

Chekhov via Stoppard a windfall for Winterfall

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THE co-founder of Northcote's fledgling Winterfall Theatre, Michele Williams, cannot believe her luck.

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The company has been granted the rights to stage the Australian premiere of Tom Stoppard's translation of Chekhov's last play, *The Cherry Orchard*.

"I saw the reviews of the show in Britain and New York and they went from good to raves," she says.

"So I inquired to see if the rights were available last year," she says.

"But Stoppard's people wanted to know all about us before any agreement was reached."

She says most of Australia's main stage companies were unable to afford to stage a play with a cast of 12, while the one-year-old independent company was keen to put it on.

"They seemed to accept what I was saying, because they were very reasonable about it all," she says.

Stoppard is one of Britain's most successful contemporary playwrights. The Melbourne Theatre Company staged his *Rock'n'Roll* three years ago and he has written a trilogy about 19th-century Russian intellectuals, *The Coast of Utopia*, that was a hit in New York but is too big for Australia.

In an interview with *Newsweek*, Stoppard says audiences are fascinated by Chekhov because he understood that people are mysterious and cannot be reduced to motivation, and describes *The Cherry Orchard* as "a comedy of self-recognition".

"Very often in Chekhov, where he exhibits a little bit of human behaviour that you recognise as true, you give a little laugh. It's like a reflex," he says.

Williams plays the lead role of Lyubov Ranevskaya, who is the head of a landed household under pressure to sell the family property because of growing debts. She says there has been debate about how to stage the play since Chekhov complained after its opening night in 1903 that his comedy had been presented as a tragedy.

"I think it is two genres at once," she says. "It is not a tragedy in a classical sense and it also contains some hysterical moments."

She puts this down to differences between the Russian and Anglo temperaments. "The characters are mercurial in how they express their feelings. The hardest thing to master is the transition from suicidal to joy in the same line."

Williams started Winterfall with Trent Baker, who directs *The Cherry Orchard*. The idea for the company came when she acquired the space that is now its home, Husk Theatre, in Northcote to run her drama school.

The company's financial backing allows it to have a professional infrastructure and access to a range of actors. "We are seeking a bigger core of actors to extend what we do over time."

The production was originally planned for last November but was postponed after cast member Phil Roberts broke his neck in a fall off his bicycle.

"The cast has been very supportive," he says, wearing a neck brace. Roberts, who performed in Pinter's *A Kind of Alaska*

with Williams last June, says he will be able to remove the brace for the performances.

"I think the adrenalin of being on stage will be good for my system. It takes it out of me but I think it would be worse for me ... if I wasn't doing it."

He is combining rehearsals with rehabilitation sessions. "I was not quite dead unlucky, but I very nearly could have been."

Roberts was cycling to rehearsals of a different play carrying a costume when he hit a speed bump and was thrown over the handlebars, breaking his nose and his neck.

"I have been very lucky. There is some nerve damage in my arms that is slowly improving."

He plays Ranevskaya's elder brother, Gaev, whom he first played in another production, at the fortyfivedownstairs theatre, in 2004.

"It is a lumbering giant of a play that changes from happy to an overarching feeling of foreboding," he says.

"After all, we all know the cherry orchard is going to be sold by the end."

Roberts compares Chekhov to Shakespeare in his innate ability to portray humanity.

"He is almost postmodern in his understanding of the random nature of life," the actor says.

The Cherry Orchard opens at Theatre Husk, 161a Heidelberg Road, Northcote at 7.30pm on Saturday until March 20. Book online, at Ticketmaster or ring 0432 822 520.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/chekhov-via-stoppard-a-windfall-for-winterfall-20110222-1b3zo.html>