



—Peter Emery photo

JAY SMITH AND MAX PLANINC

Studio Theatre fails to provide unity to Turgenev's comedy of country manners

If a 'family' consists of an aristocratic bored woman, her dull husband, a 'friend' with whom she flirts but does not really love, an adolescent girl and assorted other relatives and hangers-on, the situation becomes so intolerable that something must happen.

If an unsuspecting and handsome tutor enters the family's employ, one thing is sure to be learned: the women find out what it is to love. The psychological intricacies of this love are the theme of the Studio Theatre production of *A Month in the Country*.

Lee Royce plays Natalia, the wife; David McCulley is Rakitin, her 'friend'; Charles Parker plays Yslaev, her husband; Nancy Beatty is Vera, the young ward; and Meldrum Tuck is Beliaev, the tutor.

The temperamental rules Turgenev's play. One moment, Natalia is mocking and restless, venting her dissatisfaction on all who approach her. The next sees her "soft and still, like a summer evening after a thunderstorm."

Natalia is a creature of the moment. Her life is a series of encapsulated vignettes, each with its own motivations and its own mood. By being both imperial and exquisite, she charms those around her into raising or falling with her momentary whims.

Nothing seems more typically Russian or more difficult for the actor than these feelings which change with the rapidity of the summer storm. Director Frank Bueckert's greatest challenge in this production has been the shaping of his young actors to create this emotional evanescence.

Unfortunately, his success also has an evanescent quality.

Mrs. Royce's role is by far the most demanding. At times she manages it with great finesse. But most often, the sudden shifts in her actions seem strained, as if they were not completely natural to her.

Nancy Beatty is one of the pleasures of the play. She is winsome and shows a rare sense of comedy. Only late in the play, when her role demands a maturation, does she falter ever so slightly.

Mr. Tuck's performance is equally delight-

ful. He alone manages consistently fine transitions in mood.

The otherwise unobtrusive difficulties of these actors in achieving the required mood-changes are made glaring by David McCulley's performance.

Mr. McCulley has shown us in previous plays that he can act. But I suspect he has grossly misapprehended his role. Rakitin is a witty cynic hiding a sympathetic and authentic nature; Mr. McCulley's Rakitin is a stuffed shirt whose momentary passions and concern for honour seems to be mere affectations.

Only once, when he traps Beliaev into revealing love of Natalia, does he show a real command of his role.

In spite of these difficulties, the play has many crystallized, almost perfect moments. Catherine Jackson, as Natalia's mother-in-law and Jay Smith, as an aged and foolish suitor are tremendously funny.

Max Planinc, although he tends to overdo his role of the Doctor to the point of caricature, still has many good scenes. And much of the action between Vera and Beliaev possesses the coy balance Turgenev intended.

But each of the characters in the play remains physically isolated. Rarely do they touch one another, and when they do the touch is most often another part of the game with which they amuse themselves. If Beliaev and Natalia touch, we can be sure we are seeing them embark on a new impossibility. The sensual is always implied in the play, but rarely acted.

Designer Gwen Keatley is to be commended. Her costumes, particularly those of the women, epitomize light and air, and the leaves and sunlight of her background are an exceptionally fine lighting effect.

Russian drama, and particularly Turgenev's drama, places almost impossible demands on the actor. This play is obviously beyond the abilities of Studio Theatre; but in view of the Theatre's purpose on this campus, it is certainly justified in and indeed to be commended for the attempt.

—Shirley Swartz

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