

August

(Dir. Anthony Hopkins)

Comparisons with Louis Malle's *Vanya on 42nd St.* (the film version of André Gregory's adaptation of *Uncle Vanya*) are inevitable, but the latest treatment of the Chekhov classic stands on its own both as a film and as a strong directorial debut for Sir Anthony Hopkins. *August*, starring Hopkins as Ieuan (pronounced Eeya-wan) and with a score also by Hopkins, is itself based on a play: Julian Mitchell's transposition of *Uncle Vanya* to North Wales at the end of a summer in the 1890s. *August*, like its predecessor, is a farce with a deep, underlying sadness, and in this respect, it is very faithful to the original Russian combination of irony, pathos and quiet millennial angst. The Welsh setting in no way detracts from the play's specific qualities; if anything, it enhances a contemporary English-speaking audience's appreciation of the work. And while *August* bears a superficial resemblance to Merchant-Ivory product, its content is still undeniably Chekhov, and Chekhov, thank God, is no E.M. Forster.

August spans one hot late summer weekend at a large country estate run by Ieuan and his step-niece Sian (Rhian Morgan). Sian's father, Professor Blathwaite (Leslie Phillips), a retired academic who lives off the estate's diminishing profits, is visiting with his much younger, American wife Helen (Kate Burton, daughter of Sir Richard). The conflict that drives the plot is provided quite simply by the latter's presence: "Herr Professor" (as Ieuan unaffectionately calls him) disrupts everyone's routine with his demanding, pedantic crankiness, and Helen inspires futile longing in both Ieuan and Doctor Lloyd (Gawn Grainger), both of whom as a result shirk responsibility, finding solace in smoking, drinking, and uttering the good Welsh-inflected dialogue. Sian, who is in love with the Doctor, is the most sympathetic character (the running of the estate falls largely to her), but to a large extent it is the unsympathetic ones who are the most interesting. Helen, for her part, has brought all her unhappiness on herself by marrying a man so much older and so incompatible. Hopkins' Ieuan (like Wallace Shawn's Uncle Vanya), is a difficult central character if only because the reasons for his suffering appear so trite. Ieuan manifests a cynicism that seems out of all proportion until we realize that, from his point of view, he has devoted the best years of his life to funding the Professor's undeservingly distinguished academic career.

The beauty of Chekhov's play is that it manages to seduce us into somehow caring for these relatively pathetic individuals whose lives are obviously so much easier than those of the poor domestics, farmworkers and slate miners around them. *August*, like *Uncle Vanya*, details a very specific class of people at a specific historical moment; a moment in which the uncertainty of the future is nothing compared to the mundane horror of suddenly recognizing that not only is the past irrecoverable, but it has been wasted.

-Russ Kilbourn