The Notebook of Trigorin Production Notes

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CHEKHOV AND THE BIRTH OF *THE SEAGULL*

> CONSTANTINE TREPLEV: What we need's a new kind of theatre. New forms are what we need, and if we haven't got them we'd be a sight better off with nothing at all.[1]
>
> - Chekhov's *The Seagull*

By using his character's voice, Anton Chekhov conveys his artistic message to Russian Theatergoers – that the Russian theatre of the 1880s is no longer exciting. While stated within the dialogue of his *The Seagull* (1896), the entire work itself proposes the new form of theatre that Chekhov is suggesting (e.g. a play within a play). This, among other elements, is precisely why its premiere at the Alexandrine Theatre in St. Petersburg on 17 October 1896 was a flop. Even though this single instance is often referred to as the most traumatic episode in Anton Chekhov's life, his *The Seagull* came to bring him eventual pleasure, a wife, and, ultimately, notoriety for bringing about the transitional dramatic technique upon which the Moscow Art Theatre was founded. Although Olga Knipper became his spouse through marriage, "he frequently referred to narrative as the 'wife' to whom he considered himself respectfully united for life, to the theatre as his fickle and temporary mistress."[2] Following its failed premiere Chekhov's affair with his "mistress" is over as far as he is concerned. In a letter to his youngest brother, Mikhail Chekhov[3], he writes: "The moral of the story is: I shouldn't write plays."[4] It is not until two years later, after persuaded by a long-time admirer of *The Seagull*, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, that Chekhov allows his failed play to be produced as part of the opening repertory program of the Moscow Art Theatre. With cautious attention from Danchenko and his co-founder Constantine Stanislavski – who disliked both the play and the playwright – *The Seagull* became a historical achievement. In its transition from Chekhov's pen to St. Petersburg to Moscow, *The Seagull* is perhaps most symbolic of its playwright's life-long successes and failures.

From its conception Anton Chekhov indicated much anticipation about *The Seagull*. First mentioned in a letter to Alexei Suvorin (his publisher)[5] dated 21 October 1885, he writes:

> ....just imagine, I am writing a play which I probably will not finish until the end of November. I am writing it with considerable pleasure, though I sin frightfully against the conventions of the stage. It is a

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[1] Anton Chekhov. *The Seagull*, in Anton Chekhov: Five Plays, Translated by Ronald Hingley. New York: Oxford University Press. 1977: Act I: 70.

[2] Hingley, vii.

[3] **Mikhail Chekhov**, (1865-1936) Chekhov's youngest brother; Anton was the third of six children

[4] Lillian Hellman (ed.) The Selected Letters of Anton Chekhov. Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press. 1955, 1984: 194. [Letter dated 18 October 1896].

[5] **Alexei Suvorin** (1834-1912) was the editor of the powerful, conservative, St. Petersburg newspaper, *New Times*.

> comedy with three female parts, six male, four acts, a landscape (view of a lake), lots of talk on literature, little action and tons of love.[6]

Produced almost one complete year later - much of which is spent negotiating with the dramatic censor in Russia - the failed premiere of *The Seagull* has just as much to do with the circumstances of the performance as with Chekhov's unorthodox text. First, a famous comic actress, Elizabeth Levkeyev, holds a benefit celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of her stage debut. For unintelligent fans who were in the audience, not seeing their favorite actress (especially on *this* evening) is reason enough to despise the play,

> The audience was in a mutinous mood even before the curtain had gone up on that fateful night. Enraged by the absence of their favorite actress from the cast, these lovers of broad farce were not going to put up with the decadent highbrow rubbish. Knowing little or nothing about Chekhov, they cared less about 'new forms', whether in the theatre or anywhere else.[7]

This factor aside, the play itself had been under-rehearsed (staged in nine days) and had a cast which barely knew its lines and had very little confidence in its text. As the performance continues, unruly audience members hissed, whistled, laughed, turned their backs to the stage and had loud conversations of their own; all of which made the actors virtually inaudible. Chekhov, leaving the auditorium to go sit in the dressing room, missed the last two acts of *The Seagull* and it is not until 2:00 a.m. that he finally leaves the theatre; thus, as he feels at the time, parting from the theatre forever.

The following March, upon being found very ill of tuberculosis, his doctor forces Chekhov to move south for the winter: from his home in Melikhovo to the Crimean resort of Yalta. As many theater historians report about his condition following this transition, it is only theatre which, with begging, is granted his return:

> Although he was henceforth a semi-invalid and had again abandoned all thought of writing for the stage, he was once more to be restored to the theatre by theatre itself. In 1898 a newly formed company, the Moscow Art Theatre, persuaded him to permit the staging of his disgraced *Seagull*.[8]

Chekhov, fearing another unpopular audience response, made his presence at rehearsals as often as his health permitted. One such visit, on 9 September, proves itself historical for the reason that it is the first time he meets Olga Knipper[9]; one of the company's leading actresses, later to become his wife. Virtually an unknown in 1898, Olga (28) plays a very young Arkadina;

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[6] Lillian Hellman: 189.
[7] Hingley, xvi.
[8] *Ibid*, xvii.

Chekhov's portrayal of an eccentric actress and careless mother. Despite the irony of their distance, Knipper - committed to the Moscow Art Theatre - remains in Moscow while Chekhov's doctors forces him to stay in Yalta (his 'hot Siberia') – the actress and the playwright stay in contact with revealing letters to one another. The progression of their 'love letters' shows the metamorphosis from friends, to lovers, to husband and wife, to widow. Beginning in April of 1899 and married in 1901 they remained committed to one another until Chekhov's death in July 1904. Much of these letters discuss Olga's commitment to Chekhov's work - playing in *The Seagull, Uncle Vanya* (1897), *Three Sisters* (1900-1901) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1903-1904) – and in hindsight show the passion that Knipper felt for both her husband and his art. Chekhov's letters, on the other hand, speaks about life in Yalta, gardening, his visits to Tolstoy and Gorki, his attempts to write and frequent complaints about unwanted visitors. Although his interactions with Knipper are romantic, his loving sister, Maria[10], is very reluctant to show approval of their union. Chekhov, trying to comfort his sister, reassures her that it is to be "a marriage and no marriage."[11] This ideal echoes how Chekhov describes his wife "to-be" in an 1895 letter to Suvorin:

> All right, I'll get married if that is what you want. But my conditions are: everything must be as it was, i.e. she must live in Moscow and I in the country and I'll go and visit her. I can't bear happiness that continues either from day to day or from morning to morning. I promise to be a good husband, but find me the kind of wife who, like the moon, doesn't appear in my sky every day.[12]

Incidentally, it takes Chekhov three years to find the wife who meets these conditions. Olga Knipper is not his only love affair, but she is the only one he even considers to marry.

In her correspondence with Chekhov, Olga keeps him informed about her progress as an actress and how the audience is responding to his work, "Yesterday we performed our beloved *Seagull*. We played it with delight. The theatre was packed [....] The acting was good, light, Stanislavski says my performance has never been better. The scene with Trigorin is better now. I'm not happy with Act One – I get tense, nervy, I play jerkily."[13] While *The Seagull* remains beloved for both Chekhov and Olga, she informs him about the status of *all* of his works:

> Strange, after *Seagull* I suffered physically, now, after *Uncle Vanya*, I am suffering psychologically. I can't tell you how depressed I am by the thought that I acted so badly, in your play of all plays! ....The papers and the public will damn me more than likely, but that is

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[9] **Olga Knipper** (1970-1959) came from an Alsatian family of German background. She grew up on the fringes of cultural high-life in Moscow; her father died when she was young and her moth earned a living as a music teacher

[10] **Maria** (sometimes translated *Masha*) **Chekhova-Pavlona** (1863-1957), Anton's only sister

[11] Jean Benedetti (ed. and trans.) Dear Writer, Dear Actress: The Love Letters of Anton Chekhov and Olga Knipper. Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press. 1996: xii.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] *Ibid*, 19. [Letter dated October 2 (1899); signed: Your Olga Knipper].

> nothing in comparison to what I suffer at the thought of how I treated Elena Andreevna, i.e. you and myself, too.[14]

Despite the suffering, her emotional pact with Chekhov is eternal. In 1904 she played Madame Ranevskaya in *The Cherry Orchard;* and in 1943, at an anniversary performance of the play, she was still passionate on stage. Chekhov's art would not be what it is today if it were not for Olga Knipper's dedication to it. In short, Knipper's commitment to Chekhov and his plays is a life-long love story. In a parting letter to Anton dated 11 September 1904 - after he died - Knipper declares:

> Dearest darling, sweetheart, it's so long since we had a chat. I've been so unkept, so overwrought you wouldn't have liked me at all. I feel as though I am on my knees before you, leaning my head against your breast, hearing your heart, and you so tenderly stroking me. Anton, where are you? Are we really never to see each other again?...How glorious our life was together! You always used to say one could live so well 'as married people'. I believe that so blindly, I shall live with you a long, long time…..[15]

As his widow, Knipper survived her husband fifty-five years, never remarrying.

Another important woman in the drama of Chekhov's life (which was alluded to earlier) is his only sister, Maria Pavlovna. On the eve of the Moscow performance of *The Seagull* on 17 December 1898, she pleads, with tear-filled eyes, for the company to postpone the production. This showing of emotions makes the actors realize the importance of their endeavor that evening. Stanislavski reflects hearing an inner whisper, "You must play well, you must play better than well; you must create not only success, but triumph, for know that if you do not, the man and the writer you love will die, killed by your hands."[16]

Due to his condition, Chekhov relies mainly on letters – not just from Olga - to know how audiences are reacting to his work. Following the Moscow opening of *The Seagull*, Nemirovich-Danchenko sent him a telegram 'mad with joy' describing the endless curtain calls and ultimately a colossal success of the disgraced play. At the end of the Act One, the actors remained on stage, immobile; Olga trying to fight her sobs from flowing forth, fainted on stage. Eventually the audience, "rolling with hysterics", as Stanislavski puts it, rushed the stage to find actors amid tears of joy and kissing everyone; the moment is described as "like the bursting of a dam, like an exploding bomb a sudden deafening eruption of applause broke out."[17] The actors can not even gather enough sense to take their bows. Similar responses continued following each

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[14] *Ibid*, 24. [Letter dated October 27-29 (1899); signed: Your Olga Knipper].
[15] *Ibid,* 291. [Letter dated September 11 (1904); not signed].
[16] Constantine Stanislavski. My Life in Art. New York: Routledge Theatre Arts Books. 1924: 356.
[17] Hingley, xviii.

of the remaining three acts. Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, a playwright himself, had succeeded – and Chekhov shall continue to write plays.

While the thriving relationship between Chekhov and *his* actress is paramount, the conflict between him and Constantine Stanislaviski (playwright vs. director-actor) is equally important. As Ronald Hingley points out, "Though too polite to say directly, Chekhov was downright disgusted by Stanislavski's performance in the part of Trigorin. This serves to remind us that the Chekhov-Stanislavski axis never developed into an idyll of cooperation."[18] Not being healthy enough to see the original production of *The Seagull* during its run, the company staged a special showing at the Nikitsky Theatre for Chekhov and about ten other spectators in the spring of 1899. Despite his distaste for a few performances he was pleased with the production, as he writes to Maxim Gorki[19] on 9 May 1899 from Melikhovo:

> I saw *The Seagull* without the stage sets; I cannot judge the play dispassionately, because the Seagull herself[20] gave an abominable performance, kept sobbing violently; and the actor playing the part of the writer Trigorin walked and talked like a paralytic. He interpreted his part to be that of a man without a 'will of his own' and in a way that absolutely nauseated me. But on the whole it was not so bad, it gripped me. In places I could hardly believe it was I who had written it.[21]

Lillian Hellman points out that *The Seagull* and *The Cherry Orchard* are written to be comedies – a point which many productions ignore. She writes, "Trigorin, in *The Seagull*, has been interpreted in many ways, but he has almost never been played as he was intended: a third-rate writer, a man who was neither good nor bad, an aging and disappointed fellow who floundered around hoping that the next small selfish act would bring him pleasure."[22] Preparing for his role of Trigorin is quite a task for Constantine Stanislavski because he does not understand the play and apparently can not find its soul, "This cave is that vessel in which is hidden the great riches of Chekhov."[23] In the midst of the special performance, Chekhov expresses his emotions about what he is watching. Of one actress he cries, "Listen, she can't act in my play," and he threatens to take it away from the company.[24] Not saying anything to or of Stanislavski as Trigorin, the actor approaches his playwright and begs, "Scold me, Anton Pavlovich," to which Chekhov replies, "Wonderful! Listen, it was wonderful! Only you need torn shoes and checked trousers."[25] In this

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[18] *Ibid.*
[19] **Maxi Gorki**, *Alexei Maximovich*, (1868-1936) a writer – well-known for his portrayal of Chekhov, Tolstoy and Maria Andreyev
[20] Roxanova played Nina and Stanislavski played Trigorin
[21] Hellman: 242. [Letter dated 1989 May 19; signed: Your, A. Chekhov].
[22] *Ibid*, xxv.
[23] Constantine Stanislavski: 352.
[24] *Ibid*: 358.
[25] *Ibid.*

interaction, Chekhov clearly hides his dismay for Stanislavski's portrayal – but his abrupt response causes the actor to look even further and eventually, he thinks, come to a revelation:

> Of course, the shoes must be torn and the trousers checked, and Trigorin must not be handsome. In this lies the salt of the part: for young, inexperienced girls it is important that a man should be a writer and print touching and sentimental romances, and the Nina Zarechnayas, one after the other, will throw themselves on his neck, without noticing that he is not talented, that he is not handsome, that he wears checked pants and torn shoes. Only afterwards, when the love affair with such 'seagulls' is over, do they begin to understand that it was girlish imagination which created the great genius in their heads, instead of simple mediocrity.[26]

Finally, at the call of the playwright, Stanislavski realizes, in his character portrayal, that it is necessary to replace his elegant costume – white trousers, white vest, white hat, slippers and beautiful make-up – with the simplicity of torn shoes and checked trousers.

Following the success of his beloved *Seagull* Chekhov is able to visit his mistress (the theatre) once again. He had been waiting for this rectification since its flop in 1896. As he cries to the Moscow cast, demanding the special production granted to him, "Listen, it is necessary for me. I am its author. How can I write anything else until I have seen it?"[27] In the next years the Moscow Art Theatre, loyal to its playwright and his actress – Olga Knipper – is to produce *Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*. Moreover, the seagull, or j'en conviens, remains the symbol of the world renowned Moscow Art Theatre. The eventual popular response and notoriety of Chekhov all around Russia, and the world for that matter, is indicative of the fact that he had finally given theatergoers a 'new form of theater.' Today, Chekhov is best known, not for his short stories or his profession as a doctor but rather as the playwright. Almost a complete century since his monumental impact on the theater world, audience members no longer have to deal with the unexciting, larger-than-life portrayals of life on stage. In short, he has become a living reflection of his character, Constantine Gavrilovich Treplev, who, in Act One of *The Seagull* states:

> The theatre's in a rut nowadays, if you ask me – it's so one-sided. The curtain goes up and you see a room with three walls. It's evening so the lights are on. And in the room you have these geniuses, these high priests of art, to show you how people eat, drink, love, walk about and wear their jackets. Out of mediocre scenes and lines they try to drag to a moral, some commonplace that doesn't tax the brain and might come in useful about the house. When I'm offered a thousand different variations on the same old theme, I have to escape – run for it, as Maupassant ran from the Eiffel Tower because it was so vulgar he felt it was driving him crazy.[28]

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[26] *Ibid*: 358-59.
[27] *Ibid*: 356.
[28] Hingley: 70. [*The Seagull*, Act One].

Chekhov spent much of his days at Yalta, as an ill and dying man, worrying about what people thought about his work – the world he created and the *real* living people in it. If it had not been for the encouragement of Nemirovich-Danchenko, the love of Olga Knipper, the cautious care from his sister Maria, or the conflict between playwright and actor, then his legacy would consequently remain impotent. Indeed, however, although dead, Chekhov's work is alive, he still has a voice in the theatre – which shall last for as long as seagulls fly the blue sky.

--Kevin Benson

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KINDRED MIRROR: *THE NOTEBOOK OF TRIGORIN* AND THE LIFE OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

In the New Directions edition of *The Notebook of Trigorin*, an interpreter's note from Tennessee Williams heralds the play. In it he states that he and Anton Chekhov are playwrights of vastly differing styles, and that he may not be qualified to interpret his works because of this. He was certainly right about the dichotomy between their writing styles. Chekhov, as Williams describes him, was "a quiet and delicate writer whose huge power was always held in restraint." Williams, on the other hand, was a playwright of immense feeling whose characters and situations could in many instances be appropriately described as tempestuous. He held little—indeed, if *anything*—in restraint. Appropriately, the play that follows is a rendition of *The Sea Gull* that is starkly, dynamically different from Chekhov's well known and celebrated classic.

"If I have failed him," Williams says of Chekhov in the interpreter's note, "it was despite an intense longing to somehow utilize my quite different qualities as a playwright to bring him more closely, more audibly to you than I've seen him brought to you in any American production." He demonstrates in this one sentence an immense affection for the Russian playwright and his drama. Despite their obviously contrasting styles, Williams apparently felt in the works of Chekhov an immediate connection with his own life when he first read them. It was this connection that eventually led Williams to reinterpret *The Sea Gull* and write it in its current form, *The Notebook of Trigorin*.

The Notebook of Trigorin is a successful adaptation of *The Sea Gull*. It is a play that effectively tells a story similar to the original, but noticeably includes Tennessee Williams' "fingerprints." This amalgamation is most obvious in the representations of the characters, four of whom are the most significant.

Constantine Gavrilovich Treplev is one of the most obvious connections to Williams, particularly as "Tom", the young man. As Allean Hale points out in the opening essay of the aforementioned edition, both had "an ambivalent relationship with a domineering mother"; one can see the parallel to Tom Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* because of this. Indeed, the scene in which Constantine and Arkadina go from loving mother and son to antagonists recalls a similar scene from *Menagerie* in which Tom and Amanda make up for a quarrel, briefly achieve a level of understanding, and then go back to their usual roles of quarreling mother and son. Constantine's indignant plea "Forgive my audacity!" strikes a chord with Tom's wildly sarcastic response to Amanda's accusations: "No, I'm in *no condition!*"

Hale also listed character traits the Constantine and the young Tom shared, a few of which include "shy, sensitive, passionate, often in despair, even contemplating suicide."

Williams was indeed a very solitary boy; most of his expressions in school were through his writing in the newspaper. His first published piece was a poem entitled "Isolated", which appeared in the November 7, 1924 issue of *The Junior Life*, a school newspaper. He was often bullied by other boys when he was younger because of his delicate gait and Southern accent. His relationship with his father was for the young Tom one of fear; all of this combined to form a tortured and delicate soul that could easily be seen as mirroring that of the young writer Constantine.

Another and perhaps more obvious connection between Williams and Constantine would be found in Constantine's call for new forms in Russian theater. "We need new forms," he says to his Uncle Sorin at the beginning of the story. "And if we can't have them, we'd better have nothing." This is a virtual reproduction of young Tom Williams, who also desired to explore new forms in drama, calling out for a "plastic theater" that would cast off the constraints of realistic theater and make room for "a drama of psychological action." This exact form of theater would be realized in Williams' first widely acclaimed play *The Glass Menagerie*, and makes for an interesting connection between the playwright and the young writer he first encountered in *The Sea Gull*.

Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya is another interesting connection to Williams, particularly in *The Notebook of Trigorin*. She, much like Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*, seems to echo Williams' sister Rose in that she is a beautiful young girl, one that is apparently destined to be doomed through the course of her life. Her uncertainty with her acting at the beginning of the play is much like Laura's own lack of self-confidence, which seems to cripple her more than any injury may have done.

Williams was very close to his sister, particularly during their childhood, and does indeed describe his sister as a beautiful person. Rose was doomed in the sense that she would later suffer from a series of mental illnesses, primarily schizophrenia and paranoia, that would sadly climax in her being lobotomized. Nothing quite so drastic happens to Nina, but she still is doomed in her attraction to Trigorin, with whom she has an illegitimate child. Indeed, Williams, in making Nina a rendition of Rose, "took the writer's privilege of correcting real life." He infuses her with fortitude in this play, marking one of her speeches with his own beliefs of having the strength to go on, to endure. In relating Nina to his sister, he has also, perhaps unwittingly, linked her to himself as well.

Madame Irina Nikolayevna Arkadina is one of the most interesting representations of Williams' life in that she combines obvious characteristics of both his parents. She is an actress obsessed with her craft, possessed of a theatrical manner that makes her a presence with which to

be reckoned. In her one can see Edwina Estelle Dakin's attention to dress, which was a result of her Southern tendency to pay attention to status; her love of the theater—before she married she had secretly desired to become an actress—and her proficiency at quarrelling. She could lambast "friend and adversary alike" with "the sheer weight of words". With such poise at her command, she was an often domineering and volatile presence and often turned arguments with her husband into full-blown battles.

Cornelius Williams' stinginess and dislike of the son's writing are also apparent in Arkadina. She makes no apologies about criticizing Constantine's work, and is less than willing to give out money to either Constantine or her brother Sorin. These are very much the characteristics that befit Cornelius Williams—he often used his control over money to try to control Edwina, who was quick to note that the few instances in which he was generous to his family were when those occasions included himself. He very much disliked Tom's writing, thinking of writers and artists as "a queer lot who never made any money." It is this amalgamation of his parents' traits that makes Madame Arkadina a formidable and interesting character in *The Notebook of Trigorin*.

The most obvious evidence of Williams's "fingerprints" in this play rest, appropriately, in the character he most revised: Trigorin, the "world-weary writer." Here is Williams as an older, more seasoned writer who has made his mark in the world and experienced both its rewards and cruelties. Both men are obsessed with writing, use others as their subjects, and are concerned about the ultimate value of what they are doing. Trigorin's bisexuality, a significant point of contention for some critics and champions of Chekhov, is also another interesting connection, as Williams was homosexual, although as a young boy possessed of his mother's puritan ideals, he did not know it until he was much older. There is also Trigorin's mention of the masculine and feminine characteristics of a writer, possibly an extension of the older writer's bisexuality. Hale points out in her introduction that that "is Williams unmasked, taking his stand against homophobia." The intense love-hate relationship between Trigorin and Arkadina is starkly reminiscent of Tom's relationship with Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* because of its volatility. When Trigorin yells "You, you, you, always you!" one can almost effortlessly see Tom's tirade to Amanda in which he demands her recognition of his contributions to the maintenance of their apartment. Trigorin's desire to get away from the domineering Arkadina and become "a simply—mindless—beast…" fits well with the large amount of travelling Williams did later in his life, his way of getting away from his troubles.

The Notebook of Trigorin is indeed the successful amalgamation of two master playwrights. Despite the differences between Anton Chekhov and Tennessee Williams, they have

several significant similarities. First and perhaps foremost, both were poets as much as playwrights. Few will argue this in Williams' case; his plays utilize characters, events and language that are known for their lyricism as well as symbolism. Chekhov was also a poet in his ability to convey more in his stories than was spoken in the language. In one of his most famous quotes he states that a person can be eating his dinner, and yet his life could be falling apart at the same time. Such expression of duality befits a poet. Also of significance is the fact that Chekhov and Williams tend to write about people in unhappy situations, bound to them by a family with which they do not identify or for which they do not care. This is as much Tom's case in *The Glass Menagerie* as it is Constantine's in *The Sea Gull*, or Voynitski's in *Uncle Vanya*. These similarities enable Williams to successfully interpret *The Sea Gull* and make *The Notebook of Trigorin* a different but still valid telling of Chekhov's classic play.

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--Tony Goodwyn

THE WEB OF UNREQUITED LOVE

The Notebook of Trigorin is Tennessee Williams' rendition of Anton Chekhov's play, *The Seagull*. Williams has preserved many of Chekhov's character relationships, while contributing some original ideas of his own. Many of the characters are caught in a web of unrequited love, which forces them to settle for things and people they do not want. This leaves them without options and without hope for the future. Unrequited love haunts these characters who so desperately want to be loved by the objects of their affections. Like Chekhov, Williams does not allow this, and many of his phrases and speeches portray a message of despair from unrequited love. Williams also shows us how cruel life and love can be when Sorin says to Dorn,

> "All you prescribe for me is- resignation. Prescription rejected! You're resigned to nothing. Live a dissolute life of- self-indulgence. Oh, sometimes you'll pay the fiddler. But, you'll dance merrily on, philosophical stuff like- resignation! surrender! - to a man who'd had not one single thing in his life, not even in his youth! - to give him any feeling of having accomplished anything he hoped for."

The struggles of the characters are often futile, and life does not allow them the things they desire most. This is reflected in the constant jealousy and animosity expressed throughout the play by all of the characters. When speaking to Constantine, Nina talks about her relationship with Trigorin and her dreams of becoming an actress. She says,

> "Let's say that a man came along by chance and, having a hunter's gun in his hand, had nothing better to do, he tried his marksmanship on a bird in the sky, a seagull, struck home, it fell to death, fluttered a bit, then- it was still, it was very still, but *not* I! Subject for a short story."

Nina will continue despite her loss of Trigorin and her child. She encourages Constantine to do the same; however, he cannot continue living without Nina.

Many of these relationships lack the unconditional love that comes with having a family. All of the characters go through bad times where they cannot seem to find the love they are searching for. Williams challenges these characters to take what they have been given and live life to the best of their abilities. In the play, Trigorin, Arkadina, Constantine, Nina, and Masha all experience some sort of change that affects the rest of their lives. Although they too suffer the pain of unrequited love, they also drive the action of the play and stand out as the most complicated and interesting figures in Chekhov's/Williams' play.

Boris Alekseyevich Trigorin creates much of the chaos in the play. Trigorin is a prominent and upstanding writer of his time. Writing is his only passion, and he does whatever he has to do to create a story. Almost everyone he encounters envies him because of his talent and fame. All that Trigorin truly cares about is his writing and he is callous to human relationships. Trigorin uses people to get a story from them because writing is Trigorin's only life and love. Although Trigorin wants to have a loving relationship, he cannot find anyone who can make him feel the same way writing does even though writing cannot love him back. He lives for the moment and will not let himself get emotionally involved with anything except his writing.

He has a relationship with Arkadina who helped him become famous by using her fame to promote his own. Trigorin represents Arkadina's need to be young. He has essentially become even more famous than Arkadina, and this has made her somewhat jealous. Trigorin's relationship with Arkadina is complex because they need each other's attention. They have a dependency on each other, which drives both of them crazy because they keep coming back to one another and do not completely understand why. Nina falls in love with Trigorin and eventually goes with him to Moscow where they have a child. Trigorin uses Nina and throws her away when he no longer needs her for a story.

Trigorin's relationship with Nina is mostly physical. He finds Nina physically attractive and likes her because she has a genuine interest in his writing. Trigorin tells Nina how he feels about writing and how it effects his life when he says,

> *"About writing, it's not an enviable-- obsession because it is just that, an obsession—You live from one work to the next, haunted always by—am I finished? Will there be another...A writer's a madman, probationally released—And yet when I'm writing, I do enjoy it. Even reading the proofs, but—when I see it in print, I'm devastated.... —You know, when I die people that walk by my grave will say, "Here lies Trigorin, a good writer in his way but a far cry from Tolstoy or Turgenev."—And I'd agree."*

Writing makes Trigorin crazy, and he can only live for it because he does not want anything else to affect him the way writing does. Trigorin is genuinely interested in Constantine's ideas for new forms of writing. However, Constantine will not allow Trigorin to befriend him because he is jealous of the attention he is getting from Arkadina and Nina.

Trigorin does not change much throughout the play. He remains faithful to his writing and still doesn't seem to care about much else. He does however, become more resigned to his life with Arkadina. He has come to grips with the fact that they are going to remain together. After the two-year time lapse in the play, Trigorin becomes a bit more philosophical and realizes that time is passing and he isn't getting any older. Eventually Trigorin tells Arkadina that he is

not as strong as everyone thinks he is when he says, "I am actually a coward—morally flabby—soft—submissive. Are these characteristics you find appealing in me Irina?" Trigorin feels that Arkadina needs someone she can push around. Trigorin suggests that Arkadina loves him because she has the advantage over him. Both Trigorin and Arkadina keep each other in check throughout the play.

Trigorin stirs up a lot of emotion in the play. His presence effects everyone in a different way. It is possible that without him, the other characters in the play might not have changed at all. Certainly Arkadina, Constantine, and Nina were effected greatly by Trigorin and his work, which shows us that we must have passion in our lives for something but human love is the most important thing. Without love, we cannot exist. Trigorin is tortured by his writing because it is something that cannot love him back. In Constantine's book, Trigorin wins the game of love by getting Nina. In the end, it is Trigorin who gets the upper hand because he is not affected by the human love and emotion like the rest of the characters. He acknowledges that he is truly the winner in the game of love when he says, "Ladies and Gentleman, the game is mine."

Another character that plays an important role in the theme of unrequited love is Arkadina. Arkadina is a famous actress of the times that wants everyone to think that she is much younger and better than anyone else thinks she is. Arkadina is similar to Trigorin because she is haunted with the feeling that she could lose her fame at any time. Arkadina's love for the theatre and herself is unrequited because the theatre rejects her love and throws her away. She is Constantine's mother and does not seem to respect her son or his work. Constantine says,

> *"My mother wants a brilliant life for herself only, love for herself only, and I exist for her only as a constant reminder that she has a twenty-five year old son. When I'm not there she's only thirty-two. When I'm there, she's forty-three. Besides, nothing's important to her but the theatre."*

Arkadina is a self-righteous woman who's only true love is herself.

The character of Arkadina is important to the play because she is the catalyst for many of the things that the people do in the play. Arkadina is the only source for news that her friends and family receive and they basically believe anything she has to say. Arkadina is two-faced and polite to the point of being spiteful. She is obvious about what she wants and will stop at nothing to get the admiration of everyone she encounters. Unfortunately, Arkadina has little faith in her son and steps on him every opportunity she gets. Arkadina is a part of the web that this play creates and every move she makes causes others to react to what she does. Arkadina's

relationship with Trigorin is interesting because they are dependent on each other for attention and he keeps her going. Trigorin seems to be the only person that Arkadina can possibly love other than herself. Trigorin helps her to feel young again and that feeling is something she must hold onto no matter what. Arkadina becomes more fragile as the play progresses. She eventually loses her fame and starts to realize that family and friends are the most important elements in life. Unfortunately, she arrives at this conclusion too late to save Constantine.

Arkadina always does everything bigger than life and loves to perform scenes and monologues for everyone. She does this because she wants to prove to herself and everyone around her that she still has the spark and looks of a young and talented actress. Some of her actions and words foreshadow what is to come. For instance, she acts out a death scene for everyone, which in essence, foreshadows Constantine's own death scene when he kills himself. When she returns to her home after two years, she has lost her fame as an actress, but doesn't want anyone to know about it. She now realizes how much she loves the country life and misses the simplicity of it. Arkadina has been changed by life and reflects on her experiences when she says, "And so it goes, returns, departures, greetings begin to lose themselves in good-byes. Life's a child's watercolor, the colors all run together." At the end of the play she is asked to bow before everyone because it is because of her great performance of being a heartless mother that pushes Constantine over the edge to killing himself.

Arkadina is also caught in the web of unrequited love because she only loves herself. Arkadina doesn't know what she has and what is most important to her until it is gone. She lives for the moment and perhaps that is what ultimately led to her downfall. Arkadina wanted the tangible things when she should really be looking for the intangibility of love and devotion. She learns her lesson too late. Perhaps Williams is trying to tell us through Arkadina to find what is most important in our lives and cherish what we have.

Constantine is probably the character that is most affected by unrequited love. The focus of Constantine's unrequited love is Nina. He tries his best to help her and be with her; however, she rejects his affection. Constantine is a dark and private young man who keeps to himself most of the time. He wants people to understand him and his ambitions with writing new forms. These new forms of writing excite Constantine. He shows his enthusiasm about them when he says, "We need new forms. And if we can't have them, then we'd better have nothing." He has a passion for writing similar to Trigorin except Constantine does not allow writing to completely rule his life. Constantine only truly loves Nina. She is all he thinks about and he wants to make her happy. He sees her potential as a great actress and hopes he can be just as great a writer. Nina overwhelms Constantine and his mind is clouded with thoughts of them being together. Nina has

the key to Constantine's emotions and his highs and lows are dependent upon her. Constantine eventually becomes a famous and respected writer. However, this is not what Constantine desires most. He does not feel any self worth without Nina.

Arkadina belittles Constantine and feels that his work is worthless and that he will never be a successful writer. They love each other even though they do not show it sometimes. He likes to think of Arkadina as a mother when she is not playing the role of a famous actress. He conveys this to her when he says, "I want to remember your tenderness before you stopped being human and turned into a famous actress." Constantine loves his mother and does not want to see her with Trigorin, who Constantine does not believe, is truly in love with Arkadina.

Over the course of the play Constantine becomes even more detached. He interacts with others only because they interact with him. He will not talk to Trigorin because of the way Trigorin treated Nina. Eventually, Nina moves away with Trigorin to Moscow. Constantine is crushed to find out that Nina had a child by Trigorin and he left her when she told him that she was pregnant. Constantine has one last talk with Nina before she leaves for the second time. After Nina leaves, Constantine cannot comprehend life without her when he says, "You've found your way—I'm still drifting, it's – chaos." She tells him not to follow her and he is crushed. He decides to take his own life because he cannot go on living without Nina. He fits into the web of unrequited love because of his relationship with Nina. He feels that his writing and fame are worthless if he cannot have Nina to go along with it. He is lonely in the world and sees no option for himself other than suicide.

Nina is a character that is one of the most affected people in the theme of unrequited love. She comes from a broken home and has to put up with a hateful stepmother who constantly competes with Nina for the attention of Nina's father. This drives Nina to search for other ways to get the attention and love that she is obviously not receiving at home. Nina does not know what she is getting into with Trigorin and her lack of life experience in the beginning of the play allows her to fall in love with Trigorin and deny the love of Constantine. She is infatuated with Trigorin because she desires his lavish lifestyle and enjoys the attention he gives her. She regards Constantine as a best friend and not someone she wants to marry.

Nina is a girl who gets in over her head and has great expectations for herself and wants to become a great actress. She has to leave her home to find her dreams and in the process, has this relationship with Trigorin. She comes back to Constantine to say goodbye to him. Nina has changed dramatically from the time she first left to become an actress. Nina is sure of herself and knows that she must leave home to fulfill her dreams. She becomes more experienced and uses her life experiences of being away from home and becoming a mother to be a better actress. She

has a passion for acting similar to Trigorin's love of writing. She loves the art of performing and learns acting is what drives her to go on with life. It is Nina's art that has made her love life and all it has to offer her

Many of Nina's words reflect the mood and tempo of the play. The references to a seagull that are made in the play show the importance of independence and change. The seagull must not be kept captive or shot down because it should remain free. Nina compares herself to the seagull when she says, "To whom does a seagull belong? Can they feel love? It must be a thing of the moment, then flight again and even when flying together they seem to be each-alone."

Nina's leaving becomes the reason for Constantine killing himself because she is all Constantine wants and he cannot go on if he doesn't have her. Eventually Nina comes to the realization that she must be on her own. This is the only way she will truly be happy. She still carries her love for Trigorin despite the ordeals he has put her through. Nina changes more than any other character because she is the only one that can improve her ways of life. Everyone else is locked in position because their time for change has passed and they can no longer strive to make a better life for themselves. Nina realizes that she must make the difficult choice to leave her friends and family and do what is best for herself.

The character of Masha is driven to settle for a man that she despises because she cannot have Constantine. She has taken her place in this web of unrequited love as well. Even though Medvedenko is annoying to Masha, she marries him because there are no other available men and she cannot have Constantine. She has a special bond with her mother because they both are in love with men who don't love them. Masha drinks heavily as well to get away from the pain of not having Constantine. One of the most famous phrases is Medvedenko's words to Masha when he says, "Masha, tell me, why do you always wear black?" Masha's black clothes symbolize her hopelessness and despair because she cannot have Constantine, who is the only man she ever wanted.

Masha's role in the play is to keep things moving. She helps everyone to forget about their problems by playing lotto and cards. Masha wants to get out and do something with her life, but she feels trapped because she will not let Constantine go. She is left with little choice but to marry Medvedenko, which ensures her part in the web of unrequited love, that plagues many other characters in the play. Constantine means everything to Masha and she loves his flair for the dramatic. Masha has a tendency to blame Medvedenko for her problems and feels as if he is just a distraction to her. Over the course of the play Masha loses more and more respect for Medvedenko and she does not want anything to do with their child because it looks like him.

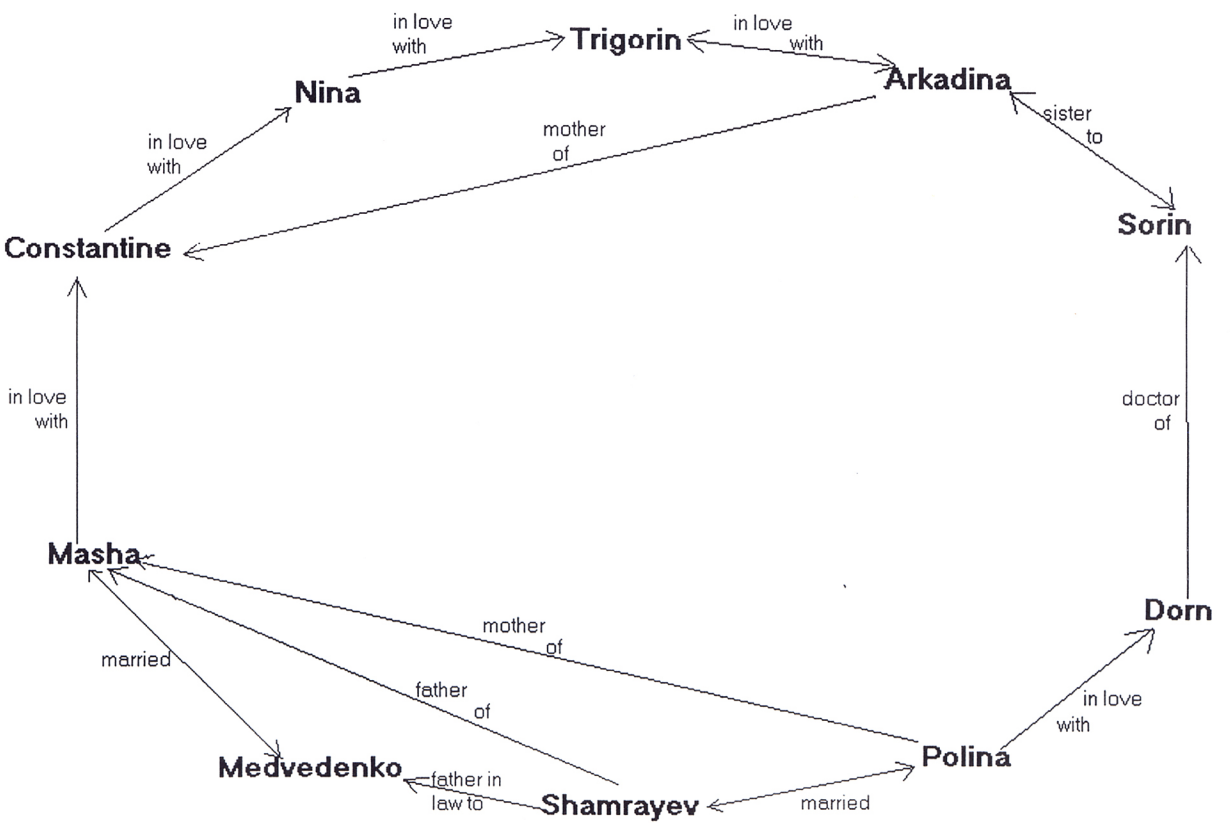
Masha is a catalyst for many of the arguments that go on in the play because she makes hateful remarks, which stirs up animosity between people. Masha does not like Arkadina because she is so condescending to Constantine. Masha does have some respect for herself. She displays it when talking to Medvedenko when she says, "Call me black as a crow's wing but never accuse me of having no pride left." This shows that Masha will never lose sight of her dreams even though she knows that she cannot achieve them. Masha plays an important role in the play and without her many of the characters would have given up on themselves long ago. She has the courage to carry on when many would have thrown in the towel. Masha is a unique character because she is a strong woman who is very open about her beliefs and feelings. It was uncharacteristic for women of the times to act contrary to their husband's demands and to form their own opinions. These are qualities that all of the women in the play possess that makes them such strong characters. Williams allows these women to show their equality with men and not break down to the pressures of society.

The characters in *The Notebook of Trigorin* are involved in a web of unrequited love from which no one can escape. Trigorin cannot be loved by his writing, even though it is all he cares about. The theatre ends up rejecting Arkadina and she realizes that she can no longer love herself because of what she has done to Constantine. Constantine is driven to commit suicide because his one true love will not love him back. Trigorin throws Nina away after she has their child. Fortunately, Nina realizes that she can go on with her life and make something of herself. Masha cannot have Constantine and decides to settle for a man that she does not love. All of these people made choices that have effected the rest of their lives. Love must be a two-way street in order to work and without love we cannot continue to live as a society. The theme of unrequited love is prevalent throughout this play. The characters react differently to their situations and end up doing what they feel is best. Not all of the characters can become the seagull and fly away like Nina. They are trapped in the reality that they have made irreversible decisions and cannot find a way out of them. This play looks at life in a different light than most people want to see it. Life is full of ups and downs and we all must endure.

--Brian Confer

Character Relationships

The Notebook of Trigorin



THE NOTEBOOK OF TRIGORIN: FROM START TO FINISH

Tennessee Williams has been called America's greatest playwright, and, while that may be true, his last play, *The Notebook of Trigorin,* did not come easily for him. Struggling to overcome the effects of drugs and alcohol, Williams required the assistance and constant encouragement of Roger Hodgman, the Artistic Director of Australia's Melbourne Theater Company, to complete his adaptation of Chekhov's classic *The Seagull*. After its initial run Williams made many changes, but the play was not performed again for fourteen years.

Williams became interested in the theater in his mid-twenties and was immediately captivated by the playwright Anton Chekhov. Of Chekhov's plays and short stories, Williams was most passionate about a play called *The Seagull* and dreamed of one day adapting it. Williams' chance to pursue his dream surfaced in 1980 when the University of British Columbia invited him to Vancouver as a visiting artist while the Vancouver Playhouse was producing "a heavily revised version" of Williams' *A Red Devil Battery Sign*. While Williams was in Vancouver he and the man who made the revisions, Roger Hodgman, often went to dinner after rehearsals. One night Williams reiterated his dream of adapting *The Seagull.* (The first time Williams mentioned it to Hodgman was when Hodgman flew to New Jersey to discuss the "revision" of *A Red Devil Battery Sign*).

Hodgman perceived Williams was serious and told Williams to meet him in his office the next morning to work something out. Williams arrived the next morning, and Hodgman commissioned him to create the adaptation he had so longed to do, and a contract was arranged for $10,000. Over the next few months, Williams sent portions of scenes to Hodgman, "usually on hotel paper from around the world." Then in early 1981, Hodgman, who was set to produce the play, decided there were a sufficient number of completed scenes to include the play in the theater's next season, with rehearsals beginning in late September of that year. In an interview Hodgman stated that early in the process "it was clear that it was going to be a very free adaptation, and at Tennessee's suggestion it was to be called 'A Notebook of Trigorin'. But what I loved – and still do – was the way he brought the subtext (or his version of it) to the surface." A few weeks before rehearsals started, Hodgman began to be nervous because he "realized that Tennessee was only concentrating on his favorite scenes – a brilliant version of the Trigorin-Nina scene and a very good version of the Nina-Constantine scene."

Acting on his anxiety, Hodgman flew to New York to see how Williams was coming along, and found that he had only completed half of the adaptation. Hodgman flew Williams to Vancouver to help him finish the adaptation, as rehearsals were only three weeks away. Once

Williams arrived in Vancouver, Hodgman visited him every morning in his hotel room, where he sat with Williams and helped him "work" on a scene, by "reading out loud the cadence of the lines" so Williams could hear how they sounded. Some of the ideas for his scenes had been written on pieces of scrap paper and were sometimes inspired by something as simple as a comment that a taxi driver had made to him. At lunchtime, Hodgman returned to the theatre and cleanly typed what Williams had written out that morning. He then took it back to Williams in the hotel after lunch for editing.

Through the rehearsal process, Williams stayed in Vancouver to finish the script, except for a "small vacation" during the second week when they staged the show. Once back from the week vacation, Williams kept rewriting the play up to opening night. Hodgman recalls, "I remember two sections giving him [Williams] particular difficulty. One was he didn't know how to render Masha's answer to 'Why are you always dressed in black?' I remember one of his favorite versions was 'Do I?' I think in the end we returned to the more conventional version." The other section that gave Williams much difficulty was the ending. Hodgman recollects, "He [Williams] wanted the wall to rise to reveal Constantine lying dead by the lake. This was arranged and it worked well, but the inherent melodrama was exacerbated by having Trigorin accusing Arkadina of killing her son. We tried endless versions and I honestly can't remember without digging up the script which one we ended up using."

Opening night was much anticipated, especially by the press, and the entire city was delighted to have Williams back for a second time after his stint as a visiting artist for *A Red Devil Battery Sign*. Unfortunately, Williams ended up offending the critics that night. First he insulted a local critic who introduced his wife to him, and Williams replied in his courtly manner as he shook her hand, "Madam, you are married to a disreputable man." Near the end of the play, Williams offended all of the critics as he inappropriately tried to lead a round of applause for the actress playing Nina on her final exit.

Some people liked the play, but most people, especially the press, reacted very harshly, and the play did not sell well. According to Hodgman, "Most people didn't understand or accept that this was a play adapted by Tennessee Williams, inspired by Chekhov, rather than a translation of *The Seagull*."

After this short-lived production in Vancouver, the show moved to Los Angeles in 1982 for an even shorter run, which has been described as a "workshop type theater" by Allean Hale, a specialist in the studies of Tennessee Williams. This would be the last production of *The Notebook of Trigorin* for 14 years.

After the two productions in Vancouver and Los Angeles, a disappointed Williams decided to rework the script before any more productions were staged. Unfortunately Williams died in 1984, just after finishing his revision, and the mastermind who is referred to as America's greatest playwright never got the chance to see the piece performed in its final version. After Williams died, his estate, including all his literary works, went to his long time friend, Maria St. Just. Once she gained control, Williams' literature was all but lost for 12 years, as St. Just refused to allow publication of any of his lost plays and attempted to control the performance rights to all the plays that were available. In revivals of Williams' plays, she frequently attempted to influence the casting process and even tried to stop a few productions that would not change to meet her specific wishes.

It has been said that St. Just's only real concern was money, not Williams' work. In the Dec. 10, 1996 issue of *The New Yorker*, John Lahr writes, "But Maria, who had no academic training and no understanding of how literary reputation is made or sustained, encouraged productions and discouraged discussion. Williams' royalties went up, but the dialogue about his work went down. Scholars were refused the right to quote from Williams' unpublished writings, or even Xerox material from Williams' early papers, which occupy a hundred boxes at the University of Texas at Austin."

One of the people denied the right to obtain and produce Williams' work was director Stephen Hollis who had seen *The Notebook of Trigorin* before Williams' death. In a telephone interview, Hollis stated that he and Williams shared the same agent, Mitch Douglas, at I.C.M. in New York. Hollis saw the script on Douglas' desk when he was in his office and asked if he could look at it since he was a big fan of both Chekhov and Williams. Douglas gave him a copy to look at as he left that day. When Hollis first read *The Notebook of Trigorin* he instantly fell in love with the piece and decided to produce it. Unfortunately his timing was bad, as he had just moved to New York from Great Britain and had no connections to get it produced. By the time Hollis had established himself as a prominent producer and had the connections to have it produced, Williams had died, and he was unable to get the rights from St. Just.

Hollis called various agencies throughout the twelve years that the rights were withheld from him in an attempt to secure performance rights, but none of the agencies he contacted had even heard of the play. The only person other than St. Just that had a copy of the script was Hollis, but he could not produce it because he also did not have the rights.

Hollis contacted St. Just a few times for permission, but she objected every time. She told Hollis she would only allow him to produce the play if he got it produced at The Royal Theater in

Great Britain or The National Theater in New York. Hollis said he knew that was impossible because the play was not well known and would never premiere in such prominent theaters. Other people who knew St. Just claim there was another reason she would not grant Hollis the rights. St. Just was Russian, as was Chekhov, and she considered Williams' altered depiction of Trigorin as a bisexual character to be disrespectful to Chekhov. In 1996, Maria St. Just died, and all of Tennessee Williams' work that had been tied up for twelve years was finally released. The rights to *The Notebook of Trigorin* went to the Casratto Ramsey Agency in Great Britain, and Hollis, whom had once lived in Britain and knew people at the agency, had no problems securing the rights to the play.

Once Hollis gained the rights to the play, he needed a place to produce it. He chose the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park. He was a good friend of the Playhouse's artistic director, Ed Stern, with whom he had previously worked. Hollis approached Stern because he thought the configuration of the Playhouse was perfect for the premiere of the final version of *The Notebook of Trigorin*. Stern was delighted and seized the opportunity to stage the play in Cincinnati. Hollis and Stern hired a production team of Ming Cho Lee as set designer, Brian Nason as lighting designer, and Candice Donnelly as the costume designer. When Stern was asked how they determined this production team, he replied that he and Hollis had discussed who to get, and Hollis suggested Ming, saying that he was the "dean of set designers." Ming then suggested Donnelly as the costume designer. Nason had previously served as the resident lighting designer at the Playhouse.

The play premiered on September 5, 1996, and ran through October 4 of the same year. Stern said that the play was very successful, adding that the national recognition even improved the reputation of the theater.

The version of *The Notebook of Trigorin* staged by the Wabash College Theater department is the product of a long and turbulent process of adaptation, revision, and collaboration. Williams was never able to completely realize his dream of successfully adapting *The Seagull*. But thanks to the work of others--notably Roger Hodgman, Stephen Hollis, and Ed Stern--the play has taken its place in the canon of plays by America's Chekhov: Tennessee Williams.

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--Michael Shannon