

BELVOIR



# THE CHERRY ORCHARD

29 MAY – 27 JUNE





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Running time: 2 hours & 35 minutes  
(including interval)

## CAST

**PETER CARROLL** as Firs  
**PRISCILLA DOUEIHY** as Petya  
**NADIE KAMMALLAWEERA** as Varya  
**KIRSTY MARILLIER** as Anya  
**LUCIA MASTRANTONE** as Charlotta  
**MANDELA MATHIA** as Lopahkin  
**SARAH MEACHAM** as Dunyasha  
**JOSH PRICE** as Pishchick  
**PAMELA RABE** as Ranevskaya  
**KEITH ROBINSON** as Gaev  
**JACK SCOTT** as Yepikhodov  
**CHARLES WU** as Yasha

## TEAM

Writer **ANTON CHEKHOV**  
Director and Adaptor **EAMON FLACK**  
Set & Costume Designer **ROMANIE HARPER**  
Lighting Designer **NICK SCHLIEPER**  
Composer & Sound Designer **STEFAN GREGORY**  
Choreographer **ELLE EVANGELISTA**  
Intimacy Coordinator **CHLOË DALLIMORE**  
Movement/Fight Director **NIGEL POULTON**  
Voice Coach **DANIELLE ROFFE**  
Assistant Director **CLAUDIA OSBORNE**  
Stage Manager **KHYM SCOTT**  
Assistant Stage Manager **JESSIE BYRNE**

Supported by the **Chair's Circle**

We acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation who are the traditional custodians of the land on which Belvoir St Theatre is built. We also pay our respect to the Elders past and present, and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

**Production Thanks:** Ben Quilty for *The Cherry Orchard* family painting, "Untitled".

Rehearsal photography by Brett Boardman.

Sarah Meacham and Charles Wu





Eamon Flack

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

EAMON FLACK

*The Cherry Orchard* is a play about a way of life that has come to an end. It is a way of life driven by a generations-long dream of leisure, property, art, love, family, comfort, the regular cycle of the seasons - all the old fantasies of liberalism. In itself it is a beautiful life, but it is not sustainable. It was founded on the exploitation of labour and the natural world, and prolonged itself on debt. Its end has arrived before the play even begins. The task for the characters is not to save what cannot be saved, but to find a new way to live. The question is, how? How do we change? Can we? Will we? When will it be too late?

This description of Chekhov's play could also be a description of Australia, or of life in the carbon economy, or the Anthropocene... Is our way of life sustainable? Is the end already here and we haven't realised it yet? What of this way of life will we be able to carry with us into the future? How do we break old patterns? How do we create new ones?

Chekhov gives us no easy answers. He knows he can't say where the path of change ends up, but he does suggest that it goes by way of grief, madness and joy. Whatever else change is, it is not rational. It's not clear how much control we have over it, even on the scale of a single family estate, let alone a whole country or a whole economic system.

The only certainty in this play is death. Which is a bleak thought. To be fair, Chekhov was dying of tuberculosis as he wrote it. But, like its writer, what animates this play is not doom but a reckless love of life. Chekhov's final wish as he lay dying was a last glass of champagne. His life had been an astonishing one (and fragments of it are shot through the play): grandson of a serf and son of a violent drunk; worked as a tutor; supported his family and paid his way through medical school by writing comic sketches; worked as a doctor throughout his life; founded medical clinics and schools; loved to fish; became, after Tolstoy, the most loved Russian writer of his day; took a year out at the height of his fame to travel to and report on Russia's most brutal penal colony; revolutionised not one but two art forms - the short story and the play - all before he died at the age of 44, a few months after the premiere of *The Cherry Orchard*.

Chekhov found that first production at the Moscow Arts Theatre a real downer. He called his play a comedy and he meant it. But few comedies have the capacious vision of humans adrift in the world that this one does. (Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is the only other one I can think of.) Chekhov perhaps meant "comedy" in the sense that Dante did - a sprawling vision of humans chained to their foibles for eternity - but it would

be uncharacteristic of him to make such a large claim. I think he simply meant that **that** the smallness of humans is made funnier, not bleaker, by the enormity of time and existence. His ability to simultaneously work on the scale of pettiness, and the scale of historic obliteration is what gives this comedy a weird and sometimes troubling power.\*

What about hope? Charles Wu who plays Yasha asked this early in rehearsals. (I've asked this outside rehearsals, too: If we can't even bother to vaccinate ourselves, which is really just a form of national tooth-brushing, what hope is there on larger fronts?) The hope, I think, unexpectedly lies in the human pettiness. We must work, it's true. But we must also waste time. We must also play. We must also live. Getting tangled up in the bird-brained patterns of our species is what keeps us together and bound to life. We are each other's **balast** in the vastness, like it or not. This was Chekhov's last gift. Not a grim hymn to mortality, but a joyous dance of folly.

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\*Chekhov's ability to work beyond the human scale is rare in modern writers - probably because theatre for the last few hundred years has mostly been about people in rooms. This is only natural, given that the great shift of modern times was the discovery that the fates of large numbers of people could be determined not by the hand of some god on the field of battle or agriculture, but by the decisions taken by human beings in private rooms. That's what we mean when we say theatre as we know it today is a humanist art form. The problem now, in the Anthropocene, is that the modern habit of ruling our fates through decisions taken in rooms is blinding us to the chaos at play out in the world, in particular the wild, broken patterns of the climate. This poses a problem for the arts, which largely continue on in the humanist forms they have evolved into over the past few hundred years. If we are going to make art in the Anthropocene, we need to figure out ways to see humans inside bigger frames of reference than ourselves and our rooms. This problem has been on my mind as we've worked on this play, as Chekhov's intimations of a frame of view larger than the human might offer some hints for how the forms of our stories might adapt to the new reality we are now living in... I put all this in a footnote because, as with everything related to climate change, all bets are off, and we are still learning to see what is in front of us, let alone propose a confident path forward...

## ON THE ADAPTATION

This adaptation was written in two bursts over the six months prior to rehearsals, and we have continued to make changes (lots) right through rehearsals. The first task of adaptation is to write an acting text that lands on the ears of an audience today with all the immediacy of the original on its audience then. We are not Russians in 1904 so it's weird to think exact fidelity is the truest way to deliver the play's many meanings. The only way to recreate the life of the play is to change it - which is apt, given the play's subject matter...

Having said that, I've largely reproduced Chekhov's play line by line. What is said *inside* the line, on the other hand, has sometimes been changed, mostly by replacing very 19th century ideas or anxieties with more contemporary ones. Occasionally I've changed the structure of a scene or updated (or perhaps just un-outdated) the worldview of a character. Lovers of Chekhov will spot changes, and depending on your bent some of them could probably lead to arguments, but nothing has been shifted without a lot of thought and discussion. The original play, for example, often references Tolstoyan idealism and anti-sexuality, which time has turned to nonsense. I've changed it. On the other hand, sometimes Chekhov's original is startlingly contemporary. Petya Trofimov's reference to childcare in Act Three for example is straight from Chekhov.

We have set our production not in Russia but in "Rushia", and not in 1904 but "now", which is a time somewhere between the last and the next hundred years.

One very small part of the adaptation has been transplanted from Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.

Petya's reference to stillness in Act Two is inspired by Toni Morrison.

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**Anthropocene:** the current geological age, viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment.





# DESIGNER'S NOTE

ROMANIE HARPER

This play is about change; unimaginable, overwhelming, outrageous, ecstatic and earth shattering.

In the design we have explored how a space is felt rather than *what* it is. The history and depth of life and habitation within the estate is palpable, and the characters' relationship to the space is what brings it to life. *The Cherry Orchard* itself is not a place but a way of life, one that is beautiful but not defensible.

The characters' progression across the four acts speaks to the way we live in the Anthropocene; they live on borrowed time and blood stained land, with the knowledge that their days are numbered and they've already danced through their best years. For us too, the chance that we may burn up or drown in the not-too-distant future will become the rhythm that we tune our bodies to.

But to live in end times is still to live; our legacy is in how we treat each other.

I wanted the design to speak to this through the act of mark making. To keep record, to remember, to bear witness; these are survival techniques. A portrait, a landscape, an imprint; these are the objects and artifacts that will hold us. We won't be able to choose our own demise, but we can control the image that will be burned on the retina of whatever witness is there at the end, so let it be beautiful, generous and passionate.



Pamela Rabe and Sarah Meacham



Mandela Mathia and Peter Carroll





Priscilla Doueihy and Lucia Mastrantone



Kirsty Marillier



Keith Robinson



Priscilla Doueihy, Kirsty Marillier and Josh Price





Nadie Kammallaweera

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