

Intimate glimpses of the Russian soul

THEATRE

Ivanov

National's Cottesloe

Rachel Halliburton

WHEN Chekhov himself first directed *Ivanov*, he found the process frustratingly farcical. In a letter to his brother, he declared that the actors' stupidity and inability to remember his script accurately left him both "fatigued and annoyed" — sentiments no doubt compounded by the play's initial failure to stay open for more than three days.

It is difficult to imagine that his ghost would feel such sour emotions if it could witness Katie Mitchell's stunningly lit and carefully measured production. Every nuance of the despair and nerve-shattering boredom of the late 19th century Russian gentry is carefully mapped out in an evening as intimate and subtly plotted as a piece of chamber music.

Mitchell initiates Chekhov's portrait of a man battling debt and failure with a spine-shivering *coup de théâtre*. On entering the auditorium, one is confronted by tall white screens, and a huge question mark about where the other half of the audience has gone. Only when the screens draw slowly back to reveal Ivanov's drawing room is the remaining 50 per cent of the audience displayed like a mirror image on the other side of the stage, blinking with delight at the picturesque minimalism of Vicki Mortimer's set. If Vermeer had painted 19th century Russia, this is how it would have looked.

Paul Rhys, originally designated to play Nikolai Ivanov, could not because of a family illness. Instead, the character who out-Hamlets Hamlet is played by Owen Teale, whose hollowly ringing voice proclaims Ivanov as a man suffering creeping paralysis of the soul. Chekhov sums up Russia's pre-revolutionary spiritual stagnation through a debt-ridden landowner too exhausted to love his terminally-ill wife. In 1997 Ralph Fiennes famously played the part. Now, despite the odd emotional inconsistency, Teale has made it his own, appearing as a wounded bear of a character infected with an equally terminal self-loathing.

The huge challenge is to sustain the fascination of a play where the characters repeatedly declare their boredom. In a series of heart-breakingly telling details, Mitchell manages just this. Sometimes it is as simple as Teale's failed attempt to hug his wife (played with elegant desperation by Juliet Aubrey), or the Count's off-stage chuckle that disturbs his soliloquy of self-hatred: at other times it is in the darted glances that reveal tragic or comic subtexts.

The excellent cast have absorbed David Harrower's translation into their bloodstream, so watching the evening feels less like being a punter than being a privileged 19th century fly on the wall. Gareth Fry's carefully orchestrated sound design completes the impression that here, on the South Bank, is an absorbing slice of pre-revolutionary Russia.

● Until 12 October. Box office: 020 7452 3000.



Struggling with spiritual stagnation: Owen Teale as Ivanov and Indra Varma as Sasha

Jansons raises the Vienna voltage

CLASSICAL

VPO/Jansons

Royal Festival Hall

Stephen Pettitt

LOOK closely at the ranks of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, and you'll see a sight to gladden the heart. In addition to the female harpist, long the VPO's sole concession to gender equality, there's a second woman, tucked away at the back of the second violins. Strange to tell, her presence has not caused standards to collapse. In fact, the first of the VPO's two London concerts this week proved they are playing as well as ever. For this, they had not only a female second violinist but also last night's conductor, Mariss Jansons, to thank.

Jansons does not try to go against the grain of the orchestra's character — one rooted in a warm sound that under some conductors can mean polished but polite performances — but neither is he in undue awe of it.

Instead, he uses it as a foundation, moulding it to his own visions, inspiring these proud players with his passion for and understanding of whatever he is conducting. So Mendelssohn's Scottish Symphony had the right sort of Romantic sweep, its breezy wildness elegantly contained and balanced within Classical parameters, while the myriad delightful quirks in Haydn's Symphony No 97 were pointed with a twinkling, knowing humour, and the colours in the 1919 suite from Stravinsky's ballet *The Firebird* were dazzlingly illuminated. The orchestra's explosive and ferocious attack in *The Infernal Dance of King Kashchei*, the ballet's best known number, caused half the audience to jump out of their seats.

Very un-Viennese. The applause indicated that he could have gone on all night, but Jansons contented himself with just a couple of daredevil encores, a Dvořák Slavonic Dance and *The Death of Tybalt* from Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, which raised the voltage levels still higher. Christian Thielemann conducts tonight's concert. He has quite an act to follow.

Threading a way between art and craft

EXHIBITION

Sensoria

The Approach, E2

Nick Hackworth

THE work of London-based Dutch artist Michael Raedecker provides a fascinating insight into the power of taste and its ability to transmute the hideous into the hideously fashionable.

Using an idiosyncratic combination of sewing and painting, he depicts, in the main, landscapes and interiors. Many of these pieces are grotesque, the kind of thing you would expect to stumble across in a Mediterranean tourist town, where an enterprising artist, tired of sticking seashells on paintings, has decided to sew into them instead.

But, of course, in these days of

knowing irony, the naffness of the craft aesthetic is something he is aware of and uses, craftily, to his advantage.

Not only does his sewing provide an edgy counterpoint to the dominant minimalist aesthetic, but it also, as a stereotypically feminine activity, allows him to indulge in a spot of

gender bending. Thoughts of Mediterranean seashells are triggered by the change of mood in Raedecker's work. He was short-listed for the Turner Prize in 2000 and, in that exhibition, he showed eerie landscapes and interiors, executed in muted colours, featuring, for example, isolated log cabins.

There, his sewing suggested the neurotic needlepoint of an American housewife stuck in the Mid-West. Here, of the nine paintings on show, the largest is a pink, Club Tropicana-style affair in which some cotton thread shacks stand on stilts in a vivid sea. The maritime theme

appears, at first glance, to continue with the large canvas, *Journeys to Glory*, which resembles an aerial view of five, oddly regular fingers of land protruding into muddy waters.

On closer inspection, however (with prompting from the gallery staff), the fingers reveal themselves to be a charming collection of penises — which shows at least that Raedecker is willing to tackle a wide breadth of subject matter.

● Until 13 October. Information: 020 8963 3878.

More reviews on Page 63

20/21 BRITISH ART FAIR

THE ONLY FAIR FOR BRITISH ART FROM 1900 TO THE PRESENT DAY

18-22 SEPTEMBER 2002
Wed-Thurs 11am-8.30pm | Fri-Sat 11am-7pm | Sun 11am-5pm

THE COMMONWEALTH INSTITUTE
KENSINGTON HIGH STREET LONDON W8

Information and lecture programme:
tel: 020 8742 1611 www.britishartfair.co.uk