

Anton Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*

A Study Guide

Prepared in Conjunction with the Pardoe Theatre Production
February 8-25, 1995

Compiled and Edited by Bob Nelson

Theatre and Film Department
Brigham Young University
.....

Contents:

Chekhov and Russian/Soviet History: A Time Line.....	2
When Chekhov Wrote His Published Plays.....	4
“Chekhov’s Life and Dramatic Vision,” by Nola Smith.....	4
“Symbiotic Symbolism in Chekhov’s <i>The Three Sisters</i> ,” by Nola Smith.....	8

.....
Tenth in a series: study guides were also prepared for BYU productions of
Hedda Gabler, *Mother Hicks*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*,
Absurd Person Singular and *Woman in Mind*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*,
The Wakefield Passion Play, and *Macbeth*.

These study guides are for teachers, students, and others who attend our productions.
We hope they enhance enjoyment and lead to deeper appreciation of the plays.

All rights reserved
© BYU Theatre and Film, 1995



Chekhov and Russian Soviet History: A Time Line

(Source: *Moscow Art Theatre: Past, Present, Future*, published 1989 by Actors Theatre of Louisville with support from NEH)

Chekhov

- 1860 January 17: born a “free peasant” in Taganrog
- 1876 Teaches in Taganrog while family goes to Moscow
- 1877 Writes farce *Diamond Cuts Diamond*
- 1878 Writes full-length plays *Fatherless* and *Not for Nothing* *did the Chicken Sing* (both lost)
- 1879 Enrolls in Medical Faculty of Moscow University
- 1880 Publishes two stories in humor magazine
- 1881 Writes articles under pseudonyms
- 1882 *Platonov* rejected by Moscow Maly Theatre
- 1884 Total published stories number 300; graduates as a physician; discovers first signs of his tuberculosis
- 1885 Writes more than 100 short stories; one-act *On the Road* rejected by censor; publishes first stories under his own name in *New Times*
- 1886 Writes one-act *On the Harmfulness of Tobacco*
- 1887 Publishes first play, *Swan Song*; *Ivanov* performed at Korsh Theatre writes one-acts *The Bear* and *The Proposal*; awarded Pushkin Prize; meets Stanislavsky

Russian/Soviet History

- 1855 Tsar Alexander II begins reign
- 1858 Dostoevsky returns from exile
- 1860 Start of railway boom; founding of Vladivostok
- 1861 Emancipation of serfs; peasant uprising in provinces; Student disorders in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and other towns
- 1862 Turgenev (1818-1883) publishes *Fathers and Sons*, main character symbol for anti-czarists
- 1863 Educational reform; court system introduced; Konstantin Sergeevich Alexeyev (Stanislavsky) born
- 1864 Introduction of zemstvos (county councils); Conquest of Central Asia; first International Workingmen’s Association founded by Karl Marx in London
- 1865 Press censorship reforms
- 1866 Attempted assassination of Alexander II; Dostoevsky publishes *Crime and Punishment*
- 1867 Sale of Alaska to USA
- 1868 Bakunin founds International Alliance of Social Democrats
- 1869 Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* published
- 1870 Municipality reforms toward self-government; Lenin born
- 1872 Three Emperors’ League established (Germany, Austria, Russia)
- 1873 Beginning of depression and industrial crisis; Tolstoy publishes *Anna Karenina*
- 1874 Military Reform; Moslem Tartars revolt
- 1875 Southern Sakhalin ceded to Japan
- 1876 Organization of secret society, Land and Freedom, formed against tsarist repression; first public demonstration in St. Petersburg
- 1877 Tchaikovsky’s opera *Eugene Onegin* produced; reintroduction of protective tariffs; Russo-Turkish War
- 1878 Strikes in St. Petersburg
- 1879 Stalin and Trotsky born
- 1881 Assassination of Alexander II; Alexander III begins reign; Establishment of *okhrona* (secret police)
- 1882 Social legislation—child labor working hours; press censorship reinforced
- 1885 Student riots lead to repressive “Rules for Students”
- 1887 Reinsurance Treaty with Germany
- 1888 *Swan Song* premieres at Korsh Theatre;

Russian/Soviet History (cont.)

Chekhov (cont.)

- 1889 *Ivanov* staged successfully in Petersburg;
writes one-acts *The Wedding* and *A Tragedian Despite Himself*;
sells *The Wood Demon* to Abramova Theatre, play opens to hostile reviews
- 1890 Travels to convict settlement on Sakhalin island; conducts census, averaging 160 interviews per day
- 1891 Writes *The Grasshopper* and final one-act *The Anniversary*;
aids famine victims;
suffers lung complications
- 1892 Organizes famine relief mission;
practices medicine, builds schools, runs estate as self-supporting commune;
publishes story in *Ward 6*
- 1894 Publishes twelve new stories
- 1895 Writes *The Seagull*;
meets Tolstoy
- 1896 *The Seagull* opens disastrously at the Alexandrinsky Theatre
- 1897 *Uncle Vanya* performed in provinces;
builds several schools at own expense;
tuberculosis diagnosed;
convalesces in Nice
(Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko meet in restaurant, protesting "old manner of theatricalism, false pathos and insignificant repertoires." Plan the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT), a national people's theatre using Stanislavsky's amateurs and Nemirovich-Danchenko's students
- 1898 *The Seagull* premieres at MAT, a tremendous success
- 1899 Sells copyright of his works, past and future, for 75,000 rubles;
meets Gorky;
organizes aid for consumption sufferers;
first letters to Olga Knipper, MAT actress (correspondence ran to 1,000 letters);
premiere of *Uncle Vanya* at MAT
- 1900 Elected to Academy of Sciences;
MAT performs Chekhov's plays for him in Yalta
- 1901 Premiere of *The Three Sisters* at MAT;
marries Knipper;
health bad
- 1902 Knipper miscarries;
Chekhov resigns from Academy of Sciences over Gorky's exclusion;
receives Griboyedov Prize for *The Three Sisters*
- 1903 Elected president, Society of Russian Literature
- 1904 Premiere of *The Cherry Orchard* at MAT;
July 2, Chekhov dies in Badenweiler health resort
- 1890 Anti-Jewish legislation enforced
- 1891 Beginning of Trans-Siberian railroad;
famine
- 1893 State monopoly on alcohol
- 1894 Death of Alexander III;
Nicholas II begins reign
- 1896 Treaty with China, concession for Chinese-Eastern railway;
strike movements;
Armenian massacres
- 1898 Social Democratic party founded
- 1899 First International Peace Conference at The Hague
- 1900 Russian occupation of Manchuria
- 1901 Russo-Persian Treaty;
Social Revolutionary party founded
- 1903 Menshevik-Bolshevik split among Social Democrats
- 1904 Russo-Japanese War
- 1905 Bloody Sunday: soldiers fire on peaceful demonstration killing 1,000;
general strike;
Workers Soviet founded in St. Petersburg Revolution;
October Manifesto reforms;
Duma (Russian parliament) created



When Chekhov Wrote His Published Plays

<i>Platonov</i>	1881
<i>On the Highway</i>	1885
<i>On the Harmfulness of Tobacco</i>	1886-1902
<i>The Swan Song (Kalkhas)</i>	1887-1888
<i>Ivanov</i>	1887-1889
<i>The Bear</i>	1888
<i>The Proposal</i>	1888-1889
<i>Tatyana Repina</i>	1889
<i>The Wedding</i>	1889-1890
<i>The Wood Demon</i>	1889-1890
<i>The Anniversary</i>	1891
<i>The Night Before the Trial</i>	1895
<i>The Seagull</i>	1896
<i>Uncle Vanya</i>	1897
<i>The Three Sisters</i>	1900-1901
<i>The Cherry Orchard</i>	1903-1904



Chekhov's Life and Dramatic Vision

by Nola Smith

You tell me that people cry at my plays. I've heard others say the same. But that was not why I wrote them. It is Alexeyev [Stanislavsky] who made my characters into cry-babies. All I wanted was to say honestly to people: "Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!" The important thing is that people should realize that, for when they do, they will most certainly create another and better life for themselves. I will not live to see it, but I know that it will be quite different, quite unlike our present life. And so long as this different life does not exist, I shall go on saying to people again and again: "Please, understand that your life is bad and dreary!" What is there to cry about? (Quoted in Magarshack *Chekhov* 13-14)

In this 1902 letter to writer Alexander Tikhonov, Chekhov echoes the hope of Vershinin, a character in Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, that someday intelligent people will fill the world. That vision had some basis in his own life, for Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was proof that an ambitious person could overcome the odds on the road from obscurity to distinction.

According to Chekhov's assessment, "In my childhood, there was no childhood" (quoted in Senelick 1). His early days of poverty and humiliation were not the ideal circumstances for nurturing an artist. Although his grandfather had managed to save enough to buy his family out of serfdom, freedom had not greatly improved their circumstances. Chekhov was born January 17, 1860, in Taganrog, a southern Russian ship-building town, third in a merchant class family of five boys and a girl. His father was a brutal disciplinarian and religious fanatic, a grocer frustrated with his lot, who divided his time between his tiny business, the violin, painting, and the Eastern Orthodox Church (where he led the choir in which his sons sang). His subservient wife put up little protest as he forced his sons to work long hours in the store after school. Pavel Chekhov had slight business sense; by 1876 he had lost even his merchant status, and only escaped his creditors by fleeing to Moscow, abandoning his indigent family. Chekhov's mother was subsequently swindled by a "friend," who illegally seized the deed to their home. Even the family furniture had to be auctioned off to pay interest on the loan. Finally, Evgeniya Chekhova gathered her youngest children and fled to her husband in Moscow, leaving Anton behind at age sixteen to support himself as best he could through tutoring and whatever other odd jobs he could find.

But Chekhov's boyhood was not completely devoid of recreation: he was reputedly stage-struck. "Although it was against school regulations, he and his classmates frequented the gallery, often in false whiskers and dark glasses" (Senelick 3). He participated as often as possible in both amateur and professional drama, and earned a reputation as a talented actor (Magarshack 21). Though it was not noted at the time, Chekhov later admitted that he suffered from stage fright. In 1893 he turned down an invitation to do a public reading with the following note: "This is silly and ridiculous, but I can't do anything about it. I have never read in public in my life and never shall. A long time ago I used to act on the stage, but there I concealed myself behind my costume and make-up and that gave me courage" (quoted Magarshack 21).

During this adolescent period, Chekhov also wrote his first two theatrical works: a drama, *Without Patrimony*, and a lost vaudeville, *The Hen Has Good Reason for Clucking* (other translators have rendered the titles *Fatherless* and *Not For Nothing Did the Chicken Sing*). Historians often refer to Chekhov as a literary figure who turned to drama near the end of his life, but clearly his theatrical interest much preceded his career as a fiction writer.

Chekhov's medical interest appears also to have commenced during these years, perhaps as early as 1875 when he was treated for peritonitis by a sympathetic and loquacious school doctor (Kirk 18). As he neared graduation from Taganrog High School, his letters mention his desire for medical training, and on August 6, 1879, Chekhov left for Moscow, scholarship in hand, with two classmates (his fare paid by a third) to enter Moscow University.

Chekhov's university days were difficult. He was surprised to discover on arriving that, despite his own penniless condition, his family now expected him to support them. His mother and siblings lived in a slum basement; his father worked for a pittance as a clerk and boarded at his job, visiting his family only on Sundays. In those rare moments when he was not busy with his rigorous medical courses, Anton began, in early 1880, to turn to writing in order to survive:

He took up short-story writing for two reasons: first because he had to support a large family which was entirely dependent on him, and the writing of short stories was the quickest way of doing it; secondly, because the state of the Russian stage in the eighties and the nineties of the last century was such that no serious playwright could hope to have his plays performed, let alone earn a decent living in the theatre....It was indeed this hopeless position of the serious playwright in Russia towards the end of the nineteenth century that made Chekhov look on fiction as his "legal wife" and the stage as "a noisy, impudent and tiresome mistress." (Magarshack 19-20)

Despite his heavy load, Chekhov did not abandon playwrighting. In 1881 he completed *Platonov* (revised from *Fatherless*), a play which, though in keeping with contemporary melodramatic trends, also contained sweeping condemnation of the self-destructive economic and social inclinations of the day: "What is significant about *Platonov* is that it represents Chekhov's first attempt to paint a large canvas of the social forces that were moulding Russian life." The characters, like Chekhov's later ones, were realistically drawn, with symbolic undertones. Even as he was becoming known as a writer of trivial humor, he was using drama to appraise "the whole social fabric of his time" (Magarshack 68). Chekhov later tried to burn the play after it was turned down by a leading actress; but one copy survived, and it was published in 1923 (Senelick 5).

Chekhov's bread-and-butter work was short fiction. He published under several pseudonyms, primarily in humor magazines. First he contributed anecdotes and jokes, then he included parodies, short stories and serials, a murder mystery, the account of a famous trial, and a romance (which was filmed four times). He earned admittance to theatre circles by writing a theatre gossip column. In 1884 he graduated, became a general practitioner, published his first book of collected stories (anecdotes from the lives of actors), and ambitiously began working on a history of Russian medicine.

He also began coughing up blood—the first signs of the tuberculosis that would eventually kill him (Senelick 5-6).

Chekhov's growing reputation and income enabled him to move his family into better circumstances. They supported him in his work: his sister Masha even dedicated her life to care for him at the expense of her own marriage

prospects. He began to travel, ostensibly to collect scholarly material, but along the way gaining experience—of places, customs, manners and manors—that would color both his fiction and plays. He continued writing one-acts, and then in 1887 successfully staged *Ivanov* in Moscow (to some controversy), followed by the curtain-raisers *The Bear* and *The Proposal*. *The Wood Demon*, finished in 1889, was less successful. It was rejected outright by the Committee of the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, one member of which suggested that Chekhov stick with short stories (Kirk 20). Chekhov humbly agreed that he had no talent for theatre, then revised the play and staged it at another theatre. Critics were contemptuous. He put the script away, but not permanently—years later he pillaged it in writing *Uncle Vanya* (Kirk 20-21).

At age thirty, comfortable with his income but increasingly dissatisfied with himself, Chekhov turned altruistic. He made the tremendously difficult thousand-mile journey to the Pacific island of Sakhalin to investigate conditions at the penal colony. There he interviewed convicts, took a complete census, and met almost every person on the island. “I don’t know what will come of it, but I’ve done not a little,” he wrote after two long months. “It is enough for three dissertations. I got up each day at 5 a.m. went to bed late, and all my days were spent in a great state of tension from the thought that there is so much left to be done.” After a third month, he took a round-about trip home, through Hong Kong, Singapore, Colombo, Ceylon, arriving in Moscow severely ill (Kirk 21-22). As usual, though, illness could not stop him; he spent the next few years involved in extensive charitable pursuits, writing, landscaping his home, and traveling throughout Europe. He wrote a “comedy,” *The Seagull*, in 1894 as therapy for the pain he felt at the plight of a woman he had previously considered marrying, who had now been abandoned by a lover and had born a child who died shortly after birth. The play was to be produced by the Alexandrinsky Theatre. Unfortunately, *The Seagull* was doomed to a rough start, as the original actors did not understand their unusual roles, and, by opening, had not even completely memorized their lines. Chekhov was so upset by the audience’s disapproval of *The Seagull* on opening night, October 17, 1896, that he “left his seat after the second act, stayed backstage to the end of the performance, and then walked the streets alone in the night” (Kirk 25).

Chekhov’s health worsened. Even though the next four performances of *The Seagull* improved and were well received, Chekhov turned moody and depressed. After a few months he became gravely ill. Doctors ordered him to Nice to recuperate. He grew stronger, but his diagnosis of tuberculosis was confirmed. For the rest of his life he would have to shuttle between his estate at Yalta on the Black Sea and various European spas to keep the disease in check (Senelick 12). To raise money for treatment, he sold the rights to all his short fiction, including future reprint rights, for 75,000 rubles. The income from his fiction thus tied up, playwriting would be more profitable to him than publishing.

The next summer was a turning point in his life. The new Moscow Art Theatre had decided stage *The Seagull*, and a reluctant Chekhov eventually agreed. Nemirovich-Danchenko was the persuasive one—even Stanislavsky was unsure about the play. In September, Chekhov arrived at the MAT to see a rehearsal, and was immediately smitten by Olga Leonardovna, the actress cast as Irina, whom he would eventually (the Chekhovian reluctance to change) marry in 1901.

Tension was high during rehearsals. The future of both the playwright and the playhouse was being staked on this one production. Chekhov was frustrated with the whole process—with theatre as a whole. In November 1889 he wrote in annoyance to his friend Suvorin:

Actors never observe ordinary people. They do not know landowners or merchants or village priests or bureaucrats. On the other hand they can give distinguished impersonations of billiard markers, kept women, distressed cardsharps, in short all those individuals whom they observe as they ramble through pothouses and bachelor parties. Horrible ignorance. (quoted in Senelick 21)

Fortunately, the cast at the MAT had more substance than he had perceived during early rehearsals, for *The Seagull* opened

December 17, 1889, as a “colossal success.” Nemirovich-Danchenko wired Chekhov, who was resting in Yalta, that “With wonderful unanimity all newspapers acclaim success of *The Seagull* as brilliant, tumultuous, enormous....” Chekhov replied “Convey to all: infinite thanks with all my soul....I’m grieved that I’m not with you. Your telegram made me well and happy” (quoted in Kirk 27). The Moscow Art Theatre promptly adopted an art-nouveau seagull as its insignia (Senelick 13).

Correspondence shows that Chekhov had definite ideas for his next play by October 1899, but was not in any hurry to complete it. Perhaps suffering from writer’s block, he informed the MAT that he would not have the play ready for the next season, and that he would “wait till it gets a little warmer” to continue working (Magarshack 227). The members of the MAT, anxious for Chekhov’s next play, traveled to the Crimea where the author was convalescing, and gave him a private showing of *The Seagull*, in hopes of relieving any misgivings he might have about his abilities. The tactic worked: soon Chekhov was hard at work on *The Three Sisters*. Inspiration, however, seemed to come in fits and starts. On August 18, 1900, he wrote to Olga that the play had taken shape and just needed to be written. On August 20 he wrote that he was frustrated by interruptions. On August 23 he was considering putting the play away for the year. He was still laboring away in mid-September, when ill health forced him to stop. He wrote Olga that “My play looks gloomily at me as it lies on my desk; and I, too, am thinking gloomily about it” (229). Another letter shows that the play was not in its finished form, for, while it was still titled *The Three Sisters*, he wrote that the play had “four highly important women’s parts, four well educated women” (Magarshack 230). He also wrote that he was looking forward to seeing the play in rehearsal so that he could make revisions, a step he considered a crucial part of the writing process (21). As soon as he was able, he resumed his labor, and, despite periodic illness, finished the first draft by the middle of October.

Chekhov was now well enough to personally deliver the script to the MAT and to attend the company’s first reading. Magarshack recalls that “He was so appalled by the interpretation given to it by Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko that he left the theatre in a huff and had a real row with Stanislavsky who had hurried after him to his hotel” (230-31).

Chekhov left for Nice to rework act four in particular. He sent the revised script back to the MAT in late December, and the play opened for its first performance January 31, 1901. It was anything but a triumph. Once again the author made revisions; this time he came himself to help prepare the staging for an autumn revival. V. Luzhsky, an MAT assistant director and actor (who played the original Andrey), was irritated that “Chekhov was present at all but the first three rehearsals of the play, [and] gave very detailed instructions on how the part ought to be played”—indeed, on how *all* of the parts should be played (Magarshack 231). Magarshack speculates that these instructions were resented by MAT, and were deliberately lost:

So convinced were the directors of the Moscow Art Theatre that they were right and that Chekhov was wrong in the interpretation of the play that all they have preserved is a short enigmatic remark here and there, usually couched in curiously stilted language. They all seemed to have agreed to look on Chekhov as a genius who did not know himself what he had really written. (231)

Chekhov had another view of his involvement and its effects. In September he wrote to a friend that “*The Three Sisters* are having a wonderfully brilliant performance....I rehearsed the play a little, gave a few people to understand what I wanted, and the play, as I am told, is now being much better performed than during last season” (quoted in Magarshack 232). Magarshack (232) points out an interesting consequence of this tussle between artists that has confused historians:

One result of the conflict between Chekhov and the director of the Moscow Art Theatre was the belief that Chekhov regarded *The Three Sisters* as a comedy. This curious idea is based on some obscure reference by Stanislavsky to Chekhov’s dissatisfaction with his interpretation of the play on the ground that he (Stanislavsky) regarded it and *The Cherry Orchard* as tragedies. It is quite true that Chekhov was furious with Stanislavsky for insisting that *The Cherry Orchard* was a tragedy, but so far as *The Three Sisters* is concerned, there is no indication that Chekhov regarded it as anything but a “drama.” It is significant that whenever Chekhov wrote a comedy, he always referred to it as such in his letters. *The Three Sisters*, on the other hand, is always referred to by Chekhov in letters as a “play,” never as a comedy.

Whether or not it was Chekhov's intervention that improved the play, *The Three Sisters* went on to enjoy great success when it was performed in St. Petersburg in March 1902.

Unfortunately, Chekhov's personal life was not proceeding as smoothly. His wife, who had not known she was expecting when she traveled to St. Petersburg to perform, suffered a violent miscarriage. After ten days in the hospital she was carried by stretcher to Yalta; Chekhov cared for her himself for two months, at the end of which he too was in a state of collapse. This, of course, put his work on *The Cherry Orchard* on hold. He had started writing in January, 1902, and struggled valiantly against his own infirmity until the text was finally completed in October. He sent the script hopefully off to Stanislavsky, but then began the disagreement over interpretation. The director saw the play as a drama, while the author meant the play as a comedy. Both felt it would fail if done as the other wanted (Kirk 28-29). Opening night was scheduled for January 17, 1904, which was both Chekhov's forty-fourth nameday celebration and the twenty-fifth anniversary of his work as a writer. The play was joyfully received. Chekhov tried to avoid the fuss by slipping in during the third act, but was forced up onto the stage, showered with flowers and telegrams, and embarrassed by speeches and celebration.

A month later, in Yalta, Chekhov's health suddenly worsened. He and Olga went to a specialist in Germany, and there he revived considerably. But June 29 he suffered a heart attack, and a second one the next day. July 1 he set Olga laughing, despite her worries, with a funny story. He went to sleep easily, but woke shortly after midnight in a delirium. He died quietly, a doctor and his wife in attendance. His last words: "It's been a long time since I drank Champagne" (Kirk 30).

Sources

Kirk, Irina. *Anton Chekhov*. Boston: Twayne, 1981.

Magarshack, David. *Chekhov the Dramatist*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1960.

Senelick, Laurence. *Anton Chekhov*. London: Macmillan, 1985.



Symbiotic Symbolism and Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*

by Nola Smith

The Moscow Art Theatre and Anton Chekhov: history has inseparably linked these names. It is true that neither might have reached the fame it did without the other. What is it that made such a symbiosis possible? The Moscow Art Theatre and Chekhov were, if you will, hardware to software, the latter providing the very substance and reason for existence, the former the means of production.

The standard offerings of the nineteenth century Russian theatre consisted, as in the rest of Europe, of farce, musical drama, romantic spectacles, and melodrama. Such spectacle emphasized grandiose special effects and stage tricks, outsized action and "star" posturing, obvious and sensational plots. In Russia, additionally, the fashion was for plays to take some sort of political/social stance. The result was a theatre that offered entertainment or catered to agendas, but did not necessarily produce art.

The winds of theatrical reform, however, were beginning to stir in Russia as they were on the rest of the continent. The plays of Alexandre Ostrovsky (1823-1886), for instance, pioneered the use of symbolism. Stage settings throughout the

country were starting to become more historically accurate in response to new scenic trends. Innovative directors were experimenting with stage pictures throughout Europe, and the “independent theatres”—subscription houses whose private status made possible the staging of cutting-edge scripts without fear of censorship—were staging the works of Ibsen and Strindberg. Despite these improvements, however, most Russian theatre perpetuated artistic traditions left over from the eighteenth century.

Very little significant progress was made in Russian theatre practice until the organization of the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) in 1898. This independent theatre, formed by Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (1858-1943), differed from other independent theatres not only in that it was professional (as opposed to amateur) from its inception, but also in that its emphasis was on attempting a new style of theatrical production instead of just promoting neglected or controversial plays. The MAT was revolutionary in its use of ensemble acting, which abolished stars and sought believability in acting, through attention to detail, and through the use of character objectives and personal emotional memory. The MAT experimented with realistic staging and acting, but public interest in these novelties per se soon faded. The MAT needed content that was as original as its own presentation.

Anton Chekhov arrived on the scene with his plays just in time to fulfill that need (Brockett 561-62).

Just as the MAT sought to reduce outsized theatrical spectacle to a realistic scale, Chekhov’s plays also reconfigure plot to an everyday dimension. The characters, in finely drawn portraits of usual people, spend their time in life-like pursuits and trivial behaviors. Thus the texts have been termed plays of “indirect action,” for on the surface, nothing dramatic seems to be happening at all. The cumulative spoken and nonverbal “subtext” of this normal reality, however, adds up to a dramatic whole, much as the individually meaningless shards combine to create a richly detailed mosaic. Chekhov’s pictures, in subtle impersonation, indict the Russian people for the neglect of their own lives. As theatre historian Oscar Brockett explains:

Each of Chekhov’s four major plays is set in rural Russia and depicts the monotonous and frustrating life of the landowning class. All of the characters aspire to a better life, but none knows how, or has the initiative, to achieve his goals. The plays are built upon infinite details, the connection among which is not always obvious. Yet gradually a unifying mood, clearly delineated characters, and a complete and simple action emerge. The absence of startling climaxes, strong suspense, and clear purpose has caused many readers to misunderstand the plays, which require detailed study and attention to nuance if the pattern behind the surface is to become clear. (561)

The key to deciphering Chekhov’s work is to pay attention to both emotional and physical detail—exactly as the MAT wished to do. Once Chekhov’s *The Seagull* proved to playwright, producers, and audience that such synthesis was possible and commercially viable, Chekhov’s final three plays were literally tailor made for the MAT actors.

One advantage that MAT audiences had over BYU’s is the knowledge of topical cultural clues woven throughout Chekhov’s plays. For example, audience members would have instantly recognized the piano music played by one character as *The Maiden’s Prayer*, thus understanding a layer of meaning missed by most Americans. Indeed, all the snatches of music in *The Three Sisters* have meaning beyond their mere mood. Likewise, Chekhov uses allusions to folk and fairy tales of his native land, particularly in the repeated references to a bear (Magarshack 235). Even individual properties required by the playwright have their own meaning. The samovar, a heavy silver Russian tea urn, is a gift traditionally given at expensive weddings or, even more appropriately, at wedding anniversaries. It is an entirely unsuitable birthday gift for Tchebutykin to bring to Irina, yet it is perfect as a dramatic tool, indicating as it does the character’s fixation with the past, his wish that he had married Irina’s mother, the impropriety of his present suit, and the deteriorating quality of his mind.

Each of the characters in *The Three Sisters* has a number of associative symbols incorporated with their portrayal, gauged to reveal their personality and motivations. Protopopov, the invisibly menacing character, is portrayed entirely

through such clues. His presence at the opening celebration is indicated by the sound of a carriage and by the gift of a cake, both symbols of middle-class respectability completely at odds with his function as base destroyer. Of all the characters in the scene, only Masha perceives the dichotomy and expresses distrust of the man. Solyony's hand, which bring death, smells like a corpse; Tchebutykin's newspaper and notes pitifully echo his youthful efforts as a medical student; Kuligin's twice given book shows both his indifference to the desires of his in-laws and the mediocrity of his own professional life (Magarshack 233-245). Dialogue, actions, time, settings, and possessions in the play all resonate with potent meanings.

Modern audiences are used to the convention that costuming carries its own messages about the wearer. In Chekhov's time, however, most actors wore clothing that flattered them either physically or socially. Chekhov and Stanislavsky agreed that the stage apparel must subordinate style to substance, and that all clothing must be pertinent to the character rather than the performer. In *The Three Sisters*, for instance, Natasha's vulgar background is revealed by the tastelessness of her frock; her ascending power is later signified by her new prerogative to criticize her sister-in-law's clothing. In BYU's current revival of this classic play, designer Rory Scanlon has respectively added his own coloring to the visual expression of Chekhov's endeavors. For example, he expressed director Barta Heiner's metaphor of the play—Moscow seen hazily through lace curtains—in the costumes of the first celebratory scene. The costumes are light and airy; Irina's gown, in particular, is made of layers and layers of white curtain gauze. The design choice captures the insubstantial mutability of spring, of youth, and of the characters' hopes. By the end of the play, when the sisters are older, somewhat hardened by events, and dispossessed of their home, Scanlon chose to costume them in rough fabrics evocative of the bark of the trees to which they are compared. The costumes send their own echo of Chekhov's message: learn to live with the circumstances as they really are, or die. The central characters must learn to strive toward the sun, to outstay the encroaching animal element (Natasha and her lover) if they are to survive, let alone triumph.

Taken as a whole, *The Three Sisters* anticipates Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The title characters are trapped in a pointless, absurd existence, marking time as their dreams dim, their memories fade, and even their physical space shrinks around them. Moscow, remembered only as an indistinct medley of impressions, becomes the psychic equivalent of Godot: that which is awaited to give ultimate meaning to existence. But Chekhov's detailed warning differs fundamentally from the absurdist's sparse analogy, in that the Russian playwright had more hope for the future than would Beckett a half century and two world wars later. In *Godot*, the protagonists wait, apparently in vain, for what they believe must come; in *The Three Sisters*, the characters still have the possibility of movement, mobility, authentic action—even though Moscow itself is probably beyond their reach. The Prozorov family loses its place through inaction when action was possible. Their own indifference to practical enterprise dooms them. But at the end of the play there is still hope that these characters will wake up and save what is best and noble in them, rather than succumb to either a beastly, meaningless existence or death. Chekhov warns the audience through them that all of us must make the same choice.

Sources

Brockett, Oscar. *History of the Theatre*, 5th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1987.

Magarshack, David. *Chekhov the Dramatist*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1960.



A ten-page study guide is available to accompany our production of Anton Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*

Contents:

Chekhov and Russian/Soviet History: A Time Line..... 2

When Chekhov Wrote His Published Plays..... 4

“Chekhov’s Life and Dramatic Vision,” by Nola Smith..... 4

“Symbiotic Symbolism in Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters*,” by Nola Smith..... 8

.....

Eleventh in a series: study guides were also prepared for BYU productions of
Hedda Gabler, Mother Hicks, Waiting for Godot, Julius Caesar, The Importance of Being Earnest,
Absurd Person Singular, Woman in Mind, The Merry Wives of Windsor,
The Wakefield Passion Play, and Macbeth.

These study guides are for teachers, students, and others who attend our productions.
We hope they enhance enjoyment and lead to deeper appreciation of the plays.

.....

PLEASE ASK FOR A COPY AT THE FINE ARTS BOX OFFICE
—NO CHARGE—

However, we ask for a \$1 donation to help pay our costs

