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From left. Kate Valk, Peyton Smith, Roy Faudree, Willem Dafoe & Willem Dafoe,

CHEKHOV, OUR CONTEMPORARY

A CRITIC ARGUES THAT NO OTHER PLAYWRIGHT—NOT EVEN SHAKESPEARE—TELLS US MORE ABOUT THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

BY ROGER COPELAND



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Chris Kondek, Michaela Stumm, Paul Schmidt, Jeff Webster and Anna Köhler in the Wooster Group's *Brace Up!*, an adaptation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.

PAULA COURT

W.H. AUDEN ONCE PROPOSED THAT ALL GREAT works of art “exhibit two contradictory qualities, the quality of always-ness and the quality of now-ness.” When it comes to dramatic literature (as opposed to virtually every other form of art), there’s a long-standing consensus about whose body of work most successfully combines these two qualities. Jan Kott made this more or less official in 1961 with his immensely influential book *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*.

But Kott’s thesis has been widely misunderstood. He wasn’t just reasserting Shakespeare’s presumed immortality and universality. After all, Ben Jonson (who really *was* Shakespeare’s contemporary) had already praised his fellow Elizabethan as being “not of an age, but for all time!” And with regard to *our* time, Kott wasn’t writing yet another brief on behalf of freewheeling directorial interpretation (as the road to “relevance”). He wasn’t arguing that the only way to “make” Shakespeare our contemporary was to set *Richard III*

in Mussolini’s Italy or *The Merchant of Venice* in the final years of the Weimar Republic.

Kott’s argument was both subtler and more specific. His central insight sprang from T.S. Eliot’s startling suggestion that the art of the past is influenced by the present just as surely as the art of the present is influenced by the past. In other words, we can’t *help* but approach Shakespeare’s plays through the prism of the present. For Kott, writing in the late 1950s, this meant examining Shakespeare through a very bleak and brittle lens: the work of Samuel Beckett and the Absurdist (which is to say: Jan Kott’s immediate contemporaries). Accordingly, one of the most influential chapters in his book was titled “*King Lear* or *Endgame*.”

By the time *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary* was translated into English in the early ’60s, Peter Brook had already put its central thesis to the test. In his 1962 production of *King Lear*, Brook approached Shakespeare’s play as if it had just been (re)written by Beckett. Brook

subsequently repaid his debt to Kott (with interest) by writing an introduction to the first English-language edition of *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary* in 1964.

A quarter-century later, Brook brought a similar historical consciousness to bear on Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. But this time around, he recrafted the Kottian lens into a pair of bifocals, permitting him to peer into Chekhov's world from two vantage points simultaneously: Shakespearean tragedy, on the one hand, and Beckettian tragic farce on the other.

Brook staged *The Cherry Orchard* in a vast "empty space," thereby dispensing with the "wall to wall" detail that had come to characterize Stanislavsky-inspired productions of the play. Without a roof over their heads or a protective barrier between indoors and outdoors, Chekhov's characters felt uprooted, cast adrift...as "un-housed" as Lear on the heath. In fact, Lear's description of Poor Tom ("Thou art the thing itself, unaccommodated man...") was equally applicable to Ranevskaya and her entourage.

Lear-like resonances were sometimes achieved simply by re-punctuating passages already there on the page. (In the new translation Brook commissioned from Elisaveta Lavrova, the aged servant Firs's final mumblings placed an unusually heavy emphasis on that most nihilistic of words "nothing," which appears more often in *Lear* than in any other Shakespeare play.)

Brook also capitalized on the fact that, even in the most conventional productions of *The Cherry Orchard*, Charlotta, the spunky, eccentric governess, can always be counted on to complain, "I don't know who I am or where I came from." As an orphan who grew up performing with a traveling circus, Charlotta prefigures (by half a century) Beckett's itinerant, vaudevillian tramps. Chekhov even anticipates Didi and Gogo's Chaplinesque antics with a carrot. According to his stage directions, immediately after Charlotta confesses that she doesn't know who her parents were (or even whether they were married), she nonchalantly pulls a cucumber out of her pocket and begins to munch on it. Brook pushed the parallels with *Godot* by having his Charlotta (the unforgettable Linda Hunt) substitute a carrot for the traditional Chekhovian cucumber.

By 1988, when Brook's *Cherry Orchard* was performed in New York at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's newly opened Majestic Theater (refurbished to resemble Brook's fashionably dilapidated Bouffes du Nord), Chekhov had already begun to vie with Shakespeare for the title of "our contemporary." Granted, Shakespeare still had a lock on what Auden called "always-ness." But with the approach of the new millennium, it was becoming increasingly clear that no other playwright—not even Shakespeare—tells us more about the way we live now, in the age of digital (dis)connectedness, than Anton Chekhov.

BUT HOW CAN THAT BE? CHEKHOV DIED IN 1904, SO, needless to say, none of his characters own smartphones, iPads or Kindles. They've never heard of blogging, selfies, instant messaging or Snapchat.

Nevertheless, there's something eerily, preternaturally *contemporary* about the way they interact with each other. Even when seated at the same dinner table, they rarely feel fully "present" to one another. They all seem to practice the sort of "continuous partial attention" that's become the new normal for denizens of the digital age. Chekhov's characters are never more alone than when they're together.

Alone Together! Has anyone ever come up with a better name for a book about Chekhov? Unfortunately, that exact title has already been taken. Not by a literary critic, but by an MIT professor of digital technology, Sherry Turkle, who used it as the title of her 2012 book about the essentially unsocial nature of social media. But more than 100 years earlier, Chekhov had already dramatized a social landscape in which "connectedness" has little to do with E.M. Forster's famous admonition: "Live in fragments no longer. Only connect."

Digital technology may have exacerbated the problem. But, as Chekhov would be quick to remind us, the human capacity for disconnection preceded the iPhone by several millennia. In fact, Chekhov might have responded to Forster with his own aphorism reading, "To be human is to dis-connect." That's why Chekhov is giving Shakespeare a run for his money with regard to "always-ness" as well. Whether it's *Stupid Fucking Bird*, Aaron Posner's cheerfully irreverent derangement of *The Seagull*; Christopher Durang's charming, omnipresent pastiche *Vanya and Sonya and Masha and Spike*; or Mikhail Baryshnikov's haunting portrait of introversion in Big Dance Theater's *Man in a Case*, one or another variation on Chekhov has become part of the very air we breathe.

Not bad for a dramatist who, when he died in 1904, had only completed five major plays and who predicted that the shelf life of those plays would not exceed seven years. Even more modestly, Chekhov was unable to imagine that any of his plays might eventually be performed outside of Russia. But today, the sheer hunger for (more) Chekhov has inspired a wide range of artists to devise strategies for transforming relative scarcity into super-abundance: Sarah Ruhl, David Mamet, Anne Baker, Tracy Letts, Tom Stoppard, Brian Friel, Jean-Claude van Itallie, David Hare, Emily Mann and Trevor Griffiths are just a few of the contemporary dramatists who've created new English translations or adaptation of Chekhov's plays. And if you factor in the countless deconstructions, reconstructions and "meditations on" Chekhov's work—some of them brilliant (like dreamthinkspeak's *Before I Sleep*), some merely fanciful [see sidebar, page 31], then Chekhov may turn out to be the most frequently produced playwright in New York and London over the past 15 years (a.k.a. the 21st century so far!).

ONE OF THE EARLIEST PRODUCTIONS TO EXPLORE THE connection between Chekhov and uniquely contemporary forms of disconnection was the Wooster Group of New York City's 1991 high-tech adaptation of *The Three Sisters*, retitled *Brace Up!*

When Andrei (Willem Dafoe) proposed marriage to Natasha (Anna Köhler), the two actors weren't onstage together in the con-



Linda Hunt in *The Cherry Orchard* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

MARTHA SVOPE

ventional sense. Dafoe was there live, seated at an upstage table. But his bride-to-be was a talking head on a video monitor.

Of course, by the early '90s, juxtapositions of live action and video projection had become a key component of almost every Wooster Group production. But in *Brace Up!*, the conversations between live and virtual performers served a peculiarly Chekhovian purpose—emphasizing the multiple ways in which characters like Andrei and Natasha are both present and absent to one another simultaneously. The sound of their conversation was convincingly realistic (indeed, downright Stanislav-

other playwright has dramatized more modes of miscommunication and interruption, leading to self-absorption.

It's not that Chekhov was an early incarnation of Marshall McLuhan, or that he set out in any conscious way to dramatize the impact of new technologies on human behavior. Then again, it *is* true that in 1886 Chekhov published a very short story titled "U Telefona," or "On the Telephone." This comic sketch depicted—with remark-



COURTESY OF PIG IRON



LISA TOMASETTI

Clockwise from top left: Pig Iron's *Chekhov Lizardbrain*; Richard Roxburgh and Cate Blanchett in Sydney Theatre Company's *Uncle Vanya*; Susan Hyon and Greig Sargeant in Target Margin Theater's *Uncle Vanya*.

skian), but the *sense* suggested something else entirely: a gap between them that felt unbridgeable, mediated by media.

Ezra Pound once described great artists as "the antennae of the race." Is it possible that Chekhov, Wooster artistic director Elizabeth LeCompte and the cast of *Brace Up!* were—however unwittingly—performing the sort of prophetic public service Pound had in mind?

The first commercial Internet Service Providers came into being in the early 1990s. Thus, the years during which the Wooster Group performed ever-evolving iterations of *Brace Up!* (1991 to 1994) were the very years that we, as a society, went online. To be even more specific, in '92, a librarian named Jean Polly published an article titled "Surfing the Internet"—and the phrase stuck. A year later, snail mail found itself competing with e-mail.

Aided and abetted by the arrival of smartphones in '94 (and the temptations of multitasking), our relations with one another underwent a profound metamorphosis: We developed ever more subtle ways of dividing our attention (and sometimes our very identities) between the world online and the world offline. As our lives became more digitally saturated, we pioneered whole new frontiers of distraction, inattention and disengagement.

We became, in other words, more and more like the characters Chekhov had created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. No



SUE KESSLER

able powers of prognostication—how easily our growing dependence on even the simplest varieties of communications technology can unleash havoc when our "signals" get crossed, scrambled. Here a caller, attempting to place a phone reservation with a busy restaurant, finds herself misdirected to—and misconnected with—an infuriating array of wrong numbers. Chekhov concludes his sketch (a mere 800

words) with the phrase "Continuation ad infinitum." Beckett would surely have appreciated both the brevity of the story and Chekhov's suggestion that what we've just read is merely the first in an endless series of repetitions.

Is there an earlier or more revealing reference to Alexander Graham Bell's invention anywhere in world literature? And is the frustration at the core of "U Telefona" significantly different from the "Can you hear me now?" mishegas that characterizes our lives today? ("Continuation ad infinitum.") Poor reception, of one variety or another, has become contemporary shorthand for the complexity and unreliability of communications technologies more generally. But it's also an apt description of the many ways in which Chekhov's characters fail to "hear" one another.

This idea figured prominently in Hungarian director Tamás Ascher's recent production of *Uncle Vanya* for the Sydney Theatre Company of Australia. By transposing his *Vanya* to mid-1950s Soviet Russia, Ascher was able to assign a minor role an onstage radio. This vintage Soviet radio-gramophone was handled as a prop by the actor playing Telegin, a dispossessed landowner (nicknamed

“Waffles” because of his pockmarked face). In Ascher’s production the radio was one of poor Waffles’s prized possessions, one of the few “luxury items” he still owned. But it’s not for nothing that *Vanya* is set in the provinces. The subtitle of the play is “scenes from country life,” which all but guarantees that its action takes place far from the nearest urban broadcast center. Inevitably, the radio’s reception is at best intermittent.

The sounds emanating from the radio seemed to mimic the speech patterns of its owner. Waffles’s verbal interjections always seem to come at precisely the wrong moment; his awkward attempts at small talk are either embarrassingly inappropriate or completely off topic. Frequently they resemble the non sequiturs uttered by the Smiths and the Martins in *The Bald Soprano*, and it’s probably no coincidence that Ascher has directed Ionesco’s play a number of times.

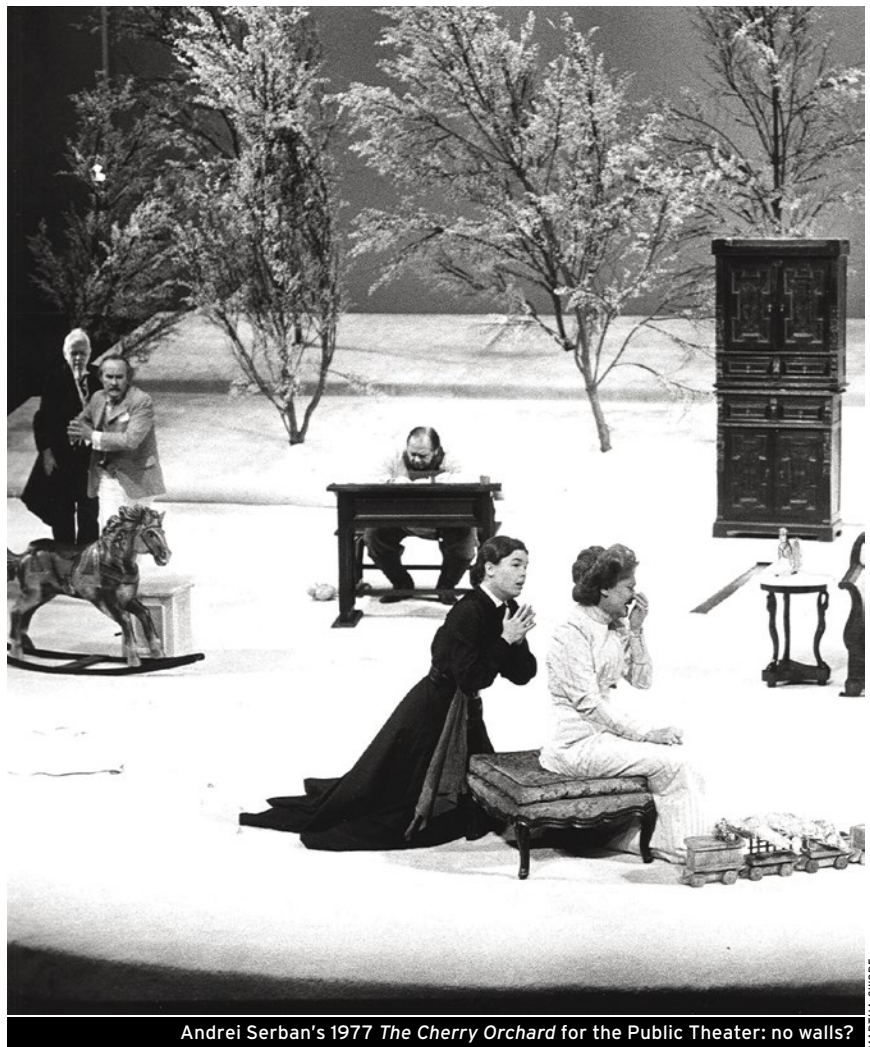
A FEW MONTHS BEFORE ASCHER’S

Vanya was performed in New York (as part of the 2012 Lincoln Center Festival), David Herskovits and his experimental Target Margin Theater staged a radical rethinking of the play in which the metaphor of “poor reception” was carried to pathological extremes. More a meditation on *Vanya* than a straightforward production of the play, Target Margin’s staging explored the idea that what ails Chekhov’s characters is something more—and indeed, something more serious—than a mere “failure to communicate.”

In this production, Chekhov’s characters weren’t just ill at ease. Their social awkwardness bordered on *dis*-ease, or at the very least some sort of developmental *dis*-order. In fact, the program notes for the production explicitly suggest that the speech habits of the characters bear a family resemblance to several neurolinguistic disorders such as “expressive aphasia” (which manifests itself in grammatical errors, repetitive stutters, inconsistent verb tenses and “telegraphic” speech patterns). Under Herskovits’s direction, the characters were always out of sync with one another; physically as well as vocally, something was always off. Attempts at conversation often resembled bad transatlantic phone calls from the pre-fiber-optic era. Pauses were invariably too long or too short.

Their physical interactions were similarly off-kilter, either too close (“in your face”) or too distant. Even the curtain call was disoriented—the actors took their bows on a series of diagonals, thereby avoiding direct eye contact with the audience. Such antisocial behaviors raised an uncomfortable question: Are Chekhov’s characters borderline autistic?

The members of the adventurous Philadelphia-based Pig Iron Theatre Company seem to think so. Their extraordinary 2008 theatre piece *Chekhov Lizardbrain* explores Chekhov by way of autism, and vice versa. The show takes place within the claustrophobic confines of a singular mind, in this case that of a character named Dmitri, a high-functioning but severely autistic botanist who feels much more at home in the company of plants than of other human beings. Indeed, the question of what it means to be at home (with oneself, in



Andrei Serban's 1977 *The Cherry Orchard* for the Public Theater: no walls?

MARTHA SWOPE

society, or on the street where you once lived) is one of queries that animates this eccentric rumination on Chekhov.

Dmitri fondly recalls the time he spent as a child playing with three friends who were brothers. Their childhood home has come up for sale, and the plot (if we can call it that) of *Chekhov: Lizardbrain* focuses on Dmitri’s determined efforts to purchase the real estate where his most comforting memories are housed. Imagine a mashup of *Three Sisters* and *Cherry Orchard* as told by Temple Grandin.

Activist Grandin, who is quoted in the program notes, was diagnosed with autism at the age of two and eventually devoted much of her life to studying the way animals think. Dmitri is similarly obsessed with studying the way plants “think.” What matters most about *Chekhov Lizardbrain* is not Dmitri’s personal history per se, but rather the disjointed way the specific details of the story are filtered through his autistic mind. In its own way, Dmitri’s fragmented storytelling is profoundly Chekhovian. As Virginia Woolf once said of Chekhov: “The leap from one thought to another was so wide as to produce a sense of dangerous dislocation.”

There are, to be sure, many characters in Chekhov’s plays whose capacity for distraction and self-absorption would situate them on the autism spectrum. Perhaps Chekhov’s characters were canaries in the coal mine, alerting us to the dangerous possibility that our capacity for face-to-face interaction with other human beings is trending toward autism. We don’t usually think of Chekhov as one of those turn-of-the-century playwrights who consciously set out to diagnose what Matthew Arnold called “this strange disease of modern life.”

But perhaps we should. He was, after all, the only major playwright who also actively practiced medicine. Who better than Dr. Chekhov to take our collective temperatures? Is it mere coincidence that the years in which Chekhov has become “our contemporary” are the very years in which diagnoses of autism have skyrocketed—and also the years in which a whole spectrum of related behaviors have become alarmingly common? The symptoms now routinely lumped under the “autism umbrella” include the misreading of social cues, difficulty listening to others, fixated and/or repetitive activities, narrowing of focus, shrinking attention spans and, of course, the inability or unwillingness to look one another in the eye.

If nothing else, this would explain why companies like Target Margin and Pig Iron have approached Chekhov’s work from the vantage point of social pathology. But would Dr. Chekhov have agreed with their diagnoses?

Hard to say. But, at the very least, I suspect he’d be intrigued by one of the more exotic-sounding linguistic disorders Target Margin cites in its *Vanya* notes: The technical term is “anacoluthon,”

and it’s triggered by emotional states as various as excitement, confusion and laziness—all of which loom large in Chekhov’s plays. But the specific dimension of anacoluthon that would undoubtedly be of greatest interest to Chekhov is the fact that it’s associated with “dramatic monologues” and “stream of consciousness.”

This leads us to one of the most unique and underappreciated of Chekhov’s achievements: the subtle way in which he often blurs the distinction between dialogue and monologue.

Think of that sad, funny moment in Act 2 of *The Three Sisters* when poor, henpecked Andrei pours his heart out to the elderly (but nearly deaf) Ferapont—on the page, their exchange appears to be conventional, realistic dialogue:

ANDREI: Oh my dear old friend...Just out of boredom today, just out of idleness, I picked up this book, my old university lectures and I had to laugh...

FERAPONT: No idea... [what you’re saying]...I don’t hear too well.

ANDREI: Well...if you could hear properly, I don’t suppose I’d be talking to you.

Desperate to unburden himself, Andrei appears to be bending Ferapont’s ear. But poor old Ferapont has no ear to bend. What looks (and even sounds) at first like dialogue turns out to be something quite ambiguous.

Ironically, even the great ensemble sequences in Chekhov often consist of sequential interior monologues. This ongoing mental chatter rises and falls in volume as Chekhov’s words float in and out of each character’s consciousness. Think of the six-handed game of lotto in Act 4 of *The Seagull*. Outwardly, each character appears to be absorbed in the mechanics of holding, examining and dealing cards. But their verbal “dialogue” is more like multiple streams of consciousness, which sequentially reveal what each character is thinking—without so much as acknowledging the existence of the others.

Surely these exchanges have more in common with late Beckett than with any of the realists who were Chekhov’s more immediate contemporaries. In Beckett’s *Come and Go*, for example, three female characters are seated on a bench facing the audience. When one of them asks the others, “Shall we hold hands in the old way?”, it’s all but impossible not to think of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*. (That’s why it made perfect sense in 2010 for Orietta Crispino to devise and direct a mashup of both plays titled *The Three Sisters Come and Go*.)

This close kinship with Beckett is surely

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DEEPER INTO CHEKHOV

Here’s an exercise you can conduct for yourself: Search the web for Chekhov variations, adaptations, takeoffs, riffs, reinventions, call them what you will. This is just a sampler of the array of contemporary projects that pay homage in one way or another to the Russian master—and inhabit stages from storefronts and campuses to Broadway.

■ ***Thr3e Zisters*** by Lola Pierson and Yury Urnov, Jan–Feb. ’15, Salvage Vanguard Theater, Austin, Tex. The siblings are zombies, and the situation isn’t pretty.

■ ***Vodka Variations***, Feb. ’15, Department of Drama, University of Virginia. This self-described “spirited toast to Russian culture and Anton at his funniest” incorporated several Chekhov one-acts and short stories.

■ ***Uncle Jack*** by Michael Hammond, Feb.–March ’15, Boston Center for American Performance and Boston Playwrights’ Theatre. “An ingenious, close-hewing variation on *Uncle Vanya*” (Carolyn Clay) set in the Berkshires.

■ ***The Marriage*** by Wooden Actors theatre company, July ’14, New Zealand Fringe Festival. Three actors and nine puppets perform text inspired by Chekhov’s one-act *The Wedding*, in which there’s anticipation about the arrival of a general at a wedding. Here it’s country music superstar Willie Nelson.

■ ***The Country House*** by Donald Margulies, Oct.–Nov. ’14, Manhattan Theatre Club in association with Geffen Playhouse. A Chekhov-inspired drama that brought Blythe Danner back to Broadway.

■ ***There There*** by Kristen Kosmas, Coil Festival, Jan. ’13, P.S. 122, New York City. Solo show inspired by irascible minor character Vassily Vasilyevich Solyony from *Three Sisters*.

■ ***Café Variations*** by Charles Mee, directed by Anne Bogart, Arts Emerson, Boston, April ’12. Based on Chekhov’s major plays and set to Gershwin music, the show revolves around a waiter in love with the patron of a café.

■ ***El Nogalar*** by Tanya Saracho, Spring ’11, Goodman Theatre, Chicago. Loose adaptation of *The Cherry Orchard*, set against the bloody backdrop of Mexico’s drug wars. Saracho has been dubbed by critics “the Chicana Chekhov.”

■ ***The Nina Variations***, July ’10, Adequate Players, Washington, D.C. Forty-two variations (plus epilogue) featuring Nina and Constantin from *The Seagull*. “Overall, a fascinating exercise” (Stephanie Merry).

■ ***Three Sisters (On Ice)***, April–May ’06, adapted and directed by Jay O’Berski, Manbites Dog Theater, Durham, N.C. Adaptation “complete with hula, nymphomaniacs, Greco-Roman wrestlers, Bollywood musical numbers and, oh yes, ice” (Nicole Wuenelle).



Three Sisters at Salvage Vanguard Theater

ERICA NIX

one of many reasons Chekhov so readily qualifies as our contemporary. But if we really want to appreciate his profound modernity, we need to consider Chekhov in relation to his *own* contemporaries: the late-19th- and early-20th-century realists, who, to their credit, attempted to rid the boulevard theatre of its most egregious excesses and artifice, such as the cheap thrills of melodrama (what Wagner called “effects without causes”), exhibitionistic acting conventions, and the excessive “no-loose-ends” tidiness of the well-made play.

BUT CHEKHOV WAS ALSO

acutely aware of the way “realism” empties the theatrical tub of much more than histrionic bathwater. All overtly theatrical conventions—the chorus, the aside, the soliloquy—were also summarily thrown out, for fear that they might spoil the illusion at the heart of realism: the conceit that the actors and the spectators are separated by an invisible yet inviolable fourth wall.

But it was Chekhov’s special genius to reincorporate classical conventions (like the soliloquy) without undermining the basic premises or promises of realism. He knew full well that in the age of the fourth wall, the actors are expected to pretend that the audience isn’t really there.

How then to make sense of a character who brazenly faces the audience and addresses them directly? Isn’t that character “really” talking to himself or herself in public? Within the narrow confines of psychological realism, the only logical motivation for such behavior is mental instability.

This is the point at which Chekhov the dramatist meets Chekhov the doctor. Chekhov dramatizes the potentially unhealthy (if not pathological) consequences of extreme introversion.

It’s this aspect of the playwright that makes him feel so uncannily prescient with regard to our digitally dictated behavior in the early 21st century. After all, until quite recently, if we encountered someone “talking to himself” on the street, we simply took it for granted that he was a street person—a sad, probably homeless soul who had lost the ability to distinguish between monologue and dialogue. But today, in the age of the concealed Bluetooth, all such easy bets are off.

So, when Chekhov blurs the line



duction did not (necessarily) violate the most sacred of all realistic conventions: the illusion that the audience and the actors are separated by an imaginary fourth wall.

THE SAME HOWEVER, CANNOT

be said of the version *Cherry Orchard* directed by Andre Belgrader for New York City’s Classic Stage Company in 2011. This became abundantly clear just a few moments after the lights came up for the beginning of Act 2. Four characters were on stage: Charlotta, the eccentric governess, in the company of Yasha, Yephikodov and Dunyasha.

Charlotta (Roberta Maxwell) was doing what Chekhov’s characters do best—feeling sorry for herself. “I so long to talk to someone, but there’s no one to talk to. I haven’t got anyone.” The other characters remained oblivious to her laments. But Charlotta was more than willing to take matters into her own hands. Eyeing an unoccupied seat in the audience, she strode directly toward it, plopped herself down and began to chat up the startled spectators on either side. Clearly, this Charlotta, in search of verbal companionship, was willing to take whatever steps were necessary. But had she—stylistically—taken a step too far and crossed the line?

To Chekhovian purists, that bottom line is always the curtain line. But their argument proceeds from a faulty assumption: that an overly “theatrical,” fourth-wall-violating approach to this scene is unfaithful to the play Chekhov actually wrote. The more strictly “Stanislavskian” one’s approach to this scene, the more quickly one discovers that Chekhov was by no means a conventional realist.

Here we begin to see why the working relationship between Chekhov and Stanislavsky was often so contentious. Soon after walking out on the first performance of *The Cherry Orchard* at the Moscow Art Theatre, Chekhov angrily declared, “Stanislavsky has ruined my play.” This wasn’t the first time Stanislavsky’s obsessive attention to realistic detail had driven the playwright up the wall. What recent productions like Belgrader’s make evident is that the “wall” Stanislavsky drove him up (and perhaps over) was, in fact, that fourth wall.

And once you’ve abolished it, is it still necessary to realistically represent the other

between monologue and dialogue, it is sometimes for the purpose of signifying anti-social behavior—but not always. There are plenty of other occasions when Chekhov reincorporates conventions like the soliloquy for purely aesthetic reasons, thereby reclaiming for dramatic literature some of the overt theatricality that realism had jettisoned in the name of verisimilitude. And if there’s been a single directorial practice that links many of the most adventurous recent productions of Chekhov—both avant-garde and mainstream—it’s a new willingness not only to acknowledge that the plays *contain* soliloquies, but to actually *stage* these soliloquies *as* soliloquies.

Consider the way Russian director Lev Dodin handled Vershinin’s utopian musings toward the end of Act 3 in the Maly Drama Theatre’s production of *The Three Sisters*. Vershinin is one of those classic Chekhovian characters who desperately needs to believe in the inevitability of progress, if only as a hedge against the bleakness of his own circumstances (e.g., “What a life it’s *going* to be, surely, what a life!...”). Traditionally, Vershinin delivers his philosophical pep talk to Masha and Irina. But here, the actor playing Vershinin (Igor Chernevich) not only faced the audience—he seemed to be confiding in us. He even appeared to know who we were: 21st-century middle-class theatregoers, time-travelers from the very future he was so determined to idealize. No wonder his cockeyed optimism deflated right before our eyes.

Chekhovian traditionalists—those eager to preserve their image of Chekhov as a great psychological realist—can therefore breathe a sigh of relief, reassured that the Maly’s pro-

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three walls? Belgrader obviously didn't think so; otherwise he wouldn't have staged the play in "three-quarters round" at a venue like CSC.

The litmus test of whether or not this approach was at odds with Chekhov's play came in Act 4 when Dianne Wiest as Ranevskya paused to take one last look at her childhood nursery, a room flush with conflicting memories of comfort and loss. Without a single solid wall anywhere in sight, Wiest murmured softly, "If these walls could talk."

A generation ago, that might have proved dangerous. The discrepancy between word and image could easily have turned unintentionally comic. But by 2010, Belgrader's decision to liberate Chekhov from the confines of the traditional box set no longer felt like "out of the box" thinking.

Then again, things were quite different back in 1977 when I had my first "Chekhov Without Walls" experience. This was Andrei Serban's game-changing production of the Public Theater's *Cherry Orchard*, performed at Lincoln Center. Serban, who had emigrated to the U.S. from Romania eight years earlier, didn't just eliminate wall-to-wall scenery, as Brook would do five years later in Paris. Serban set the play in a vast dreamscape of seemingly infinite depth, the sort of decentralized space that Robert Wilson had designed a year earlier at the Met for his epochal collaboration with Philip Glass, *Einstein on the Beach*.

But this was still a full decade before Brook's "empty space" version of the play toured to New York; and the Lincoln Center audience wasn't ready yet for the cognitive dissonance that arose when Irene Worth as Ranevskaya—dwarfed against the open-ended space—insisted on taking "one last look at these walls." There were audible giggles. But, when contrasted with Belgrader's production in 2010, it's also a clear indication of how drastically our ideas about Chekhov have changed over the past 40 years.

I CAN'T SAY FOR SURE THAT SERBAN

was influenced by *Einstein on the Beach* the year before; but the very idea that Chekhov *could* be approached by way of a nonliterary theatre artist like Wilson opened up additional dimensions of the play. This was—at least in my experience—the first production of *The Cherry Orchard* to fully embody the subterranean poetry in Chekhov's evoca-

tive description of the "atmosphere" he envisions for Act 2 of the play: "On one side rise dark poplars; and there the cherry orchard begins. In the distance, a row of telegraph poles and far, far away on the horizon, there is faintly outlined a great town, only visible in very fine, clear weather."

Utilizing every inch of the Beaumont's vast thrust stage, Serban captured what Chekhov means by the words "far, far away on the horizon."

Here, for once, was a successful attempt to grapple with what Chekhov meant by that most elusive of catchphrases, "atmosphere." When, to cite but one example, Chekhov tells us that the sun is about to set and that the characters are in a "reflective" mood, he prepares us for the lethargy and drift that will inform the way his words are spoken.

The air is so thick with heat and humidity that even the slightest physical exertion meets with "atmospheric" resistance. The sense of idleness, being stuck, takes its toll on the characters' rhythms of speech. A sentence will begin clearly and confidently, but then—out of sheer indolence (or the suspicion that no one is really listening)—will drift away, sinking into a less audible, more private mode of self-address. Everything related to human will—conviction, focus, volume, clarity—evaporates into the muggy air. The resulting drowsiness produces one of those liminal states of being: not quite asleep, not quite awake, and certainly not fully alert.

No other playwright has ever specified such a wide variety of nonverbal sounds to be created by the actors themselves between (or in place of) words: These include coughs, throat-clearings, sighs, giggles, absent-minded humming, whistling, yodeling and, of course, sobs, shrieks and audible hyperventilation.

Annie Baker made a related discovery while researching and adapting the Russian text of *Uncle Vanya* for a Soho Rep production two years ago. In a *New York Times* interview she mentions what a "huge revelation" it was to learn that the Russian text is riddled with ellipses, sentence fragments and filler. Baker singles out words like "tak" and "nu," rough equivalents of "um" and "er." Her biggest reservation about most English translations and adaptations is that these hesitations, interruptions and nonverbal sounds have been "weirdly translated into full sentences with periods."

BOTH LITERALLY AND FIGURATIVELY,

Chekhov is the most prosaic of all great playwrights. That may not sound like much of a compliment, but I mean it as the highest praise. Shakespeare comes very close to convincing us that words can both say and do virtually anything—he can even translate "silence" into words: In the opening scene of *Lear*, Cordelia's "Nothing, my lord" is really Shakespeare's verbalization of her refusal to speak. If that scene were to be paraphrased into prose, she would simply remain silent.

But that's one of the many reasons we need to supplement Shakespeare with Chekhov, if only because Chekhov continually reminds us that there is much that cannot be said, or cannot at least be said in words. The essence of Chekhov's artistry, unlike Shakespeare's, is not concentrated in the language his characters speak.

Let's face it: A list of great quotations from Chekhov's plays would be a short list. But that's only because so much of what he dramatizes lies between or beyond the words, or in the vast array of nonverbal sounds that punctuate any good production of his plays.

Then again, when I praise Chekhov as the most prosaic of playwrights, I'm not just alluding to the fact that, unlike Shakespeare, his characters speak in prose rather than poetry. The more important fact is that Chekhov's characters *live* in prose rather than poetry. No one—not even Shakespeare—has dramatized that gap more effectively than Anton Pavlovich Chekhov.

Shakespeare may be better than anyone at dramatizing the highs and the lows, the peaks and the valleys, not to mention the rollercoaster ride that carries his characters from one extreme to the other. But there's another dimension of the ride that Chekhov is better at: the middle of the journey, the prose passages, where we spend most of our lives. Chekhov is better than Shakespeare at dramatizing what Freud called the "ordinary, everyday unhappiness" of human beings. And if we want access to the fullest possible range of human experience, we cannot live by Shakespeare alone. ■

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