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# A Director's Process: The Conception, Preparation and Production of Chekhov's Uncle Vanya

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A DIRECTOR'S PROCESS:  
The Conception, Preparation and Production of  
*Chekhov's Uncle Vanya*

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Senior Honors Study  
Department of Theatre  
May 2007

*for Leah Lowe,  
my mentor and friend,  
who supported me along every step of the way*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2006, my junior year, I submitted a proposal to direct Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* as Student Director for the Connecticut College Theatre Department's 2006-2007 Mainstage season. I proposed *Uncle Vanya* because it was a play that had become close to my heart. I had first read Chekhov two years before, when someone said to me, "it is every actor's dream to play a role that Chekhov wrote," and I was immediately attracted to *Uncle Vanya* because the characters seemed so human and alive. The more time I spent with the play, the more truthful and relevant I found it, and the more I was inspired by the strength of the characters who find hope in spite of their despair. I was fortunate enough to be chosen for the student-directed slot, and in the fall of 2006 I embarked on a year-long project which has included research on the playwright, the theatre of his time, and the play, and culminated in the production of *Uncle Vanya* and the completion of this paper.

In the fall semester, I wrote Chapters One and Two as I prepared to direct my production. Chapter One is a dramaturgical chapter, which puts Chekhov's work into historical context. As part of this chapter, I studied Chekhov's life, as well as the theatrical context of his work. In a portion specific to *Uncle Vanya*, I researched select past productions of the play, from its premiere to the present day, and examined the play's contemporaneity by looking at how it has historically been produced and

received. Chapter Two is a critical chapter that begins with a literary analysis of *Uncle Vanya*, and goes on to discuss my own reading of the play and my directorial concept. It then considers three different problems in directing Chekhov's plays, and how to address them. I considered the element of comedy in Chekhov's work, the acting challenges that Chekhov presents, and the feasibility of gender-blind casting for a realistic play, intending to apply the ideas I found to my work on *Uncle Vanya*.

In spring 2007, after a semester of research and planning, I cast and directed a Mainstage production of *Uncle Vanya* in Tansill Theatre. I led an ensemble of student actors and worked with a team of faculty and student designers and technicians to realize the final product. My production served as the practical application of my directing skills, as well as the culmination of my dramaturgical research and ideas about directing Chekhov. Chapter Three, the final chapter of this paper, represents my work on this production and evaluates both the process and the final product, considering how my concept translated from imagination to the stage.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Chekhov and His Theatre:**

#### **Putting Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* into Historical and Cultural Context**

This chapter represents research on playwright Anton Chekhov and his theatre that I did in preparation to direct my production of Chekhov's play, *Uncle Vanya*. When taking on the work of a complex and significant playwright such as Chekhov it is important to have an understanding of the historical and cultural landscape in which the work arose, as Chekhov lived in a time and culture that is now distant from us. Knowledge of his environment gives insight into the relevance of Chekhov's themes in nineteenth century Russian society. Therefore, with this opening chapter, I will examine aspects of Chekhov's life, the theatre of his time, and the structure of his society, in an attempt to understand how the ideas in his plays may have played out for his first audience. I will consider the issues of social position and wealth, professional contribution, and activism in Chekhov's own life, in relation to the characters and themes of *Uncle Vanya*. Looking specifically at the writing of Chekhov's plays, I will analyze his attitude towards his work as well as the public's reception of it. Stanislavski and the Moscow Art Theatre have long been associated with Chekhov, so I will explore the theatrical atmosphere in which Chekhov's work premiered and the impact of his relationship with the theatre. I will include a close look at the Moscow Art Theatre's

original production of *Uncle Vanya*. Finally, after studying Chekhov's work in its initial environment, I will be able to investigate the play's more recent production history, and discuss how it has been produced and received in contemporary cultures. I am examining different interpretations and approaches to Chekhov's work in an effort to provide a context for my reading of *Uncle Vanya*.

### **Chekhov's Life: Class, Career, Philanthropy, and Marriage**

Many issues in *Uncle Vanya* resonate quite strongly with events in Chekhov's own life. In thinking about the play's context, some major questions arise. Russians view Chekhov as a political artist, so how does his depiction of class issues echo his own changing social status? In *Uncle Vanya*, the characters identify self-worth with their professional contributions to society. How did Chekhov, who worked all his life as both a doctor and a writer, define his own contribution to society? Exploring Chekhov's biography gives insight into the relevance of social status and professional accomplishment in nineteenth century Russia. Further questions come up when considering specific characters in *Uncle Vanya*. Astrov feels strongly that his professional accomplishments should positively affect the future of Russia. Are there parallel attitudes towards work in Chekhov's own life? Sonya and Elena struggle with unrequited love, and unhappiness in marriage. What was Chekhov's romantic life like, and how did his marriage to actress Olga Knipper influence the writing of his plays? Looking at Chekhov's philanthropic work and his marriage to Knipper provide clues into the playwright's personal ideals and passions. In asking each of these questions, I do not mean to imply that *Uncle Vanya* is an autobiographical play, or even that there are parallels in Chekhov's life which find direct expression in the play. Rather, posing



such questions leads to an examination of Chekhov's life, which will help me to better understand and contextualize his work.

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was born into a society in which social status was rigidly defined, and class mobility was greatly limited. In the first part of the nineteenth century, Russian society was organized according to a strict social hierarchy that was designed to benefit the autocracy. The Tzar was at the apex, just under him was the court, and then came the nobility who served at different levels of the civil and military service. Below the nobility were members of the clergy, then the merchantry, and finally, the peasantry and the serfs (*People's Tragedy* 35). The serfs were considered property of the landed nobility, and remained under the complete jurisdiction of their owners, rather than the state (*People's Tragedy* 48). However, in the middle of the century, things began to change. Due to years of agricultural depression, much of the landed nobility fell into debt. This economic decline, combined with the knowledge that a change in the social structure was needed, led to the Emancipation of the Serfs in 1861 (*People's Tragedy* 47). Still, it took years before the basic structure of society was redefined.

Chekhov's early life must have been marked by an awareness of his position in this social hierarchy. Chekhov was born in the port town Taganrog in 1860, just a year before the serfs were emancipated, to a family that was decidedly lower class (Clyman 17). He was a self-declared "son of a serf" (*Life in Letters* 175), the third of six children born to a small grocery shop owner. His maternal grandfather was a traveling salesman, and his paternal grandfather was a serf, who, by saving money, was able to buy freedom for himself and his family (Hingley 4-5). Though the family had managed to rise out of serfdom years before, they still suffered from financial struggle. When

Chekhov was sixteen, his family store went bankrupt. His father, mother, and two younger siblings left for Moscow, while Chekhov stayed behind and tutored students in Taganrog to earn money to live on, and send to his struggling family (Clyman 18). From an early age, Chekhov's life was shaped by the necessity of hard work as a means of survival. In Chekhov's plays, the themes of hard work and productivity are echoed over and over as necessary virtues.

Just after Chekhov was born (in 1860), the social structure in Russia was undergoing a significant change due to economic decline. In his four major plays, most significantly in his last work *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov depicts members of the landed gentry who are struggling as a result of this decline. After the Emancipation, the serfs remained extremely poor, lacking the resources and the good land to flourish on their own. The nobility fared little better – as Orlando Figes asserts, “The whole of the period between 1861 and 1917 could be presented as the slow death of the old agrarian elite” (*People's Tragedy* 47). Suddenly having no free labor to depend upon, aristocrats were forced to start tending their own land and estates, a task that many were ill-prepared for. They knew little about managing profit and loss, and many continued spending their money extravagantly, but: “most . . . found they could no longer afford to live in the manner to which they had grown accustomed. Their neo-classical manor houses . . . slowly fell into decay” (*People's Tragedy* 49). While the poor remained poor, the wealth of the nobles also declined, and their property fell into disrepair. In *Uncle Vanya*, Chekhov critiques the nobility's inability to work for themselves. Characters such as Serebryakov and Elena are steeped in inaction, and remain unaware of the work others do to maintain their privileged lifestyle.

It was in this environment of social change that Chekhov chose his career path. Upon his graduation from high school, Chekhov joined his family in Moscow, where,

after moving twelve times in three years, they were now “housed in a damp, squalid basement flat” (Hingley 28). Chekhov enrolled in the university medical school, a serious career choice that promised the potential for earning a solid living. While in school, he began to submit short written pieces to various humor journals, in the hopes of earning extra money for his family (Clyman 19). In 1884, at the age of 24, Chekhov graduated from medical school and began his own practice, which first brought him into contact with people of a higher social status (Clyman 19). He was interacting with a level of society that was previously distant from him. Not long after, Chekhov’s literary career began to blossom as well. In 1886, two years after he established his practice, Chekhov was introduced to Aleksei Sergeevich Suvorin, publisher of the well-known newspaper *Novoe Vremia* (*New Times*), and a man who soon became Chekhov’s lifelong editor and friend. In that year, Chekhov published more than ever before and his name became known among literary men (Clyman 20). Chekhov was no longer just surviving – he was working and interacting with the well-to-do people of the big city.

By the 1890s, the social structure of Russian society was beginning to be redefined. The autocracy no longer had control over the “weak and divided society,” and as a result: “The old hierarchy of social estates . . . was breaking down as a much more mobile social system began to take shape” (*People’s Tragedy* 162-63). Slowly pulling away from the strictures of the old social organization, men born as peasants were now able to raise themselves to the level of landowners and merchants and, like Chekhov, even have careers as teachers, doctors, writers, and publishers (*People’s Tragedy* 163). With this new social mobility, status “was defined much less by social position than by politics and culture” (*People’s Tragedy* 163). The intelligentsia became the new “upper class,” and as a prominent literary figure, Chekhov was included in this category.

By his mid-20s, Chekhov had raised himself to a level of society that was quite far from where he had begun. In a famous letter to Suvorin written January 7, 1889, Chekhov recognized the hard work it took him to reach this status: "What upper class writers have always taken for granted, those from humbler origins must sacrifice their youth to acquire" (*Life in Letters* 175). Chekhov spent his childhood years struggling to earn money to survive on. Now, a successful medical practice and the beginnings of literary respect were not quite enough to convince him of his step up the social ladder. Chekhov's attitude echoes the sentiments of his characters in *Uncle Vanya*, whose feelings of self-worth were connected to their sense of a secure status in society.

In an environment in which class structure had been ingrained into a person's sense of self, it took time for Chekhov to feel worthy of his new place in society. He wrote to Suvorin that the process of raising oneself up the social ladder was like the process by which one "drop by drop wrings the slave out of himself until, one fine morning, he awakes to feel that flowing in his veins is no longer the blood of a slave, but that of a complete human being" (*Life in Letters* 175). It was an arduous process for Chekhov, but he said, he now felt "a sense of personal freedom . . . a feeling that has only very recently begun to grow in me" (*Life in Letters* 175). For Chekhov, being part of a higher social class meant a having choices in life. For a long time, his lower class roots kept him from feeling that his literary contributions were worth much, because he thought of writing merely as a way to supplement his income. It was not until Chekhov accepted an attitude of self-respect that he finally felt as if he belonged in privileged society.

Just like social status, occupations fix people in society. In *Uncle Vanya*, Astrov and Serebryakov identify their sense of self-worth with their professional accomplishments, while Vanya laments on his lack of worth because he has spent most

of his adult life working in vain and with nothing to show for himself. This connection between career and identity is interesting to consider in light of Chekhov's own professional life. Throughout his adult years, Chekhov balanced his career as a doctor with his career as a writer. It seems likely that he initially chose both of these professions, at least partially, out of a desire for future financial security. When he entered medical school, Chekhov recalled that his mother was very supportive of his decision, telling him "if you work hard, you will always find a way to make a living in Moscow" (Clyman 18). He understood that becoming a doctor would be a responsible way to support himself. And his beginnings as a writer, publishing short, humorous pieces in popular entertainment magazines, were certainly motivated by a desire to make money. Chekhov originally used writing as a way to supplement his income. However, as time passed and he gained success, Chekhov changed from a man writing to earn income, to a writer who was dedicated to his work and strove to live up to an artist's ideals. Although he gradually gained high respect in Russian literary circles, Chekhov never gave up practicing medicine.

In *Uncle Vanya*, Serebryakov thinks too highly of himself as an academic. Though he has spent twenty-five years studying and lecturing, his knowledge has never yielded anything tangible or worthwhile. For several years after Chekhov began publishing, he thought too little of himself as a writer. When he published his early work, Chekhov wrote under a variety of amusing pseudonyms, including "Brother of my Brother," "Doctor without Patients," "Man without a Spleen," and, most frequently, "Antosha Chekhonte" (Finke 57). Chekhov's use of pseudonyms is revealing of his early attitude toward his literary potential. But in 1886, he changed his outlook after receiving a letter from Dmitrii Vasil'evich Gringorovich, praising Chekhov's talent, but scolding his lack of self-respect. Gringorovich was a man respected in Russian

literature, and his words deeply flattered Chekhov, who wrote back sincerely thanking the writer. Chekhov explained that he had “become accustomed to looking condescendingly upon” his own work, and that his writing had always been hasty as he was absorbed in his medical work (*Letters on Lit. Topics* 56). But, Chekhov said, he would now devote more time to his writing. After receiving this letter, Chekhov began publishing under his own name, and began to consider the impact of his work more seriously.

Chekhov remained committed to both his professions throughout his life, turning to one when he became unhappy with the other. He often expressed the conviction that his life as a doctor saved him from the constant frustration of being a writer. In 1892, he wrote to Suvorin: “I don’t respect what I write. I am apathetic and bored with myself, and glad that I have medicine which, anyway, I practice not for the sake of money” (*Letters on Lit. Topics* 47). Being a doctor, Chekhov said, gave him a love for science and an affinity for careful observation of life (*Letters on Lit. Topics* 36). It also satisfied his generous spirit, and desire to do right for those who were less fortunate. Indeed, at times he practiced medicine without pay. But Chekhov was not always satisfied with his work as a doctor either. He was deeply affected when a patient died under his care, a sentiment which Astrov echoes in a speech to Marina in the first scene of *Uncle Vanya*. In all, Chekhov seemed to thrive from both his professions, never feeling fully confident in either individually, but holding onto each. He wrote that having two professions made him feel “more confident and satisfied with myself,” and famously called medicine his “lawful wife” and literature his “mistress” (*Letters on Lit. Topics* 42). It is clear from his fickle attitude and wavering self-assurance how closely Chekhov’s professions were connected to his sense of purpose and usefulness in society.

In *Uncle Vanya*, while Astrov thinks he is a failure as a doctor, he believes he may at least be useful to society each time he plants a tree. Astrov feels that, in this small way, he may be contributing to the well-being of future generations. In his own life, Chekhov felt strongly that one must work for the future. In his personal writings, he said: "If you work for the present moment . . . your work will be worthless. One must work bearing only the future in one's mind" (qtd. in *Natasha's Dance* 208). Chekhov acted on this belief in activism for the future with his humanitarian work on the Island of Sakhalin. Located off the coast of southern Siberia, Sakhalin was a penal colony made up of convicts and exiles that was described as "Devil's Island" because it was a place of isolation and suffering (Hingley 127). In April 1890, Chekhov set off on the journey to Sakhalin that would take him away from his home for over seven months. It was a trip that furthered both his work as a doctor, and as a writer, but was not primarily intended as a way to advance either career. Chekhov's motives for undertaking such a trip were complex and varied. Partially, he went from a desire to contribute something meaningful to the field of science. Certainly, he went for humanitarian reasons. Before going, he wrote: "we suffer *millions* of people to rot in prison, to rot in vain, unreasoningly, barbarously," adding, "I only regret that it is I who am going there, and not some other more capable of arousing social interest" (*Letters on Lit. Topics* 306). Chekhov felt impelled to work actively to improve the situation so that, if only in a small way, he was improving the outlook for the future.

Chekhov's journey to Sakhalin was dangerous and life-changing, and yielded a significant publication: his book, entitled *Sakhalin Island*. In the three months spent at the island, Chekhov worked relentlessly, rising daily at five AM to interview prisoners and gather a census (Finke 67). He serialized his experiences in writings along the way, which were finally published as a book in 1895 (Finke 66). Chekhov's book revealed the

horrors of the colony to an unsuspecting Russian public. In one of its final chapters, it described a brutal beating of a prisoner, which “made such an impression on the Russian public that it helped to bring about the eventual abolition of corporal punishment” (*Natasha’s Dance* 402). Having set off to make a difference for the good of mankind, the active response to Chekhov’s book on Sakhalin was a welcome success. The years after Chekhov’s journey were marked by a period of his highest literary achievement, including the writing of his four best known full-length plays (Hingley 145). And, as biographer Ronald Hingley notes, after Sakhalin, Chekhov’s “doubts and irritability never again seem to cut so deep as in the harrowing years at the end of the 1880s” (145). After his time at Sakhalin, Chekhov seemed to be heartened by the conviction that he had done something meaningful in his life.

On a more personal level, Chekhov’s later work as a playwright was tied up in his relationship with actress Olga Knipper. From the start, Olga was linked to Chekhov’s plays. Chekhov first saw Olga rehearsing for the role of Irina in the Moscow Art Theatre production of *The Seagull*, and afterwards wrote uncharacteristically in a letter to Suvorin that if he were to stay in Moscow, he would fall in love (*Life in Letters* 183). After this introduction, Chekhov made it clear that he intended Olga to play leading roles in all of his plays. In 1899, Knipper played the role of Elena in the Moscow Art Theatre’s production of *Uncle Vanya*. Chekhov began courting her that same year. She stayed with his family while she was on tour with the theatre, and later traveled to meet him during her vacation (Clyman 28). For much of their relationship, Chekhov and Knipper were separated – he in the country because of his ill-health, and she in the city because of her work at the Moscow Art Theatre. In 1901, the two were married, though the ceremony was kept secret even from their families, at Chekhov’s request. He wrote to her, “I don’t know why, but I have a horror of weddings and



congratulations and having to stand around with a glass of champagne in my hand and a vacant smile on my face" (*Life in Letters* 466). Despite his obvious affection for Knipper, Chekhov remained reluctant to make his commitment public.

Nevertheless, Chekhov's relationship with Knipper remained loving and intimate until the end of his life, and her presence in his life clearly affected his work. His respect for her acting and his knowledge of her craft must have informed the writing of his plays. Indeed, after she acted in both *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya*, Chekhov wrote characters with Knipper in mind. She went on to originate the roles of Masha in *The Three Sisters*, and Lyuba in *The Cherry Orchard*. Biographers have noted that Chekhov's short story, *The Lady with the Lapdog* (1899), which was written during his courtship with Knipper, depicts a love relationship that, for the first time in his writing, does not fade with time (Clyman 29). Knipper seemed well-suited for Chekhov, because she was an independent woman. And although he often wrote to her with an attitude of "affectionate condescension," he shared thoughts, feelings, and frustrations with her (Clyman 29). The two cared for each other in ill health, he when she fell gravely ill after a miscarriage, and she at the end of his struggle with tuberculosis (Finke 75). Knipper was with him at the end of his life, when he took a final trip to a spa in Germany for the purpose of improving his health, and never returned (Clyman 31). Unlike his characters in *Uncle Vanya*, Chekhov ultimately found a relationship that provided mutual love and happiness.

### **The Writing and Original Reception of Chekhov's Major Plays**

Chekhov's work as a playwright was marked by dramatic ups and downs. Throughout his lifetime, his plays experienced both huge success and crashing failure,

and he was greatly affected by the popular reception of his work. He wrote his first short plays in 1878, just eight years after he began publishing (*Life in Letters* viii). Chekhov continued to write for the theatre up through his last work, *The Cherry Orchard*, completed shortly before his death in 1904. Like his short stories, Chekhov's plays are characterized by their humorous, often farcical tones. His dramatic work began with short vaudevilles, which he declared he could dash off with minimal effort, and matured with his first full length plays, *Ivanov* and *The Wood Demon*. He then built upon these, later revising *The Wood Demon* to become the much more original and successful *Uncle Vanya*. Despite his often-expressed conviction that playwriting made him "ill at ease" (*Letters on Lit. Topics* 119), Chekhov achieved increasing success with each of his four major plays, gaining commissions from the Moscow Art Theatre<sup>1</sup>, and writing his final works, *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, specifically for the theatre company (Finke 74).

Chekhov's letters give insight into his fickle attitude towards his plays. While awaiting judgment from a military court on his newly finished play *The Wood Demon*, Chekhov wrote happily of its possibilities: "Perhaps my play is recognized as a work of genius . . . Is it not sweet to be left guessing?" (*Letters on Lit. Topics* 126). He was evidently excited by his play's prospects, but after a poor reception, and a response from critics calling the play unfit for the stage, drawn out, and lacking in action, Chekhov's attitude changed dramatically (Finke 64-5). In 1891 he wrote a fervent letter to a publisher begging him not to print the play, saying "I will gladly pay for the type-setting, – throw myself into the river, hang myself, – anything you wish!" to prevent the printing (*Letters on Lit. Topics* 128). Even nine years later, in 1900, he wrote of *The Wood*

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, the Moscow Art Theatre will be abbreviated MAT.

*Demon*, “I cannot look at this play, and I try to forget about it” (*Letters on Lit. Topics* 128). This type of extreme reaction was typical of Chekhov; he was wildly swayed by the critical response, and often began expressing dislike for a play even before it was published. After a disastrous opening night of *The Seagull* at the Aleksandrinskii Theatre<sup>2</sup> in St. Petersburg in October 1896, Chekhov wrote to Suvorin, “Stop the printing of the play. . . I shall *never* either write plays or have them acted” (*Letters on Lit. Topics* 147). However, this sentiment did not last long. In another letter dated four days later, Chekhov concedes that his vanity was hurt, but that he had taken time to himself, and after a “dose of castor oil” and “a cold bath” he was ready to write another play (*Letters on Lit. Topics* 148). Though Chekhov was often marred by discouragement and strong self-doubt, he always went back and wrote more.

Little is known about the composition process of *Uncle Vanya*, for Chekhov did not discuss it in his letters. Soon after it was published in 1897, it was produced successfully in the provinces with Chekhov’s own encouragement, though he never saw it performed (Finke 72). In April 1899, the script of *Uncle Vanya* was poorly reviewed by the official Theatrical and Literary Committee. The committee suggested that Elena was “too dreary” to be of interest, Astrov’s speeches about forestry were long and boring, Vanya’s attempt to shoot the Professor was “irresponsible,” and that an audience would be unprepared for the explosive interaction between Elena and Astrov. They called for a drastic revision of the play (Hingley 252). Chekhov did not write about the committee’s reaction to the play in his letters, however, he promised to give the script to the MAT soon after. Any discouragement Chekhov may have felt had

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<sup>2</sup> For consistency’s sake, I have chosen to use the more modern spellings of Russian names throughout this paper. I will, for example, use the double “ii,” as in “Aleksandrinskii,” instead of the “y,” as in “Aleksandrinsky.”

melted away by the time the MAT began rehearsing *Uncle Vanya* in May 1899, as he commented in a letter that it was “coming along splendidly” (Hingley 253).

In the final months of his life, Chekhov’s last play, *The Cherry Orchard*, was being rehearsed at the MAT. It premiered on his forty-fourth birthday, January 17, 1904, to an enthusiastic audience. Though he stayed home for the first half of the premiere, Chekhov was summoned to the theatre after the second act and impelled to take the stage in front of a cheering crowd. He was then presented with gifts in a lengthy ceremony, during which he appeared visibly self-conscious (Finke 77). Two days later, Chekhov wrote of his experience in a letter: “they gave me an ovation so lavish, warm, and really so unexpected that I can’t get over it even now” (*Letters on Lit. Topics* 163). Finally, at the end of his life, he was able to enjoy an opening marked by popular success.

Despite Chekhov’s continual lack of confidence in his dramatic work throughout his career, he was known to express strong convictions about how his plays should be performed. In 1888, after watching a performance of *The Bear*, Chekhov wrote about his impressions of the actors: “S. and R. do not play artistically, they have no nuances. They blow on one note. They are without daring and so on” (*Letters on Lit. Topics* 116). Later that year, Chekhov was involved in pre-production for the Aleksandrinskii Theatre’s staging of *Ivanov*, and provided long descriptions of his intentions in letters to the actors (Finke 63). In later years, during his work with the MAT, Chekhov was relatively cautious about explaining his intentions for the staging of his plays. However, he did choose particular actors for some of his roles, and he was willing to express dissatisfaction when he felt so inclined (Finke 64). At the end of his life, he was famous for his disagreements with Stanislavski over, what Chekhov felt, was the comic tone of his plays.

## **Chekhov, Stanislavski and the Moscow Art Theatre**

Before Chekhov's lifetime, theatre in Russia was controlled and limited by the state. Until 1882, public theatres were not permitted in Moscow or St. Petersburg aside from the few run by the Imperial Court (Braun 59). Even after this restriction was rescinded, theatre managers were reluctant to risk any theatrical experiments that were not guaranteed to bring in large audiences. The production of plays involved collaborations among lead actors, and directors existed simply to supervise rehearsals. Sets were merely painted flats and costumes were chosen from actors' personal wardrobes (Braun 59). Acting was, in general, presentational and filled with repetition of tried and true intonation and gesture (Slonim 111). Productions were tailored to meet audience expectations and played on familiar and well-loved convention, rather than attempting to find anything new and different.

With the founding of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898, theatre in Russia began to change. Founders Konstantin Stanislavski, an amateur actor, and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, a critic, writer, and drama teacher, were two men devoted to the stage who were looking to create something new in the theatre. Together, they made plans to open a theatre independent of state bureaucracy (Braun 59). The two men outlined their goals for the new company: policy would be determined by the needs of the script and actors, productions would each have their own sets, props, and costumes, and performances would be treated artistically, not as social occasions (Braun 60). The theatre was also intended to be accessible to the worker and peasant classes, who were still suffering under poor conditions almost forty years after the emancipation of the serfs. In his opening address to the company, Stanislavski stressed this goal, saying: "Never forget that we are striving to brighten the dark existence of the

poor classes, to give them minutes of happiness and aesthetic uplift to relieve the murk which envelops them. . . Our aim is to create the first intelligent, moral open theatre, and to this end we are dedicating our lives” (qtd. in Braun 60). In practice, the MAT stayed true to this principle, and never pursued an upper class, exclusive audience, as was the trend for many other art theatres in Europe (Braun 60).

Through its production of Chekhov’s plays, the MAT pioneered a new, more modern style of acting. The theatre’s work with actors was much more ensemble-based and specific than it was at other local companies. Stanislavski and Nemirovich discouraged conventional gestures and attitudes in acting and favored finding real, individualized behavior and truth in emotion. They required the actors to stay in the scene during every moment onstage, instead of dropping character between lines. The goal was to get actors to “live on the stage” and forget the audience altogether (Slonim 112). The result was acting that was much more subtle than the grand gestures and explosions of passion that audiences were used to. It took time for the public to adjust to the MAT’s new style, which was first viewed as muted and lacking in energy (Slonim 112). In time however, the MAT became known for attracting and turning out great talent (Braun 61). In 1898, with the MAT premiere of Chekhov’s *The Seagull*, Stanislavski felt that his theatre had successfully defined its identity as a company that rejected theatrical cliché and embraced psychological truth in all aspects of production (Braun 65).

In addition to founding a new style of acting, the MAT’s work also modernized the rehearsal process. Stanislavski, himself, was considered Russia’s first real stage director. Rather than being a simple supervisor for a production, he assumed the responsibility of overseeing ensemble discipline, evaluating stage effects and illusions, and paying careful attention to detail (Braun 60). As the MAT raised the importance of

the director, it also took the focus off of individual actors, by discouraging the “star system” in favor of ensemble work. It subsequently became much more of a playwright’s theatre, for the text gained in importance and attention. In fact, it became practice for the company to come together to read and discuss each new play before it was even cast (Slonim 111). This heightened importance of the director and the playwright was a significant development in the modern theatre, and it shaped the original productions of Chekhov’s major plays.

The emergence of the theatre of Chekhov brought significant changes to the Russian stage. Before Chekhov, the trend in Russian literature was toward plays that taught lessons and preached morals (Smeliansky 29). Chekhov gave up this method in favor of a style that had much more subtlety, and asked questions without always providing answers. As Anatoly Smeliansky explains in *Chekhov at the Moscow Art Theatre*, Chekhov “changed the very object of theatre” by taking away focus on “the drama *in* life,” and putting it on “the drama *of* life itself” (30). Chekhov, himself, explained this change by describing the new perspective of his characters: “Now they shoot themselves because they are sick of life, and so on. Previously, they did it because they had embezzled public money” (qtd. in Smeliansky 30). Chekhov was not interested in moralizing, but rather in creating truthful, human characters.

In Chekhov’s plays the plot is deliberately less important, and the characters have great complexity and psychological depth (Braun 30). In a letter to his brother, Alexi, dated 1887, Chekhov described his resistance to two-dimensional characterizations:

Modern playwrights begin their plays with angels, scoundrels, and clowns exclusively. Well, go seek these elements in all Russia! Yes, you may find them, but not in such extreme types

as playwrights need. Unwillingly, you begin forging them out of the mind and the imagination, you perspire, and give the matter up. I wanted to be original: I did not portray a single villain, not a single angel (though I could not refrain when it came to the clown), did not accuse anyone, or exculpate. Whether all this is well done, I do not know.

(qtd. in *Letters on Lit. Topics* 130)

In this letter, Chekhov refers specifically to his play *Ivanov*, but his convictions ring true for each of his mature plays. He creates three-dimensional characters, none of whom can fairly be tagged as purely good or purely bad. Each have strengths and weaknesses, and each provoke sympathy. Chekhov played with the conventions of dramatic literature, in characterization, plot, tone, and even in the arc of a play. About *The Seagull* he wrote: "I began it *forte* and ended it *pianissimo* – contrary to all the rules of dramatic art" (*Letters on Lit. Topics* 146). In all aspects of his dramatic technique, Chekhov altered the conventional to make it more true to life. For this reason, Chekhov is widely recognized as the father of modern realistic drama.

Though not often immediately successful, Chekhov's plays were well known, and they gave the MAT an audience. After early success with their productions of *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya*, Stanislavski and Nemirovich laid claim to Chekhov's plays, doing their best to create a monopoly on the playwright's work. When they prevented the Alexandrinskii Theatre in Petersburg from performing *Uncle Vanya*, Nemirovich justified the action by saying it was "a defense of Chekhov's artistic interests," implying that no one but MAT performers could do justice to the text (qtd. in Rayfield 281). However, the MAT's level of possessiveness did not necessarily match up with their level of faithfulness to Chekhov's intent. Chekhov and Stanislavski famously disagreed



over the tone of Chekhov's plays, and neither seemed willing to bend to the other's will. Though Chekhov was reluctant to give notes to actors (he was known to reply simply: "It's all written there" (Rayfield 280)), he had strong opinions about the look and the mood of his plays. When he presented a script to the MAT, he designated certain actors to play the specific roles. He felt it important to attend at least some rehearsals, and when he could not be there he kept updated on a play's progress through letter correspondence. And Chekhov was not shy about voicing discontent to Stanislavski when something did not seem right.

In the spirit of naturalism, Stanislavski was intent on including as much physical detail as possible in his productions of Chekhov's plays. Stanislavski filled the stage with props and sound-effects beyond what the text specified (Rayfield 280). This was part of creating the theatre of "mood" that Chekhov's plays came to be associated with. Attending a rehearsal of *The Seagull*, Chekhov heard sounds of frogs croaking, dragonflies buzzing, dogs barking and children crying, and warily stressed that the imagery in his script was carefully chosen: "the stage reflects the quintessence of life and there is no need to introduce anything superfluous on to it" (qtd. in Braun 64). He felt most of Stanislavski's additions were extraneous. Stanislavski recalls that Chekhov later commented wryly, "I shall write a new play and it will begin with a character saying: 'How wonderfully quiet it is! There are no birds to be heard, no dogs, no cuckoos, no owls, no nightingales, no clocks, no harness bells, and not a single cricket'" (qtd. in Braun 73). Chekhov was indeed known to be picky about inaccuracy of detail. In Stanislavski's memoir, the director recalls that Chekhov was "terribly indignant" about the muddy boots and unkempt shirt that Vanya was to wear for his costume, and insisted that Vanya should wear a silk tie, as he had clearly specified (Stanislavski 362). Chekhov later indicated his reluctance to relinquish full control to Stanislavski during

rehearsals for *The Three Sisters*. In his absence, he nominated an officer to oversee the decisions made about the portrayal of the officers in the play (Braun 67). It is clear that Chekhov did not think Stanislavski, when left to his own devices, would do full justice to the plays.

Stanislavski also had difficulty with Chekhov's choice to play against dramatic convention. In the MAT production of *Uncle Vanya*, Stanislavski had Astrov passionately clinging to Elena in the final act. Chekhov wrote to Olga Knipper, who played Elena: "If Astrov takes that scene violently, the whole mood of the fourth act – quiet and despondent – will be ruined" (qtd. in Braun 66). Rather, Chekhov said, Astrov's attitude should be one of resignation, because by this time he knows he has lost Elena. Chekhov also protested against the choice to have Sonya kneel before her father when she begs him to understand Vanya's pain. He explained that the action was too falsely dramatic: "After all it's not a drama. The whole meaning and the whole drama in a person's life is located inside, not in externals" (qtd. in Braun 66). Chekhov looked for his characters to come alive onstage as complex human beings. He wanted the drama to come from psychological truth, rather than from empty stage conventions. But Stanislavski had his own strong opinions and did not always honor Chekhov's requests.

Perhaps the biggest disparity between Chekhov and Stanislavski involved the tone of irony and comedy in Chekhov's plays. Chekhov felt strongly that his plays were comic, even bordering on farcical, while Stanislavski insisted on their inherent tragedy. The disagreement became most vehement over the interpretation of *The Cherry Orchard*. Stanislavski wrote to Chekhov, in reference to the play: "This is not a comedy, nor a farce, as you have written. It is a tragedy whatever prospect of a better life you hold out in the last act" (qtd. in Benedetti 130). The issue was never resolved, and

Chekhov complained of the MAT production's despairing mood and slow, heavy pace, saying famously: "All I can say is, Stanislavski has ruined my play" (qtd. in Benedetti 134).

But despite the tensions that often existed between them, Stanislavski and Chekhov ultimately seemed to respect each other. In November 1903, Chekhov wrote to Stanislavski: "I am amazed and generally sit with my mouth wide open at your theatre" (*Letters on Lit. Topics* 162). He later wrote to Gorky, recommending the artistic value of the MAT: "You need to get nearer to this theatre and observe it so you can write plays" (qtd. in Benedetti 97). For his part, Stanislavski marveled at Chekhov's unique ability to break out unexpectedly with his "pure, childlike laughter" and infect those around him with his humor (Benedetti 363). He was greatly affected by the loss of the playwright and wrote after Chekhov's death: "I never thought I would be so attached to him and that it would create such a yawning gap in my life" (qtd. in Benedetti 135). Though the course of their collaboration did not always run smoothly, Chekhov and Stanislavski each ultimately thrived from the other's work. Their historic relationship was involved in the shaping of both the MAT's reputation and Chekhov's own prominence as a master playwright of the turn of the century.

### **The Original Production of *Uncle Vanya***

The MAT did not produce *Uncle Vanya* until two years after the play was published. The first productions were in the provinces, shortly after the script was made available in 1897. *Vanya* played in at least eight different towns, and enjoyed a good amount of success, for provincial audiences identified with the feeling of

hopelessness and worry about a wasted life (Rayfield 279). A paper in the country town Tiflis praised the play, saying:

. . . with fine observation and deep psychological analysis . . .  
we see clever, talented, educated people spending their whole  
lives on trivia and withering in unconscious quietism, busy with  
things that are beneath them, gradually sucked into base trivial  
lives, existing with no profit to others or themselves.  
(qtd. in Rayfield 279)

This early success in the provinces helped improve *Uncle Vanya's* reputation, which was poor from the start. It was prejudged first, because it was known to be a reworking of Chekhov's widely disliked play, *The Wood Demon*, and second, because it was published with *The Seagull*, which still retained a bad reputation from its disastrous opening (Rayfield 278). *Vanya* also suffered under the original reactions of literary critics, who called the play "oppressive," "vaguely sketched," and "unlikely to find success with the average spectator" because it required "a lot of thought to understand the motives behind the heroes' actions" (qtd. in Rayfield 278). Despite criticism, however, Chekhov did not revise his play.

The MAT production of *Uncle Vanya* opened in spring 1899 and brought renewed attention and fame to the play. The cast members, who were not Chekhov's original choices for the roles, included Stanislavski as Astrov (the actor had wanted to play Vanya), Olga Knipper as Elena, Stanislavski's wife Lilina as Sonya, and Vishnevskii as Vanya. The play was officially directed by Nemirovich, because Stanislavski was acting, although Stanislavski also had some input in the process. The production was filled with the kind of "mood" creating physical elements that the MAT was known for. The first act opened with mosquitoes, real chickens and a dog onstage,

all included to establish the feeling of real life happening in front of the audience. Props were numerous and detailed, down to a handbag of pencils for Maria and hot water bottles for Serebryakov (Rayfield 280). The set was a “soulless house,” containing furniture with dust covers, and a large horse-collar, which hung on a nail above the dining table, meant to suggest a noose (Worrall 115-16). All was consistent with a despondent mood.

The staging of the play included interpretive choices that emphasized the quiet futility of the characters’ lives. At the beginning of the third act, Sonya and Elena played a duet on the piano while Vanya corrected Sonya’s wrong notes. Sonya chewed her nails in anguish during her conversation with Elena, and Vanya often checked his watch (Rayfield 280). All talk of numbers was especially stressed, possibly to emphasize the arbitrary nature of such facts and figures. Stanislavski even altered the text in a few places. He took out Vanya’s line to Serebryakov “You won’t forget me,” effectively removing some of Vanya’s sense of self-worth. And, he rearranged Elena and Astrov’s final scene, so that Elena leaned “with her elbows against the door frame, as if blocking any exit” (Rayfield 280). The visual impact of this moment seemed to comment on the enclosed nature of the house. Finally, Stanislavski had Vanya, after failing to shoot the professor, turn the gun to his own forehead in a ten second tableau that ended the act (Rayfield 280). This significant choice added a suicidal desperation to Vanya’s character that is not included at this moment in Chekhov’s text.

In addition to the tableau in this climactic shooting scene, moments of stillness were also used at the beginnings of acts. Critic Aleksandr Kugel wrote of the performance: “All the acts begin with a pause. The pauses act like an introduction to the inner world of this stagnant life” (qtd. in Rayfield 117). Kugel drew special attention to the pause at the start of act two, in which the audience heard the quiet

beginnings of a storm, from the sound of the wind, to a slowly hardening rain, to a breaking windowpane. This same quiet underscoring of the scene was repeated in the final moments of the play, as described by Kugel:

A few moments of silence, and then the chirp of a cricket starts up. This is a musical symphony of slumbering life . . . Sonya speaks her monologue, Telegin plays softly on his guitar, Nanny darns a stocking – each on his own, each in his own shell, isolated – all incidental episodes gathered up in a single room.  
(qtd. in Rayfield 117).

In this final segment, each character is visually represented as isolated from the others. Each person is involved in a solitary activity, in the same space with others, but clearly separate from them. This closing was received as a beautiful and sad moment, which emphasized the sense of despair at the end of the play.

Chekhov's input on the MAT's production of *Uncle Vanya* was limited. He was present at a few early rehearsals, but then had to leave for the country because of his worsening health. His forced absence from the theatre caused him stress and embarrassment, for he felt it was wrong for a playwright to be so far removed from such an important production of his play (Rayfield 281). Chekhov finally saw his first ever performance of *Uncle Vanya* in April 1900 when the MAT production came to the countryside on tour. Visibly in despair after it was over, Chekhov came backstage with advice on the portrayal of Astrov, saying the character was a cynic, not a sentimental, and that he should cancel out the "lyricism" of Vanya and Sonya's final moment (Rayfield 281). Even though the production was set and enjoying moderate success, Chekhov had trouble relinquishing control, and still worried that his play was being inadequately produced and poorly received.

The reactions of Chekhov's contemporaries to the staging of *Uncle Vanya* were widely varied. Gorky, often a critic of Chekhov's work, had seen the play in the provinces and gushed over its power in a letter to the playwright, saying he "wept like a female" and "felt as I watched its characters as if I were being sawn in half by a dull saw." He called *Vanya* "a new form of dramatic art, a hammer you use to beat on the empty pate of the public." He went to describe his reaction to the moment in the fourth act, when Astrov mentioned the heat in Africa, "I started to tremble in admiration of your talent, and in fear of the people, of our colorless, beggarly life" (qtd. in Senelick 57). Gorky was not, however, so complimentary after seeing the MAT production a year later, but he still called the play a unique, symbolist work (Rayfield 281). Tolstoy, upon seeing the MAT production was quite negative, saying that there was no tragic situation and the sounds of the guitar and the cricket carried no meaning. He also criticized Astrov and Vanya, saying the characters were "rubbish, idlers, running from action," and "they should have married peasant girls and stopped pestering Serebryakov" (Rayfield 281). As for the literary critics, their criticism changed to praise after *Uncle Vanya's* success on stage. Chekhov was noted for his tendency to write in a unique dramatic form, and *Uncle Vanya* was said to be "not a comedy, even less a drama, undoubtedly it is not a vaudeville – it is in fact, 'a mood in four acts'" (qtd. in Rayfield 281). In all, Chekhov's complexity of tone and characterization was received as a new kind of theatre. Whether intellectuals and critics praised or criticized Chekhov's work, no one seemed indifferent.

## Contemporary Productions

In modern day society, productions of Chekhov's plays are often carefully examined, and controversially received. Perhaps like no other playwright, Chekhov's work is surrounded by a fierce protectiveness and a rigid conviction that there are clear right and wrong ways to produce it. Some scholars firmly assert that there is only one way Chekhov can and should be done to honor the writer's unique sensibility. With each of Chekhov's plays, there is an expectation that there is one authoritative, original production that all subsequent productions must strive to live up to. Yet, none of us in the twenty-first century have ever seen that "true" production. In truth, such a definitive performance probably does not exist at all, for even the MAT opening of the *Uncle Vanya* in 1899 was not the first time the play had been produced, nor was it necessarily suited to Chekhov's original intent. In actuality, every production of a Chekhov play is a personal interpretation, grounded in the traditions and ideals of its culture and time.

Despite heightened expectations, Chekhov's work has been continuously produced around the world since it was written. In contemporary times, *Uncle Vanya* has been staged with widely varying interpretation and success. Stage productions of the play abound in Europe and America in the latter half of the twentieth century and many famous directors have taken on the play. Several film productions of the play have been made in Europe, America, and Russia, transposing *Uncle Vanya* to a new medium for a modern audience. In every case, each new production of the play gave audiences a unique interpretation.

A 1962 production at the Chichester Festival in England, directed by Laurence Olivier, was called by some: "probably the best *Uncle Vanya* in English that we shall



ever see" (qtd. in Senelick 307), and illustrates the notion that there is one right way to do the play. As theatre historian Laurence Senelick explains, the production distinguished itself with a "minute sense of detail," and a careful recreation of period realism in the props and costumes (307). The design was original in its use of a unit set for all four acts. It consisted of an open floor of bare planks and a wooden wall of a house in the back, complete with a door and windows. This set made sense for the text but eliminated Chekhov's symbolic move from the outside in (Senelick 307). Olivier played Astrov in full costume that seemed to have been created in the image of Stanislavski (or perhaps Chekhov, himself) – complete with a large, curling mustache and spectacles. As Vanya, Michael Redgrave was described by one reviewer as an: "ungainly, muscular figure, built for action but constantly at odds with his own body, flapping and bumbling, yet illuminated by the sense of a refined intelligence going to ruinous waste" (qtd. in Senelick 323). Redgrave's portrayal is remembered as iconic in the long history of famous actors playing the role. The production as a whole was received as faithful to Chekhov's original conception.

Olivier's production was turned into a film in 1963. It took the viewer inside the stage performance, which was transplanted to the National Theatre in London. Oliver's version establishes its prestige with its opening slow pan into the famous theatre and its beginning credits, which use large, bold text to emphasize the importance of both Chekhov and Oliver's names. When the performance begins, the camera moves from a wide view, which includes the audience watching, into a narrow view with close ups of the stage and actors, as if the audience has moved inside the play. From the opening scene, the viewer has the sense that he or she is simply glimpsing bits of the characters' lives. They walk off camera still speaking, and appear in the background drinking tea or reading when they are not the focus of a scene. As indicated in Chekhov's original

script, Telegin (Lewis Casson) underscores several scenes, quietly strumming his guitar in the background. Sonya (Joan Plowright) is dark-haired, and appears hearty and grounded in her movements, while Ileyna (Rosemary Harris) is fair-haired and appears like a porcelain doll – delicate, cold, and languid. In the scenes between the two young women, the tone of comic irony comes through; when Ileyna says “I’m so unhappy,” on the verge of tears, and Sonya replies “I’m so happy,” giggling helplessly. And in the final scene of the play, the pace slows to include long moments of silence, as the characters sit and work. In all these aspects, the play takes pride in its faithful depiction of Chekhov’s work. Because of Olivier’s prestige in the theatre world, and because of his commitment to realism, this National Theatre production was clearly meant to be considered an authoritative performance on the English stage.

In 1970, Russian director Andrei Konchalovsky’s film *Dyadya Vanya* was released, giving audiences a very different view of Chekhov’s play. The Soviet production, done in the original Russian, was framed by an intensely political interpretation. The opening shot is a long, silent pan through the rooms of the estate where the play takes place. This sequence is followed suddenly by a montage of images of extreme poverty and extreme wealth in Russia, which flash quickly across the screen, underscored by angry, emphatic orchestral music. These same images return during the film – Astrov shows them to Elena in the third act, and then pins one of a poverty-stricken child on the wall next to his desk. With these pictures, the film establishes socioeconomic class as the central theme of the play. It highlights the chasm between serfdom and nobility, and then moves into the play, depicting Chekhov’s characters as the result of a changing class situation in Russia. They are shown as members of the landed gentry whose wealth has deteriorated, leaving them an estate and a lifestyle somewhat beyond their means.

In the film, Chekhov's characters are depicted as inactive, and neglectful of the work that needs to be done to maintain their lavish home. The rooms of the house appear in disrepair – dishes are left out, papers are scattered across the floor – and all is left untouched while the characters walk from room to room and lounge in armchairs. The acting is, in general, quiet and understated. The characters speak slowly, and leave long pauses in the middle of scenes, communicating great amounts in their eyes, which often avoid direct contact with others. Much of their feelings remain covered below the surface. Sonya, especially, is able to restrain her tears in her interactions with Astrov, though she clearly feels great pain. At key moments, however their emotions rise up in unrestrained passion, which lasts for a short time, before it is quickly snuffed out. For instance, when Astrov passionately embraces Elena, she submits fully for a moment, and then quickly pulls away and leaves him standing alone. Significantly, in the famous climax of the play, several of the characters do not react to Vanya's gunshot, instead remaining numb and still. Sonya and Astrov watch the action play out without moving from their places, and Serebryakov stands calmly and somewhat arrogantly adjusting his jacket, as Vanya takes aim at him and shoots. In the final moments of the play, Sonya delivers her speech looking to the afterlife quietly, with composure and without looking at Vanya. The camera zooms out, giving the viewer a reverse shot away from the house and a final image of the snowy, empty countryside. Underscoring most of the film is the relentless sound of a ticking clock, marking the passage of time. The film makes it clear that the numbness and inactivity of these characters keep them from making progress and doing necessary work.

Konchalovsky's film gives some insight into how Russians view *Uncle Vanya* in the twentieth century. In his home country, Chekhov is seen as a political artist, and in more modern times, his work has been manipulated to meet a political agenda. In 1950,

director Lobanov rehearsed a production at the Ermlova Theatre in Moscow which represented the repressive regime of Alexander III through the character of Serebryakov. From the start, it was implied that Serebryakov deserved to be shot, and the final act was played with the smell of gunpowder still in the air (Senelick 201). The production never opened. Similarly, in the years of the Soviet regime, Sonya's last speech, was performed as "a prophecy of post-revolutionary bliss" (Rayfield 282). Her words, which express the conviction that there is a peaceful world waiting for her and Uncle Vanya, were manipulated to imply that the current government would lead the way to their future happiness. In later years, however, this interpretation was viewed as contrary to the Chekhovian mood.

In America, beginning in 1977, Chekhov's major works were famously interpreted with a postmodernist spin by director Andrei Serban. His productions of Chekhov's four major plays were perhaps the most discussed and the most controversial in contemporary times. In 1983, Serban opened his production of *Uncle Vanya* at LaMama E.T.C. in New York City. The play began with Sonya alone onstage reading the words of her final speech from a book. She next turned on a "mournful tenor aria" from an old fashioned phonograph, and then the traditional text began (Kalson 107). This opening moment changed the perception Sonya's the final speech when she returned to it at the end of the play. It became ironic, as if her words of comfort were memorized from a book (Allen 143). The final scene between Vanya and Sonya was played in a well, which looked like a coffin, and their pens scratching on paper sounded like nails on a chalkboard. In the background, Telegin, who traditionally strums the guitar, played a balalaika and spun round and round in a striking contrast to the somber mood of the ending (Allen 143). With this finale, Serban seemed to be heightening an anguished, suffocating feeling that lingered behind

Sonya's hopeful words. While her words and Telegin's music suggested an attitude of optimism, the coffin-like appearance of the environment made them appear hopelessly trapped in their world.

The set design for Serban's production was equally symbolic. It was an enormous, multi-level house, consisting of a "maze" of corridors, rooms, and stairways in a rectangular space of fifty feet by twenty. The center had a sunken area, which represented Vanya's study. The space was imposing and surreal, and as described by critics, it "eventually defeat[ed] the little people who scurry without purpose, without direction, through its sparsely furnished rooms, along its darkened corridors and balcony" (Kalson 108). In Serban's hands, the estate became an ominous place, which threatened to overwhelm the characters. The vastness and structure of the set kept the characters constantly isolated from each other – a visual representation of their self-absorption (Kalson 108). Serban's design seems to have been aiming to literalize the psychological state of Chekhov's characters. Vanya and Sonya were trapped in the house and could do nothing but submit to the work that must be done.

Critics responded to the daring nature of the production, most frequently arguing over whether or not Serban was faithful to Chekhov's original intent. The two moments of fabricated stage business that were most upsetting to reviewers, were one in which Vanya childishly sat on the Professor's lap and another in which the Professor seductively groped at his young wife Elena. While Serban unquestioningly made choices that went against the tradition of performing *Uncle Vanya*, critics understood that the director's staging was meant to make audiences look with new eyes on an old, often-staged play (Allen 144). Some were appalled and argued that Serban obliterated Chekhov's feeling and meaning, while others felt that Serban's production captured the play's humor and sadness and brought Chekhov to life in contemporary society. In any

case, Serban's unique eye gave audiences a very different *Uncle Vanya* than had been seen before. He vividly brought out the themes of isolation and despair in the highly visual world of his production.

Beginning in the nineties, American directors have set *Uncle Vanya* in spaces that connect the play more closely to contemporary society. One such production is Louis Malle's 1994 film, *Vanya on 42nd Street*, which frames the play by showing the actors walking through the streets of '90s New York City on their way to rehearsal. In this opening sequence, we see each actor showing subtle hints of their characters in real life – Wallace Shawn (Vanya) as the everyman, eating fast food on the street, and Larry Pine (Astrov) hitting on an attractive woman she passes by. The actors gather together in an opulently designed, decrepit theatre and begin a rehearsal of Chekhov's play without any clear delineation between the end of their pre-rehearsal chat and the beginning of the first scene of the play. The viewer must take a minute before he even realizes that he is no longer just watching the actors – *Uncle Vanya* has begun. This blurring of the line between reality and the world of the play, between actor and character, brings the world of *Vanya* closer to the world of nineties New York City. The characters seem modern and familiar, yet at the same time, Malle continually reminds the viewer that these are simply actors at a rehearsal. His production is the opposite of Oliver's "authoritative" version. Malle's version is not the final word, it is just a practice (literally, a rehearsal) – an ephemeral look at characters who last through time. It is one, personal interpretation of a classic play. Malle uses his *Vanya* to make comment about the changing art forms in modern day society by blurring the line between theatre and film.

Another production that placed *Vanya* in a more contemporary setting was Janos Szasz's 2002 version at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge Massachusetts.

Szasz's play was set in a bar on the Serebryakov estate, complete with bartender, real food cooking and customers (Foster). The traditional countryside feel was removed from the space, and instead the design "invest[ed] the bar with the grayness and seediness that has eaten away at the souls of the two male protagonists, Vanya and Dr. Astrov" (Siegel). The set extended partly over the audience, which brought them closer to the world of the characters. In an interview Szasz voiced his intention to make the audience part of the performance, "And feel part of it. Not just watch it" (Foster). Setting the play in a bar was also Szasz's way of putting the characters in a space to drink and talk and forget about their lives outside. He said, "A bar is a place where people are waiting for something . . . One of the great questions of the play is, why do they drink? By drinking they will make something happen" (Foster). Like Malle, Szasz placed his *Uncle Vanya* in a space recognizable to a contemporary American audience. He pulled the lives of the characters into a modern sphere to bring out the sense of people waiting in inaction while life passes by.

In large and small theatres alike, contemporary directors have worked to make their productions of *Uncle Vanya* both popular and accessible to audiences. In 2002, director Sam Mendes opened his production of *Vanya* in repertory with Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* at the Donmar Warehouse in London. The famous cast included Simon Russell Beale as Vanya and Emily Watson as Sonya, both stars of stage and film. With these big names, the show sold like wildfire, becoming "among the most coveted tickets in London last year," and subsequently transferred its run to the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2003 (Brantley). Reviews praised the acting, yet stressed that no one cast member stood out above the others. Rather, the production gained strength from a true ensemble: "all the parts, as acted, seem created equal" (Brantley). Also notably, Mendes chose Brian Friel's translation of Chekhov's play, a version which makes some changes

to the text by updating the language and sharpening the humor. Reviews of Mendes' production emphasized the skill of the translation in capturing the spirit of Chekhov's work, one critic explaining that Friel "understands what matters in Chekhov like few others" (Spencer). Friel's version makes the text of the play accessible to modern, English-speaking audiences. In all, Mendes' production took people's attention by presenting an old play with modern stars and a new translation.

In 2004, at the other end of the spectrum from Mendes' show, director Mark Lococo's small, low-budget production showed similar desire to attract and relate to its audience. I was fortunate to be able to observe some of the rehearsal process for this *Uncle Vanya*, which opened at the 150-seat Apple Tree Theatre, located in a suburb of Chicago, Illinois. In rehearsal (a process I will discuss in more detail in chapter two), Lococo delved into the layers of each scene progressively. He pushed the actors to focus on one aspect of a moment, and then build upon that discovery by finding another layer with each run through. Lococo expressed his conviction that by delving deep into the subtext, Chekhov's writing could show human psychology up close. To enhance this feeling of closeness, the set was designed in-the-round, with the audience sitting just a few feet away from the stage on all sides. Reviews praised the space, and called the show "unfussy, intimate, [and] conversational" (C. Jones), as a result of the design. With his small space, Lococo heightened the ability of the audience to identify with the characters.

Like Mendes, Lococo chose Friel's translation for his production. Lococo spoke of his decision, asserting that an Irishman adapting a Russian work enhances the "humanity and universality" of the characters. He explained: "It's not so much about Russia as it is about the human condition" (qtd. in Petlicki). From my perspective, I saw Lococo attempting to make Chekhov's characters recognizable and familiar. By de-



emphasizing their Russianness, and focusing instead on their commonly identifiable fears and desires, Lococo brought his production closer to a contemporary American world. Like Mendes, he took steps to cross cultural boundaries and make Chekhov's work appealing to a modern, English-speaking audience. At the same time, both directors stayed close to the realistic nature of the play, and honored the simplicity of a traditional interpretation.

In all of these past productions of *Uncle Vanya*, the artists' interpretations were unique. While they received varied reactions from critics, every production brought something new and worthwhile out of Chekhov's play. The ideas and themes each director raised to the forefront were personal, and realized in different visual and intellectual approaches to the text. Consciously or not, each production was inextricably tied to the perspective of the culture in which it was produced.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Directing Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya***

In this chapter I will narrow my focus to specifically consider Chekhov's play *Uncle Vanya* in preparation for my production. I will begin with a literary analysis of the play and examine *Uncle Vanya* in comparison to its precursor, *The Wood Demon*, to illuminate the later play's unique structure and themes. After looking at *Uncle Vanya's* development, I will examine some critical commentary on the play in combination with my own ideas in an effort to develop my own reading. In addition, I will briefly discuss my choice of translation for my upcoming production. In the second half of the chapter, I will consider three problems in directing Chekhov's work and how to address them. A discussion of my directorial concept will lead into my consideration of the tension between comedy and tragedy in Chekhov's plays, the specific acting challenges that Chekhov's work presents, and finally, the technique of gender-blind casting and how it may work for *Uncle Vanya*. My analysis here will serve me later when I begin rehearsals for my production.

## PART I: AN EXAMINATION OF *UNCLE VANYA*

### The Origin of *Uncle Vanya*

*Uncle Vanya* is a revision of *The Wood Demon*, a play that Chekhov wrote in 1889. Looking at this earlier play, we can see many similarities to *Uncle Vanya*. In fact, much of *Vanya* is already present in *The Wood Demon*, sometimes even word for word (Frayn 267). The structure of *The Wood Demon*'s first three acts is much the same as *Vanya*'s and almost all of *Vanya*'s characters are already there in earlier versions. Despite these remarkable similarities, however, there is much about *The Wood Demon* that Chekhov substantially revised for his later play. In *Uncle Vanya*, the setting and basic plot become more focused, several of the characters change and are deepened, the climax and resolution are reworked, and the tone is shifted. Examining these revisions gives important insight into the shaping of Chekhov's mature play. It sheds new light on *Uncle Vanya*, and makes what is unique to this later play seem more significant.

*The Wood Demon* follows the story of eleven characters whose lives are intertwined by family ties and romantic interests. The action takes place both at the Serebryakov estate and the neighboring Zheltoukhin estate and involves a tangle of love triangles. There are three main couples: Professor Serebryakov and his young wife Yelena, Khrushchov (nicknamed the Wood Demon for his concern for the forests) and the professor's daughter Sonya, and finally a landowner's son, Fyodor, and a young woman of the Zheltoukhin family, Yulya. These three pairs all end up together, but not before a series of conflicts seems destined to divide them. While Yelena laments on her stagnant marriage to the Professor, she is the subject of Fyodor's attentions and her brother in law, Zhorzh's, passions. Sonya is pursued by Yulya's brother, Lyonya, though she really loves the Wood Demon. The Wood Demon loves her too, but Sonya

is wary of his liberal values, and so his love remains unrequited for most of the play. Conflicts heighten in the third act, when the Professor announces that he is going to sell the estate. In despair over the injustice of the Professor's decision and the futility of his life, Zhorzh (the precursor to Uncle Vanya), kills himself. Yelena, also unhappy with her husband's decision, runs away with the silly neighbor Dyadin (Waffles) in an attempt to escape her confined lifestyle. But in the fourth act, all is resolved. The Wood Demon returns to save the surrounding forest from destruction, and Sonya is finally able to admit her love for him. Yelena comes out of hiding and goes back to her husband. Yulya remains alone until Fyodor sees that she would make a good match for him, and proposes in the final moments of the play.

In *Uncle Vanya*, much of the plot's complexity is paired down, while the basic structure of the play is maintained. The characters who inhabit the Zheltoukhin estate are cut out, including the third couple Fyodor and Yulya. All of the action now takes place at the Serebryakov estate and is focused on the lives of the characters who live in the house (Vanya, Sonya, Maria, Marina), and nearby (Telegin, and Astrov). The framework of the first three acts remains almost identical. Act one still contains a majority of the long speeches given by Vanya about the Professor, and Astrov about his forestry. Act two follows the same progression of scenes as the second act of *The Wood Demon*. And act three is still centered around the Professor's announcement that he is going to sell his estate. Yet with excess characters and plot twists removed, the structure of *Uncle Vanya* seems newly focused.

With all of these similarities in structure, the few differences are particularly notable. As critic Eric Bentley notes, in *Uncle Vanya* the story is now bookended by the short stay of the Professor and Elena at their estate. The action begins with the couple's arrival and resolves upon their departure. Therefore, Bentley writes that in *Uncle Vanya*

we can now consider, “what effect has the visit upon the visited?” (Bentley 244). It is a question that cannot be asked about *The Wood Demon*, for we never see the Serebryakovs arrive or leave in the earlier play. This change reveals what Bentley calls the “unity” of *Uncle Vanya*. It indicates a new central structure that drives the action, and answers the question: why examine this particular moment in these characters’ lives? We are looking at the moment in which the characters’ routines are altered, and things begin to fall apart. The revision of the action in *Uncle Vanya* into a single location also indicates a conscious decision to unify. The acts are now structured in a directional movement from the garden outdoors to the rooms indoors, which, with each new scene, are located deeper and deeper inside the house. This movement visually reflects the feeling of being trapped in a lifestyle – the characters literally go further inside their place, and cannot break out. The unity of place in *Uncle Vanya* is thus able to function on a metaphorical level.

It is also worthwhile to note how the characters in *Uncle Vanya* are changed from their earlier forms in *The Wood Demon*. All of the characters are deepened by the revision in some respect. Serebryakov, Maria and Telegin are perhaps the most similar to their counterparts in *Wood Demon*. Serebryakov remains a stodgy old academic who has an infuriating self-involvement and haughtiness, though in *Vanya* he becomes more sympathetic as we see him feeling helpless in his sickness and old age. Maria is still obsessed with her political pamphlets and stuck in her own world, unable to understand her son’s pain. And Telegin is still deeply affected by the beauty of his surroundings, remaining both a little foolish and very sincere. Even with these similarities to their earlier counterparts, however, both Maria and Telegin become more significant in *Uncle Vanya*. They are no longer part of a crowd of characters so their presences stand out and contribute greatly to the environment of the estate. Also, in

*Vanya*, a new character appears. She is Marina, the nurse, whose role is to run the household and take care of the daily chores. Marina functions partially as another representation of the “monotony of country life” as she “sits knitting” while the “fine talk passes her by” (Bentley 249). But she is more than just a figure of a tedious life – Marina also functions as a maternal figure who cares for and continually sees the good in everyone. Her inclusion in the play provides a sympathetic perspective through which the audience can view all of the characters’ lives.

More drastic revisions are apparent in the new characterizations of Astrov, Elena, and Sonya. Each of these characters gains a greater complexity, and with it, greater psychological depth. Astrov not only becomes a doctor in *Vanya*, he also becomes coarsened in matters of life and love. Chekhov complicates him, taking away his unwavering goodness so that “The most upright and selfless character in the original play is now one who also indulges in periodic drinking bouts” (Frayn 268). Astrov is rounded out and now must struggle with weaknesses of character. While he maintains his emphatic environmentalism his focus moves inward. Instead of rushing off to save forests as he does in *Wood Demon*, he downplays his accomplishments and worries about his uselessness. Elena’s insistent virtuousness in *The Wood Demon* also becomes more ambiguous in *Vanya*. She is just as unhappy in her marriage to an older man, but now she feels an attraction to Astrov that she does not completely stifle. Her conflict is complicated, for she does not just face frustration in her marriage, she faces the temptation to be unfaithful as well. Sonya is perhaps the most altered of the three characters. *The Wood Demon*’s version of Sonya is much closer to the beautiful, confident, idle Elena, than the self-effacing, lonely, but continually hardworking woman she becomes in *Vanya*. In the later play, Sonya is less assertive in her flirtation with Astrov, and feels less deserving of his love. Yet, in the revision, she also grows

more selfless. She is able to see more deeply into Astrov's character and love him for his ideas, not simply his talent.

In *Uncle Vanya* these changes of character lead to a much more poignant and tragic love triangle. Now, while Sonya pines for Astrov, he does not and cannot return her love, for he says he is incapable of loving anyone. Astrov, meanwhile, lusts after Elena, but she is married and unattainable to him. Elena is equally as attracted to Astrov, though she knows she can never be with him dishonestly. The final act of *Vanya* subsequently ends with no new love-matches. Elena remains in her unhappy marriage, and Sonya and Astrov each resign themselves to their former, solitary lives.

Finally, as evidenced by the title, Uncle Vanya's character is given an increased focus in the later version of the play. With the revision, Vanya also gains greater agency in his own life. This change is probably best illustrated through his action in the third act of the play when he becomes enraged by Serebryakov's decision to sell the estate. Rather than giving up and committing suicide as does his counterpart in *The Wood Demon*, this Vanya turns the gun outward and shoots at the Professor. Just as before Vanya has reached his wit's end, and must act out violently to release his frustration and despair. However, he is not hopeless in this later version. He tries and fails to kill the Professor, but he does not ultimately give up on himself. As Frayn notes, the choice to keep Vanya alive is a significant change from the earlier play, for "all [Chekhov's] full-length plays up to this point have resolved with the death of one of the central characters" (268). In *Uncle Vanya*, the resolution is no longer so tidy and convenient. Vanya must confront his failure, and while he still expresses a desire to be dead, he does not act upon it. Instead, he forces himself to face his life and find a way to live it that is tolerable, and perhaps even hopeful for the future. The reworking of the climactic shooting scene alters the rest of the play. *Uncle Vanya* follows a much

smoother and more convincing trajectory than *The Wood Demon*. While the earlier play attempted to recover from the suicide with a contrived happy uniting of all the couples, the later version stays connected to the momentum of the shooting and resolves the plot lines more realistically.

With all of these revisions, *Uncle Vanya* moves away from the playfulness of *The Wood Demon* and takes on a new, more complex tone. It is no longer a play with an insistently happy ending in which couples are paired off as they should be. Rather, the ending becomes ambiguous – both tragic and hopeful – as we watch Vanya and Sonya resuming their work alone, but looking to peace and rest in the future. As Michael Frayn points out, *Vanya* introduces a new “insistence upon endurance” (269). These characters are able to face the hardship in their lives and go on in spite of it. While in *Wood Demon*, the final act has a “bucolic geniality” and a “facetiousness” as everything turns out all right, in *Vanya* the “sense of wasted life” is “left exposed” (Frayn 268). There is nothing contrived to cover the darkness. And in *Vanya*, the characters have a greater sense of the necessity of work. As Frayn notes, the “mood has changed from one of comfortable idleness to one of uncomfortably interrupted work” (268). The characters in *Vanya* truly need to work to live their lives for they do not have sufficient wealth to fall back on. Significantly, while Chekhov subtitled *The Wood Demon* “a comedy,” *Uncle Vanya* becomes simply “scenes from country life.” *Vanya* is not a straight comedy, but rather a play about day-to-day living with all its shades of humor and sadness. Using these shades of gray, Chekhov adopts “the halftone, the tragicomic” in *Vanya* (Bentley 245). He blends the comedy with tragedy so that *Vanya*’s humor becomes less direct, and the characters and situations less black and white.



## My Reading of the Play

For me, *Uncle Vanya* is about people trying to find value in their work and purpose in their lives. Each of the characters wrestles with the knowledge that life is fleeting. Nothing lasts forever. And while time ticks by, things slowly change. On an immediate level, the Serebryakov estate has begun to fall apart. The great symbol of the family's past wealth has been declining into disrepair. Still, Vanya and Sonya have spent their time working hard to keep the estate running. They tended to the grounds and managed the accounts for the Professor, to support and allow for his scholarly pursuits. But with the arrival of the Professor and his wife at the start of the play, daily routine seems to be slipping. As Marina comments, "One o'clock was always dinner-time, wasn't it? Now we don't have dinner until seven o'clock – and that used to be tea-time! It's unnatural"<sup>3</sup> (13). Their schedule is upset, so that things no longer get done when they should. Vanya, too, notes that he has been slacking on his duties, saying before the Professor arrived "life was firmly regimented," but now all he does is "eat and sleep and drink" (13). He has slipped out of his routine, and neglected his work. The interruption of their daily lives sparks a lag in work, an infectious boredom and an uncomfortable idleness.

Gradually, the characters step back and realize that life is happening around them, and they, each in his or her own way, ask themselves what they have to show for it. Despite all the work they have done, it seems that little has been accomplished. Vanya complains that he has worked for twenty-five years to pay off the estate with no thanks and no reward. The Professor believes that he has grown too old and forgotten to experience life. Elena feels she is trapped in her marriage to an old man, and is

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<sup>3</sup> All citations from the text of *Uncle Vanya* are quoted from Brian Friel's translation of the play.

frustrated with her meaningless day-to-day existence. Sonya realizes that she is alone and the man she loves will never reciprocate her feelings. Astrov laments that he has been a failure in his medical practice and in his desire to help out future generations. Each of these characters feels inadequate in his or her place in life, and subsequently finds it difficult to go on as before. Time passes by and the characters sit idly, struggling to find their sense of self-worth. Only Marina, Maria, and Telegin cling to their convictions and continue uninterrupted on their paths. Marina continues to care for the family, tending to the tea, and rounding up the chickens, though she is sad to see how much time has changed everyone. Maria sticks to her political ideals, remaining devoted to a man she has supported for almost a decade, though she too, resists the idea of change. And Telegin remains proud that he has been faithful to his estranged wife for all his adult life, though he privately worries that, behind his back, people laugh at him.

As the characters in *Uncle Vanya* sit steeped in idleness, they face missed opportunities and rejection. The love triangles that form in the play all end in separation. Sonya loves Astrov but he cannot return her love. Astrov lusts after Elena but she is unattainable because of her marriage to Serebryakov. Elena is also attracted to Astrov but does not have the courage to act on her feelings or the heart to betray her marriage vows. And Vanya loves Elena but she casually dismisses him for she does not love him back. Each of these characters is reaching for love, but all remain unrequited. The frustration of rejection builds to a tragicomic climax when Vanya shoots at the Professor at the end of the third act. His shots are unsuccessful, and the action becomes one more “miss” for Vanya. He still cannot attain what he reaches for.

In *Uncle Vanya* each character is flawed. As Chekhov said, “The artist must not be the judge of his characters and what they are talking about, but merely an impartial

witness" (qtd. in Frayn 270). The playwright's job, therefore, is to present complex human beings, neither purely good, nor solely bad. And I believe that, in *Uncle Vanya*, Chekhov succeeded in constructing such people. The characters are depicted with depth, and every person is unique, both funny and tragic, and absolutely recognizable. Every one of Chekhov's characters is written with sympathy – no one is the hero, no one the villain – they are all simply human. They each have triumphs and failures, weaknesses and strengths, doubt and hope.

In *Uncle Vanya* the characters face despair, but in the end they do not ultimately give up. In her final speech to Vanya, Sonya acknowledges the hardships that they have lived through, and says, "But be patient. Endure. And peace will come to us. Listen to me, Uncle Vanya. Peace will come to us" (86). With these words, Sonya looks to hope in the future. It is possible to read this final speech as ultimately hopeless. Critic Kenneth Rexroth argues that, in Chekhov, when a character says "'Some day life will be splendid' . . . we neither laugh nor sigh nor believe, but at the most think, 'Perhaps. Not likely. It won't matter'" (45). He implies that the audience does not see Sonya's words as hopeful because we see the idleness of these characters and know that there will be a bleak future ahead. Rexroth's point requires imagining into the future. For me, it is somewhat arbitrary to guess at what *will* happen. What is more to the point, I believe, is what we see happening *now*, in the present. We watch Sonya saying "Peace will come to us," and it is significant that she finds the strength to say this at all. In spite of all her unhappiness, she is still able to believe in good things to come. This is where there is hope. Despite their pain we see the characters living on and continuing to work, still falling in love, harboring ambition, seeking accomplishment and direction. Even when life disappoints them, the characters cannot help but be inspired by love, passions, ambition, and the promise of happiness in future generations.

So for me, *Uncle Vanya* is most importantly about hope, and this is the notion that I want to convey in my staging of the play. It is not necessarily hope that is felt by the characters knowing that everything will turn out well in the end. Rather, it is hope that the audience can feel, as they see the characters each find a way to go on in spite of their struggles and doubts. These characters struggle because they feel hopeless. Dr. Astrov says to Vanya, "The life we lead is futile. Face that. Maybe future generations will discover a way of living that is full and fulfilling" (73). He believes their lives lack purpose, but he cannot see what the audience can see: their lives are not futile, for they never give up. In the face of uncertainty, there is desire and conviction and love. Vanya still pursues Elena, Sonya still encourages Astrov, Serebryakov continues his studies and Elena befriends Sonya. Even as they worry that their lives are meaningless, they are able to find hope to cling to. When Astrov says: "we're not sure what we expect from life, but it disappoints us," Sonya replies: "I hear people say that, and I do try to understand what it means but I can't. How can life – ?" (41). Sonya cannot see how life can forever let people down. She can see the promise in others' lives even if she cannot see it in her own.

Though Chekhov's characters worry that they live futilely, their lives are not empty. They are filled with devotion, deceit, jealousy, devastation, longing, and optimism. In their modest world there is a huge range of human emotion, and in the midst of it all, daily life goes on. And though none of Chekhov's characters are epic heroes, their stakes are just as high, and they demonstrate the same refusal to surrender. Telegin remains faithful to his ex-wife, Maria sticks to her political convictions, Sonya stands up for Astrov's environmental activism, and Vanya finds the courage to declare: "I am not a nonentity" (66). This is the beauty of humanity – despite their pain we see them continuing to work and grow. They press on through their struggles and hold to

their faith that one day, as Sonya says, “Peace will come to us” (86). Chekhov’s story proves that this complexity and range of emotion is not only in sweeping epic tales, it is in our everyday lives, and it is all absolutely real and honest. We look at these characters and see ourselves, and it is both tragic and funny, endearing, and full of hope.

In my production, I want to heighten the idea that the way these characters see themselves is not how they actually are. They think they are lost, too old, too plain, too poor, but in reality they are none of these things. When Astrov is self-deprecating, Sonya tells him “Your standards are too exacting Mikhail; especially on yourself” (42). Sonya sees Astrov for who he is, yet she cannot do the same for herself. She believes she is silly, plain, and unworthy, when in truth everyone else can see that she is wise, beautiful and strong. Sonya thinks that she is not attractive and she is often taken at her word and portrayed as a truly plain-looking character. In my mind, Sonya is just as beautiful as Elena. It is important for the audience to see that it is only in the way she sees herself that she becomes plain. For me, it is necessary that these characters take themselves seriously. When they are played earnestly, the audience discovers what the characters fail to see – that what they seem to lack is outweighed by all the passion, strength, and courage they possess.

Every person, old or young, struggles with feeling a lack of purpose in life. We ask ourselves, can I accomplish what I want? Am I alone? Am I good enough? Will I make an impact? These are questions that the characters in *Uncle Vanya* struggle with, and I think these questions are especially resonant to college students who are faced with an open future that can be daunting. I think the spirit of hope that *Uncle Vanya* offers is extremely relevant to students facing the task of shaping their adult lives.

## Choice of Translation

For my production, I have chosen to use Brian Friel's translation of Chekhov's script. I believe Friel's translation effectively captures Chekhov's realism, simplicity of language, and poignancy of theme for English-speaking actors and audience members. Friel has several key attributes that make him an appropriate adaptor of Chekhov's plays. First, Friel himself is a highly respected and accomplished dramatist. He therefore has the necessary understanding of dramatic technique, and the skill to maintain the play's original integrity even when it is rewritten in another language. Perhaps more importantly, Friel's work shares a close thematic link with Chekhov's work. As Richard York claims, "There is, in both Chekhov and Friel, a dramaturgy of loss, of the wasted opportunity, of a confronting of inertia" (164). Friel's writing displays an understanding of stagnancy and inaction, much like Chekhov's own sensibility of the wasted life. Even the two playwrights' "dramatic rhythms," are strikingly similar, for "they depict alike the desultoriness of conversation, the echoing recurrence of obsessive subjects, unpredictable moments of uninhibited expression, [and] bleak anxious monologues" (York 164). Their styles of crafting a play are so close, in fact, that Friel is often described as a "Chekhovian" writer. And indeed, Friel and Chekhov come from two countries – Ireland and Russia respectively – that have a literary tradition which embraces dark comedy. The literature of both countries displays a deep understanding of the laughter that happens through tears and the hope that survives through despair.

Friel's translations of Chekhov are not traditional. Friel speaks no Russian, so he works from literal English translations to create his own interpretation of Chekhov's rhythms and cadences (R. Jones 34). In his essay on Friel's adaptations of Chekhov,

“Dramatic Interpretation as Theatrical Translation,” Richard Jones argues that Friel’s method of non-literal interpretation is perhaps better able to capture the spirit of Chekhov than some more traditional versions have been. He writes: “in the hands of a skilled playwright such as Friel, variations from a ‘literal’ translation may actually take the reader, and more especially the spectator or performer, closer to the real essence of Chekhov’s work than could be achieved by a more literal/literary rendering into English” (R. Jones 31). The success of Friel’s translations depends upon their free adaptation to the nuances of another language. Indeed, Friel explained his own technique in translating *The Three Sisters*, saying he looked at one line at a time “to see first of all what was the meaning of it, then what was the tone and then eventually what was the sound” (qtd. in R. Jones 34). By attempting to recreate the effect of Chekhov’s words on multiple levels, Friel replicates Chekhov’s own sensibility for an English-speaking audience. In my opinion, he achieves a freshness in his language, so that it does not seem oddly phrased or dated, as many traditional translations do. Ultimately, I was attracted to Friel’s translation because of his success in recreating Chekhov’s naturalness of language and complexity of tone. His sensitivity to the characters’ emotional states and his understanding of the play’s themes seem to me to truly capture the spirit of Chekhov.

## PART II: THREE PROBLEMS IN DIRECTING CHEKHOV

### My Concept

In my production of *Uncle Vanya* I want the audience to identify with the characters and see them as recognizable people, even though they may at first seem far removed from a young American audience. It is my belief that the realism of Chekhov's characters allows us to look past the aspects which seem to divide us from them – different age, nationality, and lifestyle – and see instead our common humanity. To achieve this, I want to place the focus of my production on fleshed-out human characterizations. I do not want the actors to play the characters as types, but rather as people in the given circumstances with very real fears and longings. So, to bring out the psychological complexity, I will work closely with my actors on intention and subtext, and challenge them to play into oppositions. I will push the actors to make the stakes high for each of the characters, for even though it is just day-to-day life, their desires are strong, and significant. Also, because I see *Uncle Vanya* as a true ensemble piece, I want to maintain the specificity of all of the characters, letting every person rise to the surface and hold central focus in their moment. I want to maintain the sense that daily life is happening all around, so that when a character is not the main focus he or she may still remain visible in the background, or audible from offstage.

My production will be a story about the *people*, so all of the physical elements should exist in support of this idea. For me, it is key that the audience senses they are a part of the same space as the characters. They should feel as if they are, for a time, living inside the estate with Vanya, Sonya, Astrov, and the others. This sense of shared space enhances the feeling that we are simply glimpsing the daily life of these people.



And for a time we feel close to them, for we are a part of their world. Therefore, I believe *Uncle Vanya* works best when it is done in an open, intimate setting, where the audience can be close to the action, not separated from the actors by a vast auditorium or a proscenium stage. The space in Tansill Theatre is ideal, for it is a black box with no imposed separation between the stage and the audience. My set is designed with a thrust platform to bring the stage closer to the audience. The actors will enter from all sides – from backstage as well as from behind the audience – to suggest that the world of the play exists all around.

I want to emphasize the reality of the characters without placing them in a naturalistic environment. It is important to me that the design suggests a time and place, but is not so specific that the world of the play seems dated or foreign. So, rather than attempt to replicate in detail a 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian estate, I would like the set to convey a feeling of opulence, but allow the characters to stand out in a world that is abstracted. The stage will appear to be the interior of a home, yet can also seem to blend into the forest environment around as if it were inseparable from the trees. Holding true to Chekhov's symbolic move from the outside in, the set will function as both the garden and the three different rooms inside the house, which will become progressively more and more cluttered. Throughout the play the space will constrict, so that by the final act the characters are literally enclosed onstage. This sense of constricting space parallels the emotional states of the characters. Over the course of the acts they fall deeper and deeper into their own worlds, and by the end, they are trapped within themselves, and isolated from each other.

Finally, I would like to bring out the hope in this story by respecting its comic tone. It is perhaps easy to fall into the trap of making this play a tragedy by focusing on what is wrong in all of the characters' lives. But by playing solely on despair, the play

becomes too heavy and loses its sense of hope. For me, the hope lies in seeing the moments of lightness, even in times of sadness. A character can feel both deeply connected to another person and alone, both passionate and stagnant, both in love and in pain. The audience should be able to laugh with empathetic recognition of the characters' struggles. And the audience should see what the characters cannot – that how we see ourselves and how we appear to others is never the same.

In my production, this idea will be visually represented in the bodies of the actors. First, because this is a college production, my actors will be much younger than many of the characters they are playing. So already, the actors' physical appearances will not match the visual body "types" of the characters. In addition, when I hold auditions I will use gender-blind casting, so that all roles will be open to all actors, regardless of the actor's gender. As a result, there may be an additional visual disparity for the audience. It is possible that an actor of one gender may be playing a character of another. In both cases, I will make no attempt to conceal that the physical type of the actor does not match that of the character. Rather, I will have the actor play the character as truthfully as possible, without affectation, so that the body of the character comes through in the performance. By having the characters played by college actors, some of the opposite gender, the audience will be visually reminded of the disparity between how the characters see themselves and how others see them. At the same time, this casting will also emphasize the fact that the characters' struggles are universally recognizable, and cross the lines of age and gender.

## The Element of Comedy in *Uncle Vanya*

As I discussed in the first chapter, the element of comedy in Chekhov's major plays is an issue that goes back to their original productions. Chekhov made it clear that his plays were meant to be comedies, sometimes even bordering on farce, but Stanislavski famously produced them as tragedies. For my purposes, finding the humor in *Uncle Vanya* is important to my concept of the play as ultimately hopeful. But there is a fine line between finding the comedy within the script, and treating the material as comical. If there is not enough lightness, the play becomes too heavy and the characters are sentimentalized. They lose their ability to be realistic and personal, to show the audience a reflection of themselves. Yet, if the characters are treated too lightly, the production begins to make fun of them, and the play is no longer relatable, but rather alienating. So the question is, how does a director bring out the humor in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* while still respecting the moments of tragedy?

The first step to finding the comedy in *Vanya* is to look at the type of humor that dominated some of Chekhov's other mature plays. As Harvey Pitcher asserts in his essay "Chekhov's Humour," Chekhov's comedy is "spontaneously inventive, and very much *person-oriented*" (87). It is not based on silly circumstances in which the humor is created from a ridiculous situation. Rather, it comes from the characters themselves and their behavior in everyday life. A few good examples show up in *The Three Sisters*. Pitcher points to a moment which the old servant Ferapont randomly adds his strange story about merchants eating large amounts of pancakes into the conversation (101). Here, the incongruity strikes the audience as hilarious. Pitcher also points to occasional odd comments made by characters, such as Solyony's wry remark to the new mother Natasha: "If that child were mine, I'd fry him in a pan and eat him" (qtd. in Pitcher 101)

– a remark made in all semblance of seriousness but clearly sounding absurd. Other examples of such character-driven comic moments are Pishchik’s habit of falling asleep in the middle of a sentence in *The Cherry Orchard*, or Masha’s unexpectedly somber comment, “I am in mourning for my life” (39), in the second line of *The Seagull*.

With this kind of unexpected humor, Chekhov shows that conversation is “haphazard and unpredictable.” In life, his plays insist, “people are having a serious discussion and then someone else reads something totally irrelevant from a newspaper” (Pitcher 101). This type of humor from conversational non-sequitur is certainly found in *Uncle Vanya*. Maria, who is continually focused on her political pamphlets often inserts a random remark into conversation, as in the first act when she looks up from her reading and says aloud to a confused Telegin: “Pavel Alekseyevich . . . Why did we ever trust him?” (26). And Telegin himself, often adds in non-sequiturs. For instance in the first act, he comments offhandedly to Elena “Do you sweat much yourself?” after she remarks that the sun is about to come out (20). In these cases, it is as Vladimir Katev asserts, “a comic effect is most often the result of a simple confrontation or collision” between “different conceptions of the world” (42). We find humor in the little incongruities of daily life. There is a comic effect in juxtaposition; Maria, who devotes herself to tired political figures is contrasted with Telegin who worries sincerely about the heat, and Elena who comments on the weather out of pure boredom.

Chekhov’s characters also create comedy in their surprising behavior. Pitcher writes, “Chekhov the writer-observer . . . was especially attracted to the odd and incongruous” (89). In *The Cherry Orchard* there are many wonderful examples of the humor of incongruity. Pitcher highlights the comedy inherent just in the name of Simeonov-Pishchik – the “ordinary, respectable” Simeonov is combined with the “absurd” Pishchik, a word that means “squeaker” (101). There is also the silliness of

Epikhodov's happy retelling of waking up one morning to find a spider sitting on his chest. Or, the hilarious image of the governess, Charlotta, holding a shotgun and munching on a cucumber that she has pulled out of her pocket (Pitcher 101). This type of incongruity is also found at moments in *Uncle Vanya*. Vanya himself points it out when Serebryakov returns from a walk on a warm day wearing an "Overcoat, galoshes, gloves, [and] a scarf" (4). We laugh at the ridiculousness of such an inappropriate choice of clothing.

Certainly, Chekhov balances these purely comedic moments with moments that are edged in sorrow. As Pitcher puts it, these are moments in which "the serious and the absurd are daringly juxtaposed" (101). In *Vanya*, this ironic contrast appears often throughout the play. In act two, when Sonya confesses to Elena that she loves Astrov, Sonya becomes giddy with happiness at the mere thought of him. Elena, meanwhile, thinks about her own passionless marriage and becomes upset. In a striking moment of contrast, Elena says "You are looking at a very, very unhappy woman. And you're laughing at me." Through her giggles, Sonya replies "No, no, I'm not. I just can't stop — I'm just so happy, Elena" (47-8). It is oddly funny to see Sonya feel so giddy while Elena feels despair. But Sonya's laughter and Elena's sadness also strike the audience as ironic for we know that Sonya is not loved by Astrov while Elena is. Another such darkly comic moment occurs in act three, after the Professor has announced his decision to sell the estate. Vanya, raging against the Professor and in a fit of despair, turns to his mother for some support. But Maria can only say placatingly "Just do whatever Alexander proposes" (66). Vanya has spent the entire play complaining about the Professor's inflated sense of authority, and Maria's comment, meant to resolve the situation, suggests that the Professor should be the ultimate authority for Vanya. It is the worst possible thing to say in that moment, and it therefore succeeds only in driving

Vanya further into despair. Here again there is a tension between the comedic and the dramatic. Though we understand Vanya's suffering, we also laugh because we recognize his frustration.

Perhaps the most darkly comedic moment in the play is Vanya's misfired gunshot in the third act. It is an action of extreme desperation – Vanya cannot find any other outlet for his enormous frustration – and yet it ultimately fails. It is his attempt to claim some kind of power and control, but Vanya does not succeed. After his second shot he stands stunned, and asks to the room in general, “Did I get him? Did I miss? Oh for God's sake, how could I miss again —” (68). In this moment, Vanya's incredulousness becomes funny. It is incredible how much frustration has built up inside him, only to explode outwards in a botched attempt to do something drastic. The question arises – why does Vanya miss? Was it just poor luck, or, as many critics have suggested, was it a subconscious choice to aim badly, because he is ultimately incapable of committing such an extreme act? In my mind, there is greater psychological truth as well as comic potential in the latter option. As Vera Gottlieb writes, “the ‘comedy’ lies in the disparity between aspiration and reality, or desire and fulfillment. In most cases there is little to stop the characters from doing what they want – except themselves” (231). Gottlieb explains that we laugh when we recognize that the characters are partially to blame for their own unhappiness. She goes on to say, “it is the *fear of life* which [Chekhov] exposes, and presents as ‘comic’ in that the cure potentially lies in our own hands” (Gottlieb 231). With this point of view, Vanya's action can be seen as a darkly comic expression of his inability to claim control over his life. His despair is tragic, but the same time we recognize the irony of his missed shots.

So Chekhov's humor does indeed come from his characters. We laugh at their behavior, yet our laughter does not imply judgment. Chekhov is able to write in a way

that both provokes laughter and evokes empathy – “he can present his people in their simplicity on a stage and let life itself do the mocking” (Rexroth 45). Yes, we laugh at Serebryakov’s pompousness, but we also see that underneath, he worries he has wasted his life. And we laugh at Telegin’s odd, misplaced comments, but we also see that deep down, he too wants to be respected and taken seriously. The humor arises as we first see the ridiculous way in which these characters fool themselves, and then realize that we can be equally as deluded. It is the laughter of recognition and acknowledgment. As Chekhov famously wrote in a letter about his plays, “I shall continue to say to people again and again: ‘Please understand that your life is bad and dreary!’ — What is there to cry about in this?” (qtd. in Gottlieb 231). With this statement he implies that while life may seem “bad and dreary” there is no reason things cannot change if we stop feeling sorry for ourselves and take control of our fates. Chekhov’s comedy, therefore, is “restorative,” for the objectivity and detachment which laughter may produce could inoculate us against such human diseases as pomposity, hypocrisy, self-centeredness, laziness, *or* – worst of all – wasting life” (Gottlieb 228). Chekhov gives us the comedy of life so we may be able to look at our own lives, and recognize what holds us back. Laughter, then, is a hopeful act, for it acknowledges that there is another way to live. To respect Chekhov’s spirit of comedy, means simply staying true to the spirit of realism. I, as a director, must find and heighten the oppositions that are already present in the actions and emotions of the characters.

### **Acting Challenges that Chekhov Presents**

Chekhov is known for his realism, and for the psychological complexity of his characters. His plays move away from theatrical convention, and ask instead that daily

life be realistically depicted onstage. Chekhov's work demands that the actor find a way to live his or her character truthfully in front of an audience. So how can this be achieved? From Stanislavski's original method to the philosophies of modern day directors and actors, many have devised their own systems for approaching Chekhov's plays. I have examined several of these artists' methods in an attempt to gain insight into the specific challenges of acting Chekhov.

Stanislavski was the first famous interpreter of Chekhov's work. He began directing and appearing in Chekhov's plays during the playwright's own lifetime, and before Stanislavski himself had invented his "system" of acting. Stanislavski felt very strongly that Chekhov's work demanded a kind of acting that evoked inner truth. He asserted that it is incorrect "to try to *act*, to '*present*' the characters. [The actor] must *be* – that is, *you must live, exist*, following the deep, inner, spiritual line of development" (qtd. in Allen 47). To be successful in portraying Chekhov's characters, Stanislavski felt that the actor must truly live onstage, and experience all of the emotions that the character experiences. The actor should not, as was the convention of the time, *demonstrate* the inner life of a character with physical gesture.

To achieve the level of truth he desired, Stanislavski first suggested that the actor start from external manifestations of life to get to internal truth (Allen 53). Creating the external life included evoking realism in the onstage environment – sets, props, sound effects, and costumes – so that the actors could feel as if they were really living in the world of the play. In addition, Stanislavski occasionally had the actors turn their backs on the audience (a completely unconventional and bold move for his time), to help the actors focus on the action onstage (Allen 49). Another external way to access the emotional life of a character was to create stage business for the actor. Stanislavski would "score" the roles for the actors, mapping out what they should be doing at each



moment, whether straightening a tie, combing a beard, knitting, or preparing tea (Allen 51). All of these physical actions helped create a sense of “living” the role in the moment.

When Stanislavski later began to develop his now widely-known and practiced method of acting, it was strongly influenced by Chekhov’s work (Allen 47). After years of working with the plays, Stanislavski revised his approach to begin with internal truth and work outwards to external characteristics. Stanislavski said that the truth in Chekhov’s plays “is hidden behind the lines, in the pauses, in the looks of the actors, in the emanation of their inner feelings” (qtd. in Allen 55). He began to see the subtext as an important component of performance. And, rather than plotting a map of physical actions, Stanislavski began to plot out a character’s internal thoughts (Allen 59). In so doing, he encouraged the actors to follow a logical train of thought – to live in the minds of their characters.

In 1906 Stanislavski finally codified his “system” of acting, in which the actors were required to break down every scene into units of action and character motivation (Allen 62). The system established a “superobjective,” which functions as a “through-line” for the actor to follow throughout the play. Along the way, there are “concrete actions” that the character performs in a continual effort to achieve his or her objective (Allen 62). Finally, in his mature years as a director, Stanislavski began to encourage his actors to practice “restraint” in performing Chekhov’s characters, saying “the more restrained this scene is, the more powerful and nervous it will be” (qtd. in Allen 63). Stanislavski asserted that the full emotional truth of a scene would actually come out more strongly if the actor attempted to hold back his feelings. In the end, though Stanislavski gradually revised his method, he always pushed his actors towards finding

an inner life when performing Chekhov's work. All of his tactics are valid ways of approaching the material, used ultimately in an effort to create truth onstage.

Modern day director Nikos Psacharopoulos, founder of the Williamstown Theatre Festival and an experienced interpreter of Chekhov's work, had goals similar to those of Stanislavski. Nikos directed Chekhov by asking his actors to "lead a life" onstage (qtd. in Hackett 247). In Jean Hackett's book, *The Actor's Chekhov*, she records Nikos' work on the second act of *Uncle Vanya* with a class of actors. Nikos began by instructing his actors to throw away expectation. In the scene between Elena and Serebryakov at the opening of the act, Nikos felt it was wrong for Serebryakov to begin with disgust, and Elena to begin by ignoring him. This was not interesting, Nikos said, because the actors were anticipating the problem of the scene (Hackett 246). Nikos explained to his students, "it is not that these people's needs are different, it is that the world has changed for them . . . it is the world, not the two of you, that breaks you apart" (qtd. in Hackett 246). Therefore, the actors should not create a problem by pursuing opposing objectives. Instead, they should discover the problem *through* the scene. Nikos instructed his actors never to come onstage with the intent to solve a problem. When Sonya enters into the Elena-Serebryakov scene, for instance, Nikos said she should enter to turn on a light, or blow out a candle, or arrange something, and let the problem develop out of the circumstances of life (Hackett 247). For Nikos, anticipating or prematurely constructing a problem prevents actors from truly living their characters onstage.

In his directing, Nikos looked for ways to get his actors to be spontaneous. "The best acting," he said, "comes from finding and heightening those particular circumstances that allow you to be thrown off" (qtd. in Hackett 250). For Nikos, one way to access this spontaneity was to rehearse the scenes of a Chekhov play out of

order. He remembers that he first tried this tactic for his production of *The Three Sisters* in an attempt to get his actors to “play little moments here and there, to just assume that there are all these little pieces of life that exist all on their own” (qtd. in Hackett 254). By disrupting the order of things, he forced each moment of the play to have a life of its own, regardless of its place in the script. By taking away the “judgment about what it means in the overall scheme of the play,” Nikos said he got his actors to behave in “a much more human way” onstage (qtd. in Hackett 524). When they could no longer think of each scene in the play as a means to get to an end, Nikos’ actors were able to think just of the present moment.

Nikos also asked his actors to let the text become action. For an audience, just watching two people sitting and talking was boring. The scene would be about a conversation. But if the actors activated the text, the scene would come to life. For instance, when Elena says to Sonya, “Let’s become friends,” Nikos asked his actors to “Let it play not as text but in touching each other, embracing, dancing, sitting on the floor, throwing a couple of pillows at each other . . . And then the lines will come out fully.” (qtd. in Hackett 264). If the actors physically expressed the actions they were taking to achieve their objectives, the scene would become about “two women hugging each other” (qtd. in Hackett 264). And this was Nikos’ goal – he didn’t want an audience to remember specific lines, only actions. Similarly, in Astrov’s scene with Elena, Nikos argued that talking about the maps should become a direct way for Astrov to say he loves her. Nikos explained to the actor playing Astrov that dealing with the maps was simply a physical expression of what was really going on, “it is a direct way of dealing energetically with loving her . . . so that it becomes a kind of love-making through another medium” (qtd. in Hackett 265). Again, Nikos encouraged his actors to find a way to activate the text. By giving physical expression to what was going on

emotionally, the actors were able to achieve the spontaneity Nikos desired and bring the scenes to life.

Even for experienced actors, tackling Chekhov's work presents a number of challenges. In interviews, several well-respected actors talked about what they struggled with in acting Chekhov, and how they dealt with the difficulties. Actress Olympia Dukakis explained that she was "too reverential with Chekhov at the beginning" (qtd. in Hackett 51). Perhaps because of Chekhov's literary stature, she approached the work thinking that there was a set way it had to be done, and a strictly defined character already set out for her. But Dukakis was able to gain much more freedom when she realized that the text simply provided a kind of "palette" to be painted with that was "so varied, so rich" that she had the opportunity to experiment with it, and make it her own (qtd. in Hackett 51). For actor Ian McKellen, the challenge was not to be judgmental in his portrayal of a characters. He explained, "I'm always trying not to take an attitude, but to delve into all the details of what the man is, and what he says he is, *and* what other people say about him – and [present] *that* as clearly as possible" (qtd. in McKellen 128). Rather than deciding from an impression what kind of person a character is, McKellen goes to the script and gleans the information from what Chekhov himself gives in the text. And McKellen never thinks of his characters as comical, for he believes that "to go out and try to get a laugh from Chekhov *reduces* Chekhov" (qtd. in McKellen 128). Rather, he goes into each role taking himself as the character seriously, and allows the humor to come out of what is already in the script. Actor Louis Zorich said for him, the challenge is to avoid playing the characters as bored. While Chekhov's characters are often stuck in idleness, they are not bored, Zorich insists, "all these characters want something!" (qtd. in Hackett 60). And, Zorich says, "The feelings are here! [Rubs his hands over his arms and chest.]

They [the characters] don't hide them" (qtd. in Hackett 60). So Zorich combats the tendency play a state of boredom by always playing towards an objective, and remembering that the emotions can constantly be on the surface.

I, myself, was able to observe Chicago-area director Mark Lococo rehearsing his production of *Uncle Vanya* at Apple Tree Theatre in the summer of 2004. Lococo felt that in Chekhov's script multiple layers of meaning existed for the actors to dive into. So, he approached the work by looking at one layer at a time. He would discuss a scene with the actors and then let them run it through without stopping. He gave them one aspect of a scene to think about for the run-through, but also allowed them freedom to discover something new and act upon that in the moment. For instance, in the act three scene between Astrov and Elena, Lococo would ask Elena to run it first with the intention of discovering Astrov's feelings for Sonya. Lococo would then let her discover that she is also testing her own attraction to Astrov. Or, in the act two scene between Serebryakov and Elena, Lococo would first ask the Professor to play his desire for pity from Elena. Lococo would then allow the Professor to realize that he is also struggling to combat his fear of uselessness.

Lococo's technique of layering enabled the actors to feel the flow of a scene, and work through it instinctively, without carrying too many specific directions in their heads at once. Then, after the scene was done, Lococo would point out what he saw, saying "This is what you did . . . Here is what I liked . . . Here is what I discovered watching you . . ." He enabled the actors to discover the elements of a scene progressively – by simply thinking about one aspect, another would often emerge in the moment. And Lococo allowed each element to be discovered organically. Rather than dictating what it was he wanted to see and asking the actors to find that, he allowed each actor to try the scene for themselves and then told them what he saw. In this way,

Lococo's actors always understood each new aspect of a scene because they had discovered it personally. They would then be prepared to add on another layer in the next run-through, and continue to deepen the scene.

In the work of each of these directors and actors, acting Chekhov is a process of finding sincerity and truth of emotion. It is apparent that there is no one way to reach this goal, rather each artist has his or her own method of accessing the place where spontaneity occurs and layers of a scene are discovered. The realism inherent in Chekhov's work requires the actor to find a way to replicate life onstage. For these artists, this means being fully committed in a scene and allowing every moment to happen naturally.

### **An Argument for Gender-Blind Casting**

In the earlier concept section, I presented my idea for using gender-blind casting in my production of *Uncle Vanya* as a tool for accessing the realism and relatability of Chekhov's characters. While the cast breakdown in the script is four men and four women, I am interested in opening up all roles to all actors. In other words, I will not limit any role by considering only men, or only women, to play it. I am choosing to do this type of casting partially for practical reasons. There is a large ratio of women to men in our theatre department at Connecticut College, and I do not want to limit the number or size of roles for women, as there are so many capable actresses on this campus. At the same time, it is important to me to keep opportunities open for the men we have as well. Therefore, casting without regard for the actor's gender will give equal opportunity to women and men in considering who is the best actor for each role. But how does the idea of an actor playing a character of the opposite gender work

practically onstage? Can an actor realistically evoke the characteristics of a gender that is not his or her own? And will an audience really believe a cross-gender performance in a Chekhov play?

I first developed an enthusiasm for cross-gender performance as an actor looking at a scene from Noel Coward's play *Private Lives*. In class, I was asked to play the husband, Elyot, opposite another woman playing Sybil in the opening scene of the play. The two characters are newlyweds staying at a hotel on their honeymoon, and in the scene Sybil reveals her jealousy of Elyot's first wife while Elyot serenely tries to brush Sybil off. At first, it was a challenge for me to see myself as Elyot, a typically "masculine" man opposite the very "feminine" Sybil, especially since my image of the character did not match my own body type at all. I was several inches shorter than the actress playing Sybil, and did not feel very "manly" next to her. However, I dove into the scene, and with my teacher's encouragement did not worry about playing "a man," but rather focused solely on my objective. After a short time working on the scene, I realized I had forgotten that I was playing a character of a different gender – playing Elyot became just like playing any other character. Like any role, I had to put myself into the given circumstances and *be* that person onstage. I believe my work on that role is one of the most valuable things I have done in my training as an actor. It allowed me to discover a flexibility I didn't realize I had, which not only gave me confidence, but also gave me the tools to advance and expand my range. I discovered that an actor has within him or herself the capability of truthfully portraying an opposite gender onstage.

Feminist theorist Judith Butler argues that, in fact, gender itself is not an inherent identity, but rather a physical behavior that is performed. In her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," Butler presents her theory of gender performativity, which explains that none of the characteristics that we define as "gender" are natural,

rather they are all learned and adopted. For Butler, gender is “an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (519). Therefore, what we see and read as gender is simply a collection of gestures and movements that are collectively understood to mean “masculine” or “feminine.” Butler says “One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body” (521). What defines a woman’s body as “woman” is the way in which she uses it (the same applies for a man). And, the way a woman uses her body is not natural or instinctual, but learned from society. So, for instance, women take shorter strides, sit with their legs crossed, and stand with their legs closer together than men, simply because they have been subconsciously taught to move in this way. While it seems natural because it is enacted from an early age, it is really just learned. The idea applies to all “gendered” behavior for both women and men. Our bodies are not made so differently that we cannot move in the way a person of the opposite gender moves. For the actor, Butler’s theory is key to understanding how one can execute a truthful cross-gender performance onstage. Gender is simply a behavior, and therefore it is always performed, even in daily life.

Actors *can* evoke gender characteristics that are not their own in the same way that actors can play any role which is removed from their personal experience. In her essay, “‘Not...But’ / ‘Not-Not-Me’: Musings on Cross-Gender Performance,” Rhonda Blair asserts, “An actor playing the ‘other’ gender, whatever the theatrical style, faces the same challenges as when playing any role, for any prescribed role is to some degree an Other, a not-me” (298). All that cross-gender performance requires is the ability to imagine ourselves into given circumstances that are not our own (“not-me”) – something we as actors do every time we perform. As Blair explains, “Acting is typically grounded in finding some common point of identification with a character” (297). While this “point of identification” could theoretically be gender in a



traditionally-cast performance, sharing a gender is by no means the only way into a character. In fact, I would argue that identification is much more effective if it is an emotional connection. Everyone understands, for instance, the feelings of jealousy, longing, despair, and hope. In cross-gender casting, these points of identification can still be used.

This is not to say, however, that identifying with a character's emotional state is all that is needed for a cross-gender performance. The actor must also find a way into the character's body. Like any performance in which an actor adopts a physicality that is not his or her own, it may be natural to begin with stereotyping. And, contrary to instinct for those performing in the style of realism, beginning with stereotype is not necessarily wrong. In her essay on "Stereotype," director Anne Bogart argues that in acting, the actor is constantly required to reinvent normal, everyday behavior to put on the stage. To perform recognizable behavior effectively, the actor must often begin with stereotype, and "'put a fire' under these clichés in order to bring them to life" (Bogart 96). So, rather than avoiding stereotype, Bogart says, the actor should go wholeheartedly into it, and in so doing, he or she will soon discover something personal and real instead. Blair agrees, explaining, "a stereotype provides a starting point for the director and actor to engage a character and grapple with a psychophysical stew of identification in order to uncover the not-not-me" (299). Beginning with a basic impression of a character provides the jumping-off point needed for the actor to go deeper and begin to find the "not-not-me," or the truth inside.

How does cross-gender casting work with Chekhov's realism? Some argue that cross-gender performance cannot work for realism because they believe it necessitates a heightened style of performance. I do not think this is true. For me, what takes away from realism is casting according to "type." An actor who is cast in a part that is too

similar to him or herself encourages that actor to give a surface-level, easy performance. Acting according to type may feel comfortable because it is “based on clinging to a limited sense of who-I-am and, sometimes more important, who-I-am-not” (Blair 297). The key word here is “limited.” The actor playing his “type” will not feel the need to dig as deep into a character, because that “type” comes so naturally. So casting against “type” requires the actor to dig deeper, and find something that he or she can identify with, despite all of the apparent differences. Cross-gender casting, therefore, asks the actor to find a way to relate to a character, who, on the surface, may seem far removed from him or herself. It is perfect for realism, because it requires actors to tackle characters outside their “types,” and find *themselves* in that other person. When an actor is able to bring an element of self into a character, realism is most successful.

How might cross-gender performance work for an audience watching *Uncle Vanya*? I believe cross-gender performance can be eye-opening for those watching. When the audience first recognizes that a character is being played by an actor of the opposite gender it may, for a moment, seem incongruous. At the same time, audiences are willing to accept any convention onstage if it is played with commitment and truth. So, watching a woman play a man, or visa-versa, does not undermine the meaning of the text. Chekhov’s realism comes through in the characters’ motivations and emotions, and does not depend on a literal representation of their physical appearances. But the goal is not to get the audience to forget about the physical incongruity between actor and character. Rather, the disparity between an actor’s appearance and behavior will serve as a visual reminder that the way we see ourselves is never the way we appear to others. This is a sentiment particularly appropriate for the characters in *Uncle Vanya*, who are never able to truly see themselves the way others see them.

Finally, the realism in Chekhov is based on psychological truth, which I believe any capable actor can understand and access. Chekhov deals with widely identifiable fears, desires, and longings, and understanding them is not dependent upon a shared gender. An American actor playing a person living in 19th century Russia may feel distanced at first, but the actor will soon discover that Chekhov's people are really not so different from us at all. The same occurs for the audience watching a cross-gender performance. It is a fresh perspective that allows the audience to feel empathy for the characters as humans, rather than seeing them simply as types. Ultimately, gender-blind casting places emphasis on the *humanity* of the characters. This emphasis is particularly appropriate for Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, for it allows the audience to both recognize ourselves in these characters, and examine our own lives after seeing their fears and longings.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **The Process and Product of *Uncle Vanya*: A Retrospective Analysis**

After the completion of my production of *Uncle Vanya*, this chapter looks back at the process to evaluate the successes, both artistic and personal, of the project. I will look at how the process evolved from the conceptual phase through to the final production, and consider how the ideas translated to the stage. I acknowledge that, as the director, my perspective is integrally tied up in the process, and therefore privileged in many ways and limited in others. So, after the production closed, I interviewed people who were involved in this project about their experiences, from the actors and designers, to advisers and audience members. I will include their opinions in this chapter to broaden the scope of my analysis.

#### **The Design Process**

I began working actively on the design process at the start of the fall semester. I had the good fortune to be able to collaborate with Tim Golebiewski, the set designer, from this early point in the process, and given the luxury of time our discussions began purely conceptually and evolved gradually. New to the process of collaborating with a

designer, I was determined not to stifle his ideas by dictating specific requirements. So, in our preliminary talks, I gave Tim some images that I associated with *Uncle Vanya* which I hoped would be useful in communicating my ideas about the play. The image that proved most important to us was a copy of George Frederic Watts' painting entitled *Hope*, which depicts a harpist sitting on top of the world and bowing her head in sorrow, in clear opposition to the sentiment of the title. I used this painting to communicate my idea about the contradictions in the play, and my sense of hope rising through in spite of the characters' despair.

Tim found the *Hope* image useful in our talks "because it had a color, it had a texture, and it had a feeling," all of which could easily translate into elements of design (Golebiewski). Using the ideas that the painting generated as a jumping off point, Tim and I focused our discussions around the idea of oppositions. We began with the idea of indoor versus outdoor space, and of an estate that was both elegant and decaying. We also brainstormed on the inclusion and gradual separation of the audience from the world onstage. As Tim recalled, I came in "with ideas that were specific in intent, but not necessarily specific in structure" which was useful for him because it allowed him the freedom to generate a variety of very different designs and discover what worked. Once we narrowed in on an idea we liked, explained Tim, "it was always a process of refinement and finding new ways to become more specific" (Golebiewski).

Another positive component of the set design process was that we were not only able to collaborate on what the space would look like, but also how it would be used. When we focused in on the idea of constricting space, moving from an open outdoor world into a more and more confining indoor world, Tim was very willing to discuss the opportunities and challenges that each act would provide for actors' playing space. He also gave ample thought to the ease of furniture shifts between acts, because we

wanted to keep a sense of the flow of time as continuous as possible. This idea was later picked up in the lighting design process. In an effort to minimize the sense of stopping between each act for transitions, lighting designer Shanti Freundlich and I worked to create a transition light that never went completely dark or stayed still, but instead gradually faded from the light of one act into another.

The design process for lights began much further into the production process, once both the conceptual and practical ideas for the set had already been solidified. As a result, the lighting was able to enhance the conceptual frame that had already been laid out. In talking to the lighting designer, partially from lack of experience and partially because of the success of the set design process, I began with the same technique of giving only abstract ideas to communicate what I was looking for. I talked about the sense of constricting space and of being surrounded by nature. Though these ideas were interesting to Shanti, it was ultimately more useful in the design process to talk about specific qualities of light as related to the emotional dynamic of a character or scene.

Shanti used light shifts quite effectively to mark moments when the dynamics of a scene changed. Warm lighting generally corresponded to a more communal feeling while cool light suggested isolation. For instance, Shanti began a slow fade of cooler light to mark the intrusion of the Professor and Elena in act one. In acts two and three the light became warmer when more people entered the space, and cooled down as characters exited. And in act three a gradual intensifying of warm light supported the explosion of tension and anger leading up to the gunshot. Finally in act four, the light slowly faded as characters left the stage until it had narrowed in so far that it isolated Vanya and Sonya in a pool of candlelight for the final moment. Though subtle enough to remain realistic and never become distracting, the sense of a transition into dimmer

things over the course of the acts supported the arc of the play, and was noticeable to student audiences (Golebiewski).

My preliminary discussion about costumes with designer Sabrina Notarfrancisco focused similarly on the conceptual over the practical. Our first meeting centered around description of character traits and relationships. Sabrina then took these abstract qualities and translated them into fabrics and styles of clothing, so that the costumes would be reflective of character. The costumes were often designed in opposition to each other. Sabrina described her process, saying for Sonya, Maria, and Marina she “went for more sturdy fabrics,” while for Elena “it was all about being fluffy and light and airy and delicate and totally impractical” (Notarfrancisco). Similarly, Serebryakov and Astrov, the more “serious” and “cerebral” characters “traditionally wore the darker more somber colors,” while Vanya wore tan linen suits to contrast their rationality with his “more emotionally based, more impulsive, more regretful” nature. Even the linen was able to be reflective of Vanya’s character. As Sabrina describes, “it gave him that look of [being] unkempt, trying to have control but it’s not possible... even his suit is made out of an impossible fabric” (Notarfrancisco). In the process of creating costumes that enhanced a sense of character, Sabrina was also able to talk to the actors individually about their characters, which she found useful and rewarding.

Looking back at the final product, I found the designs both beautiful and symbolic of some of the larger themes of the play. I thought the set succeeded wonderfully in conveying a sense of gradually constricting space from outdoors to indoors. In my conversation with Tim, he agreed, saying “We were very clear on the sense of being trapped or being free in a natural world or in a confined space. I think we were able to create a visual metaphor very strongly and effectively” (Golebiewski). The sense of enclosing, he added, “was my favorite thing about the design.” He only

regretted that the impression we created of building up the walls in the fourth act left out the side seating to a large degree. The sense of progression from open to enclosed was also echoed in the color palette of the costumes. Sabrina explained, the clothes began with “a lighter and airier palette in the beginning and then got progressively darker” as the play went on (Notarfrancisco). The costumes were also successful in visually representing relationships. They emphasized contrasts like “the lightness of Elena versus the darkness of Astrof” or the modern frivolousness of Elena versus the traditional stodginess of Serebryakov (Notarfrancisco).

For Tim, there were several memorable parts of the production in which the set worked visually to enhance the moment onstage. In act two, for instance, he recalls that looking at the dining room table “I had this image of sedentary rock – this horizontal place onstage and a character that’s primarily at rest there while things are happening around them” (Golebiewski). The table became a metaphor for the characters’ lives. And, in the final moment, when the window moved all the way forward, Tim recalled, “you could almost feel the audience lean back in their seats as this thing is coming at them.” It worked, he thought “as a metaphor... both as a barrier and then later... [in] that final move you have this feeling of fate coming at you inexorably” (Golebiewski). Supported by lighting and sound choices, the final move of the window was able to become a symbolic closing off of the characters’ space. In all, Tim thought it was a notably strong design package, for all of the elements “worked really nicely together in conveying time, place, and mood” (Golebiewski). The set created the environments, the costumes specified the sense of culture and time period, and the lights and sound worked to create an atmosphere in which to locate the characters.



## Casting

As I had been warned by my adviser, Leah Lowe, both the joy and the challenge of directing is that the play you imagine in your head is never the play you end up creating. It cannot stay the same from conception to production, because the process is always informed and changed by your resources. Theatre is a collaborative art form, and every person involved in the process of creating a performance brings a part of him or herself to the play. So, as more people are brought into the process, the play necessarily becomes something new. I knew this as I approached the audition process, and so to prepare for casting the piece I focused on remaining as open as possible. I was determined to minimize any preconceived notion I might have of what a character should look like, especially given my desire to cast the play in a gender-blind fashion. Instead, I set out to look for what I determined to be the essential traits of each character. These traits were a mixture of abstract qualities that I hoped the right actor for each part would be able to embody, and technical skills that I thought a particular part would require. For Vanya, for instance, my list said that the actor must possess “the ability to deeply question self; a dry, self-deprecating humor; warmth; and a physical freedom onstage.” For Astrov, who is “on the brink of alcoholism,” I wrote he must be “believably on the edge of darkness,” Sonya must “know what it feels like to be plain, but not really be,” and Serebryakov must have “pompous self-importance, that masks self-doubt underneath” and also be “able to play age.” All of the essential qualities I specified were gender-neutral.

With this ambitious list, I chose callback scenes that I hoped would give the actors an opportunity to showcase some of the essential qualities of the characters. After the first round of auditions, as expected, I found myself with a large talent pool

but not many men. I called back most of the actors I was interested in for multiple roles, including many women for male roles. I ended up, however, calling back the men for only male roles. Though I was not totally second-guessing my idea of gender-blind casting, I ultimately felt that the dynamic between Sonya and Elena would be changed too drastically if I were to cast any of the men in those roles. And I had more than enough possibilities for those characters among the women who auditioned. Also, I felt that the men I had were better suited to play the characters of Astrov and Serebryakov than they were to play Maria or Marina. On the other hand, the character of Vanya did not seem at all compromised by having female actors read the part. His character made sense regardless of the actor's gender, because it depended mostly on a sense of *not* belonging, instead of relating to another character. I was simply faced with deciding which actor's version of the role was best suited for the part, regardless of gender.

In the callbacks I looked for actors who not only showed some degree of the essential qualities I had specified for each character, but also who showed a facility with the material. I watched for those actors who found some sense of change for their character from the beginning of a scene to the end. I often gave actors simple directions and asked them to do a scene again, to see how well they incorporated feedback. At the end of the day I found that I had an unexpected number of possibilities to choose from. I was also pleasantly surprised by what some actors brought to the audition that altered my perception of what a character needed. I discovered that Astrov, for example, needed an actor with a great facility for language, as the part required the delivery of many long, thoughtful speeches. Ben Fisher, the actor whom I finally cast, has this ease with language, though I did not initially see in him the sense of "easy charm" that I had imagined for the character. Ben brought something else to Astrov – an endearing sort

of nerdiness that came from self-deprecation – and I ended up liking his interpretation better than my original conception.

In the end, the cast I chose was made up of actors whose skills were such that I felt each could have played multiple parts. The roles I chose for them, however, were based on the essential qualities that I had defined for myself, and I think they served me well. I was confident in my choices from the start, and fortunate to be able to work with such an intelligent and talented group of people.

### **The Rehearsal Process**

Going into the rehearsals I felt like my biggest challenge was knowing how much to give the actors in each phase of the process. I knew that it would be overwhelming and unhelpful, even detrimental, to dictate too much early on. Not only would it stifle their senses of creative freedom, and their abilities to own their parts, it would, I felt, result in the loss of a lot of richness in the scenes. I knew that if the director gives her actors too much at once, the essential early stages of development and discovery are glossed over. On the other hand, I had to be organized enough to get the production on its feet in four weeks, so we didn't have the luxury of extra time. To help myself move gradually but stay on task, I defined specific goals for each rehearsal. This way, each night had room for discovery within a focused framework.

During the first part of the rehearsal process, my goals for each night were often simply to block a portion of the play. I would give the actors a framework to begin working in and often let them play within that scheme and follow their impulses to move. I would try to identify for them how I saw their sense of space relating to the relationship or the feeling of a moment. If it felt like an intimate scene, for example, I

would place the actors in close proximity to each other, even tell them to hold hands, and then ask them to think about how it felt to be so close to someone they loved or hated. Or, if it was an scene full of anger I would prevent the actors from getting too close to each other, and sometimes even from looking at each other, to emphasize how I thought the emotional dynamic would affect their movement.

Giving the actors a general framework to improvise in yielded much usable blocking, because it came from their natural impulses to advance or retreat in relation to their scene partners. I was able to build upon most of what they did organically, and tweak it only for aesthetic pleasure or technical necessity. And this freedom of movement seemed to be beneficial for the actors as well. When asked for feedback on the process, one anonymous actor commented that this style of blocking “made me feel like I was really contributing artistically and owning my part,” while another agreed that it “allowed room for cast input and collaboration” (Anonymous survey)<sup>4</sup>. So, though I would often specify blocking as my goal for a rehearsal, the process of setting movement came to involve significant collaboration and was centrally about physically representing the relationship or the conflict of a scene. By letting it be a process of discovery and refinement, it ended up contributing to character development as well.

Throughout the rehearsal process I used improvisational warm-ups and exercises as ways to tackle many different challenges of acting Chekhov. From the beginning, building a group bond was greatly important to me, because of the ensemble-based nature of the play. Each character is largely responsible for creating a

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<sup>4</sup> In order to receive honest feedback on the rehearsal process from the actors, I worked with my adviser, Leah Lowe, to set up an anonymous survey. I composed three general questions about the process that were sent via email to the cast members. Leah then collected their responses and compiled them into one document before passing them on to me. In my list of works cited I refer to these responses as “Anonymous survey of cast members.”

sense of the world of the play, and so every character must always inhabit the same world onstage. To accomplish this, the cast must not only be tuned into one another, they must also trust one another. For this reason, I spent a good portion of the beginning of rehearsal every day leading collective warm-ups and improvisations. The actors indicated that this was ultimately beneficial, and helped them to “feel more unified as a cast” (Anonymous survey). Beyond that, the group work even seemed to establish a sense of safety. As one actor explained, “in order to tap into the intense emotions required, there needed to be that level of comfort with one another. If there had been any less attention given to building those bonds, I believe there would have been less of a performance” (Anonymous survey). In dealing with emotionally intense material, the environment of open experimentation and the level of trust that the group warm-ups created turned out to be quite necessary.

When I brought in structured improvisations, I was always clear on the goal of each exercise as it related to developing the play. By setting up a base, I hoped to give the actors a defined world in which to play and experiment. Early on in the process, the improvises were focused on characterization and relationship-building. I asked for out-of-rehearsal work such as assigning the actors to bring in a piece of music that related to their characters, as well as in-rehearsal work such as brainstorming the characters’ fears and desires. In these exercises I hoped not only to allow the actors to deepen their sense of character, but also to strengthen their connections to their roles. In a period play like this one in which the characters’ lives can initially seem so removed from the experiences of a modern American college student, I felt it was necessary to find clear points of identification.

Other improvises I lead focused on the world of the play, the environment, and the sense of community onstage. One of these exercises involved the challenge of creating

the “fabric” of the world onstage by requiring actors to enter one by one and work together to create a shared space. To be successful, they always had to be acutely attuned to what their fellow actors were doing. Another successful experiment was a structured improv of the moment of “intrusion” in act one. It put specific focus on how the interactions of the characters that live on the estate changed from before the Professor and Elena entered the scene to after the couple had arrived. These were two of the more successful improvs that we did, because they related directly to a scene or a moment in the play and contributed to the creation of a richer group dynamic.

As I became more comfortable in the rehearsal process, I learned to adapt my style of direction to different actors depending on what each best responded to. For instance, I was able to bring Rosa Gilmore (Elena)’s performance out by stopping her in the midst of a scene and asking her to redo a beat and go further in the moment. For Kate Michaud (Vanya), on the other hand, I knew that when I gave a direction she would take time to let the idea settle and come back the next day to incorporate it into her performance. For all of the actors, I found that making them physicalize their objectives was very effective. I had them jump as high as they could, or push against a wall with all their might, or push against each other’s hands before they started a scene. These exercises allowed them to get the sense of need into their bodies, and thereby be able to carry the scene further.

As rehearsals went on I focused on following a movement back and forth from the general to the specific. I tried to use a process of layering to deepen the scenes. I began by focusing on general, immediately accessible elements of a scene – the central conflict – and once the actors had explored and become comfortable with that aspect, I pushed them to add on another dimension. For instance, in the scene between Astrov and Elena in the third act, when he comes to show her his maps, we looked at the action

in layers. First we ran it through focusing solely on pursuing the surface objectives. For Astrov, it was to impress upon Elena the gravity of the environmental situation. For Elena, it was to find out the truth about Astrov's feelings for Sonya. Once we had a firm grasp on that, I asked the actors to add in the element of attraction. To begin this, I told each actor to be constantly aware of their scene partner's entire body, and notice how it felt different when the other person's body was nearby or far away. They then had to run the scene again, but with this added element of focus. By allowing the actors to lay down a solid base before adding on the next layer, the scenes retained their groundwork and remained strong even when a new element was added. In somewhat unexpected ways, the process of layering also helped me to discover more and more depth in the scenes along with the actors.

The rehearsal process reemphasized to me the importance of specificity. I was consistently careful never to decide exactly what a moment was and then dictate the way I thought it should be. Rather, I asked lots of questions and pointed out what I saw. Always, I found it helpful to give actors specific verbs when I sensed a moment of vagueness. I discovered that the way to lift scenes that seemed flat, or full of too much aimless talk, was to get the actors to pursue a verb more actively. From this realization grew the idea that each character should not be just working *towards* one thing, but also *away* from another. Astrov, for instance was pulling away from the despair of a wasted life and toward the excitement of a passionate affair. Marina was pulling away from the chaos of the modern, routineless household and toward the old world in which everything was clearly and firmly regimented.

About halfway through the process I began to realize that when the actors neglected to pursue their objectives, the play deflated and lost all sense of hope. The characters instead seemed to have given up and resigned themselves to a life without

purpose. To combat this sense of resignation, I encouraged the actors to keep fighting, and never to let go of their quests. When they were fighting the sense of a wasted life became more ironic, because while the characters complained that they were not really living, the audience could see that they were in fact struggling for love, recognition, attention and comfort, and thereby living fully in spite of themselves.

### **The Production and Reception**

Looking back on the final production, I interviewed three professors who were connected to the play in different ways, but who were all, to varying degrees, outside the production process. I spoke to Leah Lowe, professor of theatre and my adviser on this project, Simon Hay, professor of English and a second adviser on the project, and Andrea Lanoux, professor of Slavic Studies and my unofficial adviser on the Russian sensibility. Coming from different disciplines, and having varying levels of familiarity with the play, Leah, Simon, and Andrea were all able to provide a much more objective perspective on my production. I am able to use their feedback to gain a larger impression of how my version of *Uncle Vanya* was received.

I first considered the final outcome of my technique of gender-blind casting. For me, having Vanya played by an actress worked beautifully, and in some unexpected ways. Though I had anticipated needing the time to work with my actress to play a man without stereotype or falsity, Kate Michaud accepted the role so naturally from the beginning that it never became an issue. From the start she was able to be a man, so I simply told her to trust herself, because the audience would accept the convention when she committed to it. From my perspective, watching Kate play Vanya highlighted the difference between Vanya and Astrov in surprising ways. Next to Ben Fisher's



Astrov, Kate's Vanya seemed odder, less attractive, and less powerful. This Vanya didn't have the innate masculine qualities that Astrov carried, and so he seemed less sexual, and less desirable. Next to Astrov, Kate's Vanya had a vulnerability that I loved, because it emphasized his powerlessness with Elena. But her Vanya did not read as "feminine" to me, for he possessed a physical freedom that contrasted with the women of the play. Since the production made no attempt to disguise the fact that Kate is a woman (though it was clear from the costume choices that she was playing a man), Vanya read to me as androgynous, and universal in many ways. From the audience, I could see that this actress could access Vanya's character perfectly well, which told me that though his experiences may be remote from mine, his struggles were not.

Though I had anticipated that my casting decision would be the most controversial part of my production, audiences seemed to accept Kate as Vanya with little resistance. Most surprisingly, in the talk-back with audience members after the opening night performance, the casting choice was not even brought up. It is hard to say whether this represents an attitude of general acceptance, or simply a particularly untalkative audience. And while audience members could not forget that Kate is really a woman, they seemed to be able to see the character as truthful in the world of the play.

For Leah, Simon, and Andrea, the casting choice highlighted different aspects of the play. Andrea, who knew about the casting choice before she saw the production, was still surprised by how it illuminated the universality of the character for her. She explained, "I see this character very much as Everyman, trying to represent the human condition." When Vanya first walked out onstage, Andrea recalled, "I had this sort of eureka 'Ah ha!' moment that I didn't think of before I went to the play. To actually see a woman playing that role I thought, 'Ah well here, this really is Everyman,' because it

looks across that gender divide of the universal masculine to see Every *person* as well” (Lanoux). For Andrea, the casting choice became a visual representation of an archetype. And though she never forgot that it was an actress playing the role, Andrea was able to see the love scenes between Vanya and Elena straight. For Leah, the casting choice made the love scenes stand out, for it “highlighted the impossibility of Vanya’s love for Elena” (Lowe). While Leah did accept that Vanya was a man, the fact that it was an actress playing the role removed the possibility of sexual attraction, and instead “highlighted the gulf between the two.” While it was able to accentuate a hopeless aspect of the love triangle, Leah said, “What [the casting choice] missed, I thought, was a possibility of really drawing quite clearly the parallel between Vanya’s love for Elena and Sonya’s love for Astrov, because they weren’t the same” (Lowe).

For Simon, having Vanya played by a woman drew attention to the role in a way that, initially, he was hesitant about. After seeing a run-through late in the rehearsal process, Simon remembered that, to him, “Vanya came across as somewhat more shrill or hysterical” than he had originally read the character, thinking Vanya as male. Simon commented, “I couldn’t decide at that point whether I thought that was helpful or unhelpful” (Hay). After seeing the final production, however, Simon felt ultimately that the casting choice added to the notion of gender roles in the play. He explained, that having a character that “transgresses” normal gender roles “in ways that make visible the assigned-ness of the gender roles... makes even more visible the quiet stoicism of Sonya, the quiet despair of Elena, and the quiet stoicism of the Nanny” (Hay). By seeing a woman playing a man in the world of the play, the difference between women’s behavior and men’s behavior became more apparent. At the same time, Simon acknowledged, “it was pretty much only the depth of Ben’s [Astrov’s] voice that made him not shrill and hysterical. The character was just as shrill and

hysterical as was Vanya's" (Hay). So, for Simon, the character did read differently because Vanya was in the body of a woman.

Having spent so much time in preparation process thinking conceptually, I was anxious to hear what ended up translating effectively to the stage. In my discussions with Leah, Simon, and Andrea, I asked them to talk about the themes of the play that they felt were highlighted by my production. Each responded that they felt some sense of the move from outdoor to indoor space and the gradual enclosing that happened throughout the play. Simon described his impression of the shift in space, saying in "the opening scenes characters strolled around what space there was much more possessively, aggressively," whereas "by the end it felt like what little movement there was, was just simply people fading off the edge, or moving to a wall and then having to stop because the wall was *there*" (Hay). His sense of the confinement seemed to be from the blocking as well as the design. Leah felt that the design "gave the sense both of the confinement and also of the [world] outside... the possibilities that exist" (Lowe). For her, the omnipresent trees worked as a visual metaphor for some greater potential.

Each also spoke to some degree about the coherence of the world of the play. After working hard in rehearsal to cultivate a sense of the ensemble, and the community onstage, it seemed from the reactions that the result was ultimately successful. Leah commented that the "fabric of the world" was "almost palpable." She said, "for me that sense of these people with interconnected lives was very much there. There was a differentiation among people.... Even for the actors who were less experienced, they seemed to know who they were in this world" (Lowe). On a similar note, Simon spoke about the collective sense of "despair and wearing down of the everyday" (Hay). The feeling of a wasted life seemed to be shared by all of the characters. And Andrea spoke about the "flavor" of Russianness that pervaded the

production. With hints of the culture in the pronunciation of names, the set and costumes, and the music, Andrea felt that a sense of Russia was present, but it was a mere “hint of flavor that didn’t knock you over” (Lanoux). This, for her, is important, because while the audience wants to feel the origins of the play, like any piece of art, they need to be in their own cultural space to be able to access it.

The theme of beauty also came up several times in my interviews, which intrigued me because it is something that I hadn’t actively considered. All were struck by the beauty of the set, the lighting, and the costumes, and for Simon and Andrea, it was an idea that came up right away. It stuck out, because, as Simon explained, “the set was beautiful in ways that felt to me rubbed against what it was supposed to feel like, from the dialogue” (Hay). While the characters emphasized “the run down-ness” of the estate, it appeared attractive and opulent. For Andrea, this only accentuated the “power and importance” of beauty (Lanoux). It is a play full of characters saying that there is nothing exciting, nothing worthwhile, nothing to live for, yet Sonya falls in love with Astrov’s inner beauty, and Elena’s external beauty turns the whole house upside down. Andrea asserts, “unwittingly [the characters are] all moved by beauty. They can’t help it.” (Lanoux). While “a lot of people present a very dingy, dull Chekhov,” Andrea saw in this production “this really striking gorgeous set, [and] gorgeous costuming” which became “a kind of frame” for the irony of the characters’ complaints. We see them lamenting that they are not really living, and we think, “Don’t say nothing moves you. We know that it does, even if you don’t” (Lanoux). For Andrea, the beauty of the design was “very successful” and “had meaning” because it emphasized an idea that, for her, is one of the underlying currents of the play.

After all of the research that I did on comedy in Chekhov’s work, I found myself forgetting the humor of the play as I immersed myself in rehearsals. I did not forget it

was there, but I did not actively work on bringing it out, for I found that the humor came mostly out of scripted situations. Rarely did a character ever try to be funny, so in rehearsal the comedy became less important to me than the notion that the characters were taking themselves seriously. During the process, while I was aware that moments would be funny, I focused mostly on the perspective of the characters, which was never comical. Once the production was on its feet, and I stepped away to let it stand on its own, things became funny to me once again. But I was never sure how the audience would react.

Each person I interviewed found humor in the play. For Simon, the production “did a really good job of capturing the humor [of Chekhov], both the kind of wariness of the everyday and the humor that comes out of these situations” (Hay). He felt that the comedy centered “in large part around miscommunications,” and pointed to the opening interchange between Astrov and Nanny as an example of such miscommunication. Andrea explained that while some of her students found Friel’s interpretation of Telegin to be too comical in a way that was not “Chekhovian,” she liked the production’s use of the character. She thought his comic awkwardness could be very real, and brought up the moment in the second act when Telegin is singing too loudly, explaining “it was annoying, and he has to be annoying us [the audience] in order for us to feel how [the characters] feel” (Lanoux). For Leah, the production captured the kind of “bleak humor” that was often situational. She remembered moments like Maria’s inserted laugh in the first act, which she called “a strange kind of non-sequitur punctuation to what was going on on the other side of the stage” (Lowe). Also, dark moments like Astrov saying goodbye to the furniture, or Vanya lamenting that he could have been a “Schopenhauer” or a “Dostoevsky” became funny in their irony.

Finally, I considered the theme that I had set out to convey from the very beginning of this project: hope. In the end, I was ultimately satisfied with the sense of hope that this *Uncle Vanya* highlighted. Though of course I knew that every audience member would read the production in a different way, I felt that my version at least brought out the theme of hope as being particularly relevant to these characters' lives, whether they had hope, or they lacked it. To me, the hope came from watching the characters wrestle with the knowledge that life is fleeting and the fear that their lives have been wasted, and in spite of it all, find a way to keep going. As I discovered in the rehearsal process, Chekhov's characters are not simply bored, and they are not passively suffering. They are actively *fighting* to find value and purpose and meaning in their lives. As I wrote in my program note, they fear that they are not really living, and yet they can't stop thinking, feeling, and desiring. Though they face despair, they do not ultimately give up. Even when there is nothing tangible to grasp onto that can point to a happier future, we see them finding the strength and the faith to go on in the present moment.

In rehearsals I impressed upon my actors the conviction that their characters are never passive but always actively fighting. As I did so, I realized that the play marks an important difference between hope and optimism. Whereas optimism is a positive outlook on the future that is based in fact, in some logical reasoning that suggests good will come, hope is based in no logic at all. It is an emotion of pure faith that things will get better, even if there is no evidence to support that conviction. And this is what I thought was so beautiful in the final moment of the play. We see Sonya, whose very name means "wisdom," finding the strength to be hopeful. I shared this notion with my cast because I felt strongly that if they saw hope for their characters, they would keep fighting, even if their characters felt despair.

In the end, what became most important to me was not that every audience member read the play as hopeful (though I hoped some did!) but that the actors performing these characters were inspired by a sense of hope, of actively struggling onwards. At the end of my production, I found that Sonya's final speech was decisively not depressing because it seemed clear to me that as she was speaking those words ("Peace will come to us."), she was building her strength. She was speaking them to believe them, and to make them true for herself and for Vanya. She was like the Watts painting that I had initially been inspired by – her sense of hope rose through her despair because, in that moment, she still refused to give up.

Others did not read the production as hopefully as I did. Simon commented that he "felt much less optimistic about the characters than [my] director's note suggested" (Hay). He explained, however, that did not see the characters' lives as entirely hopeless. He saw "the real significance that these people's lives have, especially when they don't see their lives as having any meaning." To him, the characters' "despair was believable, the frustration was believable, the sense of a wasted life was believable, but they're thinking that it's wasted for the wrong set of reasons" (Hay). He saw the irony of their complaints, which simply highlighted the ways in which they are misguided. Leah was similarly less inclined to see the hope. She commented, "I sympathized with [the characters'] frustrations, but saw more possibilities for them than they themselves seemed to be seeing." However, in the end, she said, she was not left with a sense of the characters "being able to transcend the limits that they've complained about through the course of the play" (Lowe). The ending for Leah was more about the characters' acceptance of their places: "you know that they're no longer trying to fit into a position that they never will fit into," and there is something "bittersweet" about that (Lowe).

For Andrea, however, a sense of hope did come through. Sometimes, she felt, it was a slightly false sense of hope that things would be different for these characters. Still, she said, “I felt that what your characters were trying to express was that that’s all you’ve got, [and] that’s worth living for – that hope that tomorrow will bring a better day” (Lanoux). Because she went into the performance thinking about hope, Andrea also recalled the moment when Sonya is told by Elena that Astrov doesn’t love her and won’t be coming back. It was “a very poignant and very memorable part of the performance for me,” Andrea explained, because she saw it as “the dashing of [Sonya’s] hope, of everything that gave her happiness up until this point” (Lanoux). For Andrea, this moment became “a kind of climax that I’d never seen before as a climax,” and she realized that, especially for Sonya, “hope is the meaning of life... it is everything” (Lanoux).

Finally, then, at the end of the play, Sonya’s “Peace will come to us” speech stood out to Andrea as the culmination of the sense of hope in the play. It was a moment of particular interest to Andrea, who felt that on the page it lacks a clear interpretation and depends wholly on how the actress playing Sonya chooses to deliver it. Sometimes, it is a moment in which the audience says of Sonya, “how pathetic.” But, Andrea argued that in this production, “that wasn’t there at all.” Rather, Andrea felt from Sonya’s delivery of the speech that “she believes it... not that it’s true for me, but this is true for her, and this is how she’s going to get out” of the despair of her everyday life. For Andrea, in this moment, Sonya displayed the “kind of *wisdom* of being able to suck it up and find the greater truth herself. She’s trying to convey that to Vanya to help him have that which I think he’ll never have. But she does” (Lanoux). In the end, while every audience member was sure to read the theme of hope in the play differently, based on my interviews, I think the possibility of a hopeful ending remained for some.



## Conclusion

Theatre is not an individual art form; everyone involved in the process of creating a play brings a part of themselves to the piece. The process of collaboration means that there is necessarily a wonderful and exhilarating difference between what a director first imagines and what she ends up creating with the team of artists and technicians. The questions I faced on this project (which every director must face) were: how do you reconcile the ideal in your mind with the material reality you are given? How do you work most productively within the necessary limitations of time, budget, and resources? And, more fundamentally, how do you distill research and concepts to be useful onstage?

After the completion of my production, I am able to look back and realize how a semester of preparation enriched my project. From my research on Chekhov and his time, I gained a historical context in which to understand the play. Looking into the original production of the play, and then at subsequent contemporary productions, gave me an impression of how the work has been interpreted and valued through time. Perhaps equally as importantly, it gave me confidence that there is not one definitive version of the play that I had to access. Rather, I learned that there is value in each director bringing a personal interpretation to the material, for it allows the play to be relevant for the place and the moment in which it is produced.

My analysis of *The Wood Demon* in relation to *Uncle Vanya* taught me about the dramatic structure of the play, and gave importance both to what was and was not in the later play. Looking at criticism of *Uncle Vanya* helped me to understand how it has been analyzed and interpreted by scholars as a piece of dramatic literature. Ultimately, I was able to define my understanding of the play in relation to other scholars, using

both what I agreed and disagreed with in their analyses to put my reading into context, and define what made it personal.

I found the articulation of my ideas about the play into a coherent written form invaluable in the process of thinking through my directorial concept. It forced me not only to make sense of my ideas practically, but also to define specifically what messages they might convey to an audience. Thinking through possible problems in directing Chekhov's work taught me about directing in many ways. I learned by anticipating problems how to solve them before I learned by actively confronting them in the rehearsal process. I believe that thinking about some of the challenges of approaching the material prepared me for addressing these issues with actors, especially when talking to people who had not previously been familiar with Chekhov's work. I had to articulate for myself what skills his work requires, what possible obstacles this generates, and how to overcome them in order to successfully communicate my ideas to the actors.

Ultimately, I think the amount of time I spent with this play benefited me just as much as the knowledge I gained from my research. Creating a mental space in which to think about *Uncle Vanya* for so many months brought me closer to the play, which I think was integral to my understanding of the work and my ability to convey my thoughts about it to everyone involved in the production. Now, at the end of a director's process, I look back and feel tremendously proud of our play.

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