

British Theatre Guide

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Children of the Sun

Maxim Gorky, in a new version by Andrew Upton

Lyttelton Theatre (National)

From 9 April 2013

The team of Andrew Upton, Howard Davies and Bunny Christie like their Russians and have been responsible for several of the National's greatest hits in recent years.

Following [Philistines](#), this is their second trip to Maxim Gorky, while they have also provided novel readings of [The Cherry Orchard](#) by Chekhov and Bulgakov's [The White Guard](#).

Children of the Sun, which was written in jail and premièred in October 1905 as revolution promised to change the face of Russia forever, doesn't quite hit those dizzy heights but introduces some interesting ideas.

Using mildly modernised language (the expletives jarring) the 2½ hour production has some characteristics of *The Cherry Orchard* crossing over with elements of Ibsen's [An Enemy of the People](#).

Under Davies's direction, the post-Chekhovian play's central figure is a kind of comedic, absent-minded Professor.

Geoffrey Streatfeild as Pavel is a self-absorbed scientist who should be the paternalistic figure in a small town. Instead, like today's geneticists, he is obsessed with the idea of creating life in a test tube. This is the equivalent of fiddling while Rome (or possibly St Petersburg) burns. To make matters worse, he unwittingly kindles the flames, aided by the town's unprincipled pawnbroker.

Justine Mitchell plays his bored wife Yelena well, a frustrated lady torn between sleazy art and highfalutin' science, as she ponders an affair with her art teacher as an alternative to marriage with a nutty genius.

At the same time, Lucy Black's manic widow Melaniya blindly pursues Pavel offering money and undying devotion.

Mirroring her brother's turmoil is Emma Lowndes as Lisa, a possibly mortally ill woman whose mental stability is none too strong though her pre-communist politics are rock solid. She rebuffs Melaniya's brother and Pavel's best friend, Paul Higgins's Boris.

While all of the family melodramas play out, all is not well in the town, as the revolution is prefigured by symbolic disease and consequential anger.

Bunny Christie's set is remarkable, making full use of the stage space to create a home/lab and more but also the mechanics. It peaks in an explosive ending to the evening that will long live in the memory.

Unlike Chekhov and Ibsen's masterpieces, *Children of the Sun* has a tendency towards melodrama. It does however have its comic moments, especially when Florence Hall is on stage playing Feema, the mercenary serving girl.

There are also some strong political messages regarding the risks that the wealthy run when they forget their duties towards the less well-off, which might well strike resonances for more caring visitors to the National during this run.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)