

Theatrical Analysis: Liminality and Carnival in Tg STAN's Production of *The Cherry Orchard*

Maha Alatawi

Ph.D. School of English, Drama, and Film, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

Abstract: This paper presents a detailed analysis of the Belgian production of the English version of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* performed for the Dublin Theatre Festival (DTF) in 2015. It is divided into two (2) major parts. Following the trajectory of their meaning-making process through the study of all theatrical elements in the making of a coherent performance, the first part is guided by the theories of McAuley (1999) and Pavis (2013) as well as their proposed schemas of performance analysis. The more-thematic second part emphasises on the manifestations of the notions of liminality and carnival as proposed by Turner (1967) and Bakhtain (1984). Because Michael Frayn demonstrated a complex understanding of Chekhov's (1986) work and his characters in his introduction of the volume, his translation of the play is selected for textual references.

Keywords: Analysis, Ritual, Carnival, Liminality, Tg Stan, the Cherry Orchard.

1. INTRODUCTION

In adopting a principle of Gaye McAuley that meaning doesn't reside magically in the production but it is the result of the analyst's interaction with it, this paper is divided into two (2) major parts. The first part, which is guided by the theories of McAuley (1999) and Pavis (2013) as well as their proposed schemas of performance analysis, is technical. Following the trajectory of their meaning-making process through the study of all theatrical elements in the making of a coherent performance, a detailed analysis of the Belgian production of the English version of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* performed for the Dublin Theatre Festival (DTF) in 2015 is presented.

The more-thematic second part emphasises on the manifestations of the notions of liminality and carnival as proposed by Turner (1967) and Bakhtain (1984). Because Michael Frayn demonstrated a complex understanding of Chekhov's (1986) work and his characters in his introduction of the volume, his translation of the play is selected for textual references.

2. THE CHERRY ORCHARD: AN INNOVATIVE VERSION OF A CLASSIC PLAY

The Cherry Orchard, a play adapted by the Belgian company Tg STAN for DTF, is about unforgettable memories, revolutionary ideas and the prospects of economic, political and social progress. The story revolves around a financially deteriorating family at a time when Russia was at the verge of a significant change. Tg STAN's production of the play, which it performed in Dutch, English and French whilst on a tour, has been described by many reviewers as innovative and different. Frayn, in the introduction to his translation of the play, states that it is "the comedy of inertia and helplessness in the face of a truly desolating loss" [ix] (Chekhov, 1986). The company successfully captured Frayn's sense of the play in their contemporary interpretation of Chekhov's (1986). Tg STAN innovatively demonstrated new features in terms of performers' agency and playfulness, something one would not expect in a realistic play by Chekhov (1986); these elements were incorporated in order to achieve a particular resonance. Elaborating on their use of costumes, Vercruyssen (2015) who plays Lopakhin in the play explained that "the costumes certainly aren't 'époque'...we never do that, because we don't want to create a museum show, but try to confront the text with our own time, ... so we try to use elements of the time, but in general the costumes certainly are contemporary, or rather 'timeless'". Although the company's staging of the play preserves the tragic core of the story, the vital humour and sarcasm were particularly

exhibited through direct communication with the audience and the extraordinary use of narration in the play. And the O'Reilly Theatre provided a convenient stage space which is utilitarian for such purposes; it was well-suited to guarantee full engagement with the play in addition to the performers' unusual and energising occupation of audience space in a thoughtful attempt to break apart the illusion of actor-audience boundaries.

With the absence of any directing authority, the actors were granted agency to contribute to the performance, which violates the naturalistic nature of the text and other productions. Pavis (2013) introduced the term 'performise' to rename contemporary *mise en scene* in order to signal the dependence on the creative agency of performers and audiences. Aspects of *mise en scene*, which in Pavis' (2013) view are abstract but not concrete notion, were deconstructed in this production. Walgrave (2015), Tg STAN's Lighting Designer, asserted that "it is really a collective creation...we started reading the text around the table". One of the most intriguing aspects about the performance is the visibility not only of the stage but also the actors. In another attempt to establish connection with the audience, even before the play began, the actors wandered through the space as the audience entered the auditorium. This enhanced feelings of a much welcomed reception and respect. Not only did such an endeavour encourage the audience's engagement in the performance, it also encouraged their participation in the play, which further enriched the theatre-going experience. They directly addressed the audience during the performance and asked the audience whether they were ready for them to start the show. Stijn Van Opstal, who played both Yepikhodov and Firs, also performed the role of a narrator with parody and humour. He directly addressed the audience as he changed characters and sometimes informed them about incidents happening backstage such as the sound of carriages, which was inaudible for the audience and the arrival of the family. Although this kind of narration can create dissonance, it fitted well within the performance and in correspondence with other elements in order to break theatrical illusion.



Figure 1: Act 1 -Image of Charlotta's First Magic Trick

Source: YouTube Clip of Live Performance

The set was characterised by a number of changes to signal the transitions of acts and events. Despite the slow pace which can be sometimes disruptive, the actors' change through the scenes by moving the furniture around to meet the demand for more scenic realism was rather enjoyable. In the second act, the tables that were placed in rows and small stools were put on top to create the illusion of an outside setting contributed to the physical reality of the space and avoided a lengthy change-over. Some objects were used to reveal distinct features of the characters. McAuley (1999) indicated that objects on the stage work to execute dialogue. He added that "Chekhov's (1986) habit of giving certain characters a particular object that comes to constitute a kind of signature for that character is equally compelling to actors" (203). Whilst dancing during the party scene, Pischick turned Ranyevskaya upside down such that she started to drop coins, which is very reflective of her spendthrift nature. To reveal her ambivalent existence, Charlotta was seen floating, carried by balloons, which was another fascinating contribution from Tg STAN to the play, beside other live magic tricks. Some other objects, for example the bouquet, were used to show Yepikhodov's clumsiness as he constantly dropped and stumbled upon things. Objects can also be used to convey information on social and cultural contexts and status. McAuley (1999) drew upon

Arjun Appadurai's social life of things and of Igor Kopytoff's term cultural biography. The book case provided the perfect example in this play, particularly through Gayev's emotional remark and suggestion to celebrate its centenary, "I salute your existence ... directed towards the shining ideals of goodness and of truth" [299] (Chekhov 1986). At the end of the play, the furniture and all other belongings were piled on the left side of the stage to simultaneously create a sense of emptiness and to indicate the beginning of a new life at the place. And aside references in dialogue to the orchard, no visible sign was shown on the stage.

Lighting was effectively used to incorporate coherency into the whole play. Whether to the cherry orchard or the river, there was always a reference to the outside in the play and to the inside of the estate itself as well. During the party scene, the large glass windows were moved to create a sense of this inside-outside reference between the ball room where stronger lights were directed and the dance took place, and the rather dimly-lit front room where the conversation took place. As Walgrave (2015) explained, lighting, which appeared to be disco-like, was used to amplify that sense. As the music during the party was not the Jewish orchestra they were referring to and therefore the dancing, lighting "with some irony would follow that idea." Commenting on the performers' full occupation of the stage, Walgrave (2015) indicated that lighting was employed "in a way that would allow them that liberty".



Figure 2: Lighting, Design and Dance in Act 3

(Source: YouTube Clip of Live Performance)

3. IMAGES OF RITUAL AND CARNIVAL: MARGINALITY AND ANTICIPATIONS OF CHANGE

Drawing on Turner's (1967) conceptualisations on liminality, the play can be dubbed a good example of such a notion. As explained by Gennep (1960), rites of passage are divided into three phases: separation, transition and aggregation. The first phase marks the beginning of the process where the individual is detached from a previous status in the social structure. The transitional or liminal period is the state of confusion and in-betweens since it lacks the characteristics of both the first and the last phases. Then comes reincorporation in which the individual is being identified within another social group (94). From Gennep's (1960) work, Turner (1967) developed his concerns in ritual - both in tribal communities as well as the contemporary world - with a focus on the second stage (the concept of liminality and the state of "betwixt and between"). The distinction between structure and anti-structure or *communitas* (liminal period) is at the heart of his argument on ritual as social drama operating to resolve conflicts and schism (Bigger, 2009). He distinguished between serious and playful liminality, which he called *liminoid* and includes theatre. But performances, as Bigger (2009) claimed, can also be a transformative and galvanised action. Below, I focus on the notions of ritual and carnival as they appear in Tg STAN's production of the play.

Chekhov (1986) appeared to embrace an idea of being in a marginal space as all his characters are trapped in between class transitions, unresolved relationships and infinite complacency. For the purpose of this study, I focus on Ranyevskaya and her daughters on one side, and Lopakhin and Trofimov on the other side as they represent two contrasting positions. Chekhov (1986) explored the indeterminate temporary phases in human experience in the play by picturing the life of a family who has been denied the privileges of their previous life and currently passes through a ritual-like, unstructured mid-life crisis. Their previous life is now a series of memories of happiness and sorrow - Ranyevskaya remembers her happy childhood in the estate and the tragic death of her mother and son. The idea of ambiguity is clear in the family's uncertainty and inability to make decisions. She is currently outside the realm of a culturally and socially defined status, but still denies that by throwing parties and spending money.

On the one hand, Lopakhin and Varya, gorgeously played by the Russian actress Evgenia Brendes, are mutually in love but unable to take their relationship to the next level. Lopakhin's hesitancy to propose is perceived by Varya as being influenced by his yearning for more financial gains. Since he appears to be a secure and successful businessman, it seems he is the only one who has passed the liminal stage and now is identified with the rising mercantile class. And on the other hand, there is Anya and Trofimov whose philosophised relationship is "above such things as love" [321] (Chekhov, 1986). Both relationships remain betwixt and between during the course of the play. Chekhov (1986), at some point, admitted his worries regarding Trofimov as indicated by Frayn, "His other anxiety," he says, is "... the somewhat unfinished state of the student" (ixvi). The character of Trofimov ironically fulfils a double role. First, he is seen as a man of fine speeches and honourable convictions as, for instance, he talks about the effect of owning serfs on the family and secondly is "the idea of him being the unchanging student type" [ixvi] (Chekhov, 1986).

The estate is also temporally caught between a lively past and a mysterious future. The life of the family is tied to the house and the entire action takes place within that space as the two are constantly being linked, "Oh my dear orchard, ... My life, my youth, my happiness" [352] (Chekhov, 1986). More interesting is the metaphorical instances elicited from the characters' liminal situations in the diegetic world of the play. In studying ritual symbolism and social structure among the Ndembu, Turner (1967b) found out that "Each kind of ritual may be regarded as a configuration of symbols" (48). The play is charged with symbolism. Throwing parties is an aristocratic ritual that is emphasised by the family's party on the day of the auction. The chaotic status of that party symbolises the history of transformation in the late 19th century struggling Russia. Moreover, the play represents a harvest ritual that stands for the rite of passage of Russia as Trofimov once commented, "All Russia is our orchard" [322] (Chekhov, 1986). Hence, the cutting of the cherry orchard, identified with ownerships of serfs and land, announces the end of feudalism and the rise of a new economic and social system. This fact is also presented through Firs's death, which is typical to the notion of the carnival and which, in a symbolic sense, allowed for the rebirth of a new life. .

As Turner (1967a) put it, "their condition [those in a liminal stage] is one of and reintegrated ambiguity, paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories" (97). The play serves as a prototype of social, spatial and temporal liminality. It describes transitional phases in a rite of passage in the life of several characters who have been separated from a prior position but yet to be reassigned a new social role within the same society.

Equally important in the same context are the notions of carnival and reversals. Drawing on Bakhtain's (1984) carnival theory, a carnival celebrates the temporary suspension of social ranks and positions of power. It is a feast of change and renewal as it enforces the process of replacability and reversal. The carnival is associated to a wider theory on the culture of laughter. Lachmann (1988) explained that laughter transcends the physicality of the situation to possess universal symbolism that is collective and "directed at the world whole" (123). The subversion of feudalism and the rise of new economic and social systems, as signs of great social and political changes, make the play an exemplar of Bakhtainian carnival. Two apparently festive moments in it demonstrate the notion of the carnival and reversal. First, the celebratory mood of the so-called ball when hierarchical orders are suspended by means of the liberation of low orders as represented by servants and clerks such as Yasha, Dunyasha and Yepichodov. This disruption of aristocratic norms is described by Firs with his comment:

"When we gave a ball in the old days we used to have generals dancing here, now we had barons, we had admirals. Now we send for the postmaster and the stationmaster, and even they are none too eager" [332] (Chekhov, 1986).

Ranyevskaya dances with almost everyone. In this particular production, Yepichodov was spinning with her between his hands in a very carnivalesque image of restrictions being overlooked and boundaries being surpassed by those who at

some point are not allowed “past the front hall” [322] (Chekhov, 1986) All the characteristics of festival viz. dancing, singing and drinking indicative of Bakhtainian carnival, are present. Moreover, the dance was extraordinarily choreographed which enhanced the idea of equality and classlessness, the ultimate goal behind carnival practices. During this time, Yepichodov inappropriately speaks to Varya, in a way that undermines her authority over him, to the extent that she threatens him with a stick. This is one image of the binary opposition of work versus idleness emphasised throughout the play as Varya accuses Yepichodov of negligence. Thus, the party scene becomes a topsy-turvy world of inverted hierarchies.

The second image is the dramatic status reversal when Lopakhin announces his ownership of the orchard, which can also be a moment of crowning and discrowning, “I have bought the estate where my father and grandfather were slaves, where they weren’t allowed even into the kitchens” [338] (Chekhov, 1986).. A reversal of mood accompanies this moment as the champagne served to celebrate his new property is rejected. This climax initiates the replacement of the aristocrats by the once marginalised and oppressed, and the establishment of a new structure on the debris of the old one. That is the impetus of the carnivalesque. Signs of change are first foreseen by Lopakhin and Trovimoff. Although they represent two contradictory views of materialism and intellectualism, from the beginning of the play, they appraise and predict change and reformation. Lopakhin anticipates the emergence of a new class and encourages the conversion of the cherry orchard from an old and deserted place into “happy and rich and luxuriant” summer houses [298] (Chekhov, 1986). Trofimov, on the other hand, talks of advancing humankind which can only be attained by hard work. As Lachmann (1988) put it, “he sees the anticipation of another, utopian world in which anti-hierarchism, relativity of values, questioning of authority, openness, joyous anarchy, and the ridiculing of all dogmas hold sway, a world in which syncretism and a myriad of differing perspectives are permitted” (118). The characters are susceptible to change in that they create their utopia, their own imagined alternative reality. Anya, for example, proposes a temporary escape from the actual situation through her inflated language - utopian promises of a happier future that includes a new cherry orchard. The country itself is at the onset of a dramatic change in its history.

Gash (1993) claimed that there is a problematic relationship between carnivalesque plays and linear narrative (107). The play ends with the characters departing the house, an equivocal life awaiting them especially for characters such as Charlotta, Yasha, and Dunyasha.

4. CONCLUSION

“The truth in this piece is modest, simple, indirect; it is rooted in the familiar rhythms of our lives.” (Tg STAN 2015)

Walgrave (2015) explained that the actors were playing Chekhov’s (1986) and they took the text seriously, but they prioritised performance so that the audience would see a Chekhovian play and at the same time recognise the Tg STAN’s contribution to it. The company, maintaining Chekov’s (1986) powerful themes, manipulated the text in terms of narration and double roles of characters as well as various theatrical elements such as lighting, synchronised dance and contemporary costumes. What really stands out in this performance is the exhibition of magic tricks and the presence of characters as they never depart the stage space even when changing costumes. This version of the play generally reflect the Tg STAN’s policy since it was founded in 1989; the emphasis is placed on themselves as “they wished to blow up the illusion” (Tg Stan 2001-2015). Thus, they give an example of Pavis’s (2013) decentred postmodern *mise en scene*. It is important to notice that Pavis (2013) does not undermine the role of the director, but rather he assigned him new tasks. Tg STAN’s playful and experiential approach to a classic play such as *The Cherry Orchard* helps to revive a historical literary canon that can be performed repeatedly on several occasions.

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