

British Theatre Guide

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A Provincial Life

Peter Gill / Anton Chekhov

National Theatre Wales

Sherman Cymru

1–17 March 2012

A Provincial Life is a historically significant project in a number of respects: pretty much marking the second birthday of the National Theatre of Wales (English-language version), it's their 17th production (#ntw17 in Twitterspeak), but their first on the main stage at the newly redeveloped Sherman Cymru.

It also sees Cardiff-born Peter Gill returning to Wales after almost half a century spent making a prestigious directorial career in London (Royal Court, Riverside Studios, National Theatre etc.). He has been represented here as a playwright, with a touring production of the poetic-realist *Cardiff East* in 1997 (and a reading of his 1983 relationship drama *Kick For Touch* by the Welsh Fargo Stage Company last year), but this faithful adaptation of Anton Chekhov's 1896 novella *My Life—The Story Of A Provincial* marks his home-town debut as a director.

First produced in 1966, at a time when it looked as though long-entrenched class divisions might be breaking down (in the privileged West, at least), its plot—in which a young bourgeois determines to seek existential authenticity in a life of manual labour and worker solidarity—is equally timely in 2012, with downward social mobility once more big on the political agenda, albeit for very different reasons.

The central protagonist, Misail, the drop-out, is engagingly played by Nicholas Shaw, although his is the least interesting character on-stage, perhaps because, in the original story, he is the narrator, through whose eyes we watch other people's misfortunes unfold; I also found his over-precise diction a little distracting. Clive Merrison is on imperious form as his disdainful architect father, although it's a pity that an actor of his distinction only appears in two scenes; this, though, is the inevitable downside of a play with fifteen speaking parts—local luminaries such as Menna Trussler and Helen Griffin also seem sadly under-used.

More fortunate are the actresses who play the younger women in Misail's life: Sarah Lloyd-Gregory, heart-breaking as Cleopatra, his pale, consumptive sister, who ultimately pays the price for her own, less ostentatious flouting of middle-class convention; and Alex Clatworthy and Kezia Burrows as the spirited Maria and the conventional Anyuta respectively, both of whom he loves, and both of whom ultimately let him down as a consequence of feeling let down by him.

Boris, played by the magnetic Lee Haven-Jones is perhaps the play's true pivot—the hero's intellectual sparring-partner, Cleopatra's adulterous lover, Anyuta's brother, a socially responsible doctor and a more pragmatic idealist than Misail, he appears to be a surrogate for Chekhov himself. William Thomas and Richard Corgan shine as salt-of-the-earth peasant types, Mark Lewis intimidates as Maria's father, and the most of the laughs are provided by John-Paul Macleod as

Misail's eccentric, rat-like friend, Ivan. Various locations in provincial 19th century Russia are cleverly evoked by Alison Chitty's bare set (onto which the ensemble periodically carries a few items of furniture—chairs, tables, beds, a stove), as well as by Terry Davies's subtle, folk-melody-oriented score.

It's a long piece, coming in at just under three hours (including interval), and one which eschews spectacle in favour of ideas and argument; like Misail, it does not beg to be loved, but demands respect on its own terms. Maybe I've been exposed to too many multi-media extravaganzas in the past few years, but I did feel that more use might have been made of the plain backdrop, in terms of giving a sense of location, especially for those scenes set outdoors. It also seemed to me that the poignant final moments might have been more effective if shown, rather than told in monologue form.

Nevertheless, *A Provincial Life* is constantly intriguing. While it lacks the celebratory tone of a true theatrical triumph, it is ultimately condemnatory of naiveté and cynicism in equal measure, leaving one pondering human weakness and the need to conform; which is probably of more value, in the long term.

Reviewer: [Othniel Smith](#)