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brought back in “The Highest Judge of Hall” (which Billy sings before being taken up to the gates of heaven), which is often cut today. In addition to “The Carousel Waltz,” two other fine orchestral sections include the dance break of “Blow High, Blow Low” (which proved to be the unexpected highlight of this production and was featured on the Tony Awards broadcast) and Louise’s 10-minute ballet in act two.

Now that we’ve gotten *Carousel* out of the way, let’s switch to a far more heartening item – the new cast album of Lincoln Center Theater’s lush, lavish and lovely (or, as Eliza Doolittle would say, “lovely”) revival of Lerner and Loewe’s *My Fair Lady* (which unexpectedly lost the Tony Award for Best Musical Revival to *Once on This Island*).

When *My Fair Lady* opened on Broadway in 1956 (with a cast led by Julie Andrews and Rex Harrison), it was universally hailed as one of the greatest musicals ever written and went on to achieve unprecedented commercial success, running 2,717 performances (longer than any Broadway show at that time). It marked the height of Broadway’s 1950s golden age, when Broadway sat at the apex of American pop culture.

The original cast album of *My Fair Lady* is one of the most important cast albums in history – not to mention one of the most historically significant recordings of any kind. It was the best-selling album in the United States for eight consecutive weeks, and it remained on the Billboard 200 charts for 480 weeks. Many people (including Julie Andrews) prefer the 1959 London album (which was recorded in stereo, and shows Harrison more at ease with the score), but there is a palpable excitement and historic aura to the original Broadway cast album. Cast albums of subsequent revivals (including the 20th anniversary Broadway revival with Ian Richardson and the 2001 London revival with Jonathan Pryce) are less than essential. For purposes of this discussion, I am excluding the movie soundtrack – as

it is a soundtrack, not a cast album.

The new Broadway revival has produced, in my opinion, the best cast album of *My Fair Lady* in nearly 60 years. In keeping with the high standards of Lincoln Center Theater and director **Bartlett Sher**, there is a full orchestra, and the sound quality is pristine. The album contains a complete rendering of the score, including the dance breaks for “With a Little Bit of Luck” and “Get Me to the Church on Time,” the saddened reprise of “Get Me to the Church on Time,” “The Embassy Waltz,” and “Eliza’s Entrance” before the curtain closes on act one.

Lauren Ambrose (who was a surprise casting choice for Eliza) sounds radiant, handling the score’s vocal demands with aplomb. Merely listening to her sing “Wouldn’t It Be Lovely?” I felt as if I were getting a full impression of her performance, including the vulnerability and vitality that she brings to the role. **Harry Hadden-Paton**, who is a relatively muted Higgins onstage, comes off better on the album, bringing unexpected sensitivity to “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face” and even “I’m an Ordinary Man.”

My Fair Lady makes a fine addition to the other cast albums of Bartlett Sher revivals, including *South Pacific*, *The King and I* and *Fiddler on the Roof* – all of which have displayed reverence for the original scores while finding ways to make the musicals fresh and interesting for a contemporary audience. While I do hope that Sher will continue to helm more revivals of classic musicals (perhaps he will even finally get a crack at *Funny Girl*), the winds seem to be shifting in another direction, with experimental directors suddenly being entrusted with classic works. It was just announced that Ivo van Hove will direct *West Side Story* on Broadway in 2019, and a reconceived, scaled-down *Oklahoma!* will play St. Ann’s Warehouse in the fall. Who knows what those productions will look like – or how the cast albums will sound.

The new Broadway revival has produced the best cast album of MFL in nearly 60 years.

Making

By DAVID COTE

Four years ago in the *Guardian*, playwright Simon Stephens called his translation of Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* at the Young Vic a failure. “I haven’t captured the breadth of the play or its truth or comedy or sexiness,” he admitted. “Nobody could have. No matter how brilliant their Russian. No matter how masterful their stagecraft. The nature of translation means that to think otherwise is folly.”

How then am I, completely ignorant of Cyrillic script and Slavic roots, to judge the newly formed Hunter Theater Project’s *Uncle Vanya*, a joint effort by playwright-director **Richard Nelson** and the esteemed translator couple **Richard Pevear** and **Larissa Volokhonsky**? Well, this was the first *Vanya* that brought me to tears and made me laugh in places I never had before. Something of the original must be getting through.

Credit must also go to a fine cast and the extraordinarily intimate mise en scène that Nelson has been perfecting for eight years with his *Apple Family* tetralogy and *Gabriels* trilogy. Marked by rigorously realistic, low-key performances and scrupulous attention to humdrum business – usually in a kitchen or around a dinner table – these exercises in real-time, granular naturalism create a tight bond between audience and actors: We really are flies on the fourth wall.

And the approach works beautifully for Chekhov’s 1898 “scenes from country life,” in which the title character (**Jay O. Sanders**), a middle-aged farm manager who has devoted his life to raising money for his late sister’s husband, a professor (**Jon DeVries**), has a messy emotional breakdown. That’s simplifying the plot. There’s also the professor’s beautiful, much younger wife, Eléna (**Celeste Arias**), after whom Vanya pines; Vanya’s plain, devout niece, Sónya (**Yvonne Woods**); and his only friend in the village, Mikhail Ástrov (**Jesse Pennington**), a boozy doctor with a fondness for environmental causes. These “misfits,” as Ástrov calls himself and others, inhabit a country estate over a few days one summer, drinking too much, declaring love for each other, bickering,

The Old

Sound New



Jesse Pennington and Jay O. Sanders

Joan Marcus

UNCLE VANYA
Frederick Loewe

even threatening murder, which, as with much in Chekhov, turns into farce.

This might be a good place to bring up the ages-old argument about Chekhov and laughter: How funny should these plays be? He called them comedies, and Stanislavsky's memoirs record that Chekhov would often giggle at strange moments, as if the minutiae of human existence were enough to tickle the great writer. But *The Seagull*, *Three Sisters* and others are tragedies of the human spirit as well. So what's the right balance? What I found revelatory about this production – with its un-showy acting and vocal delivery that almost strays into mumbling – was that the line between pathos and silliness, gravity and giddiness, was blown away. When we watch real, unscripted life (or an artful approximation

of it), humor and heartbreak can switch places in the blink of an eye. Nelson, bless his heart, solved the Chekhovian riddle.

He could not have done it without this powerhouse of a cast. I've seen many Ványas in my time, live and on film: Wallace Shawn, Simon Russell Beale, Reed Birney, Denis O'Hare, Peter Dinklage. Each brought shades of weakness, intelligence, bitterness and pusillanimity to the role. But in Sanders I found a Ványa who actually looks like he could chop wood and haul bales of hay. With his ploughman's physique and great, rumbling bass-baritone, Sanders is the most masculine Ványa I've seen, but in the climactic third-act breakdown, with his heart broken and his home threatened, Sanders crumples into a figure of intense pathos, blubbering and stammering like a lost boy. He's a child

who never matured, yet finds himself stuck in a lumbering frame. Even if you don't care for the studied plainness of the translation, or the hyper-realistic staging, this version is worth seeing for the eruption of anger and frustration that Sanders unleashes, shattering the relative quiet of the play up to that point.

I don't want to fixate on just one actor. The entire ensemble does excellent work. DeVries will make you worry for the professor, usually an irritating, selfish duffer. Woods' Sónya shows a feisty, sharp-elbowed independence I found refreshing. Arias exudes worldly ennui that belies her youth. And Pennington takes a big risk with a mannered Ástrov who seems to always be squinting into the sun after sucking on a lemon. It sounds like I'm mocking, but the eccentric characterization won me over.

Bravo to producer **Gregory Mosher** and his team for inaugurating a new model of theatergoing at Hunter College with this achingly sensitive revival. Who knows what a "successful" translation is, but it must have something to do with hearing old things sound shockingly new.

