

UNCLE VANYA: PRESS RESPONSES

Almeida (2016)

Chekhov in a new adaptation created by Robert Icke

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THE OBSERVER

Susannah Clapp

★★★★

Robert Icke has been giving the British stage electric shocks for the past three years. Particularly with his new creations of old texts. He has said he thinks of adaptation as being “like using a foreign plug. You are in a country where your hairdryer won’t work when you plug it straight in. You have to find the adaptor which will let the electricity of now flow into the old thing and make it function.”

Icke’s approach, as writer and director, might also be thought of as blood transfusion. This is what he gave us with his galvanic 1984 and with his revelatory, split-to-pieces *Oresteia*. This is what – less shatteringly but no less convincingly – he delivers with his finely scored, highly tuned *Uncle Vanya*. Chekhov surely would have approved of this modern rewiring. He spoke up for a theatre in which life might be seen “exactly as it is, and people as they are. Not on stilts.”

Icke’s transformation is thorough-going. The action takes place some time now or in the recent past in an unspecified anglophone country house. The temptress wears a leather jacket; the anxious man fiddles with a Rubik’s cube. The dialogue swings easily into everyday life, shedding the sugary overlay that has often coated English Chekhov productions. There is more sluggishness than decorative languor. Characters are called by the English equivalent of their Russian names. Vanya becomes Uncle Johnny. Most revealingly, the name of John’s sister, the dead woman who is an anchor for so many memories, is translated as Faith.

Icke’s most far-reaching intervention is a kind of repunctuation. Hildegard Bechtler’s design puts the action on a raised platform with pillars at the corners. A nightmare four-poster. Gradually, at first so slowly that I thought something was floating in my eye, this swivels round. Characters are adrift. Time is drizzling away. There is no fixed point of view, no heroine who might focus events. Everything is seen from more than one angle. Or sometimes only half-seen. Those pillars partially obscure the view: that is irritating but it also makes a point.

A woozy motion, with moments of high intensity. This goes to the heart of Chekhov. Again and again an episode is snapped into high definition. Ian Dickinson’s sound design is so precise that you hear the click of Nanny’s knitting needles. Richard Lumsden’s angry Cartwright (Telegin) plays his guitar, falteringly, repetitively, never getting beyond a few chords, always stopping to retune. Suddenly he witnesses lovemaking and his strumming comes together in a tune.

The soliloquies have a new urgency. Characters come down from that four-poster to deliver them close to the audience. It is as if they are tearing confessions out of themselves. Paul Rhys’s rumpled John is exquisitely ambiguous. His disappointment may be that of a once promising man, or of a man lamenting his lack of promise. As the siren, Elena, Vanessa Kirby unravels like a ball of wool. She is poised between calculation and uncomprehending sensuality. Jessica Brown Findlay creates an utterly new Sonya. Unwashed hair, baggy trousers, arms constantly behind her back as if to stop them reaching out for her love. In the small part of the intellectual matriarch, Susan Wooldridge is so ramrod that she makes you believe you hear her lifting up her forbidding eyebrows.

TIME OUT

Andrzej Lukowski

★★★★★

Almeida golden boy Robert Icke does it again.

Anyone who says boredom is boring is an idiot. People fight because they're bored. People fuck because they're bored. People despair because they're bored. Boredom is the gateway drug to the emotional hard stuff – the joint of boredom leads to the crack cocaine of self-destruction.

Exhibit A: Anton Chekhov, one of the greatest writers of all time, whose plays exclusively concern people mouldering away despondently in the Russian provinces. Most directors prefer to present it all as a sort of bittersweet melancholy, but in this sublime new take on 'Uncle Vanya' from the Almeida's resident genius Robert Icke, the full impact of the characters' boredom is exquisitely realised.

Not that Icke's 'Vanya' is boring – far from it. But his production reaches its hefty three hour 15 minute running time via a series of silences so knife-edge-tense they might have caused Pinter to faint, as the play's population of jaded smalltown dreamers seethe and smoulder and stew while Hildegard Bechtler's wooden frame set slowly spins on its axis.

Icke made his name with his ultra-high-tech Orwell adaptation '1984' and sealed it with last year's similarly sophisticated 'Oresteia'. But his more naturalistic, less tricky 'Vanya' shows how good he is stripped down, with actors and emotions to the fore. His democratic adaptation gives equal weight to four of the characters: Paul Rhys's sensitive John (ie, the Vanya of this modern setting); Jessica Brown Findlay in a vanity-free performance as his dowdy niece Sonya; Vanessa Kirby as her beautiful but desperately unhappy (and misunderstood) stepmother Elena; and Tobias Menzies as Michael, the charismatic, progressive local doctor slowly losing grip on his convictions.

All four are phenomenal as they steam away in the pressure cooker of Icke's production, in which tension stokes and stokes in the precision rotation of the set, only occasionally relieved by a moment of drunken mania or an illicit snog. We never see the beginning of these people's problems – and we certainly never see the end of them.

Perhaps the main achievement of the production, cast and Icke's heartfelt, occasionally blackly comic adaptation is to create empathy: nobody is good or bad or an idiot here. Rhys's John was not wrong to be a decent guy; Kirby's Elena isn't a monster for being ill-suited to country life; Menzies's jadedness doesn't undermine the good Michael has done; Sonya's love for Michael may be hopelessly miscalculated but she may yet prove the only one with the practical skills to survive this life.

And that's what it's about, I suppose: life, in all its mundanity, heightened into something remarkable. Or maybe Chekhov and Icke's skilfully wrought frame is a reminder that there never was anything more remarkable than life itself..

EVENING STANDARD

Henry Hitchings

★★★★★

Robert Icke's interpretation of Chekhov's classic portrait of frustration and despair is slowly beguiling — and in its later stages becomes magical. Its location, never specified, certainly isn't 19th-century Russia, and the names have been anglicised — Uncle Vanya is now Uncle Johnny. But while uprooting the characters from their original setting may make the reasons for their crushing boredom less easy to grasp, the play's emotional density is intact.

These are people haunted by dreams even as they're crumpled by failure, and there are richly detailed performances throughout. Paul Rhys brings a brilliantly awkward intensity to Johnny the estate manager, and Jessica Brown Findlay captures the fragile hopefulness of his niece Sonya. Hilton McRae conveys the dry self-regard of their absentee landlord, and there's a thrilling tension between his young wife Elena — an eloquent study by Vanessa Kirby of glamour pickled in ennui — and the local doctor (a broodingly charismatic Tobias Menzies).

At nearly three and a half hours, with three intervals, this is a deliberately unhurried production. The mood is defined by Hildegard Bechtler's rotating set, which looks like a giant four-poster bed — apt for a drama full of languid longing and cyclical unhappiness, though it creates some tricky sight lines. Icke's updating of the text contains a single jarring line about sharia law, but is keenly attuned to Chekhov's vision, savouring both its melancholy and its dark comedy.

MAIL ON SUNDAY

Georgina Brown

★★★★★

Chekhov's masterpiece about unrequited love, lives squandered and characters stuck in hopeless ruts has surely never taken so long as it does in Robert Icke's radical, new contemporary version — which he also directs — with three intervals when one would have been plenty.

But never has a production been more carefully considered, more heartbreaking, more expressive. There's not a samovar in sight. But Icke has gone further, anglicising the Russian names, so Vanya is now John; the doctor, Astrov, is Michael.

And the setting is the sleepy English countryside. Hildegard Bechtler's wallless set, like a giant four-poster bed, spins clockwise, very slowly, revealing the characters from every angle — just as Chekhov does — and amplifying the way time is hanging very heavily.

Since the arrival of Hilton McRae's egomaniac professor, with his new young wife, Elena, the entire household has been almost paralysed with inertia. Paul Rhys's John, flushed with frustration, wine and heat, is bewitched by Vanessa Kirby's Elena. So is Tobias Menzies's dishy doctor and eco-warrior. Miserable, grubby-haired Sonya (Jessica Brown Findlay) is crazy about Michael. Not that he's noticed. Menzies's semidetachment suggests his work has caused compassion fatigue.

Tellingly, in the climactic scene when John walks in and finds Elena in a clinch with Michael, the room ceases revolving. It's as if time, all hope of a future, stops. In the final act, the room turns anticlockwise. In another directorial flourish, Elena's effect on John and Michael is illustrated when, late at night, drunk, they leap on the furniture singing to David Bowie's *The Jean Genie*, a ridiculous regression to their teenage selves.

All the performances are outstanding but Rhys's portrayal of John's agonisingly eloquent realisation that his life has been a stupid waste of time deserves awards.

THE INDEPENDENT

Holly Williams

★★★★

The most surprising thing about this *Uncle Vanya* is that it's not that surprising. When it was announced that Robert Icke — who adapted and directed last year's modern, gut-punching *Oresteia* — was repeating the trick with Chekhov, I expected something... strange. This, line-by-line, is incredibly faithful to the text, and although modern-set, unshowy. What it does have,

however, is real clarity of thought and depth of characterisation, confirming Icke as a majorly talented adaptor, and a director who keeps histrionics in check. As the ruminative doctor points out: "I used to think strange was the exception, and now I think it's the basic human condition."

Chekhov shares his attention across the cast of bored, irritated, ennui-laden lovers languishing on a country estate. Which is the motor, so to speak, behind a stage revolve – Hildegard Bechtler's raised wooden decking slowly turns, only halting for moments of high-drama or when characters jump down to address the audience. It democratises the viewing: you see all characters, from all angles. You also, thanks to four hefty wooden pillars, are frequently thwarted from seeing anything at all – injecting the audience with the frustration the characters experience, might be the charitable interpretation. Or it might just be annoying.

Still, Icke can cast a magic spell over theatre-goers: this Uncle Vanya is three and a half hours long, and often slow-paced and static. But even as the characters moan about the tedium, it never feels tedious. Three short sharp intervals help, acting as little palate cleansers.

Icke's biggest interference is to anglicise the Russian names: here's Johnny, not Vanya. Which is fine, though hardly revelatory – except in the translation of Vera, the dead ex-wife and sister who subtly haunts the play: in English, she's Faith. Something these troubled character seem to have lost, since they lost her. Johnny's grief for his dead sister here visibly contributes to his rage at her professor husband, who Johnny feels he's wasted his life supporting.

Paul Rhys treads the tragi-comic knife edge of Johnny – queasy creepiness, trembling neediness, thwarted nobility – while his niece, the lovelorn Sonya, is played with tenderness by Jessica Brown Findlay. Underneath her clenched awkwardness and greasy, schlumpy make-under (she almost looks "plain"), there's a shining river of longing.

Vanessa Kirby is languorous and radiant as the professor's young wife Elena must be, but we also see the fear and guilty conscience beneath her purposeless beauty and privileged boredom. Tobias Menzies plays the doctor – object of Elena and Sonya's affections. It's a fine-grained performance, a conflicted, charismatic combination of amused wry cynicism, and heart-felt conviction about the need to preserve the natural world. As planter of trees and saver of lives, the doctor is the only one who actually (itals)does anything, who creates rather than destroys. It's hot – more proto-lumbersexual than worthy eco-warrior – and his scenes with Kirby sizzle dangerously.

Unlike Icke's previous work, Uncle Vanya doesn't startle. What it does do is clarify the play: it's clear and fresh as a draught of water, revealing life and human frailty with pellucid perspicacity. Drink deep.

THE STAGE

Natasha Tripney

★★★★

Robert Icke is a Time Lord. That's the only explanation. The man knows how to speed things up and how to slow things all the way down. Icke's glorious Oresteia – originally performed at the Almeida Theatre before a West End transfer – was one of last year's theatre highlights, and quite possibly the boldest show of 2015. It originally ran to over three and a half hours, but you never begrudged it a single second. With its ticking clocks, and its choking sense of tension, not a moment was wasted.

The same can be said of his reworking of Chekhov's Uncle Vanya: it runs similarly long, it's the longest version of the play I can remember seeing, but it justifies every minute of its running time. Here though things are summer-slow and languid: time drips, it pools, like sweet tea leaking from a samovar. The production is broken up by three ten-minute intervals, but these don't disrupt the

pace, rather they make it manageable, they fall in the right places. The first quarter has a hazy, lazy quality, with Jackie Shemesh's lighting warming everything through. The cast lounges around Hildegard Bechtler's gently revolving wooden cube of a set much as they might the garden of the Big Brother house, occasionally jumping down to the floor to address the audience directly.

Icke's Uncle Vanya is a production of great empathy and generosity, with each character given room to bloom. Paul Rhys is a rumpled and tormented Vanya – or rather, John: all the names are anglicised – even though his performance and demeanour is at times almost uncannily reminiscent of Brian, the tortured artist from the sitcom Spaced. There's a glorious drinking scene, featuring both karaoke Bowie and Tobias Menzies's doctor – here called Michael – dancing around in his pants. There's also a lovely running joke about the tuning of guitars and a scene-stealing chicken.

Jessica Brown Findlay – Electra in Icke's Oresteia – is revelatory as Sonya, with that fig-ripe voice of hers, rich and raw as cherry brandy. With her hair greased to her head, she's convincingly plain yet so full of longing, it practically drips from her. The moment when she and Vanessa Kirby's highly stylish but not unsympathetic Elena finally make a connection and contemplate playing the piano together only to have this one fragile, fleeting moment casually denied them feels remarkably brutal, like a wound.

The production doesn't feel as bold and provocative as the Oresteia – it certainly doesn't leave you feeling winded in quite the same way – and there's also a sense of having seen some of this before, that Icke's repurposing some of his devices and ideas from elsewhere (the revolving set is a prime example of this), but the whole thing works so beautifully as a whole, it hardly matters. It has a seductive, thick-aired, wine-warm quality, it is so full of ache, and – in its own slow, sun-washed way – it makes the whole play feel awake.

THE ARTS DESK

Matt Wolf

★★★★

Uncle Johnny instead of Vanya, a passing reference to sharia law, and nary a samovar in sight: surely this can't be the Uncle Vanya that has long been a cornerstone of the British theatre, especially in a new version from its take-no-prisoners director, Robert Icke, that presents the four-act text with three (!) intervals?

Well, you can relax. Only the most authoritarian of purists will fail to find Chekhov's eternally wounding masterwork in correspondingly full flower across just as lengthy an evening as Icke's career-making Oresteia last year – and even more emotionally replete, as befits this most durably sorrowful of texts. Some won't like having to stand and stretch three different times for a play I have seen performed straight through and will wonder what David Bowie and Iggy Pop are doing in a landscape more frequently associated with the plangent strains of the guitar-playing Telegin (or Waffles): a character here renamed Cartwright in keeping with an Anglicisation that refers to the eco-warrior doctor Astrov by his first name, Michael (the superb Tobias Menzies, pictured below).

Icke's governing intention is to collapse the distance between a spectator in Islington in 2016 and anything that might feel remote or foreign about this cornerstone of the Russian repertoire, while all the while offering up the play with its abiding ache intact. Indeed, this Vanya is the first I've experienced since Katie Mitchell's landmark production for the Young Vic in 1998 to match the fabled reports of the soulfulness that is said to have attended the legendary Russian-language productions of this play. The Russian versions I have seen in London are too often either preserved in aspic or served up as an excuse for the kind of hammy thespian grandstanding that this magnificently acted version at almost every turn eschews.

In performance terms, the undeniable occasion of the night is the return to the Chekhov fold of Paul Rhys, who pulled out of playing Ivanov at the National Theatre in 2002 but here more than compensates with a Vanya/Johnny that seems to originate from somewhere very deep and dangerous within. His gait either unsteady or heavy, as if moving through the maze-like provincial estate where the play is (on this occasion placelessly) set were itself a burden, Rhys cuts a shambolic figure steeped in self-loathing and shame for the title character's unreciprocated longings and lack of fulfillment: a would-be Schopenhauer or Nietzsche taken over by a consumptive awareness of his own inadequacies.

And when he lashes out in the third of the four acts, we might as well be watching a suppurating wound made flesh. I intend it as the most profound of compliments to say that this performance looks as if it hurts, and Rhys throughout remains at one with a governing darkness in the character that made me think this might well be the first Vanya who at some later date does actually kill himself, Sonya's celebrated final appeal to patience - and to the angels - notwithstanding.

If Rhys plays Johnny either close to or in tears as the lacerations mount, Menzies's Michael (aka Astrov) neatly suggests the opposite. From his brilliantly realised opening encounter with the ageing Nanny (Ann Queensberry, well into her eighties, is lovely in that part) onwards, a low-voiced Menzies speaks as if something essential within him has been dulled to feeling. Traumatized by memories of his own medical missteps, Michael comes to life only in his libidinous dalliance with the gout-ridden Professor's far-younger wife, Elena (Vanessa Kirby, quietly ravishing); elsewhere, it's as if this character has himself been permanently anaesthetised, his response to life's abrasions being to shut himself off to feeling in inverse proportion to Johnny's absence of a carapace with which to deflect life's setbacks.

The action unfolds within a (mostly) rotating Hildegard Bechtler set that changes direction in the final act and that functions as a visual metaphor for Chekhov's peerless gift for viewing his personages in the round. And when the characters break the fourth wall to speak to us directly - a technique Chekhov employs in this more than any other play - the actors vault out of the frame and down to the front of the stalls to address the house as one. That same space is also utilised for the farewell scene when Hilton McRae's bruisingly dyspeptic Professor (pictured left, with Kirby behind) - a onetime aesthete gone terminally sour - departs with Elena for what is surely forever, leaving Johnny to clamber back up and into the visual wreck of a home where he and his adoring niece, Sonya (Jessica Brown Findlay, fresh from Icke's *Oresteia*) return to their accounts.

At times, the sought-for rawness of Icke's rendingly felt view of the material recedes. There are moments of calculation that feel especially phony amidst the "real-ness" that prevails elsewhere: Cartwright's sudden outburst, for instance, early on, or Findlay's androgynous, deliberately desexed Sonya letting rip about her "volatile" environs - an outburst that is itself notably volatile.

Elsewhere, though, I appreciated the multiple intervals in much the same way that you pause between great paintings while visiting a gallery so as to absorb what you have seen, the difference here being that the canvas walks and talks and its characters live among us. "I'm ruined, wrecked, completely destroyed," Johnny remarks near the end, by which point he might as well be speaking for the audience.

SUNDAY TIMES

Maxie Szalwinska

★★★★

Mounting states of excruciation and a wrenching humanity are the hallmarks of Robert Icke's modernised Vanya. While it's not an out-and-out masterpiece of re-imagining like his *Oresteia*, it has an unobtrusive grandeur all its own. Icke repots Chekhov's drama in the English countryside and lops off its specifically Russian soul, which doesn't matter as much as you'd think. The

wilderness between its characters is still there, as is the sense that nobody is going anywhere fast (Hildegard Bechtler's set is an almost imperceptibly revolving room without walls).

The time is now, and Uncle Vanya becomes Uncle Johnny (Paul Rhys), his life as crumpled as his old cords and untucked shirt. Neglecting his work, he shambles around after Elena (a goofy-sexy Vanessa Kirby) the young wife of his former brother-in-law. Failure, disillusion and hilarious discomfort are the default human conditions here, but it's an oddly bracing production, with a steady rain of acute character impressions. As Johnny, Rhys has never used his weak, neurasthenic smile to better effect. Tobias Menzies' doctor offsets broody arrogance with eco-concerns and Jessica Brown Findlay's tomboyish Sonya is intensely miserable, but intensely alive.