

The Three Sisters

by
Anton Chekhov

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The Three Sisters Pdf

By

Anton Chekhov



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AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

Carey Perloff, Artistic Director

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PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

The Three Sisters

BY ANTON CHEKHOV

TRANSLATED BY PAUL SCHMIDT

DIRECTED BY CAREY PERLOFF

GEARY THEATER

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A.C.T.
american conservatory theater

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CHARACTERS AND SYNOPSIS OF *THE THREE SISTERS*

CHARACTERS AND CAST

| | |
|--|----------------------|
| Andréi Prózorov, <i>the son of an army commander</i> | Tommy A. Gomez |
| Ólga, <i>Andréi's eldest sister</i> | Lorri Holt |
| Másha, <i>Andréi's second sister</i> | René Augesen |
| Írina, <i>Andréi's third sister</i> | Katharine Powell |
| Natásha, <i>a local girl, later Andréi's wife</i> | Mirjana Jokovic |
| Kulýgin, <i>Másha's husband, a high school teacher</i> | Gregory Wallace |
| Vershínin, <i>colonel, battery commander</i> | Marco Barricelli |
| Baron Túzenbach, <i>first lieutenant</i> | Anthony Fusco |
| Solyóny, <i>captain</i> | John Keating |
| Chebútýkin, <i>army doctor</i> | Steven Anthony Jones |
| Fedótik, <i>second lieutenant</i> | Jacob Ming-Trent |
| Róhde, <i>second lieutenant</i> | Brud Fogarty |
| Ferapónt, <i>an old porter from the Council Office</i> | Frank Ottiwell |
| Anfísa, <i>the Prózorovs' nurse</i> | Joan Mankin |
| Orderly/Musician | David Ryan Smith |
| Nurse/Maid | Jenny Lord |

PLACE AND TIME

The Three Sisters takes place over four years in and around the Prózorovs' house in a small Russian town in the early 20th century.

SYNOPSIS

Act 1. **The Prózorov home. May.** The three Prózorov sisters, Ólga, Másha, and Írina, are in their living room, talking wistfully about their desire to leave the small garrison town in which they have found themselves trapped and to return to Moscow. It is Sunday and Írina's birthday; one year has passed since their father died. As a small group of army officers joins them, Írina declares that she has found the key to happiness: working. Her longing for the day she can work inspires Túzenbach, a first lieutenant, but the others are more skeptical, including her hard-working schoolteacher sister, Ólga. Másha, depressed by the emptiness of the once-full house, sets off for her own home. Before she goes, however, Ferapónt delivers a birthday cake, a present for Írina from Protopópov,

chairman of the County Council. Chebutýkin, an army doctor who has known the girls since their childhood and rents a downstairs room from their family, appears with his own gift, an expensive silver tea set that upsets the sisters with its extravagance.

Anfisa, the family's nurse, announces the arrival of Colonel Vershínin, the new commanding officer of the town's army garrison. The sisters are delighted to learn that he is from Moscow, was once an officer in their father's battery, and knew them when they were little girls. They all become fast friends, sharing memories of Moscow.

Andréi, the sisters' brother, comes in from the next room. His sisters tease him about being in love with Natásha, a local girl whose garish taste they disdain. Kulýgin, Másha's husband and a teacher at the high school, arrives for the birthday celebration, ecstatic that he and Másha are to join the headmaster that afternoon for an outing with other teachers and their families. Másha, however, is utterly bored by the prospect. Ólga announces lunch, and as everyone sits down to eat, Irína and Túzenbach are left alone. Túzenbach expresses his love for her, but Irína clings to work, not love, as her salvation. They are interrupted by the entrance of Natásha, dressed so garishly that Ólga can't hold back an exclamation of surprise. At the table, love and marriage are the topic of conversation. Natásha is teased by the others and leaves the table. Andréi comforts her, telling her that he loves her. He proposes marriage while Fedótik entertains everyone with an aria from Glinka's opera *Ruslan and Ludmila*.

A ct II. A year and a half later. Winter (Carnival Night). Natásha and Andréi, now married and the parents of a baby boy, Bobik, discuss Andréi's sisters: Ólga is successful as a teacher, and Irína works in a telegraph office. Natásha has decided that the carnival people, who were supposed to stop by that evening, should be turned away for the sake of Bobik, whom she says is becoming ill. Andréi doesn't have the heart to refuse her, even though he knows that his sisters have invited guests and are looking forward to a night of music and dancing.

2 Ferapónt brings books and papers from Protopófov, and Andréi, now secretary of the County Council, is reminded of how circumscribed his life is in this small town. He, too, longs to return to Moscow.

As Andréi leaves for his room, Másha and Vershínin come in, discussing the limited sensitivity and intelligence of the people in the town, civilians and military alike. Neither is happy with his/her spouse, and each has found solace in the other. They are joined by Irína and Túzenbach. Although she had hoped to find salvation in working, Irína is instead worn out and depressed—and worried because Andréi has been losing money at cards. Chebutýkin sits at the table to wait for tea to be served. He calls Irína over to keep him

company, as Vershínin and Túzenbach philosophize about the future. Túzenbach announces his intention to resign from the military and go to work.

More officers and Natásha join the group as Anfisa brings in tea, along with a note for Vershínin from his daughter. Vershínin's wife has attempted suicide again, and he leaves to deal with the situation. Másha loses her temper and makes a scene. Túzenbach, armed with cognac, tries to befriend Solyóny, who has a tendency to be sullen and rude. Solyóny insists that he is simply more honest than most people, and proceeds to argue first with Chebutýkin and then with Andréi, who has reappeared. A spirit of revelry grips the group, as the liquor flows and songs are sung. Suddenly Natásha, concerned about Bobik, brings everything to a halt, and tells Chebutýkin to get everyone to leave. Chebutýkin and Andréi slip back through the living room on their way to play cards. Solyóny enters, bewildered by the party's sudden disappearance; finding Irína, he confesses his love for her even as he apologizes for his earlier rudeness. He swears to kill any rival for her love. Solyóny leaves, as Natásha enters to tell Irína that she should give up her bedroom for Bobik and move in with Ólga.

Kulýgin and Ólga return from a school board meeting, with Vershínin. Ólga has been working too hard and is exhausted. Kulýgin, finding no party, leaves for home, while Vershínin, now that his wife is out of danger, leaves to find something to do. Natásha breezes through on her way to a sleigh ride with Protopópov, and Irína is left alone, longing for Moscow.

Act III. The next year. A summer night at 2 A.M. A fire rages in the town; it has destroyed Fedótik's house and come close to consuming Vershínin's. In Ólga and Irína's room, Ólga gives Anfisa old clothes to take downstairs to the people whose houses have burned. She also makes plans to house as many fire victims as she can. Anfisa, exhausted, begs Ólga not to send her away. Natásha, who is now also the mother of a daughter, Sophie, enters and chastises Anfisa for sitting in her presence. Ólga begs Natásha not to make scenes like that, because vulgarity upsets her. Natásha, chagrined that she has hurt Ólga's feelings, nevertheless insists that the house is her domain and she can do what she likes; she wants to get rid of Anfisa because she is too old to work any more. Natásha is convinced that Ólga will be the next headmistress of the high school and that the only way their domestic squabbles will end is if Ólga moves out.

Kulýgin enters, looking for Másha. He hears Chebutýkin coming up the stairs—drunk—and hides behind a screen. Ólga and Natásha slip out as Chebutýkin comes in, mumbling furiously to himself about having forgotten all of his medical knowledge. Irína, Vershínin, and Túzenbach come in, Vershínin glowing over his soldiers' brave efforts to

combat the fire. Túzenbach, now a civilian, has been asked to organize a concert to benefit the victims of the fire, and wants to ask Másha to play piano. Kulýgin, always concerned with what the headmaster of the high school will think, is not sure that would be proper. Vershínin has heard that the brigade will be transferred to a distant post.

Chebutýkin, raging drunk, breaks a clock that had belonged to the Prózorovs' mother and leaves the room. Vershínin says that earlier that night, during the fire, he found his two daughters standing terrified on the steps of his house in nothing but their underwear; he brought them to the Prózorovs' home only to find his angry wife already there. He expresses sadness about the difficulties his girls will have to face in their lifetime. Everyone has fallen asleep but Másha, who has just come in, and Vershínin tells her of his faith that, in time, the town will be full of people of intelligence and sensitivity like her. They arrange a covert assignment.

Fedótik arrives to announce giddily that everything he owned has been destroyed in the fire. Solyóny tries to enter, jealous of Túzenbach, who seems to be winning Irína over. Irína tells him he may not come in. Vershínin takes Solyóny downstairs as Túzenbach, who has fallen asleep, wakes up and tries to speak privately to Irína. Másha insists that he leave, then expresses her frustration at the fact that Andréi has mortgaged their family home and Natásha has taken the money. Kulýgin encourages her to lie down and rest, and goes downstairs to wait for her. Irína, upset about Andréi's dissipation and abandonment of his dreams, bursts into tears, certain that she is forgetting everything their father taught them and that they will never get to Moscow. Although she has changed jobs, she is still miserable and disillusioned about her future. Ólga advises her to marry Baron Túzenbach, insisting that love isn't necessary, so long as the man she marries is honest. Másha confesses that she is in love with Vershínin.

Andréi enters, sees that all his sisters are there, and demands to know what they have against him. Másha hears Vershínin outside and leaves to join him, as Ólga begs Andréi to wait until tomorrow to discuss everything. But Andréi is determined to have his say. He reprimands Ólga and Irína for being snobs to Natásha; he defends his choice to join the city council rather than become a scientist; and he apologizes for mortgaging the house to pay his gambling debts. Kulýgin passes through, searching for Másha; Andréi leaves, upset about the dissension in the house. Irína tells Ólga she will marry Túzenbach—but only with the hope that they can all go to Moscow at last.

Act iv. A year later. Autumn. Fedótik sings as the scene shifts to the Prózorovs' garden. Irína, Kulýgin, and Túzenbach say goodbye to Fedótik and Rhóde, who are leaving with the rest of the brigade that afternoon. Chebutýkin, who has one year left before

he retires, will join them in two days. Irína asks him what happened on the boulevard the day before, and Kulýgin answers that jealous Solyóny was teasing Túzenbach. Irína and Túzenbach are to be married the next day, and the day after that will move to another town, where Irína will start teaching. She and Kulýgin go into the house to welcome Ólga, who is now headmistress of the high school and living with Anfisa in a faculty apartment.

Másha wanders into the garden, commenting about how bitter she has become. Andréi, wheeling a baby carriage, notes how empty the town will be without the soldiers. He asks what happened on the boulevard the day before, and Chebutýkin tries to dismiss the confrontation between Solyóny and Túzenbach, but lets slip that it ended in Solyóny challenging Túzenbach to a duel. Chebutýkin is to serve as the doctor in attendance. Másha wanders off again as Andréi confesses to Chebutýkin that he no longer loves Natásha. Chebutýkin advises him to leave her, as Solyóny arrives to take Chebutýkin to the duel. Andréi pushes the baby carriage off, pursued by Ferapónt with papers for him to sign.

Túzenbach and Irína come back into the garden. Irína asks him why he's behaving so strangely, but he does not tell her about the duel. Instead, he professes his love for her and his regret that she does not love him. Irína wishes she could return his love, but feels that her soul "is like a piano that's been locked up and the key's lost." Túzenbach leaves for the duel as Andréi returns, pursued by Ferapónt. Andréi mourns the loss of his idealistic youth and the stupidity of the town. Natásha admonishes Andréi, telling him not to wake Sophie, who is asleep in the carriage. Andréi goes inside, looking through the papers Ferapónt delivered.

Ólga, Anfisa, Irína, and Vershínin listen to passing street musicians for a moment, before Vershínin says he must leave. Anfisa and Irína go to search the garden for Másha, leaving Vershínin and Ólga to lament his departure. Másha and Vershínin kiss their farewell, and Másha bursts into tears as he leaves; Ólga comforts her. Kulýgin comes in, ready to forgive Másha for her infidelity. Irína comes back, and they try to cheer each other up, as a shot is heard in the distance. Natásha appears, praising her children and planning what she will do to the house and the grounds as soon as Irína leaves. As she goes out, Chebutýkin comes back with the news that Túzenbach was killed in the duel. March music plays in the distance as the brigade departs. ■

A FAMILY AFFAIR

The Three Sisters at A.C.T.

BY PAUL WALSH

A few years ago A.C.T. Artistic Director Carey Perloff asked the members of A.C.T.'s core acting company—René Augesen, Marco Barricelli, Steven Anthony Jones, and Gregory Wallace—what plays they were most interested in exploring. It's not surprising that Anton Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* was at the top of their lists. For nearly a century Chekhov has stood next to Shakespeare as a pillar of the world repertory because, like Shakespeare, he speaks with such perspicacity and precision about issues and questions that continue to engage us as citizens of the modern world. Chekhov's characters search relentlessly for meaning. They talk about, they think about, they wonder about, and they try to imagine a future world that is slowly coming into being. And in the process they try to discover a way of orienting themselves in a disorienting world. The directness of their engagement with a predicament that is so acutely modern is as reassuring as it is moving and as humorous as it is human.

Chekhov's three Prózorov sisters—Ólga, Másha, and Irína—with their brother, Andréi, long to leave the provincial garrison town where their father once commanded the artillery regiment. Since their father's death, they have felt the beauty and meaning of their lives diminish. They long for love, they fantasize about meaningful work, they clutch at illusions of a nebulous and perhaps unattainable future they would like to wish into being. And each day they renew their yearning to return to Moscow. Into this plain, provincial existence come flashes of love and the possibility of change, most notably for Másha (played by René Augesen) when a new colonel, Vershínin (played by Marco Barricelli), comes to the garrison from Moscow. Though the love is brief and perhaps doomed from the start, it revivifies the sisters, who find, at least for a time, a new sense of hope and purpose.

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A NEW KIND OF DRAMA

Written in 1900 and first produced the following year, *The Three Sisters* reaches into the depths of a society on the brink of the unfathomable changes of the coming century. In a few years, the democratic movement against the autocracy of the tsars that had begun in the 1870s would explode in the 1905 Revolution, itself a harbinger of the more sweeping changes that would come with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

In *The Three Sisters* Chekhov, who aligned himself with the democratic movement but stayed out of partisan politics, provides a moving and at times humorous glimpse of

people longing for something different, yet holding on resolutely to what they have. As he said himself about his task as playwright: “What I want is to say to people with great honesty: ‘Look at yourselves and see how dreary your lives are!’ Once people realize that, they will most certainly create another and better life for themselves.”

Chekhov wrote *The Three Sisters* for the actors at Konstantin Stanislavsky’s recently formed Moscow Art Theatre. Because he knew the actors of Stanislavsky’s company so well and admired their collective talents, he dared to break with the melodramatic traditions of dramatic writing common in his day and instead write a play that demanded nuanced and detailed ensemble playing. In this, Chekhov has been heralded as the creator of a new kind of drama for a new century: a drama of intricate and complex characters who reveal themselves slowly and with touching honesty; a drama in which what is left unsaid is as important as what is said, and in which the movement of thought is more important than twists of plot. As Gregory Wallace, who plays Másha’s cuckolded husband, Kulýgin, says: “Chekhov introduced shades of gray to a theatrical spectrum that had been dominated by melodrama, by polarities of black and white, good and bad, right and wrong. Chekhov abolished that polarity, and the results are amazing. He insisted that we recognize that life is more complicated than that.”

A GIFT FOR ACTORS

The challenges for actors posed by such a play are exquisite, which is perhaps why actors love Chekhov’s plays so dearly. *The Three Sisters* is one of René Augesen’s favorite plays because, she says, “the characters are so hard and so real and so incredibly passionate. Every single one of them, without exception, bubbles with longing, with passion, with humor.” Marco Barricelli concurs: “Chekhov is a gift for actors. There is virtually nothing in Chekhov that a person cannot connect to. Even though his characters are Russian and from another period of history, their dilemmas, their fears, their hopes and joys are universal. He’s like Shakespeare. He leads you to a more profound understanding of yourself and of the human dilemma.”

Augesen looks forward to tackling the demanding role of Másha: “I think there is an enormous aloneness about her,” Augesen says. “She starts the play in a place of extreme mental and emotional and physical confusion and aloneness. And throughout the course of the play she experiences something that is all encompassing and passionate and beautiful and lovely. Who wouldn’t want to experience that? Who wouldn’t want, for however briefly, to be able to feel even a fraction of what she feels? Something that has been dormant or dead for so long inside her comes alive again—a love, a hope. How must it feel to have hope suddenly given to you again without even really knowing what it is? It must be extraordinary.”

Similarly for Wallace there is an enticing “purity of spirit and purity of intent” to the pedantic schoolmaster Kulýgin that he is anxious to explore. “This is someone who is just interested in doing good, and in making sure that everything is right. But he also has great complexity. There is always great complexity to anyone who thinks in a deeply sincere way about what is right and what is wrong.”

“The characters in Chekhov do not see the irony of their situation,” says director Carey Perloff, who returns to Chekhov for the first time since her acclaimed 1994 production of *Uncle Vanya* for A.C.T. “Their own unhappiness seems to blind them to the fact that they cause so much unhappiness in other people. That’s partly where the comedy of the play comes from. Their hungers are too great. When you’re profoundly restless and the temperature outside is below zero and there’s no place to go, that tremendous longing and restlessness just get bigger and bigger. There are moments in the play when all the characters think they’re going slightly mad. I think that comes from having an excess of energy and no place to put it.”

SECRETS AND SADNESS

There is a story famous in theatrical circles that after the first reading of *The Three Sisters* at the Moscow Art Theatre, Chekhov accused Stanislavsky of ruining his comedy by treating it as a drama. He had written a “vaudeville,” he shouted, and Stanislavsky was treating it as a tragedy. The fact is that this is a play that defies categorization. It is at once heart-breakingly sad and surprisingly funny, because it is so immediate and so human. “Human beings are kind of funny if you sit back and watch us,” says Steven Anthony Jones, who plays the ineffectual doctor Chebutýkin. “We create problems for ourselves that are unnecessary. If our behavior were simply dictated by the fact that we’re just big mammals, life would be much simpler. But we make the simplest thing very, very complicated, which is funny and tragic at the same time.”

Perloff agrees: “These are characters who have lived in a century full of suffering and angst. As Beckett said, ‘Nothing is funnier than unhappiness.’ These characters are really unhappy, which is why the play is so funny.”

The Three Sisters is, as Perloff says, a play “filled with badly kept secrets. As in any family, these characters all believe that what they feel is a secret—until they realize everybody else already knows. I think part of the humor of the play comes from trying to figure out who actually knows what, coupled with the fact that, if everyone already knows about your carefully concealed secrets, when you finally do confess it doesn’t matter. We build to these moments in our lives when we are finally ready to expose our innermost desires—like Másha saying to her sisters, ‘I’m in love with Vershínin,’ or Túzenbach saying to Solyóny,

I'm giving up the military'—but our great, momentous news is greeted with total indifference. It's just not important to anyone else because everybody has known about it all along, or they're completely occupied with their own lives and don't care."

INTIMATE CONNECTIONS

Perloff had considered directing *The Three Sisters* for years, but was hesitant to do so without a core acting ensemble in place. "Without a real ensemble, the kind of connective tissue that this play demands would be almost impossible to find in rehearsal." Barricelli, who has been a member of A.C.T.'s core company for several years, concurs: "Here is the payoff of having a company. Material like this requires vulnerability and a deep connection that is nearly impossible to achieve under the normal circumstances of producing plays in this country. Usually you meet the other actors for the first time on the first day of rehearsal, and you have just four weeks to build a relationship that will inform what you do onstage. It's nearly impossible to succeed. But we [the members of A.C.T.'s core acting company] have already taken these steps. So instead of starting on the first rung of the ladder we're starting halfway up."

There is excitement around A.C.T. these days as a dedicated ensemble of actors prepares to perform a great play by a great playwright. Mingled with the excitement, and the anxiety, is a hint of reassurance and renewal that comes with working on a play by Chekhov. Olga Knipper, Chekhov's wife and the original Másha in the Moscow Art Theatre production of *The Three Sisters*, tells the story of a day when two locals came to Chekhov's home in Yalta to ask the good doctor for spiritual advice. "Why do you come to him?" she asked them: "He's not a preacher." With a simple smile one replied: "Because when we sit beside him, even though in silence, we depart renewed." It is this same experience of finding ourselves and our faith in life renewed that has drawn actors and audiences to the plays of Anton Chekhov for more than a century. ■

HOW WILL WE LIVE?

BY JESSICA WERNER

Sometimes I think what it would be like to start life all over again, and do it deliberately,” says Colonel Vershinin in the first act of *The Three Sisters*. “The life we’d already lived would be a kind of rough draft, and the new one would be a clean copy!” Characters in Chekhov’s plays consistently echo this desire to shed one’s illusions and mistakes, to greet the future with greater clarity and self-awareness. This theme of questioning what might constitute a happy life—which particular mysterious admixture of toil and folly, the known and unknown, the romantic and the mundane—suffuses many of Chekhov’s short stories and all four of his great plays: *The Seagull* (1896), *Uncle Vanya* (1899), *The Three Sisters* (1901), and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904).

Women and men in Chekhov’s all-too-real theatrical worlds, in which hopes and dreams are so often dashed, search relentlessly for meaning, and ultimately for happiness, wondering all the while if the two are possible in a world that doesn’t grant second chances. “Life is given us only once,” says the consumptive narrator of Chekhov’s 1893 short story “An Anonymous Story,” “and one wants to live it boldly, with full consciousness and beauty.” This line, or its variant, appears repeatedly throughout Chekhov’s oeuvre. The will to live—and thereby to learn and to grow—in the face of life’s supreme uncertainties is heard in the reflections, actions, and arguments of *The Three Sisters*’s Prózorov family and their community of friends and lovers. Hope springs from the mouths of the seemingly hopeless. In spite of everything—loss, confusion, heartbreak—Vershinin retains “a terrific desire to live.” Másha declares that they “must go on living.” Ólga affirms that they “*want to live!*” Perhaps it is this resilient will to embrace one’s future, this commitment to the risk-filled adventure that is modern life, with its abundant ironies and disappointments, that has made Chekhov’s plays resonate with theatergoers for more than 100 years.

ON THE BRINK OF A NEW AGE

The 20th century had only just dawned when the Moscow press reported, with its customary zeal for the progress reports (both personal and professional) of Russia’s beloved storyteller, that Anton Chekhov was working on a new play. In March 1900, the 40-year-old Chekhov wrote to Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (cofounder with Konstantin Stanislavsky of the Moscow Art Theatre, which presented all four of Chekhov’s full-length plays) that “it’s pecking through the shell,” his first reference to what would take shape within the year as *The Three Sisters*.

The play's turn-of-the-century setting is significant. As Chekhov worked on what would arguably become the greatest and most influential play of the 20th century, Russia's democratic movement against the autocracy of the tsars was gathering momentum, premonitions of the 1905 Revolution were on the horizon, and radical changes would soon usher Russia into the modern era.

Sitting on the brink of a new age, Chekhov's characters engage directly with the challenge of trying to discern a new way of orienting themselves in a disorienting world. Through their longings, Chekhov asks us to consider the truths that are our birthright, and whether it is imperative, in the face of uncertainty, to buttress one's sense of self against the threat of the unknown.

The Three Sisters's army lieutenant Tüzenbach speculates about "a storm gathering, a wild, elemental storm," and hints of changes to come, both mild and monumental, are uttered by characters throughout the play: What will the future look like? Will it—and will *I*—be recognizable? How will we live? When nothing has worked out as one hoped, is faith, or love, or industriousness any consolation? "This is a play that sits on the edge of the future," says director Carey Perloff. "These people want to be part of the 20th century. You do feel like something has woken them all up—but has it given them what they need to greet tomorrow?"

LIKE LIFE ITSELF

The Three Sisters has been interpreted alternately as a tragedy and a comedy. On the play's title page Chekhov wrote the words "A Drama," distinguishing it from what he considered his "vaudeville," *Uncle Vanya*, written just one year prior. It has also been viewed as an apolitical rendering of idleness, and as a pre-Revolutionary farce deriding fin-de-siècle decadence. The fact is that the play defies categorization, yet no one disputes its significance as the harbinger of an altogether new kind of drama. With *The Three Sisters*, the playwright whose name alone would one day conjure the notion of "subtext"—what characters are thinking but not necessarily saying—forever changed the way plays are written, acted, and experienced. Chekhov is credited with banishing melodrama from the modern stage. In its place he brought to life a world in which silences, interruptions, even fatuousness and ineptitude, are the agents that, surprisingly, reveal both the depth of human pain and the humor of the human predicament.

His characters can be seen as the prototypes of those that would appear in the theatrical imaginings of later playwrights such as Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, whose men and women confront the absurdity of human existence in a seemingly meaningless world. In Chekhov we find an essential, universal comprehension of human

that exists independently of context and even of plot. “This is the overwhelming demand of dramaturgy—this understanding, or its lack, divides those who can write from those who can *really* write: how much can one remove, and still have the composition be intelligible?” wrote David Mamet in a recent essay. “Chekhov removed the plot. Pinter, elaborating, removed the history, the narration; Beckett, the characterization. We hear it anyway.”

Actors still struggle with Chekhov’s insistence on leaving every moment open to interpretation. To the company of actors at the Moscow Art Theatre, for whom Chekhov specifically wrote *The Three Sisters*, it seemed he was out to create plays that sabotaged the very nature of drama, the history of a tradition that honored artificiality—the artificial nature of well-structured moments, conflicts, resolutions—as opposed to the messiness and unpredictability of real life. Disruption, lives turned upside down, catastrophe brought about by absurd accidents, people moving through a world where everything is somehow askew—these are some of the things that fascinated Chekhov. “His plays seem to have no shape, to pass no judgments, to be morally neutral—to be, in other words, like life itself,” writes biographer Philip Callow.

DETAILS ARE THE THING

The oddly, reassuringly hopeful tone that rings throughout *The Three Sisters* is itself astonishing, given that Chekhov suffered from tuberculosis for much of his adult life, and the illness was in its acute stage when he wrote his penultimate play. As early as 1884, at age 24, Chekhov had begun suffering from a deep cough that he tried to make light of to others, telling his family not to worry: “Oh, nothing; it’s no matter. . . . Don’t tell Masha and Mother,” he wrote to his brother that year, after Nicholas spied Anton’s handkerchief spattered with blood. But to his good friend and publisher Alexei Suvorin, he confided that “there’s something ominous about blood coming from the mouth like the glow of a fire.” The illness caused Chekhov great, intermittent pain (tuberculosis characteristically causes serious periods of debilitation, followed by apparent remission) and progressively impeded his ability to live a normal life—which surely informed his sense of human fragility and mortality.

Chekhov was trained as a physician before he became a writer, and continued to treat patients throughout his life, even after achieving tremendous fame for his short stories and plays. He spoke of medicine as his wife and writing as his mistress, that when he tired of one he spent time with the other. The struggle to reconcile being a doctor whom people trusted to alleviate their suffering with being a patient himself, for whom there was no foreseeable cure, defined his identity as a man and as an artist.

Although reticent throughout his short life about the specific ways practicing medicine influenced his playwriting, he was forthright about the importance, in both medicine and writing, of studying the world with clinical perspicacity. “Details are also the thing in the sphere of psychology,” he wrote to his brother Alexander, “God preserve us from generalizations.” Concerning the characters in his first full-length play, *Ivanov* (1887), he wrote to Suvorin: “I am telling you in all sincerity and in accordance with the dictates of my conscience that these people were born in my head and not out of ocean spray, or preconceived ideas, not out of intellectuality, and not by sheer accident. They are the result of observation and the study of life.”

The Russian scholar Vladimir Kataev has suggested that Chekhov’s underlying approach to character—his absolute insistence that individuals be seen as unique, with their own singular range of emotions and afflictions, and never as “types”—was shaped specifically by Chekhov’s medical professor at Moscow University, G. A. Zakharin. Chekhov held Zakharin in the highest esteem, placing him on a level in medicine which he granted to Tolstoy in literature. Zakharin urged his students to apply rigorous individualization to “every field of practical activity in the real world,” and to avoid treating the *illness* as if it were identical for everyone, but rather to treat the *patient* with all of his or her individual peculiarities.

Applying the scientific method to the infinitely complex manifestations of human emotion and behavior was a radical departure from the norms of 19th-century medicine; it was also a fitting philosophy for the playwright whose stylistic inventiveness would be an audacious break with the conventions of melodrama. In his plays, Chekhov sought to create complex, nuanced characters who reveal themselves slowly and with touching honesty. “Chekhov says you cannot apply any of the well-known general solutions to the questions that confront his heroes,” writes Kataev.

Chekhov’s characters confront their failings and their longings without recourse to theories, so that their act of living is itself a process of discovery. “When you read about [love] in books it all seems terribly silly and predictable,” says Másha (in the third act of *The Three Sisters*), “but when you fall in love yourself, you realize nobody knows anything about it, everyone has to figure it out for herself.”

THE PAIN OF EXILE

Following a sudden hemorrhage of the lungs during a dinner at The Hermitage in March 1897, Chekhov was rushed to a private hospital for a month, and then moved to a villa in the Crimean seaside town of Yalta, where he would live out the last winters of his life and write his last two great plays, *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*.

For a man who had always sought out life's adventures and joys with vigor, being forced into exile by his worsening health was a heartbreaking blow. Yalta was a slowly traveled 800 miles from Moscow. Chekhov deeply felt the separation from cultural and intellectual life, notably from the recently formed Moscow Art Theatre and, most poignantly, from the young actress Olga Knipper, with whom Chekhov was falling in love and for whom he wrote the role of Másha. Although they would marry the following year, their separation was exceedingly painful—with Anton in the country tending his own illness, tending the patients who flocked to his door in great numbers, tending his beloved garden, and tending the play he acknowledged as his most difficult to date, and Olga far away in the cosmopolitan bustle of the great city.

The couple's frenetic correspondence was turbulent and suffused with a longing that would be heard in the voices of the three Prózorov sisters who long for the idealized life they left behind in Moscow. Chekhov wrote to Knipper from Yalta as he struggled with the first draft of *The Three Sisters*: "I don't know what to tell you except what I've told you ten thousand times before and will as likely as not go on telling you for a long time to come, that is, I love you, that's all. If we're not together now, neither you nor I am to blame, it's the devil who planted the bacilli in me and the love of art in you."

We must wonder to what extent Chekhov's awareness that he would never see old age informed his art as well as his life. He married Knipper shortly after *The Three Sisters*'s premiere in 1901, despite the knowledge that their union would almost certainly be brief; he died three years later at the age of 44. "The time will come when we will know what all of this is for," says the youngest Prózorov sister, Irína. As Janet Malcolm writes in her book *Reading Chekhov*, "Those of us who do not live under such a distinctly stated sentence of death cannot know what it is like. Chekhov's masterpieces are always obliquely telling us." ■

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANTON CHEKHOV

Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) was born in a port town in the Crimea, the grandson of a serf. When his father's business failed, the family moved to Moscow where Chekhov enrolled in medical school. While still a student he helped to support his family by selling humorous stories to magazines. His first collection of stories was published in 1884, the year he graduated from university.

Soon Chekhov began writing more serious works in addition to the humorous stories for which he was already well known. He also tried his hand at stage plays, with such serious full-length works as *Ivanov* (1887) and *The Wood Demon* (1889) (later rewritten as *Uncle Vanya*). Although these met with little success, at the same time he wrote some one-act comedies that were immediately popular, including *The Marriage Proposal* and *The Bear* (both 1888). This last play, Chekhov joked, should have been entitled *The Milk Cow*, as it produced more income than any of his other writings. For several years afterward Chekhov did not write any plays, his time taken up with medicine, his family, travel, and writing stories. Much of the travel was in search of more healthful climates, for he could no longer ignore the progressive symptoms of his own tuberculosis.

In the few years of his life, Chekhov wrote four major plays, which established him as one of history's greatest playwrights: *The Seagull* (1896), *Uncle Vanya* (1899), *The Three Sisters* (1901), and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). All four were produced by Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko at the Moscow Art Theatre, and all featured Olga Knipper in leading roles. Knipper and Chekhov were married in 1901, and Chekhov died three years later.

Bio courtesy of the Shaw Festival, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Used by permission.

A TIMELINE OF THE LIFE OF ANTON CHEKHOV 1860–1904

1860 On 17 January, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, whose grandfather had bought his family's freedom from serfdom in 1841, is born in Taganrog, a provincial port near the Black Sea in southern Russia.

1875 Chekhov compiles his humorous sketches of life in Taganrog into a handwritten magazine entitled *Stammerer*.

1876 After the family's grocery store goes bankrupt, the Chekhovs move to Moscow. Anton remains in Taganrog to complete high school. He supports himself by working as a tutor.

1877 Chekhov writes his first one-act play, *Fatherlessness*.

1879 Chekhov finishes school and begins medical studies at Moscow University. In an attempt to support himself and his family, he submits satirical items to newspapers and magazines.

1880 Chekhov's first short story, "A Letter from a Don Squire Stepan Vladimirovich N. to his Learned Neighbor Doctor Friedrich," is published in the comic weekly *Dragonfly*. Over the next seven years he contributes hundreds of stories, sketches, pastiches, and law reports to numerous periodicals. He signs most of his pieces "Antosha Chekhonte," but he uses many pseudonyms, including "A. Ch-te," "My Brother's Brother," "Rover," and "A Man without a Spleen."

1882 Chekhov's play *Platonov* is rejected by the Maly Theatre in Moscow.

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1884 Chekhov has written nearly 300 short stories when his first collection, *Tales of Melpomene*, is published by *Oskolki*, a humor paper. He receives his medical degree and begins work as a doctor. He also suffers the first signs of tuberculosis.

1885 Chekhov spends the first of many summers in Babkino, where he will learn about military life.

1886 Chekhov publishes his first serious short fiction in the *New Times*, an influential conservative paper edited by his friend A. S. Suvorin.

1887 *At Twilight*, a collection of short stories, establishes Chekhov as a writer of importance. Chekhov's play *Ivanov* is produced to mixed responses. He also publishes his play *Swan Song*.

1888 "The Steppe," inspired by a trip to southern Russia, appears in *The Northern Herald*, and Chekhov is awarded the prestigious Pushkin Prize for literature. *Swan Song* premieres at the Korsh Theatre. Chekhov writes two one-act plays, *The Bear* and *The Proposal*, and meets Konstantin Stanislavsky for the first time.

1889 *Ivanov* is published and revived in St. Petersburg, where it is a great success. An early version of *Uncle Vanya* entitled *The Wood Demon* is produced at the Abramova Theatre in Moscow, where it opens to hostile reviews. It closes after just three performances.

1890 Frustrated with playwriting and influenced by an American journalist's account of touring a penal settlement, Chekhov travels 5,000 miles across Russia to the Siberian prison colony at Sakhalin Island, where he conducts a census, averaging 160 interviews per day.

1892 "Ward Number Six" appears in *Russian Thought*, a liberal literary magazine reviled by Suvorin. The tension between Suvorin and Chekhov nearly ends their friendship. Chekhov organizes relief for peasants devastated by famine and cholera epidemics in the Novgorod province; he establishes an organization to supply the victims with horses and cattle and is appointed an honorary medical superintendent in the fight against the cholera epidemic. He suffers lung complications.

1893 Chekhov's only nonfiction work, *The Sakhalin Island*, a journal of his experiences at the prison camp, is published as a series of articles in *Russian Thought*.

1894 Seeking a climate that will be better for his health, Chekhov travels to Yalta on the Black Sea.

1895 Chekhov writes *The Seagull* and meets Tolstoy for the first time.

1896 *The Seagull* premieres at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, where it fails miserably. Chekhov vows never to write for the stage again. Chekhov publishes *My Life*, a depiction of the rigid and narrow-minded life of the Russian intelligentsia.

1897 *Uncle Vanya* is published and performed in the provinces. Chekhov works on the population census and builds several schools, mostly at his own expense. He suffers a sudden and violent hemorrhage of the lungs and finally allows doctors to test for and is diagnosed with tuberculosis.

1898 Beginning a creative association that will last until Chekhov's death, the Moscow Art Theatre produces *The Seagull*, where it enjoys tremendous success. Chekhov breaks with Suvorin and the *New Times* over the anti-Semitic stand taken by his friend and his newspaper during the Dreyfus Affair, in which the Jewish French army captain Alfred Dreyfus was wrongly convicted of espionage. Chekhov meets Olga Knipper, an actress at the Moscow Art Theatre, and begins a famous correspondence that will run to more than a thousand letters.

1899 *Uncle Vanya* is produced by the Moscow Art Theatre. Chekhov sells the rights to his literary works to St. Petersburg publisher Adolf Marx. He moves to Yalta with his mother and sister.

1900 Chekhov begins to write *The Three Sisters*. He is elected a member of the Academy of Sciences.

1901 *The Three Sisters* is produced by the Moscow Art Theatre to poor reviews. Chekhov and Knipper wed. They spend their honeymoon in a sanatorium, where he undergoes treatments for tuberculosis.

1902 After friend and fellow writer Maxim Gorky's election to the Academy of Sciences is cancelled, Chekhov resigns in protest. Chekhov receives the Griboyedov Prize for *The Three Sisters* and begins writing *The Cherry Orchard*.

1903 Chekhov's last short story, "The Betrothed," is published in *Everybody's Journal*. He spends much of his time at Yalta and writes little as his condition steadily worsens.

1904 *The Cherry Orchard* is produced by the Moscow Art Theatre. Despite his health, Chekhov considers going to the Russo-Japanese War front as a doctor. In the summer, Chekhov, seriously ill, and his wife travel to Badenweiler, a German health resort, where he dies of tuberculosis. He is buried at the Nόvo-Devichy Cemetery, next to his father.

YOURS, A. CHEKHOV

Selections from the Playwright's Letters

You say that you have wept over my plays. Yes, and not only you alone. But I did not want to write them for this purpose. . . . I wanted something different. I only wished to tell people honestly: "Look at yourselves, see how badly and boringly you live!" The principal thing is that people should understand this, and when they do, they will surely create for themselves another and a better life. I will not see it, but I know it will be entirely different, not like what we have now. And as long as it does not exist, I'll continue to tell people: See how badly and boringly you live! Is it that which they weep over? (1902)

TO MARIA KISELYOVA, WRITER

A writer is not a confectioner or a cosmetician, or an entertainer; he is duty bound, obligated by the recognition of what he must do and by his conscience . . . and, no matter how awful he may find it, he is obliged to overcome his squeamishness and sully his imagination with the filth of life. He is like any ordinary reporter. What would you say about the reporter who, out of a feeling of squeamishness or a desire to please his readers, only wrote about honest mayors, exalted ladies, and virtuous railway men. . . . To a chemist there is nothing impure on earth. The writer should be just as objective as the chemist; he should liberate himself from everyday subjectivity and acknowledge that manure piles play a highly respectable role in the landscape and that evil passions are every bit as much a part of life as good ones. (14 January 1887)

TO A. S. SUVORIN, PUBLISHER AND FRIEND

Very well, I'll get married, if you wish. But my conditions are: everything must remain just as before, that is, she must live in Moscow and I in the country, and I'll go to see her. Happiness continuing day after day, from morning to morning, I shan't be able to stand. . . . I promise to be a splendid husband, but give me a wife who, like the moon, will not appear in my sky every day. (1895)

An artist must not be the judge of his characters or of what they say, but only an impartial witness. (May 1888)

The artist observes, selects, guesses, combines—all these presuppose questions. If from the very start he had no questions to ask himself, there would be nothing to divine or to select.

. . . To deny that artistic creation involves problems, questions, and a purpose would be to admit that an artist creates without reflection, without design, under a spell. . . . You are right in demanding that an artist should take a conscious attitude toward his work, but you confuse two conceptions: the solution of a question and the correct posing of a question. Only the latter is obligatory for the artist. (October 1888)

Dividing people into successes and failures means looking upon human nature from a narrow, preconceived point of view. . . . Are you a failure or not? Am I? Napoleon? Your servant Vasili? Where is the criterion? One must be God to be able to distinguish successes from failures and not make mistakes. (November 1888)

[The] past is resplendent—it is so for the majority of Russia's intellectuals. There is not one single Russian member of the gentry or of the university—there hardly ever is one—who would not boast about the past. The present is always inferior to the past. Why? Because Russian excitability has a specific property: it soon gives way to fatigue. Once somebody just hopped off the school bench, they take on burdens beyond their strength simply at the spur of the moment; and all these burdens at the same time. . . . However, hardly has one managed to reach the age of 30 or 35 than the fatigue and boredom begin to be felt. (December 1888)

TO ALEXEI PLESCHEYEV, POET AND FRIEND

Fiction is a quiet and sacred thing. The narrative is a legal wife, and the dramatic a showy, noisy, impertinent, and tiresome mistress. (January 1889)

When people talk to me about artistic and anti-artistic, of what is dramatic and non-dramatic, of tendency, realism, etc., I get perplexed. . . . I divide all works into two kinds: those which I like and those which I don't like. I have no other criterion. . . . I want to remain a free artist and nothing but that. (1889)

TO LIDIA A. AVILOVA

The writer Ivan Shcheglov calls me Potemkin and also praises me for my ability to live. If I am Potemkin, why am I in Yalta, why is it so terribly boring here? The snow is swirling about, the wind is blowing at the windows, heat is coming from the stove; I have absolutely no desire to write and have not written a thing. (18 February 1899)

TO MASHA CHEKHOV, SISTER

Snow on the mountain. It's cold. Only a fool lives in the Crimea now. You write about the theater . . . and sundry temptations, as if to tease me; as if you don't know how boring, how depressing it is to go to bed at nine o'clock, to lie down cross, with the consciousness that there is nowhere to go, no one to speak to, nothing to work at. . . . The piano and I are two objects in the house that carry on a soundless, baffled existence, ignorant of why we have been placed here, since no one can play on us. (11 November 1899)

**TO VLADIMIR I. NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO, TEACHER AND COFOUNDER OF
THE MOSCOW ART THEATRE**

Please do not take offense at my silence. My whole correspondence has come to a standstill. That is because I am writing, first; second, I am reading the proofs from Marx; third, I am very busy with out-of-town patients, who come to me for some reason. Reading proofs for Marx is drudgery. I barely finished the second volume, and had I known earlier that it was this hard, I would have gotten Marx to pay me not 75, but 175,000. The patients from out of town are mostly poor and ask me for help with arrangements, so I must do a great deal of talking and letter writing.

Of course, I am desperately bored here. I work during the day, and then as evening draws near I start to ask myself what I can do, where I can go. By the time the second act is underway in your theater, I am already in bed. I rise while it is still dark, if you can imagine, with the wind howling and the rain beating down. . . .

I am not writing any plays. I have an idea for a play called *The Three Sisters*, but it will have to wait until I finish the stories that have long been preying on my conscience. Next season will not feature a play by me—that is certain.

My Yalta dacha turned out very well, cosy, warm, and attractive. The garden will be exceptional. I am planting it myself, with my own two hands. I planted a hundred rose bushes alone—and all the finest, most noble varieties—as well as 50 pyramid acacias, a great many camellias, lilies, tuberoses, et cetera.

There is a barely audible note in your letter, faint and trembling as though made by an old bell; it comes through in those places where you write about the theater, about being wearied by the trivial aspects of life in the theater. Please do not weary, do not lose interest, whatever you do! The Art Theatre represents the best pages of the book that will someday be written about modern Russian theater. That theater is your pride and it is the only theater I love, though I have not once been there. If I lived in Moscow, I would try to obtain a position on the staff, say even as a watchman, to make some contribution and, if possible, keep you from losing interest in that dear enterprise. (24 November 1899)

TO OLGA KNIPPER, ACTRESS AND LATER WIFE

Art, and especially the stage, is an endeavor in which stumbling is unavoidable. There will be many successful days ahead, many entirely unsuccessful seasons, there will be great misunderstandings and deep disappointments and you have to be ready for all that, you have to expect it, and despite it all you must stubbornly, fanatically do what you think is right. (October 1899)

TO V. E. MEYERHOLD, DIRECTOR AND ACTOR WITH THE MOSCOW ART THEATRE
(About the role of Johannes Vockerat in *Lonely Lives*, by Gerhart Hauptmann)

Portray a lonely man, but exhibit no more nervous irritability than the text itself indicates. Do not treat this nervousness as a special phenomenon; remember that in our day almost every cultivated person, even the healthiest, feels most irritable in his own home, among his own family, for the discord between the past and the present is sensed first of all in the family. It is chronic irritability, free from violent emotion, from convulsive twitching, the kind of irritability that guests do not notice, but the full weight of which is felt first of all by those closest to you.

FROM CHEKHOV'S NOTEBOOKS

They demand that the hero and heroine be theatrically effective. But really, in life people are not every minute shooting each other, hanging themselves, and making declarations of love. And they are not saying clever things every minute. For the most part they eat, drink, hang about, and talk nonsense; and this must be seen on the stage. A play must be written in which people can come, go, dine, talk about the weather, and play cards, not because that's the way the author wants it, but because that's the way it happens in real life.

Let everything on the stage be just as complex and at the same time just as simple as in life. People have dinner, merely dinner, but at that moment their happiness is being made or their life is being smashed.

Man will become better only when you make him see what he is like.

ON CHEKHOV

Chekhov's "finality" is the finality of irony, of the man who stands a little aside from life and almost caresses its absurdities. . . . His one deep and persistent emotion towards life is bewilderment. He seems to be literally stammering with unanswered questions as to the meaning of these grotesque comedies and tragedies of the human mind, these absurdities and cruelties, passions and pains, and exaltations and boredoms of human relationships. And the perpetual and delicious irony, the amazing and refreshing aloofness, the cool precision and the cold realism are the methods by which Chekhov controls his bewilderment and prevents himself overwhelming his reader with a torrent of "Whys" and "Whats."

L. S. Woolf, "Miscellany: Chekhov," *New Statesman* (11 August 1917)

[It] is in this field of love that Chekhov's women lose their equilibrium. One by one they start out their quest, cheerfully, hopefully, courageously, and one by one they return, bloodless and lifeless, carrying but burnt embers in their hearts.

N. Bryllion Fagin, "Anton Chekhov: The Master of the Gray Short-Story,"
Poet Lore (Autumn 1921)

Love, it would seem, was the subject which fascinated him above all others, and he was concerned to present it, like all his themes, exactly as he saw it. There was certainly no problem to which he was less likely to pretend to have found a solution. . . . Among the sources of frustration in Chekhov's plays love occupies pride of place.

Ronald Hingley, "Chekhov's Last Years: His Approach to Drama,"
Chekhov: A Biographical and Critical Study (1966)

In reading Chekhov we find ourselves repeating the word "soul" again and again. It sprinkles his pages. . . . Indeed it is the soul that is the chief character in Russian fiction. Delicate and subtle in Chekhov, subject to an infinite number of humors and distempers.

Virginia Woolf, "The Russian Point of View," *The Common Reader* (1925)

The question "What's to be done?" keeps cropping up in a deliberately confused manner throughout Chekhov's work; the strange, helpless, stilted way in which his characters hold forth on the problem of existence almost borders on the ludicrous. . . . In part it may be just a satirical description of the Russian love for the interminable and fruitless philosophical discussion—a kind of persiflage that can also be found in other Russian writers.

But in Chekhov's case it has a very special background, a specific, disconcertingly comical artistic function. . . . What can we do? The uneasiness caused by this question haunts numerous characters in Chekhov. . . . His life's work, although it laid no claim to the monumental proportions of the epic, nevertheless encompassed the whole of Russia, that vast country's natural landscape forming the background to the appallingly unnatural conditions of its prerevolutionary era.

Thomas Mann, "Chekhov," translated by Tania and James Stern, *Last Essays* (1959)

The theater of Chekhov always tends toward the condition of music. A Chekhov play is not directed primarily toward a representation of conflict or argument. . . . The characters move in an atmosphere receptive to the slightest shift in intonation. As if passing through a magnetic field, their every word and gesture provoke a complex disturbance and regrouping of psychological forces. This kind of drama is immensely difficult to produce because the means of realization are very close to music. A Chekhovian dialogue is a musical score set for speaking voice. It alternates between acceleration and retardment. Pitch and timbre are often as meaningful as the explicit sense. The design of the plot, moreover, is polyphonic. Several distinct actions and levels of consciousness are developed at the same time.

George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (1961)

Among his countless gifts, Chekhov possessed what we have come to call in this country a perfect ear. . . . Chekhov could single out a line of all those spoken in the span of a man's life that could convey the essence or, if you will, the perfume of the man: his gruel, his salt. I can't read Russian and so this ear must have been able to transcend the clumsiest of translations. Along with his ear was an equally penetrating optical nerve that could again, in a single detail . . . present us with the essence of the stranger's life.

John Cheever, "The Melancholy of Distance,"

Chekhov and Our Age: Responses to Chekhov by American Writers and Scholars (1984)

[Chekhov's writing] is like lace woven by a maid. There used to be such spinster laceweavers in the past, old maids. They put their whole life, all their dreams of happiness, into the pattern. They dreamed of their beloved in patterns, and they wove all their misty, maidenly love into the lace.

Alexei Tolstoy, told to Maxim Gorky (1904)

REMINISCENCES OF AND REFLECTIONS ON *THE THREE SISTERS*

KONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKY

The following year we staged *Snow White*, *Doctor Stockmann*, *The Three Sisters*, and *When We Dead Awaken*.

From the very start of the season, Anton Pavlovich frequently sent letters to one or another of us. He asked all of us for information about the life of the theater. These few lines from Anton Pavlovich, his constant attention, exerted, without our realizing it, a great influence on our theater which we can appreciate only now, after his death.

He took an interest in every detail and particularly, of course, in the repertoire. We, for our part, kept prompting him to write a play. From his letters we knew that he was writing about military life, we knew that some regiment or other was moving from one place to another, but from these short, disconnected phrases we were unable to guess what the theme of the play might be. In his letters, as in his writing, he was very laconic. We were able to assess these disconnected phrases, these scraps from his creative thought, only later, when we learned about the play itself.

Perhaps he was finding it difficult to write; or, on the contrary, the play had long since been completed, and he could not bring himself to part with it but had put it away in his desk to mature. Whatever the reason, he did all he could to put off sending us the play. One of his excuses was that many fine plays had appeared—that Hauptmann should be staged, that Hauptmann had written another work, that he (Chekhov) was not a playwright.

All these excuses brought us to the brink of despair, and we wrote pleading letters asking him to send his play as soon as possible, save the theater, et cetera. We ourselves did not then realize that we were forcing the creativity of a great writer.

At last one or two acts of the play arrived, written in the familiar, small handwriting. We read them avidly, but, as is always the case with any genuinely scenic work, reading could not reveal its real value. With just two acts in our hands, we could not begin work on model sets, nor on allocating the roles, nor on any scenic preparation.

Therefore we began all the more energetically to try to obtain the remaining two acts of the play. We finally received them, but not without a battle.

Finally, Anton Pavlovich not only agreed to send the play but delivered it himself.

He never read out his plays and was embarrassed and agitated if he was present while the play was being read to the performers. When the play had been read out and we began

to ask Anton Pavlovich for further clarifications, he was dreadfully embarrassed and excused himself, saying, "Listen, all I knew I have written down there."

Indeed, he was never able to criticize his own plays and listened with great interest, even surprise, to the opinions of others. What amazed him most of all, and what he was never, up to his death, able to accept, was that his *The Three Sisters*, and later *The Cherry Orchard*, reflected the serious drama of Russian life. He was sincerely convinced that it was a cheerful comedy, almost vaudeville. I cannot recall that he ever defended any other of his convictions as heatedly as this when, at that meeting, he first heard this comment on his play.

We, of course, availed ourselves of the presence of the author to find out all the details we needed. Here, too, however, he gave us monosyllabic answers. At the time his answers seemed vague and incomprehensible to us, and it was only later that we came to understand their unusual imagery and realize that they were characteristic both of him and of his work.

When the preparatory work got underway, Anton Pavlovich began to insist that we invite a general whom he knew. He wanted the daily life of the military to be accurate to the smallest detail. Anton Pavlovich himself, as if he were a third party, someone not involved in this affair, observed our work from the sidelines.

He was unable to help us in our work and in our search to depict the inside of the Prózorov house. We could sense that he knew this house in detail, saw it, but failed completely to notice what rooms, furniture, and objects filled it; in short, he felt only the atmosphere of each room individually but not its walls.

Such is the writer's perception of life around him. However, this is not enough for the director, who must clearly draw and order all these details.

It is now obvious why Anton Pavlovich laughed so benevolently and smiled with pleasure when the aims of the director and producer coincided with his own intent. He would look at the model scenery for a long time and then, having examined every detail, laugh good-naturedly. . . .

Alongside all his other anxieties about the fate of his play, he was not a little concerned about how the alarm would be conveyed in the third act, when there is a fire offstage. He wanted to illustrate to us the sound of a provincial bell tower sounding the alarm. Whenever a convenient opportunity presented itself, he would approach one of us and with his hands, with rhythm and gesture, try to inspire us with the mood of this heart-piercing provincial alarm.

He attended nearly all the rehearsals of his play but very rarely, cautiously, almost fearfully, expressed his opinion. There was only one thing he insisted on energetically; here, as in *Uncle Vanya*, he feared an exaggeration which would produce a caricature of provincial life, that the military men would be turned into the usual heel clickers with jangling spurs

and not be presented as simple, pleasant, good people dressed in worn, and not theatrical, uniforms, without any theatrical adjustments, raised shoulders, rude behavior, et cetera.

“There’s none of that,” he argued rather heatedly, “military personnel have changed, they have become more cultured, many of them have even begun to realize that in peacetime they should bring culture with them into remote backwaters.”

He insisted on this even more as the military community of the day, having learned that the play was based on their way of life, were rather apprehensively awaiting its appearance on the stage. . . .

Anton Pavlovich saw the whole repertoire of the theater and made his monosyllabic comments which always obliged us to ponder their unexpectedness and which were never immediately understood. It was only when some time had passed that we were able to come to terms with them. As an example of one such comment, I can refer to the remark mentioned earlier, which was that in the final act of *Uncle Vanya* Astrov whistles.

Anton Pavlovich was not even able to stay to see the dress rehearsal of *The Three Sisters*, as his worsening health obliged him to leave for the South, and he departed for Nice. From there we received notes—in scene such-and-such, after the words such-and-such, add this phrase. For example, “Balzac married in Berdichev” was one note we received from Nice.

On another occasion he suddenly sent us a short scene. These little jewels which he sent had an extraordinarily enlivening effect on the action of the play when we introduced them into our rehearsals and prompted the actors into genuinely experiencing their roles.

We also received the following instruction from abroad. In the fourth act of *The Three Sisters*, the degenerate Andréi, talking to Ferapónt as no one else was willing to talk with him, describes what a wife is from the point of view of a provincial degenerate. It was a marvelous monologue about two pages long. Suddenly we received a note saying that the whole of the monologue was to be crossed out and replaced with just the phrase “A wife is a wife!”

This short phrase, if one reflects on it, covers everything that was said in the long, two-page monologue. This was typical of Anton Pavlovich, whose work was always short and succinct. Behind each word lay a whole range of diverse moods and thoughts, about which he said nothing but which came naturally to mind.

That explains why, although the play might be performed a hundred times, there was not a single performance in which I did not make new discoveries in the long since familiar text and in the emotions experienced in the role. The depth of Chekhov’s works is inexhaustible for the thoughtful and sensitive actor.

How worried Anton Pavlovich was at the thought of the first performance of *The Three Sisters* can be judged by the fact that on the day before the performance he left the town where we knew his address for an unknown destination, so as not to receive any news of the premiere.

The response to the first performance was rather enigmatic.

After the first act there were loud cries of “encore,” and the actors took about 12 curtain calls. After the second act they went out just once. Following the third act, just a few applauded rather timidly, and the actors could not go out onstage at all; and after the fourth act, there was one rather feeble curtain call.

We had to stretch the truth considerably to telegraph Anton Pavlovich that the play was “a great success.”

It was only three years after the first performance that the public gradually came to appreciate the beauty of this fine work and began to laugh and to fall silent where the author had intended. Each act then became a triumph.

The press also did not understand the play for some time and, however strange it may seem, the first review we read worthy of the play was in Berlin, when we went there on tour.

In Moscow, during the first year of the production, the play was performed only a few times and was then taken to St. Petersburg. We also expected to find Anton Pavlovich there, but bad weather and his health prevented his coming. . . .

During that season he watched *The Three Sisters* and was very pleased with the performance. However, in his opinion, we had not succeeded in capturing the sound of the alarm in the third act. He decided to arrange it himself. Obviously he wanted to work with the stagehands personally, do a little producing, work behind the scenes. We, of course, let him have some stagehands.

On the day of the rehearsal he drove up to the theater with a cab driver, and the cab was loaded with various pans, bowls, and metalware. He himself placed the stagehands in position with these instruments, was very concerned to tell each how to strike what, and became confused in his own explanations. He ran several times from the auditorium onto the stage and back, but somehow it did not work.

The performance started, and Chekhov began to wait apprehensively for his alarm. The noise was unbelievable. The result was total cacophony, with everyone striking whatever came to hand, and it was impossible to hear what the actors were saying.

Next to the director’s box, in which Anton Pavlovich was sitting, some spectators began to criticize first the noise, then the play and the author. On hearing such remarks, Anton Pavlovich moved further and further back in the box and finally left it and sat modestly in my dressing room.

“Why aren’t you watching the play, Anton Pavlovich?” I asked.

“Just listen, they’re criticizing it. It’s not very agreeable.”

So he sat the whole evening in my dressing room.

ANTON CHEKHOV

To live one must have something to hang on to. . . . In the provinces only the body works, not the spirit.

You won't become a saint through other people's sins.

Kulýgin: "I am a jolly fellow, I infect everyone with my mood."

The wife implores the husband: "Don't get fat."

Oh, if there were a life in which everyone grew younger and more beautiful.

Írina: "It is hard to live without a father, without a mother."—"And without a husband."—"Yes, without a husband. Whom could one confide in? To whom could one complain? With whom could one share one's joy? One must love someone strongly."

It is difficult to live without orderlies. You cannot make the servants answer your bell.

The doctor enjoys being at the duel.

From Chekhov's notebooks at the time he was working on *The Three Sisters*

Do describe at least one rehearsal of *The Three Sisters* for me. Should anything be added or cut? Are you acting well, my darling? And look here; don't put on a gloomy face, not in a single act. Angry, yes, but not gloomy. People who carry grief in their hearts, and have become accustomed to it, just whistle and sometimes become pensive. The way you often become pensive during discussions at rehearsals.

From a letter to Olga Knipper (2 January 1901)

VLADIMIR NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

This is how the play looks at the moment:

Plot—The Prózorov house. The life of the three sisters after the death of their father, arrival of Natásha, her taking control of the entire household and the isolation of the sisters. Their individual destinies and especially that of Írina represent the basic theme: 1) I want to work, be happy, lively, healthy; 2) her head is aching from work and she is unsettled; 3) her life is in pieces, youth is passing, and she agrees to marry a man she does not love; 4) destiny takes a tumble and her fiancé is killed.

The plot unfolds as in epic works, without those surprises which were thought essential by older dramatists—life as lived in the midst of simple, truthful squabbles. Name-days, parties, a fire, departures, stoves, lamps, a piano, pies, drunkenness, night housemaids, parlormmaids, chambermaids, winter, spring, summer, etc., etc.

The difference between the stage and life lies only in the author's worldview—all this life is life as seen through his worldview, the feelings, and the personality of the author. It receives that distinctive coloring which is called poetry.

From a letter to Chekhov (22 January 1901)

OLGA KNIPPER

*Anton Chekhov met Olga Knipper, an actress at the Moscow Art Theatre, in 1898. Their relationship was not a convenient one. Chekhov was forced to seek warmer climates to ease his health problems, while Knipper needed to be in Moscow for her work. Still, they made it work. Chekhov wrote her frequently—at times even daily—and their letters were published. . . . They married, secretly, in 1901 and spent their honeymoon at a sanatorium so that he could undergo his tuberculosis treatments. He died three years into their marriage. From Knipper, we not only get the intimate perspective of a devoted wife, but also a unique glimpse into the final years of Chekhov's life, the years in which, despite his illness and its consequent hermitage, he would write, and see produced, his best-known works, including *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Cherry Orchard*, and *The Three Sisters*.*

When Anton Pavlovich read *The Three Sisters* to us, the performers and directors who had long awaited a new play from our favorite writer, there was perplexity and silence. Anton Pavlovich gave a confused smile and paced up and down among us, coughing nervously. Then came individual attempts to pass some comment, and one could hear: "It's not a play, just the outline." "It can't be performed, there aren't any roles, only the suggestion of them." It was hard work, and we had to dig deeply into our hearts.

Several years passed, however, and we asked ourselves in amazement how it was possible that this, our favorite play, so full of emotions, so profound, so significant, so able to reach the deepest and finest qualities of the human heart, had once appeared to us to be not a play but only an outline, and we had been able to say that it contained no roles.

In 1917, after the October Revolution, one of the first plays we performed was *The Three Sisters*, and we had the feeling that previously we had performed it without thinking, not appreciating the significance lodged in the thoughts and emotions, and—above all—in the dreams. It was as if the entire play sounded different, and one could feel that these were not just dreams but presentiments, and that indeed "something huge will overwhelm us" and a strong storm will sweep away "the idleness and complacency in our society, the prejudice against work and the stagnant boredom." . . .

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov in the last six years of his life—such was the man I knew: the Chekhov who was weakening physically, but growing stronger in spirit.

The impression of those six years is one of restlessness and rushing about, just like a seagull flying over the ocean and not knowing where to land: the death of his father, the sale of Melikhovo, the sale of his works to A. F. Marx, the purchase of some land just outside Yalta, setting the house and garden in order; and at the same time Chekhov's strong desire to go to Moscow, to be involved in his new, theatrical undertaking; trips back and forth between Moscow and the now prisonlike Yalta; the wedding, the search for a small plot of land not far from our beloved Moscow, and a dream almost realized—the doctors permitted him to spend the winter in central Russia—dreams of taking a trip along the northern rivers, to Solovki, to Sweden and Norway, to Switzerland; and the last and strongest wish of all, in Schwarzwald, in Badenweiler, just before his death, the dream of returning to Russia through Italy, which beckoned with its colors, its vitality, and, most of all, with its music and flowers.

During these six years our inner life was extraordinarily full, rich, interesting, and complex, so that the superficial disorder and inconveniences were blunted. Nonetheless, when I look back over those six years, they seem to be made up of a series of painful separations and joyous reunions. . . . It would seem very easy to resolve the problem: leave the theater and go to be with Anton Pavlovich. I lived with this thought and battled with it, because I knew and felt how this rupture in my life would affect and weigh on him. He would never have agreed to my voluntary departure from the theater, in which he also took such a keen interest, and which linked him to the life he so loved. A man with a very sensitive soul, he well understood what it would mean for both him and me if I left the stage, for he knew how difficult it had been for me to reach it.

Excerpted from *Anton Chekhov and His Times*.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The Three Sisters is Chekhov's masterpiece, the flower of impressionism in the drama. No play has ever conveyed more subtly the sense of the transitory nature of human life, the sadness and beauty of the passing moment. The action seems to be haphazard and amorphous, not because the play has no definite shape—it has a very definite shape—but because this shape seems to be constantly changing, like a cloud in the summer sky. . . .

[N]othing is presented as other than ephemeral, and no event bears any special emphasis. The play simply marks a moment in eternity. In the impressionist view of things, of course, eternity is essentially a matter of moments. But Chekhov is by no means simply

an impressionist. To understand him, it is important to add to the sense of episode, the sense of process, and, after that, the all-enveloping doubt.

Maurice Valency, *The Breaking String: The Plays of Anton Chekhov* (1966)

Chekhov's reputation as a realist is only partially deserved. He's as much a symbolist as he is a realist. Like the French impressionist painters of his time, Chekhov builds up a large canvas by filling it with small, often inconsequential details. He provides pattern in lieu of plot. Action is woven into a pattern of recurring symbols and motifs. "Half enigmatic, half wonderful" is one character's description of life, and it could easily describe the play itself. . . . These characters live life between two poles of experience: the Past and the Future. Their home is a kind of way station, a limbo, a prison filled with windows aglow with possibility on one side and the aura of a dreamlike past on the other. Their only reality is the Past, their only possibility the Future. Their Present is an enigma. Minutes slip irrevocably away as clocks tick and watches are checked.

Mark Lamos, preface to Lanford Wilson's translation of *The Three Sisters* (1984)

Working so closely on the play for two years, I came to be astounded by the subtlety and suppleness of Chekhov's work; by the daring sexual heat and unabashed technical audacity. The play is forever deep, with startling juxtapositions of mood. No sooner does someone start to sing than they are asked to leave. If Andréi says life is disgusting, the old maid will enter in the next breath exclaiming, "What a wonderful life I have!"

Lanford Wilson, introduction to his translation of *The Three Sisters*

The Three Sisters is about what the women do while waiting or hoping to get to Moscow. For Moscow has a Godot-like sway over them, functioning in their imaginations and expectations as the site of their potential salvation or at least of their validation, their accession into dignity and true being. . . . "Let's go, oh, please, let's go!" That they do not go, with its implication that they are fated to a "lesser" life, is generally considered their tragedy, but in fact their tragedy, if it really is one, lies elsewhere. It ought to be seen that nothing physically (or morally, for that matter) prevents them from leaving. . . . Why then do they stay? Everything suggests that they stay because to remain is the meaning of their lives, the condition of their existence, as to stay and wait for Godot is that of Beckett's tramps; staying is synonymous with their being alive, and everything exists beyond categories such as tragedy or its opposite and beyond alternatives like despair or hope. . . .

Chekhov wishes to reveal how time, as we experience it, is always and only the present, how the future is always illusion, the past always absence or loss.

Richard Gilman (1974)

The final irony of the play, though, is its demonstration that we cannot live without the hopes that cut us off from life. We are both poisoned and nourished by the act of hope itself. And when our hopes for ourselves have been destroyed—as the sisters’ hopes have been at the end of the play—then we summon whatever dogged courage we can muster to confront the rest of our lives—and we start to tell the old consoling story once again; only this time not about ourselves, but about another people, living under quite different laws, on the far side of the storms.

Michael Frayn, introduction to his translation of *The Three Sisters* (1983)

A.C.T. ARTISTS

In a country [Russia] where the geography is so vast, change happens glacially and over long stretches of time. It’s very different in America, where we assume that people have individual will and can make things happen immediately. It is that sense of looking out over a vast landscape and thinking that in some very distant time things will be different that makes Chekhov so distinctly Russian. We say the Russians are not pragmatic, but what are you going to do when it takes five days to get to the next town? You can’t be pragmatic. You can’t actually do a thing; all you can do is talk about it. Geography really is destiny for them. Which means that change happens very slowly. And yet, [that vastness] gives Russian literature a sort of power and intellect; ideas, language, poetry—they all have a sort of power because they are the things that can travel.

What makes Americans actually very unhappy is that ours is a culture of manifest destiny, now more than ever, which has written into our constitution that it is our right to pursue happiness. So if we don’t succeed at whatever that is, we feel despair, we feel we have failed. What’s so interesting about the Russians is that there is no right to happiness. There’s not even a consensus about what happiness would look like. Is it stolen moments like those between Másha and Vershinin? But if they stayed together would their marriage begin to look like all the other marriages in the play? Happiness for the baron is freedom of choice. It’s leaving the army. But what is that going to mean for him? Irina thinks happiness might be work—until she tries it. Maybe happiness is something deferred. Maybe illusion is more potent than consummation. Maybe the dream, the longing for something, is more tangible and valuable than the realization of it. One of the mysteries of this play is that the

sisters are happy at the end. At the worst moment, they come together and are positive about the future. Something has happened.

Carey Perloff, Director

It is amazing how fast the world has changed for Americans in just the last two or three years. I don't know anyone who doesn't long for something simpler, something more peaceful, something less anxiety-ridden. I think the journey and the plight of these women in *The Three Sisters* speaks to that longing. They have been thrust into another world by the death of their father, and they're at a loss as to how to survive in that world; they're trying to figure it out day by day. I think that's what we're doing in this country. We're trying to figure out how we are going to survive if the world is really like this. And what goes with trying to survive is a longing for simplicity, a longing for beauty, a longing for love and delicacy and all those finer qualities of life to which these women are accustomed, which they savored and were able to live on because of their father. Now he's gone and it's all slowly diminishing. That's what I feel now, too. I feel a diminishing. These characters are up against the wall just as we are up against the wall. They are right on the precipice of huge change, revolutionary change, whereas I feel we are at the same place. So it's not just that you can identify with this play, but you can learn something from it, too. You can learn that these people make it through. They find a way to connect to each other. No matter how horrific their situation is, they find lightness and joy and humor in the way they deal with each other.

This play is about a time when people entertained themselves in a completely different way, which I find very interesting. There was no television, there was no radio, there were no movies. So people talked. Talking was a sport, an athletic event, almost. It was a heated form of entertainment. Somebody would come into the room and speak and hold people's attention with stories. There is lightness to that, because it was about holding people's attention. That's the power of someone like Vershinin, who can come into a room and make everybody stop and listen to him. And there is delight in that: a delight in life, and listening, and being in the presence of another person. Yes, there is longing, but the reason this play has grabbed the attention of generation after generation is because it is whole and complex. It encapsulates all the facets of life, which we're not used to seeing all at once.

This play is so complex . . . that is, there is so much going on at any given moment. It's not about a clear through line, a clear laser beam of action. It's not about that, because there really are all these stories happening onstage at the same time. That's complicated and that's complex. And that's what's exciting.

Gregory Wallace (Kulygin)

A TIMELINE OF RUSSIAN HISTORY, 1855–1905

1855 Tsar Alexander II begins his reign.

1859 *The Storm*, by Alexander Ostrovsky, whose work is considered the foundation of Russian realistic drama, debuts at the Maly Theatre in Moscow.

1860 The port city of Vladivostok is founded in eastern Russia as the railway boom begins.

1861 Blaming the country's serf-based economy for Russia's military and industrial inferiority following Russia's defeat in the Crimean War, Tsar Alexander II issues the Emancipation Manifesto, which frees the serfs and establishes government aid to assist the freed men in buying land from their former lords. Peasant uprisings in the provinces are joined by student disorders in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and other cities.

1862 Ivan Turgenev publishes his novel *Fathers and Sons*.

1863 A system of *zemstvos* (county councils) is established to provide local self-government to oversee social and economic services.

1864 Local government reforms are joined by reforms in education and the judiciary. The migration of recently emancipated serfs to Siberia and Central Asia shifts the focus of Russian expansion to the conquest of Central Asia.

1865 Press censorship reforms are introduced.

1866 The "school of true Russian music," the Moscow Conservatory, is founded. Pyotr Tchaikovsky is among its professors. Fyodor Dostoyevsky completes *Crime and Punishment*.

1867 Russia sells Alaska to the United States.

1868 Dostoyevsky writes *The Idiot*.

1869 After six years of writing, Leo Tolstoy completes *War and Peace*. Russian chemist Dmitri Mendeleev develops the periodic table of elements.

1870 Municipal reforms continue the move toward local self-government. Lenin is born.

1872 Turgenev's play *A Month in the Country* (written in 1850 and long refused publication and production because of its negative depiction of marriage) is produced for the first time. Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* is translated into Russian.

1873 In the midst of depression and industrial crisis, the populist "To the People" movement starts.

1874 The Universal Military Training Act of 1874 establishes all-class conscription and calls for reorganization and technological improvement of the military, and the establishment of new military schools. Muslim Tartars revolt.

1877 Tolstoy writes *Anna Karenina*. Tchaikovsky composes *Swan Lake*.

1878 The Russo-Turkish War ends and Great Britain and Austria-Hungary force a victorious Russia to sign the Treaty of Berlin, which restricts the military and political gains acquired in the war. Strikes paralyze St. Petersburg.

1879 Stalin and Trotsky are born.

1880 Dostoyevsky completes *The Brothers Karamazov*.

1881 Tsar Alexander II is assassinated by a member of the People's Will Party. The new tsar, Alexander III, reverses recent reforms and establishes the *okhrona* (secret police) to reaffirm the ancient principle of tsarist autocracy. Press censorship is expanded and other repressive measures are promulgated, making the police bureaucracy the new wielder of political power in Russia.

1885 American journalist George Kennan publishes *Siberia and the Exile System*, an exposé of the inhumanity and inefficiency of Siberian penal colonies. Smuggled copies of the banned publication circulate throughout Russia.

1888 Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov composes *Scheherazade*.

1891 Tchaikovsky composes the *Nutcracker* ballet. Construction begins on the Trans-Siberian Railway, which will be completed in 1905. Anti-Jewish legislation is enforced.

1892 Famine and cholera devastate peasant populations throughout central and south-eastern Russia.

1894 Alexander III dies and his son Nicholas II becomes the last Russian tsar. Fearing aggression by Austria-Hungary or Italy and Germany, respectively, Russia and France sign a secret treaty that requires each power to provide the other with troops in case of attack.

1896 Russia and China sign the Manchuria Convention, enabling Russia to complete the Trans-Siberian Railway across Manchuria to Vladivostok.

1897 Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko found the Moscow Art Theatre. The first all-Russian census counts 128,907,692 people.

1898 The Social Democratic Party is founded. Unlike the populists, the group believes that a bourgeois society based on the urban proletariat is a prerequisite for socialism.

1900 Russia occupies Manchuria.

1902 Maxim Gorky writes *The Lower Depths*, which is produced at the Moscow Art Theatre.

1903 At its second congress, the Social Democratic Party, unable to agree on party membership requirements, splits, forming the moderate Mensheviks and the radical Bolsheviks. The former want to foster cooperation between the classes to build the capitalist society they believe is a necessary first step to socialism. The latter favors the exclusion of the masses, and will seize control of the Russian government in 1917.

1904 The Russo-Japanese war over rival ambitions in Korea and Manchuria begins.

1905 In January tsarist soldiers fire on a peaceful demonstration of workers in St. Petersburg, killing 1,000. The event, known as “Bloody Sunday,” provides a rallying cry for demonstrations and protests against tsarist autocracy and repression. Protests lead to a general strike in October that sweeps Russia and ends when the tsar promises a constitution (October Manifesto). The promised parliament, the *Duma*, is dissolved the following year when it produces an antigovernment majority even though elected on a narrow franchise.

A TOWN SOMETHING LIKE PERM

BY RONALD BRYDEN

In the autumn of 1900, Anton Chekhov wrote his friend Maxim Gorky that he was working on a new play about three young women living in a provincial town “something like Perm.” It helps to understand *The Three Sisters*, the play he was working on, if you know a thing or two about the town he had in mind.

Chekhov knew that Perm would be familiar to Gorky, who had spent part of his vagabond youth washing dishes on the steamboats that plied the Volga River system. Perm is the largest town on the Kama River, fourth longest in Europe, which collects the runoff from the western slopes of the Ural Mountains and empties it into the Volga below Kazan. “You have a wide, splendid river,” says Colonel Vershinin, new commander of the artillery regiment quartered in the town in Chekhov’s play. “Yes, but it’s cold here,” replies Ólga, eldest daughter of the garrison’s late commander, “and there are mosquitoes.” Perm lies on the same latitude as [Canada’s] Fort McMurray in northern Alberta, ten degrees below the Arctic Circle. . . .

Chekhov had spent a long day in Perm on 27 April 1890, waiting for a train to take him over the Urals to Tiumen, railhead of the infant Trans-Siberian Railway. He was on his way to the far end of the Russian Empire, to write about conditions on the prison island of Sakhalin in the Pacific. It had taken him six days traveling on trains and riverboats to cover the 1,200 miles from Moscow to Perm, and it would take him another 75 days to reach Sakhalin. This may help to explain why the Prózorov sisters feel so far from their native city and all that they think of as civilization. In a town like Perm, they could be forgiven for thinking of their place of exile as the last gasp of Europe, the final outpost on the frontier between Europe and Asia, Russia and Siberia.

Long before it had a name or became a town, the riverbank where Perm stood had been a jumping off place for Siberia. The Stroganoff family, who held imperial monopolies on salt and furs from Ivan the Terrible, brought loads here from over the Urals to ship down the Kama. It was from here in 1581 that an army of Cossack irregulars, engaged by the Stroganoffs to stop Tatar raids on their caravans, crossed the mountains to destroy the Tatar Khan of Siberia’s capital on the river Irtysh, and then, fighting over bog, taiga, and tundra for thousands of miles, made their way to the Pacific, an adventure as extraordinary as any achieved by the Spanish conquistadors in the Americas.

Perm, founded in the 18th century by a friend of Peter the Great, the mining engineer V. N. Tattischev, became known as the place the empire’s salt came from, and its inhabi-

tants, who made their livings hoisting salt-sacks onto barges, as “the salty-eared Permyaks.” It was Tattischev who took pity on them and had the idea of bringing together the Urals’ wealth of wood and iron in a cooperage, making barrels and casks for the river trade. On that foundation grew shipyards, machine shops, and even an arms factory—a giant cannon made to celebrate Alexander III’s coronation in 1873 still sits in a park above the Kama and has an entry in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. A professor coming from St. Petersburg to help launch a university in 1916, twelve years after Chekhov’s death, described what he found as “a provincial town peacefully sleeping in the anteroom of culture.”

Because of its frontier history as the gate to Siberia, Perm was from early on a garrison town. It tells something that Chekhov chose it as his background for *The Three Sisters*, his main study of the place of the military in Russian life. It was on his journey to Sakhalin that he discovered the extent to which the army was the instrument that held the empire together. He never said publicly whether he thought the empire a good thing—he had no wish to return to Siberia—though he envied the modernization that imperialism had brought to Hong Kong and Singapore, stops on his way home from Sakhalin. But you didn’t have to approve of the empire to admire the ill-rewarded service of the men who mapped the Asian wilderness, defended Russia’s border with China on the Amur, and kept order in the far-flung outposts of the largest country on earth, with little hope of ever seeing their homes again.

“Other places may be different,” says Másha, the middle Prózorov sister, to Colonel Vershínin, “but in this town, the most decent, the most civilized and cultivated people are the military.” She is flattering the man with whom she is falling in love, as well as herself—she still thinks of herself as a general’s daughter rather than a teacher’s wife—but although none of his garrison officers is brilliant intellectually, Chekhov seems to agree with her. He had been surprised by the intellectual level of the army posts he passed through along the Amur, and knew that army officers were better educated than most Russian citizens. Peter the Great had made that part of his plan when he created the Russian army in the 18th century. Common soldiers must learn to read weapon manuals, officers must attend special cadet schools. Like aristocrats and courtiers, members of the army were personal servants of the emperor. To signal this, Peter required them, like his courtiers, to go clean-shaven in the Western manner, shedding the full beards that traditional Russian males regarded as their pious duty to display. (Tolstoy in *War and Peace* writes of peasant boys being “taken and shaven for a soldier.”) There’s a piteous piece of comedy near the end of *The Three Sisters* when the schoolmaster Kulýgin comes on clean-shaven. He is volunteering to replace his wife’s lover after the garrison’s departure. Másha cries, laughs when he dons a false beard he confiscated from a pupil, then cries again.

Peter the Great designed an army which would have no loyalties to anything but the empire and its emperors. To create it, he conscripted Russian peasant boys from their villages—none of the mercenaries and criminals which made up most European armies—and made them soldiers for life, never to see their homes again. The army itself became their home, their family. Each unit formed an *artel*, modeled on village collectives, to be a kind of bank and commissariat, to make up any deficiencies in food, clothing, or transport. Perpetually underfunded, regiments were expected to be self-sufficient, producing their own bakers, blacksmiths, carpenters, saddlers, tailors, and wheelwrights, and to sell their skills to enrich the *artel* when necessary. A regiment in Saratov, down the Volga, ran a profitable sideline in undertaking, making coffins and hiring out horses and mourners for funerals. Lieutenant Róhde in *The Three Sisters* teaches gymnastics at the local high school. His salary may enable him to buy flowers for Irína's name day, but most of it probably goes into the garrison's general fund.

To ensure that garrisons didn't go native, bonding with the local population, they were always quartered outside towns, in their own fortress or *kremlin*. Between the town and the *kremlin* would grow up a suburb or quarter housing other people with official connections to the state—in effect, a colony of the taxers maintaining a certain distance from the taxed. The Prózorov girls in *The Three Sisters* obviously live in such a suburb, while Vershínin and the other officers clearly maintain quarters nearby outside the *kremlin*; but whereas in towns further west the houses would be built of brick and stone, reflecting the wealth of the untaxed, in this town they seem to be built of wood, like the towns in Siberia—fire destroys a whole street overnight, and would probably have spread further but for the action of the garrison, carrying water from the river up through the Prózorovs' garden.

In many ways, the garrison is an occupying power, there to enforce the will of the emperor on the populace if necessary. (Perm was to be one of the hotbeds of the 1905 revolution.) Chekhov shows little sympathy for Natásha, the local girl who marries Andréi Prózorov and gradually drives his sisters from their house, and he makes it clear she is a thoroughly unlikable human being. But from her own point of view, she is something like an Irish girl in the 19th century, married into a family of “ascendancy” British who keep trying to correct her manners and accent. The revenge she takes on the Prózorovs is terrible, but she has cause for revenge.

Above all, the empire made sure its garrisons didn't go native by moving them regularly. At the end of *The Three Sisters*, the artillery brigade which has been quartered in the town for more than 15 years is transferred to Poland—there is no longer any threat of war on the old Siberian frontier, but clouds are gathering in the Far East and in the West, on the Polish frontier with Germany. The garrison marches away, except for Solyóny's battery,

which goes down river by barge, and the sisters are left behind, unable to understand what life has done to them.

You could compare them to bees left behind when their hive has been moved. I had a friend who put himself through college working for a bee farmer who rented his hives to the fruit farmers of the Niagara peninsula. For several weeks in the spring he would drive a truck of hives from orchard to orchard, setting the hives under the trees as they came into blossom to do the work of pollination for which the local bee population was insufficient. At the end of the week, he claimed, you could hear the bees singing with satisfaction in their hives, but there were always a few bees left outside, flying in bewildered circles, their places in the world gone forever. They could never live apart from their hives. One cold spring night would be enough to carry them off. It made you shudder, my friend said.

Chekhov admired much about the imperial army, but he could not overlook that it was part of the state and its apparatus, not of Russia. It contributed its share to the process he had observed in his own home town of Taganrog, on the Sea of Azov—the centralization of the empire was gradually stripping the provinces of their best young men (including the five Chekhov brothers), leaving whole districts overpopulated with young women unable to find suitable husbands, sending regiments of young males to the far ends of the earth. The best world for humans, as for bees, is one in which everyone is at home, but the century of great empires in which he lived had created one in which more and more people were displaced and homesick. That was another of the lessons he had brought back from Sakhalin. ■

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NOTES ON TRANSLATION AND ADAPTATION

BY PAUL SCHMIDT

When is a play text a translation, and when is it an adaptation? And when is it a new play altogether? It seems to me these are shifting categories, and we are therefore justified in saying that there is a verbal continuum along which we can situate any text when it is “brought over” from another language. (“Brought over” is what the word “translation” literally means.) Let’s look at some of the factors involved.

Assume we begin with a text that everybody agrees is a translation. What questions do we ask to evaluate it? Most people begin with the notion of “fidelity.” “Is this a faithful translation?” they ask. If pressed to define “faithful,” they will say, “Does the translation mean the same as the Russian?” and if pressed to be specific, they will say, “Are the words translated accurately?” So, finally, their criticisms of a translation will often be reduced to the objection: “That is not what this word means.”

There is, of course, a kind of translation in which that sort of fidelity makes sense: translation of a scientific experiment, for example, or of a passage from the Bible. In these instances the accuracy of word meaning will determine whether or not the scientist blows up his lab, and whether or not we save our immortal souls.

But if we are speaking of a play, a theater text, these questions of fidelity are subsumed by larger concerns. We evaluate a play by asking whether it moves its audience intellectually and emotionally, and to do this we know that the audience must be able to identify with the characters they see on the stage. This identification always depends on recognizing their own language, their own gestures, their own emotions and situations. When we speak of a translated play, clearly the situations and the emotions they generate are the work of the playwright, but emotion is revealed onstage by language and gesture, and these are the responsibility of the translator. Or adaptor.

I spoke of a continuum that includes both translation and adaptation, and said that the categories shift. It is often unclear where exactly on that continuum a given text is located. Are there any objective criteria for determining the point at which that shift occurs?

The act of translation, as distinct from adaptation, implies several conditions. Two languages must be involved, and some one person has to know both languages well. The task of the translator of Chekhov is to write a play in English that will produce, when staged, the same or an analogous effect on its American audience that the original may be said to have on a Russian audience. This implies that the translator is familiar with the

effect of the original on the Russian audience, and I note parenthetically that the best training for theatrical translators is to spend time going to the theater in the country or culture whose work they propose to translate.

It is important to remember that translating a Chekhov play means understanding more than just the words on the page; it means being familiar with Russian culture, with the physicality of cultural phenomena. It means asking yourself, “What are the cultural equivalents of the gestures indicated in the stage directions?” For example, in many of Chekhov’s plays—say, *The Three Sisters*—there is a stage direction which translated literally means “waving her hand.” In most translations, that is how the phrase is translated into English. The problem then for the American actor is to understand why Másha “waves” her hand. Is it a gesture of goodbye? Is it a signal of distress? Is it a sign she’s losing her mind? The literal translation leaves the American actor unenlightened. Now, the gesture Chekhov intends is a conventional gesture of dismissal, or impatience, and looks like this: the hand raised at about chest level, then dropped, without any arm movement. It’s standard Russian body language, but I think it’s current here, and any American audience can understand it clearly enough when they see it. But the translator has to provide a clear description of the gesture, so that the actor can recreate it. “Waving her hand” is too nonspecific.

Perhaps I’m more aware of the physical dimension of the text because I am an actor as well as a translator, and I have always thought of the two activities as related. For me, translating is performing, and performing is translating. You have to be able to let someone else’s words come through you, and not impose your own voice. You have to find a voice, and to do that you have to listen. We usually think of the translator sitting at a desk—in front of him a piece of paper, a text in another language, and a dictionary. But the theater translator’s first tool is his ear. I have to know enough Russian to be able to hear Chekhov’s voice in all its nuances and shades of emphasis, and then I have to try to recreate in American English a voice that resounds within the American language the way Chekhov’s voice resounds within Russian. In other words, I have to be aware of the linguistic choices Chekhov makes. What other expression might he have used here? What expression have other Russian authors used in a similar situation? What associations does a particular word conjure up for a Russian audience? What makes Chekhov’s choice—of word, phrase, or idiom—unique, and uniquely his? This is a complex, many-layered process; it involves not only my knowledge of the Russian language, but also my knowledge of Russian culture—the land and its people, their speech patterns, their gestures and body language, their history, their religion, their symbols, their fears and aspirations.

And of course I must also know my own American language—its idioms, its rich slang, its regional variation, its endless possibilities. I have to know the history of American theater, what its conventions and expectations are. Beyond a dictionary, the tools of my trade are *Roget's Thesaurus*, Partridge's dictionary of slang, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. And also every American play, movie, and television show I've ever seen.

All this apparatus is necessary because the theater translator must negotiate between three parties: the playwright, the actor, and the audience. Whatever language I speak as a translator must be a language the audience can recognize as theirs. And if it isn't contemporary language, it must at least be recognizable as part of the audience's history, part of what they already know. Theater, I believe, only works if the actors speak the same language as the audience. That language must be as natural in the actor's mouth as it is in the audience's ear.

But where does a translation become an adaptation? Or an original play? One of the most interesting pieces of translation/adaptation in American theater history culminated in the 1964 musical *Hello, Dolly!* The musical was based on Thornton Wilder's play *The Matchmaker* of 1954. That play in turn was a reworking of a play Wilder had written in 1938, called *The Merchant of Yonkers*. Wilder had based that play (translating it? adapting it?) on a Viennese farce by Johann Nestroy, from 1842, called *Einen Jux will er sich machen*. And Nestroy had based his play (translating it? adapting it?) on an English comedy written in 1835 by John Oxenford, called *A Day Well Spent*.

So here we have a 130-year history of the transformation of a dramatic text, from English to German and back into American English, and then into music. And the locale of the play shifted with its language, from London to Vienna to New York.

Wilder was often accused—rather unjustly, I think—of plagiarism, notably over his use of Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, but also over this work as well. And the question is neatly posed: At what point do we leave the translation–adaptation continuum and define the work as a new play? Wilder offered these plays, and they remain in his canon, as original plays, yet Wilder translated whole passages verbatim from Nestroy's German. (It's interesting to note that Wilder followed Nestroy's plot quite faithfully; his only departure was the creation of a new character, called Dolly Levi. It was this new character, of course, who wound up as the lead in the musical *Hello, Dolly!*)

Wilder has done no more than what theater has always done. To take a forgotten play from another culture and rewrite it so it works in our culture—this is the process that keeps theater alive. The term we give to this process is less important than our judgment of the excellence of the resulting text.

I do think there are some cases where only translation will serve, and Chekhov's plays are among them. The structures of his last four plays are so finely put together that they won't work if pieces are missing, or have been tampered with, or if extraneous elements are introduced.

If I had to call a work a translation or an adaptation, I think I would say it is a translation if the writer knows the language of the original text, and an adaptation if the writer doesn't. Not that translators cannot do adaptations; rather, in my experience, adaptors cannot translate. Clearly, there's no fixed rule that guarantees the excellence of the text—some adaptations are marvelous plays; some translations are unplayable.

On the continuum we spoke of, therefore, the definitive break is found at the point where the writer concerned knows or does not know the language of the original. But whether a text is a translation or an adaptation is not the primary question. What is important is, does the text when staged produce good theater? ■

Paul Schmidt presented these remarks in 1993 as a participant in "Translation and Adaptation: Playwrights Reinterpret the Classics," a public A.C.T. symposium funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities Division of Public Programs. This article was originally published in the performance program for the premiere production of Schmidt's A.C.T.-commissioned translation of *Uncle Vanya*.

A *THREE SISTERS* GLOSSARY

COMPILED BY PAUL WALSH

“ON YOUR BIRTHDAY, IRÍNA”

Translator Paul Schmidt changed the Russian “name-day” in Chekhov’s original text to “birthday.” He explains in the notes to the published script: “A name-day party is the social equivalent of our birthday party.” A name-day is the feast day of the saint for whom a person is named. The feast of St. Irína was celebrated on 5 May under the Old Russian calendar (18 May today).

“TWO OUNCES OF NAPHTHA, IN A BOTTLE OF ALCOHOL”

Schmidt uses naphtha as synonymous with naphthalene, a strong-smelling white crystalline hydrocarbon made from coal tar or petroleum used as a fumigant in mothballs. Later Kulýgin observes, “These rugs should be rolled up and stored for the summer, in mothballs or naphtha.”

“MAN MUST WORK, WORK IN THE SWEAT OF HIS BROW.”

Irína recalls the passage in Genesis (“In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread,” 3:19) in which Adam is expelled from the Garden of Eden and condemned to a life of toil and hardship.

“I READ IN THE PAPERS, LET’S SAY, ABOUT A WRITER NAMED DOBROLYÚBOV, SO I KNOW HE EXISTS, BUT GOD ONLY KNOWS WHAT HE WROTE, I DON’T.”

Nikolai Dobrolyúbov (1836–61) was an influential young critic in the 1850s, despite his untimely death from tuberculosis at the age of 25. As a disciple of Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyúbov demanded that the aesthetic qualities of literature be subordinated to social and political demands. Literature, he wrote, “is an auxiliary force, the importance of which lies in propaganda, and the merit of which is determined by what it propagates, and how it propagates it.” Dobrolyúbov considered works of fiction to be commentaries on the culture within which they were created. His best articles (on Goncharov’s novel *Oblomov*, for example, or the plays of Ostrovsky) were extensive pieces of contemporary social commentary inspired by a particular novel, play, or short story. Noting that Dobrolyúbov was read by all progressive Russian thinkers, Schmidt comments: “That Chebutýkin doesn’t know what [Dobrolyúbov] wrote is a good indication of the doctor’s shallowness.”

“BESIDE THE SEA THERE STANDS A TREE, AND ON THAT TREE A GOLDEN
CHAIN . . . AND ON THAT TREE A GOLDEN CHAIN.”

Másha quotes the opening lines of Russian poet Alexander Pushkin’s prologue to his epic verse fairytale *Ruslan and Ludmila* (1820). Here is another translation of the dedication and prologue to Pushkin’s long, fanciful poem of magic, adventure, and love:

Dedication

For you alone, enchanting beauties,
Queens of my spirit, for your sake
Did I convert to scribal duties
Some golden leisure hours, and make,
To whisperings of garrulous ages,
Once-upon-a-time my faithful task.
Accept them, then, these playful pages;
And no one’s praises do I ask
From fate, but shall be pleased to thank it
If one young girl should love, and pine,
And peep, perhaps beneath her blanket,
At these unshriven songs of mine.

Prologue

An oak tree greening by the ocean;
A golden chain about it wound:
Whereon a learned cat, in motion
Both day and night, will walk around;
On walking right, he sings a ditty;
On walking left, he tells a lay.

A magic place: there wends his way
The wood sprite, there’s a mermaid sitting
On branches, there on trails past knowing
Are tracks of beasts you never met;
On chicken feet a hut is set
With neither door nor window showing.
There wood and dale with wonders team;
At dawn of day the breakers stream

Upon the bare and barren lea,
And thirty handsome armored heroes
File from the waters' shining mirrors,
With them their Usher from the Sea.
There glimpse a prince, and in his passing
He makes a dreaded tsar his slave;
Aloft, before the people massing.
Across the wood, across the wave,
A warlock bears a warrior brave;
See Baba Yaga's mortar glide
All of itself, with her astride.
There droops Kashchey, on treasure bent;
There's Russia's spirit . . . Russian scent!
And there I stayed, and drank of mead;
That oak tree greening by the shore
I sat beneath, and of his lore
The learned cat would chant and read.
One tale of these I kept in mind,
And tell it now to all my kind.

“SAID THE DOG TO THE FLEA, DON'T JUMP ON ME.”

Schmidt replaced Chekhov's quotation from “The Peasant and the Laborer” (variously translated as “He scarce had time to cry ‘beware’ / When he was taken by a bear”), by Ivan Krylov, a writer famous in the first half of the 19th century for his verse fables satirizing contemporary social types in the guise of beasts, with another. Schmidt suggests that “the main point here is the rhyme and the appositeness of the sneering retort to Másha.” He adds: “The image of the bear is incidental, although I have heard long discussions of this quote at rehearsals, where the savage Russian bear was taken as a vast symbol for Solyóny and Russian society. But Chekhov had used this quote before; a character in an earlier story goes around spouting these lines, and about him Chekhov notes: ‘He had an irritating habit, in the middle of a conversation he would pronounce loudly some phrase or other that had nothing to do with what he was talking about.’ Chekhov is concerned here with a speech characteristic, not with symbols.”

“A SILVER SERVICE! HOW AWFUL!”

Much has been written about the samovar that Chebutýkin gives Irína as a name-day gift. Schmidt changed the gift to “a silver service,” which he explains as follows: “A Russian tea service consists of an urn designed to keep water hot, called a samovar, a teapot that is kept warm on its top, and perhaps a tray. So much ‘Russianness’ is attached to samovars in America that we often miss Chekhov’s point: this is the kind of elaborate present offered at bridal showers or silver wedding anniversaries, and it seems especially inappropriate for the doctor to offer it to a young girl.”

“IN NÓVO-DÉVICHY CEMETERY”

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, NÓvo-Dévichy (Nowodjewishij) Cemetery was a famous and prestigious burial site. Not only is the sisters’ mother buried there but also such luminaries as Scriabin, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Bulgakov, Gogol, Kropotkin, Mayakovsky, Khrushchev, Stanislavsky, and Chekhov himself. It is said in Moscow that only burial in the Kremlin Wall carries more prestige than burial in NÓvo-Dévichy Cemetery.

“IT’S LOVE THAT MAKES THE WORLD GO ROUND.”

It is unlikely that Chebutýkin is quoting the old Perry Como tune written by Ollie Jones and recorded in 1958, or the Bob Merrill tune from *Carnival* (1961). He certainly isn’t quoting the Madonna tune of the same title. While the phrase may sound modern, the sentiment is timeless, as another translation of this line suggests: “For Love alone did Nature put us on this earth.”

“WHAT A LOT OF FLOWERS YOU’VE GOT!”

While Chekhov loved gardening, his wife, Olga Knipper, commented that he hated cut flowers: “The sight of cut or plucked flowers depressed him, and when, as it sometimes happened, ladies brought him flowers, he would silently carry them out to another room a few moments after they had left” (O. L. Knipper-Chekhova [1952], “About A. P. Chekhov”).

“FECI QUOD POTUI, FACIANT MELIORA POTENTES.”

As Schmidt comments: “Kulýgin teaches Latin and quotes it whenever he can.” Here he is quoting a familiar proverb from Cicero: “I have done my best; let others do better if they can” (*Epist.* XI, 14).

“MENS SANA IN CORPORE SANO”

This often-quoted phrase from Juvenal’s 10th *Satire* (l. 356) means “a healthy mind in a healthy body” and recommends that each is necessary to the other.

“DARK VODKA”

Also known as *starka* and oak vodka, dark vodka is a rare and strong (50%-alcohol) aged vodka made in Russia and Poland from rye spirits and aged in oak barrels. The aging process and the oak essences leached from the wood (rather than “cockroach juice,” as Solyóny suggests) give this brandylike drink its unique bouquet, golden color, and smooth taste. The story goes that a very long time ago, when a baby girl was born, a barrel of vodka was buried in the garden. At the daughter’s wedding the barrel was dug up and all the guests were shocked and pleased by what the vodka had become over time. In the 18th century, oak vodka was said to strengthen weaknesses of the internal organs (especially the kidneys), clean and close wounds and ulcers, and prevent pestilence: “Drink this vodka,” the saying went, “it repairs everything.”

“BESIDE THE SEA THERE STANDS A TREE, AND ON THAT TREE A GOLDEN CHAIN . . . AND ON THAT CHAIN AN EDUCATED CAT GOES AROUND AND AROUND AND AROUND.”

Schmidt added the second two lines of Pushkin’s prologue to *Ruslan and Ludmila* here. He explains that “Pushkin’s poems have always been widely known and memorized, and most educated Russians, hearing the first two lines, would automatically supply the two that follow. The educated cat, going around in circles on a chain, is clearly Másha’s image of herself.”

“IF THERE ARE THIRTEEN AT TABLE, THAT MEANS TWO OF THEM ARE IN LOVE.”

Kulýgin offers a singular interpretation of the fateful “thirteen at table,” which traditionally has been considered bad luck in Christian folk belief since the “Last Supper” that preceded the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ. Perhaps he is thinking of the kiss Judas gave Christ in the act of betraying him.

“THE CARNIVAL PEOPLE ARE SUPPOSED TO COME TONIGHT.”

In old Russia, the Shrovetide Carnival was celebrated the week before the beginning of Lent, culminating in Mardi Gras on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. Schmidt points out that Carnival Week “was celebrated in old Russia as elsewhere with parties and costume parades.” The “carnival people” in Schmidt’s translation, often called “mummers” or “masquers” in other translations, are costumed folk musicians or minstrels (*skomorokhi* in Russian). The seasonal performances of *skomorokhi* can be traced back to the Middle Ages,

when ritual dancers battled winter demons and eventually welcomed the spirits of spring at festivals throughout the *Sviatki* season (the 12 days of Christmas), the Shrovetide carnival, Easter week, Pentecost, and May Day.

“SITTING AT A TABLE AT TESTOV’S OR THE GRAND MOSCOW”

While the Grand Moscow is difficult to identify, one imagines it is as fine a restaurant in Andréi’s mind as Testov’s Tavern, which was one of the most famous restaurants in Moscow. The pride of Okhotny Ryad Street—a little street that became known as “Moscow’s Belly” for the many fine restaurants located there—Testov’s was famed for the high quality and originality of its cuisine, which included open-topped starlet and sturgeon pies and suckling pigs garnished with horseradish and sour cream. It was said that Testov had special pens installed behind his tavern so his piglets, which he fed on fresh cottage cheese, would grow fat and juicy.

“EATIN’ PANCAKES”

This seeming non sequitur makes sense when one remembers that it is customary for Russians to eat blini at the Shrovetide carnival, especially on Shrove Tuesday (Mardi Gras). Though Russian blini (akin to blintzes) are thinner than American-style flapjacks, eating 40 or 50 of them is still a prodigious feat—especially if they are topped with caviar, as is traditionally the case.

“TO HER BROTHER IN SARATOV”

Saratov is both a county and city on the western bank of the Volga River in central Russia. Once the capital of the Lower Volga region, it is now the center of one of the biggest provinces in Russia. In the late 19th century, Saratov was a regional trade center for agriculture, fishing, and salt production, as well as for manufacturing and metal processing. Today the county of Saratov has a population of about 900,000 people.

“ANDRÉI LOST TWO HUNDRED RUBLES”

Following Finance Minister Sergei Witte’s 1894 reform, which put Russia back on the gold standard, the ruble was worth approximately US\$0.51. Andréi therefore lost about \$102, which when adjusted for inflation would be the 2001 equivalent of approximately \$2,084.

“VENEZ ICI.”

Chebútykin shows off his rudimentary French, asking (actually demanding) that Irína “come here.” In the 18th and 19th centuries, French was considered by many Russians to be the language of the aristocracy and the intelligentsia. It was prized as a refined

European language, as opposed to what they considered the coarse Russian language and crude Slavic customs.

“YOU KNOW WHAT GOGOL SAID: ‘LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, LIFE IS A BORE!’”

The great 19th-century Russian writer Nikolai Gogol (1809–52) is best remembered today for his 1836 play *The Inspector General*. He also wrote short stories, novels, and satires of Russian bureaucratic life that are filled with sparkling humor. The line cited here is from Gogol’s short story “The Tale of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikoforovich.”

“BALZAC WAS MARRIED IN BERDICHEV.”

It is true that the great French realist novelist Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) was married in Berdichev, a small provincial town in the western Ukraine near the border of Poland. In 1832 Balzac met and had an affair with the Polish countess Eveline Hanska, who at the time was married to a Ukrainian property owner living in Berdichev. When her husband died in 1842, Balzac expected to marry the countess, but his poverty prevented it. In the autumn of 1847, Balzac went to Countess Hanska’s chateau in Berdichev and remained there until February 1848. He returned, mortally ill, the following fall and stayed until the spring of 1850. At last Countess Hanska relented and they were married in March in the Church of Saint Barbara. The newlyweds proceeded to Paris, where Balzac died a few months later. At the time of the play, Berdichev was part of the Russian empire.

“TSÍTSIKAR. AN EPIDEMIC OF SMALLPOX HAS BROKEN OUT HERE.”

In the 19th century, Tsítsikar was a flourishing city in northeastern China, just across the Amur River from Russia.

“THAT FRENCH POLITICIAN, THE ONE WHO WENT TO PRISON BECAUSE OF THE PANAMA SCANDAL.”

It is not certain which crooked French politician’s diary Vershínin is reading. A number of careers were claimed by the Panama scandal—the largest “Enron-style” political corruption scandal of the 19th century. Three years after the financial collapse of Vicomte Ferdinand de Lesseps’ Panama Canal Company in 1889, news broke of bribes and shady dealings that had taken place as de Lesseps had tried to save the collapsing Panama Canal Company by raising money through a lottery loan supported by the French government. In order to escape imminent insolvency, the company had distributed large bribes to the press, bank employees, and influential politicians to help them promote the lottery bonds. Despite these efforts, the bond issue failed and de Lesseps resigned from the Panama

Canal Company in 1889. Three years later, the Panama scandal rocked the French Republic. More than 500 members of parliament and a large number of ministers were accused of taking bribes from the company. De Lesseps, his son Charles, members of the Panama Canal Company management, and entrepreneur Gustave Eiffel were all given prison sentences that were later commuted. A number of ministers and politicians, including the former city development minister, Bethaut, were also given prison sentences that were later commuted. Baron Reinach, the financial adviser of the Panama Canal Company who is said to have paid out the bribes, committed suicide. Other defendants fled to England. The Panama Canal scandal had such a profound effect across Europe that “panama” is still a slang word for “scandal” in Hungarian.

“JE VOUS PRIE, PARDONNEZ-MOI, MARIE, MAIS VOUS AVEZ DES MANIÈRES UN PEU GROSSIÈRES.”

Natasha’s French is clumsy, as if learned from books. What she says is something like: “I beg of you, excuse me, Marie, but you have the manners of someone not very refined.”

“IL PARAÎT QUE MON BOBIK DÉJÀ NE DORT PAS.”

Again, Natasha speaks awkward French: “It seems my Bobik no longer sleeps.”

“I AM STRANGE, WE ALL ARE STRANGE! FORGET THY WRATH, ALÉKO.”

According to Schmidt, the first sentence is an accurate quotation from the play *Woe from Wit*, by Alexander Griboyédov (1795–1829). The second sentence appears to be a garbled reference to Aléko, the hero of Pushkin’s poem “Gypsies” (1824), although these exact words do not appear in the poem.

“I HAVE THE SOUL OF LERMONTOV.”

Poet Mikhail Lermontov (1814–41) was sometimes called the Russian Byron. Reflecting a new stage in the development of Russian social consciousness, Lermontov wrote of the destiny of a generation, the moral atmosphere of society, and the tragic solitude of a freedom-loving man in resounding romantic verse. Like Pushkin, Lermontov was killed in a duel. He was only 27 years old at the time. Tolstoy once said: “It is the young who respond most immediately to the rebellious romanticism of [Lermontov’s] poetry.” Tolstoy himself took inspiration for his novel *War and Peace* from the following lines of Lermontov’s poem “Valerik”:

How pitiable is man,
What does he lack! . . . clear shines the sky,

Beneath the sky there's room to spare for
All men. And yet unceasingly
He wages fruitless war—why? Wherefore?

“IT WAS A REAL CAUCASIAN DINNER TOO: WE HAD ONION SOUP, AND A MEAT DISH CALLED CHEKHARTMÁ.”

The word Caucasian is used here in the sense of “from the Caucasus,” a high mountain range in southeastern Europe extending across the land between the Caspian and Black seas. This region, which includes Chechnya, Dagestan, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, is home to a vast and varied number of ethnic cultures. *Chekhartmá* (also called *chikhitma*) is a Georgian mutton soup, while *cheremshá* (“bear’s garlic,” also called “wild garlic”) is a plant whose green leaves have a garlicky taste. Bear’s garlic grows wild in the fens and river woods of central Europe. In spring, the leaves are collected and used raw to flavor cheese, soups, and sauces.

“AKH, VY SENI, MOYI SENI, SENI NOVYE MOYI . . . / SENI NOVYE, KLENOVYE . . . / RESCHOCHATYE!”

These lines, from a well-known Russian children’s song, mean literally: “Oh, my little front porch, my new front porch of maplewood and lattice work.” Schmidt points out, however: “They’re no more significant than ‘Polly wolly doodle all the day’ is in English.”

“THAT CHEAP LITTLE . . .”

Másha describes Natásha as “*meschbanka*,” a female member of the petty bourgeoisie. In doing so Másha underscores the fact that not only has Andréi (a member of the gentry) married beneath his class, but his wife’s behavior lacks class.

“O, FALLACEM HOMINUM SPEM!”

This phrase from book three of Cicero’s *On Oratory* was often cited in grammar books as an example of an exclamation being in the accusative case (called the “accusative of exclamation”). It can be translated, “Oh, mistaken hope of men.”

“MOSCOW BURNT DOWN TOO, LONG AGO. THEM FRENCHIES SURE GOT A SURPRISE.”

Ferapónt here recalls the great fire of September 1812 when, after the battle of Borodino against Napoleon’s army, the chief commander of the Russian army, Michael Kutuzoff, ordered a retreat from Moscow. Soon after Napoleon’s army had entered and begun to sack

the city, it started to burn. It is still unclear today whether the fire was set by marauding French soldiers or by retreating Moscovites. Heavy winds spread the fire across the city in a matter of hours and even the Kremlin itself burned. Astonished, Napoleon exclaimed: “What savages! To annoy me they burn their own history, the work of centuries!” Seventy percent of Moscow burned, including many palaces, museums, churches, and works of art.

“THEY WERE TALKING ABOUT SHAKESPEARE AND VOLTAIRE.”

At this time in Russia, Shakespeare and Voltaire were considered the twin pillars of cultured European humanism.

“THEY ALL PRETENDED. MADE ME SICK.”

Chebutýkin uses the Russian word “*poshlost*” to describe the others at the club. While the word has no English equivalent, it is often translated as “vulgar.” Nabokov suggested that *poshlost* is “not only the obviously trashy but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive.”

“IN VINO VERITAS.”

This well-known Latin aphorism, which means literally “in wine is truth,” is of pre-Christian origin—probably Roman and perhaps associated with worship of the god Bacchus.

“DON’T YOU LIKE THIS LITTLE FIG I’M GIVING YOU.”

Schmidt notes: “The doctor sings this line, but the actor will have to make up his own tune. One of the actors at the Moscow Art Theatre wrote to Chekhov asking him about this line. Chekhov answered: ‘Chebutýkin should sing only the words “Don’t you like this little fig I’m giving you.” They’re from an operetta I heard a while ago at the Hermitage theatre, I can’t remember the name. . . . He shouldn’t sing any more than that, otherwise he’ll spoil his exit.’”

“LYUBOV VSE VOSRASTY POKORNY, YEYO PORYVY BLAGOTVORNY.”

According to Schmidt, these lines (from a famous aria sung by Prince Gremin in Act III of Tchaikovsky’s opera *Eugene Onegin*) mean literally: “Love is appropriate to any age, its delights are beneficent.”

“TRAM-TAM-TAM.”

Schmidt comments: “Olga Knipper [Chekhov’s wife], who first played Másha, wrote Chekhov to ask what these lines mean. He wrote back: ‘Vershínin pronounces the words tram-tram-tram as a kind of question and you as a kind of answer, and this seems to you

such an original joke that you say your tram-tram with a laugh. . . . You should say tram-tram and start to laugh, but not out loud, just a little, almost to yourself.”

“WEE, WEE, WEE, WEE”

Schmidt replaced a pretty incomprehensible line about provoking geese, from a fable by Krylov called “The Geese,” with reference to the nursery rhyme “This Little Piggie Went to Market.”

“AMO, AMAS, AMAT. AMAMUS, AMATIS, AMANT.”

Másha provides the complete conjugation of the Latin verb *amare* (“to love”), often memorized in elementary Latin as the template for the “first conjugation” (verbs whose infinitive ends in *-are*): “I love; you love; he, she, or it loves; we love, you (plural) love; they love.”

“OMNIA MEA MECUM PORTO.”

When the city of Priene was besieged and the inhabitants were preparing for flight, the Greek philosopher Bias, one of the seven sages, is reported to have said: “All that is mine I carry with me.” Translated into Latin, this became an oft-quoted aphorism about living modestly. It was glossed by Andrea Alciati in his *Emblemata* (1539), a metrical collection in which moral aphorisms were commented upon in often-extravagant, though always elegant, Latin verses.

“THE REST IS SILENCE.”

Schmidt substituted this famous line from *Hamlet* (v.2) for Chekhov’s more oblique reference to Gogol’s *Diary of a Madman* (1835).

“I HAD TO DO IT BECAUSE I OWED A LOT OF MONEY—THIRTY-FIVE THOUSAND.”

If we adjust for inflation, Andréi owes the astonishing sum of US\$365,000.

“AND CALL YOU ‘KOKHANY.’”

Kokhany (also *kochanie*) is Polish for “sweetheart.” The adjective *kochany* means “dear,” “beloved,” or “merry.”

“TARA-RA-BOOM-DER-AY”

Chebútykin is right up with the times, altering the words to Henry J. Sayers’s 1891 song “Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-De-Ay.”

“IT’S PERFECTLY NORMAL, A MODUS VIVENDI.”

Literally meaning a “way of living,” this common Latin phrase remains in common use today.

“UT CONSECUTIVUM CONSTRUCTION”

Kulýgin’s story turns on a fine point of Latin grammar.

“I WON’T EVER HAVE TO HEAR HER PLAY THAT ‘MAIDEN’S PRAYER’ AGAIN.”

Schmidt suggests “two possibilities for the piece Natásha is playing, both 19th-century parlor favorites: ‘La Priere d’une Vierge,’ by [Tekla Badarzewska-]Baranowska, or ‘Zyczenie’ (‘The Maiden’s Wish’), Opus 74, #1, by Chopin.”

“HOW DOES LERMONTOV’S POEM GO? ‘BUT EVERY REBEL SEEKS A STORM, AS IF A STORM WILL BRING HIM PEACE.’”

Solyóny is trying to remember the concluding lines of Lermontov’s poem “The Sail,” but does not quite succeed. Here is the poem in another translation:

A lonely sail is flashing white
Amidst the blue mist of the sea! . . .
What does it seek in foreign lands?
What did it leave behind at home? . . .

Waves heave, wind whistles,
The mast, it bends and creaks . . .
Alas, it seeks not happiness
Nor happiness does it escape!

Below, a current azure bright,
Above, a golden ray of sun . . .
Rebellious, it seeks out a storm
As if in storms it could find peace!

“IL NE FAUT PAS FAIRE DU BRUIT, LA SOPHIE EST DORMÉE DÉJÀ. VOUS ÊTES UN OURS.”

Natásha’s French may be improving, but it still has a long way to go: “Stop making such noise. Sophie is asleep already. You are a bear.”

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Which of the characters do you find yourself identifying with the most? Why do you find that character particularly appealing? How do your feelings for that character affect your perception of the other characters, and of the play as a whole?

2. How is Andréi's journey related to his sisters' journeys? Does he come to the same conclusions they do? For the same reasons? How is his journey of self-discovery more or less of a reversal of his early ideas than each of his sisters' journeys? Do you like him more before he falls out of love with Natásha, or after? Why?

3. Why is Moscow so important to the three sisters and their brother? What does Moscow mean to them? Is there a place that means as much to you?

4. Why do you think Másha and Vershínin are drawn to each other? What is it about Kulýgin that is so distasteful to Másha? Why do you think he remains devoted to her?

5. Why is Solyóny's rudeness so hurtful to the three sisters? What hints do we have, besides their own statements about their education, that they are more "cultured" than the army officers who surround them? How do their attitudes about their education and social status influence the way they handle each of the events that take place: Irína's birthday; Andréi's marriage; the carnival party that breaks up; the fire; and the brigade's departure?

6. Why is Chebutýkin an important part of the Prózorov household? What does he represent for the three sisters? Why do you think they tolerate his drunkenness, when they will tolerate so little unrefined behavior in most others?

7. Do you think Másha, Ólga, and Irína define happiness in different ways? Is one of the sisters' definitions of happiness more or less understandable to you? Do you, and people you know, today define happiness differently? How?

8. Why do you think the play ends as it does? What do you think the ending is trying to say about the futility of trying to escape? Why do you think the sisters are unable to leave the path on which they are set? How much is their destiny in their own hands, and how much is it controlled by the men and women around them, the events of their past, and the historical period and geographical location in which they live?

9. How does the fact that *The Three Sisters* is set in the past for us now, but was the present for its first audiences, affect how we watch it? Are there universal truths in the struggle for survival and fulfillment that we see each of the characters fighting, or is the play now a historical piece? What can we translate into our everyday, 21st-century lives from this play?

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