



Name of Society: Amateur Players Of Sherborne
Name of Production: The Good Doctor
Date: 12th September 2026
Venue: Sherborne Studio Theatre
Adjudicator: Claire Morris

Adapted in 1973 by Neil Simon from Anton Chekhov's short stories, these vignettes capture so well Chekhov's keen eye for the absurdity of the human condition. They are works with humour and touchingly human dilemmas which dispel the cliché portrayal of 19th century Russia as harsh, unyielding and soporific. A series of different stories are presented and narrated by the "writer", who is charismatic but flawed as he shares his own experiences as well as narratives he has created throughout his life. Each scene has its own message: the desperation of youth to impress; the loneliness of ageing; keeping dreams alive; and scenes of absolute absurdity. The constant variation keeps the energy flowing so there is never a dull moment. In a subtle blend of humour and pain, either physical or emotional (or both) the follies and cruelty of Russia in the late 1800s are displayed, balancing the darkness and misery of its subject matter with witty dialogue.

SETTING

Ten very different stories requiring different sets needs careful managing to keep both fluidity and credibility, and this was managed well. The small proscenium arch at the back became a useful focal point and good use was made of the reasonably wide stage where chairs and other items were carefully placed right from the beginning to ensure speedy access. This contrasted well with the opposite side of the stage which was set for the writer's study with desk, impressive and comfortable looking chairs and the inevitable overflowing bookcase plus, subtly hung in the corner, easily accessible items of clothing ready for costume changes. Swift changes and movements of benches for A Quiet War, Too Late for Happiness and desks for The Governess and A Defenceless Creature with an addition of trolley for Surgery effectively formed the main furniture used.

LIGHTING AND SOUND

Lighting and sound was fine, accurately timed and subtly used throughout but discreetly so. It was easy to see characters faces and expressions with no shadowing. I really liked the use of the candle and lamp for The Drowned Man and the dimmed lighting then spot on Nina in The Audition. Well-timed blackout in The Sneeze for Cherdyakov's death with a swift switch on again for the alternative ending.

COSTUMES, MAKE UP AND PROPS

It was clear that great attention had been paid to detail in putting together the costumes which transported us back to 19th century Russia. From waistcoats to cravats, skirts and blouses to overcoats and even an ushanka, all looked truly in keeping and were worn with comfortable aplomb. Make up was appropriately subtle where used, and the (sometimes unusual) props all appeared authentically in the right places at the right time.

STAGE MANAGEMENT AND PRODUCTION

This is a true ensemble piece and all the actors created entertaining and engaging characters, never lacking focus. All were, in some way, reaching out for human connection and understanding via a variety of tone including dramatic realism, comedy, and farce which were well captured. Through strong direction and comic timing, the cast captured all the understated irony as well as the entrenched tragedy in 19th century Russia so that we were amused but the seriousness of the script came through.

The Sneeze

During a visit to the theatre with his wife an accidental sneeze set Cherdyakov on a hilariously manic downward spiral of his own making. Some good moments of comedy – especially of course the dramatic sneezes and very convincing face of disgust on the General's face! Good portrayals of both men eventually showing unpleasant sides to their characters with genteel support throughout from their two wives.

The Governess

This story revealed much about the expectations of Russia's lower classes which was captured well by you both. The Mistress was the seemingly cruel employer to her children's governess, running rings round her (although always appearing to be fair and supposedly with her best interests at heart). We could see the more you bullied the more defeated the Governess appeared to become with good body language from you both. I loved the final expressions as the Governess walked away with a clear form of ethical superiority!

Surgery

You both appeared to relish this chance for some humorous physical comedy which you attacked with such a gleeful gusto that it looked as much fun to perform as it was to watch! Great sense of determination from the surgeon to try her best as she wore the Sexton down, both physically and emotionally, with some amusing dry delivery.

Too Late For Happiness

Probably the most poignant story of the play as a lonely man and a lonely woman met as they stopped to rest on a park bench. Through tuneful song, you attempted to connect and agreed to meet again—just not today. Some strong emotive facial expressions from both of you – the man looking so defeated as your invitation was not accepted, and the woman as you appeared so intensely to consider saying yes. But as you left the stage in opposite directions, we knew that you would not keep that appointment.

The Seduction

Peter was superbly but nauseatingly full of self-confidence in his ability to woo women and told us, step by step, how he could win Wife. It was amusing, arguably a little cruel, watching Peter's pretence of indifference to Wife as she tried hard not to look flattered or interested. I really liked the way Wife swiftly changed every 'I' to 'We', and the delivery from Husband as he said he felt no tingle when he looked at her.

A Quiet War

This story pitted two old friends, one Army and one Naval Officer, against each other in an obviously familiar war of words describing a fantasy meal. Both fed well off each other (forgive the pun!) as the dialogue crescendoed to their departure in opposite

directions. A sense of petulance and stubbornness from you both with strong facial expressions and the back to back positioning and continued conversation really worked well.

The Drowned Man

A clever piece that shone a light on the plight of the poor just trying to earn a living. A strong controlled performance from the Sailor as a sleazy huckster performing “drownings” for passers-by with good timing and impressive management of smoking while talking and moving! An effective transition from the Man initially with an air of bewilderment and intrigue to eventually smirking as he thought he had the upper hand with the amount of money to be paid. Brilliant swift exit from the Sailor to the river with the accompanying splash!

The Audition

The recurring theme of missed opportunity appears again with the rather needy, desperate and, frankly, a little annoying Nina with a nervous giggle. Effective positioning with the Director being heard but not really seen in the auditorium so we too felt included in this audition. Nina did a great job switching back and forth throughout the scene in a deceptively complex role involving honesty, pleading and flattery as she tried to impress the impatient and irritated Director whose air of defeat could be heard in his voice. A heart-warming and hopeful end was enjoyed by us all!

A Defenceless Creature

Exposing the joys of bureaucracy, a desperate woman seeking financial redress from an unsuspecting bank manager to get what she wants, and, having already visited five previous departments you weren’t bothered where you got it from! It soon became clear that you were anything but defenceless and some fun was had especially with poor Kistunov’s bandaged foot, your quick fire delivery of your sister’s story, your knowing smirks and swoons. We could sense the sense of defeat from Kistunov about the ‘system’ and palpable anger when accused of lying. Your hapless assistant really wasn’t able to help much either.

The Arrangement

The final story to tell - Father taking his Son to a Woman for his 19th birthday with the intention of making a man out of him. Strong performances from you all – the awkward Boy desperate to please his Father who tried hard to curb his impatience with you. Good slutty body language from the Woman with good timing and dry delivery. A scene which left us with the knowledge that maturity is not always a question of age, as Father found out.

The Writer

You hit the perfect note, constantly interacting and engaging with both the audience and the cast, acting as the link between stories and allowing for seamless transitions as you handed out costumes and even dressed others or sat as observer on the side. A very self assured and wry presentation as you spoke to us about your writers block and mused about your published writing. A tremendous story teller you had a great style of talking humorously and were softly self-effacing. We really felt you were talking directly to us as individuals and so it came as a real shock when there was such a change of tone from you as Seducer and what a horrible and nauseating side we saw of you! Whether as Writer, Seducer or Father your performances were always powerful and beguiling.

Several members of the cast took on more than one role and did so very competently and impressively – you are all to be congratulated. Richard Jones moved fluidly from Cherdyakov to cuckolded husband to bewildered and intrigued Man whilst Sarah Probert played Cherdyakov's wife, Governess and fragile Nina perfectly articulating the various emotions of her characters and Samantha Elgar took on her various roles as Mistress, Wife and Woman showing great versatility. A special mention to Cameron Thrower who was excellent in his different roles as Sexton, Sailor and Assistant making each a distinctive character with strong stage presence and physical comedy.

Our day to travel to Sherborne did not start well – we had tremendous difficulty navigating blocked roads, gridlocked traffic and many diversions. So, with only 10 minutes to spare before the opening of The Good Doctor my husband and I sank thankfully into our seats and just hoped our troubles would prove to have been worthwhile! They absolutely were and I will always feel so glad that we did not miss this delightful production – thank you all so much for your hospitality and congratulations to all involved.

