

Anton Chekhov
turns 150 on
January 17,
and his work
has more than
stood the test
of time.
His stories and
plays continue to
have a huge
influence on
literature
and theater
throughout
the world.



Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

Chekhov's first known story was published in the journal *Strekoza* (Dragonfly) in March of 1880. It was signed simply "...v." [...въ]. It could well be, however, that something was published before this date. When, in 1899, Chekhov began collecting all of the pieces he had published to that point, he admitted not being able to find "every creation scattered throughout the world." He received a fee of five kopeks per line for his first story. According to Alexander Amfiteatrov, Chekhov once said: "My ideal fee would be to receive 15 kop. per line and earn 300 rub. per month."

Chekhov got his start in the so-called "small" presses: in the journals *Budilnik* (Alarm Clock), *Oskolki* (Fragments), *Zritel* (Spectator), *Mirskoy Tolk* (Talk of the World), *Svet i Teni* (Light and Shadow), and others. These were thin, illustrated journals, in which humorous stories alternated with humorous illustrations. Editors of such journals did not stand on ceremony with their authors; they might never pay an author's fee or they might pay it

By Lev Sobolev

in kind: in furniture, in a coat. The staff were day laborers, serving at the mercy of the owner-publishers. At first glance, it would seem that Chekhov was not as serious about his writing as he was about medicine, that literature was just a way to earn a little extra cash.* But first glances can be deceiving.

The “small” presses made few demands on authors. One merely had to write quickly, tersely, and humorously. Favored genres were short scenes, anecdotes, captions for illustrations, funny calendars, aphorisms and any sort of witticism. Chekhov easily mastered all these genres, commenting in a letter to Alexander Pleshcheyev (September 1889) that “aside from novels, poems and denunciations,” he had tried his hand at everything. An uncommon attention to trifles and details (whose significance is greatly heightened in shorter works) would stay with him throughout his creative period. As would the energy of a young writer. Chekhov immediately sweeps the reader into the center of events, foregoing expositions or protagonists’ pre-histories.

The small journals allowed Chekhov a level of freedom he would not have found in the “thick journals,” with their “cliquish, partisan tediousness.” “Partisanship, especially if it is dry and uninspired, does not favor freedom and expansiveness,” Chekhov wrote to Pleshcheyev in January 1888. At the same time, the journalistic day-laboring was also a menace to talent, and could drive a writer like an overworked horse, oppressing him both physically and spiritually (the opposite is portrayed in Chekhov’s 1886 story “Talent”). Chekhov well understood this danger. To his brother Alexander he wrote (in 1883), “I’m a scribbler [*gazetchik*], because I write so much, but that’s temporary... I won’t die as one. If I write, it must be from somewhere distant, from some hideaway...”

Chekhov, as Boris Eichenbaum noted in his 1944 article, contended with “great” literature, with its high-mindedness and its traditions. His story “Death of a Government Clerk” (1883), one of his earliest works, was not simply a caricature or an anecdote, as many of his critics averred. It was, at its essence, about the death of one of the most important motifs in Russian literature: the abject and insulted “little man.” As he wrote his brother Alexander in 1886, “Be so kind as to rid yourself of your oppressed collegiate registrars! Can you really not have realized that this theme has outlived its usefulness and evokes only yawns?”

IT IS CUSTOMARY TO CONTRAST the early Chekhov (Antosha Chekhonte, in his most widely employed pseudonym) and the mature writer, who, in the second half of the 1880s, begins writing longer stories about more serious themes and problems. Yet this is not accurate. In his book on Chekhov, Alexander Chudakov beautifully demonstrated that the methods

apparent in the earliest Chekhovian prose are employed even in the author’s most mature works. And it is not simply a matter of method. The story “Misery” (1886) was included in the collection *Motley Tales*, alongside such completely (and not so completely) humorous works like “Overdoing It,” “Oh, the Public!”, “Murder Will Out”, “The Exclamation Mark”... “Misery” is a chillingly realistic, sad tale, in which a cabby Iona tries to share the grief of his son’s death with his passengers, with a policeman, with a yardman, but none will listen, so he finally tells all to his understanding horse.



Chekhov in 1894, soon after his return from Sakhalin.

Human loneliness is in fact one of Chekhov’s main themes. Fear of what life may throw at you leads one to hide in shell (e.g. “The Man in the Case”). But a shell or case is not only galoshes and an umbrella, it is not only the ancient languages taught by the story’s protagonist, the instructor Belikov. The case is also about shutting oneself off from the world (as the self-

* In fact, Chekhov’s earnings from writing supported his entire family in Moscow while he was a medical student; he did not graduate medical school until 1884, by which time he was making about R150 per month from his writing.



With friends and family before setting off for Sakhalin, April 1890. Back row: Alexander Ivanenko, brother Ivan, father Pavel. Middle row: Masha Korneyeva, Lika Mizinova, sister Masha, mother Yevgenia, Seryozha Korneyev. Front row: brother Mikhail, Anton.

satisfied landowner in “Gooseberries”), about internalized slavery – to dogma, to easy decisions and accustomed formulas. “I am not a liberal, nor a conservative, not a gradualist, nor a monk, not an indifferentist,” Chekhov wrote in October 1888. “I merely want to be a free artist, and I only hope that God will give me the strength to be one. I loathe lies and violence in all its forms...”*

There are not, and cannot be, any easy decisions in the Chekhovian world. Many of his characters speak the truth, but that does not mean they are reflections

of the author’s mind. For Chekhov, truth only comes about through experience, when it is felt by a human being. This is now Ivan Velikopolsky, the hero of Chekhov’s story, “The Student,” finds truth: “...truth and beauty which had guided human life there in the garden [of Gethsemane] and in the yard of the high priest had continued without interruption to this day, and had evidently always been the chief thing in human life and in all earthly life...” And, when it came to faith or disbelief, Chekhov avoided categorical answers: “Between ‘there is a God’ and ‘there is no God’ lies an expansive field, through which a true thinker walks with great difficulty,” he wrote in his diary. Alexander Chudakov, in an article about the writer’s beliefs, arrived at the following conclusion: “At various points in his life, Chekhov was nearer to one or the other polar positions in that field. Yet he was never so close for so long that he could be identified with one or the other and thus stop being a person in the field.” In other words, for Chekhov the search for truth was more important than the illusion of possessing it.

For readers and critics, however, it was utterly strange for an author not to take a stand. “To Chekhov it is all the same: here is a person, here is his shadow, here is a bell, here is a suicide,” wrote Nikolai Mikhailovsky (a high-minded serial critic of Chekhov). “Here someone is driving a bull, here the post travels along... here a person has been killed, here they are drinking champagne.” Yet to Chekhov objectivity was to be preferred over the unsubtle injection of authorial opinions. As he wrote in a letter to his publisher and friend Alexei Suvorin in 1888, “the artist should not be the judge of his characters and what they say, but merely a dispassionate witness.”

Needless to say, many just did not “get” Chekhov’s approach. For Chekhov’s contemporaries (who were, in the words of the writer Korney Chukovsky, “impatient, narrow-minded, self-proclaimed liberals), the absence of a message signified an absence of principles. Elena Shchepoteva, an observer at the influential journal *Russian Thought*, in a March 1890 article, called Chekhov “the high priest of writing without principles.” This evoked a sharp reply from Chekhov: “I have never been a writer without principles or, put differently, a scoundrel.” For Chekhov, the absence of overt principles and ideology signified freedom.

For Chekhov, the search for truth was more important than the illusion of possessing it.

In point of fact, however, Chekhov was a person of strong moral convictions. Yet he did not express these principles directly, counting instead on the creativity of a thinking reader. He did, however, write openly about his moral predilections in 1888, in the journal *Novoye Vremya*, where he penned an unsigned tribute to Nikolai Przhevalsky:

In our troubled time, when European societies are seized by laziness, boredom with life and disbelief, when all around us there reigns a strange combination of hatred of life and fear of death, when even the best of our people sit around twiddling their thumbs, justifying their laziness and depravity with the fact that life has no meaning, we need enthusiasts the way we need the sun.

An enthusiast (“*podvizhnik*,” literally, a “mover”) is a person of big ideas, of noble ambitions, one who strives relentlessly for a fixed goal. Chekhov writes of all that distinguished Przhevalsky: his “wealth of knowledge and capacity for work,” of his being “habituated to scorching heat, to hunger, to longing for one’s homeland, to disabling fever,” of his “fantastic faith in Christian civilization and in science.” This was not about dogma, but about a persons’ individual choice, like Chekhov’s 1890 decision, at the age of 30, to cross Siberia to chronicle the horrific prison settlements on Sakhalin.*

Yet Chekhov was not born with “a sense of personal freedom.” As he wrote to Suvorin in 1889: “What the gentry-writers received as a gift from nature, the *intelligentsia* not of noble birth purchased at the cost of their youth. Write me a story of how a young fellow, the son of a serf and former shopkeeper, a *gymnasium* and college student, raised to respect rank, to kiss the hand of priests and admire strange ideas... squeezes the slave out of himself drop by drop, to wake one beautiful morning knowing that through his veins flows not the blood of a slave, but of a real human being.” Chudakov, in his biography, writes about how difficult it was for Chekhov to liberate himself from this slavish psychology, from the

THE DOCTOR AND THE PHILOSOPHER

Chekhov and Tolstoy, 1903. Early in his adult life, Chekhov was in awe of Tolstoy and respected his philosophy. But as he grew older he found he could not agree with Tolstoy’s glorification of the peasant (Chekhov, after all, had peasant blood, while Tolstoy’s was aristocratic blue), nor with his rejection of modern civilization, in particular medicine. Still, Chekhov greatly admired Tolstoy’s literary work and respected him as a crusader and a moralist. “I liked him,” Tolstoy wrote of Chekhov. “He is very talented and must have a kind heart, but up to now he has not revealed a definite point of view.”

all encompassing tendency to deceit. Chekhov was clearly a self-made man, a self-educated man.

“Chekhov came to literature from the sidelines, not from the ranks of the great intelligentsia... from where his contemporaries expected a new writer to arise.”

– Boris Eichenbaum

CHEKHOV WAS “A WRITER of universal social and stylistic scope,” wrote Chudakov, and there was hardly an estate, rank, post, age or profession which did not make an appearance in his prose. While it seemed to some that he wrote about trifles because he could not rise up to the level of great heroes or great problems, in fact few understood that Chekhov’s revelation consisted *exactly* of the fact that his typical heroes, in their normal everyday lives, revealed the significance and singularity of every moment of people’s lives, not just those exceptional times when they are on the



* Of course, as Chekhov biographer Donald Rayfield notes, Chekhov had not read Przhevalsky’s last book, in which he “advocated exterminating the inhabitants of Mongolia and Tibet, replacing them with Cossacks, and starting a war with China. What aroused Chekhov’s enthusiasm was the image of the lone traveller deserting family and friends, trekking to the ends of the earth to die.” [Anton Chekhov, by Donald Rayfield, p. 183-4.] Chekhov’s notes on crossing Siberia can be found in the Winter 2010 (#9) issue of *Chtenia*, and in the marvelous OneWorld Classics edition of Sakhalin Island, which also includes a superbly annotated translation of his notes on Sakhalin.



The writing lodge Chekhov had built at Melikhovo, alongside a cherry orchard. When he finished working, he would run a flag up the flagpole to signify that he was ready to socialize.

brink of a critical decision. This was also true, according to one of his contemporaries, in Chekhov's attitude toward the theater: "Everything on stage should be just as complex and, at the same time, as simple as in life. People eat, they simply eat, but at the same time their happiness is devised and their lives are shattered."

When Chekhov's heroes step out on the stage, they find it just as hard to understand one another as do the characters in his stories and *povesti*.^{*} Instead of worthwhile dialog, there is merely a conversation between deaf people. Witness the dialog between Polina Andreyevna and Dorn in the first act of *The Seagull*. In response to reproaches from a lovestruck woman, Dorn offers a line from a romantic song; in response to Dorn's observations on creativity, Treplev asks where Nina is; after Dorn says that one must take life seriously (in the second act), Masha stands up and says, "It must be time for lunch. My leg fell asleep..." And so on. Perhaps this method, characteristic of comedy from ancient times, is merely to underscore the play's subtitle: A Comedy in Four Acts. But of course it's not a play about method, but about how life is a comedy, a comedy where the heroes don't understand themselves, others, and life in general.

The Seagull debuted in St. Petersburg's Alexandrinsky Theater and bombed. It was booed by

the audience and the lead actress was so flustered she lost her voice. Schooled in the theatre of Ostrovsky, the actors tried to perform the play in the classical manner, contrary to what Chekhov intended. They focused on plot and intrigue. But then the play was brought to Moscow; the Moscow Art Theater focused on mood and character, and *The Seagull* was a hit.

Here is a scene from the first act of *The Seagull*:

TREPLEV: We are alone.

NINA: I think someone is there...

TREPLEV: There's no one.

They kiss

NINA: What sort of tree is that?

TREPLEV: Elm.

NINA: Why is it so dark?

TREPLEV: It's almost evening, so all things are getting darker. Don't leave early, I beg you.

NINA: I can't stay.

TREPLEV: And what if I come to your house, Nina? I will stand out in the garden all night and gaze at your window.

NINA: Don't, the guard will see you. Trezor is not used to you and will bark.

TREPLEV: I love you.

NINA: Shhh...



Chekhov wrote over 400 short stories, yet he is best known for three or four of his plays, which continue to be theatrical mainstays the world over, 150 years on. Perhaps because he was the first truly modern playwright. "Everything on stage should be just as complex and, at the same time, as simple as in life," Chekhov said. "People eat, they simply eat, but at the same time their happiness is devised and their lives are shattered."

Above, Chekhov reads *The Seagull* to the actors of the Moscow Art Theater, which would take the seagull as their mascot and symbol. At right, actress Alexandra Zakharova rehearses the role of Madame Ranevskaya (where she reads one of the telegrams from Paris – see page 34-35) in *The Cherry Orchard*, staged by Mark Zakharov.



For a concise biography of Chekhov, see "Chekhov Today," by Donald Rayfield, *Russian Life* May/June 2000.
 For a profile of Chekhov's home town of Taganrog, see "A Southern City By the Sea," by Alexandra Shcherbina, *Russian Life* Nov/Dec 2005.

Chekhov does not have positive or negative characters. There is no conflict on the surface, but everywhere there is subtext.

The heroes talk of a tree, but they are speaking of love. Thus does the Chekhovian subtext appear: that which is not expressed in words, but which exists in the depths of utterances, under and behind the words. In the dialog between Lopakhin and Varya in the fourth act of *The Cherry Orchard* this subtext is even more apparent:

Varya is looking not for her things, but for her place in life, and simply cannot find it.

VARYA: (Searching through her things.)
→ Strange, I can't seem to find it...

LOPAKHIN: What are you looking for?

VARYA: I put it away myself and can't remember where.

Their meeting has been arranged so that Lopakhin and Varya can sort out their relationship; Lopakhin's question reveals that this goal is unattainable; Varya will never find her place.

LOPAKHIN: So where will you go now,
→ Varvara Mikhailovna?

VARYA: Me? To the Ragulins... I've agreed to look after things for them... housekeeping, more or less.

Behind the empty and insignificant conversation is the impossibility of comprehension, connection.

LOPAKHIN: Is that in Yashnevo? That's 70
→ versts away. Well, life has come to an end in this house...

Said not only about the fact that people are leaving; life has passed them by.

VARYA: (Looking through her things.)
→ Where *could* it be... Maybe I put it in the trunk... Yes, life has come to an end in this house... and there will be no more...

LOPAKHIN: And I'm heading to Kharkov now... on the same train. Lots of
→ business. But I'm leaving Yepikhodov here to look after things... I hired him.

Thus Varya will not be running this household as his wife... in the third act she purposely threw the keys onto the floor.

VARYA: Really!

LOPAKHIN: We had snow by this time last year, if you recall, and now it's calm and sunny. Only a bit cold... Nearly three below freezing.

It's not the thermometer, but life which is broken.

→ VARYA: I hadn't noticed. (*Pauses*) Anyway, our thermometer broke.

Chekhov does not have positive or negative characters. There is no conflict on the surface; there is no fine dividing line between main and secondary characters. In *The Cherry Orchard* (Chekhov's final play), it is as if the characters shed light on one another, reflect each in the other. Thus, Carlotta says: "I so want to talk with someone, but there is no one... I have no one." These words could be said by almost any of the characters in the play.

Or there is the 87-year-old butler Firs, with his little

word "flibbertigibbet" (*nedotyopa*), which refers not just to Dunyasha or Yasha, because, in essence, all of the characters in *The Cherry Orchard* are to some degree or other flibbertigibbets, stuck in a rut, unable to figure things out.

There is another example. In reply to the estate owner Ranevskaya's line, "I am so glad that you're still alive," Firs answers "Day before yesterday." This is not an accidental answer, or the gibberish of a deaf man (as Ranevskaya avers). It is instead a pointed reference to the fact that for Ranevskaya, Gayev and Firs, everything is in the past, the day before yesterday. Everything is behind them.

Nothing goes right for the heroes of *The Cherry Orchard*, even Yepikhodov (who has the nickname "22 Misfortunes"). They want to send Firs to the hospital – Lyubov Andreyevna, Anya and Varya all worry about this – and yet they absentmindedly leave him behind in the battered, closed up old house, where he will die. Lopakhin decides to propose to Varya, but nothing comes of it. And, in the end, the eponymous cherry orchard, toward whose salvation endless schemes are proposed, is not saved. As the curtain descends, the stage direction indicates: "In the distance we hear a sound that seems to come from the sky, a sad sound, like a string snapping. It dies off. Everything grows quiet. We can hear the occasional sound of an axe on a tree."

There is however the interesting character Pishchik – he does in fact, at the very last moment, come up with money and pay down his debts. It is as if the landowner Pishchik is saying to the characters and to the audience, "It's okay, we'll think of something, life will go on. As with all the characters in the play, he has a strong belief in miracles, and a miracle in fact happens.

In Chekhov's plays, the real and symbolic are not sharply delineated. Any insignificant object can acquire the significance of a symbol, such as the telegrams from Paris in *The Cherry Orchard*. In the first act, Ranevskaya tears them up without reading them ("They're from Paris. I'm through with Paris."). In the second, she tears them up, but only after announcing that her lover "says he's sorry and wants me back." In the third, she tells Petya that she "supposes she should go back to Paris to be with him," and in the fourth and final act she returns to Paris. The movement of the objective detail signifies the "undercurrent" of the play:

the heroine's striving, unbeknownst even to herself, to free herself from her past, from the cherry orchard, from bitter memories...

How were Chekhov's early plays constructed, before *The Cherry Orchard*? Simply: arrival, the shot, departure. Here, nothing has changed. In fact, in the final play there is a rifle (Carlotta's) and a revolver (Yepikhodov's), yet not a single shot is fired.

Chekhov wrote of this to his wife, Olga Knipper, in 1903: "I feel that, no matter how boring it might be, there is something new in my play. And, by the way, throughout the play there is not a single gunshot."

In fact, the main thing about *The Cherry Orchard* is that it cannot return to where it began. In *The Seagull*, the characters re-commence their game of lotto; in *Uncle Vanya*, Vanya and Sonya set back down to work

on their management of the estate; in *The Three Sisters*, the heroines once again comfort one another. But in *The Cherry Orchard*, the orchard has been sold and a new, unpredictable life stretches in front of the characters. The play has an open ending.

Interestingly, Chekhov's stories and novellas of the 1880s and 1890s — "Ward Number 6," "The Seizure," "Ionych" — had closed endings. Yet in his stories "Lady With a Dog," and "The Fiancee" it is different: the ending is left open, ahead lies uncertainty, but not hopelessness. Apparently, Chekhov was at the start of some sort of new stage in his creative work, one that coincided with the beginning of the new century. But what that new work might have been like, we unfortunately will never know. Anton Pavlovich died of tuberculosis in 1904, at the age of just 44. **RL**



Yalta, 1901

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