

Bogart's Elegy

By Alisa Solomon

Small Lives/Big Dreams

By Anne Bogart
P.S. 122
(Closed)

In every Chekhov play, there's a character wondering what humankind will be up to in another century or so, or even, as *The Seagull's* Treplev contemplates, in 2000 years. Like Treplev, who presents his predictions in a Maeterlinckian drama, Anne Bogart answers Chekhov's seers in terms of the stage. Transplanting Chekhov's gentry into Beckett's terrain, she depicts fin-de-siècle despair, figuring the end of the modern era as the end of modern drama—and vice versa. Chekhovian fortitude stares into the void—and leaps.

Five actors, each associated with one of Chekhov's major plays, journey in gorgeous tableaux across the stage. A *Cherry Orchard* figure in white sequined sweater and tattered tulle brandishes a shredding parasol as though it might anchor her to a vanishing realm. Others cling to the props of civilization (and of naturalistic drama)—a clock, a china cup and saucer, a small silver samovar, a picnic basket—sentimental objects they seem to have grabbed while packing for a sudden departure. Now and then, they try to settle down for a chat, "I'll have a cup of tea, a dance but

soon a percussive rumble presages the explosion to come.

Earthquake, flood, bombing, strafing—the unsettling soundtrack suggests both natural and man-made disasters. The actors convulse in careful, choreographed sequences. They collapse. They crumble. They compose themselves and carry on. Their procession starts out again. There is no more "plot" than this, and that, in large measure, is the point—as it is in Chekhov, where intimate occasion replaces the eventfulness of heroic drama.

But here, text and character are deflected from the grand teleologies of traditional theater, too. Fragmented, refusing the logic of linear narrative, Chekhov's dialogue and dramatic personae are yanked away from coherence. As a bare stage supplants the box set, so allusive imagery takes the place of psychology. Those expecting an interpretation, or even a Wooster Group-like deconstruction, will be disappointed; Bogart doesn't *do* Chekhov, any more than, say, Coltrane *does* Rodgers and Hammerstein. Rather, she riffs into her own inventive world, where Chekhov is no longer possible, except by oblique reference.

Each actor recites lines from one of the Chekhov plays. At first, they not only don't talk to each other, they speak almost against sense. "Tea!" squeaks an actor with a pinched, three-syllable lilt, and then adds in a devolving

growl, "would be nice." Eventually, their phonemes assemble themselves into sentences, and the actors seem to converse. But their dialogue remains more disjunctive than discursive; connections come as comic surprises.

As much as Bogart posits modern drama's incompatibility with contemporary consciousness, she clears the way for restoring its power by peeling off layers of sentimental approaches. Draining language of emotion and dialogue of objective, she de-Stanislawskiizes Chekhov. The startling result is a formalism full of feeling: this is the most emotional Bogart production I've ever seen, pulsating with mourning, yearning, the refusal of futility.

Part of the power comes from her use of a continuous sound score, combining music from a dozen periods with windy whooshes and stormy outbursts. Most important, the sound is often hissy and scrappy—melodies stuck in a groove like people in spiritual inertia. Once in a while, we hear a record jerk and jump, as though that moribund vinyl is gasping for life. The grating scratch comes to sound like the mysterious breaking string at the end of *The Cherry Orchard*, at once vibrating with echoes of a world gone by and with sounds we have not yet learned to hear.

Like Chekhov's plays, *Small Lives/Big Dreams* ends with a prolonged scene of leave-taking.



Anne Bogart: an arduous and challenging leap of faith

But in Bogart's elegy, the departure suggests a return to her beginning. Dazzled with images of the inadequacy yet necessity of

Chekhov's vision, we're the ones left saying to ourselves, in sadness and with a little hope, "They're gone. Yes. They're gone." ■