

"Twelfth Night" provides ASF with some inspired clowning

Theatre Talk

By FRED LIPPINCOTT

The final play to join Alabama Shakespeare Festival's repertory season opened last week in the Octagon, Turgenev's "A Month in the Country". The play is an anomaly, for it was written in 1840, fifty years before the psychological drama of Ibsen, Chekov and Strindberg, in whose company Turgenev belongs.

ASF has given the play before, in a somewhat stodgy version, but this time the play is tighter, thanks to Brian Friel, dean of Irish playwrights and an experienced man of the theater. Despite his adaptation, the new version is still faithful to the spirit of the original. An additional plus is original music composed by the well-known pop composer Peter Ostroushko, which is splendid.

The place is a Russian country house (evoked by Charles Caldwell's minimalist, Biedermeier set), where the status quo is interrupted by the arrival of a new tutor Aleksey (Eric

Shaffer Stevens) for Vera, a young woman in the family (remarkable Grace Hsu). Although the tutor is not really a lady-killer - he's just naive in the ways of the world - he manages to attract Natalya, the bored lady of the house (Greta Lambert), and also falls in love with his student. After a month in the country, he moves on.

Besides Ms. Lambert (who has a new gown each time we see her), the cast includes a number of ASF stalwarts: Philip Pleasants (Dr. Shpigelsky), Greg Thornton (the land owner Arkady), Sonja Lanzen (his mother Anna), Paul Hebron (a German tutor Herr Schaff), Ray Chambers (Michel, a family friend also in love with Natalya), and Rodney Clark (an elderly suitor, Bolshintsov). The play is skillfully directed by Britisher David Cardiner, in his first work here.

Others in the cast are Anne James as Anna's companion, Regan Thompson as a vivacious servant, and energetic Chris Mixon, who greatly enlivens the scene as another servant. Beth Novak's cos-

tumes have their usual flair, especially a stylish grey frock to show Vera's progression from girl to young woman.

The program has gotten away from listing the scenes, even when, as here, they alternate interior and exterior sets. With a traditional play like this, I'm old fashioned enough to want to know how many scenes there are and the time sequence. Listing the scenes helps the audience follow the play, especially when plot is less important than relationships.

I saw the play at a matinee the weekend the show opened. Despite the fact that the Octagon was less than one third full, tickets were still \$28. Basic economics of supply and demand did not seem to be operating. For years the English National Opera has sold half-price tickets the day of the show, and it would be nice if standbys at ASF could get a price break, too.

A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY REVIEW (NOT 12TH NIGHT)