

# 'Cherry Orchard' ...

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are indeed ludicrous. While at first the sale of the county seat is regarded by them as a great tragedy, yet does their attitude toward the transaction warrant all the misery it has caused?

Gayeff, in the last act, according to Chekhov's stage directions, says "gaily": "Really, everything is all right now. Before the cherry orchard was sold we were all worried and upset, but afterwards when the question was finally and irrevocably settled we all calmed down and even felt cheerful. I am a bank official now—a financier—cannot off the red—and say what you like, Lyuba, you certainly look much better than you used to."

To this his sister replies: "Yes, my nerves are much better, that's true. I'm sleeping well." This is quite the opposite reaction people would have in a tragedy to an event which forms the dramatic core of the play.

MUCH OF THE misinterpretation of "The Cherry Orchard" as a tragedy is caused mainly by a misunderstanding of the nature of a comic character. A "comic" character is generally expected to keep the audience in fits of laughter, but that they do not always do. No one would deny that Falstaff is essentially a comic character, yet his fall from favor is one of the most moving incidents in "Henry IV."

While the characters in "The Cherry Orchard" arouse much compassion and sympathy in the spectator, this should not blind him to the fact that, excepting perhaps the seventeen-year-old Anya, the nature of each character possesses an unmistakable ludicrous streak which makes them essentially comic characters.

THE SALE of the cherry orchard does not form the main theme of the play. The instant its owners appear on the stage it is quite apparent that they are not going to save it. The dramatic interest in the play is then centered on Lopahin, the orchard's future owner.

Loopahin is a land speculator; what is more, he is "a tender-hearted man." But he waves his hands about and is full of himself as a successful business man, not realizing that his success has killed the finest trait of his character; it has removed the artist in him.

He walks through life like a blind man, keeping to the one straight line which he hopes will take him to even greater success. Nothing can persuade him that it really leads to failure, the failure of a man who is actually deeply sensitive to beauty but whose obsession with worldly success makes him into a destroyer of beauty.

IT IS THE absence of a conflict between the artist and the materialist in Lopahin that makes him a typically comic figure.

In his relations to the "cry-baby" Varya and his attitude towards the estate's owners another side of the "comic" element in Lopahin's character appears—the serf in him. In the fine drawing room of the Gayeff country home he can't help feeling that he is just a country yokel. He has plenty of money, but

at heart he is still a common peasant.

EVEN HIS return to the Gayeff estate is comic, almost slapstick. As he enters, Varya hits him over the head with a stick. It is as if Varya, who intended the blow for Epikhodoff, wanted to remind the new "squire" of his childhood beatings. When Varya asks if she has hurt him, he replies: "Oh, no, not at all. But there's going to be an enormous bump on my head for all that."

All through the play Fiers is denounced for using an "objectionable word." The word, which Yasha dislikes primarily because it fits him so perfectly, has to be translated as "ne're-do-well," "good for nothing" and even as "a job lot."

THE WORD is one which Chekhov himself often used during the last ten years of his life—"nedotyopa" best translated perhaps as "duffer" which is a person without any practical ability or capacity, or, generally, a stupid or foolish person." In his notebook Chekhov gave Varya, "the perfect fool," the family name of Nedotyopina.

Gayeff, Mrs. Ranexskaya and Yasha are all "duffers" by nature. And, too, so is Fiers, whose inane loyalty to his masters is perhaps the most farcical, yet the most touching, element in the play. "My life has slipped by as though I hadn't lived," he mumbles at the end of the play, and those words might well be used as his own epitaph. A comic line, "Oh, you—duffer!" are his last words, addressed to himself.

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