

Anton Chehov: A Biographical Sketch

Chehov was born in 1860 at Taganrog on the Black Sea. His grandfather had been a serf. His father was a grocer. He had four brothers (one a talented artist), and one sister.

In 1876 his father faced bankruptcy and fled with his family to Moscow.

1879 Anton Pavlovich entered Moscow University to read medicine. While at university he began to write popular short stories, humorous articles and short plays (mostly farces) in order to pay his fees. His first full-length play *Platonov* was rejected.

In 1883 he showed the first symptoms of tuberculosis. He graduated in 1884, and wrote: "My holy of holies are: the human body, health, the mind, talent, inspiration, love and absolute freedom, freedom from force and lies, whatever form they may take".

In 1886 APC published his second collection of short stories, *Motley Tales*. Of them the critic Korotenko wrote:

The entire book, still permeated with a sort of youthful light-heartedness ... scintillated with humour, mirth, often genuine wit, simplicity and conciseness of language and forceful images. But tones of pensiveness, lyricism and that singular sadness peculiar to Chehov, already making themselves felt here and there through the bright risibility, served to throw a still deeper shadow on the youthful gaiety of these realty motley tales.

Chehov wrote: "Fiction comes within the realm of art precisely because it portrays life as it really is. Its mission is to depict the honest and unadulterated truth".

In 1887 his second play, *Ivanov*, was performed quite successfully, but for what Chehov himself could already see were the wrong reasons – it was too melodramatic; but his next play, *The Wood Demon*, failed in the theatre because he had moved too far for the public in the direction of naturalism.

Chehov was now supporting himself, and, to a large extent, his family, by his work as a doctor, though he frequently refused to accept a fee. In 1890 he visited the penal settlements in Siberia; and two years later helped with famine relief. He moved his family to Melikhovo, a country estate near Moscow, but shortly after their arrival there was a cholera epidemic there. APC set up a medical station at his own expense and treated the sick

Here APC acquired his taste for gardening. He was always gregarious, and pursued a rich social life: with a "never-ending stream of interesting people, gay musical evenings, delightful strolls".

In 1895 Chehov wrote *The Seagull*, experimenting with the manner of his favourite dramatist Ibsen by adapting the symbolic technique of *The Wild Duck* to his own purposes. The first performance the following year at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in Petersburg was a comedy of errors. The production was set up at very short notice as a benefit performance for a popular comedienne who was cast in the role of Arkadina. There were only nine rehearsals. At the last moment the leading actress could not appear. The theatre was full of her admirers who had paid extravagant prices, and expected a comedy. There were jeers and uproar. Chehov left the theatre in despair. To his friend Nemirovitch-Danchenko he wrote:

Yes, my *Seagull* was a huge failure. The theatre breathed malice, the air was compressed with hatred, and in accordance with the law of physics, I was thrown out of Petersburg like a bomb.

And to another friend:

After the performance people assured me that I had depicted mere idiots, that my play was scenically clumsy, that it was silly, unintelligible, and even senseless, and so on, and so forth. You can imagine my state of mind – it was a failure such as I had never dreamed of! I felt humiliated and vexed, and I left Petersburg full of doubts of all kinds.

Chehov asked for the play to be taken off, but the management refused. The next two performances were much better received. Then it was taken off.

1897 brought a deterioration in Chehov's health. He spent the autumn in Nice:

Away from Russia I feel bad, bad in every respect... of all the warm spots in Russia the southern coast of the Crimea seems to be the most suitable so far ... It is more cosy and restful in the Crimea and close to Russia.

In that same year Nemirovitvh-Danchenko and Stanislavsky, after long discussions with Chehov, whom they hoped would be their house dramatist, founded the Moscow Art Theatre with the idea of building a permanent company of the most dedicated actors and directors, ending the star system, ending all artificiality and exaggeration in acting and production, and by doing justice to their chosen plays with long and painstaking rehearsals... Their first production, a play by Alexei Tolstoy was a success; their third, *The Merchant of Venice*, was a failure; their sixth, Hauptmann's *Hannele*, was banned on religious grounds. Their finances were exhausted. The continued existence of the company depended on the success of their seventh production, in December 1898, which was *The Seagull*. They gave it twenty-six rehearsals.

Another example of the loving care bestowed on this production is this record by the designer:

The room had to bear the stamp of impermanency. Outside it is cold, damp, windy; but there is no warmth in the room either ... I began with the furniture, arranging it in every possible way so as to obtain the effect of mental disequilibrium, so that one could see immediately how indifferent the person who lives in that room is to the way the furniture is arranged. If some piece of furniture is in his way, he moves it aside, and does not bother to replace it until someone else finds it is in his way. I got the sort of room that made you wish "to wrap a shawl round you", as one of the actresses put it.

Ronald Bryden records the opening night:

On the night of 17 December 1898, the first act curtain at the Hermitage Theatre in Moscow fell on an unearthly silence. The actors waited, listening for some sound of approval or disapproval from the auditorium. Stage hands poked their heads from the wings, listening too. Still the silence continued: not a clap, not a boo, not a murmur. One actor whimpered. The leading actress forced back an impulse to cry hysterically. Without speaking, in a stupor of depression, they started walking off stage. As they did so, a roar burst from the hidden auditorium, applause such as they had never heard before. The curtain rose, but they were too shocked to bow. They stood frozen; a tableau of middle-class Russians in summer clothes, before a painted perspective of trees, a villa, a moonlit lake.¹

¹ *Observer Colour Supplement*, 31 May 1970, p.10.

The success of this production ensured the continuance of the MAT to this day. They immediately adopted the seagull as their emblem.

Earlier that year, on the death of his father, APC had moved his family to Yalta, where he built himself a beautiful house:

Before I came here the place was a wilderness of impossible crags overgrown with thistles. And I have turned this wilderness into a cultivated, beautiful spot. Just think of it, three or four hundred years hence and the whole earth will be a flowering garden. Life will then be so much easier and pleasanter.

In 1899 Chehov wrote *Uncle Vanya*, a vastly improved rewriting of *The Wood Demon*.

Much as he loved his estate, his horses, the climate of Yalta, Chehov became bored without his circle of friends – writers, painters, theatrical figures; without his beloved Moscow and the familiar central Russian landscape. But friends old and new began to visit him – Gorki, Kuprin, Bunin, Andreyev, Chaliapin, Rachmaninov. The MAT visited Chehov in Yalta to show him their productions of *The Seagull* (which he had missed through ill-health) and *Uncle Vanya*.

In 1900 Chehov wrote *The Three Sisters*, and the following year married the MAT's leading actress, Olga Knipper.

In 1901-2 Chehov made frequent visits to Tolstoy at Gaspra.

Ill health had by now forced Chehov to give up his medical practice, but never refused medical assistance, and never charged for it. He founded a sanatorium in Yalta by organising a public subscription. He wrote:

I'm laid up most of the time, am already beginning to grow old. I'm weary of Yalta and feel how life is passing by me and how I am not seeing much of what I as a writer should be seeing. All I see, and a good thing it is, is that life and people are growing better and better, are becoming more sensible and honest.

In 1903 Chehov wrote his final play, *The Cherry Orchard*. He went to Moscow for the premiere on his 44th birthday in January 1904, but he was very ill there. In April he wrote that if his health picked up he would go that summer to the far east as a doctor at the front in the Russo-Japanese war. It did not, and in June he went to the German health resort Badenweiler, where he died unexpectedly on 2 July.

Chehov's body was taken to Moscow in a goods train in a carriage marked Fresh Oysters. The body of a Russian general killed on the eastern front arrived in the station at the same time. Many of Chehov's friends walked behind the wrong coffin, wondering why the procession was accompanied by a military band.

J. B. Priestley ends his book on Chehov with this moving tribute:

Other writers may have been as acutely observant as he was, others may have known his wealth of social experience, others again may have shared his broad compassion, his tenderness with all genuine suffering; but where else is all this combined with so exquisite a sense, amounting to genius, of what must be said and what can be left out, of a setting, an atmosphere, a situation, a character, all presented in the fewest possible strokes? We have then at one end of this man's personality the approach and methods of science and at the other end the most delicate antennae in Russian literature. He is lancing (for nothing) peasants' boils in the morning, planning a garden, a school, a library, in the afternoon, and writing a little masterpiece at night. And all done without dogmatism and theorizing and bitterly-held ideology; all done with delicacy and gentle humour

and compassion. So I say again that here was the model for a new kind of man, but the mould was broken before our blind mad century was five years old. There has only been one Anton Chekhov.²

² *Anton Chehov*, International Profiles, 1970, p.84.