The Bulletin of the North American Chekhov Society

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Introduction
Ralph Lindheim

As editor of *The Bulletin*, I invited a small group of noted Chekhov scholars in North America and Europe to participate in this issue marking the centenary of Cehkhov's death. From each of them I asked a short statement that would touch on one or more of the following topics: A) an account of the scholar's encounter with Chekhov (What drew him or her to the writer and his art? How have his or her views evolved or changed over the years?); B) the vitality and relevance of Chekhov's art (Which particular stories or features of his art continue to impress contemporary readers and audiences? Are there any performances or adaptations of Chekhov's work on stage, screen, television or radio that are especially impressive? Which of today's writers and playwrights may be profitably compared with Chekhov and vice-versa?); and C) the present state of Chekhov studies and/or its future. A current Chekhov project or one planned for the near future could also be described.

On behalf of our readers I thank all who responded to my request and offered the stimulating reflections on the following pages. More responses may be printed in the next issue.

You will also find in this number a lively theatre review by Laurence Senelick and two letters from Dr. Richard Selzer and Harvey Pitcher responding to some of the controversial issues raised in the last issue.

I want to remind you of the Colby College NACS symposium on Chekhov on Thursday, Oct. 7th. If you would like to participate in this event, which will serve as the overture to a two-day conference—Oct. 8th and 9th—on Chekhov in America, featuring roundtables, lectures, performances, screenings, and more, please write either to Michael Finke, Russian Dept., Box 1052, Washington University in St. Louis, 1 Brookings Drive, St. Louis, MO 63130 <mcfinke@artssciwustl.edu> or to Julie de Sherbinin, Dept. of German & Russian, Colby College, Waterville, ME 04901, <jwdesher@colby.edu.>.

Finally, you should know of another centennial event planned for early December in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada . J Douglas Clayton is organizing a Chekhov workshop composed of scholars from America, Canada, England, France, Ukraine and Russia. The workshop is intended to focus on one specific issue: the unique poetics of Chekhov's art. Another important objective of this conference, according to Prof. Clayton, " is to establish a permanent and dense dialogue between western and Russian scholars in Canada, an ideal meeting ground for different discourses. This is especially true of Ottawa, the cultural crossroads of Canada, where dialogue between cultures is an everyday occurrence. The links between individuals with common interests who have never met before promises to be one of the most exciting aspects of the proposed workshop."

Harvey Pitcher
Critic and translator

As a student I was more attracted to Tolstoy than to Chekhov. His ability to conjure up characters from all walks of life and to combine moving individual stories with the grand sweep of historical events was enormously impressive. So was his constant readiness to re-examine himself, challenge orthodox views and take on single-handed the established institutions of his day. And the energy of the man, writing all those drafts of *War and Peace*! But Chekhov? Chekhov was fine, but life on his gloomy Russian estates seemed impossibly inward-looking, and his stories of how X fell in love with Y but then Y went away seemed trivial alongside Tolstoy.

Why did I switch my allegiance? Was it simply that as a junior lecturer my head of department was R. F. Christian, and since he was "the Tolstoy man," I had to be "the Chekhov man"? Would it have happened anyway? I still admire Tolstoy but no longer feel comfortable in his presence. His questions are as pressing as ever but his answers seem dated. The sudden "I see it all" moments of discovery, the constant prodding to do this and not that, have lost their power to persuade. Chekhov is mistrustful of people who have discovered all the answers; he does not present us with any certainties that can sustain us throughout life; he does not tell us how to live, but he may help us to understand ourselves better. Answers have in some way to emerge, they cannot be imposed. It is not that we should cease to look for answers: on the contrary, it is our urge to go on looking for them, in spite of repeated failures, that make us truly human. All this I find much easier to accept.

Young lecturers are in the habit of wanting to write books, and I thought I would like to write one on Chekhov. But writing about Chekhov is not easy! He had achieved distinction as a short story writer and as a playwright, but plays and stories come from different traditions and have to be judged by different criteria. Most Chekhov critics choose to write about one or the other. Attempts to combine the two usually adopt a crudely chronological approach. Add to this the complication of Chekhov's life. There are those who say, the text's the thing, never mind the author, but to consider what Chekhov wrote without making at least some reference to what was going on in his life seems to me like carrying on a conversation about someone who is standing at one's shoulder.

My first plan for a general survey was crudely chronological. Publishers were unimpressed. So I took what I thought was the best part—on the plays—and expanded it into a full-length volume, which I was fortunate enough to have published in 1973. But I always dreamed of a book that would skilfully interweave the stories, the plays and the life. It seemed that a solution was just around the corner and an ideal plan for a book on Chekhov would soon be found, but it turned out that this was an illusion. I came close in the 1990s and had reached a point where I felt I had to read or re-read other critics before putting pen to paper myself. Then I read Vladimir Kataev's *Proza Chekhova* and realised that many of the assumptions I was making about Chekhov did not stand up to critical scrutiny and I needed to assimilate his views before I could formulate my own.

Rather than searching for an ideal plan I should have followed Kostya's advice to himself in *The Seagull*: to forget about forms altogether and to write in the way that comes naturally to one. Trying to cover everything is absurd. Some Chekhov stories one

can re-read time after time, perhaps finding something new or reacting differently on each occasion; others one returns to with considerable reluctance. Only the former seem worth writing about. My plan now would be to write a series of essays on topics that particularly appeal to me: to look more closely, for example, at a seeming dualism in Chekhov, between his "objective" approach to characters, where he is critical, ironical, satirical, "hard," and his "subjective" approach, where he puts himself entirely inside a character and suspends judgement; to write about *pairs* of stories, such as "Gusev" and "Student," or "Na podvode" and "Chelovek v futli*are*; "to disagree(?) with Kataev's reading of "Skuchnaia istoriia"; to ask why Chekhov never wrote a novel; and—if the topics are not too nebulous—to consider Chekhov as a writer who operated at the interface between emotion and the intellect, and between philosophy and psychology. Unless, of course, there is a young (or old) scholar about to publish who has discovered the ideal plan after all.

Vladimir Borisovich Kataev
Moscow University

1. My attitude to Chekhov has, of course, altered over the course of many years. At first it was constructed and developed along the lines characteristic for a Russian (then a Soviet) reader. In my childhood I was enthralled with Chekhov's humor. I found a collection of Chekhov's comic stories, published during the war, in my father's bookcase and I was engrossed in them. Then, in my school's higher forms, came indifference to, if not disgust with, the sociological Chekhov dissected and masticated in school textbooks. Later, gradually and step by step—a production seen at the Moscow Art Theatre, a good reading of a story heard on the radio, stories freshly read again or those read for the first time, discussions in a university seminar—I immersed myself in the depths of Chekhov's thoughts, his attitude toward the world, and the complexity of his apparently simple artistic structures. And, of course, my professional work in a large group of wonderful specialists preparing the Academy of Sciences collection of Chekhov's works. Twenty years ago it seemed to me that I could understand what was important in Chekhov. Now, the deeper I look into Chekhov, the more I understand that no one has yet seen or spoken of what is most important and essential in him.
2. Although Chekhov's universality and his accessibility to all humanity, of which Tolstoy spoke, are incontrovertible, nonetheless at different times and in different countries, for different spectators and readers, different aspects of his legacy come to the foreground and are considered relevant. Let us say that for contemporary Russia such lines as "All of us are to blame," and "No one knows the real truth," and "That which is most complex and most difficult is only now beginning," sound more relevant. There are quite a few good productions and films based on Chekhov's works, though none, probably, is totally adequate. As a viewer of long standing, I put together for myself an all-star team of actors for the roles in each of Chekhov's plays, but, alas, if the actors were to be brought together in one production, they would turn out to be in completely different age groups.

3. Today, a hundred years after Chekhov's death, not all of his texts are yet published: the cuts made in his letters have not been restored, the publication of the index cards of his Sakhalin census is just being planned, and specialists would be interested in the medical prescriptions he wrote. *The Island of Sakhalin* remains his least studied work. And the problems in interpreting Chekhov, which always fascinated me, remain compelling. Although the newest approaches propose the elimination of the author and the construction of arbitrary strategies for the reading of texts, in Chekhov's case his authorial intent remains of prime interest. Chekhov was a writer who had something to say. Of course, the language in which his works were written conceal not a few surprises and discoveries, and in the course of time many attempts at deconstruction will be undertaken, but God grant that we grasp what the writer consciously inserted into the texts of his work.
4. I am now interested, in particular, in such things as the resonance of space in individual plays and stories by Chekhov as well as in his creative thought at large. Tolstoy compared Chekhov's work on language to the labor of a lace-maker. But space in his works is multidimensional, voluminous, with a multitude of correlations—one might call them rhymes—and this poetic, musical element in Chekhov's texts constitutes their distinctiveness. Another aspect that interests me now is the playful element in his works, which one of my teachers, Andrei Donatovich Siniavskii, refused to see in Chekhov.

Donald Rayfield
University of London

As a student, I hardly noticed Chekhov: I was fascinated by the exoticness of Leskov and Gumilëv. I first encountered Chekhov in 1965 when I had my first job in the University of Queensland and wanted to weld into a coherent group a motley lot of students, some native Russians, some Slavs, some Anglo-Saxons. We decided to stage *Uncle Vanya* largely for the benefit of the Brisbane Russian community. As the curtain rose we played *Bozhe Tsaria khran*i and had some of the front row in tears; in Act 2 a tropical thunderstorm broke out just as Serebriakov asked for the window to be closed. I finally realised the emotional power in Chekhov. My next initiation was in 1972, when a publisher's editor countered my offer of a monograph on Mandelstam with the remark that what the British public really needed was a book on Chekhov's work. But I could only claim to become a *Chekhoved* when perestroika opened the archives and I was able to explore the enormous Chekhov *fondy*, especially the 10,000 letters written to him.

I then understood that Chekhov was far more complex as a writer and a man than had been thought, and moreover a contradictory mix of the crude and the refined, the scientific and the inspirational, the cruel and the kind. My views of his work have modified in that I see his subtitle 'comedy' as a tempo-marking to be heeded and his attitudes to the real world not as indifference or unworldliness but as a set of firmly, if discretely, held existential principles.

The impression Chekhov makes outside Russia depends of course on translators and interpreters, and now we have better versions of the stories and productions of the plays. I am particularly impressed by *Uncle Vanya* in Australia or on 42nd street, the

Cherry Orchard turned into a gas station in western England, *Platonov* performed round a swimming pool, *Three Sisters* with a small audience actually at the name-day party on stage. There is no longer any doubt that without Chekhov there could be no Samuel Beckett, no Artaud, not even the best of Feuchtwanger. He is more central than ever.

On the present state of Chekhoviana, I am less sure. Too many academics have been trampling too small a field. I believe we have more preliminary groundwork to do. For instance, there are small pieces of Chekhov's work which remained to be unearthed. There may well be in the archives of the Odessa educational district his matriculation piece, "There is no greater evil than anarchy." In the archive of Moscow University's medical faculty Chekhov probably left a number of historiae morbi for his tutors and professors. At least three are known (none of them is to be found in the Collected Works). One was published in a collection of 1947, an autopsy of Efimov, a drunken peasant who in 1884 hanged himself by a sash from a beam in the latrine of a Moscow house. Another is the study of a case of neonatal syphilis (Kurnukova), and the first page is reproduced in Dr Mëve's *Meditsina v tvorchestve Chekhova*, and the paper itself is probably still in Mëve's archive in Kiev. A third piece, in RGALI, with annotations by Chekhov's colleague Dr Rossolimo, is an account of a psychotherapeutic exercise in which a young railway clerk, Bulychëv, is treated for compulsive masturbation by a series of cold baths. The two pieces on Efimov and Bulychëv are in fact of some interest for a study of Chekhov's fiction. One of Chekhov's few political manifestos has been lost, an interview given in Spring 1897, in Paris, and in French, to the noted Jewish Dreyfusard, Bernard Lazare. Possibly, it lies in the vaults of *L'Auror*e and if found would help scotch the ill-founded view of Chekhov as an apolitical writer.

Two batches of Chekhov's letters are missing—to Elena Pleshcheeva, the daughter of the poet Pleshcheev and to Suvorin's governess, Emilie Bijon, an enterprising Frenchwoman who abandoned her illegitimate son in Alsace to become governess in Suvorin's household. The latter letters were passed on to two Bijon nieces who, when I inquired, were both, with a trunkful of possessions, in an old folks' home in Neufchatel (Switzerland).

Computerization gives answers to questions that would never be posed by a normal human mind. Once all Chekhov is encoded on a CD, then a day's work by the computer will produce a *Slovar' iazyka Chekhova* with word frequencies,. More interesting would be to verify statistically what one notices casually: that Chekhov's language is osmotic—it absorbs phrases used in his presence, in letters to him, in his reading. Old Taganrog phrases recalled by Aleksandr in his letters to Anton—*Propadai moia telega, vse chetyre kolesa* go into *Vishnëvy sad* (just as the title "Anna na shee" came from Aleksandr's bitter description of his unhappy dying first wife). In other words, if we digitalized not just Chekhov's texts but the texts he read, we would understand far better how he literally lets characters speak their own language.

Emma Polotskaia
Scholar and writer

I took up Chekhov as a graduate student in the beginning of the 1950s. His art, seen against the usual background of the Russian classics, seemed to me at that time to be

unusually rich in content and also diverse in form. His work was insufficiently valued then, both by readers and by scholars and critics. This was still the time when V. Ermolov's views on Chekhov predominated. Having defended my dissertation in 1954, I became keen on Chekhov's narrative prose and then his creative process. It was to this latter theme that my book *A. P. Chekhov The Trajectory of His Creative Thought*, Moscow (1979) was devoted. To this theme is connected some chapters of my recent book *The Cherry Orchard: Its Life in Time*. Another significant issue that has always interested me is indicated by the title of another of my books *On Chekhov's Poetics*. As part of my duties at the Institute of World literature I worked on the 30 volume, complete edition of Chekhov's works and letters: I helped prepare for publication the first volume of Chekhov's letters, the stories in volumes 5 and 10, and *The Cherry Orchard*, which appeared in volume 13 in 1978. Since that time Chekhov's last play in particular and his dramaturgy in general have become the subject of my research and study. These basic topics are also engaging my attention at the present time. Planning a future collection of articles devoted to Chekhov the playwright, I am beginning to study and reflect on a number of related aspects and problems. In particular, I am working on the question of inexactitude in Chekhov's plays. By this I mean the concrete information that is omitted in these works, that is, the details missing about the past lives of the characters or about the books they are reading or have read—of the titles of these books there is no mention. Of course, it is details like these that do not interest the playwright, since his attention is focused on what is more important elsewhere, namely, the events in which the characters participate and their experiences. The basic idea is, of course, that these are not to be considered omissions in the text but instead reflect what the writer considers significant and comment on the trajectory of the author's creative thought.

Karl Kramer
Professor Emeritus, University of Washington

Centennial Notes

My interest in Chekhov was preceded by a course on James Joyce in graduate school. I had become intrigued by the epiphanic short story, and when I began reading Chekhov, it seemed as though the same kind of analysis one brings to a Joycean story might apply to such Chekhov pieces as "Verochka." That didn't really pan out, but eventually what hooked me on the man were his letters. His was a personality which intrigued me more and more, particularly his sense of humor. It was a personality I found enormously congenial. Many years later, I undertook a study of Bunin's stories, but the project came to a quick halt. I couldn't imagine spending any quantity of time with a writer who seemed so devoid of any sense of the comic.

My readings of many stories have changed over the years, most notably in the case of "The Teacher of Literature." Initially, I turned a blind eye to the comic element in the story, which now seems to me written very large indeed. As a result, I took Nikitin far more seriously and sympathetically than he could possibly deserve.

Some thirty years ago now, a very talented graduate student told me that, compared with Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy, Chekhov's is a pretty minor talent. As the years go by and the quantity and quality of Chekhov criticism has proliferated, it seems to me that student was very wrong. I now believe that there are writers whose work is in the last analysis fully comprehensible. Much of Turgenev's output falls into this category. It is possible to reach a point at which there is no longer any reason to revisit the piece. With writers of the highest caliber one never gets to this point. Chekhov's work has that quality of inexhaustibility.

My interest and training were originally in the area of prose narrative. It took a long time for me to grapple with the plays. What initiated this project was a call from the artistic director of Seattle's Intiman Theatre. Margaret Booker wanted to check on the pronunciation of names in *The Three Sisters*, because she was about to stage it. As we talked about various aspects of the play, it became apparent our understanding of Chekhov was similar. She took the bold step of inviting me to come to the theatre for the first reading and to try to handle any questions the actors might have. It did start the interpretive juices flowing, when the actress playing Masha asked just what the hell she means when she says, "thirty or forty officers would attend our name day parties. There was lots of noise, but today there's only a man and a half." Many more challenging questions followed over a period of several weeks. I was forced to try to come to grips with issues in the play, which had hitherto never even occurred to me. Watching the director and the actors attempting scenes in different ways made it much clearer to me what manner of staging might work and what wouldn't. I believe my participation helped those making the play come alive on stage, and heaven knows the experience for me meant the difference between a passive reading of a Chekhov play and actually trying to understand what is physically and psychologically transpiring at every moment of the performance.

This collaboration led to work on two more productions, *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Seagull*. The process proved equally enlightening for me. I particularly recall a rehearsal of the second act of *Cherry Orchard*. Liubov Andreevna had just gone through her catalogue of sins, when the actor playing Lopakhin brought the scene to a standstill by pointing out that, while Liubov Andreevna is discussing the death first of her husband and then of her son, Lopakhin's only response seems to be: Yeah, and my handwriting's awful. The gravity of her confession versus the apparent triviality of his response is not an easy difference to explain, especially if one has never thought of it before. Eventually, this dilemma led me to an interpretation of a major thread in the play.

After this apprenticeship, in my naiveté, I assumed I might well encounter other chances to work on productions of Chekhov plays. To my dismay, what I later learned was that Ms. Booker belonged to an extraordinarily rare species in the theatrical world: a director with sufficient self-assurance to at least consider the advice of others. Another prominent theatre company in the area later staged two Chekhov plays, but the director hadn't the slightest interest in permitting the actors to talk to an academic, nor did he want to himself. Leading after-play discussions was the proper role for an academic. My conclusions may seem to be based on a remarkably limited experience, but I understand that some years ago a meeting of stage people and academics with a mutual interest in Chekhov was held at Northwestern University. I have heard that for the most part neither faction wanted to talk to the other. I consider this attitude a terrible waste of valuable

resources. Each group could learn much from the other, and the ultimate beneficiaries might be the theatre-going public.

Savely Senderovich
Professor of Russian Literature & Medieval Studies, Cornell University

My Years with Chekhov

I have taught Chekhov for over a quarter of century, both in the original and in translation. My course has attracted small numbers of very good students whose satisfaction with their choice has been considerable. The freshness and inexhaustibility of Chekhov's world, the depth and problematic nature of his texts, and the irreducibility of his stories to any formula have been the source of this satisfaction. And the best I could do, apart from offering a cultural commentary, was to teach my students to read Chekhov attentively and to question any hasty conclusions.

Already in my childhood I loved Chekhov because he was funny. But when I started looking closer at his texts, I realized that something mysterious was going on beneath their apparently simple surface. Yet I was prepared to read his texts in depth only after a diligent apprenticeship in the study of poetry. His place is between Pushkin and Mandelstam, not between Turgenev and Solzhenitsyn. Like every great poet, he speaks in his own language, and until we have learned it, we cannot really read him at all. A friend, who is a Turkologist, told me once how an inscription on a stone found in Central Asia was translated and interpreted by an archeologist and seemed very simple, until a linguist showed that it was written in a different language altogether. Then difficulties began. Similarly, during his lifetime and after, Chekhov has remained one of the most popular and one of the least understood Russian writers. Not only did the general reader fail to understand him, but also his highly talented friends and admirers in the Moscow Art Theatre as well as writers of books on his art of writing and poetics—all of those who approached him with ready-made notions and preconceived expectations.

Chekhov cannot be squeezed into any cliché. The greatest fallacy on this side of the Atlantic is the application of ideological constructs—be they from Christianity, the social sciences or psychoanalysis—as explanatory paradigms for a writer who tended not to accept anything commonly believed to be true. *Routine thinking* was the worse he could say about a writer. When Chekhov presents one of the notions current in his time, it does not signify his acceptance of it; usually he employs it as an object, as a part of the reality he represents, as a reflection of his character's opinions or beliefs rather than of his own. He in fact challenges us to understand the place and function of the character's language and values within his own. And as soon as an easily recognizable idiom is encountered in his text, it should arouse the reader's suspicion.

Studies that approach Chekhov with open eyes are rare. They can be counted on the fingers of a few hands. Once, I gathered a number of such studies (that adhered, of course, to my perhaps all too rigorous standards) in a collection: *Anton Chekhov Rediscovered*, East Lansing, Mich.: Russian Language Journal, 1987 (eds. S. Senderovich and M. Sendich). Since that time, only a few can be added to the list.

I allowed myself the luxury of spending seventeen years on the study of a limited stratum in Chekhov's work (one that runs through all his works) in order to learn in a detailed and consistent manner how to read him. My book, ***Чехов – с глазу на глаз. История одной одержимости А.П. Чехова. Опыт феноменологии творчества*** (*Chekhov—Face to Face. A Story of an Obsession of Chekhov. An Essay in the Phenomenology of Artistic Creativity*), is on the surface a reconstruction of Chekhov's life-long obsession with the motif of St. George. That much has been noticed by its reviewers. My intent, however, was to use this motif as a device for discerning things more sublime: the presence behind the apparent tales explicitly narrated by Chekhov of second stories that extend and deepen the profundity of his works; the necessity of a particular bifocal adjustment of the reader's eyesight for a proper reading of Chekhov's texts; the gap between the idiom of Russian popular culture and the writer's own; a glance into his unorthodox vision of the Russian cultural world; a reconstruction of Chekhov's personal mythology as well as of deep, indeed, unconscious psychological preoccupations—by means of proper literary analysis, the field of psychoanalysis is broadened so as to introduce complexes other than those attested by Freud; and, finally, a glimpse of the glow emitted by the electric arc of high tension between Chekhov's thematic preoccupations and the deep contents of his psyche. My book avoids definitive conclusions and closed interpretations; instead, it is designed as an introduction to Chekhov. This book was published in 1994 in St. Petersburg and sold out in a flash, or, should I say, vanished into obscurity. Of my other work on Chekhov, an interested reader may be referred to a study of Chekhov's short story "Mire," in which I have uncovered a depth that undermines its apparent anti-Semitic surface (***Автор и текст. Петербургский сборник***, 2, 1996), and a paper on *The Cherry Orchard,* in which I have shown that the play is a lyrico-farcical confession rather than a tragedy/comedy about the moribund class of land owners (*Russian Literature*, XXXV [1994]).

Michael Finke
Washington University in St. Louis

Chekhov in My Life

I began learning to read Chekhov—I could say, learning to read—as an undergraduate in a Chekhov seminar conducted by the late Marena Senderovich at Cornell University toward the end of the 1970s. Marena was finishing up her own Ph.D. dissertation on Chekhov at the time, and her rather formalist approach to Chekhov's semantics facilitated an unlocking of the text that I had never before experienced. A high level of discussion was ensured by the graduate students in that seminar (including Tom Seifrid, Kevin Moss, and others whom I remember well but who did not go into the field, and whose anonymity shall therefore be preserved); but what set me on the path toward graduate study in Slavics and something of a career in Chekhov scholarship was the attention and mentoring I received from Marena and, in the following years, from Savely Senderovich as well. Mimicking as best I could their approaches, mulling their hints and outright interpretive gifts—I hate to think how many might have resurfaced years later as uniquely mine, thanks to the very convenient processes of forgetting—I started to enjoy a

certain delusional feeling of mastery: I actually understood something while reading Chekhov, I was privy to patterns and submerged levels of meaning others failed to perceive. It was some time, I must confess, before I registered the profound scholarship that accompanied their analytical techniques, and the implications of its lack in my own work; it wasn't just a matter of learning to handle silverware with elegance while attacking the steak and peas. I am especially reminded of this whenever I have the good fortune to consult with certain Russian *chekhovedy*.

And still, there may be no other Russian author who feels so accessible to American readers. Books about Chekhov make the "notable" list of the *New York Times*. I believe it accurate to say that Chekhov's plays appear on the American stage with a frequency second only to Shakespeare's, and a Neil Simon can kitsch up the person of Chekhov and acquire commercial success; there are doubtless movie scripts and play projects about Chekhov in process at the present moment. Retired doctors who have always hankered to indulge their creative side write articles and books about him. Publishers see markets not only for new translations, but find profits in recycling Constance Garnett's, long out of date and copyright, even if it means paying a marquee author to add an introduction. Teachers of creative writing swear by Chekhov. I suppose Chekhov's intercultural portability—the ease with which he has been Anglicized and Americanized—has been both a blessing and a curse. I'll never forget the Moscow artist who told me I'd do better to study Dostoevsky; Chekhov, he said, was too Russian, I would never say anything of value about him. And yet one wants to try. The Chekhov jubilee conference planned in conjunction with an NACS Chekhov symposium for October 2004 at *chekhoved* Julie de Sherbinin's Colby College—"Chekhov the Immigrant: Translating a Cultural Icon"—will explore the miracle and pitfalls of Chekhov's naturalization.

It seems to me that most who become taken by Chekhov either begin or eventually settle on the man, or their fantasy of the man. There is most definitely something quite special about the way both we Americans and educated Russians see Chekhov: on the one hand, we frankly acknowledge considerable blindness in regard to his inner life; on the other, he has in effect become, in psychoanalytic parlance, the "ego-ideal" of Russian literature and, in some respects, American letters as well. Thus Sergei Dovlatov wrote, "You can delight in Tolstoy's mind, Pushkin's refinement, and Dostoevsky's deep psychological penetration, but the only one you can wish to be <u>like</u> is Chekhov."[1] So too the American novelist and essayist James McConkey, in an autobiographical work that simultaneously retells the story of Chekhov's journey to Sakhalin Island, admits: "Perhaps my love of T. [Chekhov] is narcissistic; perhaps he is but a mirror of my ideal self."[2] Dr. Robert Coles, an author and physician who built a long career acting on the social values we associate with Chekhov, one of the first MacArthur 'genius grant' recipients, and the originator of the discipline of medical humanities in the U.S., has professed to being flattered by the thought that he might be following in Chekhov's footsteps.[3]

I certainly cannot claim to have absorbed or acted upon Chekhov's most important lessons, the ones that make us wish we were more like Chekhov. Meanwhile, in one month my psychobiographical study of Chekhov is due to the publisher, and at present I still stand before his texts and his person, aspiring to a position of understanding that all too often resembles, embarrassingly, a hubristic position of comprehending

mastery. If there is a sliver of understanding in my understanding of Chekhov, then it tells me how deeply he would have resisted and resented what I have to say about him. Recall his reaction to the critic Skabichevskii's prediction of an abject, drunken death (it's easier for us, of course, working in retrospect); or later in life, how he deflected the pretensions to intimacy of Lidiia Avilova: "Another's soul is a mystery." It's tricky territory, this space between the Chekhov that reflects something of our (ideal) selves and Chekhov the opaque other.

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[1] Emphasis mine. Cited from Gennadii Shaliugin, "Chekhov v krugu kolleg," in *Brega Tavridy* No. 5-6 (1999): 276.
[2] James McConkey, *To a Distant Island* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2000), 19.
[3] Personal communication.

Gerhard Bauer
Professor Emeritus, Freie Universität Berlin

The Delusive Evidence of Chekhov's Situations

OK, he did survive. He outlived both the last years of the Tsarist regime and stagnation, and the long years of the Soviet deception and self-deception, and disappointment. The master with his quiet, restrained voice has become one of the principal voices of our time, for he presents us a standard and unequalled example both of story telling and of play writing.

So, he was wrong when, with his unique shy smile, he always maintained that within a few years he would be forgotten. His Korolëvs and Vershinins, however, were proven wrong in a really painful way. The bright and happy life they predicted for 50 or 100 years in the future—it doesn't matter how long it takes to arrive, Vershinin adds—did not come, and if you look around today it isn't even dawning. The happiness they didn't dare to start enjoying for themselves, in their own lives, was postponed from generation to generation. The ghostly figures from Chekhov's world seem as vivid today as in his time and they continue to undermine their own lives. Do they gnaw at our lives and energy as well?

No doubt, it's a considerable comfort and a pleasure (though a mixed sort of pleasure) to see how vivid they still are today, in our immediate neighbourhood and in our own skin: Chekhov's three desperate sisters and their brother, and Uncle Vanya, and his ineffective questioners, such as Lyzhin and the bride, who is and remains "the bride" in spite of her continuous flight from her fiancé and home. To be sure, we would be worse off without the extremely moderate emphasis of this particular author and his empathy with his/our fellow creatures. Sure, even today we could still learn from the sharp insights he produces, from the courageous or even cheerful devotion with which his figures, in spite of their disgust, stick to the unpleasant tasks of their lives. And yet, is it really our life and our nerves that resound when we read Chekhov's texts? Or do we give in to a nostalgic flashback, a sort of mental and cultural regression?

What is especially convincing in Chekhov is how he makes us *see,* and *feel,* concrete human existence and its limitations. Reading his stories and plays, we cannot but perceive the rooms and gardens—and the gray fences—where he settled his creatures, cannot but hear their bells and breaking strings, cannot but sense their expressions of anger or doubt on our own faces. Concreteness, however, is what our time lacks above all. Everything depends on a hundred causes we can't help and we don't even see or know. The "system," the "structure" of conditions, decides on your job and makes the materials, and patterns, of my hobby smooth instead of rough. Things, processes, and relations show themselves in an inconspicuous way. The more you try to investigate them, the more remote and invisible you'll find their causes. So, Chekhov's art with its personal faces or with a certain atmosphere of places and habits seems to be of little help today.

Unless we find a new way of looking at his people and situations. They are neat and easy to understand, it's true, but they are more than what they were bred to be according to their customs and heritage, more than what is shaped by their actual conduct. Quite a few of them stick very closely to externals, the social conditions of their existence; they care for ranks and distinctions, and are deathly afraid of stepping outside of simple neat categories and shells. Yet some of the best and most impressive of Chekhov's characters doubt and express some hesitation about what they are. They may be indolent or they may be busy, but that is not what counts (for themselves, perhaps for their partners and neighbours, and certainly for the readers of Chekhov's tales). They are liberals or artists or clerks and so forth in a preliminary, indecisive way—in biblical terms: they pretend to be something they are not. Yet there are also moments when they wish to be what the dominant impulse of their existence forbids them to be. Their "real" existence proves to be more restrictive than all their vague yearnings, but some of their whims and scruples are more impressive—to today's readers, at least—than the jobs they do and the deaths they die.

So, we don't lose too much if we are no longer able to believe in the definite outline of Chekhov's figures or to rejoice in the authentic evidence of the situations he creates. Modern stage managers have learned to avoid real samovars, and some of them even refuse the word "samovar." To him, it would be no surprise that we find the attractive, and charming, and important, and significant evidence of his situations delusive in the end. He made them the way he did in order to be delusive. He sometimes played with deceptions, and made his Vanyas or Mashas reflect the tricky way their relations and confrontations turned out. When in the long ending of *Uncle Vanya* Sonya repeats "We will rest," and repeats it over and over, she (or her author) creates a strong spell to give in, and relax. At the same time, however, there is something in the words—or is it the tone or the repetitions?—which evokes so tellingly the contrary of what she says and suggests. There will be no rest, neither for herself nor for her uncle and his indignation. It is unfair to lull people to sleep, and she doesn't definitely mean it, and the author has already provided some dissonant voices to this lullaby during the previous constellations. And *otdokhnut',* by the way, means both to rest (to recover) and to exhale. And you can't exhale without again taking in fresh breath, for further troubles and quarrels.

A favorite reaction to the inconspicuousness of conditions and consequences in our post-modern world is the saying: Do what you are able to do, and don't worry. It

sounds modest, at least, and sometimes there is nothing better at hand to cling to. Chekhov, though he had a weakness for modesty, would not be content to say this. You are to worry, he says, especially about things you'll never know definitely and you are unable to handle in a practical way. What man needs is not three arshins of soil and not a lousy country estate, Ivan Ivanych argues in "Gooseberries," but the whole terrestrial globe. And he needs it to become aware of what is in him and what possibilities, however dim and uncertain, there are ahead of him.

Matthias Freise,
Goettingen University

A. My first encounter with Chekhov's art took place at the University of Hamburg in a seminar for advanced students. It was also here that I engaged in my first academic controversy, with the professor who taught us a great deal about Chekhov but in the end, as it seemed to me, missed the message of the text under discussion, Chekhov`s short story "The Student." Should we condemn the young seminarist for hunting on Good Friday or for his inappropriate reaction to Vasilisa's tears? Is his "insight" into the chain of human culture at all times valid or false? The class had strong defenders and accusers of Ivan Velikopolskii's cause, and our discussion about "The Student" went on for almost 10 years, in one circle or another. The controversy led me to a fundamental question: does an author create ignorant heroes just to condemn them? If true, how cheap this would be! I was never comfortable with a condemnation of the young seminarist in "The Student" nor with an acquittal for him, and the basic question of the relationship between author and hero stimulated both of my books: one on Bakhtin's "dialogism" and the other on Chekhov's prose. In the latter, I tried to formulate a solution that moves beyond the conventional alternatives: the more a Chekhov hero is determined and even mocked by his illusions, errors, and habits, the more he is at the same time respected and justified as a human being.

B. Chekhov's prose texts are of a unique complexity, for they have four simultaneous levels of meaning. On the thematic level, everything seems to happen accidentally; even many details have little or no relevance for the plot. This is the realistic level of Chekhov's texts. On the level of poetic devices, where there are repetitions, symmetries and leitmotivs, every detail is essential, and the heroes' behavior is controlled by their basic needs and passions, which is similar to Zola's naturalism. On the level of meaning, which is immanent in the fictitious world, everything is vain. Empathizing with the hero, we encounter the nothingness of reality. This is the impressionistic level. If we, finally, decode the symbolic meaning of setting and words, that is, the "external" level of meaning, we encounter deep human meaning where we least expected it. This is the symbolic level. On the first level the hero is a middle-class nobody, a sociological case study; on the second level he is almost a pathological case; on the third level he becomes an existentialistic outcast; and on the fourth level he is a tragic figure. Chekhov's major plays and his last few stories have, in addition, a metapoetical and metacultural dimension. They anticipate the loss of the authentically tragic dimension of human life at the dawn of twentieth-century narcissistic culture, the complete loss of cultural orientation, and the imprisonment of modern man in the cage of his own views and fears.

There are hardly any contemporary writers comparable to Chekhov. One reason for this is the advent of a new dominant art form in the twentieth century, the cinema. The contemporary film artists who, like Chekhov, reflect with maximum economy of means the cultural threshold of our times are Lars von Trier and Krzysztof Kieslowski.

C. Although in Russia and in Germany many Chekhov specialists still praise the mimetic qualities of his art, the "structural" or "metapoetical" meaning of his texts is more and more appreciated, especially by American and Dutch scholars. However, radically metacultural views of Chekhov's art still run up against academic resistance: the most innovative work on Chekhov's drama I have ever read ("From Tragedy to Myth – the Inner Development of Chekhov's Dramatic Work") was not accepted as a dissertation at the University of Leipzig and therefore is still unpublished. In my own research, in which I try to extract the inner momentum of cultural change from textual analysis, Chekhov's art is, of course, the key stone of my argument.

Margarita Odesskaya
Russian State University for the Humanities

I first took up Chekhov seriously in the middle of the 1970s when I was a student in the Faculty of Philology at Moscow State University. I chose Chekhov as the subject for my required third-year research project because I did not want to focus on the ideological content of a literary work, which was at that time an absolute requirement in the study of twentieth-century literature

Chekhov was one of the officially recognized writers. He was forgiven the absence of a hero in his works because, according to the formula of Soviet criticism, he did not live to see the birth of *the new hero*, but he did anticipate the revolutionary changes to come. Then, in the 70s, the lack of a hero, the lack of a "general idea" in his writings together with the absence of despotic, authorial impositions, and his irony towards unrealized dreams fit in the best possible way with the sensibilities of the intelligentsia. The fragile positivistic model of Soviet ideology in the 60s was not successfully reconstructed in the 70s on a foundation of disenchantment, lost illusions, and bitter irony. As is well known, the repressive measures taken toward culture in the 70s gave birth to an alternative system of values to that promoted by official ideology.

In the 70s, influenced by the ideas of M. M. Bakhtin and Iu. M. Lotman and new findings in the fields of semiotics and text theory, there took place a gradual break with the dominant methodology, in which the artistic work of art was viewed not as an object of study but a means for the formulation of Soviet ideology. It was at this time that a new stage in the study and interpretation of Chekhov was constructed. In this decade the first publication by the Academy of Sciences of the complete edition of Chekhov's works and letters appeared. And a large group of well-known scholars ad critics of Chekhov—Irina Gitovich, Emma Polotskaia, Zinovii Papernyi, Aleksandr Chudakov, Vladimir Kataev, and others—worked on this edition. It is significant that in the same period were published major studies by Chudakov (*The Poetics of Chekhov*, Moscow, 1975) and Kataev (*Chekhov's Prose. Problems of Interpretation*, Moscow, 1979), studies in which

Chekhov was presented as a poetic writer, a philosopher who posed the insoluble universal problems of human existence.

In the 70s and the beginning of the 1980s the best theatre directors, Anatolii Efros, Iurii Liubimov, Iurii Pogrebnichko, offered their visions of Chekhov onstage and, by means of a poetic language of metaphor and allegory, linked the hopeless anguish of Chekhov's characters, the impossibility of their hopes and dreams, with the lives of the audience, the spectators of this already distant time. And the words of Chekhov's sisters, "[We shall find out] why we live, why we suffer…" were in keeping with the thoughts of the people gathered in the auditorium.

I was lucky enough to manage to approach Chekhov at a time of a revaluation of values, a shift in the cultural paradigm that sharpened and exposed significant aspects of the writer's creativity that are currently important: the universal features of his work, his theatrical and cinematic quality, his penchant for constructing his text on the foundation of another's, and the openness of his texts, in their turn, to new literary and theatrical readings. The process of transforming Chekhov's works continues in contemporary literature and art. What is important is how successful these transformations of the canon are and not whether they are needed. The play with a Chekhov text and all the resulting literary, theatrical and cinematic interpretations do not contradict in any way Chekhov's poetics, since he himself loved to experiment, to transfer well known literary heroes from the works of other writers into new situations and circumstances. And this is the way today's writers such as Boris Akunin, Vladimir Sorokin, Iurii Kuvaldin and others explore Chekhovian motifs in absurd situations from contemporary life.

It's interesting that Iosif Raikhel'gaus has put on the stage of the Theatre of the Contemporary Play Chekhov's *Seagull* and Akunin's *Seagull* as an experimental duologue that transforms a comedy with a melodramatic finale into a tragifarce. The shows play on successive evenings, and the characters of Chekhov's play, keeping their stage masks, "flow," as it were, from the first play into the second. In Raikhel'gaus's productions the device of play, of blatant theatricality, is stressed. And this director has put on a third *Seagull*, an operetta on Chekhovian motifs. This show emphasizes Chekhov's description of his play as a comedy, and with vaudeville verses, dances, and the heroes' comic behavior banishs any hint of melancholy and decadence.

Today's Chekhov, therefore, means new readings, both serious and funny, experimentalism, all possible remakes of the original texts. Everything today leads away from the canonization of a classic and his preservation in conservative anthologies.

Cathy Popkin
Columbia University

Old and New Testimonies

The most striking thing about the suggested topics for these remarks is that all three (and their helpful amplifications) are predicated on the passage of time, asking us to reflect on the relationship between past and present (and present and future)—as is perhaps fitting for an anniversary year when we commemorate now, at a centennial

distance, something that happened "then." And in considering the quality of pastness in the present, in investigating its persistence or its return, its evolution or its transformation, its resonance or its remoteness, we are talking essentially about relations of sameness and difference. When we juxtapose our earliest forays into Chekhov's work with our more recent endeavors (noting, with any luck, the kind of divergence born of development) or invoke Chekhov in a consideration of contemporary writers (a move prompted by a sense of continuity), when we theorize about the continuing appeal of works written over a century ago (plus ça change…) or examine the terms of an adaptation (a form that explicitly changes what it also preserves), we are asking specifically about the way sameness and difference both mark and efface our movement across time. We are measuring the import of time's passing in terms of how much is different and how much, remarkably, is not.

How appropriate for our discussions of a writer whose own favorite story (как полагаем) foregrounds the recognition (whether penetrating or flawed, endorsed or undercut) of an unbroken connection between past and present, and our propensity, for better or for worse, to repeat, reprise, and reuse the past to construct present meaning. And whether Ivan Velikopol'skii's Good Friday retelling-cum-reenactment of the Gospel story evokes in his listeners the sense of connection he posits or an equivalence he misses, whether, in effect, his narrative links diverse things or repeats the same one, «Студент» both tells of and relies on using the past to present effect.

How appropriate the terms of our survey for a writer whose recourse to past material (Biblical and otherwise) goes well beyond the garden-variety harnessing of precedent. Recycling the Eden myth in "За яблочки" (and elsewhere), rerouting Noah's ark into the deluge "На море," or even rewriting *Анна Каренина* again and again is not in itself idiosyncratic. But these repetitions of repetitions belong to Chekhov's speculation in a wider economy of production and reproduction, especially when it comes to the circulation of cultural material (literary, religious, scientific, and more). When his characters (like Laevskii) live by the book or (like Matvei Savvich) damn by it, the implications of their appropriation of culture's scripts are hard to miss. But what do these say about Chekhov's own complicated reduplicative strategies, and even the "neutral" narrator's recitation of *his* lessons in these texts? (This question courtesy of Stephen Shaklan at Columbia.)

How appropriate for a writer whose characters' repetition compulsions (Ippolit Ippolitych, Olen'ka, Gurov) reveal his own enduring preoccupation with iteration and reiteration, and whose formal innovation in the short story genre revolves precisely around the very problem of eventfulness, the possibility of diverging from the same old thing and doing—or saying—something wholly new.

How appropriate for the writer whose final narrative act was a meditation on the potentials of an apocalyptic break with precedent, a rupture in which the past is "lost for all time and irretrievable," and leaving is (как полагала) forever, but in which each move to overturn (перевернуть) the old contains a return (вернуть) to it.

How appropriate, too, that my current project is a revision of an existing edition (the Norton *Anton Chekhov's Short Stories*), and my scholarly assignment is expressly to figure out how both to retain and to overhaul. As for the evolution of my own work (on a writer whose oeuvre has been so stubbornly—and so perniciously—divided into "early" and "late"), I sure hope there's a difference between my earliest readings (which now

seem painfully naïve) and my latter day efforts to read against the grain and then read against my own grain, a development I owe in large part to the smart graduate students at Columbia. And although prophecies in Chekhov's work are invariably dopey, I do feel safe in predicting that the work of these emergent scholars will make a difference.

They have seized on Chekhov's persistent revisiting of the continuities and discontinuities between past and present moments and past and present texts, the originals and their respective remakes. What is striking in this new work, though, is less its examination of Chekhov's (or his characters') recycling of, say, Biblical material than its awareness of Chekhov's recurrent reminders that the Biblical text itself raises its own questions about the relationship between sacred history and current events, and between urtext and latter day compositions. Chekhov makes subtle use of the New Testament's dialogue with Hebrew scripture, the fact that its authority is predicated upon both its sameness as and its difference from its precedent, the fact that the son claims to have come not to abolish, abrogate, or supplant, but, somehow, to supplement and complete..

Thus, "На море" not only rescues Noah and his couples. It also raises the question, in its uneasy standoff between a son and a father who is very much still in place, of the position of a New Testament God vis-à-vis his Old Testament predecessor (and their respective moral universes). By inscribing New Testament parable (Christians shouldn't have to place their fingers in holes in order to believe) in an account of the deluge, in which sinners who bore such holes are struck dead by lightning, the story juxtaposes disparate notions of what constitutes faith and sin. (This reading belongs to Douglas Greenfield's far more subtle and detailed analysis of the story). Similarly, "Мелюзга" gives us Nevyrazymov's struggle to celebrate the new life of Easter as a contest between dead letter and spirit, between commandments and an apophatic God. Or, in terms of *Chekhov*'s "Student," not only does Velikopol'skii's story jockey for position vis-à-vis its famous model, but that model is a sequel that stakes out a claim to be spreading better news than the story it came to fulfill.

I'll leave Greenfield and Shaklan and others publish their own inspired readings. I note only in conclusion that the NACS survey has done the very Chekhovian thing of posing productive (and apposite) questions.

Lady with a Lapdog

Reviewed by
Laurence Senelick, Tufts University

Kama Ginkas and his consort Henrietta Ianovskaia have been formidable figures on the Russian, then international theatre scene ever since the government grudgingly installed them in the Moscow Theatre of the Young Spectator in 1986. At first, Ginkas was content to be the scenographer of his wife's productions, most notably on an adaptation of Bulgakov's *Heart of a Dog*. From 1988, however, he began to stage Russian literary classics in his own versions, noted for their atmosphere of surrealism and

grotesquerie. He specialized in Dostoevsky: *Notes from Underground* (1988), *We Play "Crime"* (1991), and *K .I. from "Crime"* (1994). His only venture into Chekhov, apart from designing the sets for Ianovskaia's *Ivanov (and the Others)*, was an hallucinatory interpretation of the story *The Black Monk* (1999). Now, as his first major production in the United States, Ginkas has adapted and staged Chekhov's late story *Lady with a Pet Dog* for the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Mass.

Sergei Barkhin, his usual designer, has opened up the stage to the full width of the Loeb Drama Center, to present an archetypical *plage*: puddles of water, rivulets of sand, and a number of small, light-weight cabañas in blue and white stripes. This could as easily be a setting for *Death in Venice* or *The Boy Friend*. Two tall light ladders stand at stage right, and at the back hangs a kind of Joseph-Cornell box enclosing a rowboat. This is a purely emblematic stage piece with no functional use in the production. The bright lighting and alternation of azure and dun recall David Hockney.

The production opens with the actors' heads bobbing up from a pit behind the stage, as if they were rollicking in the surf. This playful mood is maintained for the first half-hour: the characters appear in striped Max-Sennett bathing costumes and frisk about light-heartedly in the full glare of the lighting. There are four of them: Gurov and Anna Sergeevna will gradually put on items of period clothing to indicate their growing involvement in the story. The other two, designated in the program as "Gentlemen Sunbathers," wear derbies and clown shoes. Vaguely reminiscent of Beckett's Didi and Gogo, they serve as Meyerholdian "proscenium servants." Over the course of the evening, they annoy Gurov with their antics and interruptions, serve as the train that carries Anna to the town of S., and play various minor roles, including Gurov's children. Most of the narration and dialogue is, however, carried by the two principals.

In essence, this is illustrated story-telling. Chekhov's narrative, in a serviceable translation by Ryan McKittrick and Julia Semliansky, is related, not without repetitions, breaks, and interpolations. Anyone coming to the theatre without knowing the story in advance would have no trouble following it. So far so good. However, Ginkas has decided to impose a form of delivery which, over the course of nearly two hours, becomes tedious in the extreme. The characters deliver their narration, for the most part, in an uninflected manner, taking pauses after every third word. Each pause lasts just a beat longer than we might expect. Of course, there are moments of more heightened emotion, where the rhythm speeds up and becomes more natural. These are few, however, and the general impression is of a verbal *grisaille*. Equally tiresome is the practice of having the Anna actress interrupt the Gurov actor in telling the tale. This is amusing for a while, but becomes protracted and then is repeated with the "Gentlemen Sunbathers" and eventually comes across as a tic, rather than a device to reveal character or enthrall the listener.

It is, I believe, a not uncommon failing, when a director is working in a foreign language, to misconstrue the particular genius of the new language. *Lady with a Lapdog* in Russian has far fewer words than in English, and on the Russian stage an actor will often make a meal out of a single word. Last summer, an audience at the Moscow Art Theatre roared at the various changes rung on the phrase "*Poshli von!*" in Gogol's *Marriage*. American actors are seldom trained to color words or to imbue them with a totemic value. Hence, whatever emphasis Ginkas hoped to achieve by this staccato monotone was thwarted partly by the less emphatic nature of colloquial English and

partly by the inadequacy of the actors in using words to convey more than direct lexical meaning.

Casting was at fault in this as well. As Anna Segeevna, the relatively inexperienced Elisabeth Waterston was simply not up to the part. She came across as a petulant girl, rather than as a disappointed woman. The singular *odor di femina* which gradually captivates Gurov and makes her his obsession was totally lacking. A skinny neurotic, this was more Irina or Sonia than Anna. Moreover, her vocal technique was wanting. Although the actors were miked (causing an unfortunate feedback at one point), her diction and resonance were poor, incapable of using the words to create the images Ginkas had in mind.

Stephen Pelinski as Gurov, on the other hand, was an excellent choice. He had already played Astrov at the Guthrie Theatre, and one would like to see his Vershinin. Tall, with graying hair and beard, and a resonant voice, he successfully conveyed both Gurov's trivial side and his aching sense of futility, In the latter part of the production, Barkhin put him in a homburg and overcoat to simulate photos of Chekhov in Yalta. When Pelinski was allowed simply to sit and, with restrained gestures, speak the lines, his mastery of nuance conveyed the meaning eloquently. Had he not been fettered by the director's "bright ideas," he could have achieved a truly powerful performance. As it was, whatever success the evening had rested on his shoulders.

Over the course of the play, the lighting grows darker, the mood more somber. When Gurov travels to the town of S., a huge fence rises to cover the Cornell box. Unfortunately, it was not the kind of prison-like paling one sees in the Russian suburbs, but a neat row of New England pickets, hardly the formidable obstacle Gurov describes. On the other hand, the episodes in S., partly because Anna is not dominant in them, were among the most interesting theatrically. When Gurov questions the porter at the hotel, the servant replies in excellent Russian, and the actor/character Gurov/Pelinski is delighted to find that he can translate Russian. (The porter's sharing a flask with Gurov is, however, worse than an anachronism, since it violates the sense of Gurov's isolation.) At the local playhouse, Gurov, in describing the spectators, picks out members of the ART audience and imitates them. These moments are more vibrantly alive, less calculated than the rest of the play, where one feels the actors have been forced into alien patterns of speech and movement,

Ginkas employs a number of directorial gimmicks, some of which, such as covering objects with a white cloth to simulate snow, or using stage pieces for various functions (the cabañas now as bathtubs, now as signposts), are tried and true. Others, such as simulating intercourse by having Gurov, sitting on top of a ladder, shaking a white drape that goes halfway across the stage into Anna's spread legs, are downright silly. The "Gentlemen Sunbathers," played by two students from the MXAT school connected with the ART, become as annoying to the audience as they are to Gurov. In the circus, clowns are often used to amuse while the ring is being cleared for the next act. Ginkas occasionally employs these buffoons to indicate the passage of time with their shenanigans, but, since they were not very adept, their buffoonery grows embarrassing. Intentional, you might say? An indication of the trivial diversions we use to while away real life? Perhaps, but, given the ineptitude of the performers, the intention was far from clear.

Ginkas' major interpolation, meant to be a *leitmotif*, came at the very beginning. Life is not happy, we are told, but can be made beautiful. At various points, these and similar sentiments were interjected, with such additions as "It could be worse. You could be crippled! You could have cholera!" By the end, Gurov and Anna, her long hair now in a tight bun, are seated against a brick wall, at the extremity of the darkened stage, staring into space, uttering these doleful remarks. This will hardly dispel the common idea of Chekhov as a merchant of gloom and doom. And its banality sorts ill with the accepted idea that he is a master of prose and understated drama.

Letters

September 18, 2003

To the Editor:

… . I read with great interest the debate over Olga Knipper's fidelity. It has long been my suspicion (and that is all anyone *can* have) that Chekhov suffered from some sexual infirmity—such as premature ejaculation, or even impotence. He loved to flirt with women, to "make love" in the abstract, but I doubt that he really engaged in successful intercourse. Loving Chekhov the man, as I do, and feeling a great affinity for him both as doctor and writer, I am full of sympathy for his plight (as I see it). I do not at all blame Olga for adultery, if indeed she committed it. Good for her! But all my compassion is for Chekhov.

By the way, a third possibility for Olga's severe and protracted illness is Pelvic Inflammatory Disease, secondary infection with gonococci. This would have taken the time to "burn itself out." Nor would this diagnosis preclude the existence of pregnancy. …

Sincerely,
Richard Selzer
6 St. Ronan Terr.
New Haven, CT 06511

30 November 2003

To the Editor:

May I add a few comments to the exchange of articles between Hugh McLean and Donald Rayfield on Olga Knipper's alleged infidelity to Chekhov? McLean thinks that the jury is out, whereas I take the view that there is no case to answer.

In the 1970s, when I was writing *Chekhov's Leading Lady*, I made a careful study of the extensive Chekhov-Knipper correspondence. In Knipper's letters I could find no hint of deceit or deviousness (and I looked very hard). She liked things to be out in the open, whereas Chekhov can sometimes appear evasive and reticent. On both sides the correspondence is demonstratively affectionate throughout. If anything, Knipper struck me as the more deeply committed of the two. "You are the only person in the world for me," she wrote on 28 August 1902.

Rayfield, however, implies that such sentiments were a smokescreen behind which she concealed from Chekhov her highly-sexed promiscuous nature, and that she deceived him about the true reason for her pregnancy.

In her scribbled note to Chekhov of 31 March 1902 (not published in full until 1996) Knipper wrote: "They confirmed that it was an embryo of 1 1/2 months." For Rayfield's hypothesis to stand up – that this was the end of an ectopic pregnancy of at least 8 to 12 weeks duration – the figure of 1 1/2 months must be wrong. We can rule out the possibility that two top gynecologists made a simple error. So was Knipper telling a deliberate lie?

After her miscarriage she was in a state of emotional and physical shock, and not in a fit condition to think up an elaborate cover story. But the obvious reason why Knipper was not lying is that she could not have hoped to get away with it: Chekhov had only to contact either gynecologist to be told a different story. There is no reason to doubt that the gynecologists were right and Knipper reported them truthfully.

Let us suppose with Rayfield that Pamfil was conceived in January, not February, and that Knipper had been unable to get away to Yalta until the end of March when the Petersburg tour ended. By then her pregnancy would have been impossible to conceal from her doctor husband. After their shared hopes of having a baby together, would she have said to Chekhov that yes, she was now pregnant, but not by him? Or would she have tried to terminate the pregnancy earlier? Hard to conceal this from Chekhov, with whom she was in almost daily contact by letter; harder still from her flatmate, Chekhov's sister. Yet these are the kind of impossible situations that Knipper risked getting into all the time if, as Rayfield claims, she was being persistently unfaithful.

If Knipper had been pregnant for at least 8 to 12 weeks by 30 March, she must have conceived some time in January. Rayfield points the finger of suspicion at Nemirovich-Danchenko. Unfortunately for this theory, Nemirovich left Moscow for Nice on 2 January and did not return until the 23rd: a visit that Chekhov and Knipper refer to in their letters on at least ten occasions.

Rayfield says that he did not intend to doubt Knipper's honour, only to explain Chekhov's "extraordinarily uncaring behaviour" towards her in June and July. "Extraordinarily uncaring" is unfair to Chekhov. He had remained constantly at her side for two months and put his own precarious health at risk. The idea that his departures were the behaviour of a deceived husband bearing a grievance belongs to the world of cheap romantic fiction.

The prosecution's star witness." E. B. Meve, turns out to be an embarrassing disaster. Far from being "conclusive," his four-page letter of 11 November 1960 to Sergei Mikhailovich Chekhov, setting out his "Story of the Unborn Pamfil" (RGALI 2540, 2, 460, 28-31) is almost worthless. Meve is not impartial. He hero-worships Chekhov ("my favourite man in the world"), regards Knipper as a "bad woman" (*nekhoroshaia zhenshchina*) and the marriage as fatal for Chekhov "from start to finish." Only one paragraph in the letter addresses the problem seriously. Meve argues that Knipper's bad turn on Simferopol station after leaving Yalta could not have happened to anyone who was only a few days pregnant (whereas in fact it is quite consistent with a pregnancy starting to go wrong in the earliest stages), and that no doctor could have diagnosed a 28-day pregnancy (a miscalculation for 35). Meve was using Derman's 1936 volume of the Chekhov-Knipper letters, from which clinical details were excluded, and

would have been dismayed to learn that Knipper had written: "They confirmed that it was an embryo of 1 1/2 months."

Donald Rayfield need have no fears of refutations from inside Russia, since his speculations will merely reinforce the existing prejudice against Knipper. Mention her name and the usual response is that "everyone knows she was unfaithful to Chekhov." This is the notorious *Vsem izvestno, chto* that in Soviet times always prefaced a highly dubious assertion or downright lie. When asked for the evidence, on which they base this allegation, these critics back down very quickly: "it's what *other people* say." Chekhov always attached great importance to fairness (*spravedlivost'*). To accuse Knipper of infidelity when there is no evidence against her is unfair to his memory as well as to hers.

Yours sincerely,
Harvey Pitcher
Cromer, Norfolk, UK

Some Concluding Notes
From the editor

Among other items, the second issue of this year will report on a number of conferences devoted to Chekhov this year and print a bibliographical survey of recent articles and books on Chekhov. But I must conclude this issue on a sad note of profound regret at the death of Joseph L Conrad, Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Kansas, who died on 21 December 2003. Professor Conrad was a devoted reader of Chekhov and his many students and readers deeply appreciated his lectures and articles produced over a span of more than thiry-five years.