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0521293456 - Chekhov in Performance: A Commentary on the Major Plays

J. L. Styan

Excerpt

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# Introduction

Western tradition has accustomed us to thinking that great plays deal with larger-than-life people, important events, great experiences. Chekhov deals in the little things, the particulars that go to make up general experience; he leads us to the greater experience step by step by touching us with a thousand insights. It was the practising physician who wrote, 'Details are also the thing in the sphere of psychology. God preserve us from generalizations.'<sup>1</sup> And writing about the characters in *Ivanov* he claimed, '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.'<sup>2</sup> It is, moreover, his immense particularity which makes him so stageworthy and such a joy to act.

Tracing Chekhov through his details and seeing how all the elements of his craft work together is an attempt to plumb the depth of his subtext. This kind of exegesis can never, of course, be complete, but I am not alone in finding that the usual methods of dramatic criticism – describing plot and character and theme – are inadequate to realize the texture and density and the 'experience' of a Chekhov play. Robert Corrigan has said, 'To analyze these plays properly one would have to begin with the opening speech and then, making cross-relationships, work through the entire play until the final curtain in much the same manner one would give a critical reading of a poem.'<sup>3</sup> The analysis of theatre is more complicated than this, but I have tried to work roughly along such lines. The method of the book is, therefore, really designed to echo Chekhov's own practice, which prompts a host of controlled impressions from an audience as the play proceeds.

<sup>1</sup> Letter to his brother Alexander, 10 May 1886, in Simmons, p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Suvorin, 30 December 1888, in Hellman, p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> Introduction to *Six Plays of Chekhov* (New York, 1962).

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It goes without saying that this is also the method of the director in the theatre.

Yet there is an abiding belief that Chekhov did not bother his head with the rules of playwriting. Tolstoy, according to his friend A. B. Goldenweizer, was, like everybody, impressed by Chekhov's command of details, but without perceiving how these details were anything but casual in their ordering. Tolstoy found Chekhov a singular writer: 'He throws in words seemingly haphazardly, and nevertheless everything in him lives. And how clever! He never has superfluous details; on the contrary, each is either necessary or beautiful.' If this is true, it follows that it is unthinkable folly for a company to 'adapt' a major play by Chekhov for performance: cutting even one line would be working blind. But Tolstoy adds, 'Nevertheless, it is all only mosaic without a genuinely governing idea.'<sup>1</sup> We must watch to see how Tolstoy's 'impressionist painter with his brush strokes' works on the stage. We must examine how his details fuse in a complete, if dramatically ambivalent, harmony. The governing idea may be discovered in the governing experience.

The task of piecing together one of Chekhov's giant jigsaw puzzles in order to discover little by little what the whole picture is, must also be the only way the student of Chekhov can recognize the hidden beauties of his art. But it is not possible to anticipate what these beauties are. His poetry of the theatre is to be sensed in his balancing point with point, in his fine control of contradictory feeling, in the delighted objectivity an audience assumes when all its senses are in play. The literal meaning of the words of the dialogue offers little help when the minute behaviour of the character, or at the other extreme, when the centripetal mood of the whole stage, betrays another tone and rhythm in the real action of the scene. The submerged life of the text, in Chekhov's little silences and tensions, in the pacing and lyricism of the action, can finally be recreated, of course, only in the theatre. And only there can it be judged. 'What is so wonderful about Chekhov's plays,' declared Stanislavsky, 'is not what is transmitted by the words, but what is hidden under them, in the pauses, in the glances of the actors, in the emanation of their inmost feelings.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Dmitri Chizhevsky in *Anton Čechov: 1860–1960. Some Essays*, ed. T. Eekman (Leiden, 1960) and reprinted in Jackson, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> Balukhaty, p. 130.

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It is a commonplace that Chekhov's text 'reads badly', but plays beautifully, and this book aims to recreate a stage sense of his drama in order to understand him.

It is hoped that this treatment will also incidentally illuminate the playing conditions of the nineteenth-century European theatre with and against which Chekhov was working. An appreciation of the task of the naturalistic dramatists of the period is essential in Chekhov's case above all. Since his remarkable preface to *Miss Julie* of 1888, Strindberg had been pleading for that licence to release the stage from its stereotypes of character and action; this release became an absolute necessity for the weaving of Chekhov's delicate webs. In arguing for an 'intimate theatre', Strindberg twenty years later was still attacking false, declamatory acting:

A declaration of love is bellowed forth, a confidence expressed like a call to arms, a secret of the heart whispered hoarsely from the bottom of the throat and lungs, and everybody on stage acts as if he were in a frightful temper and only interested in getting offstage.<sup>1</sup>

The story of Chekhov's own attack on such theatre and of his theatrical development are one and the same. It is also the story of his progress towards objectivity in his beliefs as in his art. 'My holy of holies are the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and the most absolute freedom – freedom from force and falsity, in whatever form these last may be expressed. This is the program I would maintain, were I a great artist.'<sup>2</sup> The words are familiar in Chekhov criticism, but they reverberate into all corners of his life and work. Even at the time of writing *Ivanov* he was aiming for a new impersonality as a playwright.

Present-day playwrights begin their plays solely with angels, villains, and buffoons. Now, search for these characters in the whole of Russia. Yes, you can find them, but not such extremes as are necessary for a playwright. One is forced to squeeze them out of one's head, get into a sweat, and give it up . . . I wanted to be original; I have not introduced a single villain nor an angel, although I could not refuse myself buffoons; I accused nobody, justified nobody.<sup>3</sup>

John Hagan rightly argues that this is not to be construed as a

<sup>1</sup> August Strindberg, 'Notes to Members of the Intimate Theatre', trans. E. Sprinchorn in *The Chamber Plays* (New York, 1962), p. 208.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to A. N. Pleshcheyev, 4 October 1888, in Hellman, p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Alexander Chekhov, 24 October 1887, in Koteliensky, p. 93.

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declaration of neutrality, but as an ideal of the artist's truthfulness.<sup>1</sup> 'To chemists there is nothing unclean in this world. A man of letters should be as objective as a chemist.'<sup>2</sup> If Chekhov's plays are to deal objectively in true problems of human relationships and society, the artist in him can hope for no more than to engage the spectator's interest as honestly as he can. Happily, the drama is a form which insists upon objective representation: the good playwrights seem impersonal, their characters are seen obliquely, and they are encouraged to do on the stage what might seem perverse in other literary forms.

In sum, we can learn Chekhov's lesson, his 'governing idea', only by getting to grips with his stage method. Chekhov, in the actuality of his practice, teaches us by refusing to teach us. 'You ask what is life? That is just the same as asking what is a carrot. A carrot is a carrot, and nothing more is known about it.'<sup>3</sup>

It remains to touch on two technical matters. I have chosen to retain the well-known translation by Constance Garnett for my quotations in the text. In spite of its slightly period flavour, this sensitive rendering is held by many, including myself, in great affection, and that same period flavour seems right for a *fin de siècle* drama. It is a controversial issue whether or not the Russian convention of trailing dots, which Garnett largely retained, but which the crisply modern and colloquial version of Ronald Hingley eschews, should be exactly rendered in the English. In stage dialogue these notorious dots helpfully indicate, it seems to me, the pauses and hesitations which the playwright intended us to hear on his characters' lips. It has been well said that Chekhov is the poet of half-lights;<sup>4</sup> his scenes and his people are fragile by nineteenth-century standards. Since his pauses of suppressed feeling or uncertain reflection are implicit in the vitality of his lines, we should hesitate before eliminating them from the printed page.

The commentary begins with *The Seagull* and treats in turn the four major plays. *Uncle Vanya* gets the shortest treatment, and to *The Cherry Orchard*, the summit of Chekhov's achievement, it

<sup>1</sup> See 'Chekhov's Fiction and the Ideal of "Objectivity"', *P.M.L.A.* vol. LXXXI, No. 5 (New York, October 1966), 409–17.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to M. V. Kiseleva, 14 January 1887, in Hellman, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to O. Knipper of 20 April 1904, shortly before he died (Hellman, p. 386).

<sup>4</sup> By John Gassner in an address at Brooklyn College on the occasion of the centenary of Chekhov's birth in 1960.

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seemed appropriate to give the most attention. The book is not a history of Chekhov production, but to each commentary there is added a brief introduction on matters of stage history and Chekhov's method and purpose.

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# The Seagull

*A Comedy in Four Acts*

1896



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of talk on literature, little action and tons of love,'<sup>1</sup> he wrote in a letter to his friend Alexei Suvorin, the editor of the St Petersburg *New Times*, on 21 October 1895. There were four female parts in the final draft, but he continued to call it 'a comedy in four acts'. However, it was accepted for production at the Alexandrinsky Theatre, St Petersburg, on 17 October 1896. The report of the Alexandrinsky's literary committee had already anticipated the worst: its most biting comment was on the loose structure of the play, and it was particularly critical of what it called its 'symbolism, or more correctly its Ibsenism', which it found to be 'running through the whole play like a red thread'.<sup>2</sup> As it happened, the committee was right in being more critical of this element than Chekhov was himself.

The story of the first night has been told many times: it was the occasion of a notorious fiasco. The theatre itself was associated with popular, low-brow entertainment. The play was directed in a hurry by E. M. Karpov, otherwise a writer of successful melo-dramas, with only nine rehearsals.

At the sixth rehearsal Chekhov observed with dismay that several of the cast were absent, a few still read their lines from scripts, and only an assistant director was present to guide the actors. *The Seagull* was just another play to them, and it was clear that the limited Karpov, in his staging and instructions to the actors, had failed to understand the structural innovations of the play, its poetic mood and the tender and refined delineation of character. Shocked by the stilted, traditional intonation of the actors, their false emphasis in reading lines, and their lack of comprehension of the roles they were portraying, Chekhov frequently interrupted the rehearsal to explain the significance of a phrase or discuss the real essence of a characterization. 'The chief thing, my dears, is that theatricality is unnecessary,' he would repeat. 'Really unnecessary. It is entirely simple. They are all simple, ordinary people.'<sup>3</sup>

The leading actress E. I. Levkeyeva, famous for her comic character parts, had selected the play for her benefit performance. In the event, she did not appear in the play at all, but only in the comic after-piece, and an angry audience that had paid benefit night prices was ready to jeer at any opportunity. In spite of the fine performance of the young Vera Kommissarzhevskaya<sup>4</sup> as Nina

<sup>1</sup> Hellman, p. 189.<sup>2</sup> Simmons, p. 365.<sup>3</sup> Simmons, pp. 366–7.<sup>4</sup> Vera Kommissarzhevskaya's brother, Theodore Komisarjevsky, one of the out-



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Zarechny, the audience found an early occasion for mockery in Nina's speech which opens Treplev's play, 'Men, lions, eagles and partridges . . .', and Chekhov's little joke about *avant-garde* theatre was turned into a joke against himself. Both author and character seemed equally to belong to the 'decadent' school. Treplev's entrance with a bandaged head and the use of the property seagull were found to be uproarious. Chekhov left the theatre in despair, and Karpov took the play off after eight nights. Here was a straightforward, almost narrative, form for a play, it seemed to the author, and he had been shown that it was meaningless. It had been made meaningless, of course, because it had been played in the convention of another age.

In later performances at the Alexandrinsky *The Seagull* was better appreciated. It was also successfully performed in the provinces. But it was not until two years later, in 1898, that the event occurred that was both to justify Chekhov's experiment and promote that final rush of dramatic composition by a dying man which gave us three more brilliant plays.

Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, the novelist, playwright and director of the dramatic school of the Philharmonic Society, came together with Konstantin Stanislavsky, the most talented actor and director of his time, to create the Moscow Art Theatre and eventually share the direction of *The Seagull*. Still under the spell of the ensemble playing of the company of the Grand Duke of Saxe-Meiningen which visited Russia in 1890, these two wanted, like Chekhov himself, to alter the course of the conservative Russian theatre and to present plays as honest works and not as vehicles for self-display. The new aim was to play as a team and to remain loyal to the intentions of the author. Thus the director was to acquire the authority previously possessed by the star actor.<sup>1</sup>

standing European directors of the 1920s, describes her playing of parts like those of Nina and Sonya (in *Uncle Vanya*) as of great simplicity and sincerity, symbolizing the deepest feelings and longings of girlhood and womanhood. And he quotes Znosko Borovsky's *History of the Russian Theatre*: 'She always seemed, by some inexplicable magic, to be much more than merely the person she was representing. Her wide-open blue eyes looked at us questioningly from the stage, while her inimitable deep musical voice seemed to be making an appeal to something beyond the bourn of this material world as if promising to tell a wonderful secret which everyone of us longed to know' (*Myself and the Theatre*, New York, 1930, p. 70).

<sup>1</sup> The reader should consult Stanislavsky's autobiography, *My Life in Art*, trans. J. J. Robbins (London, 1924) and Nemirovich-Danchenko's *My Life in the Russian Theatre*, trans. J. Cournos (London, 1937) for a full account of the M.A.T.'s policy.

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No policy could seem to accommodate better the plays of a dramatist who had himself dispensed with star parts.

Nemirovich-Danchenko knew Chekhov personally, and it was he who persuaded both Chekhov and Stanislavsky to try the rejected play. Their decision became more important than the success or failure of one play;<sup>1</sup> it was a decision about the future of the new theatre and the direction the new theatre movement would take. It affected the theatre of the Western world for half a century.

Stanislavsky gave the play twenty-six rehearsals, an unusual amount of preparation at that time, and himself played Trigorin to Olga Knipper's Arkadina. He describes the occasion of the first performance at the M.A.T. on 17 December 1898:

I do not remember how we played. The first act was over. There was a gravelike silence. Knipper fainted on the stage. All of us could hardly keep our feet. In the throes of despair we began moving to our dressing rooms. Suddenly there was a roar in the auditorium, and a shriek of joy or fright on the stage. The curtain was lifted, fell, was lifted again, showing the whole auditorium our amazed and astounded immovability. It fell again, it rose; it fell, it rose, and we could not even gather sense enough to bow. Then there were congratulations and embraces like those of Easter night, and ovations to Lilina, who played Masha, and who had broken the ice with her last words which tore themselves from her heart, moans washed with tears. This it was that had held the audience mute for a time before it began to roar and thunder in mad ovation.<sup>2</sup>

The M.A.T. recognized their debt to their playwright by adopting a seagull as their emblem.

Chekhov's major drama encourages us to see without distorting, to follow an ideal of truth without romanticizing, and to be detached without being clinical. With *The Seagull*, he achieves his first real success in communicating to an audience what it feels like to see with his eyes. On 27 October 1888, he wrote to Suvorin telling him he must not mix up two ideas, 'the solution of the problem and the correct presentation of the problem'. And he went on, 'Only the latter is obligatory for the artist. In *Anna*

<sup>1</sup> *The Seagull* was not the first play produced at the M.A.T., but it was mounted in the first season.

<sup>2</sup> Stanislavsky, p. 356.