

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

TV Stars Fail to Brighten Month in the Country

David Sheward · Wednesday, February 11th, 2015

The Classic Stage Company production of Ivan Turgenev's *A Month in the Country* features some high-wattage TV stars present and past (Taylor Schilling of *Orange Is the New Black*, Peter Dinklage of *Game of Thrones*, Megan West of *How to Commit Murder*, Anthony Edwards of *ER*) and has some arresting moments courtesy of director Erica Schmidt, but it lacks the essential spark of passion. Like two productions of plays by Turgenev's fellow Russian Anton Chekhov, this *Month* falls into the trap of portraying bored people in a boring way.

As in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* and *The Seagull* (though the Turgenev play was written about 50 years earlier), the action takes place on a rural estate where the indolent landowners and their guests suffer from ennui and frustrated emotions. Dazzling Natalya is locked in a loveless marriage with the banal but decent Arkady. She strings along the witty Rakitin who wants more than a platonic relationship, but never presses the matter out of consideration for Natalya's husband, his best friend. This delicate balance is upset when Natalya develops a Phedra-like adoration for her young son's teenaged tutor, Aleksey. To complicate things, Natalya's girlish ward Vera is similarly smitten with the schoolmaster. On the edges of the action lurks cynical Dr. Shpigelsky, scheming to marry Vera off to his chum, the clumsy Bolshintsov, in return for three new horses.



Taylor Schilling and Mike Faist in *A Month in the Country*. Photo by Joan Marcus.

The trouble is there is no fire coming from Schilling's icy Natalya who glides above the action like Tippi Hedren in a Hitchcock thriller. Similarly, the faun-like Aleksey of Mike Faist, who resembles a young Danny Kaye, is puppy-dog cute and endearing, but hardly charismatic enough to make us believe all the women are falling over themselves to get to him. Apart from one intense monologue describing his blighted romance, Dinklage's Rakitin is lackluster. Edwards makes Arkady more than just a cuckolded buffoon, but the smallness of the role gives him little opportunity to make much impact. Of the characters caught in the main love tangle, West's Vera is the most interesting, vivifying the girl's transition from joyful innocent to disappointed but wiser woman. Schmidt and costume designer Tom Broecker aide in this transformation by having Vera switch from childish play clothes to a somber, dowdy frock after Aleksey has rejected her and declared his feelings for Natalya. For an added touch, Vera's hair is now wore up and the previously prim Natalya's locks are cascading like a mermaid's.

With the principal storyline rendered unexciting, the supporting players take over with Thomas Jay Ryan practically stealing the spotlight with his rakish and brutally frank Shpigelsky. In a delightfully comic scene, he woos a sly Annabella Sciorra as the spinsterish Lizaveta, by bluntly

laying out all his faults and stating she is not likely to do better. Veteran character actress Elizabeth Franz is a vinegary Anna, Arkady's mother, and Peter Appel an appropriately doltish Bolshintsov.

The design elements are proficient, but set designer Mark Wendland has placed a huge barn-like set of walls over the characters. This is probably meant to convey the suffocated lives they lead, but it only succeeded in adding to the sense of claustrophobic the production induces.

Jan. 28—Feb. 28. Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St., NYC. Tue.—Thu., 7 p.m.; Fri.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Sat., Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours including one intermission; \$75—\$125. (866) 811-4111 or www.classicstage.org.

This review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, February 11th, 2015 at 7:23 pm and is filed under [Theatre](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.