

Chehov's Theatre

A writer can be a very ordinary person, even a rather silly person, when he is not writing imaginatively. Speaking of another Russian, Tolstoy, Lawrence wrote: 'Never trust the artist, trust the tale. ... The artist is often a dribbling liar'. That is to say, getting into the imaginative mode involves an obligation and an ability to tell truths not often admitted in ordinary life. In life we get away with murder, but in art everything must be paid for.

Chehov persisted all his life in thinking of his plays as comedies. He conceived of his characters as clowns, unable to cope with life's simplest challenges, yet also representatives of contemporary Russian life. He thought he could make people less foolish by making them laugh at themselves.

All I wanted was to say honestly to people: 'Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!' The important thing is that people should realize that, for when they do, they will most certainly create a new and better life for themselves. I will not live to see it, but I know that it will be quite different, quite unlike our present life. And so long as this different life does not exist, I shall go on saying to people again and again: 'Please understand that your life is sad and dreary'.

But once Chehov got into the throes of composition, and his characters became more real to him, he realized that creating a new and better life for oneself is not so easy. He saw that in making that demand of his characters, he was asking them to lift themselves by their own bootstraps. He saw that their absurdity was a measure of their suffering and humanity. His compassion (and Chehov was probably the most compassionate writer who ever lived) overcame his desire to mock his characters for satirical purposes. Hence the unique poignancy of Chehov's humour. There is the same ambiguity in Beckett. We laugh when a character's trousers fall down. But what happens to that laughter when we know that they have fallen down because he has removed his belt in order to try to hang himself with it.

In each of the last three plays there is a character who expresses a utopian vision of the future. In *Uncle Vanya* Astrov is an astonishingly modern ecologist and conservationist, specializing in forestry:

When I go walking by the woods that belong to the peasants, the woods I saved from being cut down, or when I hear the rustling of the young trees I planted with my own hands, I'm conscious of the fact that the climate is to some extent in my power too, and that if mankind is happy in a thousand years' time, I'll be responsible for it even though only to a very minute extent.

In *The Three Sisters* Vershinin voices a similar belief in progress:

Life will swallow you up, but you'll not quite disappear, you'll make some impression on it. After you've gone, perhaps six more people like you will turn up, then twelve, and so on, until in the end most people will have become like you. So in two or three hundred years life on this old earth of ours will have become marvelously beautiful. Man longs for a life like that, and if it isn't here yet, he must imagine it, wait for it, dream about it, prepare for it, he must know and see more than his father and his grandfather did.

In *The Cherry Orchard*, Trofimov voices a more politically focussed optimism:

To rid ourselves of all that's petty and unreal, all that prevents us from being happy and free, that's the whole aim and meaning of our life. Forward! ... You're living in debt, at other people's expense, at the expense of people you don't admit further than the kitchen. We are at least two hundred years behind the times; we still have no real background, no clear attitude to our past, we just philosophize and complain of depression, or drink vodka. Yet it's perfectly clear that to begin to live in the present, we must first atone for it by suffering, by extraordinary, unceasing exertion. ... Always, every moment of the day and night my soul has been filled with such marvellous hopes and visions. I can see happiness, I can see it coming.... And if we don't see it, if we don't know when it comes, what does it matter? Other people will see it!

Similar sentiments are to be found again and again in Chehov's letters, where he reveals himself to be as idealistic and utopian as any of his characters. But in the context of the plays these ideals are undermined by a much darker vision. Astrov is too far ahead of his time. He allows himself to be dragged down by provincial backwardness, coarsened by disappointment,

and deflected by vodka and women. Vershinin's optimism is overwhelmed in the hopelessness of the ending of *The Three Sisters*. His insistence that one 'must' imagine a happier life is not because that is a saving truth, but because it is the only alternative to despair. He is whistling in the dark. Trofimov, the prophet of 'unceasing exertion', is mocked by all the other characters as the 'perpetual student' who has never done a day's work in his life. And again the ending of the play extinguishes all such hopefulness. In any case what use is it to these characters that their suffering just might be making some infinitesimal contribution to an increase in human happiness hundreds or thousands of years hence.

Chehov was not a prophet of revolution in any positive sense. But he was its prophet in a negative sense. That is, he was fully aware of living in a moribund society. He saw clearly the decadence of the aristocracy, wholly dependent on unearned income and leisure, incapable of work, responding to economic pressure by borrowing, or, failing that, selling off the few remaining assets. They are charming innocuous people, but already anachronisms. In *The Cherry Orchard* the supreme achievement of Gayev's life has been to pot the red into the corner pocket. Chehov saw that the collapse in upon itself of this exhausted class would leave a vacuum that other forces were pressing to fill. Lopahin, whose grandfather had been a serf, is a hard-working materialistic opportunist, who sees scope for developing the land which is now coming onto the market so cheaply. The cherry orchard is destined to make way for holiday villas for the Moscow nouveaux riches.

The British tradition of playing Chehov as tragedy has been attacked as un-Chehovian, but I believe it is correct, given that tragedy does not preclude several kinds of humour.

Russian drama when Chehov began to write was predominantly melodramatic, dominated by murders, suicides, and passionate love affairs. Chehov wrote:

But really, in life people are not every minute shooting each other, hanging themselves, and making declarations of love. And they are not saying clever things every minute. For the most part, they eat, drink, hang about, and talk nonsense; and this must be seen on the stage. A play must be written in which people can come, go, dine, talk about the weather, and play cards, not because that's the way the author wants it, but because that's the way it happens in real life.

Chehov's realism was mocked by Tolstoy, who wrote to Chehov: 'But where is one to get to with your heroes? From the sofa to the lavatory and back'. Even the sympathetic Stanislavsky, believing himself to be following Chehov's principles, misunderstood them. His notes for the opening scene of *The Seagull* read:

Distant sounds of a drunkard's song, distant howling of a dog, the croaking of frogs, the creak of a landrail, the slow tolling of a distant church-bell, faint rumblings of thunder in the distance.

When Chehov asked 'What for?', the answer was 'to help the audience to get the feel of the sad monotonous life of the characters'. Chehov, of course, had his own subtler way of doing this. Masha's 'My foot's gone to sleep' implies hours of inertia. 'It must be time for lunch' implies a morning stretching out interminably. Chehov continued to fight a running battle with Stanislavsky to stop him putting real trees on the stage and drowning the dialogue with realistic sound effects of cicadas and other noisy insects. His own significant sound effects and even his dialogue was drowned in the clamour. After *Uncle Vanya* he wrote:

In my next play I shall make the stipulation: the action takes place in a land which has neither mosquitoes nor crickets, nor any other insects which hinder conversations between human beings.

Nor did Stanislavsky leave room for Chehov's telling silences; moments when further conversation has become futile, or the characters become aware of the futility of the conversation they have just been having. Chehov wrote:

People who have long born grief inside them and have become used to it only whistle a little and often become lost in thought.

As for real trees on stage, Chehov's answer was devastating:

The stage is art; theatre expresses the quintessence of life. There is no need to introduce anything superfluous onto the stage. ... In one of Kramskoy's genre paintings he has some magnificently drawn faces. What if we cut the painted nose from one of these faces and

substituted a real one? The new one would be 'real', but the painting would be ruined.

It was not 'slice of life', fly-on-the-wall naturalism that Chehov wanted. He anticipated Kafka and Beckett in his perception that people's lives are determined less by actions than by inaction: 'People dine, merely dine, but in that moment their happiness is being made or their life is being smashed'. This could not be communicated in the theatre by the kind of action which might be recorded by a hidden camera, or dialogue which tries to simulate a tape-recorder left running. It required a subtle and complex artistry, but an artistry completely new, completely different from the contrivances of melodrama.

Nevertheless, Chehov's own plays always seemed to him melodramatic in retrospect. Ivanov shoots himself on stage. Trepliov shoots himself off-stage in a low-key manner which aims to drain the act of melodrama. Vanya tries to shoot Serebriakov on stage but misses, and subsequently fails to poison himself. In *The Three Sisters* Tuzenbach is shot, but in the far distance, so that the characters do not recognize the shot as anything of significance, and when the news finally arrives that Baron Tuzenbach has been killed on the eve of his wedding, it is received by Chebutikin as without significance: 'Another Baron more or less in the world, what difference does it make?' Of *The Cherry Orchard* Chehov wrote that there was 'not a single pistol-shot in the whole thing'. And it is not just pistol shots. He is gradually moving mere events out to the periphery of the action, as if they were tangential to the quality of life.

* * *

Chehovian comedy is the human comedy. He presents his characters as ridiculous without forfeiting sympathy for them. On the contrary, their absurdity is a measure of their failure to come to grips with life, and hence of their suffering and humanity. When Yeliena says 'What a lovely day', Vanya replies: 'It would even be pleasant to hang oneself on a day like this'. Later he claims: 'If I had had a normal life I might have been a Dostoevsky'.¹

Chehov's method of composition was to think first of a group of people and their situation, the predicaments generated by the interplay of character and situation. From this details of narrative, such as it is, would

¹ Quotations from *Uncle Vanya* are from *The Seagull and Other Plays*, trans, Elisaveta Fen, Penguin 1954.

gradually emerge. The plays are not constructed from a series of events, or around a hero: each is a complex web of relationships, in the quality of ordinary life, in a way of life gradually becoming chronic.

Raymond Williams describes Chehov's characters as

a generation whose whole energy is consumed in the very process of becoming conscious of their own inadequacy and impotence. ... a generation which sits up all night talking about the need for revolution, and is then too tired next morning to do anything at all, even about its own immediate problems.

Uncle Vanya (1899)

The Chehov who took up *The Wood Demon* ten years after writing it, was a vastly greater dramatist. The changes he made utterly transformed the play. He dropped five characters altogether, merging aspects of two young unmarried women into a new, plain, Sonia, and added the drinking and womanizing of a wastrel to the character of the originally rather one-dimensional Wood Demon himself, thus transforming him into the far more interesting Dr. Astov.

The protagonist in all of Chehov's first three plays shoots himself. Chehov now realized that this was a theatrical cliché, that in real life not many people shoot themselves. In *Uncle Vanya* instead of shooting himself, Vanya attempts to shoot the professor, but misses twice from close range, thus creating a wonderful scene of tragic farce. When Vanya later steals some morphine from Dr Astrov, he allows himself to be persuaded by Astrov and Sonya to give it back.

The Wood Demon suddenly changes key altogether in its terrible final act, with pat reconciliations and feel-good romance. The last word is 'delightful'. In *Uncle Vanya* that act is replaced by a masterly, wholly convincing and Chehovian scene of parting, loss, and resignation which is slow suicide.

Astrov is a doctor, who, like all Chehov's ubiquitous doctors, cannot cure soul-sickness, least of all his own. He is a humanist who prefers trees to human beings, and sees life itself as 'tedious, stupid and squalid'. Yet he works tirelessly both as doctor and as conservationist. He expects nothing for himself in this life, but vaguely toys with the idea that some reward for his efforts might be forthcoming after death, if only in the form of pleasant dreams. There is no light in the distance which makes his journey through

the night tolerable. He can maintain his conviction that he is 'doing a tremendous job for the good of mankind' only when under the influence of vodka. When sober, he thinks of himself as a crank. His ideas, superior as they are, have no more chance of achieving anything than Maman's endless pamphlets or the 'work' of such academics as Serebriakov.

That Serebriakov is not a caricature but a realistic figure of the time was evidenced when Chehov offered the play to the Maly Theatre in Moscow. A spokesman for the theatre committee told him that they had examined the play and could not accept the shooting in the third act. 'It could not be conceded that anyone should shoot at a university professor, a person who had received a diploma'.

Vanya is even further gone than Astrov. He has greater emotional needs and less ability to dissolve a problem in a quiet chuckle. Yet he does not take himself quite seriously enough to hang himself, or steal poison from Astrov, or make a proper job of shooting the professor. He envies Astrov, but for all Astrov's more pro-active and man-of-the-world approach, he gets no further with Yeliena than Vanya does. Astrov's ecological foresight, his conservationist's energy, his idealism, has been swamped by the surrounding inertia. Vanya find his schemes 'charming but not convincing'. He knows that the moralising which bolsters everyone's illusions is mere rhetoric. Consequently he cannot respond to Sonia's consolations. His heart aches for unreachable joy, not for certain rest. Work and waiting are but euphemisms for slow suicide.

The play ends with one of Chehov's masterly 'chords of feeling', in Francis Fergusson's phrase.² The first note is the sound of harness bells as Astrov departs. He has agreed not to return, except in his professional capacity. His departure marks the death of his friendship with Vanya, of his hopes of an affair with Yeliena, and of Sonia's hope that her love for him might at last be reciprocated. The second note is the sound of the clacking of the abacus on which Vanya makes his endless boring calculations. He is measuring out his life on it. The third note is Sonya's speech attempting to console him. But there is a note of desperation in her declaration of faith in the joys of heaven after death. Genuine as her mood clearly is, she indulges it in the hope of comforting Vanya rather than herself. That she should close her speech with the words: 'life will become ... sweet as a caress' betrays what she really longs for. In addition to these notes, there is the nonentity and hanger-on Telyeghin strumming his guitar, the watchman tapping, the scratch of Maman's pen as she annotates yet another useless pamphlet, the

² *The Idea of Theatre*, Princeton University Press, 1949.

click of Marina's knitting needles, and, by far the dominant note, Vanya's continued sobbing.

There is not the slightest hint of a resolution, rather the terrible recognition that life is really what it seems; that to ask for happiness without delusions is to ask for altogether too much from life. Eric Bentley has written:

In the Greeks, in much French drama, and in Ibsen, recognition means the discovery of a secret which reveals that things are not what all these years they have seemed to be. In *Uncle Vanya* recognition means that what all these years seemed to be so, really is so, and will remain so. This is Vanya's discovery and gradually that of the others. Thus Chekhov has created a kind of recognition which is all his own. In Ibsen the terrible thing is that the surface of everyday life is a smooth deception. In Chekhov the terrible thing is that the surface of everyday life is itself a kind of tragedy. In Ibsen the whole surface of life is suddenly burst by a volcanic eruption. In Chekhov the crust is all too firm' the volcanic energies of men have no chance of emerging. ... This growth from ignorance to knowledge is, perhaps, our cardinal experience of the play. [*In Search of Theatre*]

The best production I have ever seen of any play was Olivier's 1962 production of *Uncle Vanya* at the Chichester Festival Theatre. I saw it again when it transferred to the Old Vic as part of the first season of the National Theatre. I wasn't alone in finding this production as near to perfection as any production can get. Philip Hope Wallace described it as 'magnificent ... one of the finest pieces of creative acting to be seen in the English theatre these 30 years ... an extraordinarily beautiful and moving and delicate assumption of Chekhov's tragic comedy, which hits us between wind and water, sets us marvelling at the absurdity of human pathos'.³

I had not expected ever to see a production of *Uncle Vanya* to rival this one. But the 2012 production directed by Lucy Bailey at the Print Room in London certainly did so. Instead of the languor, the interminable days, of the Olivier production, we had a much more dynamic version of the play, the repressed energies closer to erupting.

³ Fortunately this production was filmed at the Old Vic, and is available on DVD.

Astrov, as I mentioned earlier, is a conservationist. He has charted the destruction of the environment he knows and loves over a period of fifty years:

The Russian forests are literally groaning under the axe, millions of trees are being destroyed, the homes of animals and birds are being laid waste, the rivers are getting shallow and drying up, wonderful scenery is disappearing for ever. ... Man is endowed with reason and creative power so that he can increase what has been given him, but up to the present he's been destroying and not creating. There are fewer and fewer forests, the rivers are drying up, the wild creatures are almost exterminated, the climate is being ruined, and the land is getting poorer and more hideous every day.

Chehov planted as many trees as he could on his estate at Melikhovo, but his last play, *The Cherry Orchard*, ends with the ominous sound of an axe striking a tree in the cherry orchard, which is to be cleared to make way for villas for the nouveau-riche Moscow fat cats.

During the first world war Shaw wrote *Heartbreak House* in which he recognized how close the society Chehov depicts was to English society during the long Edwardian summer which had preceded it.

In 1970 Ted Hughes wrote:

While the mice in the field are listening to the universe, and moving in the body of nature, where every living cell is sacred to every other, and all are interdependent, the Developer is peering at the field through a visor, and behind him stands the whole army of madmen's ideas, and shareholders, impatient to cash in the world.⁴

Chehov's vision is just as relevant to the England of today, if not more so. We are even further gone in 'inertia, ignorance and utter irresponsibility'. In 1912 the government proposed handing over to the developers our entire countryside. The work of over a century of conservationists since Chehov has failed to prevent the destruction of not just field and forest but of our entire ecosystem. Chehov's world was a vacuum which imploded with the

⁴ *Winter Pollen*, 130.

Russian revolution; Shaw's was a vacuum which imploded with the first world war. What catastrophe awaits us?

The Three Sisters (1900)

The Three Sisters ends with an even more complex, but equally dark and moving chord of feeling. There is Vershinin's farewell speech: 'Everything comes to an end':

There's a huge vacuum clamouring to be filled. Humanity is passionately seeking something to fill it with and, of course, it will find something some day.⁵

There is Olga's realization that she is condemned to be headmistress for life. As Vershinin leaves Masha sobs, and is hardly consoled by her husband: 'We'll start our life over again in the same old way'. He tries to distract her by putting on a false beard and moustache he has confiscated at school. The sound of a gunshot is heard in the distance. The intolerably insensitive Natasha enters at this moment. She has left Mr Protopopov looking after Sofochka (who is probably his daughter). Andrey and his 'old violin' can move into Irena's room when she leaves: 'He can saw away at it as much as he likes there'. So much for Andrey's earlier ambition to be a concert violinist. She declared her intention to have the fir-tree avenue, much loved by the sisters, cut down, and returns to the house, now *her* house, shouting at the maid. News arrives, strangely muted, of the death of Baron Tuzenbach, who was to have married Irena on the morrow. This leaves Irena with the prospect of soul-destroying work:

Tomorrow I'll go away alone and teach in a school somewhere. I'll give my life to people who need it. ... It's autumn now, winter will soon be here, and the snow will cover everything.

There is no longer any mention by any of the sisters of going to Moscow. Seizing on the incongruous tone of the military band. Olga attempts to find

⁵ Quotations from *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* are from *Three Plays*, trans. Elisaveta Fen, Penguin 1951.

a reason for going on living, but it is a 'note of tremulous hope', as unsustainable as Sonya's declaration of faith in *Uncle Vanya*:

The band is playing so cheerfully and joyfully – maybe, if we wait a little longer, we shall find out why we live, why we suffer ...

But the gay march is already growing fainter and fainter. Is the hopelessness redeemed by her courage; or is the courage itself, in the circumstances, absurd. Andrey's situation is equally hopeless, his ambitions, even at the local level, mocked as he pushes the pram back and forth, abandoning *his* house to his wife and her lover.

The retired, incompetent, drunken doctor, Chebutykin, speaks with the choric authority of the ending of a Greek tragedy: 'Tarara-boom-di-ay... I'm sitting on a tomb-di-ay...' 'Nothing matters!' The last line of *Oedipus the King* is: 'Count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last'.⁶

***The Cherry Orchard* (1903)**

The Cherry Orchard is a revolutionary play, in that it is the first play in which nothing happens. And Chehov's genius was to find many ways of presenting characters who are bored out of their minds without boring the audience (not, that is, in a competent production), and to make nothing happening intensely dramatic. It is dramatic because of our growing awareness of how desperately something ought to be happening, if the characters are to be saved. Chehov himself described the masterly second act as 'boring and monotonous, like a spiderweb'; but of course a spiderweb is a miracle of engineering. Chehov's stage directions must be meticulously observed:

An old wayside shrine in the open country; it leans slightly to one side, and has evidently been long abandoned. Beside it there are a well, an old seat, and a number of large stones which apparently served as gravestones in the past. A road leads to Gayev's estate. On one side and some distance away is a row of dark poplars, and it is there that the cherry orchard begins. Further away is seen a line of telegraph poles, and beyond them, on the horizon, the vague outlines of a large town, visible only in very good, clear weather.

⁶ *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fagles, Penguin 1984.

The characters who drift here to drag out the afternoon are as purposeless as the shrine and the stones. There may be no pistol-shot in *The Cherry Orchard*, but Yepihodov says:

Somehow I can't seem to make out where I'm going, what it is I really want, I mean to say – to live or to shoot myself, so to speak. All the same, I always carry a revolver on me.

Charlotta says: 'Who I am, what I exist for, nobody knows'. The main characters are just as purposeless and incompetent at living. Liubov Andryeevna drops her purse, scattering gold coins, as she has done all her life: 'I've eaten up my whole fortune in sweets'. They have been out to lunch, but 'it was all so pointless: 'Fancy talking about the decadents to the restaurant waiters'. All Gayev wants is to get back to the billiard table.

Only one character, Lopahin, has a purpose, and that is 'to lease the cherry orchard and the land for villas'. He belongs to the future world of the encroaching large town and its telegraph poles and nouveau riches. He genuinely wishes to save the family, but without the land and the cherry trees, they are fish out of water. They are themselves decadents, left behind by the inevitable march of time. Their whole culture as landed minor gentry is an anachronism. The Lopahins, the grandsons of serfs, are inheriting the world, buying up the decayed estates for 'development'. Their grandsons will plunder Russia and buy up English football clubs.

Nothing happens, but the atmosphere becomes progressively more threatening. Liubov Andryeevna says: 'I keep expecting something dreadful to happen ... as if the house were going to fall down on us'. That is, of course, exactly what is happening.

The senile Feers is the human embodiment of the stretched-out, attenuated past:

The peasants belonged to the gentry, and the gentry belonged to the peasants; but now everything's separate, and you can't understand anything.

There is wry comedy, among such nobodies, in Lopahin's 'surely we ought to be giants, living in such a country as this'.

The act registers the last spasms of a group of doomed characters. The tension of their attempt to drag out the past builds to the point where it becomes excruciating. 'The sun's gone down, ladies and gentlemen', announces Gayev. Their feeble conversation is exhausted:

They all sit deep in thought; the silence is only broken by the subdued muttering of Feers. Suddenly a distant sound is heard, coming as if out of the sky, like the sound of a string snapping, slowly and sadly dying away.

This is surely the most amazing and evocative sound effect in the history of theatre. Each character has a different interpretation of the sound; but there is no natural or mechanical explanation. The characters have drawn out the past to the point where it becomes excruciatingly taut and finally snaps. It is the moment of doom for them and their world.

Fourteen years later came the Russian Revolution. In 1919 Yeats wrote:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Chehov, before the event, distilled all this into a single plangent sound.

.

© Keith Sagar 2012.