

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov



Life and Works

Brenda Huggins, Dramaturg

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Chekhov: Life and Works

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Chekhov the Playwright

Chekhov is one of the most important playwrights in all of Western drama. His name has been linked with those of Molière, Schiller, and Shakespeare for the impact his work has had on the history of theatre.

The content and dramatic technique of Chekhov's four masterpieces, *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard* inaugurated fundamental changes not only in the way plays are composed but in the way they are acted, a revolution that persists to this day.



Chekhov: Biography

Chekhov family and friends in 1890. (*Top row, left to right*) Ivan, Alexander, Father; (*second row*) unknown friend, Lika Mizinova, Masha, Mother, Seryozha Kiselev; (*bottom row*) Misha, Anton.



Chekhov: Biography

- Born on the 17th of January, 1860 at Taganrog. Father: Pavel Chekhov a business man and musician, Mother: Yevgeniaya. (one of six Children)
- Entered Moscow University to study Medicine in 1879.
- Began to publish stories and writings during his first year of school to help support his family.

“I have no doubt that the study of medicine has had an important influence on my literary work; it has considerably enlarged the sphere of my observation, has enriched me with knowledge the true value of which for me as a writer can only be understood by one who is himself a doctor.” - Letter to G. I. ROSSOLIMOYALTA, October 11, 1899.

Chekhov: Biography

- He moved to St. Petersburg in **1885** where he practiced Medicine and met A. S. Souvorin, editor of the journal *Novoe vremja*, who encouraged the young writer to develop his writing.
- In **1892**, Chekhov bought the small country estate of Melikhovo, about forty miles south of Moscow, where he lived with his family.
- March **1897**, Chekhov suffers a major hemorrhage of the lungs while on a visit to Moscow and, is diagnosed with tuberculosis and moves to Yalta with his mother and sister.

Chekhov and the M.A.T.

- Director and co-founder of the Moscow Art theatre, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko approaches Chekhov after seeing his production of *The Seagull* at the Alexandrinsky theatre in St. Petersburg (although it was not well received)
- In 1898, *The Seagull* was produced by the M.A.T. as part of their inaugural season.

“I can remember that I was terrified sitting there in the dim light with my back to the audience during Nina's monologue and that I unobtrusively held my leg which was nervously twitching.”

-C. S. Stanislavsky

Chekhov and the M.A.T.

- *Uncle Vanya*: 1899.
- *Three Sisters*: 1901.
- *The Cherry Orchard*: 1904

“He saw the life of a man as the meaningful and at the same time pathetic, ludicrous and tragic attempt to bridge this gap.”

“Chekhov was very conscious of the existential loneliness of the human condition. In fact, the central theme of all his plays is estrangement.”-*Masterpieces of the Modern: Russian Theatre*

Chekhov and Olga Knipper

- Chekhov married M.A.T. actress in 1901.
- He wrote the roles of Masha in *Three sisters* and Madame Ranevskaya in *The Cherry Orchard* for her.
- Knipper-Chekhova spent her time in Moscow while Chekhov lived in Yalta due to his health.
- The complete Chekhov-Knipper correspondence was translated into English in the collection "Dear Writer, Dear Actress"

“As I write I look out of an enormous window with a very extensive view, so magnificent it cannot be described. I shan't send you my photograph until I get yours, you serpent! I wouldn't think of calling you a “snake,” as you say; you are a great big serpent, not a little snake. Now, isn't that flattering? Well my dear, I press your hand, send my profound compliments and knock my forehead against the floor in worship, my most respected lady. I am sending you another present soon.”

-Yalta: September 30, 1899



Chekhov and the Modern Theatre

- Chekhov banished the old concept of “theatre” and preferred to have fewer conventions of the melodrama.
- “He painted pictures from life, not plays for the stage”- C.S. Stanislavski, *Stanislavski's Legacy*
- Chekhov changed the style of drama in the use of "indirect action," where dramatic events are not show on stage. Characters instead reflect on unseen events, intermingled with discussions of daily affairs and seemingly random observations.
- In reference to *The Seagull*, “I began it *forte* and ended it *pianissimo*-contrary to all the rules of dramatic art.” -*Chekhov, 1895. In a letter to A.S. Souvorin.*

Chekhov and the Modern Theatre

- This new drama required new acting techniques.
- “This all gave rise to methods of interpretation quite unknown before Chekhov. Chekhov's characters cannot be “shown,” they can only be lived.”-C.S. Stanislavsky.
- “Suffering ought to be expressed as it is expressed in life- Subtle emotions of the soul in educated people must be subtly expressed in an external way.”- Chekhov, Letter to O.Knipper. January 2, 1900.

Chekhov and the Modern Theatre

- Chekhov was very involved in the casting and approach to characters of his plays.
- November 2, 1903- Chekhov writes a letter to Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko concerning each of the roles in *The Cherry Orchard*.



From Theatre Arts Magazine

THE CLIMAX OF ACT III IN TCHEHOFF'S "THE CHERRY ORCHARD," AT THE MOSCOW ART THEATRE

Primary Sources and Culture

- “At eight o'clock a shrill hand-bell called the audience to the first performance-*Uncle Vanya*.”
 - C.S. Stanislavski, *Stanislavski's Legacy*
- In the matter of Russian names:

Russian names consist of three parts:

 - (1) Given Name (2) Patronymic name (ending in itch for men and vna for women), and the (3) Family Name.
 - Strangers would use a family name when addressing someone, friends of the same rank use given name plus patronymic name, more intimate relations use given name or a nickname.

Primary Sources and Culture

- Example found in *Three Sisters*:
 - Tusenbach first calls Alexander Ignatyevitch Vershinin by his family name, but later calls him “Alexander Ignatyevitch” instead of “Vershinin.”
 - The nurse Anifsa calls Olga, Masha and Irina “Olya”, “Mashenka”, and “Irisha” because she has known them since their childhood.

Primary Sources and Culture

- Another example from *Three Sisters*:
 - At the beginning of the play, Irina observes not her birthday, but the feast of the saint whose name she bears.
- On *The Cherry Orchard*:
 - “It is not a comedy, not a farce, as you wrote- it is a tragedy no matter if you do indicate a way out into a better world in the last act. I can hear you say: “But please, this is a farce...” No, for the ordinary person this is a tragedy.”-C.S. Stanislavski

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

1860-1904



Resources

Internet:

1. Letters of Chekhov to family and friends

-<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/c/chekhov/anton/c511t/>

2. enotes

-<http://www.enotes.com/drama-criticism/pavlovich-anton-chekhov>

3. Chekhov world

-<http://www.chekhovworld.com/biblio.shtml>

Books:

1. Bain, Carle. The Norton Introduction to Literature: Drama. Toronto: Norton & Company, Inc, 1973.

2. Corrigan, Robert W. Masterpieces of the Modern: Russian Theatre. New York: Macmillan Company, 1967.

3. Stanislavski, Constantin. Stanislavski's Legacy. New York: Routledge, 1958.