

Cultural Daily

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The Present with Cate Blanchett: Russia via Australia

David Sheward · Wednesday, January 11th, 2017

The box office-draw of radiant Cate Blanchett may be the reason *The Present*, Australian playwright Andrew Upton's adaptation of Chekhov's first untitled play in a production from the Sydney Theatre Company, is now on Broadway. But the double-Oscar-winning star is just one shining jewel in a mostly dazzling show full of farcical humor, heartbreaking pathos, and pointed political observation. Clocking in at three hours, the comedy-drama does have its slow points—the third of four long acts is especially lead-footed. Yet the intense and witty moments more than make up for the snooze-inducing snatches.

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Chris Ryan, Richard Roxburgh, Susan Prior, Marshall Napier, Martin Jacobs, Toby Schmitz, and Cate Blanchett in *The Present*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Usually when a classic work is translated into a modern setting, it feels mismatched, like the proverbial square peg in a round hole. But Upton, who happens to be Blanchett's husband, has managed to fit the late 19th century work, unpublished until long after Chekhov's death under the title *Platonov*, into a contemporary slot without shoving or straining. We are still in Russia, but rather than the original pre-Revolutionary era, it's post-glasnost with the oligarchs in charge rather than the tsar. In celebration of her 40th birthday, the vivacious Anna Petrovna (Blanchett) has gathered a group of friends to her late husband's estate for a festive weekend. Chief among the celebrants is Mikhail Platonov (the charismatic Richard Roxburgh), a failed but still vibrant intellectual approaching middle age who attracts all the women at the party.

Like their country, everyone at the gathering is in a state of upheaval. Their emotional turmoil parallels the national state of confusion as the rigid Communist structure gives way to chaotic quasi-capitalism with Anna attempting to play off influential elderly suitors against each other as she eyes Plantonov. Mikhail performs a similar romantic juggling act, barely balancing Anna, his wife Sasha, and Sophie and Maria, the respective romantic partners of his two best friends Sergei and Nikolai.



Richard Roxburgh and Cate Blanchett in *The Present*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

This plot summation makes the play sound like a riotous farce, but it's also a sharp portrait of the shifting state of Russia. Anna's dead husband, referred to as "The General," and his contemporaries represent the ruthless former regime while the younger guests are the confused and displaced inheritors of a broken system. John Crowley's sharp staging expertly blends comedic and melodramatic elements. The polished performances of the Australian cast allow us to differentiate between the myriad characters and keep their complex relationships straight.

In addition to Blanchett and Roxburgh, I particularly enjoyed Chris Ryan's comically insecure Sergei, Susan Prior's conflicted Sasha, and Marshall Napier's blustering Ivan (Sasha's alcoholic father). The action flags after intermission when we discover a drunken Platonov seated center stage bemoaning the mess he has made of his and everyone else's life. One by one, his fellow guests approach him to restate their individual problems and then wander off into the night. This gets repetitive really fast, but fortunately, the final scene, where all the conflicts come to a crashing conclusion the next morning, regains the dizzying pace of the earlier sequences.

The title refers to both senses of the word—a gift as well as the current time. Though it has its flaws, this is *Present* of a stunning evening of theater and an insightful examination of how echoes of the past can influence how we live now.

Jan. 8—March 19. Sydney Theatre Company at the Ethel Barrymore Theater, 243 W. 47th St., NYC. Tue, Thu, 7 pm; Wed, Fri-Sat, 7:30 pm; Wed, Sat, 1:30 pm; Sun, 3pm. Running time: three hours including intermission. \$79—\$149. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

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