

film

AFT's 'Three Sisters,' 'Butley' both successful

Anton Pavlovitch Chekhov would have rolled in the aisles over the American Film Theater's presentation of his play, "Three Sisters." That's a compliment; Chekhov was reprimanded more than once by serious directors for laughing hysterically at the ludicrous self-inflicted ennui of his characters. Director Laurence Olivier has succeeded in achieving that critical balance of the characterizations by keeping the dialogue going at such a rapid, normal conversational clip that it all seems very interesting. Until, that is, the viewer is confronted with a wide angle pan of objectivity and realizes that nothing is being said.

Which is what the play-film's about. The basic plot concerns three orphaned sisters and their brother, all still living in their father's mansion and none capable of finding satisfaction in life. Marriage is no solution, either. Masha (Joan Plowright) married her revered school teacher when she was eighteen, but now, about six years later, discovers he was no brilliant or even stimulating being. Even a brief period of romance with visiting Colonel Vershinin (Alan Bates) is doomed because the troops are eventually transferred.

Everyone else is sorely mismatched, too. Olga (Jeanne Watts) gave up the unequal struggle years ago and resigns herself "to serving those less fortunate than ourselves" through teaching and as a stock old maid. Irina (Louise Purnell) is the youngest sister who limply tackles the question of whether she should marry an old dottering baron (Ronald Pickup) and be wealthy and secure or whether she should wait until Mr. Right comes along. Yea, even genius brother Andrei mindlessly marries an intellectually and socially inferior miss who turns from a sweet young thing to queen bitch. Cheery.

The only reasonable content person is Dr. Chebutikin, played by Olivier himself. The doctor is the stereotyped wizened mediator and protector, counselor and father to all. And then there's a household of servants—mostly character roles—and all the visiting military.

Acting performances were consistently good, but Olivier's and wife Joan Plowright's were the finest—the most consistent within and without their characters. Bates lacked the necessary ardor.

"Three Sisters" was a more overt stage production than any of its American Film Theater predecessors. Settings were not sparse, but one can easily imagine more grandeur possible had this been done in a purely cinematic context. Backdrops were openly recognizable; one could almost discern the splatter. But the production was very worthwhile. It is so easy to either sympathize or criticize the bored plights of Chekhov's characters until you remember the last time you got depressed and why.

As subjective was "Three Sisters," "Butley," the AFT successor, is objective.

"Butley," featuring Alan Bates in the title role, is the story of English literature professor Ben Butley and his total inability to relate to people. The conflicts are between Butley's preoccupation with personal academic pursuit, his physical heterosexual marriage and his stifled homosexual bent.

Butley at first appears as a disheveled, alcoholic, chain-smoking intellect probing the depths of Beatrix Potter nursery rhymes on the subway. His littered, disorganized office complements this image. In the office Butley becomes the bane of everyone's existence: fellow professor Edna Shaft (Jessica Tandy) leaves him in tears when he admits supporting her long critical student in 30 years of teaching; students leave his office frustrated and bewildered when he refuses, forgets about and makes a savage mockery of tutorials, and office-mate Joey Keyston (Richard O'Callaghan) is harassed endlessly.

Ben Butley's personal life is no less at odds than his professional one of "intellectual nausea" (as film director Harold Pinter puts it). He is currently separated from his wife, Anne (Susan Engel). Although he is very cool, rude and chiding when Anne visits him at his university office, Ben is enraged when Anne proposes formal divorce, which would both free him and would allow her to marry his former best friend. When she questions his argument against divorce, Ben is unable to offer any reasons for his adamant rejection of the idea. Anne is Ben's one close human contact and his daughter is the lone confirmation of intimate union; divorce would mean total severance.

Marriage is not Butley's only social problem. Despite his professed

heterosexuality Butley battles his compulsive preference of men companions. He is venomously jealous of Joey's relationship with his lover, Reg Nuttall (Michael Byrne). In his vain attempts to join Joey and Reg for dinner and then, upon rejection, to probe and antagonize their gay relationship, Butley only reinforces his suppressed desire to be a part of Joey's homosexual life.

By the end of the movie Anne has gone to live with her new fiancée; Butley has disowned all his tutorials, and Joey has not only moved into another office in the university, but has moved out of the house he and Butley shared and moved in with Reg. And Ben Butley's alone with his cigarettes, scotch and Beatrix Potter.

Human-intellectual, self-inflicted castration is Butley's plight. The viewer is torn between pity and he-did-it-to-himself sorts of emotions. Why Butley's absolute denial of everyone and everything? Qui sais?

Assuming Bates' performance in the film version of "Butley" was consistent with his performance in the stage production on Broadway, it is simple to see why he won the "Tony" award for it. He is stupendous in the role. From his introductory shaving nick to the verbal and emotional destruction of everyone around him—and eventually, himself—Bates never deviated from his immaculate personification of the estranged Ben Butley.

Michael Keyston was effective as the tyrannized former student and office-mate who wants only to be left to himself and his private life with his lover.

Jessica Tandy epitomized the starved, old regiment English professor. She was hilarious as the foil who always burst into Butley's office at the wrong time, in the middle of one of many tense confrontations therein.

So that was "Butley." Now, one thing I forgot to tell you last time I expounded on the virtues of The American Film Theater: Although admission was originally to be by season pass only, because the National Theater in Eugene did not sell out, tickets can be purchased at show time. The price is \$3 for matinees (2 p.m.) and \$4 for evening programs (8 p.m.). Next on the agenda is Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson's "Lost in the Stars," to be shown at the National Theater Monday and Tuesday (One matinee and evening performance each day), March 11 and 12.

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