

Robert Icke's new revolution: a Vanya to blow Chekhovians' samovars

He unleashed a fierce 1984 and brought Aeschylus bang up to date. Now the Almeida's wunderkind is stripping back a Russian classic with actor Paul Rhys

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Say what you like about his productions, but Robert Icke has some nerve. His *Romeo and Juliet*, created for touring troupe *Headlong* in 2012, boldly gave the play the *Sliding Doors* treatment, full of rewinds and what-if scenes (in one version the Capulets and Montagues fail to start a brawl; in another the lovers never quite meet). Icke's breakout production, last year's searing and surgically precise *Oresteia*, turned one of the oldest dramas in the western canon into a knuckle-biting contemporary courtroom procedural. The evening culminated with the audience being asked which way they would vote, as if Aeschylus were *The X Factor* – is the revenger Orestes guilty, or should he go free?

For his latest transforming trick, a new adaptation of *Uncle Vanya*, Icke is attempting something that will make a certain breed of Chekhovian blow their samovars: Vanya isn't even in the script. In an office backstage at the Almeida theatre, after a long day of rehearsals, the director smiles wolfishly. "We've called him Uncle Johnny," he declares.

They've changed the title character's name? Alongside him, Paul Rhys, playing Vanya – sorry, Johnny – tries to explain: "The names are hugely important in Chekhov: if you leave them in Russian you miss all the nuance. In the text he's actually called Ivan – John – but everyone calls him Johnny. It's dismissive; it tells you so much about his character." Icke smiles triumphantly. "I had a good fight with an American academic who told me your audience must be morons if they don't realise it's a nickname." He shrugs. "Well, I didn't. So we've changed it."

On the face of it, it seems surprising that Icke has decided his next target will be Chekhov, that virtuoso of middle-aged muddle and murk, of love and lingering resentment. But this will be the master as he is all too rarely done: stripped to the brutal essentials. In Icke's adaptation Johnny is a small-time farmer struggling to make ends meet – openly jealous of his successful, city-dwelling brother-in-law and deludedly in love with the brother-in-law's second wife. Reading the script, it's the play's fierce contemporaneity that hits: the way it confronts depression and anxiety, the terrors and fears that drive families to the brink.

Icke and Rhys are cagey about describing their exact setting, but it's a reasonable bet that linens and parasols, which have become wearily familiar in British productions of the Russian classics, will not feature. "Robert's version is the truest to Chekhov's intention by a million miles," says Rhys. "It's almost word for word the literal text. Of the 20 versions I've read, it's the purest. It's a very sharp instrument."

The project began in unlikely circumstances, when the teenage Icke spotted Rhys on DVD, in the 1997 Channel 4 adaptation of Anthony Powell's blue-blood period saga *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Years later, Icke tracked the older man down and the pair became friends. Deciding to do *Vanya* was partly sparked by the realisation that, at 47, Rhys was exactly the same age as his character.

In the hour or so the three of us talk, Icke is forthright on everything from the nature of genius ("fundamentally right-wing") and the desiccation of opera ("in its own sealed universe") to the profile of certain audience members ("aristocratic pensioners"). Still only 29, he has had a whirlwind few years. After making his reputation with *Headlong*, he followed artistic director Rupert Goold to the Almeida in north London when Goold took over the theatre in 2013 – part deputy, part dramaturg, part resident wunderkind. *Oresteia*, part of the theatre's acclaimed *Greeks* season, was a hit and transferred to the West End. The show Icke did immediately before

that, an adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* created with playwright Duncan Macmillan, was praised for its wintry portrayal of an Orwellian world gone mad, and is currently touring the US.

To date, Icke has only a handful of professional credits to his name. He's adamant that he's as much a writer as a director (the Icke website features a cheeky addendum to his CV: "why label?"). He knows he's lucky to have got this far, this young: a smooth glide from Cambridge University to *Headlong*, Almeida, West End, international tours, all in just over seven years. But he says: "I think the fetishisation of age is pathetic. The thing that's hard is making good art." Doesn't British theatre have a bit of a boy-wonder complex, though, from the days of Peter Brook on? There is a light pause. "Of course it's important that people make diverse work, but it's about how good the work is. It should be an open playing field, but then it should be fucking meritocratic. If it isn't, we're not properly being custodians of the artform."

After *Vanya*, Rhys is disappearing into filming for *Victoria*, an ITV miniseries. ("This play will be my last!" he proclaims Eeyorishly; I gather this is a running joke.) Icke, meanwhile, is trying to line up a major new production of Shakespeare. (It was reported late last year that the Shakespeare would be *Hamlet*, starring *Sherlock's* Andrew Scott; Icke won't deny or confirm.) Eager to pull yet another rabbit out of the hat, Icke insists that one thing he's dying to do is a big musical: in front of me, apparently on a whim, he tries to persuade Rhys that he'd make a fine *Sweeney Todd*.

That's the thing about theatre, says Icke: unless it has the capacity for surprise as well as delight, the artform might as well turn up its toes and die. "You feel with theatre, when we get it right ..." His eyes are blazing. "I still think it's possible to cause a riot."