THE PERSONAL TOUCH
By HELEN BALDWIN

Cherry Orchard Depicts Life
As It Is Today, Say the Cooks

We would like to have known, when we visited Anton Chekhov's home, now a museum, at Yalta on the Black Sea in the U.S.S.R. a few weeks ago that we'd soon be seeing a performance of his work in Baylor Theater.

We'll see The Cherry Orchard one night during the coming week. Pat and Bill Cook staged the first performance Friday night, the second Saturday night, and there'll be a show every night during the coming week at the theater.

CHEKHOV, WE LEARNED in the Soviet Union, was a poor boy, son of a small store operator, grandson of a serf. He was hard put to find money to educate himself as a physician. He eventually died of tuberculosis, from which he was suffering when he wrote The Cherry Orchard, a few months after it was performed in Moscow. His death was mourned as a national loss. Flocks of admiring countrymen were visiting his home museum while we were in it.

WHAT HE REALLY wanted to do was to write. He discovered his talent when he picked up some spare money during his medical education by writing sketches.

He turned out to be a first class story teller. By the time he was 30 Moscow Art Theater had produced his plays. He married Olga Tritt, a leading Russian actress, only two years before his death. Today he is considered one of Russia's most in-produced in that country to show the faults of the disappeared class, to minimize the faults, lacks, failures of the former peasants.

But Chekhov actually does not take sides. He sees—and lets his audience see the good and bad of both sides.

HE PICTURES the social futility of the declining top class. He lets an audience glimpse the equal futility of "lower classes," the people crushed by life, distorted by fate, dehumanized by man's cruel and stupid condition.

His characters, victims of triviality who can't communicate their love, their loneliness, their defeat, finally drown in resignation. They don't do much on stage. But you realize they suffer. Passing of an old order does not leave a mere vacuum.

MADAME RANEVSKAYA, who owns the cherry orchard and the property surrounding it,
BAYLOR THEATER is using Tyrone Guthrie's translation of The Cherry Orchard. An accurate literal translation is not enough, this leading theater director says. A Russian writer will make a character say, "My heart is un speakably oppressed" or "My soul is filled with dark forebodings." In English a character says "I feel depressed" or "I am anxious, as we are chary where Russians are proclival in referring to our hearts and souls.

THE COOKS hope to bring Guthrie to Baylor next spring. He wants to see the only "thrust stage" in the Southwest in Weston Studio. This means the audience sits on three sides, watches the action from above. Guthrie has directed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, at the Old Vic in London, has had such actors as Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud, Richard Burton, Ralph Richardson lead his casts. He established the Shakespeare Theater at Stratford, Canada, and the Tyrone Guthrie Theater named for him in Minneapolis.

BAYLOR'S IS the first university theater to use his translation of The Cherry Orchard. So the Minneapolis theater has already asked for photographs, press releases, examples of how the play is being used here.

The Cooks believe the play is timely because many similarities exist in American life today and in the life of a Russian at the turn of this century, when one way of life was dying out and another was crumbling into place.

CHEKHOV LIVED during the time the landed gentry were being dispossessed in Russia. They could not cope with the new world they saw dawning. During the playwright's time the drama was shown to audiences of aristocrats. Today it wants to sell it to free persons of the binding ancestral ties and to speed back to an unsatisfying lover she had had during her widowhood.

Friend Trofimov says "What difference does it make whether the estate is sold today or not? It's all over. There's no turning back. It's the end of the road. What's the good of deceiving yourself? For once in your life look the truth straight in the face."

"WHAT IS THE TRUTH?" he asks him, puzzled. "You took ahead so confidently. That's because you haven't come to grips with life. You're more confused, more honest, more profound than we. But look at it from my point of view and be as generous as you can.

'I was born here. My father and mother lived here; my grandfather. I love this house. I simply couldn't live without the cherry orchard. My son was drowned here. But I can't go away by myself. The silence frightens me.

AND OF HER LIAISON with the distant lover, she says, "That wild creature is ill again. He imposes me to forgive him and begs me to come to him. What is one to do? What SHALL I do? He's ill; he's all alone, he's unhappy, who's to look after him?"

"What's the use of pretending? Why not be open about it? I love him. He's a millstone around my neck. He's dragging me with him down to the depths. But I love my millstone. I can't live without him."

RUSSIAN LITERATURE is believed by many westerners to have emerged from the darkness of that country's despotism and barbarity only within the last 100 years. Its profound rejection of pretense, its ring of sincerity as Chekhov writes it, its combination of irony and compassion, have built his world-wide reputation as a dramatist.

The Cooks believe, with many admirers of Chekhov, that what his play means may hit when the spectator goes home and starts thinking about what has been seen. Sometimes this delayed effect bears the force of a discovery, or a revelation, about life. These undertones are what keeps Chekhov plays in demand.

Four Wacoans are in the cast of the show being staged this week. They are Charles Batte, Bob Guthrie, Jeanie Guzman and in Bob Wayne Ousley.