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Editor's Note

This issue marking the sesquicentennial of Chekhov's birth opens appropriately with an essay by Anna Muza on Cekhov's attitudes toward and depictions of jubilee celebrations. Caryl Emerson then introduces an essay by Sigizmund Krzhizhanovskii that illuminates facets of the comic writings with which Chekhov began his literary career and touches on the importance of Chekhonte's work for Chekhov's. Two notes follow: one on the birth and first ten years or so of the NACS by Julie de Sherbinin and the other by Laurence Senelick about Constance Garnett's sister-in-law and her report on the first performance of *The Sea Gull*. The issue continues with Radislav Lapushin's discussion of two adaptations, cinematic and operatic, of *Three Sisters*. At the very end you will find a press release about the December conference, *Chekhov on Stage and Page*, at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. Use the link in the release to check out the preliminary schedule of keynote speakers, panels, exhibits, master classes, readings, and screenings.

## Chekhov's Jubilee and the Jubilee in Chekhov

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On 17 (30) January 1904, "all Moscow," as the press had it, or rather the more privileged of the Moscow intelligentsia, attended the opening night

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Chekhov's texts are taken from the *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v 30-ti tomakh* (Moskva: Nauka, 1974-1983). All translations from the Russian are mine unless otherwise noted.

of *The Cherry Orchard* at the Art Theatre and also witnessed, and participated in, a public ceremony honoring its author. The celebration, which coincided with Chekhov's forty-fourth birthday and name-day and which took place between the play's third and fourth acts, ingeniously brought Chekhov's personal and creative histories to an apogee on the Art Theatre's stage. Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko concluded the suite of speeches and gifts with the offering to Anton Pavlovich of the Theatre itself: «Это твой театр» ("This is your theatre"), he told his friend.[1] Indeed, the emblem of the seagull on the Theatre's new curtain testified to Chekhov's presence in the very fabric of the company's artistic experience and experiment.

The occasion at the Art Theatre is a well-known fact of Chekhov's life, as well as of *The Cherry Orchard's* cultural record, yet quite a few details concerning the planning and execution of the celebratory interlude remain uncertain and somewhat puzzling. In the public's mind, the tribute was associated with the twenty-fifth anniversary of Chekhov's literary work, although Chekhov's own evasive and misleading dating of his debut had been meant to deflect or camouflage the jubilee.[2] Anxious to arrange a public event during the writer's stay in Moscow, Chekhov's collaborators were undoubtedly prompted by an awareness that another chance might

[1] Nemirovich's rhetorical gesture was subsequently recalled by many memoirists: see, in particular, Nikolai Èfros's monograph based on documentary sources *"Vishnevyi sad," P'esa A. P. Chekhova v postanovke Moskovskogo Khudozhestvennogo teatra* (Peterburg, 1919), p. 68.

[2] Responding to rumors and inquiries concerning the upcoming jubilee, Chekhov referred it to "1906 or 1907": See letter to Olga Knipper, 17 November 1903, or to P. F. Iordanov, 26 November 1903, (both in *Pis'ma*, vol 11, p. 308 and 316). Following the celebration, he named 1880 as the year of his first publication: see letter to F. D. Batiushkov, 19 January 1904*, Pis'ma*, vol. 12, p. 14. The editors of the PSS comment on Chekhov's dating of his career in *Sochineniia*, vol. 18, pp. 236-238.

never occur. In a letter to Nemirovich on January 14, Stanislavsky called Chekhov only "half-alive" and *The Cherry Orchard*, his "swan song."[3]

Chekhov's poor physical state, incessant coughing, and obvious exhaustion have come down as the most memorable aspects of the jubilation at the Art Theatre, as ill-timed as Ranevskaia's party in the third act of *The Cherry Orchard*. The writer's death in July must have enhanced the mournful overtones of the evening for its eyewitnesses.[4] In addition, the melancholy tenor of the Art Theatre's staging of *The Cherry Orchard* resonated with the author's own, only too apparent mortality. Chekhov's comedy sounded like a requiem both for the dying epoch and for him. In 1914, the journalist and critic Aleksandr Amfiteatrov bemoaned the "fatal axe" which, while chopping down the orchard of the gentry, also cut out the boards for Chekhov's coffin.[5] In the 1920s, Stanislavsky recalled that the "jubilee gave out a funereal smell."[6]

Chekhov was partly to blame for the distressing effect of his jubilee appearance. Having always avoided recognition and public exposure, he finally came to face his audience a dying, pitiful man. In his book *Seeing Chekhov* Michael Finke has offered a penetrating reading of Chekhov's fear of publicity, carefully guarded privacy, and need to observe, never to be

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[3] Quoted in O. A. Radishcheva, *Stanislavskii i Nemirovich-Danchenko. Istoriia teatral'nykh otnoshenii. 1897-1908* (Moskva: Artist. Rezhissër. Teatr, 1997), p. 234. The event at the Art Theatre was generally referred to by the comprehensive term *чествование*, "public honoring."

[4] Olga Knipper admitted that the tribute may have assumed a more sinister coloration because of what followed so quickly: See her "O A. P. Chekhove" in *A. P. Chekhov v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov* (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1986), p. 630.

[5] Aleksandr Amfiteatrov, "Anton Chekhov i A. S. Suvorin" in *A. P. Chekhov v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov* (Moskva: Gelios APB, 2004), p. 76.

[6] K. S. Stanislavskii, *Moia zhizn' v iskusstve* [1924-26], Sobranie sochinenii v deviati tomakh (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1988), p. 347.

observed. Being placed on the stage as a "cultic object to be viewed by others, and in reference to which these others might signal their own cultural refinement"[7] was the exact opposite of Chekhov's coveted, sheltering invisibility. «Знаете, во время чествования я несколько раз принималась плакать, право! Посмотрю на [Чехова] и <...> так жутко за него делается» ("You know, several times during the tribute I would start crying, really. I would look at [Chekhov] and <…> feel so awful for him"), Stanislavsky's young niece wrote immediately after what she called «торжество Антона Павловича» ("Anton Pavlovich's triumph"), on January 17.[8]

Biographers now agree that Chekhov's very participation in the jubilee occurred as a result of the Art Theatre's scheme, which caught him unawares: tricked by a mischievous note from Nemirovich-Danchenko, Chekhov came to the theatre merely to greet the actors and was all but pushed onstage.[9] However, in the days preceding the premiere Moscow newspapers kept referring to the ceremony anticipated at *The Cherry Orchard's* opening performance,[10] and it is hard to imagine that Chekhov, unlike the rest of Moscow, had heard nothing about it. Unlike the common memory of Chekhov's ailing, frail body, contemporary recollections and

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[7] Michael C. Finke, *Seeing Chekhov. Life and Art* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2005), p. 189.
[8] Quoted in G. Brodskaia, *Alekseev-Stanislavskii, Chekhov i drugie. Vishnevosadskaia èpopeia* (Moskva: Agraf, 2000), Vol. 2, 1902-1950, pp. 155-156.
[9] See, e.g., Donald Rayfield's *Anton Chekhov. A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), p. 587; Finke's *Seeing Chekhov*, p. 24; or the very recent *Chekhov* by Alevtina Kuzicheva, (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 2010), pp. 819-820.
[10] E.g., *Russkoe slovo* (*The Russian Word*) reported on January 16 that a public tribute, *публичное чествование*, to the author was being planned on the opening night: Quoted in *Pis'ma*, vol. 12, p. 252. On publicity concerning the opening of *The Cherry Orchard* see commentary in *Pis'ma*, vol. 12, pp. 251-252.

conjectures concerning his acceptance of, and reaction to, the public tribute differ quite significantly.[11] Chekhov's notes and letters written immediately after the celebration leave – as they often do – a contradictory impression of his emotional state. On the 18th, writing to a close acquaintance, Ivan Leont'ev (Shcheglov), Chekhov mentioned that his play had opened the night before and "therefore [his] mood was quite poor,"[12] without saying a word about the festivity. In his often quoted letter to F. D. Batiushkov of January 19 he described the event as "generous and heartfelt" («меня чествовали, и так широко, радушно») and said that he was "still overwhelmed" («до сих пор не могу прийти в себя»).[13] Most characteristically, in a brief note of gratitude to the critic Nikolai Èfros -- «Бесконечно признателен за вчерашнее»[14] ("I'm infinitely obliged for yesterday") -- Chekhov left the occasion and the favor unnamed, as if they were of a delicate or embarrassing nature.

The "Chekhovian difference" of the event at the Art Theatre with its reluctant and vulnerable protagonist has overshadowed the standard, canonical properties of what the newspaper *Novoe vremia* (*New Times*) described as a "grandiose, solemn as well as sincere, tribute to A. P.

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[11] Stanislavsky remembered that Chekhov had eventually succumbed to the Art Theatre's persuasion (*Moia zhizn' v iskusstve*, p. 346); Olga Knipper claimed that he had to be sent for and driven to the theatre ("O A. P. Chekhove", p. 630); the actor Leonid Leonidov, who played Lopakhin, believed that the celebration came as a complete surprise to Chekhov ("Proshloe i nastoiashchee", quoted in commentary to *Pis'ma*, vol. 12, p. 255).
[12] *Pis'ma*, vol. 12, p. 14.
[13] Ibid., p. 15.
[14] Ibid., p. 14.

Chekhov."[15] In its concept, purpose, and format the tribute exemplified a social convention, highly prominent in contemporary public life, which had intrigued Chekhov long before it had any personal relevance. Stanislavsky subsequently acknowledged, in passing, the paradox of subjecting Chekhov to that very «длинное и тягучее торжество юбилея, над которым он добродушно смеялся в своих произведениях» ("long and drawn-out jubilee ceremony that he had kind-heartedly laughed at in his writings").[16] Yet Chekhov's attitude was less than kind: from his earliest sketches, such as "My Jubilee" (1880), to the famous salute to the hundred-year-old bookcase in *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov pulled apart the ritual's verbal tissue and affective mechanism, and wreaked havoc on its procedure. After twenty-five years of such literary work, the occasion on the opening night of *The Cherry Orchard* looked like an act of vengeance exercised by the genre itself on a hubristic hero who had aspired to be above its grip.

Of course, the jubilee offered Chekhov an apt form for observing human vanity, self-delusion, affectation, and other similar flaws and weaknesses exposed and ridiculed in his work. Yet his close interest in the genre representative of his society and culture was arguably of a deeper and more paradoxical nature. In this essay I wish to review the occasion in the Moscow Art Theatre in terms of its essential, generic traits, consider Chekhov's "jubilee texts" in a broader contemporary context, and open a

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[15] «Грандиозное, полное и торжественности и искренности, чествование А. П. Чехова», *Novoe vremia,* January 18, 1904. Published at http://starosti.ru/archive.php?m=1&y=1904.
[16] *Moia zhizn' v iskusstve*, p. 347.

Chekhovian perspective on the festive practice so popular with the educated Russian classes in his time -- and, one may add, ever after.

Even a cursory glance (to which I here restrict myself) at the contemporary public scene shows that the event organized by the Art Theatre on Chekhov's behalf was but one of an overwhelming number of anniversaries and celebrations of major and minor authors, critics, journalists and journals, societies, and so on. In the early 1800s, the very word *юбилей* was a curiosity: in 1805, the journal *Vestnik Evropy* (*Herald of Europe*) published a piece explaining the concept's Hebrew origin, its subsequent history in the Church of Rome, and its secular meaning as the fiftieth year of a monarch's reign.[17] A century later, the third edition of Vladimir Dal''s dictionary registered the word's latest meaning as a tribute paid to individuals on the occasion of a certain term of their service, be it scholarly, artistic, pedagogical, public, or any other kind. The dictionary entry also included the noun *юбиляр* (to signify the person celebrating an anniversary), a coinage absent in Western languages. Despite the occasional celebration of personal dates, such as Tolstoy's eightieth birthday in 1908, the jubilee ethos privileged "service": years of significant activity, *деятельность*, in the social sphere.

In a scathing satire written in 1875, «*Юбиляры и триумфаторы*» (*Heroes Accorded Jubilees and Triumphs*), Nikolai Nekrasov made the jubilee celebration an epitome of the ruling class's corruption and self-indulgence. However, the genre of public tribute was as eagerly used by

[17] *Vestnik Evropy*, 2 (1805), pp. 121-123. I'm grateful to Luba Golburt for this reference.

the intelligentsia with its yearning for public space, collective experience, and civic discourse. In 1900, Nemirovich-Danchenko wrote to Chekhov about the anniversary of the journal *Russkaia mysl'* (*Russian Thought*):

> На юбилее был. Боже, боже! Я состою при литературе 21 год и 21 год я слышу одно и то же, одно и то же!! Ну, хоть бы что-нибудь, хоть бы по форме изменилось в этом обилии намеков на правительство и в словах о свободе. Точно шарманки, играющие из "Травиаты".[18]
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> [I did attend the jubilee. Oh Good Lord! I've been involved in literature for 21 years and for 21 years I've been hearing the same thing over and over again. Oh, if only something, at least in appearance, would change in this sea of allusions to the government and words about freedom. Just like barrel organs playing from *La Traviata*.]

By the turn of the century, apparently, the jubilee lost its grand "operatic" luster to drown in a joyless, unexciting monotony (which did not, of course, deter Nemirovich from organizing Chekhov's jubilee in 1904). The broadening of the public sphere, which made possible the Pushkin festival of 1880, eventually resulted in a mass production of trivial occasions. Nor did one have to wait for half a century to be honored: just like the Catholic Church, the secular jubilee code reduced the term to twenty-five years. In *The Jubilee*, Chekhov's farce written in 1891, a bank celebrates its *fifteenth* anniversary: apparently, anything goes. In "The Lady with the Dog" (1899) the narrator mentions jubilees as part of Gurov's idle, consumerist Moscow routine: "Его уже тянуло в рестораны, клубы, на званые обеды,

[18] Vl. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko. *Tvorcheskoe nasledie*. Tom 1. Pis'ma [1879-1907] (Moskva: Moskovskii Khudozhestvennyi teatr, 2003), p. 325.

юбилеи…" ("Already he felt a longing for restaurants, clubs, banquets, anniversaries…").[19]

Having complained of jubilee boredom, Nemirovich-Danchenko went on to write and stage «В мечтах» (*In Dreams*, 1901), a play dramatizing a celebration in honor of a former diva, now a famous singing teacher. Made up mostly of interminable speeches on life in art and art in life, the play succeeds in giving a compelling example of the "long and drawn-out" jubilee routine, which by the turn of the century had become familiar and predictable enough to serve as a dramatic convention. The anniversary fever affected even the unconscious: in 1902, Aleksei Suvorin recorded in his diary a dream in which he congratulated Tolstoy on his fiftieth literary jubilee.[20]

One of Chekhov's earliest sketches published in July of 1880 is entitled "My Jubilee": it marks the beginning of Chekhov's literary career with a story about the end of one. An aspiring author, who has received exactly two thousand rejections from editorial offices and gives up writing, announces that this unparalleled accomplishment has earned him a place on an "unshakeable pedestal" («незыблемый пьедестал»). The silly narrator's *exegi monumentum* is clearly prompted by the recent Pushkin days in Moscow, but the reversal of the jubilee narrative also intimates Chekhov's skepticism concerning tangible, countable merit as a measure of human life.

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[19] "Dama s sobachkoi", *Sochineniia*, vol. 10, p. 136. Characteristically, in this and other instances English-language translators opt for "anniversaries" or "celebrations", as the "jubilee" does not fit petty everyday contexts, especially in the plural.

[20] *Dnevnik Alekseia Sergeevicha Suvorina* (Moskva: Nezavisimaia gazeta, 2000 and London: The Garnett Press, 2000), Podgotovka teksta D. Reifilda i O. E. Makarovoi, 2nd edition, p. 446.

Two symmetrical stories written in 1886, “The Jubilee” and “The Album,” examine jubilee poetics. The former is set among the actors, the latter among civil servants. A provincial tragedian is moved to tears by an overview of his service on the “thorny path” of art to be appreciated by a “grateful posterity.” A weeping actual civil councilor comes to feel that, if it had not been for him, awful things could have happened to the Fatherland. The two *юбиляры* receive identical gifts: albums filled with photographic portraits of their colleagues. Finally, both nonchalantly part with their presents: the penniless actor, craving more booze, sells his on the very jubilee night; the councilor’s goes to his daughter, who replaces the civil servants with her girlfriends, while his Excellency’s young son, much to his parent’s delight, turns the discarded officials into toy soldiers. The heroes’ lack of attachment, both to the gifts and to the givers, mirrors a larger void at the center of the entire jubilee ritual, a certain hollowness in its script of human interaction. In “The Album,” the councilor’s son pricks the officials’ eyes with a pin, then fastens one cut-out figure on a matchbox and calls it a “monument,” *памятник*, but the dehumanizing metamorphosis shatters the jubilee premise, and promise, of memory and continuity. Chekhov engages the jubilee as an enterprise predicated on the human ability to make sense of and transcend the passage of time, one of the central themes and concerns of his work.

“He was a man, take him for all in all,” Hamlet says of his father in the briefest of tributes. In Chekhov’s vaudeville *The Jubilee* the chairman of a bank’s board praises his own “knowledge, energy, and innate tact” in

resolving the bank's "Hamletian question, to be or not to be."[21] One may wonder whether Chekhov is not simply ridiculing the disparity between his unremarkable characters and bombastic, larger-than-life, jubilee accolades. He is; yet ultimately his quarrel is with the genre as such, regardless of its protagonist's deserts. Chekhov wrote to Suvorin about the impression made in Moscow by the jubilee of the venerable writer Dmitrii Grigorovich, his one time literary patron: "All are saying now, how much we lied, and how much he lied."[22] Explaining his absence from the celebrations of Pushkin's centenary in 1899, Chekhov referred to his inability to listen to the lying jubilee speeches.[23] Jubilee discourse is immanently false because it creates a spurious image of a better, purposeful, meaningful reality. Nikolai Stepanovich in "A Boring Story" (1889) recommends himself as an honest man who has never given speeches either at dinners or at funerals, a detail that should speak in his favor. A famous scientist "known to every educated person in Russia," Nikolai Stepanovich is a ready case for a public tribute, and in a sense the opening paragraphs of "A Boring Story" frame it as a counter-jubilee narrative, in which the narrator's list of accomplishments develops into a bewildered and disheartening confession. In *The Jubilee* the celebration is utterly sham: all words and things offered to the main character by his bank's delegation have been personally selected by him. In the short story of the same title the feted actor gets to sit in a fine armchair,

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[21] *Iubilei. Shutka v odnom deistvii* in *Sochineniia*, vol. 12, p. 219.
[22] 25 January 1894, *Pis'ma*, vol. 5, p. 265.
[23] See letter to M. O. Men'shikov, 4 June 1899, *Pis'ma*, vol. 8, p. 196. Chekhov's correspondence at the time contains quite a few, usually more humorous, excuses for his neglect of Pushkin's jubilee: see, e.g., the letter to V. K. Kharkhevich, 20 May 1899, p. 187.

which, as it turns out, has been borrowed from the company's stage properties and needs to be returned to represent Claudius's throne in *Hamlet*. The jubilee simulacrum is twice removed from reality: a representation of a representation, it has even less substance than toy soldiers or theatre props.

Things are prominent in Chekhov's jubilee texts and contexts not only as material tokens of affection, remembrance, or the human subject's worth, seen humorously or more skeptically. Inanimate objects interest Chekhov as participants in the scripted, boring ceremony that deprives living people of their organic humanness. The strangely prescient jubilee speech to a hundred-year-old bookcase in *The Cherry Orchard* is usually seen as an extreme example of Gaev's "logorrhea" that compels him to address an item of furniture; [24] but the scene also shows the bookcase as an ideal *юбиляр*. In the notebook entry that contains the seed of Gaev's speech Chekhov stressed the mindless, mechanistic nature of the jubilee habit: having discovered a bookcase that has been in their office for a hundred years, officials "celebrate its anniversary in all seriousness" («чиновники серьезно справляют ему юбилей»).[25] A Gogolian reversal of the animate and inanimate enables, in Chekhov, a celebratory occasion:

> **Гаев**. Да... Это вещь... (*Ощупав шкаф*.) Дорогой, многоуважаемый шкаф! Приветствую твое существование, которое вот уже больше ста лет было направлено к светлым идеалам добра и справедливости; твой молчаливый призыв к плодотворной работе не ослабевал в

[24] Donald Rayfield in his witty analysis of the play finds this affliction in all of the main male characters: *Understanding Chekhov. A Critical Study of Chekhov's Prose and Drama* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), p. 250.
[25] *Sochineniia*, vol. 17, p. 96.

> течение ста лет, поддерживая (*сквозь слезы*) в поколениях нашего рода бодрость, веру в лучшее будущее и воспитывая в нас идеалы добра и общественного самосознания.[26]
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> [**Gaev**. Yes…. That's something… (*Tapping the bookcase.*) Dear, honored bookcase, hail to you who for more than a century have served the glorious ideals of goodness and justice! Your silent summons to fruitful toil has never weakened in all those hundred years, sustaining (*through tears*) through successive generations of our family, courage and faith in a better future, and fostering in us ideals of goodness and social consciousness…]

According to the testimony of the Art Theatre actors, the jubilee salutations to the "dear, much honored" Anton Pavlovich prompted Chekhov's wink at the bookcase.[27] Scholars have probed into Chekhov's self-equation with an antiquated, mute container of literary heritage;[28] I think that Chekhov's irony concerned, rather, the dehumanizing effect of the genre on the celebrated, objectified hero. The bookcase epitomizes that inert rigidity "clashing with the inner suppleness of life" which Chekhov's contemporary Henri Bergson placed at the core of his theory of the comic.[29]

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[26] *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, pp. 206-208. The English translation is by Avrahm Yarmolinsky, *The Portable Chekhov* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 544.

[27] Stanislavskii, Vasilii Kachalov, Vlas Doroshevich and others remembered the bookcase joke, although only Kachalov proposed that Chekhov had actually said it aloud on the stage. Such explicit behavior seems to me to be more typical of an actor than of Chekhov. See Kachalov's memoir in *A. P. Chekhov v vospominaniiakh*… (1986), p. 422.

[28] See Savely Senderovich, "*The Cherry Orchard*: Čechov's Last Testament," *Russian Literature* XXXV (1994), pp. 233-234, and also Finke in *Seeing Chekhov*, pp. 186-187.

[29] Henri Bergson. *Laughter*. *An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Authorized translation by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911), p. 44.

Gaev's encomium construes the bookcase as a typical Russian *intelligent* committed to the "shining ideals of goodness and justice," "a better future", and social service. In its civic virtue, the bookcase is the opposite of many Chekhov's heroes who, lost in confusion and uncertainty, could envy the bookcase's determined progress through time. According to Ivan Bunin, *многоуважаемый шкап* instantly became a catchphrase,[30] and it is remarkable that, delighting in Gaev's absurdity, contemporaries seem to have missed the blasphemous thrust of Chekhov's parody directed at the cornerstones of the intelligentsia ethos and discourse. It is extremely telling that someone like Vlas Doroshevich, a liberal journalist, brilliant satirical author, and old acquaintance, should interpret Anton Pavlovich's "first and last" public appearance in the very terms that Chekhov quite unsparingly ridiculed through Gaev's blabber. Citing Chekhov's resistance to publicity, Doroshevich wrote in his obituary in July:

> Чехов принял чествование.
> Почему?
> Потому что пришел к убеждению, что это «нужно». Нужно в общественном смысле. Нужно чествование русским обществом писателя.[31]
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> [Chekhov accepted the tribute.
> Why?

[30] I. A. Bunin. "Chekhov" in *A. P. Chekhov v vospominaniiakh*… (1986), p. 489.
[31] V. M. Doroshevich, "A. P. Chekhov" in *Vospominaniia*, (Moskva: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2008), p. 568. Doroshevich reiterated this thesis in the memorial essay "Desiat' let" ("Ten Years") in 1914, when he was able explicitly to associate the Chekhov event with the public atmosphere on the eve of the first Russian revolution. See *Vospominaniia*, pp. 572-573.

> Because he had come to the conclusion that it was 'needed.' Needed in the civic sense. Russian society needed to pay tribute to the writer.]

The newspaper *Russkie vedomosti* (*Russian Gazette*) exhorted Chekhov to be more like the bookcase:

> … да наступит скорее в вашем творчестве момент, когда тоска сменится бодростью, грустные ноты – радостными, когда раздастся песнь торжествующей любви, заблещут лучи яркого весеннего солнца, дружно возьмется за работу русский народ на столь еще мало возделанной ниве русского просвешения и гражданственности.[32]
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> […let the moment come soon when anguish in your writing gives place to optimism, sad notes to cheerful ones, when a song of triumphant love comes forth, when the rays of a bright spring sun begin to shine, and the Russian people all get down to work on the field of Russian enlightenment and citizenship, which to this day has been only poorly cultivated.]

However, Gaev's ideal of the enlightened compatriot collapses in the face of reality: at the moment the bookcase is unlocked to retrieve, not a silent summons to fruitful toil, but telegraphic appeals from Ranevskaia's lover in Paris. Perhaps the incomprehensible book that Lopakhin holds in his hands as he enters the stage, the book that had put him to sleep, also comes from these shelves.

Whether or not Chekhov, as Lev Shestov argued, ambushed and ruined every human hope, he certainly did spend some of his authorial

[32] Quoted in Nikolai Èfros, *Vishnevyi sad*…, p. 66.

energy on ruining all kinds of human celebration. Chekhov's characters are seldom allowed to carry on even a family gathering: more or less formal proceedings in his texts get out of hand and out of joint, and are often suspended on a peak of chaos: "The Name-Day Party" («Именины», 1888) ends with the heroine's premature labor and loss of the child; *Ivanov* (1887) concludes with the protagonist's suicide on his wedding day; the family council in *Uncle Vania* (1897) results in Vania's shooting at his brother-in-law; Ranevskaia's party stops with the pounding intrusion of the cherry orchard's new owner. In the vaudevilles *The Proposal* (1888), *The Wedding* (1890), and *The Jubilee* (1891), [33] the eponymous rituals collapse into sheer madness. In *The Jubilee*, the celebration in the bank, an all-male affair, is wrecked by two women of insurmountable verbal power, whose irrational behavior exposes the equal absurdity of the rational world of the men. In her study of Chekhov's one-act plays Vera Gottlieb has pointed to the frightening, dark aspect of *The Wedding*, in which the "discrepancy between the celebratory gathering and characters' behavior and values [….] makes something sordid and joyless out of a normally happier event."[34] Yet there is no normally happier event for Chekhov: an "event" can realize itself either in a deadening, dehumanizing procedure or in scandalous, only too human chaos. Perfunctory expression of love, easy sentiment, and flowery obliteration of reality make the jubilee, the wedding, and the funeral very

[33] *The Wedding* and *The Jubilee* are also based on earlier stories, "The Wedding with a General" («Свадьба с генералом», 1884) and "A Defenseless Creature" («Беззащитное существо», 1887) respectively, although in the latter the jubilee setting is added only in the dramatic form.
[34] Vera Gottlieb, *Chekhov and the Vaudeville. A Study of Chekhov's One-Act Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982), p. 153.

much alike. Bunin wrote down one of Chekhov's pronouncements on the jubilee phenomenon: «Бранят человека двадцать пять лет на все корки, а потом дарят ему гусиное перо из алюминия и целый день несут над ним, со слезами и поцелуями, восторженную ахинею!» ("They scold a man mercilessly for twenty-five years, and then give him an aluminum quill and read over him all day long, with tears and kisses, some rapturous gibberish").[35] The peculiar phrase «несут над ним» evokes the reading of prayers over the dead. Doroshevich called jubilees of rickety stage veterans a "dress rehearsal for the funeral"[36]: for Chekhov, the celebratory genre per se invited the analogy. He compared his friend's Tatiana Shchepkina-Kupernik's expertise in arranging benefit performances to the undertakers' handling of funeral ceremonies.[37] The bridegroom, the deceased, and the honoree, *жених, покойник, юбиляр*, appeared similar in their loss of agency, their inability to alter or interfere with their ritualistic roles.

Chekhov told Doroshevich that on January 17 the Art Theatre had kept watch at his side till the very last moment, lest he should flee the scene à la Podkolësin. [38] By accepting the anniversary tribute Chekhov in a sense returned his debt to his Art Theatre friends for failing to appear at the dinner that followed his wedding in 1901.[39] With no window to afford him a Podkolësin-like escape, he had to receive the suite of speakers rather like

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[35] I. A. Bunin, "Chekhov", in *Chekhov v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov* … (1986), p. 484.
[36] "Iubilei Gerdta" in *Teatral'naia kritika Vlasa Doroshevicha* (Minsk: "Kharvest", 2004), p. 369.
[37] See letter to Aleksei Suvorin, 29 December 1895, *Pis'ma*, vol. 6, p. 113.
[38] "Desiat' let," p. 573.
[39] Stanislavsky recalled the odd prank in his memoir in *A. P. Chekhov v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov* (1986), p. 397. Chekhov told Knipper that he was "terribly afraid" of playing the part of the bridegroom: see his letter of 26 April 1901 (*Pis'ma*, vol. 10, p. 17). Cf. also Finke's comments in *Seeing Chekhov*, p. 5.

Agaf'ia Tikhonovna her suitors. However, dutifully playing his part, Chekhov indulged in imagining the evening ruined by a scandal. He later spread a story about an excited man in the audience, who waved his clenched fist at him as if intending not to greet but to beat the terrified writer for some offense.[40] The alleged "unknown red-headed man with a red face,"[41] a rather unlikely personage for the select jubilee crowd, was Chekhov's fantasy of a clown who would turn the "fairly tiring sequence of tributes, richer in sincere emotion than in originality or substance", [42] into a wild farce.

Celebrating Chekhov on its own territory, the Art Theatre asserted its status as the privileged institution of the intelligentsia and dissociated the public tribute to a man of letters from the more *пошлые* ("vulgar"), celebratory sites, such as a restaurant or banquet hall. For comparison, none of the honorary tributes to Aleksandr Ostrovskii that occurred in his lifetime took place at the Malyi Theatre, the playwright's artistic home and also an Imperial office: all were tied to more or less formal dining.[43] Yet the theatrical setting of Chekhov's jubilee also accentuated the performative, actorly overtones inherent in the exchange of symbolic, as well as material, values between an individual and society. The tableau of a bowing Chekhov receiving wreaths and gifts linked the writer to the tradition of benefit performances -- a major, proverbial feature of Russian theatre culture since

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[40] Doroshevich relayed Chekhov's anecdote in "A. P. Chekhov," p. 568 and, again, in "Desiat' let," p. 575.
[41] "Desiat' let", p. 575.
[42] Nikolai Èfros, *"Vishnevyi sad"...*, p. 66.
[43] See B. V. Mel'gunov, «O pervykh iubileiakh russkikh pisatelei," in *Russkaia literatura*, 4 (2001), esp. pp. 148-149.

the 1780s .[44] Chekhov himself, of course, was a victim of a disastrously misplaced *бенефис* on the opening night of *The Seagull* at the Alexandrinskii theatre in 1896. The Art Theatre had from the start opposed the practice beneficial for the player's image and pocket but alien to the company's spirit of collectivity, disinterestedness, and credo of loving art in oneself, not oneself in art. Still, flowers and "aesthetically valuable" gifts remained part of the Theatre's routine: in November of 1903, Knipper wrote to Chekhov about the wreaths offered to leading actors after the twenty fifth performance of *Julius Caesar*.[45] Actors, with their harrowing nightly exposure to the audience's judgment, could not completely disavow tokens of recognition, such as Arkadina boasts of in *The Seagull*: "What reception they gave me in Kharkov! Goodness gracious me, my head hasn't stopped whirling yet! <…> The students got together an ovation… Three baskets of flowers, two wreaths… and see here (*unfastens a brooch from her breast and throws it on the table*)."[46] The Art Theatre could rightfully regard the celebration in Moscow as Chekhov's recompense for the Petersburg misfortune, [47] but the *mise-en-scène* also evoked the questionable custom

[44] According to *Teatral'naia èntsiklopediia v piati tomakh* (Moskva: Sovetskaia èntsiklopediia, 1963), dramatic authors in Russia had been at one time entitled to benefit nights but lost that privilege after 1809.
[45] Letter of 16 November 1903, in *Perepiska A. P. Chekhova i O. L. Knipper, v dvukh tomakh* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 2004), vol. 2, p. 298.
[46] The translation is by Eugene Bristow from *Anton Chekhov's Plays* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), p. 45. It is noteworthy that Shamraev's response to the brooch, «Да, это вещь» ("Yes, that's something") is identical to Gaev's subsequent expression of admiration for the bookcase. Both "things" reflect and represent human value and merge with human beings.
[47] Olga Knipper implicitly referred to the stage history of Chekhov's play, comparing the opening night of *The Cherry Orchard* with *The Seagull's* triumph at the Art Theatre in 1898: "O A. P. Chekhove" in *A. P. Chekhov v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov* ... (1986), p. 630.

that the theatrical innovators saw as "paying for talent."[48] Chekhov's jubilee story about a viewer who was going to beat him inverted and perhaps checked his own reaction to the pleasure of public reward, in which his heroine revels in *The Seagull* shortly before her son's invisible suicide provides an unsettling inner rhyme to her equally invisible triumph.

The theatrical framing of Chekhov's jubilee did make an impact on Chekhov's personal qualities – modesty, self-restraint, lack of ostentation – although not in the sense of turning him into a vain, self-admiring Arkadina. Chekhov's aversion to the public stage was to an extent fed by fear of a ready-made, "rigid" significance that preceded the occasion rather than was generated from it. He refused to participate in the tribute to Grigorovich because the old writer's Derzhavin-like stance towards the young author prompted the following script:

> Я был открыт Григоровичем и следовательно, должен сказать речь. […] Голос мой должен дрожать и глаза наполниться слезами. Я положим этой речи не скажу [...] Но встанет Лавров – и расскажет, как Григорович меня открыл. Тогда подымется сам Григорович, подойдет ко мне, протянет руки и заключит меня в объятия и будет плакать от умиления. […] Самое главное, что и я должен буду плакать ….[49]
>
> [I was discovered by Grigorovich and consequently, I have to give a speech. […] My voice has to tremble and my eyes fill

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[48] *Khudozhestvenno-obshchedostupnyi teatr. Otchët o deiatel'nosti za 1-yi god. Sostavil Grigorii Ryndziunskii* (Moskva: Tovarishchestvo Skorop. A. A. Levenson, 1899), p. 89. The report contains a discussion of the Theatre's policy regarding benefit performances. I am indebted to Galina Rylkova for this rare source.

[49] Chekhov's scenario, as well as the actual celebration, are described by Ignatii Potapenko in "Neskol'ko let s A. P. Chekhovym", in *Chekhov v vospominaniiakh* … (1986), p. 304.

> with tears. Let's suppose I won't give that speech. […] But then Lavrov will get up – and tell the story of how I was discovered by Grigorovich. Then Grigorovich will get up, approach me, open his arms and embrace me, and cry from tenderness. […] Most important, I also will have to cry…]

Stanislavsky left a similar account of Chekhov's panic during the Art Theatre's performances in Yalta in 1900, when Chekhov learned about his mother's intention to see *Uncle Vania*:

> Старушка перерыла все сундуки и на дне их нашла какое-то старинного фасона шелковое платье, которое она и собралась надеть для торжественного вечера. […] Антон Павлович разволновался. Ему представилась такая картина: сын написал пьесу, мамаша сидит в ложе в шелковом платье. Эта сентиментальная картина так его обеспокоила, что он хотел ехать в Москву, чтобы только не участвовать в ней.[50]
>
> [The old lady rummaged through all her coffers and at the bottom of one found an old-fashioned silk gown, which she was going to put on for the festive night. […] Anton Pavlovich got very anxious. He imagined the following picture: the son has written a play, his mother sits in a box in a silk gown. This sentimental picture disturbed him so much that he was ready to take a train to Moscow, to avoid being part of it by any means.]

However, having avoided even fleeting identifications with a role or a type, Chekhov in the end had to face the public in a setting specifically designed for such identifications. Inevitably, the stage turned Chekhov's face into an image, his clothes into a costume, and his humility into a display of

[50] "A. P. Chekhov v Khudozhestvennom teatre," in *Chekhov v vospominaniiakh* … (1986), p. 391.

humility. Eyewitnesses noticed Chekhov's everyday jacket, «серенький пиджачок», more theatrical than the tails appropriate on such occasions.[51] Chekhov, of course, had put on the jacket because he did not expect to appear before an audience, but for the latter it indicated "modesty incarnate."[52] The *пиджачок* went on to be worn by a whole generation of *intelligenty* in soviet film and theatre of the 1960s, including Innokentii Smoktunovskii's Iurii Detochkin in the cult comedy "Берегись автомобиля» (*Beware of the Car,* 1966), and to be eulogized by Bulat Okudzhava as an intelligentsia habit that cannot be refashioned.[53] Similarly, everyone noted Chekhov's refusal to sit down – a token of respect for those who came to honor him that grew into a public gesture of self-denial. The stage consolidated and enlarged Chekhov's traits to turn "Chekhov" himself into a type, a culturally significant cohesion of form and content.

In his classical work, Iurii Tynianov argued that if a comedy can be a parody of a tragedy, then a tragedy can be a parody of a comedy.[54] Chekhov's jubilee, which turned Chekhov's illness into a "literary fact" and honored the dying writer by the cultural means that he had already made comedic, may be a case in point. The tribute was belated, not in the sense that Chekhov's days were numbered but because Chekhov had broken the conceptual and emotional spell of the celebratory genres that his

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[51] See Doroshevich, "Desiat' let," p. 573; also N. G. Garin-Mikhailovskii, "Pamiati Chekhova," in *Chekhov v vospominaniiakh* … (1986), p. 598.
[52] Doroshevich, "Desiat' let," p. 568.
[53] «Я много лет пиджак ношу, // Давно потёрся и не нов он. // И я зову к себе портного // И перешить пиджак прошу»: «Старый пиджак» (1960), in Bulat Okudzhava, *Stikhotvoreniia* (Moskva, Novaia biblioteka poèta, 2001), p. 211.
[54] "Dostoevskii i Gogol' (k teorii parodii)" in Iu. N. Tynianov, *Poètika. Istoriia literatury. Kino* (Moskva: Nauka, 1977), p. 226.

contemporaries thought indispensable for modern civilization. Uniquely responsive to Chekhov's artistic sensibility, the Art Theatre failed to see the discrepancy between the jubilee dramaturgy – heroic, logocentric, static, humorless – and Chekhov's and its own modernist project, which privileged the ensemble over the protagonist, subtext over text, and silence over speech.

Yet in placing the tribute in an intermission in the performance of *The Cherry Orchard*, the Theatre inadvertently captured the genre's ultimate defect in Chekhov's eyes. A celebratory occasion for Chekhov was itself an intermission, a rupture in the organic flow of time, an illusion substituting for experience a lifeless representation of experience. The ritual for him placed human beings outside their own selves and into the world of objects: instead of enriching life, the celebration depleted and stole from it.

**Sigizmund Krzhizhanovskii (1887-1950) on Anton Chekhov**

Excerpts from **"Chekhonte and Chekhov (The Birth and Death of the Humoresque)"**
**«Чехонте и Чехов (Рождение и смерть юморески)» [1940]**

**Introduced, translated and edited by Caryl Emerson,**

**Princeton University**

*Sigizmund Dominikovich Krzhizhanovskii, Russophone modernist writer of Polish descent, was born near Kiev and died in his adopted city Moscow, largely unpublished and unperformed. Over a period of twenty years, SK wrote a dozen "performative" texts (plays, stage adaptations, pantomimes, libretti, film scenarios, radio scripts) and 150 experimental prose works, ranging in length from novellas to one-paragraph miniatures, often organized loosely in cycles. The stories for which he is best known today are phantasmagoric, philosophically complex, and as cerebral as a metaphysical poem. But there is also a lighter, more whimsical side of his talent—brief slice-of-life stories reminiscent of the early Chekhov—that he cultivated, one suspects, in hopes of meeting the Stalinist literary establishment halfway. Even these inoffensive vignettes and comic parables, however, display his trademark "idealist" (non-materialist) cutting edge. Often their hero is not a person but an Idea (an idea acting like a person); the quest of this Idea is to win for itself expression free from distortion and secure from the threat of oblivion,*

*One story, «Жизнеописание одной мысли» ["The Life and Times of a Thought"](1922), traces the birth and slow death of a famous phrase of Immanuel Kant's—its glorious inception, its humiliation at being forced into letters, lines of print, paraphrased in textbooks, twisted into topic sentences for dissertations—that is re-united with the mind that conceived it only as an epigraph over the thinker's grave. Another with distinctly Chekhovian overtones is the two-page tragi-farcical «Контролер» ["The Ticket Collector"] (1937), in which a writer is crammed into a crowded tramcar so tightly that he cannot reach pen or notepad to jot down an idea that has just*

*occurred to him; terrified it will escape, he finally wrenches a hand free, borrows a pencil, and catches the idea's contours on the edges of his ticket—which he then turns over to the collector, a careless act he realizes with horror only after he descends into the street with a desperate face, "as if it were the final stop in his writerly life."*

*These sketches bring a smile to those in the thinking and writing trade. But they were not to the taste of Maksim Gor'kii, who read a few of SK's stories in 1932 and judged them irrelevant to the working class. The verdict clung. Except for nine short stories, one stage adaptation of a spy novel by G. K. Chesterton, one patriotic libretto, and a half-dozen critical articles (censored and abbreviated), SK's life's work lay unpublished in typescript in the Krzhizhanovskii fond at RGALI (Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, Moscow) from the late 1960s until the end of the Soviet era. The first collection of his fiction appeared in 1989. Between 2001 and 2010, almost single-handedly and after decades of recuperative work, the Russian poet and researcher Vadim Perel'muter published an annotated five-volume* Sobranie sochinenii *of SK's work: three volumes of prose, one of literary criticism, and one of SK's notebooks and works for theater.*

*Between 1918 and 1948, while hoping to break into print or on to the stage, SK free-lanced for a living as editor, proofreader, adaptor, translator, and theater pedagogue. He was too little known to be targeted for major literary misdemeanors. But in October 1935, a tiny selection of his satirical aphorisms (modeled on the 19th century fictive author Koz'ma Prutkov) was published in* Literaturnaia gazeta. *This feuilleton column was attacked a week later in* Pravda, with ominously demonic overtones, *as the work of a «распоясавшийся пошляк» ["unbridled smug vulgarian"], written by «некоего С. Кржижановского» ["a certain S. Krzhizhanovskii"]. SK's Moscow friends, fearful of his arrest, engineered (on very slender in-print evidence) his election to the Soviet Writers' Union, dramaturgical section, in 1939. SK was not repressed—but he did begin writing fiction and criticism in simpler, more mainstream modes. From this period (1938-1943) date his "jubilee" essays on Edgar Allan Poe, Bernard Shaw's one-act plays, Anton Chekhov, some less adventurous analyses of Shakespeare, and, during the war, physiological sketches and libretti on military themes.*

*As a part-time lecturer in the Experimental Actors' Studio of the Moscow Chamber Theater and close friend of its director Aleksandr Tairov, SK was intensely interested in the philosophy of theater and in the technical parts of plays. He wrote imaginative essays on titles, epigraphs, and the device of the stage direction. ("Teatral'naia remarka. Fragment" ["The theatrical stage direction. A fragment"] contains an illuminating survey of the stage direction from laconic Shakespeare through cerebral Bernard Shaw to lyrical, landscape-sensitive Chekhov). His unconventional studies of Shakespeare, Shaw, and Aleksandr Ostrovskii attend especially to wordplay (puns and speaking names), the pace or tempo at which a character or theme moves (personal and seasonal "calendars"), the ontological status of theater and its counterpart in the dream, and the centrality of the actor (rather than the playwright or the director) in all performing art.*

*The essay excerpted and translated here was written in the late 1930s. It was published in* Literaturnaia uchëba [Literary Studies] *#10 (1940). That same journal rejected a second essay by SK on Chekhov, «Писательские 'святцы' Чехова» ["Chekhov's Writerly 'Church Calendar',"* *also late 1930s*], *devoted to proper names and place names (mostly comic) in the short prose. That essay appeared six decades later in the same journal (*Literaturnaia uchëba *#4 [2004]), after SK's rediscovery in post-Communist Russia.*

*Both essays on Chekhov can be found in Sigizmund Krzhizhanovskii,* Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh, *ed. Vadim Perel'muter (Sankt Peterburg: Symposium, 2001-2006), vol. 4, pp. 574-618. "The Life and Times of a Thought" mentioned in the headnote can be found on the Krzhizhanovskii website http://az.lib.ru/k/krzhizhanowskij_s_d/ and also in SK: Ss v. 1, pp. 139-46, in the cycle* Сказки для вундеркиндов [Tales for Wunderkinder] *(1922); "The Ticket Collector" is the sixth tale in the 1937 cycle* Мал мала меньше [One Smaller than the Other] (SK: Ss v. 3, pp. 222-24).

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**“Chekhonte and Chekhov (The Birth and Death of the Humoresque)”**

One of Chekhov’s first literary experiments — “The Naïve Woodsprite” [«Наивный леший»] — tells the story, in the form of a fairy tale, of the wood-sprite who changed his profession a number of times with the aim of escaping the “stupid expression on his face.” He tried to become a man of letters too, with the result that the stupid expression doubled. He had to enter another line of work. The humorous journals in which the twenty-year-old Chekhonte began his writerly activity required two things of their contributors: not too long, and not too smart.

A “thinker” thought up by Chekhov in one of his early stories tries to invent a means for “grinding down the whole world into powder while remaining intact himself.” That means was found, in essence, by the petty journals of the time, organs intended to entertain and amuse, called by their most talented collaborator “mosquitoes and house flies.”

This journalistic thought-grinder destroyed many. But Chekhov remained intact. And he even learned something from Chekhonte.

The movement of a caterpillar — it’s impossible not to notice this — comes about by dragging up the *end of the body* toward the beginning, the tail part toward the head part. As this simple observation about a Chekhovian narrative demonstrates, it achieves its brevity by means of drawing together the exposition and the ending. It’s enough to read his humoresque “A Life in Questions and Exclamations” (1882) to be convinced. Let us persuade ourselves (shortening what is already short, I cite only one-third of the text):

> *[SK reproduces representative sentences under each of the five rubrics of the story: Childhood, Young Manhood, Between 20 and 30, Between 30-50, Old Age. In the compression of Chekhov’s story as it appears in SK’s Collected Works* (SK: Ss *v. 4, p. 575), inexplicably, all exclamation marks are reduced to periods. — CE]*

Here we are given, in exhaustive brevity, the life of a basic character in a Chekhovian narrative. The majority of this writer’s early works are created according to this method, the movement of the hand of the clock. The life

and times of the day: morning, noon, twilight, night. The biography of the year: spring, summer, autumn, winter. More often yet, a fragmented calendar-like distribution of the plot. Chekhov takes his first lessons in the humoresque precisely from the rip-sheet daily calendar. Every morning a calendar sheet, a page in the periodical of the year, is torn off, and glancing at it we see: the date—the season of the year—the rising and setting of the sun—the phases of the moon—the name of the routine saint—a dinner menu—the joke of the day and the aphorism. The journals of the time lived by these rounds, and it was to them, during his first year, that the beginning Chekhov tossed his handful of humoresques.

Thus were they distributed, according to the rounds of the calendar: A New Year's cycle about high-society callers; about clerkly callers signing their names in the boss's vestibule in a special book; about doormen, a city policeman, and chimney-sweeps arriving with season's greetings etc. «Новогодние великомученики» ["New Year Martyrs"], «Новогодняя пытка. Очерк новейшей инквизиции» ["New Year Torment. A Sketch of the Latest Inquisition"], «Мошенники поневоле. Побрехушка» ["Scoundrels against Their Will. The Little Liar"], «Гадальщики и гадальщицы. Подновогодние картинки» ["Fortunetellers (m and f). Scenes from the New Year Season"], «Либерал. Новогодний рассказ» ["The Liberal. A New Year's story"]. Further, let the titles speak for themselves: «На Страстной неделе» ["During Holy Week"] — «О бренности» ["About mortality"] (a Shrovetide sermon) — «Святою ночью» ["Holy Night"] — «Праздничная повенность» ["Holiday Duty"] (Easter) — «Встреча весны» ["The Meeting of Spring"] — «Весной» ["Springtime"] (twice) — «В Сокольниках» ["In Sokol'niki"] (traditional festivities at the beginning of June) — «Дачники» ["Summer-cottagers"], «Дачница» ["The Summer-cottager" (f)], «Дачное удовольствие» ["Summer-cottage pleasure"], «Дачный казус» ["A Summer-cottage incident"], a series of summer-cottage husbands — «Двадцать девятое июня" ["The Twenty-ninth of June"] (a title we encounter twice) — «В рождественскую ночь» ["On Christmas Eve"] — «На Святках» ["Yuletide"] — «Ёлка» ["The Christmas Tree"]. The circle is closed.

## II

Sometimes there intrudes into what is "ordinary in all respects" that which is "simply ordinary": a market fair — the eclipse of the sun or the moon — the arrival of Sarah Bernhardt — the sudden fall or rise of the ruble. Chekhonte's calendar-driven humoresques take note of all these "events." He provides a series of accounts of district supervisors on the "unseemly behavior of the moon" («Затмение луны», ["A Lunar Eclipse"]1884), the comic clash of astronomers and *ordinary inhabitants* («Злоумышленники. Рассказ очевидцев» ["The Culprits. The Account of the Witnesses"], 1887), a parody on a review of a French actress on tour, and witticisms of this sort: if one stands with a left foot on one side of the Austrian border and a right foot on the other side and pass a ruble from the right pocket to the left, then the ruble will turn into 65 kopeks.

But special attention is allotted to the flip side of the calendar sheet, with its aphorism, joke, and menu.

Arthur Schopenhauer, in his "On the Freedom of the Will," provides the following expressive example: a professor of philosophy, after finishing his lecture, goes out into the street, approaches an intersection, stops, and reasons thus: I am a human being, my will is free — if I so will it I can commit a crime; if I so will it I can perform a heroic deed; if I so will it I can set off on a distant journey, if I so will it . . . but I will not perform that deed, nor that crime, nor that journey, but freely, according to *my very own will*, I will set off now to my very own wife, because otherwise dinner will get cold and my spouse will begin to quarrel in a big way.

The scenario of this philosopher-pessimist might serve as the background canvas for an entire series of Chekhonte's "light-hearted" stories. In a half-page storylet with the title «Немножко философии» ["A Bit of Philosophy," *which is the subtitle given to the half-page story titled "Man"—CE*] the author succeeds in giving exposition, development, and denouement. Exposition: "A tall, well-built, dark-haired man, young but already sufficiently tested by life, in a black tailcoat with a snow-white tie, stood at the door and not without some sadness gazed into the hall, full of blinding lights and waltzing couples."

Development: "It's difficult and tedious to be a man," he thought. "Man is a slave not only to his passions, but also …"

Denouement: “ ‘Man, bring me some water.” The man made a respectful face, started from his place, and ran off.” (1886).

The humoresques of Chekhonte took lessons of brevity from life itself. After all, life could turn “man” [человек] into “Hey, you, man” [чеаэк]. And it doesn’t matter that under his elbow a “slave has not only passions”: he also has a serving towel — a briefcase — the arm of a wealthy spouse.

## III

But man is “free.” At least in relation to “Hey, you, man.” For example, he can freely choose from the menu. It’s true, even here he is somewhat determined by the prices. The Moscow pub of that time—characters from Chekhov’s stories so often meet there—is a visible mock-up of social stratification. “A pub (I quote the signboard) of the first rank”—“a pub of the second rank”—“of the third.” Each rank is divided into the upper “clean” half and the “lower dregs,” for those who are “simpler.” Upstairs are visitors of the tailcoat-and-frockcoat type, champagne and oysters. Downstairs the peasant caftan, long fitted coat, shirts not tucked in, round-the-clock cabbage soup and vodka. Upstairs, big banknotes and gold. Downstairs — rumpled rubles and loose change.

The upstairs visitors “love to eat.” But also the fish, it turns out, “loves to be grilled on the pan.” A man moves toward the table, pulls up the plate and silverware, and unnoticeably … the images of the eaten and the eater draw together, losing the features that differ and taking on ever more features of similarity.

Between eater and eaten a logical law of identity establishes itself, A = A. “A man is what he eats.” Is = eats [«Естъ = ест.»] The little story «Невидимые миру слезы» [“Tears the World Sees Not”] describes how “the inspector wiggled his fingers in the air and illustrated a dish of some sort on his face, a very tasty dish, no doubt, because they all licked their lips when they saw his face.” Several lines later, it (the food equivalent to the face) resettles from the face into words: “they take some ordinary carp, still alive and quivering … into the milk with them … for a day the rascals swim about in the milk and then they’re put in a sizzling saucepan in sour cream, and then …” And again three lines later [speaking of meat dumplings]: “you pepper them, sprinkle them with dill and a bit of parsley and … there are no

words to describe it." Approaching the limit of what words can do, the image strives to materialize itself. The speaker "suddenly sensed the aroma of fish, unconsciously began to chew, and …" — only after this does the place of action transfer to actual dishes and plates. [ . . . ]

*[Two paragraphs follow with further examples of A = A (the eating face and what is eaten) in «Сирена» ["The Siren"], «Дама с собачкой» ["Lady with a Dog"], and «Старый дом» ["The Old House"].*

IV

"A stupid expression on the face" imposes obligations. Humorous literature of the 1880s was very successful in working out techniques of senselessness. Consider the lexicon of Chekhonte: "председура" (instead of процедура, procedure) — "электрический позвонок" [electric vertebra] (in place of electric звонок, bell) — "женский полонез" [a woman's polonaise] (in place of женский пол, the female sex), "энциклопедия" (in place of клопы, bedbugs), etc. Or: "The Caucasian prince in white sherbet rode in an open feuilleton."

Chekhonte's first literary attempts were clearly connected with Poshekhontas folklore (I am not referring here to the «Пошехонская старина» of Shchedrin) and with the devices of Koz'ma Prutkov. I cite the writer's first published piece, «Письмо донского помещика к . . . д–ру Фридрих» ["Letter of the Don Region Landlord to … Dr. Friedrikh"]: "If we descended from apes, then nowadays gypsies would be leading us from city to city on display …"; "can people live on the moon, if it exists only at night, and during the day it disappears? " And in Prutkov: "If people ask you what is better, the sun or the moon, answer 'the moon,' because the sun shines during the day, when it is bright anyway, but …", etc.

The philosopher Herbert Spencer divided the world into the known and the unknown. The ponderous-minded Koz'ma Prutkov divides it into what can and cannot be embraced. The entire comic energy of Prutkov lies in his exceeding his own power to embrace the world. He thinks entirely on a planetary scale, but measures only in inches. [ . . . ]

Moving through the calendar cycle, Chekhonte's pen catches on every

ridiculous proper name or name of a holiday that conceals within itself the possibility of some humorous miniature. *[A dozen examples follow, reminiscent of Gogolian wordplay and speaking names.]* The basic device in working with calendar and history dates is to lower the theme. [ . . . ] "March 10th. On this day the death of Pan Tvardovskii took place in the pub "Rome," and Caesar crossed the Rubicon — 11th. On this day Antony fell in love with Cleopatra, and Aleksandr Fillipovich Makedonskii [Alexander of Macedonia, as the Russians call Alexander the Great] set out on a pilgrimage on [his favorite horse] Butsefal. — 12th. On this day … ." The humoristic stamp works almost mechanically, moving the "point" ever further and further. This is very elementary wit, the aim of which lies only in the violation of proportions, in the reshuffling of facts and citations.

## V

The little stories of the beginner Chekhov are almost all scattered about small rooms, pocket-sized spaces and pantries. The place of action: hotel rooms, student corners, cheap "chambres-garnies," the closets of choristers and seamstresses. More rarely, the rooms of inns, pubs, restaurants, etc.

If one trusts a purely external indicator, the titles beginning with the preposition "in," then we end up with a series of names of Chekhov stories: «В аптеке»— «В бане»—«В вагоне» — «В номерах»— «В овраге» — «В потемках» — «В почтовом отделении» — «В цирульне» — «В усадьбе» — «В приюте для неизлечимо–больных и престарелых» — «В Сокольниках» — «В гостиной» — «В родном углу». And among these designations of the place of action there is only one that promises spaciousness: «В море». But once into the story you realize that the plot is hidden away in a tightly-closed two-bunk ship cabin (with chinks in the walls for peeping in).

The "encyclopedia" crawling out from under the wallpaper of all these little rooms in a certain sense encyclopedically explains the subject matter of these little incidents from the life of little people, small salaries that force them to cram themselves into tiny little rooms — and even that for a short time.

*[Three paragraphs on insects follow, beginning with the name of the journal «*Стрекоза*»* (The Dragonfly)*, through a discussion of the tiny blood-sucking insect with "an irritating hum and a petty bite," and ending on the predominance of comically debasing uses of bedbugs, cockroaches and flies.]*

Precisely at the time this humoresque «Злоумышленники» ["The Culprits"] was written, a romance was in fashion, or better was being sung to death: "Flies" [«Мухи»]. The first couplet: "Flies, like black thoughts" … etc. The second couplet: "Thoughts, like black flies." One of the Chekhov's basic images also moves back and forth between these two lines.

The author of an article on Chekhov in the English *Encyclopedia Britannica* (14th edition) sums up Chekhov's mastery in the short story as his ability to "transmit the little stabs of life (the pinpricks of life)" [«мелкие уколы жизни»; *SK appends the phrase in English—CE*]. This opinion refers to a later period — the period of Chekhov's psychological stories.

But the author himself, looking back (1886) on the years of his debut, composed the following "Fairy Tale" [«Сказка»]: "A fly once flew round from room to room and boasted loudly that he was collaborating in the papers. 'I'm a writer,' the fly buzzed. Hearing that, all the mosquitoes, cockroaches, bedbugs, and fleas were filled with deep respect toward its person… and the publicist-fly pointed to all those innumerable dots, with which the newspaper page was covered."

## VI

Laughter—purely physiologically—is a series of exhalations that quickly follow one after the other. Like a suddenly interrupted bellows, the lungs give back the air. As many psychologists suppose, this physiological mechanism corresponds to the psychological mechanism of laughter: when you expect something large and significant and instead get something small and insignificant, there is something like a discharge of expectation, one's tensed attention relaxes from the shock, and this is accompanied by a feeling of liberation. "It's only *that*." In place of a giant: a midget. The head that has been raised up cautiously can bend down with a condescending smile.

"The mountain gave birth to a mouse." It's not extraneous to note that in the Latin proverb there's an epithet added to the word "mouse": "mons peperit *ridiculus* mus" (the mountain gave birth to a *ludicrous* mouse).

*[Several examples follow from Chekhov's notebooks and early stories.]*

The principle of the "laughing mouse" is realized by several devices. Let us touch only on a few.

If one adds ever newer pendants to a load suspended on a thread, there will come a moment when the $n^{th}$ pendant will break the thread. Chekhov often utilizes this device. The "plot thread," which is being tested for durability, receives ever newer and newer weights. The moment of its rupture always coincides with the denouement of the story. The attention of the reader is fully stretched by expectation when the "end" finally arrives.

It's clear what difficulties this manner of plot composition presents for the writer. If the thread of the story is burst in two or three rips, there will not be the effect of expanding growth, the feeling of ever greater tension of the thread. But if the process of increasing the load is excessively prolonged, the story will exceed the boundaries of a humoresque, it will become too drawn-out. Chekhonte-Chekhov possessed an amazingly precise feeling for duration. In his hands, stories of this type never exceed the limit of four or five pages. What is more, the scale of tension is many-leveled and is constantly rising upward (one tiny story of this type is called just that: «Вверх по лестнице» ["Up the staircase"]. The master achieves this with the help of an extremely quick accumulation of motives (volitional stimuli, psychological pendants).

> *[A close analysis follows of the 1881 story «Гость» ("The Guest"), about a tedious visitor who, hour after hour, takes no hints from his weary host that it's time to leave. SK charts (literally) the key bridge sentences between "stimuli (the host)" and "reactions" (the guest), noting that the pace of the story is "largo" (the desperate host cannot move the amiable rambling guest off dead center) but for all this slowness, the body of the story does not put on weight; the effect of a long narrative is achieved*

*entirely by segmentation and inner timing of the host / guest interaction.]*

[ . . . ]

VIII

How are midget stories created? two-page humoresques? First of all, by means of midget reality, the hunched-overness and stoopedness of life. These tiny [крохотные] stories correspond to quibbling [крохоборческие] interests and needs, just as the green dust-specks of Persian powder (Chekhonte's constant accessory) correspond to the yellow crawling spots of cockroaches. What was written about in the '80s and '90s? Chekhonte provides an inventory of themes: "About disbelief, about mothers-in-law, about jubilees, fires, women's hats; about the fall of morals, about [the Italian ballerina Virginia] Zucchi …" The themes, bending low, fell apart into an infinite number of "petty plots." One of Chekhov's "Two Newspapermen" [«Два газетчика»] says: "You throw a stone at a dog, and you hit either a question or a happening …" And it's worth noting that Chekhov himself (according to Bunin's memoirs) said something similar: "If you want, I'll write a story about this inkwell." The same "newspaperman" delivers an apologetic speech in defense of the theme of … an eaten egg. "An egg, destined by nature for the reproduction of the life of an individuum … is suddenly eaten, becomes a victim of the stomach's pleasure. This egg would have produced a chicken, the chicken in the course of its life would have brought forth a thousand eggs … — there you have it, in the palm of your hand, the undermining of the economic structure, the eating-up of the future. In the first place, if the egg was eaten, that means that in Russia people are well-fed … and in the third place … but why bother counting? The theme suffices for a hundred issues."

Chekhonte, having learnt brevity from the rip-sheet calendar, imitating its pages like a dutiful student (for example, his "*The Alarm Clock's* Calendar " [«Календарь «Будильника»] with phases of the moon, historical information, jokes, and menus of the sort "soup with wet chicken," "compote of Adam's apples" etc.) very quickly mastered the technique of the two-page story.

But the essential difference between this writer, who soon shortened his own signature "Chekhonte" to "Chekhov," and the other swift short-sketch scribblers for the humorous press of the day, is his ability to achieve brevity not by petty themes but by a method of tightening-up, a foreshortening of the plot. By no means is this talent given to every beginning writer. But here it's possible to name a whole series of stories which have been made short not by the steamroller machine of life and not by any shorthand-style on the part of the writer but in the formal logic of what is called an enthymeme *[an argument from probabilities, or in which premise or conclusion is not expressed but only implied—CE]*. In the short story "A Happy Ending" [«Хороший конец»] Chekhov succeeds in bringing the end close to the beginning by means of the following purely plot-construction device: a railway conductor, already well on in years, wants to marry and engages to this end a matchmaker, a woman also not young; after conversations with the matchmaker, who proposes a whole collection of brides, the conductor proposes to … the matchmaker. And the matter works out, but the story ends considerably sooner than the reader might have expected. [ . . . ]

Defending the little story, its rights to literary existence, Chekhov resorted to a complex and, at first glance, contradictory image: "The unstretched eraser [*rezinka,* also rubber band] erases no worse than the stretched" [*perhaps also a pun here on «тянуть резину» or "play for time"—CE*]. In the above two examples we see precisely the device of erasing plot endings. [ . . . ]

## X

[ . . . ]

In Leo Tolstoy we find a character (Sviiazhskii in *Anna Karenina*) who is thus characterized: "He never permitted anyone beyond the reception rooms of his mind." In Chekhov, this sort of personage turns out to be life itself. The rooms where feelings and thoughts live in all the people of all Chekhov's stories of this period are separated by the click of a key from the reception rooms.

In his story "Agafia," Chekhov transfers a display-case landscape, with its path thrown from riverbank to riverbank, into a literary frame and writes

into this landscape, out of words, the figure of a woman, Agafia. On one bank a repellent husband and beatings; on the other side of the river flowing between the village and the forest, her heart's delight and love. The end of the story shows us Agafia at that moment when she, together with the early morning dawn, has approached the bank of the river. Behind her a sinful but marvelous night — before her the day, brightly illuminating her shame. After a minute of hesitation she enters the water.

The humoresques and little storylets move, as we have seen, almost always on a flat surface, like flies crawling along a pane of glass, behind which the shutters are tightly closed. But here [in "Agafia"] the shutters have been flung open and the landscape beyond the window is revealed — to perspective. This landscape is itself three-dimensional, but not for the fly beating against the pane of glass. In practical terms it's absolutely the same for that fly: whether it crawls along the windowpane or along a pane pressed up to the flat painted landscape. Perhaps it would like to fly, to fly and fly high over the path, into the dawn, reflecting "the unearthly and eternal." But its very desire is a painted desire. [ . . .]

In the story "Oysters" [«Устрицы»], Chekhov took from the humoresque only its external contour, the literary container, and succeeded in filling it with profound tragic content. Chekhonte was over.

*1940*

# The North American Chekhov Society
# A Brief Look Back on the First Decade

**Julie de Sherbinin**
**Colby College**

The North American Chekhov Society is now approaching its twentieth year as a scholarly association. The North American Chekhov Society, or NACS, was founded in 1991. It emerged from a conference held at Yale University—*The Third International Chekhov Symposium*—that was organized by Robert Louis Jackson, then president of the International Chekhov Society. (The papers from this conference were published in R.L. Jackson, ed., *Reading Chekhov's Text*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993.) Through a combination of Jackson's vision and the organizational and editorial work of Julie de Sherbinin, NACS was launched. The initial year saw the establishment of a membership list and a meeting at the December, 1991 AATSEEL conference, attended by twenty-five Chekhov scholars, where the decision was made to publish a newsletter for the Society twice a year in order to communicate news of publications and conferences.

The first rudimentary volume of *The North American Chekhov Society Bulletin* came out in 1992. In that issue, Robert L. Jackson, then president of NACS, credits two other professional organizations—the Chekhov Commission in Russia and the International Chekhov Society—with giving impetus to the founding of NACS. The initial meeting and publication set out the direction of the North American Chekhov Society for the decade of the 1990s. First, the Society was to sponsor a yearly NACS panel at annual conferences held by AATSEEL, following which membership meetings were held. Second, and

perhaps more seminal to the Society's mission, the *North American Chekhov Society Bulletin* was to appear twice a year from 1992 to 2000. Since its inception, the *NACS Bulletin* set out to "provide a forum for news and scholarly exchange in Chekhov studies" in the United States and Canada. Since 2001, *The Bulletin*, edited by Ralph Lindheim, has enhanced and expanded this forum.

During the 1990s, the *NACS Bulletin* (in an 8- to 12-page photocopied format) was edited by Julie de Sherbinin (Colby College). NACS executive committee members took on active roles. Andrew Durkin (Indiana University) served as the book review editor; Elise Thoron reported on Chekhov theater in the United States, and the late Marena Senderovich (Ithaca College) submitted occasional conference reviews. However, the *NACS Bulletin* depended on participation from a broad range of members, who submitted small news items and articles, updates on work in progress, and conference reports. Active collaboration with Russian Chekhov colleagues was crucial to the success of the endeavor. Chief among them was Moscow *chekhoved* Alevtina Pavlovna Kuzicheva, who reported regularly on Chekhov theater and publications in Russia. In addition, a long list of contributors can be credited with providing substantive reports and reviews over the years: Richard Borden, Michael Finke, Harai Golomb, M. Goriacheva, Galina Kovalenko, Marina Murzina, E.A. Polotskaia, E.M. Sakharova, Laurence Senelick, Maija Sheikina-Volkevich, Maia Turovskaia, and others.

In reviewing back copies of the *NACS Bulletin* for the 1990s, it is striking to note the density of activity around Chekhov during the decade. International Chekhov conferences occurred regularly, as did panels at AAASS and AATSEEL. Performances of Chekhov's plays, although perennially popular, seemed to flourish especially in the first post-Soviet decade. At least sixteen monographs on Chekhov were reported on, or reviewed, in the *NACS Bulletin.* In chronological order of publication these include: Cathy Popkin (1993), Natalia Pervukhina (1993), Savely Senderovich (1994), Elena Tolstaia (1994), C.J.G.

Turner (1994), V.Ia. Linkov (1995), Mark Rozovsky (1996), Donald Rayfield (1997), Laurence Senelick (1997), Julie de Sherbinin (1997), A.S. Sobennikov (1997), Vera Zubarev (1997), Peter Dolzhenkov (1998), Radislav Lapushin (1998), A.P. Kuzicheva (1999), and Laurence Senelick (2000). A significant number of edited volumes appeared in the 1990s as well, such as the books edited by R.L. Jackson, ed. (1993), Patrick Miles, ed. (1993); A.S. Sobennikov, ed. (1993), J. Douglas Clayton, ed. (1997), and Kataev, Kluge and Nohejl, eds. (1997). In addition, the marvelous *Chekhoviana* compilations published in Moscow came out annually, overseen by A.P. Chudakov and Vladimir Kataev. The decade also saw the loss of revered Chekhov scholars V.Ia. Lakshin, Z.S. Papernyi, and Marena Senderovich.

In 1998 the *NACS Bulletin* publication scheduled moved to one issue per year in a 24-page format. From this period, two thematic issues, in particular, bear mentioning because they became something of a resource for those in the field. The first of these was the Spring, 1999, *NACS Bulletin* devoted to Chekhov and film. The issue features a list of over two hundred films made internationally on Chekhov themes—a list which undoubtedly fails to cite many films but provides a baseline for information about cinematic representations of Chekhov drama and prose. Helpful brief commentaries concerning film versions of Chekhov texts also appear in that issue. The second volume, from the spring of 2000, engages the question of Chekhov in English translation. While the list of available translations is by now very dated for the absence of stellar translations from post-2000 by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Peter Constantine, Michael Heim, Laurence Senelick, and others, one can locate there a fairly comprehensive view of the translation history. The interest in discussions of translations signaled by this 2000 volume eventually led to the 2004 forum on translation at the *North American Chekhov Society/National Endowment for the Humanities*

conference/symposium, a discussion forum published in its entirety in Finke & de Sherbinin, eds., *Chekhov the Immigrant: Translating a Cultural Icon* (2007).

In 2001Ralph Lindheim at the University of Toronto took over as editor of the *North American Chekhov Society Bulletin*, changing its name slightly and smartly moving to on-line distribution. It holds a vital place in Chekhov studies.

On-line back issues of the *North American Chekhov Society Bulletin* from 1992-2000 will soon be available at the Colby College website attached to the Russian Program pages. Should you do an on-line search for these back issues, you may run across a chance irony: the acronym *NACS*, formed from the title *The North American Chekhov Society*, is also the acronym for the National Association of Convenience Stores. One likes to think that Chekhov would have appreciated the humor, given that he grudgingly devoted so much of his childhood to clerking in his father's "corner store."

# *The Seagull* Premiere As Reported by a Visiting Englishwoman

**Laurence Senelick**
**Tufts University**

Olive (or Olivia) Rayne Garnett (1871-1957) was the daughter of the British Museum librarian Richard Garnett, a sister of Edward Garnett and, consequently, the sister-in-law of Constance Garnett. Like Constance, her interest in things Russian was promoted and cultivated through her acquaintance with Sergei Mikhailovich Kravchinskii (1851-95), known in England as Stepniak. Although he could be characterized as a terrorist (his Russian past involved a political murder), this revolutionary propagandist was seen by the Bloomsbury intellectuals as a sympathetic protestor against Tsarist iniquities and inequities. Stepniak's literary tastes influenced Constance Garnett's choices as a translator, but he was emotionally and politically more involved with Olive. They were never lovers (Stepniak was happily married), but he exercised a Svengali-like sway over her ideas of Russia. Joseph Conrad drew on their relationship when he wrote *Under Western Eyes*.

Details of her friendship with the "radical reformer" were recorded in Olive Garnett's diaries for 1890 to 1895, which were published in the late twentieth century. During her first trip to Russia in 1896, she seems not to have kept a diary, but recorded her impressions in long letters sent back to her friends and relatives. These letters, so far unpublished, are of interest in presenting the reactions to Russian culture of a reasonably well-informed, highly literate and socially progressive Victorian Englishwoman at the start of the turbulent reign of Nicholas II.

As it happens, Olive Garnett was a regular theatre-goer and has left her own

account of the opening night of Chekhov's *The Seagull* on October 17 1896 at the Alexandra Theatre in St Petersburg; it has come down in theatrical tradition as an unqualified fiasco. However, by the time she penned her letter, the play had had five subsequent performances that were more favorably received. She was not an eye-witness but is retailing literary gossip, indicative of the taste of the times. The following excerpt comes from a letter to her father from Nevsky Prospect 791.3 St Petersburg, 4 November 1896. The letter is held in the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library, and is quoted here with the permission of the Special Collections Librarian Scott Krafft.

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[...] And that reminds me that Zina & I went to the French theatre, Theatre Michel, on Saturday to see a new piece "Innocent" a comedy (or as I should say, a screaming farce) in three acts. It was very trivial, but I was glad to find that towards the end of the performance I followed the dialogue quite easily. It was more interesting to observe the building itself & the audience. The former was spacious, clean & beautifully decorated in yellow velvet, white & silver. The stalls occupy the whole floor of the house with a few cheaper places raised behind, but nothing resembling our pit. There are balconies, galleries & boxes as with us, but many more boxes, for until just recently, it was not considered "comme il faut" for ladies to go to the stalls. At first the audience produces an impression of gloom, only ladies in boxes wear evening dresses, everywhere else they must wear high necked costumes in black, mauve or some dark colour. The uniforms of the men make a little variety; our audiences are comparatively brilliant.

Every theatre (there are but three, I think subsidized by the state, at a great loss) has a foyer, like a drawing room; not like a hall, as ours. I went to see it, but it is

not "comme il faut" for ladies. The house was full, as always on Saturdays & Thursdays; but it was not as exciting a first night such as the one at the Russian theatre on Monday when a new play by Tchekov was produced. The whole history of this is most interesting, too long to go into here. "The Sea Mew" is a literary play, somber with the pessimistic atmosphere of our times, intensified by its being very Russian as well. Damned the first night, it was an enormous success the second night, after a laudatory article upon it by the editor of the Novoe Vremya who is a friend of the author. Poor Tchekov (who has drawn himself in the hero, a literary man without a will), called for an ovation, was nowhere to be found; he had taken the train to Moscow in despair at the first reception of his piece. As far as I can judge Ibsen seems to have inspired him, but there is something very Russian in the hopelessness of the plot, the characters are all good, & all unhappy. "The Sea Mew" is the talk in literary circles, which are divided in opinion; there will be lectures & discussions upon it. Some sections say that all is good concerning it except that the editor of the N.V. (disliked) is quite right in what he finds to praise.

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A few remarks may be in order. Performances at the Théâtre Michel or Mikhailovskii (Grand Duke Michael) Theatre were given by French and German troupes; the fare was usually boulevard hits. Garnett's remarks about understanding the dialogue relate to her comprehension of French, not Russian. As to *The Seagull*, since there was no agreed-upon translation of *Chaika* at this point, Garnett calls it *The Sea Mew*, a choice that her sister-in-law luckily avoided. Many of the standard anecdotes about the opening night are already in place, as are the early British attitudes to Chekhov as a playwright: the equation of Russian and pessimist, the assumption that Trigorin is Chekhov, and the play's hopelessness. That Chekhov's admirers should deplore that Suvorin, the

monarchist editor of *New Times*, approved the play also deserves notice. (Despite his friendship with Chekhov, of a decade's duration at this point, Suvorin was not always so approving. He deeply disliked *Three Sisters*.) It is only natural that Garnett should see Ibsen as Chekhov's inspiration: Ibsen was considered the foremost avant-garde playwright in London in the 1890s. She could hardly be aware that Ibsen was a bête noire of Chekhov, who much preferred Maeterlinck and Strindberg.

# From Charleston, SC, to a Zen Garden: Different Facets of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*

**Radislav Lapushin**
**University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**

The movie and the opera I discuss in this essay have little in common except for the fact that both are inspired by *Three Sisters***.** Nonetheless, their juxtaposition is revealing in how it confirms an intrinsic duality of Chekhov's play, which can hardly be captured by any single adaptation.

For a Chekhov scholar, Arthur Allan Seidelman's movie *The Sisters* (2005) is instructive in two respects: how faithfully it follows and, simultaneously, how strikingly it departs from its original source. Based on his stage play, Richard Alfieri's script transfers the action from the provincial Russia of Chekhov's time to the spacious faculty lounge of a university in New York. The change in the setting, however, leaves Chekhov's protagonists instantly recognizable. Who is this professor of English with his beard and tired, all-knowing eyes by the name Dr. Cherbin (Rip Torn)? Evidently, it is Chebutykin. In spite of his new academic status, he does not part with a newspaper, reading aloud some items from the criminal beat to his younger colleagues. And who are these two men playing chess: one with a dreamy and romantic appearance (Chris O'Donnell), another unshaved and sardonic (Eric McCormack)? One has no trouble deciding which of them is a reincarnation of Tuzenbakh (now he is David Turzin, a professor of philosophy, which is hardly surprising considering Tuzenbakh's penchant for philosophizing). And the other is the new Solënyi (his

name now is Gary Sokol) promoted from staff captain to professor of political science (why "political science" is anyone's guess).

As in Chekhov's play, the action unfolds unhurriedly and is filled with apparently insignificant bits of conversation. The camera leaves the closed space only to introduce some new characters on their way to the lounge. Finally, the two older sisters come in: Olga, also a professor (Mary Stuart Masterson), and Marcia (Maria Bello), both of whom are loaded with gift-wrapped packages. Of course, as anyone familiar with Chekhov's play would immediately guess, all these gifts are intended for the youngest sister, Irene (Erika Christensen), whose birthday is about to be celebrated in that very lounge.

But first, an unexpected visitor from the sisters' past comes to the club, the former TA of the late father, who was also a professor and chancellor—tellingly, all the military men are replaced by the members of the academic world—by the name Vincent Antonelli (Tony Goldwyn). Like his obvious model, Vershinin, Vincent is well mannered, sensitive, and disappointed. Predictably, he also has a hysterical wife and two daughters of whom he is very fond. But most importantly, he is a living reminder of the sisters' supposedly happy and harmonious past in their house in Charleston, SC, to which they are dreaming of returning sometime in the future.

Meanwhile there is yet another guest to the party, the sisters' brother Andrew (Alessandro Nivola). Unlike his Russian counterpart, he succeeded in becoming a professor, and his specialty is music, which is arguably a nod to Andrei's playing the violin. His professorship, however, does not make him a happier man. As expected, he has already fallen under the spell of his own Natasha renamed Nancy (Elizabeth Banks), the sexy and vulgar bird of prey who is going to take control of his life. Finally, the last guest, Marcia's husband, the psychologist Dr. Harry Glass (Steven Culp), arrives. And the subject of his conversation with his wife is also of no surprise for those acquainted with *Three*

*Sisters*: there is to be an important reception tonight, which Marcia, contrary to her wishes, has to attend along with her husband.

Thus, all the major characters in the movie have their counterparts in *Three Sisters*. Moreover, the dynamics of their relations and the general development of the events in *The Sisters* follow closely the pattern of Chekhov's play. Suffice it to recall the aborted love affair between Marcia and Vincent, or the dramatic triangle of Irene, David, and Gary, or Nancy's taking from the sisters their dream house in Charleston (she pushes Andrew to sell this house without having asked his siblings for their permission). Even the inversion of the opposition "the capital–the provinces" —living in New York, the American sisters are hopelessly longing for their family home in Charleston—might be viewed as quite Chekhovian in its hidden irony.

However, in the course of the film there are certain revealed "skeletons in the closet" that could hardly be imaginable in Chekhov's play. To begin with, the idealized and mythologized father, whose cult the two older sisters carefully preserve, is revealed to have been an ominous figure: he molested his daughter Marcia when she was a child. This could explain her excessive nervousness and agitation, and even her aggressiveness, at times, towards Nancy, as well as accounting in part for her failed marriage. Meanwhile Olga has her own secret: she is a closet lesbian who hides her sexual orientation even from her closest people—the sisters. The youngest of them, Irene, a vulnerable and sensitive university student with childishly plump cheeks, who is overprotected by Olga and Marcia, appears to be a drug addict. Overdosed, she loses consciousness on her way home after the birthday party. Luckily, the devoted Turzin-Tuzenbakh happens to be there at this moment and brings her to the hospital.

What can we make of these changes? What are their ramifications?

Perhaps any adaptation, no matter how reverential, inherently contains an element of rivalry and rebellion. I find it suggestive that in the course of the

movie each of the older siblings (Olga, Marcia, Andrew) is desperately trying to resist the late father's authority and, consequently, establish herself/himself as the head of the family. In line with the movie's psychoanalytical implications, this struggle can be viewed as a challenge issued by contemporary artists to a father-figure of the modern theater—and, to a great extent, cinema as well—Anton Chekhov. It is as if they were saying: "Now we know more about these issues than you did in your time; we know all too well, for instance, about the other—abusive—side of the father-figures, or about repressed sexuality as a primary cause of neuroses, or about the inevitable fallibility of memory and the danger of fictionalizing the past, etc., etc. Thus, we are in a position to update the original source and fill its gaps with some definite and explanatory content."

In doing this, however, the departure from Chekhov is not simply on the level of content but also on that of poetics. On this level, paradoxically, the new incarnations of Chekhov's characters look pre- rather than post-Chekhovian and more "traditional" than their original counterparts. To elaborate on this point, it can be useful to recall the famous criticism of the sound film from Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "The sound film […] leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience."[1] The analogy between Chekhov's plays and silent films is perhaps not too preposterous if one brings to mind the signature pauses of this writer so indispensable to the verbal texture of his drama. In general, pauses, omissions, ellipses, and gaps are this writer's innovative devices in the presentation of his characters. They are his way of generously leaving "room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience."

Loaded with too much background—no matter what this background is—Chekhov's characters lose something crucial to their personalities: their

[1] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1947/1972), p. 126.

elusiveness and resistance to any kind of pigeonholing. They become demystified. They cease being iridescent and evocative of one another. They can be rationalized and explained, which is arguably the worst-case scenario for a Chekhovian protagonist! (Of course, to appreciate this elusiveness of the original characters one has to go beyond the characters and situations to the play's integral poetic texture with its elaborate network of leitmotifs and allusions, its careful sound and rhythmic design, its organization of space, etc.)

A similar loss of subtlety is evident in the general representation of life in the movie. The Moscow of *Three Sisters,* as is well known, is far from being just a geographical point of destination. The true and full meaning of this poetic symbol escapes the interpreters as easily as Moscow itself escapes the play's protagonists. It speaks of their lost past, their suppressed desires, and unfulfilled wishes. It represents the very best in them that can be sacrificed under no conditions. Simultaneously, however, this Moscow stands for the vanity of their dreams, their state of denial and inability to live in the present and cope with the life as it is. While the Charleston of Seidelman's movie is also quite an ambivalent image—introduced as a lost paradise of childhood, it appears to be a place of abuse, a hell for, at least, one of the sisters—its ambivalence is of a different nature. It can be rationalized and fully explained. This Charleston *is* the city one can find on the map, buy tickets for, and go to. Had the greedy and insensitive Nancy not sold the house, the sisters (at least, Irene) would likely wind up there sooner or later.

Not only are subtlety and elusiveness central to Chekhov's characters and his play in general, they also, I would argue, account for the play's adaptability to various cultural environments. The gaps deliberately left by Chekhov in his characters' backgrounds and motivations seem to constantly provoke generations of artists, allowing them to bridge these gaps according to the spirit of their times as well as their own artistic personalities and inclinations. But ironically (isn't it

quite a Chekhovian kind of irony?), these very qualities responsible for the play's adaptability are often the first to be sacrificed when Chekhovian characters and motifs are transplanted to a new setting. The movie under discussion is a case in point: it recontextualizes Chekhov's characters and their life situations apart from the integral poetic texture of *Three Sisters*.

To show that it can be the other way around, I now turn to another recent adaptation of *Three Sisters* and a very different medium: the opera of the same name written by Peter Eötvös—originally from Hungary, he now lives in Germany—premiered in France at the Opera de Lyon and released on disc by Deutsche Grammophon in 1999. The opera is likely to surprise an unprepared listener/spectator from its very opening. The composer, who together with Claus H. Henneberg co-authored the libretto, begins his version of the play with the final monologues of Chekhov's sisters. The second and more striking surprise is that all the roles are played by men (four countertenors take the parts of the sisters and Natasha, while Anfisa's part is entrusted to a bass), which provokes an association with Baroque opera and kabuki. Eötvös himself emphasizes the concept of "timelessness" in his unorthodox approach to Chekhov's characters.[2] The three sisters for him are pure souls expressing the inescapable misery of the human condition apart from the contingencies of life in any specific country and at any specific time.

Chekhov's play, as we remember, opens with the following setting:
"In the Prozorovs' house. A drawing room with columns, beyond which a large reception room is visible. Midday: it is bright and sunny outside. In the reception room a table is being set for lunch. Olga, in the dark blue uniform of a girls' high-school teacher, is correcting exercise books […]; Masha, in a black dress, her hat

[2] Pierre Moulinier, "A Contemporary Grand Opera." In *Three Sisters* [CD booklet] (Hamburg: Deutsche Grammophon, 1999), p. 15.

on her lap, sits reading a book; Irina, in a white dress, stands lost in thought."[3] And here is the description of the initial scene in the Lyon production: "[…] Three large silhouettes, identically made up and wearing similar kimonos, seemed to float on air between transparent paper panels, a Zen garden, and wooden floor, as in a sort of dream."[4]

The contrast is obvious: there is only one white color instead of Chekhov's three and just "paper panels" in the place of regular furniture. These sisters do not take lunch. They are not supposed to read books or correct students' works. The traces of mundane daily life are erased or, if present, immediately acquire an overtly symbolic, metaphysical dimension. The mundane layer of the sisters' existence, including their social and professional status, personal backgrounds and psychological motivations, becomes so insignificant that even their gender ceases to matter. Their reality is that of a dream, of a human soul's inner world in torment. Not by chance, the performer of Olga's role, the countertenor Alain Aubin, claims: "We're neither men nor women, but the soul of three sisters"[5] (notice that there is a singular "soul" rather than "souls," the one in all three). Hence the "bareness" of the stage: nothing should disturb or shadow our contemplation of such a pure soul.

At first sight, this "purity" and neglect of the mundane are incompatible with Chekvov's poetics. Even while "floating on the air," this writer's characters keep standing on the ground and can never be pulled out from their environment. Regardless of who they are—teachers or students, officers or doctors, merchants, peasants, priests, children—they are always deeply embedded in the routine of their lives and cannot escape from it even while dreaming.

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[3] Anton Chekhov, *The Major Plays*. Trans. Ann Dunnigan (New York: A Signet Book, 1964), p. 235.
[4] Moulinier, "A Contemporary Grand Opera," p. 15.
[5] Ibid.

On the other hand, it would be equally shortsighted (perhaps arrogant) to assign Chekhov's protagonists exclusively to this layer and refuse them access to life's existential and dreamlike dimensions. As early as 1905, one of the first Russian modernist poets, Innokentii Annenskii, as if paving the way for Peter Eötvös's conception, noted that in the final scene the three sisters represented a single soul rather than three different persons.[6] Another modernist poet, Vladislav Khodasevich, in his article devoted to the twenty-fifth anniversary of Chekhov's death, spoke of "much more meaningful and tragic perspectives" of this writer's legacy that would be discovered by his "future reader." [7] The presence of such "perspectives" is stressed in the opera, especially in its Lyon's production. Here, however, one sees the opposite extreme: perceived as "hostages of eternity" (in Boris Pasternak's phrase), Chekhov's characters are fully released from the "captivity" of their—or any particular—time. Excluded is everything particular, everything Russian (the only musical exception is the sound of an "ethnic" accordion heard for a short time in the opera's prologue). In the original play, the "meaningful and tragic perspectives" are peeping through the shapes of real life. In the opera, these perspectives are moved to the foreground. "Timelessness" here completely devours "time."

Furthermore, Peter Eötvös completely alters the structure of the original play. Instead of Chekhov's four acts, where all the events develop chronologically, the composer offers three "sequences" (his own term). Each of these sequences is focused on a particular character (Irina, Andrei, and Masha, respectively) and shows the same events from their different perspectives. This restructuring leads to the repetition of certain episodes (e.g., Natasha crossing the stage with a candle, Chebutykin smashing the family clock). These recurring moments, of course, are not mere repetitions mechanically transferred from one

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[6] Innokentii Annenskii, *Knigi otrazhenii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1979), p. 87.
[7] Vladislav Khodasevich, "O Chekhove." In *Koleblemyi trenozhnik* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1991), p. 252.

sequence to another. Each time they acquire some new meaning and emphasis due to the new context. More importantly, they create the system of leitmotifs, which is one of the most distinctive and innovative features of Chekhov's drama. The authors of the libretto move in this direction much further than Chekhov's poetics would allow. In the opera, even the most fatal events loose their fatality, their "eventness," so to speak. Tuzenbakh, who is killed at the end of the first, Irina's, sequence (and at the very end of Chekhov's play) comes back to the stage to participate in the next sequence devoted to Andrei. The military brigade is leaving the town, but the love between Masha and the battery commander Vershinin only blazes up in the very last of the three "sequences." All of these chronological "discrepancies" create a very particular temporal structure in which there is no distinction between past and present, and the sequence of events ceases to be irreversible. Does such a temporal structure contradict Chekhov's concept of time? The answer is both "yes" and "no."

It is "yes" because in Chekhov, time is arguably linear, irreversible, and progressive. The action in *Three Sisters* lasts for several years during which the protagonists are making their way from spring in the first act to fall in the last one, from hopes and illusions to hopelessness and total disillusion. At the end, they are not the same persons they were in the beginning. And there cannot be any doubt that, after Vershinin leaves the town, Masha will never see him again. After Tuzenbakh is killed, he will never come back to the Prozorovs' house.

Yet the answer might also be "no" because such a temporal structure is polyphonically (I would say, self-polemically) layered in Chekhov with an opposing concept, according to which the progress of time does not bring any serious change, while the conception of "eternal return" can equally apply to a particular life and life in general. After all, it is not for nothing that one of Chekhov's contemporaries called him a "Russian Ecclesiastes."

Once again, we can see that Eötvös both follows and contradicts Chekhov. He seems to split the image of the Russian writer by ignoring Chekhov the realist (evolutionist and social critic) for the sake of Chekhov-the mystic and fatalist, which explains why there is not any movement of time—and, correspondingly, the development of the plot—in the libretto. Eötvös's sisters are already doomed and are inherently unable to change their lives even before the curtain has risen. It is only logical therefore that the composer opens his opera with their final monologues and concludes it with the exact repetition of the phrase that opens the first sequence.

Considering all these profound revisions, one might be surprised how carefully Eötvös is trying to retain the rhythm of Chekhov's phrasing and the dynamics of his dialogue, how sensitive he is to—and inspired by—the inner music of Chekhov's word. It is symptomatic that having excluded all traces of "Russianness," Eötvös decided on Russian as the language for his libretto (the initial choice was German). Russian, according to the composer, is a "very concentrated language," in which "the vowels have a singing quality to them and the consonants have lots of character."[8] I could cite numerous examples from the libretto to demonstrate how skillfully the composer utilizes these qualities. Consider, for instance, a very expressive yet laconic (it consists of just one word) utterance by the doctor after he smashes the family clock ("Vdrebezgi!" [Smashed to bits!]). It becomes more expressive by the exclusion of the fist two vowels: "V-dr-bz-gi!" According to Eötvös, he employs "the vowels for consonance and the consonants as percussive elements,"[9] and one can physically feel the percussive presence and tension in this "V-dr-bz-gi." Eötvös's treatment of the very specific Russian word "naziuziukalsia" (got tipsy) is an example of his masterful work with vowels: this verb acquires two additional syllables (naziu-ziu-ziu-ziukalsia).

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[8] Peter Eötvös (1999), "'Opera Isn't Dead': Peter Eötvös in Conversation with Pierre Moulinier." In *Three Sisters* [CD booklet] (Hamburg: Deutsche Grammophon, 1999), p. 18.
[9] Ibid.

The poetic texture of the play also finds its representation through some purely musical devices. To name just one of them, each of the opera's characters is related to a specific instrument that can be viewed as this character's second—profound and substantial—voice. Olga is a flute, Irina is an English horn, Masha and her husband are clarinets, Andrei is a bassoon, while his vulgar and rapacious wife is associated with the blowing of a saxophone. The three sisters as a unit rather than individually have their own instrumentation: a string trio. Their old nanny is a double bass. Not surprisingly, the military men are brass instruments: a bugle serves for Vershinin, two horns for Tuzenbakh, a trombone for Chebutykin. Percussion instruments are associated with the duelist Solënyi. All these instruments make up the chamber orchestra in the pit, assuring the protagonists' ever-lasting presence and intertwining their "voices," which serves as a musical parallel to the integral lyrical flow of Chekhov's play that in places erodes the borders between independent characters.[10]

Moreover, the 18-piece chamber orchestra in the pit is not the only one used in the production. The composer decided that his *Three Sisters* should be more than just a chamber opera and, to quote Pierre Moulinier, "added a larger orchestra of 50 players, hidden away at the back of the stage and allowing him to extend his musical world, just as Chekhov extends the physical space of his action when he moves from salon to garden. When the two officers come to say goodbye in sequence 1 (no. 9), the music opens up, therefore, as though a door were opening on to the outside world."[11] The dialogue of two orchestras—one in the pit, another at the back of the stage—becomes a musical equivalent of Chekhov's representation of space.

To conclude: Peter Eötvös's opera amplifies the poetic and dreamlike nature of *Three Sisters* by ignoring its linear development of the plot and its

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[10] See in my book, *"Dew on the Grass": The Poetics of Inbetweenness in Chekhov* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 77-81.
[11] Moulinier, "A Contemporary Grand Opera," p. 11.

faithful representation of life. Arthur Allan Seidelman's movie, on the contrary, exploits and advances this play's "realistic" element while leaving behind its poetic subtlety and elusiveness. To achieve a Chekhovian synthesis would mean to bring together a Zen garden and Charleston and merge into an organic whole the apparently incompatible languages of a "timeless" opera and a "topical" movie.

**CHEKHOV ON STAGE AND PAGE**
**DECEMBER 2-4 2010**
**COLUMBUS, OHIO**

We are delighted to announce that the preliminary conference program for "Chekhov on Stage and Page" has been posted to the website at the Ohio State University Center for Slavic and East European Studies. See http://slaviccenter.osu.edu/chekhov2010.html. The conference will take place December 2-4, 2010 at the Blackwell Conference Center on the OSU campus, with special events at the award winning Thompson Library, the Drake Union's Roy Bower Theater, and the Grand Lounge of the OSU Faculty Club.

**Highlights:**
In addition to 25 conference papers by scholars from the U.S., Russia, the UK, Bulgaria, and Israel, the conference will feature four roundtables and/or symposia: on teaching Chekhov, on screening Chekhov, on recent theatrical productions of Chekhov, and on writing under the influence of Chekhov (featuring OSU MFA students and graduates). Keynote addresses by theater director Alexandre Marine (a founding member of Moscow's Tabakov Studio Theater who has run the Théâtre Deuxième Realité in Montreal since 1995), theater critic Olga Galakhova (one of Moscow's leading theater critics), and Vladimir Kataev (the unofficial "dean" of Russian Chekhov studies) will kick off the conference.

Other special events include screenings of Sasha Waters's documentary "Chekhov for Children" (see trailer on conference website) and Vera Zubarev's "Four Funny Families"; a Chekhov-related exhibit at OSU's newly renovated Thompson Library including costume designs and other materials related to productions of Chekhov plays; and a reading of new Chekhov-inspired work by Michelle Herman (author of, among other works, the novella *A New and Glorious Life*, inspired by Chekhov's "Lady with a Lapdog"). During the conference, Alexandre Marine will present a master class, open to all, on performing Chekhov for OSU and Columbus actors.

The conference will conclude with a reading and booksigning by author Valerie Martin of her 2009 *Confessions of Edward Day* (see NYT Book Review at http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/23/books/review/Winer-t.html?_r=1)

There is no registration fee for the conference. However, to ease our planning, colleagues who will be attending but not presenting should confirm their attendance no later than November 1 to brintlinger.3@osu.edu.

**Sponsors and Publication:**

The conference is being supported by the OSU College of the Arts and Humanities, the Center for Slavic and East European Studies, the George Kalbouss Russian Culture Fund, the Departments of Theater and Slavic and East European Languages and Literatures, and the Program for Creative Writing at the Department of English, as well as the North American Chekhov Society. Article-length versions of papers will be considered for publication in volume 10 of *The Ohio Slavic Papers*, to be edited by Angela Brintlinger and Carol Apollonio and published by Ohio State University Press in 2011.