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The Lady with a Dog

Mark Giesser
Alces Productions
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I wish that playwright and director Mark Giesser had not described his new play, *The Lady with a Dog*, as being “adapted from the story by Anton Chekhov”.

I was eagerly anticipating a drama of erotic mystery and Chekhovian yearning in which two lovers, seeking to escape from the ‘false’ bourgeois restraints of marriage, family and social mores, find that they become trapped instead—by a lethargy that is both their own and their country’s—within a clandestine love which becomes their only ‘reality’. This was the tragi-comic futility which George Bernard Shaw defined as the essence of Chekhov’s genius.

Instead, Giesser presents a rom-com—think *Notting Hill* meets Noël Coward—which occasionally strains in conflicting directions: on the one hand towards serious social commentary, and on the other towards Wildean wit.

Giesser has updated what he calls “one of Anton Chekhov’s most charming yet bittersweet love stories” to the years following WWI, transporting us from mid-nineteenth century Moscow and Yalta to London and Paris in the 1920s. It’s an art deco world of champagne and Charlestons, sensuously and sensitively conjured by Giulia Scrimieri’s beautiful costumes.

At first glance, this transplantation is not entirely unreasonable. After all, F Scott Fitzgerald nodded significantly towards *The Lady with a Dog* when Jay Gatsby, like Chekhov’s Dmitri Gurov, fell unexpectedly in love with a ‘lady’—in Gurov’s case, Anna Sergeyevna, and in Gatsby’s, Daisy Fay—and found that his romantic yearning became almost religious in its intensity.

But, Giesser’s ‘reasoning’ lacks logic. He explains that, in the decades which followed Chekhov’s death, social and political revolution swept through Russia: “the world about which Chekhov wrote was gone… old certainties no longer provided much guidance”.

But, Chekhov wasn’t concerned with the world twenty years after he had died. His story looks back to time when an emergent leisured class enjoyed new opportunities and women sought greater independence. A world in which a Madame Bovary might both bask in the respectability and status which marriage endowed and crave the frisson of freedom.

It’s not just the logic that’s a little shaky, but the landscape too. Designer Oscar Selfridge’s picture-postcard seaside vista is more Southwold than the Scotland it reveals itself to denote. Yes, we’ve been transported from the briny Black Sea to breezy North Berwick, where a linen-suited Lothario, Damian Granville (Alan Turkington), is holidaying, without his wife, and espies a similarly unaccompanied Anne Dennis (Beth Burrows).

The ex-military man charms her by patting her Pomeranian (here, imagined), and during some playful conversation about crosswords, golf and ice-cream, a trip to the pier photobooth and a twilight tango, love blossoms. Like all holiday romances, though, this one must come to an end. But, when Damian and Anne return to their spouses, Elaine (Laura Glover) and Carl (Duncan MacInnes) respectively, they find that the rituals of married life cannot extinguish the murmurings of memory.

The structure and crafting of the play is not without some sophistication. While his wife plays away, war-wounded Carl, puffing at his pipe and tugging at his too-short tank-top, is busy preparing his bid to become a Tory MP at the General Election. For some time, cold, aloof Elaine has stayed at home caring for the children while her husband carries out his serial seductions.

Although Chekhov tells us little more than that Dmitri's wife is staid, intellectual and that he is afraid of her and that Anna's husband is tall and stooping with side-whiskers, Giesser brings the deceived spouses into the drama. From deckchairs on the hotel terrace, they watch the nascent romance ignite. And Giesser cleverly constructs a criss-cross of conversations in which, as times and places conflate, the characters reveal their inner lives.

This device usefully energises the chronological unfolding of Damian and Anne's illicit affair but brings its own problems, for it encourages Giesser to venture into irrelevant waters. Just as the lovers' romance is going nowhere, so the drama runs aground as Giesser attempts to turn the play into a socio-political commentary by incorporating remarks about a wife's responsibility to support husband's parliamentary career and allusions to the growing crisis in Germany, with its intendant economic threat. The play sprawls over its two hours, and the dramatic threads are straggly in the second act.

Giesser offers some neat one-liners. Oxford-born Anne's husband studied at Cambridge—"ours is a mixed marriage"; Elaine cuttingly suggests that Damian might take up shooting so that when he next travels north for his leisure, he can "bring home a trophy that we can all enjoy". The cast deliver the Coward-esque waggishness with pithy poise, but Giesser spreads the wit like marmalade, not caviar, and the verbal quips overpower any remnant of Chekhovian yearning. When Anne and Elaine find themselves face-to-face—at the 1924 Paris Olympics!?—they descend into feline sparring of which Wilde's Gwendolyn and Cecily would have been proud.

The cast, without exception, act well. MacInnes bumbles and blathers but wins some sympathy. Glover's tongue is as sharp as a Mitfords'. Turkington conveys the disorientating diminishment of Damian's self-assurance as, for the first time, he is helplessly and hopelessly smitten, haunted by love. Burrow's Anne is aptly gauche, girly and garrulous.

But, here lies an essential weakness. During the first meeting of Chekhov's lovers, Anna is paralysed by shame, "There followed at least half an hour of silence". It is because she is a 'lady'—so different from all the other members of what Dmitri's calls the 'lower race'—that he is struck off balance by love. From the first, she dreads that Dmitri will despise her if she submits to her desire.

Giesser acknowledges this fear in the closing moments, when Anne declares herself to be "so ashamed". But it's far too late to establish the tragic interplay of dignity and desire on which the credibility of the lovers' relationship, and the expressive power of the narrative, depend.

Reviewer: Claire Seymour