry Krymov in collaboration with the Wilma Hothouse Company and Chekhov interpreter Tatyana Khaikin. The play was led by Lopakhin (Justin Jain), Gayev (Lindsay Smiling) and Ranyevska (Krista Apple), who summoned the dignity of their characters with aching complexity. The cohesive ensemble featured other performances by Ross Beschler, Jaime Maseda, Suli Holum, Campbell O’Hare, Sarah Gliko, Brett Ashley Robinson, Trevor W. Fayle, and Matteo Scammell. The play fundamentally captured the absurdity of modern life to such an extent that the audience begrudgingly yet consumedly laughed—until they began to cry. *The Cherry Orchard* dramaturgically gestures to a moment of Eastern European conflict on a contemporary global scale. Yet the production also foretells the heartbreaking and destructive realities of intimate conflict for individuals and their livelihoods. The audience witnesses and reconciles the distance of the spectator to leave and pursue another possible future; one that reconciles, reckons, and repairs with each conflict summoned by the work of the play, regardless of the scale.

With poignant and dynamic direction by Krymov, the physical acting styles and evocative design offered an encompassing experience with contemporary resonances and theatrical confoundment. The laughter was loud and the sobbing decidedly audible. Interactive direction involved the audience, offering unexpected avenues for this current climate. The interactive element went so far as to have over half the eleven-person cast physically cross the entirety of the third row—with the audience still in their seats! An attempt by a young theatre-goer to tie a lead actor’s tie was recalled in a later bit, much to the thrill and embarrassment of the volunteer. With several other examples of audience interaction, Lopakhin’s early comment, “yeah, it’s going to be this kind of play” rings true. Even when personal interaction and discomfort were implicated, this was done

with care and empathy, creating a sense that the audience is equally vital to stagecraft as the performers.

The Wilma's *The Cherry Orchard* begins with four actor-musicians, who attempt to improvise based on a Russian lyrical text. As Chekhov's original text suggests a meta-theatrical component, this serves as a frame for the performance as a complete work. The framework of a theatrical space—in the world of the play as well—reminds the audience that they are currently at The Wilma Theater in Philadelphia. But they will travel, as the set design tells us, from Philadelphia to New York, New York to Paris, Paris to Moscow, Moscow to Krakow. Nevertheless, in the Philadelphia of the current moment, the audience looks overseas through a mediated context. The schema of meta-theatricality suggests that only live theatre will allow one to imagine these worlds either meeting or diverging in a perceivable future. The hope of the text lies in its commitment to live art. We look to theatre—rather than the immediacy of a news alert—to tell what is next, and to reckon with the unknowable ultimatum that implies.

Lighting design by Thom Weaver presented an enticingly chilly mise-en-scene. Irina Kruzhilina's costume design met the necessary sensuality of Chekhov's characters as well as class discrepancies and historical distance. Costumes were also made deliciously *unpalatable*, spattered with the crimsons of cherry juice and blood, which added to the production's tone of grave absurdity. Irina Kruzhilina additionally collaborated with Dmitry Krymov on the set, which consisted of the literal components of a dining area, a volleyball court, and a train station (which in various moments, appeared all at once). Yet it was the departure board—aided with sound design by Daniel Ison—that encompassed the majority of design attention. In the script, the departure board directs questions to and from the human characters, thereby becoming a character itself. The board spins to reveal questions on everything from “what time will the train arrive?” to “has my cherry orchard been sold?” Like the spinning boards of a slot machine, the departure board possesses the power to decide upon true or fantastical futures. When, later in the play, Chekhov's translated dialogue appears on the board instead of being spoken, the text advances far too rapidly for an audience to conceivably maneuver. Still, Krymov's direction placed action throughout the theatre as a whole—onstage, in the audience, and in the technical elements. This suggested that, even if one could not read the final lines of the play, the dynamic, on-stage canvas provided an entire story. Therefore,

it did not matter where one looked at any given moment; the audience members could decide for themselves. Aiding the text's metatheatrical undertones, the wings remained bare and, in an eleventh-hour gesture, Lopakhin removed a stage lamp from the back wall of the theatre, climbing across the house towards the booth to do so. Overall, the scenography suggested that, as a train can veer from its route, the theatrical space is never stagnant.

The conflict in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* primarily revolves around the fear of loss, whether that loss involves selling the cherry orchard, missing an opportunity, or losing all sense of stasis or control. As Ranyevska experiences what is perhaps post-partum psychosis, the loss of a child is only passingly addressed. Yet the loss of a child pervades the text as a fear of lost hope. Subtle invocations of marriage and romance return to suggest that some of us are artists, and some of us will raise them. At one moment, Trofimov (Trevor W. Fayle) took the disembodied stage light from Lopakhin to wrap and give to Anya (Campbell O'Hare), as though it were their child. This remarkably simple gesture conceded for all that we *must* make theatre. Lines played for humor, such as "Even Chekhov saw it coming," haunt a reckoning that trust should lie not with the departure board to provide information, but with the stage lamp that will light our own imaginings. Firs (Jaime Maseda), who is notoriously left behind in Chekhov's play, was in this version invited by the family to leave alongside them. With darker undertones, perhaps we, the audience, are the ones who are left behind. Upon returning to the theatre within a pandemic, the reason for doing so must be that, in spite of what is lost or gained or left behind, theatre will remain. And it will continue, for even at the beginning of this text, the characters know that they are in a play and will perform further for us. By the end, we realize that this complete and exceptional production is rehearsal for a future we will make ourselves. The framework of the band improvising at the start of the play comes full circle when the audience realizes that all of life is an improvisation. There is always a song or a text to pick up and play. Chekhov's text may leave or remain, but the theatrical act continues.