The Bulletin of the North American Chekhov Society

Vol. XVII, No. 1 **WINTER, 2010**

Editor's Note

This issue begins with three short essays. Cole Crittenden explores modernistic aspects of Chekhov's major plays, while Radislav Lapushin, in discussing an American cinematic adaptation of some of Chekhov's stories and one farce, touches on features of the writer's work that inspire a modernistic treatment. Sandwiched between these essays is a piece by Harvey Pitcher, the well-known British translator, scholar, and critic. His essay, which appeared first in the *festschrift* for V. B. Kataev noted in the select bibliography at the end of this issue, was inspired by the puzzling name given to the young heroine in "The House with a Mezzanine" and by Harvey's interest of long standing in English governesses in Russia. The issue concludes with the aforementioned bibliography of recent works on Chekhov and with a list of Internet links, including the link for news and information about the December 2010 Chekhov conference at Ohio State University, *Chekhov on Stage and Page*.

Comments, suggestions, and articles to be considered for future issues should be sent to ralph.lindheim@utoronto.ca or Ralph Lindheim, Dept. of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Toronto, 121 St. Joseph St., Toronto, ON M5S 1J4, Canada.

Playing with Time: Chekhov's Drama and Modernism

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Modern literature is often characterized by its move towards the exploration of the structuring devices and generic conventions within which the writer creates; literature becomes more self-conscious of the material from which it is created. Interest in time is just one example of this self-consciousness, but it is a prevalent one, probably because of the general interest in time keeping, the scientific definition of time, and the standardization of time zones during that period. The second and third decades of the

twentieth century are particularly rich in literature that explores temporality. The year 1921 is often singled out in the history of Modernism for two reasons: it was the year that Einstein was awarded the Nobel Prize; and it was also the year that James Joyce's *Ulysses*, often called the literary equivalent of Relativity,[1] was published. Writers such as Joyce, as well as Proust, Woolf, Lawrence, Eliot, Belyi, and Nabokov, foreground the theme and enactment of time in their works, and scholarship on these writers has often focused on this characteristic.[2] Writing decades before these writers (and, for the most part, in a different genre), Chekhov created plays that strongly prefigure the concern with temporality that in part defines the twentieth-century aesthetic. And yet the literary period and movement to which he belongs is a debated question. Chekhov is modern, but is he Modern?

It is easy – and in many ways correct – to regard Chekhov as a threshold playwright. In terms of chronology, his major dramatic works were written around the milestone of the turn of a century, a convenient (if arbitrary) date not only for dividing centuries, but also literary movements (in this case Realism from Modernism, the latter a term in Russian culture which included such movements as Symbolism, Acmeism, and Futurism). Flanked by two centuries and two major movements, Chekhov wrote four masterpieces that have secured for him a reputation as one of the most important dramatists of modern times: *The Seagull* (1896); *Uncle Vania* (1899), a reworked version of the earlier play *The Wood Demon* (1888-89); *Three Sisters* (1901); and *The Cherry Orchard* (1903).

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[1] See, for instance, Carmen Perez-Llantada Auria, "Joyce's *Ulysses*: A Writer's Commitment to the (Scientific) Sign of the Times." *Papers on Joyce*, 2 (1966), 65-75.

[2] The number of scholarly works on time in various Modernist writers is overwhelming. For a recent book that treats temporality in many of these writers collectively, see Michael H. Whitworth, *Einstein's Wake: Relativity, Metaphor, and Modernist Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001).

But it is not just chronology that calls for the situating of Chekhov in the interstice between eras. Stylistically the dramatic tradition that precedes Chekhov's works – both in Russia and in Europe as a whole – is very different from the developments that occur during and immediately after his short career as a playwright. Against the background of nineteenth-century drama Chekhov's plays are revolutionary, while in comparison with the Modernist experimental theater that dominated the early twentieth century his plays seem much more traditional. Chekhov's drama is regarded by many scholars, therefore, as something of a threshold phenomenon. On the one hand he dispenses with familiar dramatic forms, avoiding traditional plot and intrigue to the point of being accused of writing plays in which nothing happens. But at the same time his dramatic works fit in with what Brecht famously called "dramatic theatre," a type of poetic realism that is "constrained" by its desire to show a realistic "slice of life" limited to the perspective of the individual characters within the play.[3]

The qualified alignment of Chekhov with tradition is certainly understandable given the types of drama developing in his own time and in the immediately following period. Symbolist drama was the primary alternative to Realism at the turn of the century, and many critics, seeing the awkward fit of Chekhov with straightforward Realism, have attempted to read elements of Symbolism into Chekhov's plays. Futurist and Constructivist drama, influential in Russia largely through Meierkhol'd's productions, take hold in the period after Chekhov's death, and their concerns are

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[3]Probably no other twentieth-century writer has dually influenced the theatre both as dramatist and theorist as much as Bertolt Brecht, and his *episches Drama*, or epic theatre, has come to be viewed as the ultimate counter to the Western tradition of realistic theatre that predates it. Brecht himself first sets up this binary opposition in the notes to his 1930 opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (see *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett [London: Methuen, 1964], 33-42), where he includes a table that elaborates the distinctions between "dramatic form" and "epic form."

generally seen as sufficiently removed from Chekhov's drama to limit readings that would link Chekhov to them. Absurdist and Epic drama are extensions of these Modernist reactions against Realism. Relative to these radical breaks with Realism, Chekhov does seem Realistic, if "poetically" so.

Realism was the major force of Russian culture in the second half of the nineteenth century, dominating literature, painting, and the theater, where its primary focus was an exploration of specifically Russian histories and milieus. Few writers concentrated exclusively or predominately on drama, but one writer who did in this period was Aleksandr Ostrovskii, who wrote nearly 50 plays and single-handedly created a sizeable repertoire of Russian works. Ostrovskii's plays are numerous enough to cover a variety of dramatic genres, but he is primarily known as an astute chronicler of the merchant class of his own time. He also wrote historical drama, as did Aleksei Tolstoi, who excelled at the form. Depictions of the Russian peasantry, some of them harshly naturalistic, also flourished, especially in the dramatic works of Lev Tolstoi and Aleksei Pisemskii. This naturalist strain of drama culminated with the early works of Chekhov's contemporary Maxim Gorkii.

To be sure, Realism was not the only force in theater at the time. While most important new Russian plays were of this type, Russian theaters continued to play a large number of works from European traditions, mostly French. Indeed, fully half of the repertoire at the Aleksandrinskii and Malyi Theaters (the Imperial Theaters in St. Petersburg and Moscow, respectively) was foreign or adapted from foreign sources. These works were mainly older classics or the works of popular escapist entertainment,

especially light comedies.[4] Chekhov himself wrote a number of short vaudevilles, including *The Bear* and *The Proposal*. What nearly all of the works being played in this period – whether domestic or foreign, whether new or old, whether serious or comic – have in common, however, is their adherence to plot-dictated construction.

An Aristotelian approach to drama favors clear plot presentation and development built around specific action, an approach that has long been the norm in Western theater. In later nineteenth-century works this approach was taken to its extreme in what became the most popular form of drama in France and – because of France's cultural influence – Europe as a whole. The *pièce bien faite*, or "well-made play," with its careful construction of a plot based on preparation, exposition, and denouement, was the reigning theatrical form. Originating with the French playwright Eugène Scribe (1791-1861), the term found its fullest elucidation in the critical writings of Francisque Sarcey (1827-1899), the leading French theater critic of the second half of the nineteenth century. Clarity and logic of structure were the qualities of drama Sarcey most admired, and the keystone of dramatic structure was, for him, the *scène à faire* (the obligatory scene), a term he invented that became a central concept of play construction. Through careful arrangement of anticipation and fulfillment, an author of a "well-made play" presents a conflict which the audience then expects to be resolved in an "obligatory" scene. Such a scene may have any number of outcomes, but its occurrence is certain. This tight, action-driven structure was originally viewed as a corrective to the more loose construction of

[4] According to Cynthia Marsh, between the years 1862 and 1881, 1,227 plays are recorded in the repertoire of the two Imperial theaters. Of these, 607 were translations or adaptations of foreign plays. Of the remaining 620 Russian plays, some 500 were popular vaudeville pieces or works by forgotten dramatists. Of the 120 remaining plays, 30 were Russian classics from a former era (Gogol''s *The Inspector General* being the most often performed Russian classic), 49 were Ostrovskii's works (either his own or collaborations), and the remaining 51 were by various Realist playwrights. See Cynthia Marsh, "Realism in the Russian Theatre, 1850-1882," *A History of Russian Theatre*, eds. Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 161-162.

French Romantic drama, in which characters spoke much but did little. The rise in popularity of the "well-made play," both in France and elsewhere, as well as the important playwrights associated with the form, lent its practitioners and champions an authority in the late nineteenth century which is difficult to overestimate.[5] Ibsen adhered firmly to the form. In Russia it was also popular, both in staged foreign works (which were predominately "well-made plays") and in Russian works – primarily in the comedies of Ostrovskii, but also in Realist dramas which borrowed the form. Under this influence, even plays which were more complicated formally, such as historical drama (which had to follow a known factual story, the basic outlines of which were difficult to alter), still tended to orient themselves towards the tenets of the plot-driven form.

Against this backdrop, the revolution in Russian theater at the turn of the century could not have been more pronounced. In the first few decades of the twentieth century Russia became *the* locus for ground-breaking experimentation in drama. This spirit of experimentation manifested itself in production as well, and to account properly for the remarkable state of artistic productivity in Russian drama during this time, it is necessary to look not only at plays and their authors, but also at productions – and producers – of these plays.

The rich state of Russian theater in this period is in part explained by the larger literary and cultural ferment that resulted in so many great works of art generally. Russian poetry saw its renaissance precisely in this period, and some of the most important Silver Age poets, including Blok, Kuzmin, Gippius, and Tsvetaeva, were also

[5] Indeed, that authority is difficult to overestimate even today. Sarcey championed the well-made plays of Scribe, but also saw similar practices in Augier and Dumas, and he applied the terminology to the classics, as well. For a discussion of the form and its origins, see Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993), 215-218 and 282-284.

some of this period's most interesting – and non-traditional – playwrights. Nikolai Evreinov's plays (and his own productions of them) self-consciously explored the "theatricality" of drama. And Revolutionary theater, the hallmarks of which were agitprop and direct address to the audience, was proving to be an important art form under the pen of Maiakovskii.

The Russian systems and schools of acting that were developing at that time have become worldwide institutions, and the names attached to them – Stanislavskii and Meierkhol'd – have become the stuff of legend. These directors in particular were largely responsible for the monumental shift in Russian theater towards new forms. Their willingness to rethink older, more traditional works as well as produce new Symbolist and Futurist plays gained for them a newly perceived role in artistic creation: directors – and not just playwrights – could now "script" the trajectory of artistic development in the theater.[6] Stanislavksii and Meierkhol'd each developed his own approach to stage direction, with Stanislavskii favoring an illusionistic style of theatrical presentation called "living through" (переживление), in which an actor draws on her own personal experience to embody the role as completely as possible, whereas Meierkhol'd came to favor an anti-illusionistic or conventional theater (so called because of its tendency to draw attention to the conventions of performance), in which an actor does not embody her character but rather engages in "representation" (представление).[7]

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[6] The rise of the director as theatrical artist was possible in Russia only after 1882, when the Imperial Monopoly in Moscow and St. Petersburg, which placed all theatres in these two major cities under imperial control, was lifted. For a discussion of the rise of private theaters (including the Moscow Art Theatre) and the development of directors as artistic forces, see Jean Benedetti's "Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre 1898-1938" and Spencer Golub's "The Silver Age, 1905-1917," both in *A History of Russian Theatre*, eds. Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999).

[7] The terms originated with Stanislavskii and Meierkhol'd, but critical work on this period has elucidated – and polarized – the terms far more radically than the originators did. For a discussion of the terms, their origins, and how they apply to Chekhov, see Herta Schmid, "Čechov's Drama and Stanislavskij's and

It is, of course, Stanislavskii's approach that has come to be closely associated with Chekhov's drama.[8] *The Seagull* was one of the first plays staged by the Moscow Art Theater, and Stanislavskii's production was an unprecedented success, both for himself and for Chekhov, whose reputation had suffered after the sharply negative reception of the premiere of *The Seagull* at the Aleksandrinskii Theater in St. Petersburg in 1896. Chekhov subsequently wrote *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* specifically for the Moscow Art Theater, and despite the well-documented disagreements[9] between Stanislavskii the director and Chekhov the playwright over the artistic direction of the performances, the plays nonetheless tend to be read the way they were initially staged by Stanislavskii – as works of life-like Realism.[10]

But if this was Realism, it was certainly different from the plays that had previously come under that rubric.[11] Formally Chekhov's major plays seem to eschew the conventions of the "well-made play." Indeed, they are a clear departure from this formula. The plots of the plays are difficult to recount, primarily because there are no obvious turning points or climaxes. In all four of the plays, the important characters are

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Mejerchol'd's Theories of Theater," *Theater and Literature in Russia 1900-1930*, eds. Lars Kleberg and Nils Ake Nillson (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1984), 23.

[8] Meierkhol'd did, in fact, stage three of Chekhov's early satirical one-acts, or vaudevilles, in 1935, but he never produced the major plays once he was an established director. Stanislavskii never staged the vaudevilles. See Schmid 23-24.

[9] Chekhov's greatest complaint was Stanislavskii's interpretation of the plays as serious dramas, even melodramas, neglecting the comic elements that Chekhov insisted were present. For an overview of the often contentious collaboration, see Michael Heim, "Chekhov and the Moscow Art Theater," *Chekhov's Great Plays: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Jean-Pierre Barricelli (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1981), 133-143.

[10] It is worth remembering that Stanislavskii did not only produce realistic theater. A large number of the plays staged at the Moscow Art Theater under Stanislavskii's direction were Symbolist plays. Chekhov himself strongly encouraged Stanislavskii to produce the works of Maeterlinck, and the resulting production of *The Blue Bird* in 1908 was so celebrated that it stayed in the repertoire of the Moscow Art Theater for decades. See Benedetti 270.

[11] Except, perhaps, the plays of Turgenev, whose dramatic characters (especially those in *A Month in the Country*) have been read as forebears to Chekhov's, but who are nonetheless part of much more traditional plots. See, for instance, Maurice Valency, *The Breaking String: The Plays of Anton Chekhov* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 41-47.

all present on stage from the first act, meaning that no outside force is introduced that will alter the course of the action (something that nearly always happens in "well-made plays"). Moreover, there is little "action" to be seen. F. L. Lucas, commenting on this characteristic of the plays, writes:

> For Chekhov, the scène à faire becomes often the scène à ne pas faire…Most tragedies are about terrible things happening; but often in Chekhov the tragedy lies rather in the things that fail to happen – the dreams that die still-born. Most tragedies are about things that matter terribly; but here the tragedy is rather that nothing seems to matter at all.[12]

Lucas perhaps incorrectly reads as tragedies plays that Chekhov himself – perhaps perplexingly – designates as comedies,[13] but the point he makes is nonetheless valid. Chekhov's plays are full of unrealized actions: Kostia can win neither Nina's love nor his mother's; Uncle Vania never changes his life, but goes on supporting his brother-in-law as he always has; the Prozorov sisters never go to Moscow; and Gaev and Ranevskaia cannot save their orchard.

Of course, to say that nothing really happens in Chekhov's plays is something of a cliché, and an incorrect one at that. As David Magarshack's *Chekhov the Dramatist*[14] makes abundantly clear, plenty of dramatic things do happen in Chekhovian drama. Chekhov's innovation in his "plays of indirect action," as Magarshack terms them, is how these things are presented to the audience and the import they assume. As Magarshack notes, traditionally dramatic events and actions at times occur, but they generally happen offstage and are relayed to the audience through dialogue. The dialogue, however, is

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[12] F. L. Lucas, *The Drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello* (London: Cassell, 1963), 93.
[13] The scholarly debate on the genre of Chekhov's plays (comedy vs. tragedy) shows no signs of abating. This is due in large part to the tension between Chekhov's own classification of *The Seagull* and *The Cherry Orchard* as comedies and the common interpretation (begun by Stanislavskii) of the content as tragic. Lucas' comments are about Chekhov's plays in general, but they are contained in a section that discusses *Three Sisters*, a play Chekhov calls, generically, a "drama."
[14] David Magarshack, *Chekhov the Dramatist* (London: John Lehmann, 1952). See especially 159-173.

rarely centered around those actions, or, more specifically, around the mere reporting of those actions. Instead, Chekhov creates an emotion-laden language that by virtue of its very "indirectness" evokes the inner feelings and documents the changes that occur. Characters talk less about what has actually happened than about what has never happened, about what may never happen, and about how nothing consequential ever really happens or is likely to happen. External action does occur, in other words, but it is the internal emotional and psychological states of the characters – their mental reactions – that often constitute a Chekhovian plot. As Harvey Pitcher, discussing the changes that Chekhov made in developing *The Wood Demon* into *Uncle Vania* (and thereby into what is more generally recognized as a "Chekhov" play), writes:

> The essential difference in characterization, I believe, is this: that in the later play Chekhov is not so concerned with the kind of people his characters are, but is focusing his attention directly on their *emotional preoccupations*. The individual qualities are still there, but they have become more blurred and peripheral; they are no longer at the centre of Chekhov's vision. What the characters are feeling becomes the focus of attention. And whereas it is natural for an audience to adopt a detached and critical attitude towards individual qualities, such a response seems far less appropriate in the case of feelings or emotions. In contrast therefore to the general tradition of Western drama, an audience is under no obligation to pass judgement on the characters as individuals, but is rather being invited to respond on an emotional level to the feelings that the characters experience. This constitutes for me the single most important element in an understanding of *the Chekhov play*.[15]

Pitcher regards character emotion as *the* organizing principle of Chekhov's drama, and his view is corroborated (although generally less explicitly articulated) by much of the scholarship on the plays. The emphasis for Chekhov is not on action, but rather on reaction.

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[15] Harvey Pitcher,"The Chekhov Play," *Chekhov: New Perspectives*, eds. Rene and Nonna D. Wellek (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1984), 77-78. Italics are Pitcher's.

Chekhov's focus on the internal state of his characters and his prevailing mistrust of event-centered dramatics clearly distinguish him from the playwrights that precede him in what is termed the Realist period of drama in Russia. The emphasis on juxtaposed individual emotions has occasionally earned him the label "impressionist," a somewhat equivocal term used to describe more loosely structured and subjective works that still portray life "as it is," but focus more on means than ends and create an underlying mood that the audience feels along with the characters.[16] More recently, Chekhov's dramatic approach has been interpreted as an extension of another branch of Realism – that practiced by Russian Realist novelists. Michel Aucouturier, for instance, calls the collaboration of Chekhov and Stanislavskii a "belated transposition to the stage of the poetics of Russian realism" and notes that the medium of theater is perhaps the most appropriate place for the artistic movement to manifest itself:

> In this striving towards "life itself," the dramatist (and the director) can go further than the novelist: reproducing life "in the flesh," i.e. in the medium of life itself, the theater appears as a privileged field for the ultimate execution of the aesthetics of realism. It represents the extreme limit of mimesis, which according to realism is the very purpose of art.[17]

Dramatic events and dialogue are foreign to the Chekhovian ethos, and when his characters do engage in "dramatic" behavior, their display of histrionics is inevitably undermined by the unresponsiveness of other characters. As Gary Saul Morson writes, at times the characters "act as if they lived in a world of melodrama and romantic fiction,

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[16] Maurice Valency, writing about *Three Sisters* in his *The Breaking String: The Plays of Anton Chekhov* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), rather vaguely calls the play "the flower of impressionism in the drama" (219). H. Peter Stowell's earlier work *Literary Impressionism, James and Chekhov* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980) also places Chekhov under the label, but Stowell elucidates his use of the term "impressionism," and it is from his definition that I explain the term as applied to Chekhov. See especially 150-166.

[17] Michel Aucouturier, "Theatricality as a Category of Early Twentieth-Century Russian Culture," *Theater and Literature in Russia 1900-1930*, eds. Lars Kleberg and Nils Ake Nillson (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1984), 10.

but they are brought into a prosaic world where their poses are revealed as such."[18] Morson cites Chekhov's drama as an example of "prosaics," Morson's term for the literary approach also favored by Tolstoi that discredits the ultimate meaningfulness of seemingly important and easily identifiable actions in the course of life. Chekhov, then, though not in line formally with other Realist dramatists, has been read not only as a counter to that movement but also at its apogee, as more true to Realism's tenets than any of its preceding playwrights. According to this view, after him there was nowhere else for Realism to go, and this explains in part the radically divergent directions theater took in the period after his death.

There is at least one other taxonomic designation for Chekhov's work that deserves mentioning: pre-Absurdist. There have been a small number of insightful readings that retrospectively see in Chekhov's work aspects of Absurdist theater, usually in connection with the disjointedness that characterizes so many of the conversations and the lack of traditional plot developments in the plays. Martin Esslin, in his canonical work *The Theater of the Absurd*, first noted the similarities between Chekhov and certain Absurdists' style, especially that of Arthur Adamov.[19] It is in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, however, that subsequent critics have seen the strongest parallels with Chekhov's drama. Richard Gilman, comparing *Three Sisters* with *Waiting for Godot*, writes:

> Whatever the differences in their work of utterance, gesture, and *mise en scène*, the geniuses of Chekhov and Beckett share some common grounds and intentions: they will not make theater as they have seen it being made; they will present new relationships and not new tales; they will use the stage for the creation of consciousness and not for its reflection; and they will offer neither solutions nor

[18] Gary Saul Morson, "Sonya's Wisdom," *A Plot of Her Own: The Female Protagonist in Russian Literature*, ed. Sona Stephan Hoisington (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1995), 60.
[19] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), 67-68.

> prescriptions, not even heightened emotion, but mercilessly stripped artifacts of the imagination that will present our deepest "story."[20]

J. Oates Smith (a.k.a. Joyce Carol Oates) has placed Chekhov beyond most Absurdists, calling all of his major plays more complex and iconoclastic in their entire disregard of the climax, something many Absurdist pieces, including the works of Ionesco, still retain. Like Gilman, Oates sees Beckett as Chekhov's primary compatriot, and notes, "In this existential drama a strange, dissipated action, or the memory of vague desire for action, has replaced the older, more vital ritualistic concerns of the stage; the existential drama of Chekhov and the absurdist drama remain true to their subject – life – by refusing to be reduced to a single emotion or idea."[21]

The period placement for Chekhov the dramatist, then, is a complicated question, but whether he should ultimately be regarded as an ultra-Realist or Impressionist or even an Absurdist (before there was such a school), there is nonetheless a consensus that Chekhov's focus is on the complex and multivalent internal state of his characters rather than on external, traditionally "dramatic" behavior or events. This widely recognized orientation towards the internal can also place Chekhov under the heading of one other movement, that of Modernism, more specifically, the strain of Modernism that explores time. For as many Modernists believed (Bergson in particular), there is nothing of time but the experience of it, an experience that is inherently internal and feeling-centered, and plots that are oriented towards internal experience can present and account for time in a manner more consistent with the way time is actually encountered.

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[20] Richard Gilman, *The Making of Modern Drama* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), 123.
[21] Smith, J. Oates, "Chekhov and the 'Theater of the Absurd." *Bucknell Review*, 14, no. 3 (1966), pp. 44-58. Citation from 57-8.

Many of Chekhov's characters privilege the past (or, at times, the future) and feel disconnected from the present, and Chekhov's innovation of privileging inner experience over outer action as a replacement for plot has significant meaning for dramatic structuring and engagement with temporality. All of Chekhov's major plays have a large number of characters with sizeable roles and developed worldviews, and what is striking amidst this generous peopling of the stage is the amount of dissatisfaction with life in the present. Characters in Chekhov's plays tend to find meaning in what they do not have. A golden age of contentment is generally something already lost in the past or perhaps realizable only in the distant future, whereas the present is something merely to be endured. Certainly memory is a constant theme in all of Chekhov's works,[22] both prose and drama, but what is striking about his use of it, especially in the dramatic works, is the consistency and abundance of a largely *negative* attitude towards the present that memory highlights. Memory, in other words, reminds characters not only of the past, but also of the worsened world in which they now live. This view of the present is a hallmark of Chekhov's work, a feature that has led him to be called, in Lev Shestov's famous formulation, the "poet of hopelessness."[23] Shestov coined the phrase in his essay "Creation from the Void" («Творчество из ничего»), a work that primarily examines Chekhov's prose but also discusses *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vania*, and while Shestov's claims about the underlying spirit of dark resignation in Chekhov's work have not gone unchallenged, Shestov's observations – indeed, the very title of his essay – deserve careful consideration, especially as they relate to drama. After all, how does an author create a successful work out of characters who seem not to live in the present, but rather

[22] For an excellent discussion of the role of memory in Chekhov's work (primarily the prose), see Daria A. Kirjanov, *Chekhov and the Poetics of Memory* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).
[23] Lev Shestov, *Chekhov and Other Essays* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1966), 4.

to endure it, in a genre which by its very nature is oriented towards present-tense enactment?

The examples of such characters in Chekhov's four major plays are copious. In *The Seagull*, Arkadina privileges the past when she was a younger actress and lover, while her son, Treplev, moves from wishing for future glories as a writer (glories which might somehow win his mother's approval) to a longing for the past, when Nina Zarechnaia loved him. And Nina herself, who dreams of a future life as an actress at the beginning of the play, returns briefly at the end, abandoned and exhausted, to say that what really matters is learning to endure things. The title character of *Uncle Vania* talks constantly of his earlier potential to become something, a potential squandered by supporting his academic brother-in-law Serebriakov, something he nonetheless decides to continue doing at the end of the play. Astrov mourns the lost forests of the past in the countryside and keeps old maps around. Serebriakov complains about being old and is convinced his younger wife, Elena, is angry at him for aging. And Sonia, whose love for Astrov is unreciprocated, at the end of the play pronounces the need to simply endure the present life and its sufferings. *Three Sisters* is about Ol'ga, Masha, and Irina's impossible longing to return to the Moscow of their youth. Their brother, Andrei, also reminisces about the past and the plans he had, plans that have gone unrealized. While the Prozorovs are consumed by an irretrievable past, Tuzenbakh and Vershinin, the two suitors of sorts in the sisters' household, philosophize only about the distant future and what it might look like. This play, too, ends with a plaintive pronouncement of the need to endure the present, delivered by Ol'ga. *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov's final play, is about a sister and brother, Ranevskaia and Gaev, who, upon returning to their beloved

family estate, are so attached to the memories and customs of how things were that they cannot adjust to the economic demands of the present and therefore lose the estate and its orchard. Lopakhin, a descendent of the family's former serfs, is the new owner at the end of the play, but he, too, is caught between his desire to reclaim the past through ownership of the estate as it was and to reinvent the future (and himself) by cutting down the orchard and dividing it into summer dachas.

If life is what happens when you are making other plans (or remembering old ones, as so many of these characters do), then Chekhovian drama really is life-like in a way few dramatic works are. But while endless deferral of meaning is certainly a mainstay of characters' worldviews and dialogues in Chekhov's plays (a feature which could arguably put Chekhov among the ranks of Post-Modernists), the genre in which these characters exist is not a form that easily allows the sustained transference of meaning to tenses outside the present. "Russians like to reminisce, but do not like to live," the narrator observes in Chekhov's novella *The Steppe*. But it is precisely their present-tense living which matters most in dramatic form. Chekhov draws on this tension between the time-orientation of his characters and of his form in his dramatic works.

There is, to be sure, a certain temporal tension that obtains in any dramatic work, inasmuch as preexisting, fixed form and present-tense enactment are potentially conflicting presentations of time. As Jackson G. Barry writes:

> Drama is an image of man's life in time in which the patterns structures represent our view of time as fixed, as capable of being viewed as *pattern* – whereas the improvisational quality corresponds to our sense of time as the eternally changing, eternally present "becoming." There has been, and probably always will be, some conflict between these views, and plays will seem to have more or less of an

> improvisational nature as their author sees life in time as spontaneous interchange or a fixed and recurring pattern.[24]

Barry cites Chekhov's plays, with their nontraditional, "plotless" structure, as an example of the more open, improvisational depiction of time as it actually unfolds. The irony is that Chekhov's more open form, based on character feeling rather than action, allows for characters who do not feel at ease with the temporal "becoming" that surrounds them, but who instead choose to privilege the past or the future, since these tenses are "finished" (the past since it is already lived, the future since it can be imagined as one wishes) in a way the present is not.

There persists, then, in what we might call Chekhov's open temporal form the presence of more obviously patterned temporal models, but they are invoked by the characters rather than enforced by the dramatic form, which keeps its focus on the open present of theatrical performance. This distinction can account for why the plays are still successful dramatic works, despite all their talk of the past. Tension is a necessary component of dramatic composition, but the tension that Chekhov creates is grounded largely in a reconfigured duality of temporal models at work. Instead of a tension created out of present-tense enactment within a plot-driven and therefore obviously patterned model of time, Chekhov favors a reverse approach: tension created out of the desire of characters in a seemingly open and non-plot-driven model of time to live their life in a plot-based, patterned way. Because Chekhov's "tension" is so different from that of most drama, it is often unrecognized, or, more precisely, it is often misclassified. Nearly all critics agree about the importance of the internal, feeling-centered state of the characters in Chekhov's plays. "Mood" is a word often used to characterize the focus and the effect

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[24] Jackson G. Barry, *Dramatic Structure: The Shaping of Experience* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1970), 81.

of the plays. But as H. Peter Stowell writes, "Chekhov's vaunted moods are often the product of his temporal patterns. And those patterns, so complex, so varied, so steeped in the conflicting fragments of individual temporality, emerge to form a vague sense of time, a gestalt."[25] That gestalt is a non-unified whole, one created from the tension of competing ways of conceptualizing time. And it is precisely this recognition of difference, foregrounded by the characters themselves, that makes Chekhov's works so true to the complex experience of time – and so Modern.

That underlying temporal gestalt can have implications beyond the fictional "mood" of the plays, however. As Eric Bentley has noted, drama's element *is* time,[26] and it is, therefore, a particularly productive art form in which to explore the complex meaning of time, both in the life that the art form seeks to represent and in the art form itself. With its connections to theatrical performance, dramatic literature must simultaneously account for two temporal paradigms: the internal, fictional time of the text; and the uninterrupted, real time of performance. All playwrights create dramatic worlds that engage these two distinct time frames. But Chekhov's plays are constructed in a way that actively draws attention to the act of conceptualizing and framing time. Chekhov's orientation towards the internal state of his characters results in plays that are all largely centered around the experience of time's passing, and by making time itself their subject, he creates in his plays and in his audience a heightened awareness of the temporal experience, as both a theme and a problem of representation. It is in this sense that Chekhov may be called a Modernist.

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[25] H. Peter Stowell, *Literary Impressionism, James and Chekhov* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1980), 157.
[26] Eric Bentley, *The Life of Drama* (London: Methuen, 1965), 79.

From the Memoirs of a Literary Detective: An Unsolved Case

Harvey Pitcher

"Dom s mezoninom (rasskaz khudozhnika*)*" ["The House with a Mezzanine: An Artist's Story"] was published in April 1896. An entry in Chekhov's *Zapisnaia knizhka* II [Notebook No. 2] (p. 35) makes it clear that he had worked out the plot by the spring of 1895, but most of the writing appears to have been done in November and December.

Much has been written, and many speculations put forward, about the real-life places and people that may have inspired the story. The artist-narrator is recalling events in his life that took place six or seven years earlier. Chekhov, too, was looking back. In the summer of 1891 the family had rented a dacha at Aleksin south of Moscow, but it proved unsuitable, and when E. D. Bylim-Kolosovskii, owner of the estate of Bogimovo 10-12 versts away, offered to rent out the upper floor of the eighteenth-century manor house which he no longer occupied, Chekhov jumped at the opportunity. The house in the story where the artist has taken up residence, with its huge rooms and minimal furnishing, is clearly based on the house at Bogimovo, but there may have been more than one source for the nearby house and estate where Madame Volchaninova and her two daughters are living.

Bylim-Kolosovskii and his *podruga* [woman friend[1]] Amenaisa Èrastovna ("*Dlia kratkosti zovëm eë Semiramidoi ili Miur-i-Merilizoi,*" ["For short we call her Semiramides or Muir & Mirrielees,"[2]] Chekhov wrote to Lika Mizinova on 20 June 1891) appear thinly disguised as the minor characters of Belokurov and Liubov' Ivanovna. If Chekhov is to be believed, the younger daughter Zhenia, otherwise known as Misius', who is "seventeen or eighteen", was not only a real person, but had at one time been his fiancée. On 26 November 1895 he wrote to Elena Shavrova-Iust: "*Teper' pishu malen'kii rasskaz: 'Moia nevesta'* [the title was later changed]. *U menia kogda-to byla nevesta… Moiu nevestu zvali tak: 'Misius''. Ia eë ochen' liubil. Ob ètom ia pishu.*" ["I'm writing a little story at present: 'My Fiancée'. I had a fiancée once … She was

[1] For *podruga* "mistress" sounds dated and "partner" too modern.
[2] Muir & Mirrielees was the famous British-owned department store in Moscow where Chekhov was a customer.

known as 'Misius''. I loved her very much. That's what I'm writing about."] Chekhov was fond of weaving absurd romantic fictions around himself and his friends (poor Mizinova was on the receiving end of many such "comic" epistles), but his letters to Sharova-Iust were largely on literary matters and his tone here does not appear to be joking. Shavrova took him seriously, replying: "*Menia ochen' interesuet Vasha nevesta 'Misius''. Odno imia prelest'! Krome togo, menia raduet uzhe odna vozmozhnost' togo fakta, chto* cher maître *liubil kogda-to i chto, znachit, èto zemnoe chuvstvo emu bylo dostupno i poniatno.*" ["I'm most interested in your fiancée 'Misius''. The name alone is charming! Apart from that, I am delighted by the mere fact that it was possible for my *cher maître* to have been in love once, and to know that he had access to this mundane feeling and understood it."] (*PSSP Pis'ma* 6, 446)

Chekhov is known to have had a fiancée at one time: Evdokiia Isaakovna (Dunia) Èfros. A *kursistka* [a student of one of the higher Courses for Women] and friend of Chekhov's sister, she was Jewish. The engagement was short-lived. On 18 January 1886 Chekhov informed his friend Bilibin that he had proposed to a young lady, on 1 February he explains that there's a problem because she doesn't want to convert to Orthodoxy and in any case she's a "*zliuchka strashnaia*" ["an awful little shrew"], and by 28 February he and his fiancée have split up finally (this word is underlined by Chekhov). But Dunia Èfros is quite unlike the fictional Zhenia. For a start she was in her mid-twenties, whereas Zhenia is still a teenager. She was also quick-tempered and intellectually mature, whereas Zhenia is distinguished by her mildness of manner and complete lack of intellectual sophistication.

Might there have been a second fiancée? The only commentator to consider this possibility is the American biographer Ernest Simmons, who writes that the allusion to a fiancée in Chekhov's letter to Shavrova "is lost in the mist of Chekhov's secretive love life" (p. 362). No one else asks the question. This is surprising: after all, had it not been for the letters to Bilibin, the engagement to Èfros would never have come to light. Chekhov's life is now so well documented, however, on an almost day-to-day basis, that the existence of a second fiancée seems unlikely, but the possibility that she might still be lurking somewhere in the interstices of his life cannot be ruled out.

Whether or not he invented a fiancée, it seems unlikely that Chekhov invented the name "Misius'". As Shavrova commented: "*Odno imia prelest'!*" ["The name alone is charming!"] Without it "Dom s mezoninom" would not be such a memorable story. It is, indeed, the last thing to stay in the reader's memory, because of the story's famous ending:

A eshchë rezhe, v minuty, kogda menia tomit odinochestvo i mne grustno, ia vspominaiu smutno i malo-po-malu mne pochemu-to nachinaet kazat'sia, chto obo mne tozhe vspominaiut, menia zhdut, i chto my vstretimsia…

Misius', gde ty?

[And very occasionally, at moments when I'm weighed down by loneliness and feel sad, I remember the past dimly, and for some reason it gradually begins to seem that I too am being remembered, that someone is waiting for me and we shall meet…

Misius', where are you?]

Through the narrator Chekhov explains carefully how Zhenia had acquired her unusual nickname: "*...eë v sem'e eshchë ne schitali vzrosloi i, kak malen'kuiu, nazyvali Misius', potomu chto v detstve ona nazyvala tak miss, svoiu guvernantku.*" ["…they did not yet regard her in the family as an adult and called her Misius' like a little girl, because that was what she had called her English governess as a child."] This allusion to an English governess has always interested me. In the 1970s I had the good fortune to meet a large number of these former English governesses in Russia, either in person or through the accounts they had left of their experiences, and their recollections provided the raw material on which I based my book: *When Miss Emmie was in Russia: English Governesses before, during and after the October Revolution* (1977).

Catherine the Great was the first to refer to the nanny who looked after the future Alexander I (known in Russian by her married name of Praskov'ia Ivanovna Gessler) as "an Englishwoman", even though she was Scottish in origin: see Ol'ga Solodiankina, *Inostrannye guvernantki v Rossii* (Moscow, 2007, p. 333). Ever since then, the term "English governess" or simply *anglichanka* ["Englishwoman"] seems to have been used

indiscriminately to refer to all English-speaking governesses, whether they came from England, Scotland, Ireland or Wales. Very few Russians to this day seem to be aware that apart from their distinct histories and traditions, the Scots, Irish and Welsh all speak English with different accents. If you wished to climb the social ladder in nineteenth-century England, you tried to lose your Scottish, Irish, Welsh or other regional accent, and to cultivate an English English accent. Scottish and Irish governesses were always prominent among the "English" governesses in Russia, and their pupils grew up speaking English with a Scottish or Irish accent. In his autobiography, *One Man in His Time*"(1960), Serge Obolensky describes how he learned English from his governess, Lizzie Arthur, an extremely outspoken little Scotswoman born in Glasgow, so that when he went up to Oxford, his fellow undergraduates were highly amused to hear him speaking English with a strong Scottish accent. In *From Cradle to Crown: British Nannies and Governesses at the World's Royal Courts* (2006), Charlotte Zeepvat describes how on meeting the Russian royal family for the first time in 1908, King Edward VII of England was taken aback when the four daughters of the last Tsar of Russia began talking away in a broad Irish (or was it Scottish?) accent. "There are two theories," Zeepvat writes, "about where the accent came from." Was it from their former Irish governess, Margaretta Eagar, or from their Scottish tutor, John Epps? "Either way, the King's remarks to the parents led to an English English tutor being appointed very smartly" (p.223).

By the 1880s and 1890s, when Chekhov was writing, English governesses had become relatively common in upper and upper middle class Russian society, although they were never so numerous as French governesses. Chekhov describes one of them in "Doch' Al'biona" ["The Daughter of Albion"] (1883), although it is no more than a caricature. Her age is impossible to determine, but she is probably meant to be in her forties. She is frigid, aloof, and infuriatingly superior, and after ten years in Russia has not learned a word of the language. Griabov, her employer, cannot stand the sight of her: "*Ne bud' detei, ia by eë i za desiat' vërst k svoemu imeniiu ne podpustil*." ["But for the children, I wouldn't let her within ten versts of the estate."] Even her name he finds intolerable. She is "Uilka Charlzovna Tvais." One wonders where Chekhov got hold of these names. "Charlzovna", daughter of Charles, is a plausible patronymic, but "Wilka"

is not an English first name (only "Willa"), and if Tvais was meant to be the English word "twice," that does not exist as a surname either. When Griabov is reluctantly forced to attract the ogre's attention, he addresses her formally as "*Miss Tvais*."

In the summer of 1902 Chekhov did meet a real English governess: Lilian Glassby, daughter of Robert Glassby, the Sculptor to Queen Victoria, and the prototype for Sharlotta Ivanovna in *The Cherry Orchard*. She was the exact opposite of the daughter of Albion. She chattered away in her own version of Russian and was known to her employers, the Smirnov family, as Elena Romanovna: names related only loosely to her own but signaling her willingness to be assimilated into Russian society. Eventually she became so much a member of the family that everyone called her "Lily." The young Emma Dashwood was known in her first job as "Miss Emmie," but the family's nanny, more used to French governesses, addressed her as "*Mamzel'*." If a governess was unpopular, the other servants might modify her name: Ol'ga Solodiankina mentions a Miss Short – a common English surname – who became known as "*Miss Chërt*" ["Miss Devil"] (p.18). In general, the governess who insisted on being addressed in the formal English manner as Miss X or Miss Y is likely to have been an older lady anxious to retain a certain dignity and self-respect.

To return to "Dom s mezoninom." When the artist sees the sisters for the first time, Misius' "*s udivleniem posmotrela na menia, kogda ia prokhodil mimo, skazala chto-to po-angliiski i skonfuzilas… .*" ["looked at me in astonishment as I walked past, said something in English, and was overcome by confusion… ."] This suggests that Lida, who is twenty-three, must also speak English and might have had the same governess in Moscow as her younger sister, but when their father, a *tainyi sovetnik* ["privy councilor"], died and his widow decided to move permanently to their country estate, the governess is likely to have sought another job.

On 8 April 1990, as part of a Festival held in conjunction with the Chekhov Conference at Yalta, the Lipetsk Dramatic Theatre presented a dramatised version of "Dom s mezoninom" under their director Vladimir Pakhomov. At the discussion that followed, V. I. Lakshin, who was then head of the Chekhov Commission, argued that the name *Misius'* should be stressed on the first syllable and should be understood as a child's lisping pronunciation of the word <u>miss</u>. This puzzled me considerably. To a non-

Russian ear at least, the name sounds less attractive if stressed on the first syllable, and why should a child, lisping or otherwise, add the extra syllable "*ius*"? Moreover, I understood "*Misius*" as a form of address, and it would have been impolite for a child to address her governess in English simply as "Miss" without adding her surname or less commonly her first name. Alla Khanilo had previously recalled that when O. L. Knipper-Chekhova came down to Yalta on one of her summer visits to the White House in the 1950s, she was invited by Mariia Pavlovna to give a reading of "Dom s mezoninom" to the museum staff. Ol'ga Leonardovna put the stress on the second syllable. So did G. A. Birkett and Gleb Struve, the knowledgeable editors – one English, one Russian – of *Anton Chekhov: Selected Short Stories* (Oxford, 1951), which is where I first read "Dom s mezoninom."

I should like to propose that unknown to Chekhov the English governess was not English but Welsh and her name was Miss Hughes.

The surname "Hughes," derived from the first name "Hugh," is one of the most common Welsh surnames and is now widespread throughout England as well. In place names and personal names an initial "H" in English often becomes a "G" in Russian (*Gavana*, *Genri*), but this does not apply to "Hughes": thus, the industrial complex built up by the Welsh industrialist and entrepreneur, John Hughes (1814-1889), who went out to Russia in 1869 and pioneered Russia's Industrial Revolution, came to be known as *Iuzovo* or *Iuzovka* (until 1924 when it was re-named *Stalino*). In pronouncing "Miss Hughes" an English speaker tends to come down heavily on the first part of the surname, whereas in Russian it is easier to elide the two words to produce "*Misius'*."

To put forward a hypothesis is easy; to substantiate it is another matter. I had hoped that by approaching the problem from both ends, Russian and British, I should be able to discover the real Miss Hughes whose name had been incorporated in "Dom s mezoninom," and that she might even provide a clue to Chekhov's other fiancée. In retrospect this seems absurdly optimistic. "*O, fallacem hominum spem! Vinitel'nyi padezh pri vosklitsanii…*" ["Accusative case with an exclamation…"]

For a start there is very little evidence to work with, but there is also a much bigger problem. Because Hughes is such a common surname, there are far too many potential suspects: between 1875 and 1895 more than fifty ladies with the surname

Hughes applied for passports to visit the Continent (including Russia) and that was from London alone. The surname Glassby, on the other hand, which by a miracle Chekhov spelled correctly when filing Lily's two letters to him, is exceptional; there was only one family of that name living in London at the right time. Emma Dashwood was even less of a problem. She was alive and well and living in the next street to mine.

It is possible that Miss Hughes might have been a member of the British community in Russia. An Elizabeth Hughes was born on 2 June 1840 and christened at the British Chaplaincy, Saint Petersburg, on 27 July 1841. She appears to have been a member of a large family settled in St Petersburg. Another Elizabeth Hughes (or perhaps the same person) is believed to have been working as a governess in Russia in the 1880s, but from the little information available it is impossible to see a potential link between her and Chekhov. She is described by the donor of material about her to the Leeds Russian Archive as "a governess to the Tsar's children," but family legends of this kind, claiming a glamorous connection with the Russian royal family, are numerous and nearly always turn out to be based on a misunderstanding. There *was* a Miss Hughes employed as a nanny to Grand Duchess Alexandra Alexandrovna, but that was way back in 1843 (Zeepvat, p.292).

Two promising suspects were Edith Hughes, born in 1871, and her sister Kathleen (1873). It was not unusual for girls of seventeen or eighteen to go out to Russia as governesses, so they might have been working there in the first half of the 1890s. The sisters were undoubtedly genteel. They were the daughters of a clergyman in a small Welsh village, but when he died in 1875 at the age of 47, his widow was left with six young children to support. It was this kind of situation, which arose frequently in Victorian society, that led such a large number of young girls, who needed to be self-supporting, to take the unusual and surprisingly adventurous step of becoming governesses in Russia; an English governess abroad, especially one working in Russia, enjoyed a higher status and was much better paid than in her own country, where far too many governesses were chasing too few jobs. In 1916 a Miss Hughes was a subscriber to the British Church of Saint Andrew in Moscow. From the records of the British Foreign Office we know that the sisters, by then in their forties, were among a party of 127 British people who left Russia via Finland in October 1918. In 1920 Kathleen Hughes

wrote to the Foreign Office seeking permission for a Russian family to come to England. This suggested that she had been with one family for a number of years and was deeply committed to their wellbeing; many English governesses of long standing, appalled by the disasters that had overtaken "their" families after the Revolution, made strenuous efforts to get them safely out of Russia. In short, Edith and Kathleen Hughes seemed to be ideal suspects but for a trifling difficulty: however hard one tried to prove the contrary, all the evidence suggested that they did not go out to Russia until after 1895, the year in which their mother died.

So the case remains open. All one can do is to hazard a few guesses. Since "Dom s mezoninom" is so full of memories of Bogimovo, it seems likely that Chekhov heard the name "*Misius"*" and the explanation of its origins in the summer of 1891; although he was writing intensively during those four months, he also met a number of new people. But then again it might go back to the 1880s. As Trigorin says in *The Seagull*, no doubt echoing Chekhov's own experience, a writer is forever saving up words and phrases in his literary store-house: "*avos' prigoditsia*" ["it might come in useful"].

As for the lady's identity, I see Miss Hughes not as one of the young girls who went out to Russia for a few years' adventure, but as a career governess, middle-aged (insisting on being addressed by her surname), although hopefully without the unsympathetic qualities of the daughter of Albion, Moscow-based, moving from job to job as circumstances dictated and with luck saving enough money to be able to retire to a country cottage in Wales long before the Russian Revolution; and in the unlikely event that any descendants of her original pupils are still living in Moscow and speak English, it would be pleasant to think that they do so with a faint sing-song accent that would be recognisable only to a Welsh ear.

And very occasionally, at moments when I feel sad and disappointed by the failure of my search, for some reason it gradually begins to seem to me as if there is someone out there waiting for me and that we shall meet…

Miss Hughes, where are you?

*

I am very grateful to two good friends for their assistance: to Michael Welch for his meticulous research and to Richard Davies for making information available from the Leeds Russian Archive.

‘Gloomy People’ from Cleveland
(Chekhov and American Independent Cinema)

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“I love all films that start with rain.”[1] The contemporary poet Don Paterson, who wrote this line, would definitely admire Michael Meredith’s film *Three Days of Rain* (2003). The movie lasts almost two hours, and there are only several minutes free of rain. The rain’s transparent yet impenetrable walls separate characters from each other and the world around them. Different and yet somewhat similar, rich and poor, old and young, all of these characters are residents of Cleveland in the beginning of the twenty-first century. There is yet another feature that they share in common: almost every one of them owes—to a different degree—his or her existence to Chekhov.

The aged taxi driver John has just learnt that his son is dead (ironically, the director assigned the role of the father who lost his son to his own father, the former football star quarterback, Don Meredith). As anyone familiar with Chekhov’s “Toska” [”Misery”] can guess, John is trying to share his “misery” with his various passengers. Predictably, absorbed in their own misery, happiness, or loss, they are not willing to listen to someone else’s story. “I’m here to suffer pain. These things—I’m destined to

[1] http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/poetry/2008/05/26/080526po_poem_paterson

hear them!"— moans one of these passengers played by Blythe Danner in a cameo appearance. This emotional outburst does not come directly out of Chekhov's works; it does seem Chekhovian, however, in its hidden irony toward the self-obsessed character. Who is she? The princess from Chekhov's story of the same name ("Kniaginia")? Arkadina from *The Seagull*? Blythe Danner used to play Nina in a Broadway production of *The Seagull*. So it is only natural for her to come back as Arkadina some thirty years later.

John himself does not seem to rely on his passengers' attention and sympathy. Toward the end of the movie, he is having his coffee at the empty night cafeteria and finally telling the story of his loss to a tired and aloof waitress. At least, she lets him speak, and this is perhaps the highest level of communication available in the modern world.

Another aged father, Waldo by name, is a loyal customer of the bar "The Blue Bird." Following in the footsteps of Musatov, his counterpart from Chekhov's short story "Otets" ["The Father"], he inventively wheedles cash from his son while, in his own words, "assuming the part of an abused father" in the senior center where he lives. An inspired and virtuosic liar who is disarmingly sincere even in his lies, a drunk and social outcast who is trying to preserve his dignity, a skilful manipulator who is vulnerable and incurably lonely, he is a natural charmer, unlike his enormously patient but somewhat colorless son. Played by John Cassavetes's alumnus Peter Falk (known to the wider audience as Inspector Colombo), this role is arguably the most expressive and memorable performance in the movie.

One more variation on the theme of fathers (in this case, mothers) and children is young Tess, an emotionally unstable and childishly fragile drug addict who comes to a family of a judge and his wife to babysit their foster child. The child appears to be Tess's own daughter, of whom she has lost custody. Chekhov's tragic "Spat' khochetsia" ["Sleepy"] is a literary inspiration for this sub-plot.

For a Chekhov reader, it does not take long to recognize the prototype of yet another protagonist, a mildly retarded railway janitor Dennis. A rail nut is found in his locker. Did he unscrew it because of his ignorance, as did Chekhovian "malefactor," Denis Grigor'ev? Or is he rather a victim of the intrigues of his supervisor, who wants to edge Dennis out of his job to make room for a relative? Dennis looks innocent, harmless, and meek (needless to say, he is also as lonely and "gloomy" as any other protagonist of this movie). The finale adds an anecdotal—and, I would say, quite Chekhovian in its spirit—twist to this contemporary variation on Chekhov's story. Walking down the rails with the blissful smile on his face, Denis unscrews one nut after another and neatly collects them in a cardboard box.

"I am just a goddamn tilemaker," —another protagonist challenges the heavens. The rain has destroyed his work. His girlfriend has just left him. He has no money to pay his rent. In despair he is rushing to the widow of the man who has not paid for his work. She is his last hope. The widow, however, is focused on her grief. She refuses to be distracted and write a check. The tilemaker, in turn, refuses to leave her apartment (now it is clear that we are dealing with the paraphrase of Chekhov's vaudeville "Medved'" [*The Bear*]). Both are equally stubborn and self-absorbed; neither is willing to compromise. Finally, the morning finds them in the same bed, sleeping next to each other.

In contrast to the tilemaker, the last of the movie's protagonists, Alex, is a well-off man and has an apparently perfect family life. At night, he goes with his wife to a restaurant for dinner: lively conversation, friendly jokes, and an atmosphere of mutual understanding. There is a small incident on their way home: a homeless man asking for some change or, at least, the doggie bag with the take-home dessert. Helen, Alex's wife, refuses: the dessert has been taken for her sister. This incident, as Jeannette Catsoulis writes in *The New York Times*, "opens a wound in the marriage that neither knew was there… It's the film's most Chekhovian moment: a marriage torn apart by chocolate mousse."[2]

As in Chekhov's short story "*Kazak*" ["The Cossack"], Alex tries without success to find the beggar in order to help him. Most importantly, he comes to see his wife of many years in a totally new light: "You're not a kind person," he says bitterly to Helen. Due to its direct moral lesson, this story is commonly defined in Chekhov criticism as one of his "Tolstoyan" works. The movie seems to "return" the story back to Chekhov: its conclusion is more ambiguous and Chekhovian than it appears to be in the original. Alex might well be justified in his discoveries about his wife and his life in general. But obsessed with his new ideas, he appears to be no less uncompromising and self-righteous than his wife.

The movie thus unites six of Chekhov's short works—five stories and a one-act play—written in his "middle" period and representative of the multifariousness of Chekhov's art. Furthermore, there is an overarching motif that connects the movie to *Three Sisters*: different characters hopelessly long to escape from a rain-swept Cleveland.

[2] http://movies.nytimes.com/2005/09/30/movies/30rain.html

Speaking of artistic results, it is perhaps not surprising that the more successful adaptations are those based on less masterful stories ("The Father" and "Kazak"). Indeed, it is difficult to imagine an adaptation of "Misery" that would do justice to this story's poetic richness and ambiguity. For any director, it would be challenging to match a finale like this one:

> Иона молчит некоторое время и продолжает:
> —Так-то, брат кобылочка... Нету Кузьмы Ионыча... Приказал долго жить... Взял и помер зря... Таперя, скажем, у тебя жеребеночек, и ты этому жеребеночку родная мать... И вдруг, скажем, этот самый жеребеночек приказал долго жить... Ведь жалко?
> Лошаденка жует, слушает и дышит на руки своего хозяина...
> Иона увлекается и рассказывает ей всё… (4, 330)
>
> [Iona is silent for a while and then continues: "That's how it is, old girl… Kuz'ma Ionych is no more…. Departed this life…. He up and died to no purpose… Now let's say you had a little colt, and you were that colt's mother... And suddenly, let's say, this very colt departed this life… You would feel sorry, wouldn't you?"
> The nag chews, listens, and breathes on her master's hands...
> Iona is carried away and tells her everything…]

A critical discussion about the "true" meaning of this finale has been going on and on for a long time (consider the telling title of Robert Louis Jackson's article, "Концовка 'Тоски': ирония или пафос?"[3] ["The Ending of 'Misery': Irony or Pathos?"]). In the space of his four-page story, Chekhov has brought together the ostensibly incompatible features of anecdote, parable, and tragedy, naturalistic sketch and biblical poetry so that the very borderline between disparate literary discourses has become blurred. No matter how convincing Don Meredith is in his role, his final talking to a deaf ear leaves no doubt about the nature of this communication—it is better to say, miscommunication—and can hardly provoke any discussion. As one of my students wrote in her response to the movie:

[3] See *Russian Literature* 40:3 (1996), 355-61.

"I was disappointed in him talking to the waitress at the end. I think a stray dog would have been better or more fitting… It wasn't a personal experience as with the horse."

Even more damaging, in my opinion, is the movie's treatment of "Sleepy," whose incomparable poetic imagery and permanent fluctuation between dream and reality are sacrificed for the sake of a straightforward criminal narrative: the judge is a sexual molester; the heroine is virtually his sexual slave; she is unable to protest because of her drug addiction; at the end, she kills her own infant child—who, as I have mentioned, is also the judge's stepdaughter—to prevent the girl from reliving and suffering her mother's fate.

However, it would be unjust to state that poetic qualities of Chekhov's prose and drama are not taken into account by the creators of *Three Days of Rain*. The camera constantly switches from story to story (none of them are told uninterruptedly), but the movie does not seem to be disjointed. In addition to a thematic unity, there is also a poetic unity achieved through the use of cinematic devices of sight and sound.

Consider the rain that acquires a symbolic quality. Chekhov says of his cabdriver's misery: «Тоска громадная, не знающая границ. Лопни грудь Ионы и вылейся из нее тоска, так она бы, кажется, весь свет залила, но, тем не менее, ее не видно» (4, 329 [" His misery is immense, knowing no bounds. If Iona's heart were to burst and his misery to flow out, then it would, it seems, flood the whole world, but to no one, however, is it visible"]). No one says these words in the movie, but Iona's misery and that of the other protagonists *are* seen and embodied in the image of the never-stopping rain that literally "floods" the "whole world," or at least, the whole of Cleveland. Like any symbol, the rain cannot be reduced to a single definition. Standing

for the characters' inescapable misery, it also speaks of their isolation and disconnection. Furthermore, the rain symbolizes something that exceeds human power and is beyond human control. Not accidentally, commenting on the weather, a mysterious jazz radio DJ (his importance to the movie will be discussed below) mentions the inability of human beings "to escape the occasional act of God." To summarize: the rain in the movie is anything but just a background. Instead, it should be treated as the key character, and the noun "rain" in the title *Three Days of Rain* almost takes on the quality of a proper name.

Another important factor that accounts for the unity of the film is its original soundtrack created by jazz composer and arranger Bob Belden. The very first words we hear in the movie come from the voice of the invisible radio DJ (only at the very end do we see him and realize that the voice belongs to the singer-songwriter Lyle Lovett) who provides a live report from a jazz festival taking place in Cleveland. The festival accounts for an almost uninterrupted stream of music accompanying the action. None of the characters go to a concert or pay any serious attention to this music. But unnoticed by them, the music (a lyrical, meditative jazz played by the greatest representatives of modern jazz—Joe Lovano, Marc Copland, and others) intertwines with their lives. It knows of them what they do not know of themselves and says in its subtle language what they are unable to say. It bridges their disparate fates and makes them echo one another, no matter that they are not even aware of each other's existence. The voice of their suppressed and unrequested humanity, the music gives their sufferings substance and depth. It refuses to judge. It does not interfere with events but rather glimmers through them. In short, the music's role in the movie is analogous to that of the author's word in Chekhov's stories. The poetic qualities of the original texts—in particular, their artistic

richness and ambiguity—have not always found their way into the movie's script. This deficiency is, to a certain degree, redeemed by the persistent yet subtle presence of the music.

Thus, the movie is not only based on Chekhov's works but also strives to render some important features of his poetics through purely cinematic, audial and visual devices. Yet in their reviews of *Three Days of Rain*, critics have usually mentioned Chekhov only in passing. Characteristically, they have cited not literary but rather cinematic sources as major inspirations for the film. Consider, for example, the following quote from the aforementioned review in *The New York Times*: "*Three Days of Rain* belongs to the now-familiar genre of overlapping tales of urban desperation staked out by Robert Altman in *Short Cuts* and seen most recently in Paul Haggis's *Crash.*" (Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* and Rodrigo Garcia's episodic films with such characteristic titles as *Ten Tiny Love Stories* and *Nine Lives* can also be added to this list.)

There are some obvious correspondences between Robert Altman's movie and *Three Days of Rain* traceable on the level of themes (misery, loneliness, misunderstanding, and miscommunication that result in troubled relationships between spouses, lovers, parents and children, etc.) and that of characters (compare, for instance, Peter Falk's character with Jack Lemmon's from *Short Cuts*: both of these fathers are equally talkative, self-absorbed, and disconnected from their respective families. Both are pathetic, miserable, and hopelessly lonely). The kinship between the two movies can be traced on the musical level as well: the jazzy soundtrack, so crucial for *Three Days of Rain*, could have been suggested by *Short Cuts* (one of the characters here is a jazz singer, which allows for an excessive presence of jazz on and "behind" the screen).

Furthermore, both movies share an appearance by Lyle Lovett. “Inspired by the short stories of Anton Chekhov,” as the credits of *Three Days of Rain* state, this movie can be seen as equally, if not to a greater extent, inspired by Robert Altman’s groundbreaking film.

But stressing the indisputable importance of *Short Cuts* as a prototypical model for films like *Three Days of Rain*, one should not forget that the former has its own literary source. It is based on short stories written by no one other than “an American Chekhov of this century,” as critics have called Raymond Carver (The comparison between these two writers is beyond the scope of this essay). Is it just a coincidence? Or can we rather suggest that a Chekhovian type of short story serves as a literary counterpart and inspiration for this cinematic “genre”?

Who are the protagonists of such stories? Mostly they are common people deeply embedded in the routine of their lives and unable to escape this routine even through dreaming. Neither heroes nor villains, they are disconnected from tradition and religion, from people close to them, and from their own better selves. But “captives of their times,” they are also, to use Boris Pasternak’s line, “hostages of eternity” whose misery possesses an existential dimension and redeeming qualities.

How are these characters presented? Not surprisingly (think of disconnection!), they belong to the world of short stories rather than to that of novels. We do not know their pre-histories and what is going to happen to them afterward. We enter their lives momentarily, with no introduction. We leave them abruptly and not fully aware of whether we are going to see them again. All we have is only snapshots of their lives rather than developed biographies; dotted lines, whose gaps are purposely left to our own

imagination and experience. Naturally, such fragmentation is almost an intrinsic feature of the genre of episodic movies.

Consider also the principle of interlocking several stories that are connected by their common themes (leitmotifs) and subtle allusions to one another rather than by a definite plot. Needless to say, each of Chekhov's stories is a finished work of art and can be read independently of all others. Yet all of them shed additional light on one another, commenting on each other's themes, plots, and characters. As has been noted in Chekhov scholarship, the parallels and interconnections between this writer's different works (simultaneously, between the early and late Chekhov or between Chekhov's prose and drama, his artistic works and letters) are so extensive that all of them can—and should—be viewed as an "integral resonant space." For example, a character or motif (situational twist, detail, etc.) that has been on the periphery of one work can naturally move to the foreground of some other. Correspondingly, a story developed in a major key can be rewritten in a minor one, or vice versa.[4] This explains why, in spite of the fact that Chekhov left behind only one cycle, his "little trilogy" ("Chelovek v futliare" ["The Man in a Shell"], "Kryzhovnik" ["Gooseberries"], "O liubvi" ["About Love"]), there has been a number of "sleeping" trilogies and cycles discovered in his oeuvre by generations of literary critics. This also explains why an apparently accidental selection of short stories can be reworked to become a basis for an episodic yet integrated script, as has been the case with *Three Days of Rain* and numerous other—mostly Russian—stage and film adaptations based on Chekhov's "motley stories."

[4] As Igor Sukhikh wittily notes, "A completely contextual reading of Chekhov's oeuvre demonstrates that it is possible to publish his collected works with numerous 'parallel passages'" (*Problemy poètiki Chekhova*, Sankt-Peterburg, 2007, p. 110).

As an aside, one can note that *Motley Stories* is not simply the title of one of Chekhov's first collections. It is rather the principle on which he structures his collection, bringing together characters representative of diverse social groups, professions, and backgrounds and mixing the elements of comedy and drama, tragedy and farce. The same principle applies to movies that belong to the genre initiated by *Short Cuts*. *Motley Stories* could be an alternative title for many of them.

Chekhov's presence in the aforementioned movies is not confined to his work as a storyteller. Think of Chekhov's major plays. Obviously, they have a linear development of plot and are not cut into separate independent subplots. Yet the term "decentralization" is aptly applied to Chekhov's innovative treatment of the plot, meaning that instead of one central event, around which the whole action unfolds, the audience is faced with a number of intertwined micro-events and micro-plots.[5] "Decentralization" is equally evident on the level of characters, meaning that instead of several protagonists and the supportive cast, there is a well-elaborated network of characters, each of whom has a potential of becoming a protagonist, and all of whom are mutually reflective of one another («Друг друга отражают зеркала, взаимно искажая отраженья» ["Mirrors reflect each other while mutually distorting the reflections"], as the poet Georgii Ivanov would have it). Thus, Chekhov's drama also paves the way to the genre of overlapping tales represented by movies like *Short Cuts* or *Three Days of Rain.*

One can speculate that while preserving its general mood, imagery, setting, and a similar cast of characters, *Three Days of Rain* could be based on some other—and not necessary Chekhovian—short stories or be an original script rather than an adaptation.

[5] See, for example, Zinovii Papernyi, "*Vopreki vsem pravilam…": P'esy i vodevili Chekhova*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1982.

My point is that in either case, giving credit to Chekhov as an "inspiration" would be a proper and well-deserved acknowledgment. In the language of Don Paterson quoted here in the beginning:

> …all things flow out from this source
> along their fatal watercourse.
> However bad or overlong
> such a film can do no wrong.

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