

# 'The Cherry Orchard' in Lafayette: in the depth of the Russian soul



Sarah Ruby, Ted V. Bigornia, and Tim Holt Jones

Photos Jay Yamada

By Sophie Braccini

It takes great skill to put together the rich tapestry of human characters that are explored in Anton Chekhov's work, in a way that appeals to modern audiences without sacrificing its depth. Town Hall Theatre has successfully met this challenge with "The Cherry Orchard," thanks to a lovely and talented cast led by the precise vision of director Susan Evans.

The magnificent cherry orchard and the estate it rests on are about to be sold. The most prized possession of an ancient family that used to be powerful in that part of Russia will soon be auctioned to pay for the years of debts that were accumulated through lack of management and carelessness. There are options to get out of the situation, some are very pragmatic and require sacrifices, other are pipe dreams that feel good but are not realistic. This multi-generation drama-comedy, set at the beginning of 20th century is Chekhov's last play. Within the span of two hours it describes the inexorable passage from one world order to another by exploring the everyday life of a few characters. Chekhov's marvelous art is to make us laugh while being touched by human poignancy, and to reach depth and complexity of feelings while depicting simple moments of everyday life.

A changing social order is at the crux of the play. Forty years before the beginning of the play, serfdom was abolished in Russia, but that social hierarchy still impregnates the scene; not only with the old servant who regrets the order where he was a serf and probably had a clear perception of this place in the world, but as one character explains it, the whole property and the former wealth of the family was built through the labor of this version of slavery. And as the old order has crumbled, modernism is coming in with the train from Moscow now reaching to the countryside, bringing along new opportunities that some

will seize.

The orchard represents the beauty and elegance of a former order that has now lost its pertinence and usefulness. This is one of the most endearing charms of Chekhov's work: the nostalgic lyricism of the atmosphere and the language. The feelings displayed here are caused or not expressed through big action, but by the little details of everyday life: the nostalgia created by a bookcase, the ancient power balance between former slave and master revived by the smell of chicken the now rich former "moujik", the arrival of the tutor of the child who drowned. The central element that makes the quality of Town Hall Theatre's version of the classic play is in the interpretation given by the chosen actors, with emotions that are suggested and internalized, yet perceived by the audience. At the center of the play is Lyubov Andreevna Ranévsckaya, the mother who lost a child, who is now losing the house where she grew up and can't seem to find in herself the resources to fight; Sarah Ruby is excellent as this central character, bringing elegance, restraint and poignancy to the woman who has been through so much but continues to be generous and loving to a fault.

Each of the other characters embodies one type of reaction in the face of change. Anya (April Deutschle), one of the two daughters, is in love with Trofimov, an eternal student who represents the intellectual challenge to the old order. The two young people are full of hope and ready to embrace the future. Trofimov (Jake Gleason) could be a reader of Karl Marx and some of his sententious comments announce the Russian revolution, just over a decade later. Ermolai Alexéievitch Lopakhine (Ted Bigornia) exemplifies the former slave who through his ingenuity and hard work has become very rich. He tries to help the family through his advice but is not listened to. He still respects

his former masters, but disdain and need for revenge are just below the surface. Varya (Heather Kellogg Baumann) is the adopted daughter who dreams to join a convent or to marry Lapakhin; she is pragmatic but also lost. Boris Borisovich Siméonov-Pichtchik (Mick Renner) is a family friend and also a landowner who is on the brink of financial disaster and dreaming of miraculous rescue. Léonid Andréievitch Gaiev (Tim Holt Jones) is Lioubov's brother, even more extravagant and immature than his sister. Firs (Tom Relly) is Gaiev's frail and aging servant whose decay symbolizes that of the old order.

Director Evans noted that, as THT artistic director, she chose a newly released version of "The Cherry Orchard" that was unearthed by scholars who found the original text before the first Russian director, Stanislavsky, made cuts in 1904 for its premiere, despite the author's protest. Chekhov called his play a comedy, and this primordial version has more comedic element than that of the one that has universally been played since the first public performance. Chekhov aficionados and first-time viewers alike will enjoy the playful version of one of the most emblematic Russian theatrical texts.

"The Cherry Orchard" will play at Town Hall Theater through March 21. Tickets and special events at <https://www.townhalltheatre.com/201920-season>



Tim Holt Jones and Sarah Ruby

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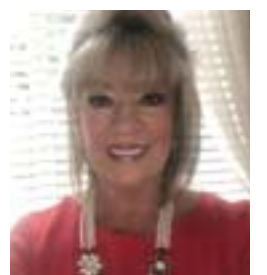
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## In Memory

### Russell Johnson

July 2, 1919 – December 12, 2019 Resident of Lafayette



Russell Johnson peacefully left this world at 100 years old. Born in Idaho Falls, he was the descendant of Swedish immigrants. The family moved to Berkeley, where Russ graduated from Berkeley High School.

Russ was a lifelong tennis player. He attended UC Berkeley, majoring in Economics, then went to work for IBM. When World War II came along, Russ enlisted in the US Army, and saw combat in Germany, attaining the rank of Master Sergeant. When the war ended, he attended the University of Dijon and studied French.

Returning to the States he was rehired by IBM and worked in Oakland and San Francisco as a salesman. There he met Betty Thompson, a fellow IBM employee, whom he married in 1947. Russ had a successful career with IBM, always making quota, selling large computer installations to the Federal Government, the

US Military, the Post Office, and Ames Research Center in Sunnyvale. Russ, along with his family, was sent by IBM to cities around the country and around the world, each move a promotion: Phoenix, Washington DC, Germany, Denver, Tacoma, New Zealand, and finally back to the Bay Area, settling in Lafayette in 1966. Both Russ and Betty were faithful members of St. Anselm's Episcopal Church in Lafayette until the end of their lives.

Russ became President of the Lafayette-Langeac Society. Langeac, France is the sister city of Lafayette and home of the Marquis de Lafayette, American Revolutionary hero. Russ and Betty also supported the successful effort to erect the statue of the Marquis in Lafayette Town Square, and the construction of a city Petanque court for the French bowling sport.

After retiring from IBM, Russ and Betty travelled extensively, with hiking tours in France, a house exchange in Paris, and several cruises. Betty was a gourmet cook, and Russ created a beautiful garden that he tended passionately. Betty and Russ entertained frequently at their comfortable and elegant Lafayette home. After Betty's death in 2010, Russ wrote his autobiography, "My Life with Betty." Two years later, Russ moved to Piedmont Gardens senior community. There he met Amity Buxton, with whom he travelled to Paris at age 95.

Russ is survived by his daughter Janet Brown of Derwood, MD, and son Christopher Johnson of Pleasant Hill, CA, as well as four grandsons and four great-grandchildren.

Russell Johnson had a phenomenal memory for past events and a terrific sense of humor. He was an engaging storyteller, an affable companion and friend to many, with an easy smile and charismatic and graceful manner. Russ retained relatively good health, a razor sharp mind and superb hearing to the end of his life: a life full of success and good fortune. Lucky in love, skillful in business, blessed with the love of his family and friends.