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M A R Q U E E

By John Freedman

Boris Yukhananov's production of Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard," called "Orchard," for his own Studio of Personalized Directing, can get bizarre. Running about seven hours over two days, it is a formless journey ranging far beyond Chekhov's text. The characters, looking like plants, insects or ragged 18th-century courtiers, emerge from an inflatable spaceship and interact with the intensity of a cherry tree seed germinating. Interesting in conception, it is aggressively self-indulgent in reality. Until now, anyway. The show, which has slowly evolved since it first appeared in 1990, was recently joined by an extraordinary group of youngsters with Down's syndrome. They freely move in and out of the action, echoing the primary characters, or bringing their own interests into play. One, an intense, even tragically inclined, boy recites poems that seem to be of his own composition and are so powerful they simply stop all other action. Others include two tender boys who tirelessly escort the actors about; a shy but divinely smiling girl with a crooked flute; and a delightfully sly boy surreptitiously sneaking about the stage.

Their sincerity, ardor and faith in the magic of the theatrical process has a stunning effect, creating the true atmosphere of genuine avant-garde art. When this production works — as it does when the kids are on stage — it is a stunning, purifying revelation. For information, call 207-0195.