

**Latest Issue:**  
Vol. 19 No. 4 Oct 2020

**This Issue:**  
Vol. 1 No. 4 Jul 2002

**All Issues**

**Site Map**

### QLRS sections

Editorial  
Poetry  
Short Stories  
Essays  
Criticism  
Interviews  
Extra Media  
The Acid Tongue  
Letters

### QLRS general

About Us  
News  
Forum  
Links  
Submissions  
Contributors' Notes  
Mailing List  
Advertising  
Site Map  
E-mail

 


## Cherry Blossoms In China

The Toy Factory plays with Chekhov

**By Richard Lord**

*The Morning People*

Written by Chay Yew, adapted from the Anton Chekhov original  
Directed by Goh Boon Teck

Anton Chekhov, an overworked physician who couldn't find the time to heal himself, especially since he was also churning out stacks of published stories and brilliant plays to support himself and his family, was near the end of his tragically short life when he wrote what is arguably the greatest of all Russian plays, *The Cherry Orchard*. Also, let me add, one of the greatest plays ever, in any culture.

Chekhov, by all accounts a most accomplished and dedicated physician, must have known that the tuberculosis racking his body would soon result in his own death. The acrid insights forced by such knowledge undoubtedly infuse his last work, a play which examines a dying culture, a moribund class, and a family running away from the awareness of its own impending demise.

Goh Boon Teck has decided to package Chekhov's autumnal tale in his own inimitable style for this year's Singapore Arts Festival. He also decided to transpose the setting from Czarist Russia to China's Shanxi Province, circa 1934, and enlisted Singaporean playwright Chay Yew, himself a longtime exile from his homeland, to carry out this task.

The product(ion) of these decisions is brilliant. The Shanxi relocation works beautifully. At points, you even find yourself asking whether Chekhov may have miscalculated in setting his play in Russia. A culture where gods and ancestors continue to inhabit a piece of land, where class is fate, where spirits can indeed be felt lurking behind trees and cherry blossoms, is a most fitting locale for the themes of loss of home, or loss of identity tied to that loss of home and social status.

Playwright Chay Yew follows the events and characters of Chekhov's script closely, but he consistently makes such adjustments as needed to suit the tale to northern China and the Thirties. Chay adeptly grafts almost verbatim a number of Chekhov's saddest or funniest lines (in some cases, these are one and the same), while his own text is a potent brew - by turns poetic, stark, robust, straight-forward, and veiled, fleshing out the themes from Chekhov or the pre-revolutionary Chinese setting.

Leading up to the play's sad denouement, Chay and Goh Boon Teck tack on little details which reinforce this chosen period and place while simultaneously invoking wistful Chekhovian elements. For instance, early on, two key characters who have just returned from London (Chay switches from Paris in the original) listen to some favorite music - the warm yet tristesse-steeped strains of Erik Satie's "Gymnopodes." And later, off-hand remarks about Chinese versus British tea or the fickleness of the four seasons again nicely capture this Chekhovian flavor.

Throughout, Chekhov's plot and its slow, skillful build-up to the final inevitable loss remain intact: Madam Siet, the Sinocized version of the original Madame Ranevskaya, has returned from self-chosen exile in the West to the house and the estate where she grew up, married, and began her family. The drowning death of her only son was the ostensible reason for her abrupt

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**Local Content and Its Discontents**  
Richard Lord on second-quarter local theatre.

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Richard Lord on soups, fruits and suits.

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Richard Lord on Wild Rice's *Animal Farm* and Action Theatre's *Mammon Inc.*

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Liana Chua revisits an alternative anthology.

**Black Cat's Misfortune**  
Amos Tang reviews Múm.

**A Forum For All**  
Richard Lord comments on the Arts Fest theatre forum.

**Revel Without A Causeway**  
Richard Lord reviews *Causeway*.

**Opulent Minimalism**  
Cyril Wong reviews the Michael Nyman Band.

**Urgency, Power and Sensibility**  
Francis Phang reviews Compagnie Marie Chouinard.

**Movements in Two-d**  
Francis Phang reviews Nomadi Productions's *Opal-d*.

**Triumph of Form over Content**  
Richard Lord reviews *Le Costume*.

**Walking the Plan K**  
Francis Phang reviews Compagnie Charleroi/Danses - Plan K's *Metapolis - Project 972*.

**Musicians or Music-Gladiators**  
Loh Jee Kean reviews the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra.

departure, but it becomes clear that a profound dissatisfaction with her life in Shanxi was the main reason for leaving. After years of misguided attempts to establish a successful musical career in London, Siet admits to an even deeper dissatisfaction with her existence there and returns to seek the solace of her ancestral home. The cherry orchard of Chekhov's title remains a key element in *The Morning People*: it holds a heightened significance for Madam Siet and is a major part of the draw this remote estate still has for this fading Chinese music star.

Siet brings back two of her daughters, while her essentially decent but feckless brother Xing also returns to join them at the estate, now managed by the one daughter who has stayed behind. But the fate of their ancestral estate is rather clouded since the family can't meet the impending mortgage payments. One plan, to save at least part of the property by selling off large tracts - including the cherry orchard - for housing developments, is rejected out of hand by the entire family. But no viable alternative plan is served up. Instead, the family members, doused in privilege and pampered for much of their lives, simply continue to either dance or languish at the edge of a crater which is so obviously about to give and swallow them into it.

Denial thus becomes the prime operating force in these lives - and also the knot that binds the members of the family together. But this denial is only one aspect of their flawed personalities. The play perks with an underlying dramatic tension, as competing vectors of hope, desire, and despair thrust against each other. And the characters' refusal to fully acknowledge, let alone creatively harness, these other forces prevent them from ever using either hope or desire to achieve their goals.

Now, that's just the text. What the Toy Factory team does to bring this text to the stage is where the magic begins.

Moved out of the cramped confines of the Toy Factory's home base to the spacious stage of the Victoria Theatre, Goh's expansive visual imagination is allowed full run and he displays his talent splendidly. Goh, in tandem with his set designer Gordon Woo, has spurned the doomed clutter of the Moscow Art Theatre's original production set, swinging more in the direction of the poetically minimalist style of Andrei Serban's New York *cause celebre* production of the 1970's. Like Serban's staging, this production presents us with a pageant of pretty pictures, aided in no small part by the side lighting strategies of lighting designer Dorothy Png. But, thankfully, Goh, who originally studied art, goes far beyond assembling pretty pictures, using these marvelous images to render this sad story in a most compelling manner.

However, Goh's most valuable resource in putting together this brilliant production is his large, multi-talented cast. At the centre, Neo Swee Lin's Madam Siet is a beautifully crafted character, winning our affections even as she lets us see how Siet's grace and reckless charm lead inescapably to her own fall.

Neo's real-life husband Lim Kay Siu delivers another wonderful performance as Qiang, the wealthy businessman who grew up as a peasant on the estate and is now as passionate about business and money as he is emotionally desiccated in the sphere of human affairs. Lopakhin, the Chekhovian model for Qiang, is often portrayed as a ruthless capitalist villain, but Lim's Qiang is actually rather sympathetic, a man as sad as he is successful. This Qiang makes money because he just can't make friends - or even deeper connections. And the pain that resides just below his self-assured surface shapes his features as well as his words.

Gerald Chew also turns in a winning performance as Xing, Madam Siet's decent but dullard brother, though a bit more texture and complexity would make this Xing truly sing.

The supporting roles are also handled wonderfully, led by Janice Koh's sadly compelling Mei and Beatrice Chia's Ri, a beautifully limned rendition of an inflated ego thrashing in the confines of an unhappy marriage and a stifling environment. (This egomaniac

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even feels the Shanxi sky pushing down on her.) The gestures, body language and speech inflections all build up this character with exquisite precision. This is by far the best thing I've ever seen Chia do.

Close behind these two prize-worthy support performances are Kevin Murphy and Emma Yong. Murphy here fulfills the strong promise he showed in two shows at the Toy Factory earlier this year with a near flawless portrayal of a young, polished manipulator whose clever predatory instincts long ago devoured any residues of shame, guilt or sentiment he ever had. Emma Yong shines as Soh, Murphy's chief victim. Yong's Soh is a servant girl trying to find her place in a rapidly changing world, which only leaves her emotionally bruised and bewildered, though finally a victim of her own faltering will.

But praise also has to go to Carina Hales, Sheikh Haikel, Rodney Oliveiro, Chua En Lai, and Lee Weng Kee, all of whom contribute handsomely to the ultimate triumph of this show. Where the production hits its one sour note is in the character of Hua, the "once-a-peasant-always-a-peasant" elderly servant, fashioned here by Hossan Leong. (Hua is the Shanxi version of Firs in the Chekhov original.)

Leong calls on his considerable comic skills to milk this character for all the laughs he can snare, but never once is he convincing as an old man. Leong's make-up, which makes him look more like someone who just finished runner-up in a community centre costume party, only accentuates the comic, "we're-just-pretendin'-folks" tenor of his Hua. Sure, it's fun to have Leong's comic relief nuggets sprinkled here and there, but they have none of the bittersweet nature central to the character. More importantly, the truly pathetic nature of this old man is sorely missing, and it's precisely that element which is essential to the play's closing scene.

This is the one area where Goh Boon Teck earns a negative mark: he should either have cast an older actor in this role or insisted on Leong's getting the character correct in every regard. Otherwise, Boon and his entire team deserve flowing praise for giving us a production which recalls the heights of magic theatre is capable of.

The Morning People *plays at the Victoria Theatre on 6-8 Jun 2002 (8pm). Tickets are available from SISTIC.*

QLRS Vol. 1 No. 4 Jul 2002

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[Return to Vol. 1 No. 4 Jul 2002](#)

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