



■ Frances de la Tour and David Bark-Jones in a scene from the National's production of *The Forest*

## Theatre as covert social comment

**A**RT can be used in the most deliciously mischievous way, even to challenge the power of authoritarian governments, writes *Sergei Belyakov*.

In Russia, the folly of the human ego was exposed by skillful dramatists who had to overcome the censorship of the 19th century. They were able to do so by manipulating the egos of landowners who considered themselves as the couriers of culture. They established theatres on their estates to entertain their guests. At the time, theatre was the art form for the illiterate masses, and some writers used plays covertly, to disseminate seditious material under the guise of entertainment.

One such exponent of the white art of telling the truth was Alexander Nikolayevich Ostrovsky (1823-86). That he succeeded we can tell from the fact that, during the Soviet era, when bourgeois taste was banished from the cultural scene, his works continued to exercise influence; and the statue of his brooding figure was allowed to remain outside the theatre which he established, across the square from the Bolshoi ballet.

In his works we see how a fertile mind can use stagecraft rather than Molotov cocktails to subvert tyranny, by holding up to ridicule the characters who held power over other people's lives.

Ostrovsky wrote more than 50 plays. He is credited with virtually inventing the Russian national repertory, laying the foundations for the Moscow Art Theatre. He was the son of a rich merchant who was ruthless in laying bare

the shameful poverty of his society.

In *The Forest* he exposes the petty concerns of the rich rural landowning class which deluded itself with notions of generosity even as it squeezed the peasants to maximise their rents. *The Forest* was first staged in 1870, nearly 10 years after the abolition of serfdom. The central character, Raisa Pavlovna Gurmyzhskaya is a middle-aged landowner with amorous designs on a younger man.

She was anxious to assure her friends that "Everything I own, my worldly possessions, all my money, belongs to the poor, doesn't it?"

Ostrovsky captures the hypocrisy over the ownership of wealth with telling lines like: "I'm only looking after it while I'm here – you and I, we're only custodians. The true owners of our wealth are every poor unfortunate person who ever walked this earth."

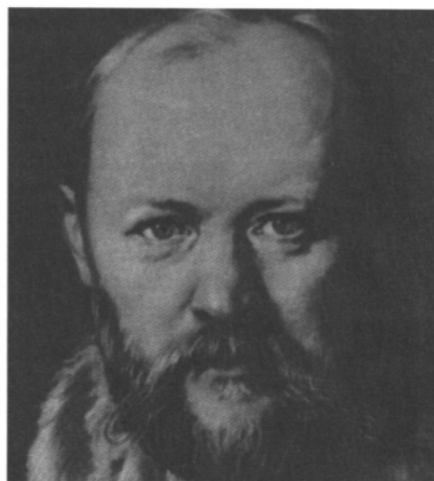
*The Forest* has just completed a run at London's Royal

National Theatre, with Frances de la Tour acclaimed for her performance in the role of the tight fisted landowner. As one critic noted, de la Tour "captures a fascinating mix of unearned grandeur, gurgling, girlish infatuation and grasping greed; at times you find yourself feeling almost sorry for the preposterous old boot, but her implacable meanness

of spirit finally chills the blood".

This was a broth designed to cheat the pencil of the censor, but to the newly emancipated peasants on the great estates it was vitriolic stuff which helped to corrode the traditional deference shown by the serfs to their landlords.

The script for the National production was adapted by Alan Ayckbourn. His injection of a few modern vernacular phrases jarred; I would have preferred a more faithful rendition of the original, but nonetheless in the hands of talented comedy actors like Michael Williams and Windsor Davies the mischievous intentions of the playwright are brilliantly deployed to convey a sense of the corrupting fabric of rural Russia in the days when the whim of a frustrated spinster could exercise a life-or-death fate over people who were locked into her orbit of influence – the boundaries of her estate.



■ Alexander N. Ostrovsky

## The Justice of the Peace

Hilaire Belloc

HILAIRE BELLOC was born in 1870, the son of a French barrister. He served in the French artillery and studied at Oxford before his election as Liberal MP for Salford in 1906. His party was radicalised by the philosophy of American social reformer Henry George. The Liberal government clashed with the House of Lords, which opposed the government's plan to tax the value of land.

Belloc remained an MP through the constitutional crisis to 1910, when he withdrew from politics as the party of Lloyd George and Winston Churchill hammered home what they regarded as the evils of the private exploitation of publicly created land values. The Welsh statesman roused crowds at the hustings, and Churchill applied his forensic mind to hone his speeches. But the poetical Belloc preferred satire. He exposed the pretentious claims of the aristocracy in *The Justice of the Peace*.

Distinguish carefully between these two,

This thing is yours, that other thing is mine.

You have a shirt, a brimless hat, a shoe

And half a coat. I am the Lord benign

Of fifty hundred acres of fat land

To which I have a right. You understand?

I have a right because I have, because,

Because I have – because I have a right.

Now be quite calm and good, obey the laws,

Remember your low station, do not fight

Against the goad, because, you know, it pricks

Whenever the uncleanly demos kicks.

I do not envy you your hat, your shoe.

Why should you envy me my small estate?

It's fearfully illogical in you

To fight with economic force and fate.

Moreover, I have got the upper hand,

And mean to keep it. Do you understand?

Source: Hilaire Belloc, *Complete Verse*, Gerald Duckworth, London, 1970, p.147.