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978-0-521-78395-8 - The Chekhov Theatre: A Century of the Plays in Performance

Laurence Senelick

Excerpt

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Introduction

A funny thing has happened. Anton Chekhov, who was judged in his own time to be a playwright narrowly culture-bound, over-refined and obscure, whose drama was persistently characterized at home and abroad as “depressing” and “pessimistic,” has become second only to Shakespeare in reputation and in frequency of production. Andrzej Wajda’s remark – “Theatre in our European tradition derives from the word, from literature, the Greeks, Shakespeare, Chekhov,”¹ – is typical of the regard in which Chekhov is held. He is a synecdoche for all modern drama, indeed, in Wajda’s debatable overview, for all drama from the Elizabethans to ourselves. Other contenders for the title are disqualified for being, like Ibsen, more rooted in time or, like Beckett, more constricted in vision.

Shakespeare’s plays are multiplex and manifold, encompassing a universe of epochs, peoples, actions and emotions. Three centuries have had no difficulty in reading their own preoccupations into them. Chekhov’s world, contained in some half a dozen major plays and a like number of one-acts, seems to revolve around one historically, nationally determined social class, one narrow spectrum of concerns, feelings and ideas. For all that we know about Shakespeare, there is still a sense that the expansive cosmos of his drama has not been circumscribed by his authorial intentions. When it comes to staging, there is little talk, except among dinosaurs in the English Department lounge, of “what Shakespeare intended.” For Chekhov, on the other hand, one has to take into account a large corpus of prose, drafts, notebooks, twelve volumes of correspondence, a library of memoirs, sheaves of reviews of original productions. Even his notoriously ambiguous comments to actors of his characters merit serious attention. The scope for the appropriation of Chekhov by alien cultures and sensibilities looks at first to be quite limited.

And yet, of all playwrights, Chekhov provokes the strongest sense of

proprietorship. “That’s not Chekhovian” is a common cry of critics and spectators, precisely because a consensus of what is Chekhovian has congealed over the last century. What is or is not admissible has been made more prescriptive than in any approach to Shakespeare or Ibsen. Stage tradition, which once allowed Shakespearian actors to gain a reputation if they merely introduced a new piece of business or a new line reading, has in the twentieth century similarly restricted the presentation of Chekhov. Actors are often recalcitrant to a directorial interpretation or a fresh translation if it runs counter to their accepted ideas of a character’s sympathy quotient (actresses, for example, have been known to cut lines in Arkadina’s part to make her seem less selfish). Audiences, expecting to be sucked into a plausible and *gemütlich* world of bygone gentility, react angrily to productions that are more abstract, more physical or more surrealistic than what they expected. Quite unlike Ibsen and Beckett, the traditional Chekhov generated an affection in the playgoing public, which in turn bred a sentimentality he would be the first to deplore.

This is largely because Chekhov’s plays first won popularity in the highly finished and seductive stagings of the Moscow Art Theatre, or in less expert imitations of them. They perpetrated a plethora of conventions of characterization, atmosphere and even placement of furniture that were difficult to supercede or supplant. The result was that, for a long time, Chekhov was seen in his own land as the irrelevant recorder of an obsolete way of life, and outside it as the quaint memorialist of a peculiarly Russian state of mind. The diaspora of Russian *émigrés* after the Revolution broadcast the maudlin nostalgia that had begun to cling to his plays.

Temporal distance was required before the characters and situations could take on a more figurative meaning. The Czech dramaturge Karel Kraus, speaking to a post-World War II, post-Holocaust, Communist-dominated Europe, explained that

a production of Chekhov can engage our interest in two ways. One is connected with the feelings and attitudes of the Russian intelligentsia in the gelid climate of reaction and repression which followed the attempt on the life of Alexander II; the other is the complex destinies of characters unable to attain their ideal life and fulfilment because they are locked into a system of illusions in order to protect themselves not only from others but from themselves: the collapse of this system of illusions, which discloses too cruel a reality, demands that ongoing existence be made tolerable, bearable – a new scaffolding of self-mystification.²

This was a seminal redefinition of Chekhov for the age of existentialism. It enabled him to become “Chekhov our contemporary.” Even in its

heyday, the Art Theatre's idealizing and ennobling of Chekhov had been called into question. The theatre's leading supporter in the critical camp, Nikolay Éfros, had noted that although "Chekhov the writer is very mild-mannered, he is essentially cruel."³ During the Cold War era, that cruelty became the dominant element in Central and Eastern European stage productions.

This strain rarely was heard in English-language theatrical treatment of Chekhov, where his icon as the bard of twilight Russia was replaced by a new effigy: the wry, indulgent observer of human vagaries. From *frater dolorosus*, he became a Son of Man whose view from the cross prompted him to ironic laughter. The comedy in his plays, once overlooked or deleted, now rose to the surface, often coarsened to buffoonery. The periodic rediscovery that Chekhov was a comic dramatist was a necessary antidote to the clichés of lyricism and melancholy; but this in turn became a cliché. Now, in the all-too-knowing "postmodern" phase, Chekhov is familiar enough to enter the stockpile of cultural tokens and totems; this allows him to be theatrically deconstructed; traditions, recognized as such, are deformed, discarded or reconstituted. He has the resilience of a real classic and is capable of withstanding hard treatment.

For better or worse, Chekhov's plays were written at a time when the stage director was becoming a paramount factor in the theatre. In the wake of Ibsen, the dramatist's message took precedence over the actor's virtuosity; in the wake of Wagner, the unified "vision" of a single maker took precedence over the individual contributions of performer, musician and designer. The technical innovations of the modern stage, including electric lighting and *mises-en-scène* intent on reproducing "real life," required expert handling to blend and harmonize the various elements. Chekhov's development as a playwright from 1888 to 1904 coincides with this move from a stage governed by histrionic and spectacular display to one in which ensemble effect and the creation of "mood" reigned supreme. Ibsen's works can still be seen as permutations of the nineteenth-century star vehicle; *Hedda*, *Ellida*, *Borkman* and *Rubek* are larger than life, surging up in the foreground and eclipsing the other characters. Their fates are what matters. This remains true of Chekhov's first performed full-length drama *Ivanov*: its effect stands or falls by the leading man's interpretation. But Chekhov's "Big Four" can succeed on stage only with strong and coordinated ensemble playing, best achieved under the baton of a single "conductor." Much of what occurs happens beneath and between the lines; much of the meaning is conveyed by the spatial configuration of the characters, by ocellades and tentative ges-

tures that pass between them; so that individual performances, no matter how extraordinary, are insufficient to achieve the desired result. Consequently, the stage history of Chekhov's drama is a chronicle less of great performers in starring roles than of the success and failure of directors and acting companies in realizing his plays and communicating them to a given audience at a particular moment in history.

This book is a survey of the ways in which Chekhov's plays have been interpreted on stage in something over a hundred years' time: in the process, it comments on the interests and tastes of certain societies as well as on the usual theatre-historical concerns. The danger of such an approach lies in ignoring Dr. Johnson's injunction about enumerating the stripes of the tulip. I have tried to treat in selective detail those productions whose contributions were either highly symptomatic of a cultural climate or added something new and important to our understanding of Chekhov. Admittedly, even in a bad production, a single line reading or a telling piece of business may shed light, but it would be tedious to accumulate all such instances. Perhaps someday someone will apply Marvin Rosenberg's coverage of Shakespearian tragedy to Chekhov, and go line by line through the plays, listing every recorded rendition of a given moment. I am not that someone and cheerfully relinquish the task of a "variorum" Chekhov to others.

The greatest space in this survey has been meted out to the Russians, because Chekhov has meant the most within the cataclysmic changes undergone by Russian society over the past century. Separate chapters are devoted to British and American productions, because they have the greatest interest to the English-speaking reader, although it is demonstrable that they have had less resonance elsewhere. Great European directors have been more influential in disseminating new concepts. I have also been somewhat synoptic in treating Chekhov in Great Britain because two good books by Patrick Miles have already covered much of that ground; but I have tried to cite observers and practitioners he has not. Spatial limitations have prevented me from dealing with Chekhov in the Scandinavian, Hispanic and Dutch cultures as well as in the British Commonwealth;⁴ in most of these cases, the usual model applies: epigones of the Moscow Art Theatre prevailed until very recently, when more idiosyncratic or parochial approaches obtained. Similar constraints have also forced me to omit any discussion of Chekhov in film, dance and opera.

This is not an objective account. It is full of prejudices, many of them my own. Over the course of forty-some years of playgoing, I have seen a

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flock of seagulls, met a dynasty of uncles and sisters, and travelled through a wilderness of cherry orchards. I learned to approach Chekhov as an actor under Alvina Krause and as a scholar under Nils Åke Nilsson. I have sat through rehearsals of and performed in my translations and those of others, attended innumerable Chekhov conferences and celebrations all over the world, and spoken on the subject to all kinds of audiences. Not surprisingly, I have not sought to conceal the opinions that have formed, particularly when evaluating those productions of which I have personal experience. The theatre historian often has to rely on the record of journalistic criticism, a dubious source at best; it is salutary to be able to match one's own reactions against those of the press and to convey impressions obtained on the spot.

It is current practice in writing about opera to cite the title in the language in which a given performance was sung: so we get Wagner's *I maestri cantori* at La Scala, Verdi's *Le trouvère* at the Paris Opéra, and Offenbach's *Orpheus in the underworld* at the London Coliseum. I had originally intended to follow this practice, referring to Sharoff's *Il gabbiano*, Barrault's *La cerisaie* and Stein's *Drei Schwestern*, not to mention Stanislavsky's *Chaïka* and *Vishnevyy sad*. But I soon realized that this would hopelessly confuse the reader, particularly if I carried accuracy to distinguishing *The Sea Gull* from *The Seagull*, and *The Three Sisters* from *Three Sisters*. So a compromise is in place: I have adopted a consistent translation and spelling of the plays' titles, and on an earlier page they are keyed to the original Russian names. The foreign-language title is provided the first time a play is mentioned in a given linguistic context. Characters' names are also standardized, and are listed in a separate index. The Moscow Art Theatre is abbreviated as MAT. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from foreign languages are mine.

I have used a method of transliteration from the Cyrillic alphabet which is intended to be user-friendly to the English-language reader with no Russian. Within the text, such familiar spellings as Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Chaliapin are used, although more technically accurate versions are given in the transliteration of Russian titles in notes and bibliography. Soft and hard signs are deleted. Я is given as *ya*; ю as *yu*; й within a word as *i*; ы, terminal й, ий and ый as *y*. Э appears as *é*; but no distinction is made between e and ë, which are both rendered as *e*.

A book that covers as much ground as this one owes many debts to the migrants picking in the orchards before me. Here I must recognize not

only scholars but also the many theatre people I have encountered along the way; for it is truism, still not sufficiently endorsed in the academic study of drama, that directors and actors can be as insightful as any critic and a production can be as illuminating as any piece of writing, if not more so.

The scholars and critics from whom I have learned, both from the printed page and in conversation and correspondence, include J. L. Anderson, Jean-Pierre Barricelli, Aleksey Bartoshevich, Jean Benedetti, Robert Brustein, Sharon Carnicke, Ellen Chances, David H. Cheshire, J. Douglas Clayton, Toby Clyman, Donald Fanger, Erika Fischer-Lichte, Daniel Gerould, Christine Hamon-Siréjols, Benjamin Harshav, Michael Henry Heim, Vladislav Ivanov, Robert Louis Jackson, Julius Kagarlitsky, Simon Karlinsky, Vladimir Kataev, Rolf-Dieter Kluge, Alma Law, the late Harry Levin, Felicia Londré, David Maxwell, Aya Mihara, Nils Åke Nilsson, Richard Peace, Harvey Pitcher, Herta Schmid, Paul Schmidt, Virginia Scott, Savely Senderovich, Anatoly Smeliensky, Inna Soloveva, Jurij Striedter, Ieva Vitins, and Andrzej Wirth.

Actors and directors with whom I have worked and spoken, to my inestimable advantage, include George W. Angell, Claire Bloom, the late Jacques Chwat, Ron Daniels, Robertson Dean, Oleg Efremov, John Emigh, Zelda Fichandler, Gerald Freedman, the late Minnie Galatzer, Jeremy Geidt, Spencer Golub, André Gregory, Giles Havergal, John Hellweg, Jon Jory, David Kaplan, the late Alvina Krause, Robert David Macdonald, Jeffrey Martin, Vinnie Murphy, Natacha Parry, the late Raymond Pentzell, Edward Petherbridge, Marilyn Plotkins, Philip Prowse, John Pym, the late Michael Quinn, Marilyn Redfield, Harry Ritchie, Richard Schechner, Lloyd Schwartz, Nicholas Scott, Kenneth Tigar, Richard Trousdell, Yutaka Wada, Douglas Wager, Kathryn Walker, Irene Worth, the members of the Manhattan Project and all the casts who have appeared in my translations.

I also owe thanks to playwrights, dramaturges and literary advisers who have shared their perceptions and appreciations of Chekhov with me: Robert Anderson, the late Philip Blackwell, Robert Chapman, the late Paddy Chayefsky, Michael Bigelow Dixon, David Feiner, Cynthia Jenner, Margaret Lynch, Laurence Maslon, Arthur Miller, Bob Scanlan, Irwin Shaw, Barry Stavis, Megan Terry, Jean-Claude Van Itallie, and Susan Weinacht.

In selecting illustrations within budget constraints, I looked for images that would be both representative and unfamiliar; I have often chosen moments from the play-within-a-play of *The Seagull*, the last act of *Three*

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Sisters, and the scene on the road in *The Cherry Orchard* to present striking contrasts. Appeals for illustrations were met generously by Christine Autant-Mathieu; Richard Buck and the staff of the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library; Jarka Burian; Paula Court; Scott T. Cummings, former editor of *Theatre Three*; Rob Orchard of the American Repertory Theatre; Paul Schmidt; and Josef Svoboda. In every case, I have tried to locate the copyright owners of the illustrations, not always with success.

As ever, Dr. Jeanne Newlin, former curator, and the staff of the Harvard Theatre Collection have made my work much easier. Other librarians who smoothed my path were Vyacheslav Nechaev of the Central Theatre Library in Moscow; and Louis Rachow of the International Theatre Institute in New York. My graduate research assistants Thomas Connolly, Randy Kapelke, Sergei Ostrovsky and Michael Zampelli showed outstanding resourcefulness in following up even the most tenuous leads. Michael McDowell was characteristically diligent in processing my words, and Sarah Stanton of Cambridge University Press was a supportive editor from the inception. Her successor in guiding the project, Victoria L. Cooper, has been unfailingly responsive and enthusiastic. Whenever I, like Epikhodov, would indulge in histrionic despair, she, like Vershinin, would respond with a rosy prospect of the future.

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CHAPTER I

Compromising with the theatre (Russia 1880–1896)

[*The Wood Demon*] had been painstakingly staged, but those set-pieces wings, canvas walls, swinging doors, offstage thunder never for a minute reminded me of the nature I knew. It was all from *a stage I knew*, but I wanted it to be from *the life I knew*.

Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko¹

THE PRE-CHEKHOVIAN STAGE

Chekhov's relation to the theatre can be tracked along a curve bounded by poles of attraction and repulsion. The earliest phase of his playgoing, when he was a gymnasium student in Taganrog, was uncritically enthusiastic. Throughout the 1880s and nineties, this enthusiasm was progressively tarnished by first hand experience of theatre in the Russian capitals; he was impelled to promote reforms. In the period from 1898 to his death in 1904, when he was closely associated with the Moscow Art Theatre, Chekhov's impulsion between admiration and disgust became more feverish and more extreme.

The schoolboy Chekhov took part in domestic theatricals, and, after his bankrupt family moved to Moscow, leaving him alone in Taganrog to finish his courses, he became an inveterate spectator at the Civic Theatre there.² "In those days we were all gripped by a theatrical fever," recalled a classmate. "All our savings and pocket money went for gallery seats."³ The Taganrog management had refurbished the repertory to suit a new playhouse constructed in 1865. Whereas the local company had formerly played an outworn stock of Kotzebue, vaudevilles and grandiloquent patriotic pieces, the new management sought to introduce "the latest thing" to this thriving trade centre on the Black Sea. The repertory lists of the theatre from 1868 to 1879, when Chekhov was still a resident, show that he had the chance to see operas by Rossini, Donizetti and Verdi, as well as an ever-increasing number of good Russian plays and

foreign imports. Gogol appeared with some frequency, and gradually the staples of the repertory came to consist of the “new drama” of Potekhin, Ostrovsky and Dyachenko, in addition to the well-made melodramas of Sardou and Denney.⁴ Newness does not imply depth – Dyachenko’s society dramas are one step away from *Lady Audley’s Secret* – and these problem plays, dramas and comedies of *byt* or “everyday life” were imbibed indiscriminately by the impressionable adolescent along with romantic melodrama: Dumas’ *Kean*, Burdin’s *The Mail Robbery*, Barbusse and Crisafully’s *The Murder of Coverley* whose villain ends up run over by a locomotive. The actors in these plays comprised a generation of flamboyant personalities who held an audience rapt by the virtuosity of their playing, little subordinated to the script.

A medical student in Moscow, Chekhov embarked on a sideline of comic journalism and through his brother Nikolay, a painter and part-time scene designer, came into contact with the city’s bohemia. This phase coincided with the Moscow theatre’s imminent awakening from a decade of torpor. The years 1882 to 1898 are marked by both administrative and scenic reforms which rapidly transformed the Russian stage.

Increasing pressure from amateur groups, “people’s” theatres and influential playwrights had led emperor Alexander III to sign a decree (24 March 1882) abolishing the monopoly of the Imperial theatres in the capitals. The Imperial dramatic theatres, the Maly in Moscow and the Alexandra in St. Petersburg, retained their peculiar subsidized status, as the administration reaffirmed old principles, particularly the *emploi* system by which actors were assigned a specific “line of business.” The presence of the administration could be felt at every level, most painfully through punishments, fines and various stoppages of pay for artists who did not learn twenty-five lines of text a day, displayed insolence to their hierarchic superiors or failed to show up at rehearsals. The possibility of arrest was still on the books, though rarely put into practice. With the aim of improving the artistic management, the administration invited the dramatists Aleksey Potekhin and Aleksandr Ostrovsky to be directors of the troupes. The results were disappointing: the former soon turned into a dictator and the latter dismissed anything that wasn’t his own work.

The chief opportunity provided by the 1882 reform was the opening of private theatres in the capitals. An onslaught of provincial entrepreneurs was expected, but failed to materialize. The endemic problem of Russian theatre was the limited size of its audiences. Moscow with its

700,000 inhabitants could barely support three legitimate theatres, even though the Maly received state subvention. Only two new theatres were founded in Moscow between 1882 and 1889, and only one serious enterprise opened in St. Petersburg. These were essentially commercial ventures, although their impresarios proclaimed ideals of art and creativity, in line with the Russian belief that drama assisted the enlightenment and spiritual development of the nation. In practice, these managers based their calculations on the box-office and the untutored taste of the “esteemed public.”

The private dramatic theatres in Moscow were run by the “wizards and warlocks” Mikhail Lentovsky and Fedor Korsh. Lentovsky’s initial expensive ventures foundered in bankruptcy, but the merchant class, to whose taste he catered, enabled him to make a fresh start. In 1886 he opened the Skomorokh (Merry Andrew) Theatre with the highest hopes of a reputable repertory of legitimate drama to be offered to a working-class audience. He even wrote to Tolstoy, offering to mount *The Power of Darkness*; this provoked the ire of Pobedonostsev, Procurator of the Holy Synod and tutor to the heir apparent, who urged a decree instituting a double censorship for all “people’s” theatres. Lentovsky had perforce to address the middle classes whose simple tastes were reflected in his bills. Plays of Gogol and Ostrovsky and even *Hamlet* could be found there, but increasingly the bulk of the repertory was composed of translated farces, melodramas and particularly *féeries*, Lentovsky’s speciality. His productions abounded in pyrotechnical display, explosions, fires, collapsing bridges, and all the impedimenta of sensationalism, which Chekhov called “bitter-sweet, German Liebergothic rubbish . . . gun-powdery balderdash.”⁵ His chief complaint about Lentovsky’s extravaganzas was that they were merely heightened realism tarted up with special effects rather than a true stimulus to the imagination.

While Lentovsky robustly catered to the popular craving for spectacle and sensation, Korsh slapped a veneer of culture on his commercialism. When he took over Anna Brenko’s Pushkin Theatre in 1882, its actors and public alike assumed that he would carry on its policy of serious literary drama by the best Russian authors. Instead, Korsh maintained a stable of hacks to churn out translations of European bedroom farce and well-carpentered dramas of adultery; this practice, abetted by clever publicity, greatly enlarged his audience and reached ranks of society new to the theatre. To Korsh’s credit, he encouraged Russian writers to turn their talents to the stage, soliciting Chekhov to write a comedy in the spirit of his humorous tales. He instituted an unheard-of policy of