

The Vaudevilles of Chekhov

Dramaturgy Study Guide

Chekhov and Russian Nationalism

By Sterling Carter

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov wrote at a time when Russian culture experienced a breakthrough, finding its identity in a Euro-dominated world. Today, the world recognizes Chekhov as one of Russia's most significant artists and playwrights. In a period of increased censorship by a progressively more autocratic government, Chekhov used his plays and short stories as artistic expressions against a repressive Tsarist system. Indeed, throughout Chekhov's career, one may define his work as a logical advancement towards the eventual Communist uprising of 1918.

However, it would be incorrect to link Anton Chekhov with such revolutionaries as Marx and Lenin. Chekhov never developed reactionary, proletariat ideals in his work. One cannot categorize the playwright into a sympathetic, proletarian figure. Instead, he held status as a member of the intelligentsia, the bourgeois, intellectual elite of Russia. His father was a merchant, and Chekhov began his career not as a writer, but as a doctor.¹ His experiences in his father's shop and with his various patients gave him foundational experience with all strata of Russian life and culture. Critics have always been amazed at Chekhov's deep knowledge of extraneous, natural experience embedded in his works. The broad and evocative themes seen in his later, full-length plays, such as *The Seagull*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *Three Sisters*, can be distilled into their very essence through studying his earlier, experimental vaudevilles. The first piece in our collection of one acts, "The Alien Corn", provides insight into Chekhov's later works by exploring conflicts between Russia and Europe and class conflicts between the wealthy and their servants.

Wabash's performance opens with perhaps one of the most challenging pieces in the vaudevilles. "The Alien Corn" follows the seemingly typical, slightly tragic dinner conversation of two long-time compatriots, a French tutor and his Russian employer. In the dialogue that follows, the audience bears witness to a tragicomic exchange between the two, which frames a broader conflict between two cultures: the European and the Russian. While everyone can agree the French deserve the occasional satiric barb, it is important to note that Chekhov was a forerunner in mocking the French. Why did Chekhov feel comfortable mocking one of the most powerful empires of the 19th Century? Many relate it to a tiny man who led the French to conquer all of Europe before his embarrassing defeat in the face of the icy, Russian winter. However, the separation between Russia and the West is not limited to the Napoleonic Empire. The enmity the Russians felt between their Russianness and the pull of European culture stems back much further in history,² and as the theme presented in "The Alien Corn" recurs throughout Chekhov's career, reaching its pinnacle in *Three Sisters*.

The idea of "Russianness" became a central topic in Russian life at the time Chekhov lived and wrote these plays. The question of what made an Eastern European "Russian" was an integral one, and something the autocratic tsars spent time trying to define. Chekhov, through his writing, explored the idea, and one of the most obvious outcomes that traces its way through his works is the separation between the Russian Moscow and the European St. Petersburg.

- "The goal of dramaturgy is to resolve the antipathy between the intellectual and the practical in the theatre, fusing the two into an organic whole."

--Leon Katz

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Note on sources:

All sources cited in these essays are available at the following web site:

reelstudent.wabash.edu/notes.htm

To begin, it is important to trace St. Petersburg back to its very beginning and discover the conflict between European Russia and “Russian” Russia. The early 18th Century saw Russia in a land war with Sweden. Tsar Peter the great wished to extend his landlocked empire to the Baltic Sea, and in November 1703, he ordered the construction of a fort on the Neva River estuary.³ St. Petersburg grew at an alarming rate, becoming a mythical city, the jewel of Russia and the icon of Peter’s grand Europeanization project. Peter brought artists from all over the continent to build his city and make it the pinnacle of European beauty and culture. He hated the onion dome cathedrals of Moscow. To Peter, Moscow represented the old Russia, a backwards, antiquated Russia. Thus, when he began his search for architects and artists to beautify his city, virtually none came from Russia. The laborers, craftspeople, and artisans arrived from around his country, but the actual designers arrived from Germany, Italy, and France, specifically brought in by Tsar Peter to construct his new capital.

After a mere fifty years of labor, workers finished St. Petersburg, the crown jewel and new capital of Russia and the artistic masterpiece of Europe. No one could deny the city’s extravagant beauty. Many of the wealthiest Russian courtiers moved to St. Petersburg to be nearer to Tsar Peter’s artistry, his heaven on earth for the more civilized, educated Russians. Upon completion, Petersburg became the capital of the new Russia, a Eurocentric, progressive Russia. Tsar Peter left behind the animal stalls and onion domes of Moscow and moved his court to the opulent city.

However, artistic beauty it may have been, Petersburg was cold, and not in the sense of a bitter Russian winter. Many remarked that, “the city was assembled as a giant *mise-en-scène* – its buildings and its people serving as no more than theatrical props.”⁴ The city amazed European visitors through the unity the city’s architecture imposed upon it. In other European cities, several architectural styles came together over the years to form a collage of varying forms. Yet, Peter wanted his city to be a piece of art, and through his work, St. Petersburg became a uniform, unnatural landscape. Even while at war with the Swedes, Peter worked to perfect his “paradise” by bringing in citrus trees from Persia, ornamental fish from the Middle East, and songbirds from India.⁵ By the nineteenth century, the city was generally regarded as a bastardized copy of European art and architecture, beautiful, but at the same time unsettling and artificial. The Russian elite ignored the criticism and regarded their city as the greatest in Europe, thereby distancing themselves with other Europeans as well as their own countrymen.

As the nineteenth century rolled around, popular opinion of St. Petersburg was generally waning, and a land war in Europe had begun. By 1812, Napoleon Bonaparte reached Moscow, and surveyed his conquest. He held the captured city in high regard, a much livelier city than St. Petersburg, full of the Russian vigor lacking in the artistic city. As he took up residence in the Kremlin however, Russian nationalists set fire to their beloved city. No French presence would defile the maternal symbol of Russia. Napoleon was both outraged and impressed by the audacity of the Russians with rhetoric such as, “What a people! They are Scythians! What resoluteness! The barbarians!”⁶ The fire destroyed nearly eighty percent of Moscow, but it succeeded in pushing the French out of Russia and to their eventual defeat. It is in *The Alien Corn*, in which we can see a subtle link to this old prejudice the Russians and Chekhov felt towards the French. In the work, Champagne, the French tutor, appears as a burnt shell of a once important man. He used to have a purpose in the household, but now he has been relegated to a position of relative insignificance, as Kamyshev describes him, “Tutor? You don’t even have to tutor! There’s no one left to tutor! They’ve all grown up and gone! What do you have to do? Get up, get dressed, sprinkle scent on yourself, and come in to lunch.”⁷

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The defeat of Napoleon and the fire that ravaged Moscow reestablished the city as the matriarch of the Russian empire. The fire represented a rebirth, a phoenix rising from the ashes. The major churches around the Kremlin survived the blaze and became the center for the city's revitalization. However, as opposed to the construction of St. Petersburg with its long, straight avenues and particularly European feel, Moscow developed in the classical Russian style with graceful onion-domed cathedrals and winding avenues. Muscovite life valued personal comfort over ostentatious public displays.⁸ The people lived a provincial life, much more in line with the Russian people than the landed gentry of St. Petersburg.

The rebirth of Russian life came as an attack on the wealthy courtiers in St. Petersburg. The barrage of "Russianness" originated from the literary elite, longing for a return to the pastoral, simple view of Russia represented by Moscow and directly opposed by the foreign atmosphere that pervaded St. Petersburg. The Petersburg elite were unattached; they constituted the courtiers who eyed advancement in the social order. The Muscovites, on the other hand, represented the old order. They wore beards, lived in the country during the summer, and came to Moscow in the winter for the social season. Moscow was famous for its restaurants, clubs, and entertainments that were virtually unknown in St. Petersburg. In Moscow, the nobility lived like nobility, without a care for the Tsar's court or the affairs of state. Sumptuous food and great quantities of vodka became the "Russian" way of life.

The literary and artistic elite of Russia picked up on the new place the old capital held in the character of the country. Within the sixty years of its virtual destruction, Moscow was transformed into a bustling metropolis with shops, offices, eateries, and a population growth rivaled only by New York. This is the Moscow that Chekhov knew and loved. He believed firmly in progress through science and technology (because of his medical background), and he wrote lovingly of the city which he called home for so many years. The idealistic Moscow, one of fine food, fine vodka, and an easy life is how Chekhov viewed "Russianness" and Russia's place in the world. After he moved away from the city, it became a distant, unreachable paradise as seen in *Three Sisters*. In a letter to Sobolevsky in 1899, Chekhov wrote, "It's boring without Muscovites, and without Moscow newspapers, and without the Moscow church bells which I love so much."⁹

However, as "The Alien Corn" suggests, Kamyshev, our Russian landowner, does not follow Chekhov's ideal. He is a loud, brash, inconsiderate landowner, who brags, "Step outside the gate...and you can keep going forever."¹⁰ One may be quick to eliminate Kamyshev as symbolic of Russia during this time; however, once one examines the political structure during the late nineteenth century, the focus of his character becomes much clearer. With the reemergence of Moscow as the cultural capital of Russia came the rise of the serfs in the political scheme. Tsar Alexander II emancipated the serfs, the serving class in Russia for centuries, in 1861.¹¹ Much like the Emancipation Proclamation in America, the freedom of millions set off waves of political change throughout the country. As with any progressive leader, Tsar Alexander II faced numerous challenges in promoting his social agenda, and unfortunately, as it becomes common place in society, the progressive leader was assassinated by a member of the revolutionary group *Narodnaya Volya* (People's Will) in 1881. In addition to emancipating the serfs, Alexander II abolished corporal punishment, established local self-government, initiated judicial reform, and revised the educational system.¹²

His son, however, Tsar Alexander III was not as progressive or forthright with reforms

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as his father. He witnessed the trouble his father had with rebellion within Russia, and attempted to roll back the freedoms his father established, while at the same time promoting a new face of Russia. His rabid nationalism is, in fact, what Chekhov caricatures in "The Alien Corn". Alexander III witnessed the assassination of his father and several senior Cabinet members, and he resolved to regain the reigns of a country slowly slipping out of the Tsar's grip. He believed that without a strong hand, or in this case an iron fist, leading Russia that the country would fall into anarchy and disintegrate. Russia could not survive with its many ethnic, political, and class divisions, and in order to hold it together, Alexander III began to institute a "Russification" project of his own.

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During the last few weeks of his reign, Alexander II began to introduce some limited political involvement among the differing strata of Russian culture. However, upon ascending to the throne, Alexander III immediately rescinded all of these movements. The repression that followed is in part what led to the violent overthrow of the Tsarist state. He immediately attacked the universities and clamped down on the zemstvos,¹³ the local administration in the provinces, which had more autonomy and usually promoted free and open debate. As a member of the intelligentsia, this put Chekhov in a rather desperate situation, but an ambiguous artistic license allowed him full reign to express his political beliefs without fear of retribution.

This was very fortunate for his personal and professional growth and safety. Tsar Alexander III, while waging war against the intellectuals of Russia, also enacted emergency decrees that gave him full power to exile anyone suspected of political opposition without a judicial check on his power.¹⁴ If we view Kamyshev as a satirized portrait of Tsar Alexander III, this idea of political exile becomes especially relevant in "The Alien Corn":

Kamyshev. Perhaps you'd like to take a trip in the opposite direction, then – to Siberia.

Champagne (horrified). Siberia? ...But you have my passport! I gave you my passport!

Kamyshev. Of course. And I put it in a safe place.

Champagne. So where is it, then, please?

Kamyshev. My dear chap – how should I know? That was thirty years ago!

This begins to sound like the tactics used years later by Soviets and Fascists to prevent their own people from leaving the oppressive autocracy.

In addition to cracking down on the institutions of higher learning, Alexander's "Russification" process extended to all areas of Russian culture. He required schools to teach only in Russian. He progressively began to ban and censor all other aspects of non-Russian culture in the country. The tsar limited the administration from using any language other than Russian, and he outlawed publication in many other languages in an effort to unite Russia under one culture.¹⁵ To be fair, this occurred throughout Europe at this time. After all, Otto von Bismarck united the German provinces during this time as well. However, Tsar Alexander's changes were much more oppressive, more in the vein of keeping his autocratic power intact, much like Kamyshev in "The Alien Corn".

These autocratic policies continued with Alexander III's successor, the last tsar, Nicholas II. By this time, Chekhov's artistic freedom reached its full heights and he was able to express his opinion through his writing as only the truly elite may. He continued to explore the theme of Europe versus Russia throughout several of his works, but he also attempted to portray Russia's essential "Russianness" in a more positive light. In his full-length play *Three Sisters*, Chekhov manifests true Russianness as the idealized portrait of Moscow. The three sisters cannot abide the country life and long for the bustle of the city Chekhov held so dear as the symbol of mother Russia.¹⁶ Always in his larger works there is a longing for an ideal, the true pleasure of a Russian life. In *The Seagull*, Sorin is this figure, a bittersweet character that sees his best days behind him and longs for one last trip to the city. As he approached the end of his life, however, the idealistic Russian life seems to fade like a shattered dream. In his last work, *The Cherry Orchard*, the cherry grove seems to represent a fading era of Russian life.¹⁷ While Chekhov supported progress and forward motion, one can only imagine his sadness at losing what he deemed to be true Russian: good food, good drink, and good family.

Chekhov represents perhaps the pinnacle of Russian playwrights. He influenced an entire generation of directors, writers, and actors, and represented a turning point in acting as we know it. Through his plays, we can see the inner machinations of a highly developed mind, tackling such issues as a "Russian" identity in the face of an oppressive autocracy. His shorter one-acts set the scene for developing themes in his larger works. In "The Alien Corn" specifically, the audience can see how one man's subtle fight against a poisoned political system can lead to a career as a revolutionary, if not in the political scene, than in the dramatic.

The Literary Depths of Chekhov

By Matt Hagen

Anton Chekhov was one of the key playwrights of the nineteenth century as he created and developed a new, distinctive style of subject matter, structure, and dramatic writing techniques. He reevaluated the prior theatrical constructions of the Greeks and the Elizabethans, which generally relied on strict rhetorical structures and monologues to explicitly relay the main characters' thought process and reasoning. Chekhov found such approaches to be excessively conclusive, removing the realistic elements of daily human existence. In direct response to "traditional" theatre, his plays and short stories create a convincing portrayal of the spontaneity and uncertainty of human life, yet in doing so, he questions the nature of reality itself. This inquiry helps to explain the fundamental theme throughout his plays and short stories: that people are inherently connected to and can be characterized by their specific responses to real, trivial events. Often, such responses to emerging events cause the characters of Chekhov's literary works to contradict their initial conceptions of reality. These misconceptions of reality within his works are presented in an idealistic and excessive manner, revealing the ridiculous and comedic element in human pursuits for truth. Though the main characters never fully realize the mistakes in their beliefs, Chekhov masterfully presents the situation with narrative objectivity, wonderfully disclosing their fallacies to the reader or audience. Thus, a Chekhovian short story or play explores the paradox between prejudicial and idealistic misconceptions of truth, and the

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One element of Chekhovian literature is the trouble people experience as they communicate and attempt to relate with one another. As frustration escalates, the characters behave in unnecessarily temperamental ways. Chekhov's portrayal of the lack of understanding between his characters provides an overarching absurdity within misunderstanding, resulting in comedic interactions. Ralph Lindheim writes, "Chekhov comments movingly on the indifference of human beings toward one another fostered by routine toil and strengthened by real or imaginary slights and humiliations." Such "indifference" reveals the ridiculous pride and stubbornness people display as they refuse to compromise with one another in simple conversation. Thus, through the hostility between his characters, Chekhov creates farcical interactions.

Chekhov's farce can be seen in two short stories entitled "Surgery" and "Sergeant Prishibeyev." In "Surgery," a sexton, Exaudimeyev, visits the hospital to have his tooth removed and is, to his surprise, met instead by the orderly, Kuryatin. At first, the two enjoy congenial conversation. However, once Kuryatin begins to extract the tooth, the pain sets in and the sexton loses his composure. Exaudimeyev flagrantly criticizes the orderly's brutal technique, which causes him to become extremely defensive. Both men fail to act professionally, displaying not only their true ignorance, but also their lack of respect for one another. The deeper value of Chekhov's story renders the reader with his critique of the arrogance and irrationality that occurs when people refuse to calmly make themselves understood between differences in status and beliefs.

Similarly in "Sergeant Prishibeyev," Chekhov makes light of the combative ego of public officials and their abuse of power. The story reports the indictment of Sergeant Prishibeyev for his disorderly use of language in public. As the charges are brought forth, Prishibeyev behaves increasingly more defensive. He views his actions as just in reference to the law, when in reality, he exploded on local villagers for singing songs and lounging on their porches. Though the villagers have broken no laws, Prishibeyev believes these activities to represent sloth and laziness. By acting on his own accord, the officer becomes the criminal. Lindheim describes Prishibeyev as representing a "man in a shell, where the shell stands for anything that traps and confines individuals, anything that impoverishes rather than enriches, anything that enslaves rather than liberates." Chekhov intentionally critiques such status roles by creating a hilariously absurd situation, symbolizing his vision for artistic freedom. Throughout both "Surgery" and "Sergeant Prishibeyev," Chekhov emphasizes the faulty reality and complete misunderstandings that humans conceive in order to maintain their arbitrary divisions between status and social roles.

Using the comedic elements of communication breakdown as a foundation, another key theme Chekhov employs is the tendency humans have towards wasting their lives in the present with fantastical views of the future. In this sense, Chekhov's characters often suffer psychologically because they are overwhelmed by regret, or they become disillusioned in their unrealistic hopes for a better life. The result is a feeling of estrangement, both from themselves and those around them as time ceaselessly passes. Lindheim elucidates Chekhov's intentions as he writes, "Human beings are more pitied than feared or hated because all, not just special groups or generations, are caught in a losing battle against time." Despite the seemingly cynical implications of such beliefs Chekhov offers inspiration for the blessing of life in the present. His explicit emphasis on the failures of his characters renders the audience or reader with the realistic hope that the ordinary, daily existence they live is extremely significant. Though the characters in Chekhov's works never realize their

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utter misconceptions of time, it is implied to the reader or audience. The main idealistic characters in his plays and short stories do not become heroes; in fact they are usually the most comedic and absurd characters. Instead, realistic secondary characters often prevail, symbolizing Chekhov's faith in the extraordinary potential of human life in the present.

Chekhov best displays his reverence for the present in his plays *Uncle Vanya* and *The Cherry Orchard*. *Uncle Vanya* tells the story of a Professor and his young wife, Yelena, who relocate to his country estate from the city. Vanya is the caretaker of the estate, along with the Professor's daughter, Sonya, from his first marriage. Vanya has been neglecting the work of the estate due to his severe depression on account of his regret over his wasted life. When his mother discusses the topic of his past, Vanya replies,

"Up until this last year I was just like you—I kept trying to fool myself with that intellectual gobbledygook of yours, so I wouldn't have to face reality. And I thought I was doing something. And now! If you only knew! I can't sleep nights, I'm so depressed, I'm so angry—all that time wasted, when I could have been doing everything I can't do now because I'm too old!"

This quote embodies the mindset that Chekhov wishes to criticize. Vanya has wasted his life attempting to work off the mortgage for the estate rather than engaging himself in the greatness of youth. At the end of the play, the professor and Yelena eventually leave because they cannot stand the country life or the constant condescending remarks from Vanya. The epitome of the play arrives once the two have left and Vanya is sitting in his office with Sonya. As he complains about his unhappiness, Sonya tells him that the two of them must continue living and that once they die, they will truly receive their rewards for the suffering they have endured. Ironically, this is the final statement of the play, with Sonya embracing a blind hope in their futures resembling the same idealistic vision Vanya must have possessed when he was younger. The tragedy of the play seems to be the inevitable perpetuation of bottomless hope that caused Vanya to become so direly depressed. Consequently, Chekhov brilliantly causes the audience to understand the value of seeking truth and happiness in the present, rather than in an imagined future.

The Cherry Orchard further expresses the uselessness and irrationality of human denial of reality. Liubov Ranyevskaya, the owner of the estate that will be auctioned desperately holds on to the illusion that a miracle will spontaneously occur, rescuing the family from debt. Though the rest of her family and onlookers notice the disillusionments of Liubov, they all share her same wishes of keeping the estate. Lindheim writes, "They do not discard their foolish poses, their impractical dreams, their illusions, because to give them up would be to surrender not just their pitiful camouflage, but also their most intense desires and aspirations to be better, different, higher." Such negligence of reality adds to Chekhov's use of the absurdity in order to create comedy, which is present in *The Cherry Orchard*, but also to explore the disparity that occurs when humans attempt to hide from the unforgiving powers of the external world. *Uncle Vanya* and *The Cherry Orchard* promote both qualities, further defining the style of Chekhovian literature.

However, the attribute that combines Chekhov's comedy and his worry over wasted life to fully produce his plays on stage or in the mind of the reader is his innovative engagement with the audience. His succinct use of detail intentionally forces the audience to pay close attention in order to avoid missing any momentous information about the play. Andrew R. Durkin writes,

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"Such apparently pointless details not only intensify the illusion of reality with the confines of a short work, but also help to engage the reader who cannot assume that all the elements in the story have been "preselected" because they are significant or directly pertinent to the plot. The reader's task is to distinguish the essential from the peripheral or nonessential. His judgment must be actively involved in these small matters and in larger ones as well."

It is extremely important to note that Durkin uses the word "judgment" to describe the role of the audience because it gives each Chekhovian work a personal element. The audience must form an interpretive relationship with the text or production. As a result, the audience finds and creates a reality within the play or short story. This engagement helps to explain Chekhov's venerable value of the present in relation to his works. In essence, Chekhov's work can always remain fresh and realistic in the present as each reader or audience member molds and incorporates it into his or her own reality.

Furthermore, Chekhov contrasts his tremendous attention to detail with his deliberate lack of conclusive endings. He does not reveal his characters' futures, or hint towards a definitive conclusion to his works beyond speculation. This highly distinctive Chekhovian trait ultimately enhances the experience of his works for the reader or audience. Durkin explains, "Chekhov intentionally 'fails' to describe a situation fully so as to draw the attentive reader into more imaginative participation than would be the case if Chekhov were to state explicitly all implications." Not only does this draw readers or audience members to seek more fulfillment from his subtle details, it also perpetuates an imaginative response. Chekhov's characters never realize their mistakes because they lack perceptive reasoning into the deeper significance of their interactions and experiences. Similarly, if the readers or audience members fail to fully devote their attention to every detail, they will also become lost in their pursuit for truth. Thus, Chekhov completely enraptures the audience in his works, while encouraging and nurturing personal creative nuances.

The five Vaudevilles that will be performed by the Wabash College Theatre Department are prime examples of Chekhovian engagement. They all perfectly exhibit the farcical characteristics, the emphasis on time, and the inconclusiveness of other works written by Chekhov. The dialogue of *The Alien Corn* carries the thread of a ridiculous discussion about mustard that leads into a critique of the differences between French and Russian culture. *The Bear* focuses on an estranged widow who grieves excessively over the death of her late disgruntled husband. Chekhov forces the audience to revel in the detail within the seemingly whimsical, outrageous dialogues in *The Proposal* and *A Jubilee*. Finally, *On the Harmful Effects of Tobacco* leads the audience into imagining the strange and oppressive relationship between the speaker and his wife, not explicitly embellished by Chekhov. Though every one-act represents a Chekhovian work, each embodies and creates its own distinctive reality.

As I had the exclusive honor of viewing *The Cherry Orchard* at the Steppenwolf Upstairs Theatre in Chicago on Saturday February 5, 2005, I realized that the essence of Chekhovian literature is truly embedded in its purest form: the stage production. Directed by Tina Landau, the setting of the Ranyevskaya estate was nothing more than several wooden items of furniture and four billboard-size wooden frames with a lace fabric filling in the center for walls. Immediately I knew that the performance would demand everything from the actors and actresses. I wanted to grasp the paradox between prejudicial and idealistic misconceptions of truth, and the ambivalent reality of human existence. Distinctively, each player captured the pride,

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joy, indifference, ambition, and disillusionment written in Chekhov's original version of *The Cherry Tree*. It was a brilliant performance. I laughed at Peter Trofimov (Ned Noyes) and his rants about the importance of work, though he spends all of his time studying. I laughed at Yasha's (Ben Viccellio) pompous, completely self-absorbed sneers and laughter. I fell for the nostalgic Liubov Ranyevskaya's (Amy Morton) masquerades as she saw only her family and her cherry orchard. And I knew that all was real when Firs (Leonard Kraft) laid down for his final, tired monologue. Ultimately, I was there, exactly where Chekhov wanted me to be: living a reality he created on stage.

Stanislavski and Chekhov

By Joey Smith

The face of theatre has not always been like it is today. With each culture and each time period comes a new style of theatre. Just over a hundred years ago, the theatre was completely turned upside down by two Russians, a director and a playwright. Anton Pavlovich Chekhov and Konstantin Stanislavski changed the way actors acted and playwrights wrote. They changed the theatre into the modern day theatre it is today. This all started in a small theatre called the Moscow Art Theatre and has turned into the main way theatre is viewed today. In this paper I will divulge the history of the Moscow Art Theatre, how Chekhov and Stanislavski helped create the Moscow Art Theatre, and how they changed the way we see theatre.

Konstantin Stanislavski was born on January 5, 1863 in Moscow. Being born into a very wealthy, theatrical family, Stanislavski was placed into a theatre group at age fourteen. The years he was with this family organized group, he perfected his acting abilities and became a major player in the group. At age 25, Konstantin took the stage name Stanislavski, in order to avoid the reputation, and stereotype of the extravagant son of a rich man. In that same year he started the Society of Art and Literature. This was an amateur company at the Maly Theatre. After growing and maturing as an actor, he began to produce and direct plays. As he was producing and directing, he felt that the theatre was not as meaningful as it should be. He felt that it had not the realism that it should have had. So he decided to create a new style of acting that relied more on the emotional and psychological role of the character. This is called method acting in the present time. After establishing his methods on acting, he teamed up with Vladimir Nemirovich Danchenko, to start up the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898. He used this theatre to put his new methods on the stage.

Prior to the Moscow Art Theatre and the revolutionary acting techniques originating from Chekhov and Stanislavski, the actor had a different style of acting. Melodrama – a dramatic form in which exaggeration of effect and emotion is produced and plot or action is emphasized at the expense of characterization.¹ This was a major method of acting prior to the Stanislavski System. It was based on exaggerating the acting that is done by the actor in order to tell the audience how he/she is feeling. In melodrama, if an actor was supposed to be angry, he/she might scream their lines and use really big, fast movements to portray angst. They did this to make sure the audience knew how the actor was supposed to be feeling. When an actor would prepare him/herself for a character, he would not do the in depth character analysis that actors do today.

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Melodrama style acting did not allow a playwright the ability to write with realism because he knew it would not be portrayed that way.

At the time just prior to Stanislavski, Sigmund Freud's psychotherapy just became the newest and best way to understand the human mind. In this psychological process, one would have their past experiences analyzed to help understand who they are in the present. Stanislavski was very much inspired by this idea when creating the new style of acting. Stanislavski's new method of acting required many new things for the actors to learn and unlearn. One thing to keep in mind while reading this is the fact that most of the actors Stanislavski taught his new acting method to had to actually "unlearn" how they already learned to act to learn Stanislavski's new system. The Stanislavski System is a very deep and complicated method of acting.

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It all starts with what Stanislavski called the "super objective" (sounds a little bit like Freud's Superego). The "super objective" is the overall driving force that is supposed to drive the character. The actor would have to think what the character's objective in the overall play is. With that in mind, the actor should bend to that objective. An example of this is if an actor's character is trying through the entire play to get the girl he is in love with, that "super objective" should be played out throughout the entire play. The "super objective" can be broken into smaller increments in the play. It all depends on how the director wants the character to develop.

The next idea in the Stanislavski System is the idea of action. Stanislavski says that an actor, when engaged in the process of carrying out an action, should always have a purpose to that action. "Do not run for the sake of running, or suffer for the sake of suffering. Don't act "in general", for the sake of action, always act with a purpose."² An actor should always have a reason why he/she is carrying out an action on stage, even if the director has not told them what to do. The actor should always be asking themselves why they are doing what they are doing. If they do not have an answer for this, they are not acting within the parameters of the system.

The next idea of the Stanislavski system is the idea of the "magic if". The "magic if" is the process in which the actor will keep asking him/herself "What if?" "What if my character just got a letter from his mother saying that she is leaving his father?" Questions like this allow the actor to explore the depth of emotion in their character. This process would require the actor to do many improvisations of the character. Each separate improvisation would be a different what if. When improvising the many magic ifs, the actors would have to rely on "given circumstances". This would require the actor to do a little dramaturgical research. He would have to know the story, the conditions of life in that time, character's purpose, the place of action, and the interpretation of the production.

These are only some of the ideas behind the "given circumstances". As one can see, the actor would take these "given circumstances" and act within the boundaries of them. Stanislavski said that for an actor to do all the things he thought they should do to be prepared for their character, the actor must use his imagination. He says that an actor should imagine all different kinds of scenarios that the character could be involved with. To do such things, the actor needs to use their imagination.

Finally, one of the other techniques Stanislavski introduced to the actors is the idea of "emotion memory". This would require the actor to recall past experiences in order to play them more realistically. He said that if an actor had to play a part that required him to be sad, that actor should use past experiences of sadness to help himself find the most realistic way to play it. Just like Freud's therapy methods, Stanislavski had the actors use past experiences to understand better why the character is feeling the

way he/she was feeling. Stanislavski said that an actor should bring some of himself into the role he plays. With this new acting method, the actor could throw himself into a character, letting his recalled emotions help with the character he was about to portray. This allowed for an actor to become more "in touch" with the character he was depicting, which, in turn, made for a more realistic character. "Ask an actor, after some great performance, how he felt while on the stage, and what he did there. He will not be able to answer because he was not aware of what he lived through, and does not remember many of the more significant moments. All you will get from him is that he felt comfortable on the stage that he was in easy relationship to the other actors. Beyond that, he will be able to tell you nothing. You will astonish him by your description of his acting. He will gradually come to realize things about his performance of which he had been entirely unconscious."³

Stanislavski's new method allowed actors to "step-out" of who they were now, and become the character they were going to portray. And the actor will not be able to remember what the character was feeling because he/she is no longer that character and can therefore not think like that character.

Anton Chekhov was born on January 17th, 1860 in Taganrog, Russia. His father was a croaker, not very wealthy. He had a very strong faith in his religion, and was a very strict disciplinarian. It has been said that he beat his children on a daily basis. When he Chekhov was sixteen, his family left him alone in Taganrog because their father went bankrupt. Chekhov stayed to finish his education. After finishing his education, he went to Moscow (that is where his family fled to) to meet back up with his family. While in Moscow he studied medicine, and helped support his family through writing. His writing started with some comic sketches for different journals.

These sketches usually had a political message, and usually stating his views rather bluntly. "I am afraid of those who will look for tendentiousness between the lines and who are determined to see me either as a liberal or a conservative. I am neither a liberal nor a conservative, neither a gradualist nor a monk nor an indifferentist. I would like to be nothing more than a free artist, and I regret that God did not give me the gift to be one."⁴ Even as a younger comic writer, Chekhov had a strong sense of self, knowing who he was. He wanted to not be held down with labels of political views. He wanted to be able to write what ever he wanted to without expectation.

His "free-artist" views attracted a small cult following. With his rising success and growing group of followers, he was promoted to The St. Petersburg Gazette in 1882. In 1884, he graduated as a doctor, and practiced when he needed to. Years after writing comics and sporadically practicing medicine, he became a national literary figure, now working at St. Petersburg biggest and most popular newspaper. In 1887, Chekhov wrote his first hit play called Ivanov. This play received mixed responses from the critics of his time. This play inspired other plays that received the same mixed views from critics. It was not until 1889, when he was able to join the Moscow Art Theatre, that he really got to see his plays be performed the way he wrote them to be performed. Under the direction of Stanislavski, he was able to see his plays be performed the way he thought them to be performed.

Chekhov wrote plays in which he paid little attention to the plot. Chekhov emphasized imagery and themes important to the time of civil unrest in his plays. His characters were written to be ambiguous in the purpose and left up to interpretation. His characters were also deeply emotional, and required a realistic actor. When at the Moscow Art Theatre, he found the director who helped his characters develop

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--Anton Chekhov

emotionally like Chekhov wanted. It seems that Chekhov and Stanislavski helped each other out, in developing this new way of acting. It is said that Stanislavski is the one who started the new method of realistic acting, but it was Chekhov's plays that inspired that new way. It was the "Stanislavski System" that truly brought Chekhov's plays to life. The characters usually searching for meaning in life were sad and required a realism to that sadness. Allowing the actor to recall on past experiences of sadness really brought out what Chekhov was trying to say with his writing. "Man is what he believes"⁵ says Anton Chekhov. Therefore, if a man can recall on his past experiences to make himself believe that he is feeling the same emotion of the character, then, that actor is that character because he believes in what he feels.

The Moscow Art Theatre was started by Konstantin Stanislavski and Nemirovich Danchenko in 1897. This theatre started as a modest theatre putting on shows that received mixed reviews. What made this theatre so popular was the fact that Chekhov and Stanislavski used it to start the revolution in acting. They used the Moscow Art stage to change the face of theatre forever. With the melancholy scripts from Chekhov, and the emotionally charged directing of Stanislavski, The Moscow Art Theatre became the primary theatre in Russia. The Moscow Art Theatre is still here today, and has been a staple in the theatre community all over the world. It has inspired the creation of other timeless theatre groups such as The Actors Studio. It also has inspired the legendary Group Theatre. During a practice that Chekhov came to in 1889, one of the actors told him that during the play frogs croaked backstage, dragonflies hummed and dogs howled.

"What for?" asked Chekhov, sounding dissatisfied. "It's realistic," said the actor. "Realistic", Chekhov repeated with a laugh. And then after a brief pause, he remarked, "The stage is art. In one of Kramskoy's genre paintings he has some magnificently drawn faces. What if we cut out the painted noses from one of these faces and substituted a live one? The new nose would be real but the painting would be ruined."⁶

The relationship between Chekhov and Stanislavski is a rather peculiar one. Inspired by the writing of Chekhov, Stanislavski created a new style of acting. Inspired by the direction of Stanislavski, Chekhov wrote some of his best, richest, and emotionally charged plays. It seems that if they would not have met, they would not have been as prominent and important today. They respected each other very much, for the work that they did. Stanislavski called Chekhov "the best of men". They both recognized each others talent and fed off of it. But, at the same time, they feuded with each other. They would disagree on many occasions. They were emotionally charged people writing, and directing, emotionally charged theater. Although, the feuding only made them stronger in their craft. Each one would not the other one do anything less than his best.

The legacy of Chekhov and Stanislavski are seen worldwide. Each actor practicing the "Stanislavski System" on both the stage and in film is part of the arts. Although now it has transformed into what is called "method acting". We see this style of acting in all forms of acting media. It has inspired such great actors as Marlon Brando and Sean Penn. This modern style of acting allows for actors to develop their characters with deeper and more subtle emotions. This is very important in today's theatre. A character has to be believable and real in today's standards. If it was not for Stanislavski and Chekhov, we might not have the real and believable characters. Stanislavski and Chekhov have left their "mark" on the world through their books, scripts, ideas, etc. Through the Moscow Art Theatre, they were able to inspire future companies who would follow in the footsteps that theatre. It is easy to see the affects that Chekhov and Stanislavski has on the arts today. It is everywhere.

"Inspired by the direction of Stanislavski, Chekhov wrote some of his best, richest, and emotionally charged plays."

The Evolution of Modern Acting

By Alex Rinks

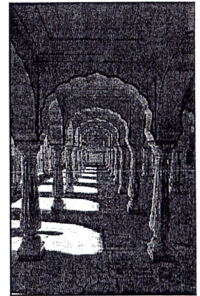
The most effective performers do not act. "They try not to act but to be themselves, to respond or to react", states the once teacher and leader of the Actors Studio Strasberg. This method or style of acting can be classified as method acting and its roots stem back to the early Russian pioneers of the theater, Anton Chekhov and Konstantin Stanislavsky. The influence of these two individuals significantly changed the American theater and acting forever. With the influence of these two, actors such as Marlon Brando and Sean Penn have continued to transform acting, theater, and film today.

Chekhov and Stanislavsky broke the code on typical "melodramatic acting" and transformed the entire make-up of acting. Chekhov wrote plays that concentrated less on plot and more on the interaction and relationships between individuals or actors. This naturalistic approach to theater that Chekhov created became a stepping-stone for Stanislavsky's ideas on acting and it helped him to develop his own unique system of training. Using Stanislavsky's method, actors would research the situation created by the script, breakdown the text according to their character's motivations and recall their own experiences, thereby causing actions and reactions according to these motivations (Kryingsky web site). "In our art you must live the part every moment that you are playing it, and every time" (An Actor Prepares). Chekhov and Stanislavsky are the two most influential individuals in beginning the evolution of acting.

In 1898, Stanislavsky and Dantchenko opened the Moscow Art Theatre, later proving to be the most influential event in the evolution of modern theater. These two individuals, "represent interchangeably the ideals of content and form, plays and productions, regarded as a unity social and human vision, made concrete and beautiful through their spontaneous organic embodiment in the complete medium of the theatre - of which the true focus is a group of actors" (The Actors Studio website). Dantchenko brought the idea of creating "psychological portraits" to the theater. He began doing plays that involved the psychological interactions between characters. He believed that each playwright or director should present his own ideal of realism in a production. Ultimately, through him, a stronger emphasis was made on content in modern theater. In order for this ideal to take shape in theater, a new system of acting needed to be developed. Through endless searching, observation, and learning, Stanislavsky began to develop what is known today as "the method". It took him nearly a decade to develop the method, but its value has enabled it to continue to be taught to actors today. The joint effort of these two individuals and the development of the Moscow Art Theatre significantly transformed modern theater, enabling those who followed after to continue its evolution.

In 1931, Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford and Lee Strasberg opened The Group Theatre, later proving to be an extremely influential piece of American theater. These three idealists opened The Group Theatre in New York which became the American equivalent to the Moscow Art Theater. The goal of these individuals was to transition the American theater away from its highly melodramatic style, to a new more naturalistic style.

The Group Theatre was a company based on an ensemble approach to acting. First seen in the work of the Moscow Art Theater, the ensemble approach proposed a highly personal and cooperative method. That individual actors played individual parts



Caption describing picture or graphic.

"The most effective performers do not act."

was no longer important. The focus was on a cast that was familiar and believable as a whole. If the actors had relationships off-stage, then the relationships on stage would not only seem, but be more "real." As the members of the ensemble grew to know each other, this familiarity was successfully reflected in their work. (PBS website)

Based on techniques learned from Stanislavsky, Lee Strasberg came up with what is today known as "the method". The method proposed a series of physical and psychological exercises. For example, if the part called for jealousy, the actor must remember an instance in his or her life of jealousy and bring an honest emotion to the stage. These techniques enabled the actor to break down the barrier between life on and off the stage. The first production in the Group Theatre was "The House of Connelly" and it marked a significant shift in the American theater. For the first time in the American theater, "method acting" was being used and it sparked a phenomenon that is still being experienced today. By the late 1930's the group began to crumble due to a lack of funding and problems involving disputes about "the method". In response, this sent many of the actors to Hollywood to do film and by 1941 The Group Theatre was no longer in tact. "Despite its relatively short life span, The Group Theatre has been called the bravest and single most significant experiment in the history of American theater, and its impact continues to be felt" (PBS website).

"The Group Theatre has been called the bravest and single most significant experiment in the history of American theater."

After the demise of the Group Theatre, Lee Strasberg went on to continue teaching "the method" at the newly developed Actors Studio. At the same time, Stella Adler was also teaching method acting. However, these two individuals interpreted Stanislavsky's ideas differently. Strasberg placed emphasis on how the actors should draw from their own experiences to inhabit a character. His method of teaching involved stressing the importance of concentration, relaxation, and sense memory. Adler insisted that actors must pay closer attention to the plays circumstances than to their own memories or emotions. Her classes involved predominately voice and body work. These two individuals taught the method simultaneously in New York to some of the great actors that we have come to appreciate in modern film and theater today.

Arguably the greatest method actor of all time is Marlon Brando. Marlon Brando Jr. was born on April 3rd 1924 and died on July 2nd 2004. Brando grew up in Omaha, Nebraska and experienced a very difficult childhood. Both of his parents were alcoholics and this problem affected Brando later in his life as well. In 1943, Brando's father acquired enough money to send him to New York to pursue his lifelong dream of becoming an actor. Upon arriving in New York, Brando attended the New School and then the Actor's Studio where he learned method acting. "The Actor's studio pioneered this form of acting, which stipulated that actors would try and emulate and attempt to become the roles they were employed to play" (Barker 1).

Brando excelled while attending acting school and broke onto Broadway with his first role in the stage drama I Remember Mama. Brando gained his first major recognition when he won "Broadway's Most Promising Actor" for his lead role in Truckline Café. He continued to gain recognition on the stage and his role in Tennessee William's A Streetcar Named Desire gained him the needed recognition to transition into Hollywood film. His first role in Hollywood really gave Brando the chance to show his experience as a method actor. In The Men Brando portrayed a wheelchair bound Ken Wilcheck. In preparation for this part, Brando spent three weeks in the paraplegic ward of a veteran's home (Barker, 1). This performance led to Brando's first of many Oscar nominations. Brando's film career continued to rise and he developed in to what most consider to be the best method actor of all time. His dedication to method acting, and becoming a character, significantly influenced generations of actors and truly transformed what is considered "good acting" today.

Method acting continues to take shape in theater and film today. "The efforts to adopt certain characters have been taken to the extremes famously by actors such as Robert De Niro, who put on 60 pounds to play an older Jake Le Motta in Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull*" (Barker, 1). More recently, actor Jamie Foxx lost 30 pounds as well as shadowed the everyday life of Ray Charles (a blind musician) in order to become his character for the film *Ray*. The method is continuing to be used in film and theater today and those actors who use it are among what critics consider to be the elite.

Sean Penn is leading the frontier for method acting in film today. Penn was born in Burbank, California in 1960. He was born son of Leo Penn, an actor, writer, and director during the McCarthy era (Tiscali website). During childhood, Penn grew up taking acting classes and developing the techniques that he vividly portrays in films today. Being a normal surfer kid from Southern California, Penn received the "dream job" as he played surfer/stoner Jeff Spicoli in *Fast Times at Ridgemoat High*, proving to be his breakout film. Penn continued to excel in Hollywood until earning an Oscar for Best Actor for his performance in *Mystic River*. In this performance, Penn takes on the role of a father whose 19-year-old daughter is murdered. Penn is noted for using his own emotions of rage to fuel the character that he becomes in this film. This film really exhibits Penn's ability to become a character and his ability as a method actor.

Acting has evolved significantly throughout history. With the development of method acting, theater and film have become more realistic. Acting is no longer simply reading lines of a character, but it is becoming the character and using your own experience to make the character come to life. Its evolution began with Chekhov and Stanislavsky and continues today with De Niro and Penn. Acting has seen significant change throughout history and will continue to evolve into the future as new actors and take techniques are introduced.

Dispassionate Authors By Denis Farr

In a paragraph to his brother Aleksandr, Anton Chekhov related his views on the concept of a dispassionate, non-judgmental author. In helping Dwight Watson with his production of a collection of Vaudevilles, or short one act plays, I have found his six points an invaluable device for gauging and looking at the writing and even acting process for this work. Being in the role of both dramaturge and actor, it has lent a new view on things beyond the slight snippets the director may ask an actor to look up on his or her own volition. Therefore, it would be most prudent to discuss these points and examine each one as it has applied to Chekhov's Vaudevilles that have been selected to be performed here and our own work on weaving them together.

The first point is to have an "absence of lengthy verbiage of political-social-economic nature" (Maraden 14). Chekhov was known to try and avoid labels on himself, therefore it makes sense that this should follow in his Vaudevilles, which were based off the French tradition of Vaudeville, which was better known as *voix de villes*, translated as "song of the streets" or "voices of the city." While Chekhov's later works are much more serious and austere in nature, his earlier Vaudevilles seem to be some of his more comical work. Of course, Chekhov himself considered his full length plays comedies as well. These Vaudevilles, however, have very little to do with singing or dancing, but overarching farce without any necessary political affiliation.

Class, land ownership, and nationality are some themes that do appear in the vaudevilles that have been selected to be performed here at Wabash. However, looking at these plays in a closer depth, Chekhov allows fun to be poked at everyone in equal measure, and makes sure that these quips are quite short-lived and quick to be passed on and moved beyond for the next Vaudeville in line. It seems as if *The Alien Corn*, perhaps the most nationalistically charged piece, is perfect as the shortest play in the collection present. The verbiage is sparse, and Chekhov could indeed go into more depth on the characters of Champagne, Misha, or Kamyshhev. So, while the theater may be a forum for political discussion, as a removed author one must be careful.

In the writing of the intermediate scenes, the purpose has become to introduce the pieces. Therefore, the question of politics, social order, or even economics may only be brought up in order to educate the audience. These scenes are not even meant to detract from the plays themselves. Instead, the actors have been told to be somewhat reserved and spare their energy for the productions themselves. Indeed, in the introduction to *The Alien Corn* has as the longest line, as of the day of this publication, "A dull Sunday on a country estate. Kamyshhev, the owner of the estate is making a leisurely lunch..." The line continues in much the same vein, borrowing from the description provided in the script itself. There is no bent Watson and I are portraying to the audience other than informing them of the play they are to see, which, under Chekhov's own rules should be devoid of his views as well.

Which leads to the second point Chekhov illustrated: "total objectivity" (Maraden 14). As stated above, Chekhov has fun at the expense of all the characters. All the characters are flawed and none of them have anything that allows them to rise above anyone else. These are all characters with neuroses and problems that will hopefully make the audience crack a chuckle or two. While Chekhov lived in a very politically charged time, each of his one-acts allow for a nice view of the time period

"There is no bent Watson and I are portraying to the audience other than informing them of the play they are to see, which, under Chekhov's own rules should be devoid of his views as well."

and then steps back to allow an audience's interpretation. The problem lies not in the author here, however, but in the production itself. What choices do the actors and directors make?

Disseminating information can be seen as either the most or least intrusive act. In providing information, I would argue that Watson and I are merely offering a slice of the pie. There is obviously quite a bit of information we will not and cannot include. The selection of the information presented is primarily to give the name of the play, perhaps allow an interesting fact from Chekhov's own quotations to appear, and then disappear, an author whose words are heard but not thought about too terribly much. We offer no interpretations nor give preference on the information of one play over another.

"Truthful depictions of persons and objects" are said to also allow a non-judgmental author to form (Maradan 14). Unfortunately, not knowing the people of the time period, it is hard to conjecture whether Chekhov's characters are accurate depictions. However, considering the element of farce, Chekhov has very clearly exaggerated the characters. Is this truthful? It probably is not the case that such characters were actually in existence, but the carefully constructed comedic sketches of characters that Chekhov himself used in order to gain laughs from an audience and make broad generalizations about types of people.

From the very beginning, Watson has made clear that none of these characters are normal in his view. They all have physical or mental ailments of some sort that he believes connects with the fact that Chekhov was trained as a physician. When he was writing the Vaudevilles he was still working primarily as a physician. Yet, even in his characters there is a large sense that these characters' ailments have been blown out of proportion and are not to the degree with which people dealt with them.

As Watson and I are depicting the actors as no more than actors, they have no characterization. Again, they are not meant to distract from the primary attraction of the evening, meant as a finger food before the main meal. Indeed, the production itself will be in period dress with very realistic furniture. The main effect of the show is to be a snapshot in sepia tones, reenacting a scene where Chekhov is reading to Konstantin Stanislavski and his troupe of actors.

Perhaps the most adhered to point in terms of our production is that of extreme brevity (Maradan 14). Chekhov's one acts themselves are also short, though perhaps their brevity is best noted when the dialogue of the characters is short, clipped, and very close to everyday speech, as was Chekhov's bent. To reiterate, Chekhov has many points he could drive on and expound upon in order to further make sure the audience gets whatever point is to be made, yet this is not the goal. Some characters stutter and go off on tangents, true, but they are characters that are passionate and have one humour or another out of place.

Without having to deal with characterization or the entire process of creating a play within a play, the introduction scenes are brief and to the point. There is nothing they say that is extraneous or more than what needs to be said. No liberties are taken in the fact that the audience will be sitting there for the performances, therefore the production can say whatever it will and it will be heard. A quick introduction and the next scene is ready. In point of fact, the opening scene for The Jubilee is merely, "A Jubilee!"

"The main effect of the show is to be a snapshot in sepia tones, reenacting a scene where Chekhov is reading to Konstantin Stanislavski and his troupe of actors."

To be audacious and original without the use of stereotype seems rather redundant until one considers that even with stereotype one can create a body of work as impressive as Shakespeare's—or Chekhov's (Maradan 14). Chekhov does use stereotypes, but is audacious and has some original, thought-provoking works. Considering the fact that he did not have actors who could do his works justice at first seems to speak to this quite clearly. This was a man who was ahead of his time. Unfortunately, the themes found in these Vaudevilles would later show up again in his full-length plays, but at least they were fleshed out more fully by that time.

“Chekhov does use stereotypes, but is audacious and has some original, thought-provoking works. Considering the fact that he did not have actors who could do his works justice at first seems to speak to this quite clearly. This was a man who was ahead of his time.”

While much of the intermediary material as it now stands is no more than quotations and quick synopses, these are not delivered completely devoid of any thought. In order to stop the staccato flow, there is a mixture of quotes, where one actor starts, and is interrupted halfway through by another quotation:

Actor #1: “Medicine is my lawful wife,”
 Actor #2: “I’ll write a vaudeville...”
 Actor #1: “... and literature is my mistress.”
 Actor #2: “and that will keep me happy ‘til the summer.”

The actors are generally actors, but by being general, there is no stereotype attributed to them. Essentially, as there is no deep thought to be put in character, the character itself is almost nothing more than words lifted off the page to be delivered to the audience in a manner which befits the stage. There is no room for deep psychological study, nor the complete shuffling off into the role of the servant versus the master or the two lovers who cannot attain each other due to their families’ strife toward each other.

After all his tenets, Chekhov ends with that of compassion (Maradan 14). This seems the most surprising of all after the previous five. Yet, it means that that the author in question must be concise and an expert craftsman. The term playwright fits perfectly, as one who builds and constructs plays. In a short, precise piece removing the author’s personal political and social opinions, there is supposed to be compassion. The audience is made to be brought in to these characters’ lives and experience some part of them.

Chekhov’s use of stereotype is a double-edged sword. It allows the extreme to be recognized, and thereby the audience may recall to its mind a person that exemplifies such behavior to a lesser degree. Making this more personal, for even play watching audience members have been known to exaggerate tales and persons. At the same time these characters are the extreme and it can be hard to view them as exactly human. Merchootkina in *The Jubilee* is the belligerent old woman who wishes to be paid the rest of her husband’s salary. With the help of Jamie Watson, Merchootkina is an aggravating old woman who hears nothing but that which she wants to hear.

In the writing of these scenes, there is not much more compassion that can be implemented beyond the author’s own words about the process of writing and his plays opened up themselves. In order to more fully involve the audience, there is a push to make them more familiar with their surroundings for the next scene to gain a better understanding so that they may not only watch the play performed before them, but to allow the intimacy of the Experimental Theater to draw them in so that they may not sit back and be completely removed from the action.

As for myself, this process has been an intriguing mixture of research and collaboration. Just this past week the cast has received small parts to read as the

moving of stage props is set into action. It was Friday, February 11th that Dwight Watson and I sat together in his office and kicked around some ideas so as to judge their merit. One such idea was perhaps to have almost a guide to the evening, thereby allowing him or her a closer connection to the audience so as to make it easier to move them from the Experiment to Ball Theater before The Harmful Effects of Tobacco...

Such issues have been looked at in both practical and creative merit. In the case of moving the audience, it is to be an announcement, where the cast members shall precede the audience so as to guard the bathrooms. Here it was questioned whether the actors needed any scripted dialogue among each other. Not only is the question of what should be written important, but where is it needed and when does it become superfluous? Eventually the guide was abandoned anyway, as it was decided that this would be entirely too dependent on an interaction with the audience that breaks their attention from the Chekhovian words (albeit translated) to be presented to them in a manner imitating acting. After this it was questioned whether or not these characters would be trustworthy.

If a character's information is not to be trusted fully, and it is made apparent, the audience would be on its guard. Is this a desired effect, however? That is what every eventual question comes down to as well, is this a desired effect? What are we looking to achieve? Through this process it has been interesting to consider the audience beyond the method of acting, directing, or designing. This is the question of how we conduct the evening for them.

Then, of course, there is the research. Luckily, in working for Watson, he handed me various printed websites he wished analyzed and fished for facts that ought to be interesting. Here it was that I learned of the puns on the names and Chekhov's almost glee in the simple thrill of words and how they fit together in the production. This little fact has had no role in the play as of yet beyond personal pleasure in knowing something that makes sense and seems to unlock something of these plays. So far, in fact, most of the information is not required, but is nice to know that the information is there if needed.

The scripts now having been written, it is intriguing to know how very little information is actually in the dialogue. Though I knew it would be sparse, the actual implementation is truly interesting to view in a sense. At the outset I thought perhaps these would be miniature scenes interspliced through the production, but instead it has been intriguing to watch them be whittled down to short introductions that are barely noticeable as more than a chance to allow the stage to be set (literally and more).

"If a character's information is not to be trusted fully, and it is made apparent, the audience would be on its guard. Is this a desired effect, however?."

**Wabash College
Theater**

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Dramaturgy Course Description

This course is intended to bridge the gap between theater history/literature/theory and the performance areas of theater. Aimed primarily at the theater major and minor (though by no means excluding others), this course will focus on the process of textual and historical research/analysis and its collaborative impact on the creative process of the director (production concept), actor (characterization), playwright (play structure, narrative and character development) and designers (scenic, lighting, and costume design). Dramaturgy includes a study of various historical approaches to classic texts, as well as the process or research and investigation of material for new plays. Ideally, students enrolled in the course could be given dramaturgical responsibilities on mainstage and student-directed projects.

About Wabash Theater...

The Theater Department places a high value on the power of drama, particularly in performance, to celebrate humanity, to heal and to excite, to explore social, moral, political, and religious viewpoints and to challenge an audience to confront a multitude of ideas, feelings and values.

These matters are a central concern in both course work and the production of plays.

The theater department staff challenges the student to create his own plays and to act, design, and direct them.

Collaboration in production work offers the student an important opportunity to develop skills in working harmoniously and seriously with others.

In studying the significant classic and contemporary works of dramatic art and in mastering the basic crafts of performance, the theater student develops both his intellect and his technique.