

ASF's 'Country' gripping

By Allan Swafford
Special to the Advertiser

The Alabama Shakespeare Festival's powerful production of "A Month in the Country" gives theatergoers a new view of Turgenev's Russian masterpiece in a free adaptation by Irish playwright Brian Friel.

Friel has both tightened the original and — in terms of previous translations — honed the thematic impact of the play. And ASF mounts it with a stunning cast.

In its emotional complexity and gently satiric view of humanity, the script eludes pigeonholing while it predicts the coming of a greater playwright, Chekhov. It deals with serious, very realistic situations and passions, but leaves its audience with a sense of having watched clever comedy.

At the center of the story is Natalya (Greta Lambert) who is tormented by the ennui that Russian theater has depicted ever since as the seed of all ills on the great country estates. Married to Arkady (Greg Thornton), she has a long-standing affair with family-friend, Michel (Ray Chambers).

The arrival of a handsome, young tutor, Aleksey (Eric Sheffer Stevens) causes her to discard the resident lover for a new, but not yet secured, one. In the process of this realignment, her husband discovers the first affair, ironically after she has ended it, and the plot tangles. Tangles!

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WANT TO GO?

- **What:** "A Month in the Country"
- **When:** Runs through July 22
- **Where:** Octagon Stage at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival
- **Admission:** \$20-30
- **Information:** (334) 271-5353 or toll free at (800) 841-4273.

ASF: 'Country' has stunning cast, direction

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The word doesn't even begin to cover the situation.

The underlying themes center on the destructive power of passion, the hopelessness of romantic love and the helplessness of people caught in these delusions. Toward the play's end Michel, speaking with the authority of personal experience and reflecting Turgenev's own unhappy love life, declares, "All love is catastrophe." In the context of the script, the statement is a truism.

Structurally Friel has sharpened Turgenev. At least four love stories — each differing in its dynamics from the others — are examined, and they unveil revealing counterpoint to comment on each other. The result is a richly layered play.

In this production there is simply no weak performance. From Lambert's masterly, passionate thwarted Natalya to the acutely executed servants, Matvey (Chris Mison) and Katya (Regan Thompson), acute, perceptive creations triumph. Chambers' Michel is a

languid man defeated by passion. A decided pleasure is Philip Pleasants' exploration of every nuance of the unusually complex Dr. Shpigelsky while Rodney Clark makes the gentle gaucherie of Bolshintsov somehow endearing. Greg Thornton embodies a likable Arkady that wins his audience. Sheffer Stevens' very attractive young Aleksey abounds with fresh-faced energy, a freshness equaled in Grace Hsu's gentle, buoyant Vera.

Sonja Lanzener's quick-witted, warmly varied Anna is simply not on stage enough. Newcomer Anne James delights as Anna's snuff-dipping companion, Lizaveta, especially in her courtship scene with the doctor. Paul Hebron as the comic German, Herr Schaff, corners the production laugh market.

Director David Gardiner has approached his script with great sensitivity and handles the not always easy Octagon stage with assurance.

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