

# British Theatre Guide

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## Chekhov's Shorts

Anton Chekhov

European Arts Company

York Theatre Royal

4–5 April 2017

Chekhov is widely regarded as one of the great chroniclers of human suffering. However, while his plays and short stories are often filled with tragedy—Konstantin's suicide in *The Seagull* (1896), the murder of a baby in "Peasants" (1897)—there is also a vein of black comedy running through many of them.

The five short plays performed by European Arts Company represent an important stage in Chekhov's development as a writer, forming a bridge of sorts between his bittersweet short stories—most famously "The Lady with the Little Dog" (1899)—and the tragicomic plays of his late period, such as *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). While *Chekhov's Shorts* doesn't include the Russian dramatist's finest writing, a couple of the pieces foreshadow the greatness of his later theatrical work.

The production gets off to an underwhelming start with *The Evils of Tobacco* (1886), in which a henpecked husband, Nyukhin (Rupert Mason), delivers a public lecture on the dangers of smoking. However, rather than expounding on this topic as promised, the lecture turns into a long rant about his domineering wife. Despite Mason's spirited performance, this monologue has not aged well and is only sporadically amusing.

In the second piece, *The Dimwit* (1883), the horribly conceited (and apparently closeted) Captain Sousov (William Hartley) describes his ideal wife to the local matchmaker, Lukinishna (Eva Savage). Although livelier than the first piece, *The Dimwit* is brutally short: just as it seems to get going, it comes to an abrupt end.

However, the first half of the evening ends on a high with an impressive staging of *The Bear* (1888), arguably the greatest of all Chekhov's short dramatic works. This piece was a huge success during Chekhov's lifetime, prompting him to joke that, "my Bear has made me more money than all the gypsies' real bears". On the seven-month anniversary of her husband's death, grieving widow Elena Ivanova Popova (Savage) is confronted by a fiery local landowner, Grigory Stepanovitch Smirnov (Hartley), who demands the repayment of a loan her late spouse made. The couple's rapid transformation from enmity to love is vividly played and energetically directed by John O'Connor.

The second half is stronger overall. *Swan Song* (1887) combines humour and pathos in its portrayal of a fading stage actor, Vassily Vassilyitch Svetliodv (Mason), who dwells on past glories, life regrets and impending death. The evening ends on a high with *The Proposal* (1888), which was written shortly after *The Bear* and depicts a similarly turbulent battle of the sexes. The hysterical hypochondriac Lomov (Hartley) goes to the home of Chubukov (Mason) to propose to his daughter

Natalya (Savage), but the three become embroiled in a chaotic land dispute. *The Proposal* contains some inspired comic moments and bristles with energy.

Although I found the five plays variable in quality, I was impressed by the three performers' dynamic and committed performances. Mason shines as an ageing thespian in *Swansong*, delivering speeches from Greek tragedy and *King Lear* in the style of an old ham. Eva Savage excels as the self-dramatizing widow of *The Bear*, who is suddenly overcome by passion. Equally impressive is Will Hartley, who appears to channel both Leonard Rossiter and Bob Hoskins (an unlikely pairing!) as the wide-eyed, red-faced Smirnov. Some audiences might find the actors' comic playing rather broad at times, but I felt it was in keeping with the ridiculousness of the characters, many of whom delight in theatricality.

Director John O'Connor ensures that the pacing rarely flags and makes fine use of the limited space. I enjoyed the device of having the actors pose for photographs at the beginning of each play; in the programme, these photos appear under the heading 'Scenes from Russian Domestic Life 1883-1888'. Helena Coyston's set design is pleasingly adaptable (if rather threadbare) and Gianluca Gasparini's costumes evoke late nineteenth-century Russia to a tee.

Despite my misgivings about the first two plays, the final three make *Chekhov's Shorts* worth watching. The production is well acted, robustly staged and often very funny.

**Reviewer:** [James Ballands](#)