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A False Tradition? Chekhov and the Moscow Art Theatre

Auf das verbreitete Bild eines Dramatikers kann das Akzidenz der Inszenierung nicht nur als bestimmendes, sondern nicht selten auch als verheerendes Moment wirken. Im Hinblick auf Cechov geht eine Vielzahl von Fehldeutungen auf die Uraufführungen des Moskauer Künstlertheaters zurück; so wurde das Verständnis von Cechov als eines Naturalisten wie auch das Hervorheben der *nastroenie* (Stimmung), der Pausen und der angeblichen Handlungslosigkeit in erster Linie durch die Bühnenpraxis Stanislawskis geprägt. Trotz Cechovs eigener Vorbehalte sind diese Inszenierungen nicht allein in Rußland, sondern in aller Welt zum Vorbild geworden. Hierin liegt eine bedenkliche Ironie: denn nach der Oktoberrevolution kamen sowohl Cechov als auch das Künstlertheater außer Mode, und als das Künstlertheater sich erneut mit Cechov befaßte, ging es darum, die anderswo bereits als klassisch und wegweisend empfundenen Inszenierungen nach sowjetischen Richtlinien umzugestalten. Mit der Erörterung dieses Verfahrens eröffnet sich die breitere Frage: wie ist das dramatische Werk weiterzugeben, nachdem die den Originalinszenierungen zugrundeliegenden Gedanken an Wirkungskraft eingebüßt haben und ein verändertes Rezeptionsklima eingesetzt hat? Unter welchen Voraussetzungen läßt sich das vermeintliche Wesen eines Dramatikers auch in Neuinszenierungen bewahren?

There is a not-very-old saying in the American theatre (in fact, I made it up) that »To do something twice constitutes a tradition.« It may take longer, but theatrical tradition, whether of a style of performance or a set version of a text, rapidly establishes codes which alter in significance as the audience undergoes change. These codes, now devalued or even devoid of value, can take on an almost totemic prestige and accrue around a play like barnacles on a hull. Not infrequently this rigid and congealed tradition distorts the idiosyncratic shape of the original work.

This has been especially the case with the major plays of Anton Chekhov. From their earliest stage history, they have been associated with the techniques of the Moscow Art Theatre and, specifically, of Konstantin Stanislavsky. There is a wry irony in this, for Chekhov deeply distrusted the stage of his time and doubted whether his serious works could be adequately realized by it. Throughout his early plays (with the exception of the one-act farces), there is a tension between the need to conform to contemporary

stage convention and the desire to innovate, to find a new scenic language in which to express his particular insights. Such works as *Ivanov*, *The Wood Demon* and *The Seagull* are imperfect precisely because of this unresolved tension. They were also written at a time when Chekhov lived in the capitals, Moscow and St. Petersburg, closely involved in the day-to-day activities of theatres; he wrote with certain persons in mind and often revised in order to correct the misapprehensions evoked by a performance.

However, the masterpieces *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, although composed directly for the Moscow Art Theatre and its players, were written at a far remove, as he nursed his tuberculosis in Yalta. The Chekhovian vision they embody was formulated at a distance from the pragmatic requirements of a theatre (although Chekhov did eventually make alterations at Stanislavsky's request), and he was deeply dismayed to find that his notions of comedy, even farce, were played as lachrymose drama. Shortly before his death in 1904, he even projected a play that would have been beyond the scope of the MAT. It was to feature an Arctic explorer haunted by the ghost of his beloved and a ship would be seen crushed by ice floes.

Yet the accident of his association with the Moscow Art Theatre has helped to define the term »Chekhovian« as it takes shape in the popular imagination. It can be argued that Chekhov was co-opted by the MAT, which managed to package him so as to make him acceptable to the public of his time. In so doing, however, it often ran counter to his own wishes and intentions. Most appraisals of Chekhov's plays make reference to qualities which were not attributed to him until those plays had become familiar in MAT stagings. For example, the term *nastroenie* (mood, atmosphere) that so often characterizes the ethos of a Chekhov play, was one he himself never used in this respect. The earliest citation that I can trace occurs in a letter of Nemirovich-Danchenko to Chekhov during preparations for the MAT *Seagull* (31 May 1898): »I keep re-reading *The Seagull*, searching for those little bridges which the director must make the audience cross, without becoming mechanical. The public is not yet able (and perhaps never will be) to yield to the *nastroenie* of a play.« In other words, Nemirovich-Danchenko (and Stanislavsky as well) believed mood to constitute the ultimate effect a play has on an audience. In this regard, they were post-Wagnerians, using a darkened auditorium, affective sound and a consistent *Gesamtkunstwerk* to impose their unified artistic impression on the spectator. Chekhov himself had no such mystical aspirations. Note too that Nemirovich was anxious to find means to induce the spectator to share this mood; despite frequent disclaimers, the MAT was always aware of the need to *ménager* its audience.

Similarly, there is the common notion that the pause is characteristically »Chekhovian.« Of course by the time Chekhov wrote his last four plays,

Maeterlinck had already pointed the way as an exploiter of pregnant silence, and Chekhov admired him. But if one compares the sparse number of pauses in Chekhov's texts with the superabundant number of pauses in Stanislavsky's *Regiebücher*, it becomes clear that the writer was using them as seasoning, the director as main course. The result was that in a Moscow Art Theatre production everything is framed and stressed equally, slowing down the movement so that each moment can receive full value. Yet if, as Jurij Striedter has stated, Chekhov needs time, the time must elapse in the incubation of the production, not necessarily in its performance. Chekhov himself complained bitterly that the MAT was massacring his last acts by dragging them out.

The most frequent statement about Chekhov's plays is that they have no action, but again this is a misreading, derived from Stanislavsky's approach. (Significantly, it is a complaint heard more often from foreign critics exposed to MAT-style performances and not to be found in the early Russian critics, who were cognizant of an indigenous and non-Aristotelian tradition of drama.) Chekhov does not omit action, he displaces it: his plays are filled with suicide, both successful and failed, murder (failed), plays-within-plays, an auction, parties, a fire, a regimental departure, a duel, frequent comings and goings. Compared with such precursors as Becque's *La Parisienne* or Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* or Bjornson's *Over A vne* (which Chekhov liked but said was unstageworthy precisely because it had »no action, no living characters, no dramatic interest«), Chekhov's plays are virtually operatic. However, Chekhov displaces his action offstage or during the interval or, more significantly, equates violent physical actions with the ambient trivia and minutiae of everyday life, to present a more even-handed picture of human existence and its values. He does not go so far as Maeterlinck does in *Le Trésor des humbles* to claim that what goes on in the mind of an old man sitting alone by a lamp is more meaningful than the tumultuous behavior of a deceived husband. Rather, Chekhov will juxtapose the old man by the lamp with the jealous husband or even conflate them (Serebryakov in *Uncle Vanya*), so that these different facets of human behavior comment on one another. The so-called »lack of action,« then, was another impression gleaned from the MAT staging.

Stanislavsky, as he admits in his memoirs *My Life in Art*, did not like nor understand *The Seagull* when he was first given it to direct in 1898. The »lack of action« bothered him in particular; so he composed a score (*partitura*) that compensated for standard »action« with a host of trivialities, sound effects and sub-text to create *nastroenie*. At this period in his artistic development, his approach to staging *The Seagull* differed little from his direction of historical drama. He sought in contemporary Russian life the same picturesque groupings, the same telling mannerisms, the same portentous

pauses that had enthralled audiences when he reconstructed seventeenth-century Muscovy or Renaissance Venice. Rather than inquiring closely into Chekhov's meaning, Stanislavsky took the play to be a romantic melodrama. As late as 1924, he insisted that Nina was an innocent ruined by that »scoundrelly Lovelace« Trigorin, and Treplev a misunderstood Byronic genius, the hero of the piece. Chekhov was experimenting with multiple protagonists, but Stanislavsky reduced them to one. Nor did Stanislavsky try organically to elicit performances from the actors. Their every move, reaction and intonation was prescribed in his score and learned by rote.

Chekhov was less than ecstatic with the result. Although he had insisted that Stanislavsky play Trigorin, he found that the actor made him too elegant and formal; he detested Roksanova's Nina, far preferring the more luminous interpretation Kommissarzhevskaya had given at the allegedly »failed« première in St. Petersburg two years earlier. Whatever his misgivings, though, the audience of intelligentsia took to it precisely because, for the first time, »the way we live now« was subjected to the same careful counterfeit presentment that had hitherto been applied only to the colorful past. The spectators beheld their own tics and heard their own tones of voice meticulously copied.

The MAT was quick to capitalize on this success by adopting Chekhov as its house playwright and affixing a Jugendstil seagull to its drop-curtain and programmes. He himself resisted this identification and submitted *Uncle Vanya* to the Maly Theatre; only when its playreading committee insisted on substantial changes, did Chekhov give it to the MAT. Again he had to correct Stanislavsky's penchant for romanticism in his portrayal of Astrof. *Three Sisters*, on the other hand, was written for the MAT, with its capabilities in mind, and the result was the most successful of all its Chekhov productions - in part, because the first performances coincided with student riots, enabling the audiences to relate the sisters' despondency to topical social unrest.

With the production of *The Cherry Orchard*, the discrepancy between Chekhov's unfolding originality as a dramatist and the MAT's dogged concept of what is Chekhovian grew greater. In his early plans for the play, Chekhov envisaged the estate owner as a liberal-minded old lady who dresses like a girl, smokes and cannot do without society, a sympathetic sort tailored to the Maly Theatre's Olga Sadovskaya, who specialized in crones. When the Maly refused to release her, Chekhov rejuvenated the role until it was suitable for someone of Olga Knipper's age, but he complained to her that there were no old women in the MAT company, thus limiting the age-range of his characters. (It is often forgotten that at this period the average age of an MAT actor was thirty; the only middle-aged person in the company was Artem, who created Chebutykin and Firs.)

Even if some of Chekhov's complaints from Yalta can be dismissed as side-effects of his physical deterioration, there is no doubt that the Art Theatre staging misplaced many of his intended emphases. He meant the major rôle to be Lopakhin, like him a self-made man, and he wanted Stanislavsky to play it. But Stanislavsky, the son of a mill-owner and the great-grandson of a serf, preferred the part of the feckless aristocrat Gaev to that of a *nouveau riche*; he handed Lopakhin over to Leonidov, a less experienced, less talented actor. Olga Knipper, whom the author had seen in the grotesque rôle of the German governess Charlotta, was cast as Ranevskaya. Immediately the central focus shifted to the genteel family of landowners, because the strongest actors were in those parts. And even then Stanislavsky played Gaev more nobly, less farcically, than Chekhov had in mind. Later on, fugitives from the Revolution and the Civil War identified so closely with Ranevskaya and Gaev that they disseminated a nostalgic view of the gentry's plight throughout Western productions of the play.

Chekhov's art is allusive, syncretic, rich in ambivalence and ambiguity. His standard practice when rewriting was to excise lines that seemed tautological or overly explicit. Stanislavsky's view of art was more Victorian; he wanted it to illustrate, inform and explain. In addition, Nemirovich-Danchenko stressed the social purpose of the drama. Consequently, a Moscow Art Theatre production treated a play less as the imaginative fruits of an individual author's sensibility than as a segment of real experience, to be probed in depth. Because Chekhov's plays are grounded in reality and his characters are accretions of closely-observed psychological detail, the Moscow Art Theatre approach yielded successful results, but the success was only partial. Contemporary audiences, drawn from the intelligentsia, were enthralled to see what they considered their malaise reflected with such accuracy, while Chekhov believed, with some justice, that his reticence, his even-handedness, his comic pacing and his symbolic qualities were lost in the process. The Moscow Art Theatre took photographically what had been meant as *pointillisme*.

In his *Regiebuch* for *The Seagull*, Stanislavsky noted that a laugh offstage coming in the last act after Nina's quotation from Turgenev would be a »vulgar effect.« But he could not resist it, for the very reason that it was effective and so it remained. In *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov had the second act end with a bizarre comic scene between Charlotta and Firs; Stanislavsky requested him to omit it so that he could end the act with a less »down« finale, a pseudo-love scene between Trofimov and Anya. Stanislavsky's proclivities were for the theatrically effective; his approach to directing was to set up signposts to explicit meaning and to translate ambiguity into easily apprehended stage messages. The Art Theatre's greatest gift to Chekhov, ultimately, may have been simply its insistence on ensemble playing.

Nevertheless, Chekhov had bestowed on the MAT its distinctive image and with his death in 1904, it lost the one dramatist for whom it had developed an idiosyncratic style. As Leonid Andreev later put it, they had found a key to unlock Chekhov (he called it panpsychism, the infusion of everything on stage with a soul), and then tried to use it as a skeleton key to break into Griboedov, Gogol, Molière, Shakespeare and Pushkin, with no success. Meanwhile, the Chekhov productions had become models to emulate. As a tyro director, Meyerhold, formerly the MAT Treplev and Tusenbach, copied them in the provinces. Evtikhy Karpov, who had staged the original Petersburg *Seagull*, saw one *Cherry Orchard* in Yalta that claimed the patronage of the MAT: »The only thing meant by >modelled after the MAT production was that there was an assistant director standing backstage throughout the play constantly whistling, cawing, cuckooing, chirping, croaking and peeping - in other words, drowning out the actor's lines with his bird and frog imitations.« The very externals that Chekhov himself had protested against had become the earmarks of an »authentic« Chekhov production.

A further problem with this hardening tradition arose after the October Revolution. Chekhov went out of fashion, for his plays were dismissed as irrelevant to a society of workers and peasants. Along with the Art Theatre, they were condemned as relics of an obsolete and bourgeois way of life, appealing only to the same ineffectual types that people them. Attending a production of *Uncle Vanya* at the MAT, Lenin praised the acting, but failed to see the necessity for staging such »negative« works. The party-line was that Chekhov (at least as the MAT portrayed him) was too pessimistic at a time when »active progressivism« was the byword. Mayakovsky, in a prologue to his *Mystery-Bouffe* derided going to the theatre were »You look and see / - Auntie Manyas and Uncle Vanyas flopping on divans. / Neither uncles nor aunts interest us, / We can get uncles and aunts at home.« Consequently, the two greatest directors of this period, Vakhtangov and Meyerhold, turned to the farces when they chose to stage Chekhov. By 1930 only the vaudevilles and *The Cherry Orchard* were revived, with Trofimov and Lopakhin exalted as harbingers of the Revolution.

As a result, the MAT lost touch with its own traditions. Its audience was now more proletarian and less sophisticated; on one occasion, Stanislavsky had to harangue it after the second act of *Uncle Vanya* to behave decently and show respect for the actors' work. To justify its existence, the MAT had to put on plays of »revolutionary« import (Stanislavsky's first choice, somewhat naively, was Byron's *Cain*). *The Seagull* had dropped out of its repertory in 1905, *Three Sisters* in 1923, *Ivanov* in 1924, *Uncle Vanya* in 1928, and in the Twenties, in fact, they only played Chekhov on tours abroad. When the MAT returned to him in Russia in 1928, he had become a fragment of the past. The world he portrayed had taken a wistful tinge as a

bygone relic of a dead society. One Soviet critic felt compelled to comment in 1934: »The Art Theatre lagged behind Chekhov. *It did not want to laugh.* It was more conservative than the writer and [... [was still grieving over Ranevskaya's parting with the cherry orchard.« (I. Bachelis, *Teatral'naya Dekada*).

Nemirovich-Danchenko set about to bring Chekhov in line with socialist ideas. Directing a *Cherry Orchard* in Milan (1933) with an Italian troupe headed by the emigrée actress Tatiana Pavlova, he had been able to discard some MAT traditions and move Ranevskaya and Trofimov closer to what he believed was Chekhov's intent. Back home, he (not Stanislavsky, who had withdrawn into semi-retirement on medical grounds) applied similar revisions to the Russian *Orchard*. The family became inoffensive parasites surrounded by a grotesque entourage of servants, and Trofimov's dream of a new life was put center stage. The result was an orientation towards the future, a diminution of sentimentality and an admixture of »manly simplicity.« Marx's statement, »The way humanity takes leave of its past, of its outmoded forms of life is by laughing at them« became the motto.

Next to undergo Sovietization was *Three Sisters*. Nemirovich-Danchenko saw the characters not as futile and philistine, but as fine minds »longing for life«, fit to be acted in a style of »virile strength.« Everything from uniforms to dressing-gowns was made beautiful, everything cold or degrading was eliminated. Tusenbach's speeches about all of society working in twenty-five or thirty years are delivered as a prophetic utterance, and the final hymn to the future was performed without Chebutykin's ironic counterpoint. The whole play was speeded up in tempo and its poetic values jettisoned in favor of a more optimistic, more clearly constructive meaning. »Nostalgic melancholy, even despair,« noted the French director Michel Saint-Denis when he saw the new staging in 1940, »had given way to positive declamation.«

Saint-Denis regretted this alteration because, outside of Russia, the original MAT style had taken hold and while the company itself was trying hard to cast off its old-fashioned outlook, that very outlook had been adopted by most Western theatres. Here again, the MAT had been valuable in introducing Chekhov to an unsympathetic public. Despite a handful of astute critics who recognized what the playwright was driving at, for the most part his plays were met abroad with blank incomprehension. Commentators, to quote at random, found his characters to be »fit subjects for the psychiatrist,« »a strange assemblage of neurotics, lunatics and semi-lunatics,« »a coterie of Neuropaths, all adepts in the art of making themselves eternally unhappy.« There is even reference to the »purely Russian delight in being miserable,« for audiences that saw the MAT productions but knew no Russian assumed that there is a peculiar tribe of persons who normally indulge

in this sort of eccentricity and that Chekhov's plays are accurate depictions of some nebulous Slavic soul. This also perpetrated the fiction of Chekhov as a naturalist.

The effects were first felt in Germany to which the MAT toured regularly before the first World War. Its example was so strong that Germans chose not to compete. Even Max Reinhardt staged no Chekhov except for the farce *The Bear* (1905), and only after 1945 did he gain a foothold on the German stage. It is curious that Peter Stein's current production of *Three Sisters* performs an act of homage to Stanislavsky, beginning from the same premises, but attempting to broaden the vision, through space and sound, to a more existential one. On the other hand, Augusto Fernandes' Hamburg *Seagull* plays out all the clichés of a sub-MAT Chekhov: endless pauses, everything carried out at the same snail's pace and an emphasis on veristic detail for its own sake.

The United States first became conscious of Chekhov the playwright with the Moscow Art Theatre's tours in 1923 /25. Their Chekhov productions were almost two decades old and middle-aged actors played the parts they had created as young men and women in order to swell the box-office receipts (Stanislavsky came out of retirement to do so). In his memoirs, Leonidov, Nemirovich-Danchenko's business manager, describes the three components of the audience: Russian-Jewish immigrants anxious for a look back at the life they had abandoned; the *Schickeria* who simply wanted to view the latest novelty; and serious theatre practitioners who were genuinely interested in the Art Theatre's methods, but had no Russian and could respond purely on an emotional level. (In Edmund Wilson's diaries, John Dos Passos is described telling how he had »wept buckets« over *The Cherry Orchard*.) None of this was conducive to an analytical or cognitive appreciation of Chekhovian drama, and with the Art Theatre's departure, Eva Le Gallienne attempted a series of carbon copy productions that strongly influenced the way American audiences conceived of Chekhov.

In France, the MAT's visits were somewhat overshadowed by the even gloomier but less naturalistic stagings of Georges Pitoëff (constrained by his low budget from using anything but allusive effects); in any case, Russian emigrés in Paris were distrustful of the MAT as an instrument of Soviet propaganda, whatever nostalgia the productions themselves may have provided. The MAT never visited England, but a Madame Donnet, yet another Russian emigrée, produced several Chekhov plays in 1919 and 1920 which were based on the MAT model, and which won the Bloomsbury faction to the cause. However, the most persuasive image of Chekhov in London was purveyed by the director Theodore Komisarjevsky (Fyodor Kommissarzhevsky) who pruned away his ironies, bathed him in moonlight and served him up as a pastel-colored romantic, suitable for matinee audiences.

Komisarjevsky did for the between-the-wars English essentially what the MAT had done for Chekhov's Russian audiences. His subtleties and complexities had been too innovative to be accepted by a theatrical public of his time unless accommodated in a palatable form. Without devising a *cuisine nouvelle*, the MAT managed to dish up the play in a fresh sauce that was piquant and complemented the raw material even if, in fact, it masked many of its nuances. The baneful aspect of the MAT tradition was that it was so polished and integral that it rendered any other approach inconceivable and established Chekhov as a sentimental naturalist. It took time to weaken this incrustation and break its hold on the imagination. The post-war Russian directors of Chekhov - Efremov, Efros, Tovstonogov and Lyubimov - experimented more broadly, but they and their audiences were always aware that they were diverging from the »original.«

More generally, such accidents of original production color the reception of any dramatic author and affect the transmission of his work. Forms are handed down which may have been inspired at their creation, but neither the inspiration nor its regeneration have been preserved. The productions go through the motions of an academic exercise, which has been the case with Molière and Racine at the Comédie Française, Gilbert and Sullivan in the D'Oyly Carte company, Wagner at Bayreuth, or Chekhov at the MAT - until some radical rethinking obliterates them. As in the parable of Plato's cave, the reflections become images of further reflections and never of the primal reality. And, as someone once said of the première of *The Beggar's Opera*, the audience arrives whistling the tunes. Its expectations are based on spurious assumptions and it reacts to what it sees according to pre-designated guidelines. Hence the popular notions that Restoration comedy is a limp-wristed evening of poses and that Chekhov is a purveyor of gloom and doom to be performed reverentially and sepulchraly.

In a recent essay on current French productions of Chekhov, Maria Shevtsova has asserted, »There is no such thing as one text, *the* text, Chekhov's or any other writer's; there is, instead, a new text, created by the production itself, in terms of which the production is to be viewed, understood and analysed - which, in short, is to be read as a text in its own right.« But no one can avoid the historical circumstances that engendered the original production and color its meaning within the present nexus of historical circumstances. In the past, when Aeschylus choreographed his own choruses and Shakespeare played the Ghost of Hamlet's father and Molière created the comic leads in his plays, a certain authority could be attributed to the original production. In the modern age, as literature and theatre became more estranged from one another, and the playwright became more a man of letters, less an *homme de théâtre*, the authority of the original production, however convincing and effective it was at the time, grew more questionable.

The danger lies in refuting tradition simply for the sake of refutation, and thereby producing a negative image (in the photographic sense). A production of a literary script (as opposed to an unscripted performance piece) should not be a museum reconstruction, but at the same time it ought not assert itself as an autonomous work independent of the author. There must still be present a Chekhovian or Molièrian or Shakespearean »essence« to undergo metamorphosis. How a production distills and validates the basic quintessence of a playwright so that it speaks to its audience with some urgency can be determined only by examining individual cases in detail.