

Anton Chekhov's first substantial play, known as *Platonov*, was never performed during his lifetime. It's not hard to see why, as the original script is an indulgent seven-hour epic with an excess of action and melodrama.

The play nevertheless contains intriguing prototypes of the wonderful characters who would inhabit Chekhov's later great plays, and thus has attracted the attention of many writers and directors since its posthumous publication in 1923.

*Platonov* has recently been reworked by Michael Frayn and David Hare, and it's the latter's version that sparked the interest of Simon Stone, the 23-year-old artistic director of the Hayloft Project.

This new Melbourne company sprang to critical attention last year with its premiere production, *Spring Awakening*, and has just taken up residence in a converted warehouse in Yarraville.

Hayloft's *Platonov* is an ambitious, courageous production, and Evan Granger's striking design makes an immediate impact, setting the action in a shallow 10-metre-by-five-metre pool filled with water. This unexpected staging is dotted with fragments of 19th-century furniture, creating a productive dialectic between naturalism and absurdism. The water also suggests a metaphor on Platonov's life - a character who appears deep and reflective on the surface, but who is gradually exposed as thoroughly shallow.

The opening scenes are very effective, as the various characters establish themselves. Chris Ryan is terrific as Chekhov's alter ego Nikolai, adroitly jumping from infectious bonhomie to savage bursts of anger. Meredith Penman brings depth and complexity to the widow Anna Petrovna, and Angus Grant finds just the right nervous goodwill as her cuckolded stepson Sergei Pavlovich.

Simon Stone achieves a lot in the first half, both in his adaptation of the script and the nuances of direction. He is not quite as successful stepping into the shoes of the title role, however, especially in the second half where Platonov becomes the absolute centre of the play, and the script wallows in the sort of heavy-handed moralising that the mature Chekhov would later learn to eschew.

Stone's decision to conflate the mis-en-scene of the final scenes sets up a dream-like atmosphere, though the excessive variety of acting styles undermines the integrity of the action.

It didn't help that on opening night the auditorium was infiltrated by the muted wailing and throbbing of a thrash metal band rehearsing elsewhere in the warehouse.

Full marks to this company nevertheless for its ambitious enterprise - and for maintaining its nerve in such circumstances.