

**The Bulletin
of the
North American
Chekhov Society**

Vol. XIV, No. 1

Fall, 2006

Editor's Note

Since a number of subscribers expressed their appreciation of Nathan Rosen's remarks about the ending of "The Darling," I was delighted when Professor Rosen sent me another of his essays on a favorite short story of many readers of Chekhov. The essay came with a brief letter explaining its odd history. It seems that the essay was printed in the second issue of an Italian journal *Teoria e Critica*. The journal, unfortunately, died shortly after the second issue was printed, though none of the American universities--all three of them--who had subscribed to the journal received more than the first number. So, the only place where this issue with the Chekhov piece in it has been available is Italy. To rescue, therefore, the essay from relative obscurity and direct it to an audience it deserves, I have agreed to "reprint" it here. Accompanying Rosen's essay is a vigorous note on Solënyi provided by a good friend of *The Bulletin*, Laurence Senelick. Mark Swift, aided by Andrew Durkin, has submitted a helpful summary of the papers presented at this summer's Lake Baikal conference. This issue also contains two reviews of recent productions of Chekhov's last play in Los Angeles and a review of a New York production of a one-act, forty-five minute adaptation and modernization of *Three Sisters*. The issue ends with an amusing note about a band that all lovers of Chekhov will want to learn about and an announcement of the NASC panel at the AATSEEL conference in Philadelphia at the end of next month. Finally, let me urge those who have not sent in their \$10.00 dues to mail them to me: Ralph Lindheim / Dept. of Slavic Languages and Literatures / University of Toronto / 121 St. Joseph St. / Toronto, ON M5S 1J4.

Chekhov's Religion in "The Student"

**Nathan Rosen
Professor Emeritus, University of Rochester**

"The Student," published in 1894, belongs with "The Duel" and "Rothschild's Fiddle" in the brilliant if brief series of stories that deal with weak men who, by grace of God or psychology or both, develop enough strength in a crisis of self-awareness to overcome their weakness. Chekhov himself, according to Bunin, offered this story as a refutation of the charge that he was a pessimist: "What sort of a pessimist am I? Of all

the things I have written 'The Student' is my favorite story."¹ In another connection he repeated that this was his favorite story because it was the most perfect and polished of his works.² It certainly deserves much more attention than it has received. Chekhov prized brevity, and "The Student" is one of the shortest works of his late period--one of the shortest, densest, and most unusual: a parable set simultaneously in the present and in the time of Christ, with the intervening 1900 years of history as a link between them.

The opening paragraph sets a scene of spring weather in a swampy area full of sounds--cries of thrushes, the sound of a shot aimed at a snipe, and "something alive that droned plaintively as if it was blowing into an empty bottle." When the forest grew dark, however, "a penetrating wind blew from the east," icy needles covered the water meadows, and the forest became "uncomfortable, silent and deserted. There was a smell of winter." This sudden change in the weather terribly disturbs Ivan Velikopolskii, a student at a higher divinity school, who is returning from a snipe-hunting expedition. He sees the sudden onset of cold, darkness, and gloom as a breakdown in the order and harmony of nature. Since it is Good Friday he has been fasting all day. Hunger and cold make him think of the poverty and hunger of the Russian masses from the time of Rurik, Ivan the Terrible, and Peter the Great. None of these mighty rulers could lessen the misery of their people--a misery which was, is, and will remain for the next thousand years. So thought the student "and he did not feel like going home." Home meant his poor peasant parents.

There is something odd about a student at a higher divinity school who is engaged in snipe-hunting on Good Friday. Just as odd is the fact that hunger and cold--mere sensations--could lead him to pessimism and despair over the poverty of the masses. Surely his reading of the Bible should have comforted him; Christ had much to say about the poor and the Kingdom of Heaven. But our student does not cite the Bible and seems to be of a materialistic bent. His religious training is at best "good works without faith," as the deacon in "The Duel" expresses it.

But there may be another element here. Ivan Velikopolskii was unusually troubled by the sudden change in the weather. From this change he very quickly drew a parallel to the senselessness of history. One might think that his dejection and pessimism had existed beforehand and now clutched at a reason, any reason, that could offer them an outlet. This mood could be understood in the light of the opening paragraph, which presumably reflects the point of view of the student although this is

¹ Chekhov, A.P., *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v dvadtsati tomakh*, vol. 8 (Moscow, 1944-1951), p. 564,

² *Ibid.*

not stated. The sudden change from light to darkness, the forest turning "uncomfortable, silent, deserted,"--and a cold wind blowing in from the East: would this sudden darkness not remind the student that it was Good Friday, the day of the Crucifixion, when for three hours the earth was plunged in darkness? Hence Ivan's pessimism and despair. When combined with his hunger and cold we can see why his thoughts turned to the unending poverty of the masses rather than to the Resurrection.

At this dark moment Ivan sees a fire blazing near the river and goes up to it. This is the "Widows' Garden." Two widows, a mother and daughter, have just finished eating by the fire. A ploughed field is all around them. The women are described in detail. The mother, Vasilisa, is tall, stout, old, and wears a man's overcoat. Having served as a wet-nurse among the gentry she has some knowledge of the world and speaks delicately. A soft gentle smile hovers constantly over her face. Her daughter Luker'ia is sharply contrasted with her. Luker'ia is small, pockmarked, dull-witted, a peasant woman who had been beaten by her husband. She is silent and has a strange expression like a deaf-mute. Although both women have Christian names, even the names are contrasting. Vasilisa means queen, and would be associated by a Russian with Vasilisa Prekrasnaia of fairy tales--Vasilisa the Beautiful. Luker'ia, derived from Glikeriia, means sweet or sugary and is a servant's name. Both women have been to church for the services but they have now committed the sin of eating on a holy day of fasting.

Ivan, approaching the fire, remarks that "winter has come back." It is true, physically, and (for him) intellectually. Vasilisa doesn't recognize him at once but then quotes a proverb about those not recognized: "You will be rich." This turns out to be prophetic. While Ivan warms his hands over the fire, he recalls the similar situation of Peter after Christ's arrest. The similarity is purely physical; there is no hint that Ivan thinks of himself as Peter, except that both warmed their hands over a fire. But the story of Peter's denial of Christ rises to his mind: "What a dreadful night that was! An exceptionally cheerless, long night!" And Ivan looks around at the darkness, convulsively jerking his head. We do not know whether he is imaginatively preparing himself, as a good story-teller, to act out the part of Peter or whether he already senses that he too would be as weak as Peter. (Recall his despair at the change of weather and his pessimism.)

Ivan relates Peter's promise to join Christ in prison and death, Christ's foreknowledge that Peter would deny Him three times before the cock crowed, and Christ's anguish in the garden of Gethsemane while His disciples slept. "Poor Peter's heart was tired. He was weak, his eyelids were heavy, and he could not overcome his need to sleep. He slept." It is characteristic of Ivan to lavish many more adjectives on Peter's state of mind and body than are found in the Bible and in doing so to identify

himself more and more with Peter imaginatively. After Jesus was betrayed by Judas, he went on, they beat Jesus, "and Peter, exhausted, in an agony of distress and alarm, you understand, his sleep cut short, with a foreboding that at any moment something fearful would happen here on earth, followed behind ... he passionately, madly loved Jesus, and now he saw from afar how He was beaten ..."

At this point Luker'ia stopped cleaning spoons "and fixed an immobile gaze upon the student." Although she is dull-witted, and perhaps has not understood the story, she has caught a word twice repeated--"beaten," applied to Christ--and remembers how she too was often beaten by her husband. An identity, a link has been established between her and what happened 1900 years ago.³

Ivan goes on with the story of how Jesus was taken to the high priest for interrogation while servants of the priest were building a fire in the courtyard to warm themselves. "Peter also stood by the fire with them and warmed himself, as I do now." Accused three times by people at the fire of having been associated with Jesus, Peter three times denied the accusation. "And after that time the cock crew at once, and Peter, looking afar at Jesus, recalled the words which He had said to him at the Supper ... Recalled, roused himself, went away from the courtyard and bitterly, bitterly burst out in tears. The Gospel says: 'And he went out and wept bitterly.' I imagine: the garden, very very quiet, very very dark, and in the stillness could barely be heard a muffled sobbing ..."

Chekhov changed the Biblical version at three points. The servants at the bonfire are called *sluzhiteli* in the Bible; Chekhov calls them *rabotniki* (workmen). We shall later see the importance of this change. Second, none of the Biblical versions mention that when the cock crowed, Peter looked at Jesus and remembered the words that He had said to him at the Supper. Neither Matthew 26:7, Mark 15:72, nor John 18:27 speak of this. In Luke 22:61, however, it is said that "the cock crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly." Note that in Luke it is Jesus who turns to look at Peter; in Chekhov's version it is Peter who turns to look at Jesus: a complete reversal, whose effect is to make Peter more

³ Jessie Coulson's translation of "The Student" is generally reliable but she "improves" Chekhov's style at this point: "They led him bound to the high priest, and *smote* him ... [Peter] loved Jesus passionately, to distraction, and now he saw from afar how he *was buffeted*..." (Anton Chekhov: *Selected Stories* [London, Oxford University Press, 1963], pp. 107-8). Earlier in Jessie Coulson's translation, Luker'ia's husband "had *beaten* her stupid." Thus three different words are used where Chekhov uses only one: *beaten* (*zabitaya*, *bili*, *bili*). This is an important point because Luker'ia awakens to the meaning of the story only when she hears the word *beaten* repeated. She might not have recognized the word masquerading in such high-falutin synonyms as *smote* and *buffeted*.

aware of his guilt and shame. A third difference is that the Bible briefly says that after the cock crowed, Peter "went out and wept bitterly." The Bible does not say where Peter went but Chekhov adds a destination: the garden of Gethsemane--the same garden where Christ had prayed at night while His weak disciples slept. Chekhov's change enables Ivan to imagine the garden as very quiet and very dark--perhaps because Christ's presence can no longer be felt; and Peter, by returning to the garden, consciously identifies himself with his earlier weakness (when he had slept, against Christ's command); thus he intensifies his shame and grief: "in the stillness could barely be heard a muffled sobbing ..."

When the student finished the story, Vasilisa, "still smiling, suddenly sobbed, large, abundant tears flowed down her cheeks, and she hid her face from the fire with a sleeve as if ashamed of her tears, while Luker'ia, gazing fixedly at the student, blushed, and her face had a heavy, strained look like a person trying to hold in a sharp pain." Vasilisa's constant smile had, like her man's overcoat, protected her from the world; Luker'ia's immobile, expressionless face, like that of a deaf-mute, registered the power of her body to withstand her beatings; and now she tried to repress her agitation at the story she heard. These two women, extremely different from one another, were both deeply affected by the story of Peter. The scene ends with the arrival of workmen (*rabotniki*) who had been watering their horses by the river. The first workman came up on his horse, and "the light from the fire played on him." Ivan bids the widows goodbye and continues on his trip; he does not feel it necessary to talk to the workmen.

It is dark, cold, and windy as before but the student is no longer troubled by the weather. Looking back, he notices that the fire twinkles calmly in the darkness but people are no longer visible; he can now generalize his experience. If Vasilisa had burst out crying, this meant that everything which had happened on that dreadful night to Peter had some kind of relation to her, and her daughter felt that Peter's experience was close to her own. The nature of this kinship is not spelled out but is easy to understand: the women are both widows, weak, defenseless, poor, sinful (eating on a day of fasting) and so they identify with Peter's weakness--as well as his shame at his weakness. The fire and the garden likewise serve as parallels to the setting of Peter's story. And the workmen arriving on horseback at the Widows' Garden--the *rabotniki*--remind the reader of the *rabotniki* who had warmed their hands at the fire in the high priest's courtyard 1900 years ago. Everyone needs the fire to warm his hands at; faced with the surrounding darkness we all need warmth, light, and companionship. The arrival of the workmen serves to broaden the meaning of Vasilisa's and Luker'ia's experience to include all of mankind as well. The student need not tarry to greet the workmen for

he knows they are no different in nature from Vasilisa and Luker'ia and have the same needs and fears. "The student again thought that if Vasilisa cried, and her daughter showed distress, then obviously what he had related about an event 1900 years ago had a relation to the present--to both women and, probably, to this deserted village, to him personally, to all people."

It should be noted that Vasilisa identifies with Peter rather than with Christ, for Peter is weak like herself while Christ is strong; and her interest (we are told) is less in the story of the three denials than in what is taking place in Peter's soul: his weakness, shame at his weakness, and love of Christ for loving him despite his weakness. And all of mankind, thinks the student, is as weak as Peter and Vasilisa!

One would suppose that this is a gloomy conclusion about human nature, but Ivan feels suddenly joyous. "The past," he thought, "is linked to the present by an uninterrupted chain of events that flow out of each other. And it seemed to him that he had just seen both ends of this chain: when he had touched one end, the other had trembled." This statement poses some difficulties. An English critic calls it a "monumental cliché" which is made worse by mixing a chain metaphor with the flowing of water.⁴ The critic argues that Chekhov deliberately debunks the student's prose style at such a moment of exaltation as a warning to the reader not to identify Chekhov's own beliefs with those of an intellectual like Ivan. I personally fail to see how the defects of Ivan's prose style discredit his experience. Even if Chekhov shared Ivan's insight at this moment, would Chekhov have granted Ivan a style so superbly eloquent as not to be characteristic of Ivan? I find more troublesome the notion of continuity between past and present. There is an identity between Peter's experience and Vasilisa's, but where is the "uninterrupted chain of events"--a cause-and-effect relationship extending through all the intervening generations? We have been shown only an identity of experience, not a sequence of events. This problem is to be resolved in the next and last paragraph of the story.

The last paragraph consists of an immensely long and syntactically complicated sentence (very unusual for Chekhov) which suggests that everything has now become clear to the student, that everything is interwoven in a complex rational and esthetic unity. The sentence deserves to be quoted in full:

"While he was crossing the river on the ferry and then, climbing the hill, looked at his native village and the west, where a narrow strip of sunset shone cold and crimson, he was thinking that the truth and beauty

⁴ L.M. O'Toole, "Structure and Style in the Short Story: Chekhov's 'Student'," *Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 49, No. 114 (January 1971), 56-57.

which had guided human life there, in the garden and in the courtyard of the high priest, had continued without a break to this day and, evidently, always constituted the most important thing in human life and on earth in general; and a feeling of youthfulness, health, power--he was only twenty-two years old--and an inexpressibly sweet expectation of happiness, of unknown mysterious happiness, gradually took possession of him, and life seemed to him delightful, marvelous, and full of high meaning."

This sentence contains three parts: (1) his journey across the river and up the hill; (2) his meditation on truth and beauty; and (3) his sudden awareness that he was young and life was full of meaning. Let us start with the second part, the meditation on truth and beauty, which is actually a continuation of his previous notion that an uninterrupted chain of events flows from Peter to Vasilisa.

The question arises at once: what *truth* and *beauty* had guided human life in the garden and in the courtyard? Surely the student is not thinking of esthetic beauty as it is ordinarily understood, for the garden and the courtyard were associated with pain, with beatings, interrogations, tears. And just as puzzling is the thought that this same truth and beauty that had guided human life there had continued uninterrupted until now and was the most important thing in human life.

If we go back to the opening paragraphs of the story, we recall that the student was disturbed by the unseasonable change in the weather, which he interpreted as a violation of the order and harmony (*poriadok i soglasie*) of nature itself. If we think of Christ as a principle of order, a moral ideal, then harmony would consist in man's effort to live in harmony with Christ's values. In other words, truth is Christ's truth, and beauty is our effort to live by that truth.⁵ For Chekhov esthetic beauty and moral beauty are often closely related. In "The Lady with the Dog," for example, Gurov's noblest feelings--up to then buried within him and not admitted to his consciousness--are awakened by his early morning walks with Anna Sergeevna beside a beautiful sea; and from then on he can never relapse into his grey philistine life. His love affair with Anna Sergeevna stands out tragically for this reason from all his previous casual love affairs, becoming indeed the moral center of his being. In the story "The Beauties" the narrator gazes at a beautiful young girl "and little by

⁵ Gunnar Jacobsson has a slightly different notion of what Chekhov meant by beauty in this story: "Es dürfte klar sein, dass unter 'Schönheit' hier in erster Hand ein moralischer und nicht ein ästhetischer Begriff zu verstehen ist. Für Petrus muss 'Schönheit' das Ideal des Vollendeten, des Vollkommenen, des in moralischem Sinn nicht Defekten repräsentieren. Jede Handlung, die in Übereinstimmung mit diesem Ideal ausgeführt wird, d.h. nicht gegen dies Ideal verstösst, ist somit 'schön.'" (*Anton Cechov: 1860-1960: Some Essays*, ed. T. Eekman [Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1960], p. 100-1).

little one feels like telling Masha something unusually agreeable, sincere, beautiful, something as beautiful as she herself was."

But are "truth and beauty" the most important thing in human life, as the student asserts? If we take truth and beauty to mean Christ's truth and the need to live in harmony with it, the assertion makes sense. Human nature has not changed since the time of Christ. We would agree that, given the choice, we would prefer to follow Christ, that is, not to lie, not to hate our enemies, not to judge others, not to live for this life. Knowing the difference between good and evil, we have tried all through history to be good rather than bad. We are, of course, weak and thereby do evil (as Peter has done), but thanks to our ideals we are aware of wrong as soon as we have done it, we are ashamed and repent. Historically we have betrayed Christ and continue to betray Him, but this is *because we are weak rather than evil*. The story of Peter's denial of Christ becomes mythical and timeless; transmitted through the ages from father to son, Christ's values, and our own waywardness in trying to live by them, become the stuff of the "uninterrupted chain of events" seen by the student; and this can be reduced in essence to the story of Peter's denial of Christ: first, his passionate love of Christ (who is strong); second, his weakness in living out his love of Christ; third, his feeling of shame and repentance; fourth, his deepened love of Christ for continuing to love someone as weak and unworthy as Peter. Let us keep in mind that Peter was Christ's favorite disciple and the strongest among them; yet they all fled when Christ was arrested. And it was this strongest of the weak disciples, Peter, who built the Catholic Church as an institution that shields the weak and even offers them the possibility of grace and forgiveness. In short, humanity is weak; it always needs the fire for warmth, light, and companionship in the darkness. If we are conscious of our weaknesses and repent, we may even become strong, like Laevsky in "The Duel" and Bronza in "Rothschild's Fiddle." At the very least we become honest, stripped of our self-illusions, humble, and thus related to our fellowmen. It seems to me that this is what "The Student" is about.

What we have said here about "truth and beauty" is a meditation which is preceded in the story by Ivan's crossing the river, climbing a hill, and looking at his native village (up to now covered in mist and darkness) and looking at the West, where a narrow strip of sunset shone cold and crimson. Crossing the river is a traditional symbol for entering upon a new reality. Ivan then reaches a height from which he can see his journey in perspective. The cold cruel wind from the East at the beginning of the story crosses over the student, the bonfire, Vasilisa, Luker'ia, and the horsemen--that is, all of mankind--and is transmuted into the cold crimson sunset in the West. If the cold wind from the East refers to the Crucifixion, then the Crucifixion is transmuted at the end into the cold

crimson sunset ("crimson" suggesting Christ's blood). The Crucifixion thus becomes part of something that is beautiful, harmonious and --at last--full of meaning, intellectually and esthetically.

At this moment Ivan suddenly feels that he is young, healthy, strong, and twenty-two years old; he expects life to be happy and finds it full of miracle and high meaning. This is a complete reversal of his attitude at the beginning of the story.⁶ He has acquired a "general idea"--that general idea which the professor in "A Boring Story" lacked, and which Chekhov himself complained was lacking in himself. Is this a religious idea? It is practical, ethical, teaching us how to regard ourselves and our fellowmen, but it is not mystical. The importance of the "general idea" is that it focuses all of one's energies and powers. If we assume that the student hitherto had been of little faith, then he had no driving aim in life, no focus for his energy, and so did not grasp the meaning of his youth. Now he has a mission: which comes down to telling and retelling in various ways the story of Peter under every circumstance, to make every Vasilisa and Luker'ia aware of herself (as Chekhov tries to do in almost all of his stories). And since the student is only twenty-two and healthy he can accomplish a great deal in the world. And this focus for his energy releases new energy, new human possibilities of achievement. The student had an "inexpressibly sweet expectation of happiness, of an unknown mysterious happiness."

A Model for Solënyi?

**Laurence Senelick
Tufts University**

Outside of Russia and Eastern Europe, audiences are often at a loss when, in *Three Sisters*, Solënyi keeps comparing himself to Lermontov. Yet this was an aspect of the character that Chekhov considered to be crucial. To Iosafat Tikhomirov, who played Ferapont in the original Moscow Art Theatre production, Chekhov wrote (14 January 1901), "Actually, Solënyi does think that he resembles Lermontov; but of course he doesn't--it's ridiculous to think of ... He should be made up to look like Lermontov, The resemblance to Lermontov is

⁶ A. Derman, a Soviet scholar, thinks that Ivan's last discovery of the "uninterrupted chain of events" should not be taken seriously. It is "the irony of a positivist and materialist [i.e., Chekhov] carefully basing an intellectual movement on a physical foundation." Derman claims that Ivan's pessimism at the beginning is caused by hunger and cold, and his joy at the end by the realization that he is young! (A. Derman, *Tvorcheskii portret Chekhova*, [Moscow, 1929], pp. 320-23.) The obvious refutation is that Ivan feels joyous and young only after he has made his discovery.

enormous, but only in Solënyi's mind." This seemingly contradictory statement means that Solënyi resembles Lermontov physically, but in character and talent he does not. After all, as Jurij Striedter has pointed out, "Lermontov's life ended with his death in a duel, and Solyony is copying him. Conversely, in Lermontov's novel [*A Hero of Our Time*], it is the Byronic hero's rival who is killed by him, which would point to Solyony's rival Tusenbach. Only in Lermontov's novel it is the rival who is a pronounced *poseur* and imitator of the Byronic hero [Pechorin]-like Solyony himself."⁷ It is characteristic of Solënyi to confuse his literary avatars.

The actors who created the role of Solënyi at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1901, Mikhail Gromov and Leonid Leonidov, were indeed made up to look like Lermontov, and this tradition was continued in Nemirovich-Danchenko's new production in 1940, when Boris Livanov interpreted him as a swashbuckling bully, a reading which became inescapable for decades.

Did the notion of a self-hating and destructive individual modelling himself on a romantic poet spring full-blown from Chekhov's brain, or was there a prototype that suggested itself to him? A remarkably similar type is described in the memoirs of Mariia Gavrilovna Savina (1854-1915), in Chekhov's lifetime the leading actress at the Imperial Alexandra Theatre in St. Petersburg. Of a theatrical family, she had first gone on stage at the age of ten, and in 1867 was a thirteen-year-old actress-of-all-work in a troupe in Chernigov. The acting company performed only three times a week, because they were expected to take part in dances at the "Rotunda" Officers' Club. Savina recalls,

"I soon got fed up with mazurkas with handsome adjutants and I made up my mind to force 'M-- Pechorin' to dance. There was a certain officer who outwardly resembled the type of Lermontov's hero and copied him exceedingly. During the dancing he would stand in a corner or near a window, his arms crossed, and disdainfully gaze upon it all. I was introduced to him, with the preliminary explanation that he did not dance, and for two weeks I listened to his tirades about the pointlessness of existence, the vanity of the world, disillusionment, etc. One evening I was in specially good form, because my ringlets were more in curl than ever and my red velvet suited me wonderfully, and 'Pechorin' was so disillusioned that he decided to give the waltz a whirl. I can remember even now how all the dancers stopped to make room for

⁷ Jurij Striedter, "Drama als Spiel reflektierter Erwartungen: Čechovs *Drei Schwestern*, in *Dramatische und theatralische Kommunikation. Beiträge zur Geschichte und Theorie des Dramas und Theaters im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Herta Schmid und Jurij Striedter (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1992), 192-23. Trans. Laurence Senelick

him or more accurately to stare at this wonder. I was ecstatic, and from every side I was congratulated on my success. Pechorin got angry and stopped coming to the club on dance days. I wasn't sorry for it, because he no longer interested me."⁸

Could Chekhov have heard this story? Savina composed her memoirs in the summer of 1883 on her estate at one of the happier times of her life, when her marriage to N. N. Vsevolodskii was still in an idyllic phase. She entrusted the manuscript to her friend V. I. Basilevskii, who urged her to publish it, as did the editor of *Russkaia Starina*, Mikhail Ivanovich Semevskii. She refused, and after her death it became the property of the State Museum of Academic Theatres. The memoirs were finally published in 1927.⁹

Savina, a Petersburg luminary, swam into the orbit of Moscow-dwelling Chekhov only in 1888, when she expressed a desire to play the female lead in the Alexandra premiere of *The Bear*. With his characteristic disdain for divas, he described her ironically as the "highly talented and divine" (letter to Leont'ev-Shcheglov, 11 November 1888), but also reported that he had "heard much good" of her (letter to Suvorin, 11 November 1888). The following month he spoke to her on the telephone, and hoped she would play Sarra in the first (and only) Petersburg performance of *Ivanov*. When he found out that she preferred to act Sasha, he rewrote the role to provide her more opportunities. He even stated that "had I known in time that she would play Sasha and Davydov Ivanov, I would have named my play *Sasha* and constructed the entire work on this basis, and shunted *Ivanov* to a siding; but who knew?" (letter to Suvorin, 7 January 1889). In the event, she played Sasha only once, at the stage director Fëdor Fëdorov-Iurkovskii's benefit performance (in 1909 she was to assume Sarra quite successfully).

In all these cases Chekhov never wrote directly to the actress, but approached her through the intermediacy of Suvorin and Fëdorov-Iurkovskii. Similarly, Savina never saw fit to write to him, but, even when she turned down the role of Nina in the first production of *Seagull*, did so through the agency of Suvorin. Later, when Chekhov had seen Eleonora Duse perform, he compared her to Savina, to the Russian actress's disadvantage. In his notebooks, he remarks, "Savina is to actors what Viktor Krylov is to writers," about the lowest evaluation he could give. In turn, Savina, although she played Arkadina in 1902 and Ranevskaiia in 1904, never took to these roles; in an interview given in *Teatral'naia Rossia* in 1905, she demonstrated that she understood and

⁸ M. G. Savina, *Goresti i skitaniia. Zapiski 1854-1877* (Leningrad: Academia, 1927), pp. 40-41.

⁹ A. M. Brianskii, "Predislovie" to Savina, pp. 13-15

appreciated Chekhov's plays, but was turned off by the fashion for "atmospheric" production values.

Under those circumstances, if Chekhov ever heard the story of "M--Pechorin," it would not have been from Savina's lips. It may have been transmitted to him by Suvorin. Savina made a great success in Suvorin's society melodrama *Tatiana Repina* (1889), a play in whose writing and mounting Chekhov was closely connected. Possibly, during the rehearsals Savina told Suvorin the story and he relayed it to Chekhov. Still, we must not discount another possibility: that a fad for Lermontovism existed among young officers in the late 1860s and 1870s. The boy Chekhov may have observed it first-hand. Still, Savina's anecdote makes it clear that Solënyi is not an isolated brainchild of Chekhov, but had his objective correlative in Russian life.

“The Philosophy of A.P. Chekhov”

**A Conference Report
by
Mark Swift
(aided by Andrew Durkin)**

About 30 Chekhov scholars from seven countries gathered for the conference “The Philosophy of A.P. Chekhov” at the *Chaika* Tourist Base on Kurkut Bay, Lake Baikal, 27 June – 2 July 2006. Sessions were chaired by Vladimir Kataev, Svetlana Evdokimova, Rolf-Dieter Kluge and Vasilii Shchukin. Vladimir Kataev opened the conference with a moment’s silence in memory of the late Aleksandr Pavlovich Chudakov.

General themes of papers presented included trends in thought as reflected in Chekhov’s work, the writer’s values and worldview, moral-ethical concerns in his works, his philosophy of art and his craftsmanship as a prose writer and playwright. In the conference's opening paper, “Pis'ma Chekhova ob èsteticheskom vospitanii cheloveka,” Svetlana Evdokimova of Brown University analyzed Chekhov’s moral and aesthetic philosophy as deduced from the author’s thoughts on aesthetic education and its role in culture. Evdokimova discussed the Russian concept of an *intelligent* as compared to the institution of the European gentleman and argued that Chekhov strove to fashion a new type of a “man of culture,” the “gentleman-*intelligent*.” If the Russian *intelligent* often ignored the aesthetic aspects of life, Chekhov’s concept of “a man of culture” presupposes a synergy of moral and aesthetic vision that links him to the tradition of the European gentleman.

Vladimir Kataev borrowed the title of his paper, “Istinnyi mudrets,” from Chekhov’s well-known pronouncement on the limitations of the knowable, from which Chudakov in turn derived his now axiomatic designation of the *chelovek polia*. Kataev observed that, with the notable exception of Rozanov, who is still revered, many of formerly venerated Russian philosophers (Solov’ev, Berdiaev) have been reevaluated as inadequate and inconsequential for the 21st century. Chekhov, however, remains relevant—not as the discoverer of ideas, but for his method of critically assessing ideas. Kataev rejected the notion of Chekhov’s boundless relativism; that “no one knows the real truth” doesn’t make the notion of truth a fabrication, but an “unperceived reality.” He noted as well that some of Chekhov’s heroes share Rozanov’s traits. In the paper “‘Razmyshleniia Marka Avreliia...’ v sporakh geroev Chekhova,” Alla Golovachëva of the Chekhov Museum in Yalta elucidated features of the analytical approach of Marcus Aurelius that find expression in “Ogni” and “Duèl’.” These include the method of examining questions from different perspectives; calling things by their own name as a method of comprehending their essence and recognizing their origins. The presenter noted that examination of the same phenomena leads Chekhov’s heroes to different conclusions.

Rolf-Dieter Kluge presented a penetrating reading of Chekhov’s “Black Monk” in his paper “Zagadka ‘Chërnogo monakha’.” Prof. Kluge first noted the Romantic and mythological antecedents of the story’s imagery in Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Hoffman. He then considered the question of reality in the story and elucidated the paradox of madness as communion with the transcendental and/or with the demonic: under the influence of his hallucination, Kovrin is blissful and inspired; when well he is petty, irritable and boring. In the ensuing discussion, Douglas Clayton, supported by Aleksandr Kubasov, argued that Kovrin’s blissful smile at the moment of his death suggests the image of the black monk can be interpreted as death itself.

In the paper “O filosofii ‘velikanov’ i rabotnikov ‘malykh del’” Barbara Olaszhek of Łódz posited a broadened concept of positivism in regard to Chekhov, beyond scientific method to a philosophical approach. Elena Sozina of Ekaterinburg discussed the nature of pessimism in her paper “‘O syroty vodostochnykh trub’: filosofsko-antropologicheskoe izmerenie tvorchestva Chekhova v kontekste pokolenii.” Anna Jędrzejkiewicz of Warsaw traced moral and ethical concerns revealed to Chekhov’s heroes in her paper, “Golos sovesti v khudozhestvennom mire Chekhova.” Anastasiia Zhuravlëva (Moscow) presented the paper “Khronotip russkoi klassiki v proze A.P. Chekhova (k voprosu o chekhovskoi modeli miroustroistva).” In the paper “Predstavleniia o vere kak spasitel'naia illiuziia i gubitel'nyi obman u Chekhova,” Mark Swift of Auckland University contrasted the faith of Chekhov’s despotic believers with that of his good-hearted faithful, and noted that in each case the psychological experience of

Chekhov's believers is a fulfillment of desire, in keeping with Freud's interpretation of faith as illusion.

A series of papers was devoted to Chekhov as playwright. A paper presented by Olga Kuptsova of VGIK, "Filosofiia zhanra vodevilia i odnoaktnye p'esy Chekhova," explicated Chekhov's violation of genre norms in his vaudevilles. Iurii Shatin of Novosibirsk related Chekhov's innovations in drama to philosophical categories explored by Schopenhauer, particularly, the notion of presentation, in his paper "Filosofiia dramaturgicheskogo deistviia v p'esakh Chekhova." Margarita Goriacheva of the Gorkii Institute addressed the notion of theater as a model of life and justified the provocative title of her paper, "Liubil li Chekhov teatr?," by the playwright's frequent disillusionment with the staging of his plays and by his references to actors as uncultured and capricious.

Two papers considered philosophical propositions in *The Cherry Orchard*. In the paper "Chekhovskii Petia Trofimov i filosof Sergei Bulgakov: tol'ko li neskhodstvo?" Oleg Kling (Moscow) noted that Petia, in contrast to Chekhov's Unknown Man, remained committed to his idea. He cited Bulgakov's writings from 1895–1903 and excerpts from Chekhov's play and letters to point out striking parallels between the philosopher's thought and that of Chekhov and his hero on freedom, religion, and capitalism. In the paper, "Linia Trofimov – Lopakhin: filosofskie obertony," Sergei Komarov (Tiumen) examined questions raised in the debate between Trofimov and Lopakhin, and Rosanov's mythological scheme as a source for Petia's character.

Several papers examined aspects of Chekhov's poetics and narrative technique. In the paper "Modeli diskursa v 'Student' i 'V ssylke'," Andrew Durkin of Indiana University juxtaposed the effectiveness of two of Chekhov's inner narratives. If in "In Exile," both the overtly didactic discourse of the ferryman Semën and the emotive expression of the Tatar prove inadequate to move their listeners, in "The Student," Ivan Velikopolskii, with no didactic intent, recreates a culturally-engrained text with unintended powerful effect. Aleksandr Kubasov of Ekaterinburg examined Chekhov's adaptation of scientific language into literary discourse in the paper, "O statuse publitsisticheskogo i nauchnogo nachal v rasskaze Chekhova 'Vstrecha'"; he found the content of Chekhov's story is enriched by the incorporation of material from disparate registers. In the paper "Obraz chitatelia v rannikh rasskazakh Chekhova," Aleksandr Verkhozin of Irkutsk examined direct address and other devices in the early stories that construct an explicit reader and considered their effects—the creation of an illusion of intimacy, trust, and humor.

The Canadian contingent presented engaging and well-received papers on the role of animals and animal metaphors in Chekhov's work. Douglas Clayton (Ottawa), in the paper "Zhenshchina kak ptitsa i lohad' – k fenomenologii chelovecheskikh otnoshenii v khudozhestvennom mire Chekhova," gave an

insightful and witty analysis of Chekhov's use of animal imagery to characterize his heroines. In the paper "Mezhdū prirodoi i chelovekom: sobaka v tvorchestve Chekhova," Natal'ia Veselova (Ottawa) explicated the heroes' relationships with and attitudes towards dogs in "Uchitel' slovesnosti" and "Dama s sobachkoi" as expressions of veiled motivations and reflections of human relations in the stories.

Two papers considered Chekhov's influence on contemporary Russian literature. Viacheslav Sukhanov of Tomsk examined selected works of Trifonov and Petrushevskaia as adaptations of Chekhov classics in the paper "Khudozhestvennaia filosofiiia 'pozdnego' Chekhova i russkaia literatura vtoroi poloviny XX veka." In her paper "Ot Chekhova k Dovlatovu: 'proslavlenie bestsel'nosti' ili Poètika, okazyvaiushchaia soprotivlenie tiranii," Olga Tabachnikova (U.K.) identified Dovlatov as Chekhov's artistic successor: each writer presented a challenge to established literary norms; the primacy of the individual reigns over the force of ideas in the work of both writers and each refrains from judging his heroes.

Four papers examined spatial-temporal aspects of, or geometric imagery in, Chekhov's work. Irina Plekhanova of Irkutsk examined the effects of time on the heroes in "Skuchnaia istoriia" and "Step" in her paper "Geroi Chekhova kak liudi vremeni." Time displaces the heroes, alters their attitudes and changes their relationships. She noted spatial-temporal conflict in each narrative, and echoes of the Old Testament that link the heroes to a grander scale of time. In the paper "Zamety ob ontologicheskikh i gnoseologicheskikh aspektakh izobrazheniia prostranstv v prose Chekhova," Vasilii Shchukin of Kraków posited a tetradic model of Chekhov's typology and hierarchy of space: the confined space of a room or "case," the expansive space of the steppe; semi-open spaces represented by country estates, parks, villages; and, finally, the city as a unique space for its concentration of cultural amenities. Aleksandr Bondarev of Irkutsk presented a reading of geometric imagery in "Ogni" in the paper "Tochka i priamaia v povestiakh Chekhova," whereby points of light symbolize objects of thought, and the lines of telegraph wires represent story composition and memory. Both images appear on the backdrop of distant mist, representing chaos, and each significantly holds the attention of different characters. Elena Shishparënok of Irkutsk in the paper "Ontologiiia prostranstva v ocherkakh 'Iz Sibiri'" noted that the transcending of geographic boundaries in Chekhov's Siberian travel sketches is accompanied by a concomitant transcendence of personal limitations and an ensuing conflict of *svoë* versus *chuzhoe*.

Papers not presented at the conference, but listed in the conference program and slated for publication in the *Proceedings* include A. S. Sobennikov, "Mark Avrelii v retseptsi Chekhova"; A.A. Shcherbakova (Moscow), "Usadebnaia filosofiiia – filosofiiia v usad'be"; L.E. Bushkanets (Kazan), "Moskva i Peterburg v khudozhestvennom mire Chekhova i v obshchestvennom soznanii

kontsa XIX veka”; N.V. Kapustin (Ivanovo), “Slovo ‘filosofii’ u Chekhova: kontekst i semantika”; N.F. Ivanova (Velikii Novgorod), “Muzykal'naia èstetika Chekhova”; N.E. Razumova (Tomsk), “Kontsepsiia i obrazy kul'tury v tvorcestve Chekhova”; V.V. Bashkeeva (Ulan-Ude), “Problema izobrazheniia cheloveka v proze zrelogo Chekhova”; A.A. Medvedev (Bagnaul), “A.P. Chekhov i V.V. Rozanov: sblizhenie i ottalkivanie (k istorii vzaimootnoshenii)””; S.M. Kozlova (Barnaul), “Filosofiiia iumora: nekotorye antropologicheskie i metafizicheskie aspekty komicheskogo v tvorcestve Chekhova”; E.G. Novikova (Tomsk), “Filosofskie smysly chekhovskikh puteshestvii.”

The Baikal conference was sponsored by the Chekhov Commission of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Faculty of Philology and Journalism of Irkutsk State University. Thanks to the organizational efforts of Anatolii Sobennikov and his team, and to grants from the Russian Humanitarian Research Fund and from the Irkutsk benefactors I.S. Grinberg and S.I. Goldfarb, conference participants enjoyed accommodation, meals, and transportation between Irkutsk and the conference venue free of charge. The company of *chekovedy* was broadened and enlivened by some accompanying spouses, children and one grandchild. Unofficial activities during and after the conference included bracing dips in Lake Baikal, excursions on the lake and to Olkhon Island, a presentation by a Buriat shaman, evening campfires, *bania*, and observance of the local rite *burkhanit'*— a ritualistic offering to indigenous spirits.

Announcements made at the Baikal conference:

A Russian language Chekhov Website with news of conferences, publications, and other matters of interest is to be launched in the coming months. Anastasiia Zhuravlëva welcomes contributions and input from colleagues. Her email is: <allo-o@yandex.ru>.

The next volume of the *Chekhoviana* series with papers from the 2004 Melikhovo Centenary Conference *Vek posle Chekhova* is due to go to press. Margarita Goriacheva reported that the publisher (Iz. Nauka) increases the small print-run (600) in response to pre-publication requests and encouraged colleagues to make such requests. Vladimir Kataev advised that the following volume in the *Chekhoviana* series will likely be devoted to *Diadia Vania*; he also reported that a 3-volume *Chekhovskaia ènsiklopediia* containing 600 articles is in progress.

Alla Golovachëva of the Chekhov Museum in Yalta reminded colleagues of the annual thematic conferences held there and invited suggestions for topics: <chekhov@mail.ylt.crimea.com>. Vladimir Kataev announced three forthcoming Chekhov conferences: 1) a sesquicentennial conference, with the support of the Russian Federal Government, is to be held in Moscow in 2010; 2) colleagues are invited to bring to the attention of their students that the next conference in the occasional series *Molodye issledovateli Chekhova*, which has produced five volumes to date, is to be held in Moscow in 2008 on a date to be determined; 3) *Chekhov and the Russian Diaspora*

(*Chekhov i russkoe zarubezh'e*) is the proposed theme of another intended conference (and possibly a volume in the *Chekhoviana* series) at a future date to be determined.

Two Takes on *The Cherry Orchard* in Los Angeles

Reviews by Steven Leigh Morris
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CLASSICAL GAS

Why Chekhov is fading and Shakespeare isn't
(February 27, 2006)

Generations of drama students have been taught that Chekhov wrote classics, works that endure the tempests of the decades. We've been taught many things. That doesn't mean they're true, and the Taper's production of *The Cherry Orchard* has triggered the painful realization that Russia's most famous turn-of-the-last-century dramatist, Anton Chekhov, wrote a body of plays that's slowly—no, quickly—waning in significance.

The Cherry Orchard is about spendthrift Lyubov Ranyevskaya's (Annette Bening) return to her provincial Russian estate in the early 20th century after a disastrous love affair in Paris that has left her and her clan in a catastrophe of debts, which she and they refuse to acknowledge. Sort of like America today, you may say. Well, yes and no. In *The Cherry Orchard*, there's a hope that the burgeoning middle class might save the day by offering to lease plots of the family's farmland, if Ranyevskaya allows the emblematic orchard to be axed. In America today, the middle class is actually disappearing, so that parallel is a dubious one.

Ranyevskaya ran to France in the wake of two deaths: her husband's and that of her son, who drowned accidentally in the local river. And now she's come home to face the facts. But the debt-ridden family need not endure poverty and exile. The leasing solution is offered by Lopakhin (Alfred Molina), the uneducated, spurned, nouveau riche grandson of a slave. Furthermore, if somebody doesn't formally propose a solution soon, a public auction threatens to allow a stranger to buy out the estate from under them. This is why Lopakhin, the vulgarian, winds up with the keys to the place. It's the Russian Revolution foreshadowed. An ancient manservant named Firs (Alan Mandell) embodies the life, the epoch, that's collapsing around them. Deaf, senile and muttering non sequiturs, Firs recalls the "misfortune" of the serfs being freed.

Any Chekhov play can be set in the antebellum South or Marin County, if a director wishes to point to certain threads of familiarity, but that's not the same as a play emerging as universal. Chekhov paved the way for dramatists who composed works of poetry and drama that have aged more gracefully—those by Samuel Beckett, for example, whose writings are less widely known and produced than Chekhov's, but whose verities are eternal. When Beckett writes about the end of the world, he's writing about the end of the world. When Chekhov writes about the end of the world, he's writing about the end of the Russian aristocracy in the early 20th century, even with his profound and humane understanding of people. Chekhov's depictions of characters ensnared in unrequited love, and lust, still speak to us, as they do in so many wonderful French farces that nobody produces anymore. There's no question that Chekhov's plays are treasures. The larger question is, what's the difference between a treasure and a classic?

When asked to explain the character of Doctor Astrov in *Uncle Vanya*, Chekhov replied, "He wears a silk tie." In this somewhat cryptic response, Chekhov was referring to the futile attempts at elegance by a doctor traveling on horseback across muddy roads, ditches really, while suffocating from the plethora of filth and disease he encounters across the provinces. The core, however, is the silk tie—the barbarian world and, in it, the ludicrous stab at gentility that lies at the essence of Chekhov's plays.

If you track Chekhov's dialogue, with all its wondrous imagery and economy, you'll find a gallery of well-meaning people who mean what they say but who fail to listen to each other. You'll hear characters giving earnest confessions to others across the room who are dozing off, comically. The most brutal aspect of Chekhov's characters is their insensitivity. If they would ever hurt a fly, they might withhold the fact, they might change the subject, but they'd never knowingly lie or dissemble. That would be vulgar. Their sweet essence has so little to do with our age; it places *The Cherry Orchard* next to *Oklahoma!* in terms of relevance. It's a window onto a fantasy of who we were.

Chekhov is gathering dust because our culture is so far beyond even the remotest attempt at gentility. Our conversations are not ruminations interrupted by people on a different track. Our conversations are screaming matches. Dissenters are not politely given their say and then challenged with reasonable counterarguments. They are Swift Boated, discredited and impeached by people who do not mean well, and who do lie, knowingly. Motivation in our culture is not polite; it's duplicitous if not venal. You can find all this in Shakespeare, which is why the Bard is so damnably enduring.

Sean Mathias' production of *The Cherry Orchard* for the Taper offers a series of revelations, even though it's not particularly good (few are). Its first revelation is an obvious one: how difficult it is to master Chekhov's tonal blend of

vaudeville and ennui. Near the top, Mathias sends the clerk, Yepikhodov (Raphael Sbarge), flowers in hand, tumbling onto the stage with a perfectly executed pratfall. In the middle, Chekhov throws in a magic act for light entertainment, which Frances Fisher pulls off with aplomb. Meanwhile, there is an occasional, eerie sound heard in the distance, the cable of a mineshaft snapping, perhaps. Nobody knows, but we hear it, as do the characters onstage who all stop, mid-sentence, with silent apprehension that the sky just might be falling.

Molina's Cockney Lopakhin, so marvelously self-possessed, even in torment, is in a different production from the comparatively mannered ensemble, which winds up looking "Chekhovian"—a lugubrious strain to appear light and spontaneous in dark circumstances. The best productions of Chekhov I've seen have been acted by ensembles that have worked together for years, or have at least rehearsed for months, economically impossible in our commercial and regional theaters, unless a producer imports such a company. This did occur on Broadway 10 years ago with Moscow's glorious Sovremennik Theater and their productions of *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*. Chekhov might fare well in L.A. with an imaginative director working with some of our better resident ensembles in the smaller theaters that can afford to take their time: Pacific Resident Theater, A Noise Within, Actors' Gang and Theater of NOTE, just for starters.

I suggested to the students in the world theater course I'm teaching at Cal State San Bernardino that they might benefit from driving in to L.A. to see the Taper's *The Cherry Orchard*. I told them about live theater, which four-fifths of them had never attended; and then about the Russian playwright, Anton Chekhov, about whom five-sixths of them had never heard; and, finally, I mentioned Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, a play unfamiliar to almost everyone in the room.

After an hour, with the lure of extra credit and Center Theater Group's remarkable \$12 student group rate, 45 of them had signed up. Some wanted to bring spouses, significant others and even children. This was not due to any contagious love of theater or innate charisma on my part. It was the direct consequence of four words, like magnets, like gold: Annette Bening, Alfred Molina.

This got me to thinking: would Center Theater Group have risked staging any play by Chekhov without the likes of Annette Bening and Alfred Molina? Of course not. Who would come? Would they risk doing *Richard III* or *Henry V* without stars? Probably not, but they *could* because Shakespeare draws crowds. He draws crowds in college productions across the country; he draws crowds from the power of bloodletting and sex, and betrayal and death. The Bard is a bawd, which is why he still belongs to us. Shakespeare is a superstar who casts

his own light; I love Chekhov more, which is why it's so difficult to see the good doctor standing in a doorway, watching the light fade.

THE CHERRY ORCHARD | By ANTON CHEKHOV | Presented by Center Theater Group at the Mark Taper Forum | Through March 19.

WISHING WELL

A furious Cherry Orchard closes Evidence Room
(July 2, 2006)

Earlier this year, in a review of the Taper's *Cherry Orchard* with Alfred Molina and Annette Bening, I raised the possibility that Chekhov no longer speaks to our age—not because Chekhov isn't one of the world's grandest and most profound dramatists, but because in our age, a kind of decorum that lies at the heart of Chekhov's plays has disintegrated beyond recognition. Language has increasingly become an instrument of competition rather than investigation, devolving from argumentation and exchange to spin and rant. Our country's polarized values are reflected in our words. Just scan the radio dial for an hour and listen to the sounds of our culture, the music, the primal cadences, the songs and sentimentality wrapped around the warlike drumbeat of one sales pitch after the next, whether for products or hearts or minds. The truth in all its complexity is beside the point, which is the victory, the sale. This is the drumbeat that keeps us warm at night, that puts gas in our tanks, that keeps our shopping malls stocked and keeps us coming back for more.

When Chekhov's characters ruminate and pontificate earnestly, ridiculously, comically, often behind the gentle strains of an offstage orchestra or a marching band, the tone is so far removed from what we've become, it sounds almost unbearably sad. After that review of *The Cherry Orchard*, I received a few hostile letters in rabid defense of Chekhov, as though I'd been attacking him (I hadn't). The letters proved me right: We're a nation of warriors, far more attuned to conquest than conversation.

Bart DeLorenzo, the artistic director of Evidence Room, told me that he wanted to do a production of *The Cherry Orchard* that could demonstrate the immediacy to Los Angeles of Chekhov's gentle drama about Lyubov Ranyevskaya, a bankrupt, spendthrift aristocrat who returns to her provincial Russian estate from Paris to put her affairs in order. A businessman named Lopakhin—the uneducated, perpetually snubbed grandson of a serf—ends up buying the defaulted property in an auction, with the idea of chopping down the

estate's cherished cherry orchard and converting it into rental properties for tourists. Lopakhin is the only realist in this long, winding play about beautiful dreamers and the turning of an age.

It's no secret to those who follow such things that DeLorenzo has been turned out of his theater, and he's taking the theater's name and identity, Evidence Room, with him. (*The Cherry Orchard* is his farewell production.) DeLorenzo served as director, curator and impresario at E.R.'s various locations since the early '90s. The current incarnation of the theater on Beverly Boulevard had, until recently, an executive team of four artists, once friends with shared goals, who, except for DeLorenzo, shared ownership in the building. After an irreconcilable interpersonal dispute that had been brewing for years, DeLorenzo was forced out.

After speaking with DeLorenzo and with Alicia Adams (the person primarily responsible for his departure), it's clear that no driving philosophical, artistic or administrative principle justifies such a parting, no revolution on the horizon. Rather, a series of personal rebuffs, along with some hubris, has led to a situation where neither can stand being in the same room. This is heartbreaking folly, since, under DeLorenzo, Evidence Room had evolved into a community magnet for like-minded artists and patrons, and there's not yet a replacement plan in sight. Evidence Room was more than a theater that put on plays. It was an arts center with a bar, a lobby that could hold 100 people, and a defining aesthetic. This was all DeLorenzo's doing, and how few leaders we have with any vision, work ethic and attention span to actually accomplish something. Evidence Room was exactly the kind of hub L.A. theater needs, a watering hole for a parched community, and you'd think such a need would be sufficient to keep two contrary people in the same room. In theater, as in politics, when two players can't be in the same room, nobody wins.

It's in this context that DeLorenzo has staged *The Cherry Orchard* as a group of actors putting on a play in quasimodern dress (costumes by Barbara Lempel) and eventually leaving the room, tossing cardboard boxes over an outdoor railing through the open back door. It presumes, somewhat high-mindedly, that the end of Evidence Room is akin to the end of an epoch. Were there immigration marches, or some reference to them, going on outside, the philosophical parallel might have had a more apt sense of proportion. But what makes DeLorenzo's immediate situation so exasperating is not that his ouster is an epic matter. It's that its underlying causes are so damnably petty, they diminish all of us. Nonetheless, DeLorenzo plugs into a certain personal fury that gives pertinence to Chekhov's saga of bankruptcy and unrequited love.

This fury manifests itself in the framing concept of the maid, Dunyasha (Ryan Templeton), and the valet, Yasha (the looming Will Watkins). Templeton plays Dunyasha with the mania and physical dexterity of an electric toy plugged into a high-voltage outlet. Her gestures are larger and faster than anyone else's,

her voice is squeakier, and her affair with Yasha—which breaks the heart of her clumsy suitor (Michael Cassady)—takes on the physical quality of a living comic-book strip. Meanwhile, Dunyasha and Yasha perform a series of soft-shoe dance routines between scenes—a nod to the vaudeville that Chekhov so emulated, which later influenced Samuel Beckett for similar reasons having to do with puppets on strings wondering what exactly they’re here for.

This could, or should, be moving, but there’s too much anger in this production, and it’s too messy to capture Chekhov’s transcendent wisdom. There are, however, some beautiful, lugubrious moments, such as when a group of characters stares into the horizon and one of them announces, “Ladies and gentlemen, the sun has just set.”

The Cherry Orchard is the stage equivalent of Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony, a melding of hauntingly beautiful motifs into a single theme that keeps returning and swelling until interrupted by the timpani clap of a thunderstorm. When the theme re-emerges after the storm, it’s slightly refreshed, but also slightly broken. And if the play’s musicality is not as skillfully played as a symphony, it melts into a generalized wash of comic and pastoral moods and faux moodiness.

Don Oscar Smith is a lovely, wry actor, but his Lopakhin barely cuts beneath the obvious surfaces of affability and frustration; local legend Tom Fitzpatrick walks too gamely in the footsteps of Ranyevskaya’s brother, Leonid, so that when he arrives sobbing with the news of the estate’s sale, it comes off as artifice.

Leo Marks plays the student Trofimov, searching for spiritual meaning amid the mire, with such neurotic, earnest gravity that he becomes one of the production’s two anchors. The other is Maria O’Brien as the dithering matriarch, Ranyevskaya, parading in clingy dresses and a high-pitched voice in direct counterpoint to Bening’s grandiloquent dame at the Taper. By Act 3, her face has absorbed an expression of such poignant confusion and panic, eyes brimming with tears, that her performance starts to tug at the bones. Never mind the fading Russian aristocracy: O’Brien has all the twitches, the bursts of anger and perfectly modulated bewilderment to make the collapse of a theater on Beverly Boulevard seem like something almost tragic.

DeLorenzo’s production is a product of his circumstances, which is a product of our times, in which people rattle AK-47s and storm out of rooms. We’re all too noisy and too busy for much meaningful exchange. When listening at the lip of a wishing well for truths from the deep, we need to stand side by side, quietly and still.

THE CHERRY ORCHARD | By ANTON CHEKHOV, translated by PAUL SCHMIDT | Evidence Room | Through July 2.

21st-Century Chekhov

Three Sisters by Daniel Reitz

Review by Sean Michael O'Donnell
(July 10, 2006)

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Anton Chekhov writes with such urgent simplicity that his plays have proved to be timeless. Their themes are as relevant today as they were a hundred years ago, and his characters speak a truth that is no less pertinent now. It is therefore no surprise that attempts to update and modernize his writings are frequent. The results vary, however, too often sacrificing character and story for mediocre reinvention.

Such is not the case with Daniel Reitz's new play, *Three Sisters*, a fresh look at an established classic that is anything but mediocre. Inspired by the great original, Reitz has written an intriguing and witty update that effortlessly brings Olga, Masha, Irina, and Chekhov himself firmly into the 21st century.

No longer left to toil in the outer provinces of Russia and long for their beloved Moscow, the sisters have been exiled to the outer boroughs of Manhattan, where they long for their beloved Upper West Side duplex. Olga, Masha, and Irina have gathered to celebrate Irina's birthday in an East Village bar, where they drink wine and commiserate about their lives.

Olga teaches Italian and lives quietly, but she is so afraid of life she can't even place a personal ad online. Masha lives with a man she doesn't love but won't leave because they have a great apartment in Brooklyn's Dumbo neighborhood. She's also having an affair with a married man from her yoga class. Irina, an "actress" working three jobs to make ends meet, is slowly becoming a stranger in her own life. Like their turn-of-the-century counterparts, the sisters are unhappy yet helpless to do anything about it.

Reitz cleverly and seamlessly weaves Chekhov's story into his modern tale. The sisters bond over the loss of their Upper West Side home to their brother's horrible wife Natasha, much the same way they do when Natasha takes over their Russian home in the original. Allusions are made to Olga's bouts with melancholia. Irina is lost, swallowed up by work but never fulfilled. Masha stays with a man she doesn't love (Kulygin) yet longs for a mysterious stranger (Vershinin). The sisters talk of taking a trip, of moving back to Manhattan, of reclaiming their beloved home. But they just talk; nothing tangible will come of their plans.

Daniel Talbott's efficient direction keeps the play focused. He hits every beat, finding the quiet in humor and the truth in adversity. He wisely incorporates the audience, casting them as patrons in the bar. The play unfolds around the audience members as they eavesdrop on the sisters' celebration.

The show benefits greatly from the strong portrayals by its leading ladies. As Olga, Masha, and Irina, Addie Johnson, Samantha Soule, and Julie Kline are wonderful. Each actress perfectly captures her character's center, delivering a fully realized and rich performance that is fascinating, intelligent, and funny.

Johnson makes Olga a woman surprised by the sound of her own voice. Longing to break free from her predictable life but afraid to take action, Olga is the most interesting of the sisters under Johnson's skillful guidance. The actress leaves you with the impression that she has only just begun to tell Olga's story.

Samantha Soule's Masha is a manic whirlwind, a mass of contradictions ready to either explode or collapse. With her rich voice, Soule commands attention, cracking her tough exterior to subtly reveal the fragile little girl beneath. Julie Kline plays Irina as a witness to her life, allowing the action to happen around her. Kline has a wonderful, fresh energy that serves the naïve Irina well.

In the mysterious role of Nicco, Denis Butkus delivers a charming performance as the sisters' ideal, but unattainable, man. For Olga he is Kulygin, the true intellectual who will love her for her mind. For Masha he is Vershinin, the mysterious visitor who will take her away from her unhappy life. For Irina he is Tuzenbach, the great hope who will take care of her.

Ultimately, these subtle allusions to the original play are what makes Reitz's piece so captivating. He incorporates Chekhov's classic story and his most recognizable heroines effortlessly, leaving the highlighting and exclamation points to lesser writers. Reitz embraces Chekhov's *Three Sisters* while simultaneously making it his own. And Olga, Masha, and Irina are all the better for it.

Three Sisters by Daniel Reitz | Rising Phoenix Rep | Seventh Street Small Stage
at Jimmy's No. 43 | July 10 -17, 2006.

Bravo Silva is the name of a musical group formed by Joel "Bravo" and Henry "Silva," 2 Dartmouth alums who together with Matt Wolf (drummer), Ian Everall (bassist), and Dan Gower (keyboardist) have recently become an established fixture on the New York musical scene.

Members are reminded of the NACS panel at the AATSEEL convention in Philadelphia, Thursday, Dec. 28th, 3:45 - 5:45. The panelists (and their papers) are Erica Siegel, Columbia University ("Chekhov and the Old Testament: 'Mire' revisited"); Mila Shevchenko, The University of Michigan ("Misplacement as Poetic Stratagem in Chekhov's *Platonov* and *On the High Road*"); and Tetyana Varenychenko, Holy Family University ("Reading Chekhov's Stories: 'Vanka' and 'Varka'"). Inna Caron of the Ohio State University is chair, and Cathy Popkin of Columbia will be the panel discussant. After the panel a short meeting of the NASC will be convened, and the main item on the agenda is discussion of the 2010 conference at OSU.