Introduction

Anton Chekhov is arguably the greatest playwright of the modern period. Yet, his reputation rests on a handful of plays — only four have permanently entered the repertory. Each of these works, moreover, is written in an unmistakable signature style. Unlike August Strindberg or Bertolt Brecht, Chekhov refrains from showy experimentation; and, unlike Henrik Ibsen, he is content with exploring a single social theme.

That theme is the radical change in Russian society that led to the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. About these changes, Chekhov takes no single political view. There are few playwrights who are more aloof, more distant from the opinions of their characters, who are more deeply involved with what they do than what they say. Yet, despite this appearance of detachment, no other playwright is as deeply invested in the future of the human race or more regretful about the prostration of the cultured elite before the forces of provincial darkness than Chekhov. Chekhov's writing is full of paradoxes — at once comic and tragic, engaged and impartial, subjective and objective. He creates no heroes or author's surrogates; yet, we are never in doubt about the value he puts on human life.

Chekhov's four major plays sometimes seem to be one long play, focusing on the same class of aristocratic characters curdling in the country, engaged in the same debates about culture and provincialism, concluding with the same sense of ambiguous possibility, torn between hope and despair. *The Seagull* is unashamedly a play about literature and love, featuring two sets of actors, two writers, two views of the stage (realistic and visionary), and three love triangles. That the one of these has an incestuous component underlines the play's parallels with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Like *The Seagull, Uncle Vanya* is a play about hope and disillusionment. Vanya has lost all respect for his one-time idol, the academician Serebreyakov, and he is in love with the professor's bored wife, Yelena. So in a more desultory way is Doctor Astrov. But Yelena is too indolent to be un[illegible]ful. Eventually, Vanya's loss of faith in the future produces despair. By the end of the play Vanya has come very close to the suicide that ended the life of Constantine Treplev.

Three Sisters, one of Chekhov's two indisputable masterpieces, is also about the loss of a comforting ideal. The Prozorov sisters have spent most of their mature lives in a provincial military town, longing to return to Moscow. Masha is unhappily married to a schoolteacher; Irina is about to wed a soldier she admires but does not love; Olga is stuck in a boring job as a schoolteacher. Meanwhile, their sister-in-law, Natasha is eating away at their ancestral home like a carpenter ant, moving the sisters from one room to another and eventually out of the house in order to accommodate her crude maternal, social, and adulterous needs. *Three Sisters* is the bleakest play Chekhov ever wrote.

Composed with great difficulty while he was dying, *The Cherry Orchard* is, nevertheless, the most comical of his full-length plays, and it may be his greatest work of art. In the tradition of a French mortgage melodrama — plays about villainous overseers stealing the property of impoverished aristocrats — the play focuses on the loss of an ancestral estate whose aristocratic owners are too distracted to save it. In the speeches of the perpetual graduate student, Trofimov, we hear condemnations of the serf system and rumbles of the coming revolution; yet, he too is so paralyzed he can do nothing about it but speechify. Ultimately the estate falls into the hands of the bourgeois Lopakhin, who, far from being a villainous overseer, is the hardest-working man in the area.

Chekhov sketches out a grand panorama of history through the lives of a few idle aristocrats. Through characters like Lopakhin, the descendent of a serf, Chekhov leaves us in no doubt where his political sympathies lie. But as an artist who is humane to the marrow of his bones, he embraces virtually every one of his characters with deep-felt sympathy. Standing on the threshold of the modern world, Chekhov prophesies a future in which, as Yeats said, the best lack conviction, and the worst are full of passionate intensity.

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Chekhov

IN A MINUTE

AGE	YEAR	
	1860	**Enter Anton Chekhov.**
1	1861	Czar Aleksandr II emancipates Russian Serfs.
3	1863	Poles rebel against Russian rule.
5	1865	U.S. Civil War ends preserving the Union.
7	1867	Secretary of State William H. Seward buys Alaska from Russia for $7 million.
9	1869	Leo Tolstoy — *War and Peace* published.
11	1871	Germany unifies under Emperor Wilhelm I.
12	1872	Brits and Scots square off in the first international soccer game.
14	1874	Impressionism takes root in Paris.
19	1879	Ibsen — *A Doll's House*
20	1880	Edison and Swan each independently introduce a practical electric light.
21	1881	Czar Aleksandr II is assassinated, succeeded by Aleksandr III.
22	1882	Austria, Germany, and Italy form the Triple Alliance.
25	1885	Karl Marx — *Das Kapital*, volume 2 published.
27	1887	**Anton Chekhov — *Ivanov***
29	1889	Alexander Gustave Eiffel designs tower for the Paris World Exhibition.
30	1890	First "moving-picture" show premieres in New York.
31	1891	Famine ravishes Russia.
32	1892	Gladstone becomes prime minister of Great Britain.
33	1893	Franco-Russian alliance challenges German power in Europe.
34	1894	Czar Alexsandr III dies, succeeded by Nicolas II, the last Russian czar.
35	1895	Auguste and Louis Lumiere invent the motion picture camera.
36	1896	First modern Olympiad held in Athens after an interval of 1,500 years.
37	1897	Edmond Rostand — *Cyrano de Bergerac*
38	1898	**Anton Chekhov — *The Seagull***
39	1899	**Anton Chekhov — *Uncle Vanya***
40	1900	Max Planck's quantum theory throws the world into uncertainty.
41	1901	**Anton Chekhov — *The Three Sisters***
42	1902	Maxim Gorky — *The Lower Depths*
44	1904	**Anton Chekhov — *The Cherry Orchard***
		Exit Anton Chekhov.

A snapshot of the playwright's world. From historical events to culture and the literary landscape of the time, this brief list catalogues events that directly or indirectly had an impact on the playwright's writing. Play citations refer to premiere dates.

HIS WORKS

DRAMATIC WORKS

Platonov
On the High Road
On the Harmful Effects of Tobacco
Ivanov
Swan Song
The Bear
The Proposal
Tatyana Repina
A Tragedian in Spite of Himself
The Wedding
The Wood Demon
The Jubilee
The Night before the Trial
The Seagull
Uncle Vanya
The Three Sisters
The Cherry Orchard

NARRATIVE FICTION

Chekhov's narrative fiction comprises some 588 short stories.

This section presents a complete list of the playwright's works in chronological order.

ONSTAGE WITH CHEKHOV

Introducing Colleagues and Contemporaries of Chekhov

THEATER

Bertolt Brecht, German playwright and poet
Maxim Gorky, Russian novelist and playwright
Henrik Ibsen, Norwegian playwright
Konstantin Stanislavsky, Russian director
August Strindberg, Swedish playwright
Lev Tolstoy, Russian novelist
Ivan Turgenev, playwright, novelist, short story writer
Oscar Wilde, Irish playwright

ARTS

Edvard Munch, Norwegian painter
Sergey Rachmaninov, Russian composer, pianist, and conductor
Auguste Rodin, French sculptor
Alexsandr Scriabin, Russian composer
Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Russian composer
Vincent Van Gogh, Dutch painter
Giuseppe Verdi, Italian composer
Richard Wagner, German composer

This section lists contemporaries whom the playwright may or may not have known.

POLITICS/MILITARY

Otto Von Bismarck, German statesman
Benjamin Disraeli, British prime minister
Alfred Dreyfus, French army officer
Ferdinand I, king of Bulgaria
Vladimir Lenin, Russian revolutionary, Bolshevik communist
Nicholas II, last Russian czar
Oswald Spengler, German historian
Queen Victoria, British monarch

PHILOSOPHY/RELIGION

Henri Bergson, French philosopher
G. K. Chesterton, English Christian apologist
Johann Wilhelm Herrmann, German theologian
Theodor Herzl, founder of Jewish Zionism
Karl Marx, German philosopher, political economist
Friedrich Nietzsche, German philosopher
Charles Peirce, American logician
Herbert Spencer, English philosopher

LITERATURE

Matthew Arnold, English poet and essayist
Joseph Conrad, Polish-born English novelist
Fyodor Dostoevsky, Russian novelist
Guy de Maupassant, French writer
Herman Melville, American writer
Rainer Maria Rilke, Austrian poet
Paul Verlaine, French poet
Emile Zola, French novelist

SCIENCE

Niels Bohr, Danish physicist
Charles Darwin, English naturalist
Thomas Edison, American inventor
Albert Einstein, German-born physicist
Sigmund Freud, Austrian psychologist
Richard von Krafft-Ebing, German neurologist
Carl Jung, Swiss psychologist
Max Planck, German physicist

INDUSTRY/BUSINESS

Alexander Graham Bell, American inventor of telephone
Karl Benz, German engineer; inventor of first four-wheel car
Henry Ford, American automaker
King C. Gillette, American inventor of safety razor
Alfred Krupp, German industrialist
Alfred Nobel, Swedish inventor of dynamite
Cecil Rhodes, English mining magnate
John D. Rockefeller, American oil baron

SPORTS

Meriwether Lewis Clark Jr., founder of Kentucky Derby
"Gentleman Jim" Corbett, American boxing champion
Pierre de Coubertin, organizer of modern Olympic games
W. G. Grace, English cricketer
William Muldoon, American wrestler
Lady Margaret Scott, English golf champion
John L. Sullivan, the first great American boxing champion
May G. Sutton, English tennis champion

CHEKHOV in an hour

RUSSIA BEFORE CHEKHOV

Nineteenth-century Imperial Russia, where Anton Pavlovich Chekhov lived and wrote, was a land larger than the entire American continent. It covered eight-and-one-half million square miles, or one-sixth of the world's inhabitable surface. Nowhere at the time was there a continuous stretch of territory in the world, ruled by a single ruler, of comparable size to the Russian Empire. Stretching from Eastern Europe all the way across Siberia to the Pacific Coast, the land was vast, varied, and dramatically diverse in terrain. Indeed, with its immense forests, great rivers, wide steppes, towering mountain ranges, and extreme climate (ranging from Arctic to subtropic), it seemed like another planet. Divided by the Ural Mountain range, the country was, like the Greek god, "Janus-faced." Russia west of the Urals looked to Europe for its cultural model, while the Russia east of the Urals was called "Asiatic." At the time, this meant backward, desolate, and impenetrable. When Chekhov himself journeyed across the entire country in 1890 by a combination of train and cart, it took him months. At the turn of the

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This is the core of the book. The essay places the playwright in the context of his or her world and analyzes the influences and inspirations within that world.

centu[illegible]e railroad was finally completed. It still took a week to cross the country by train.

This vast empire was under the rigid, autocratic rule of the Romanov family. They had ruled since the 1600s. Comprising the royalty was first and foremost the czar and his family. There was also a handful of titled aristocracy, including princes, counts, and barons. The czar's system of governance was archaic and clumsy. It had been established in 1722 by Peter the Great. It consisted of a pretentious hierarchy of fourteen official ranks (i.e., a civil service), which remained in place until 1917. Members of the hierarchy had cumbrous titles, ornate uniforms, and elaborate decorations. This gave writers of the nineteenth century rich material for satire — when they could get past the censor. The function of the civil service — indeed of all governmental organs, including the Ministry and the Senate — was to implement the czar's will, rather than to set policy. In Chekhov's time, Czar Aleksandr II (1855–81) made an attempt at reform of the local government system with the establishment of town and rural councils. However, the czarist government kept close watch on these local councils, lest they exercise any kind of political autonomy.

THE CLASSES

The monolithic social structure of the country was divided into classifications or "estates." The clergy was just under 1 percent of the total population. The landed gentry was considered a suborder of the nobility without title and it was just over 1 percent of the population. The military made up 6.5 percent of the population, and the town dwellers equaled 9 percent, including merchants. This was the class to which Chekhov's family belonged. Doctors, lawyers, architects, teachers, and other professionals came from several of the above groups. The remaining and vast majority of the population consisted of the peasantry, or former serfs, and represented 81.5 percent of the population. They lived in medieval conditions of poverty and squalor. They were subject to the extremes of the climate, famine, and disease. On the other hand, the landed gentry lived in a world of its own, speaking primarily French and other Western languages. They were often unable to read or write in Russian. Both the gentry and the clergy were exempt from taxation, conscription, and corporal punishment. As the owners of "souls," the gentry had complete control over the lives of their serfs. They could buy them and sell them, subject them to corporal punishment, and enlist them in the Russian army at their whim.

During Chekhov's lifetime, the population grew at a rapid rate, from roughly 74 million in 1860 to over 133 million by 1904. It was a large, complex population, representing 200 different nationalities, speaking dozens of languages.

As for its economy, Chekhov's times saw the beginnings of rapid industrialization in Russia in an effort to keep up with its European neighbors, behind whom it lagged significantly. As a result, there were severe social consequences, and the working and living conditions of the workers (drawn from the former serfs) were dire. The gap between the new industrial working class and the czarist regime widened even more sharply. This created fertile soil for extremism, foment, and disorder.

In short, nineteenth-century Imperial Russia was a huge, backward empire. It was unwieldy in size and unjust in governance. Political, social, and economic changes were desperately long overdue. That is what makes the study of Chekhov's life and work so interesting. In his plays and short stories, one sees a huge country and a great culture in flux. It is moving toward the final stages of what would be a tremendous and dramatic transformation. Chekhov's plays themselves are harbingers of these changes.

REVOLUTION IN THE AIR

This was the Russia into which Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was born. His lifetime spanned an extraordinary period in Russia's history, one of enormous political and social change. He was born in 1860 — one year before the greatest social upheaval in that land in centuries. In the next year, the emancipation of the serfs representing the vast majority of the population occurred. He died in 1904. This was one year before the first of what would be two definitive revolutions. These would overthrow the centuries-old, rigid, autocratic rule of the Romanov family, and they would catapult that giant land into the modern era. In that brief period alone, Chekhov would observe — and write about — these huge changes. They included the vast shifting of the population off the estates and into the cities. This deepened the poverty and misery of the lower classes. Chekhov also saw the rise of industrialization, and the emergence of a capitalistic middle class. He witnessed the weakening of the Orthodox Church, the corrosion of czarist rule, the decline of the landed gentry, and the decay of the ineffectual intelligentsia. It was replaced by a new political vanguard with revolutionary ideas. Again, references to all these elements can be found in his four major plays, each of which captures a moment in time — what came before, and what would come after.

RUSSIA MEETS THE WEST

As a result of Napoleon's invasion of Moscow in 1812, the Russian Army occupied Paris. This occupation opened the eyes of Russians to the huge changes in the West. It also underlined the woeful gap in Russia's own cultural and economic development. Russian soldiers — gentry and serfs alike — returned to Moscow and began to question the backward ways of their country. After the death of Czar Aleksandr I in December 1825, a group of young noblemen began to call for an enlightened new czar. They hoped he would lead their backward country into a new period of modernization and political reform. They wanted a constitution, religious tolerance, and increased freedom of expression. Called the Decembrists (named after the month in which they submitted their proposals), they were met by the severest opposition from the new Czar Nicholas I. He was terrified by their demands and ordered the execution of their leaders and the exile of their followers.

Meanwhile, a passionate young intelligentsia was galvanizing. They were inspired by the idealistic example of the thwarted Decembrists. They included the anarchist Michael Bakunin, the critic Vissarion Belinsky, the philosopher Nicholas Stankevich, and the writer Alexander Herzen. The poet Nicolas Ogarev and the novelist Ivan Turgenev also joined them. All these men, with the exception of Belinsky, were of the nobility. Ignited by philosophy and political thought from Germany and France, they congregated in Moscow University circles. They spoke of their hopes and dreams for changing Russia. While they met and talked and dreamed, their intellectual circles widened and their ideas spread. Meanwhile, Czar Nicholas's severely reactionary regime instituted even harsher restrictions on freedom of speech, thought, and artistic creativity. Philosophy could not be taught in the universities. Censorship was absolute, the czar's secret police were everywhere, and the young intelligentsia was persecuted. Herzen was eventually banished and stripped of his noble rank. Stankevich and Belinsky died young from tuberculosis. Still their ideas spread, and the exiled Herzen would mobilize an émigré community and continue to proselytize for change.

A DECADE OF GREAT REFORMS

The advent of Czar Aleksandr II to the throne in 1855, five years before Chekhov's birth, ushered in a decade of great reforms. This led to the freeing of the serfs in 1861, only one year after Chekhov was born. Other reforms included the introduction of trials by jury and a new local government system — the *zemstvos*. There were improvements in health care and local school reforms. Despite these attempts, there continued to be no freedom of the press or open criticism of government. So social critics of the 1860s found that they could get around the censors by writing about art and literature. Thus, artistic and litera iticism became a venue for the expression of political ideas.

Czar Aleksandr II was assassinated in 1881, when Chekhov was twenty-one. This ushered in a new era of extreme reaction and police rule under his successor, Aleksandr III (1881–94). Still, Russia had begun its period of rapid economic development. The landed gentry weakened, and bankers and industrialists rose to take their place. The bureaucracy and the army remained the society's mainstay. With the advent of Nicholas II (1894–1917), industrialization was fully underway.

Meanwhile, the seeds of revolution had been sown. In the 1840s and 1850s, intellectuals were divided into two camps. The Westernizers, like Herzen, looked to Europe as a model of enlightenment and progress for Russia. The Slavophils, like Dostoevsky, turned their backs on Europe and looked eastward to the true, profound Russia. By the 1860s, when Chekhov was born, radicals emerged like Chernyshevsky, who preached nihilism. The year 1870 was pivotal, as Herzen died and Lenin was born. In the 1880s, Marxism infiltrated Russia. By the end of the decade, *Das Kapital* was the most widely read book among Russian students. The Social Democrat movement emerged. Proponents were Marxist in thinking, and they looked to the working classes to promote change. At the same time, the Populist movement looked to the peasants, hoping to foment violence to create disorder. In the early 1900s, the Bolsheviks emerged with Lenin as a leading voice. His "What Is to Be Done" appeared in 1902. By 1905, the year after Chekhov's death, a number of elements combined to create a time ripe for uprising. These included strikes and disturbances in both town and country. Revolutionary groups worked to stir up peasants and workers. To this was added the humiliating defeat in the Sino-Japanese War. A demonstration in St. Petersburg on January 22, 1905 (Bloody Sunday), resulted in soldiers opening fire on the crowd. This brought on the first Russian Revolution.

Chekhov's play of 1900, *The Three Sisters*, was written only four years before his death. In this play, two characters, Tusenbach and Vershinin, dream of what life will be like in 200 to 300 years. If only Chekhov had lived fifteen or twenty years longer, one can imagine his amazement at the acceleration of the changes he predicted in his plays. These changes would culminate in the greatest upheaval of his country's history. They brought the destruction of an autocratic order centuries old, the entire upheaval of a mammoth society, and the advent of the great Bolshevik Revolution.

THE RUSSIAN THEATER IN CHEKHOV'S TIME

In a letter to Leontyev dated November 7, 1888, Chekhov wrote about theater. He said, "The contemporary theater is like a rash, a bad urban disease. It is necessary to sweep away this disease with a broom . . . "

Unlike the grand English and French theater traditions that had produced playwrights like Shakespeare and Molière, the Russian theater into which Chekhov was born had not yet had a golden age. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Russian theater was controlled by the czar, as was every other aspect of life. The Heritage Court Theater in the Winter Palace, the Imperial Theaters (the Bolshoi in Moscow — used mostly for opera and ballet — and the Maly and later Aleksandrinsky in St. Petersburg) dominated the theater scene. All other popular theaters were controlled by the state as "non-court" theaters. In addition, there was a network of provincial theaters.

With the advent of Czar Nicolas I and his repressive rule in 1825 came a harsh decree placing all public theatrical performances under the Imperial Theaters in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Then, in 1847, the existing censorship law was expanded to control all theaters, both urban and provincial. Because of these harsh controls, the marginal theaters were the only source of creativity and freedom in the Russian theater. These were the fairgrounds, street shows, cabarets, amateur drawing-room theatricals, and salons that were less closely watched by the secret police.

CENSORSHIP AND THE RUSSIAN THEATER

Despite government censorship, four major Russian plays were written in the nineteenth century before Chekhov came on the scene. The first, Griboyedov's *Wit Works Woe* (1824), was a satire on Moscow society. It initially met with censorship. It was finally premiered in 1831, two years after the playwright's death. Its protagonist, Chatsky, an angry young man who speaks his mind, became the model for the young Russian romantic hero. The second — *Boris Godunov* (1824), written by Russia's revered poet Pushkin in episodic style — was published in 1830. (Though it has been staged subsequently, it was most successful as the libretto for Mussorgsky's opera.) The third play, Gogol's *Inspector General* (1836), was a widely popular farce about corruption and ineptitude in the Russian provincial government. It became a favorite of Czar Nicholas I. The fourth, Turgenev's *A Month in the Country* (1855), was considered to be the first play of "psychological realism." It would be the one that would most influence Chekhov a half century later.

Four isolated plays by four different playwrights were scarcely enough to form the foundation of a dramatic literature or a national repertoire. It was hardly a precedent for an emerging playwright and his place in the Russian theater. By the mid-nineteenth century, there was still no treasure trove of Russian dramatic literature. In the 1840s at the Maly Theater, for example, Schiller, Molière, Goldoni, French vaudevilles, and melodramas dominated the repertoire. Then, in the 1850s, the playwright Aleksandr Ostrovsky emerged and dominated the theater scene. His extensive oeuvre included forty-seven plays about the Russian merchant class and the rural gentry. They were staged at the Maly until his death in 1886. The first to champion the right of playwrights to receive royalties, he fought in vain to found a national theater based on a Russian repertoire.

CENSORSHIP AND THE CRITICS

Not only did the government served as censor, but as critic as well — although in an unofficial capacity. A literary work, according to the government, must be topical, relevant, and socially critical. Furthermore, it must have some meaningful social content. With this view, critics looked to art and literature for a high standard of social relevance. They imposed a rigid system of criteria, both in form and content, to which all literature must conform. Critics of the 1860s, '70s, and '80s, for example, lobbied against fantasy, imagination, poetry, mysticism, and physiological perception in the theater. All literature and theater, they believed, was required to be didactic and contain some obvious social relevance. This became the norm in Chekhov's time. He would fight against this utilitarian approach valiantly, advocating personal freedom for writers and for literature. In turn, he would meet with great opposition from the critics. They felt that his humorous stories were fine, but not his serious ones. They perceived these as subversive, an affront to Russian realism in the tradition of Turgenev and Gogol. Indeed, one critic, Nikolai Mikhailovsky, the leading critic of the day, systematically tried to discredit Chekhov. His ultimate failure most likely led to the eventual liberation of Russian literature from this utilitarian standard.

Given this tradition of Russian criticism, it is no surprise that the critics of Chekhov's time could not understand his plays. Few appreciated the newness of his views and the originality of his forms. They came around long after, when his work was exported to England and America by the touring Moscow Art Theatre. Then world criticism began to appreciate Chekhov's profound contribution to modern drama. Instead, admiration and recognition for Chekhov came from his contemporaries. Notably his fellow writers Tolstoy, Gorky, Bunin, and Kuprin extolled the beauty of his craft. They appreciated the uniqueness of his vision and the depth of his humanity.

C KHOV: THE LIFE

In a letter dated October 11, 1899, Chekhov wrote the following: "Autobiography? I have a disease — autobiographophobia. To read any sort of details about myself, or worse, to write them for publication, is true torture for me."

Given the brevity of his lifetime (1860–1904), the accomplishments of the Russian writer Anton Pavlovich Chekhov — grandson of a serf and son of a shopkeeper — are nothing short of remarkable. In his forty-four short years, Chekhov played many roles. He was a doctor, humorist, humanist, landowner, environmentalist, social activist, and provider for a large family. At the same time, he was struggling with consumption, the first signs of which appeared when he was twenty-four. Even so, he managed to produce a veritable outpouring of prose writings that fill thirty volumes of his complete collected works. These include 588 short stories and over 4,000 letters to friends, family, writers, artists, and thinkers of his day.

Chekhov also wrote plays: eleven short works and seven full-lengths. This was a far more modest output compared with his prose work. Yet, their impact on the world stage has been enormous. This is particularly true of the final four, which are called "the major plays" — *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*. They were similar in power and scope to the impact of the early French Impressionists on modern art. With their daring disregard for Aristotelian form, their unique aesthetic, their brilliant vision, and their universal themes, they paved the way for twentieth-century modern drama. Writers around the world from so many different cultures and traditions claim Chekhov as their first and foremost influence. His plays are the most frequently translated and widely produced dramas throughout the world today. They are second only to Shakespeare. These plays are all the more remarkable in that they are the work of a modest man who — in addition to the theater — devoted his life to so many other endeavors. He had very little faith in his abilities as a dramatist, and he knew at a very early age that his life would be short.

In a letter to Tikhonov dated February 22, 1892, Chekhov himself offers a brief, amusing overview of his life:

> Do you need my biography? All right, here it is. I was born in Taganrog in 1860. I graduated from Taganrog Grammar School in 1879. In 1884 I graduated from the medical school of Moscow University. In 1888 I received the Pushkin Prize. In 1890 I made a journey to Sakhalin, across Siberia and returned by sea. In 1891, I completed a tour of Europe, where I drank excellent wine and ate oysters. . . . I began to write in 1879 for the journal "The Dragon Fly." My collected works are: *Motley Stories*, *In the Twilight*, *Tales*, *Gloomy People*, and a novel, *The Duel*. I have also sinned in the realm of drama, although in moderation. I have been translated into all languages with the exception of foreign ones. However, I have already been translated into German, a long time ago. The Czechs and Serbs also approve of me, and the French don't think too badly of me, either. I experienced the mysteries of love at the age of thirteen. With my colleagues, both medical and literary, I remain on excellent terms. I am a bachelor. I would like a pension. I still practice medicine, to the extent that, in the summertime, I even perform an autopsy or two, although I haven't done one now in two, three years. Among writers, my preference is Tolstoy. . . . However, all this is nonsense. Write whatever you like. If you have no facts, substitute something lyrical.

GRANDPARENTS, PARENTS, AND EARLY MEMORIES

Chekhov was born in 1860, in a southern Russian town on the Sea of Azov. He was the son of a shopkeeper. His father's father was a serf of the Voronezh province. He had purchased the freedom of his family in 1841, twenty years before Russia's abolition of serfdom. By dint of hard labor, Chekhov's peasant grandfather, Yegor Chekhov, managed to save 3,500 rubles. He did this to purchase the freedom of his eight-member family at the rate of 500 rubles per head. His master threw one of Yegor's daughters into the bargain "for free."

Pavel Yegorovich, Chekhov's father, opened his own grocery shop in Taganrog. He required the services in the store of his six children: Aleksandr, Nikolai, Anton, Maria (Masha), Ivan, and Mikhail. It was in this grocery store that the vivid scenes of Chekhov's early life played themselves out. These included long hours of labor, limited opportunity for school preparation, and mandatory practice for church choir conducted by his father, which frequently began before dawn. Chekhov's father often beat the children — Lopakhin's description in the opening scene of *The Cherry Orchard* of the blows he received at his father's hand is painfully reminiscent of Chekhov's own experience. The memoirs of Aleksandr, Chekhov's eldest brother, depict, however, a close and lively family life among the siblings during these early years. They were filled with parlor theatricals and practical jokes. These were engendered, authored, and enacted by Anton himself, as an antidote to paternal tyranny. It was in these early years that the humorous muse — and the love of theater — was born in Chekhov.

As a youth, he delighted in stealing away to attend the provincial theater with his brothers. Together, they saw Shakespeare, Hugo, Schiller, and other European classics. He even played a role in Gogol's *Inspector General* in a local amateur production. Translations of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* were among the first books he owned, as well as Goethe's *Faust*. He frequented the public library and read voraciously — Schopenhauer, Hugo, Cervantes, Goncharov, Turgenev, Belinsky. From his readings, he gained an appreciation of the European heroic tradition. Turgenev's essay "Don Quixote and Hamlet" made a strong impression on him. From the nineteenth-century Russian novel, he gained an appreciation of the Russian protagonist known as the "superfluous man": He was the well-born, well-educated gentlemen who tries in vain to effect change in his society.

THE SEVENTIES: COMING OF AGE

The main event of the 1870s for Chekhov, his second decade, was the relocation of his family. His father's business in Taganrog failed. The bankrupt Pavel Yegorovich fled with his family to Moscow in 1876, leaving Anton behind to face the creditors and complete his studies. For three brief years, Chekhov was completely on his own. While he planned for a medical career, he developed a passion for writing. In 1877–78, he sent a number of short comedic stories and sketches to his brother Aleksandr in Moscow. Alexsandr submitted them for publication. Among them also was a full-length play. Some literary historians speculate that the lost manuscript, purportedly entitled *Fatherless*, was an exorcism of the paternal demons that haunted Chekhov in his early years. In later life, remarkably, Chekhov forgave his father. His only form of rebellion against his pious parent was his rejection of organized religion. Chekhov took responsibility for supporting his parents and siblings throughout his life. In the meantime, though, he dreamed of when he could be close to the "real" theater in Moscow and make his own mark.

TO MOSCOW

When Chekhov arrived on the Moscow scene in 1879 to join his parents in their poor basement flat, he did so with a plan to study medicine. He enrolled at Moscow University. However, he was determined to write serious work for the theater. At nineteen, he already possessed attributes that would serve him well. Among these were an inspired sense of humor, an exposure to classical drama and literature, some amateur experience, and a passion for serious theater. The problem lay not with Chekhov but with the Russian theater. In the 1880s, the Russian theater was stagnating, as Nemirovich-Danchenko, one of the future cofounders of the Moscow Art Theatre, lamented. The 1880s saw the Maly at the height of its fame, but even so, its offerings had become stale and conventional. Most of the repertoires of Moscow and St. Petersburg theaters consisted of foreign classics, Ostrovsky reruns, the few Russian classics that existed, melodramas, farces and numerous vaudevilles, both in translation and imitations by contemporary Russian writers. As for the development of new Russian plays, there were several writers-in-residence at the Maly. It was their task to write expressly for the company's leading actors and actresses. Even so, these were not leading dramatists of the day. Moreover, there was no artistic leadership. The theater was run by a government-appointed administrator, not an artist, and the stage director had no creative power or function.

According to Nemirovich, there were no visionaries on the horizon to lead the Russian theater into new artistic territory. Nor was there any system of identifying, nurturing, and developing serious new dramatists for the stage. To Nemirovich's own complaints about the Maly, Chekhov added his own observations about the other Moscow theaters. These included the mediocrity of the new playwrights, the low level of production values, and the uneducated, ill-prepared, and often inebriated actors. The stagnant Russian theater of the 1880s was ready for new forms and new voices. It was a void that would soon be filled . . . by a new young playwright and a new theater.

PLATONOV

Young Chekhov, compelled to support his studies and his family, began to write sketches for humorous journals. Meanwhile, he plunged into the writing of his first full-length play. This was a melodrama (the untitled, unfinished work now known as *Platonov*), which he ultimately sent to the Maly.

In form, it bore the influence of Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*. It had the same country-estate setting and familiar country types (landowners, doctors, eligible young ladies, and the like). In content, however, it is a bold and deliberate composite of numerous classical portraits. Chekhov had culled these from all the Russian and European literature he had been reading so avidly. The character of Platonov is first and foremost drawn in the tradition of Don Juan. He is the reckless womanizer who attracts us and repels us at the same time with his seductive charm and passion for life, and who is punished in the end. Equally, he is Hamlet in Russian translation (complete with monologues) — ineffective, brooding, erratic, sometimes cruel. Platonov is also a descendant of the romantic Byronic antihero celebrated in nineteenth-century Russian novels. He is like Pechorin of Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Times*, handsome, moody, unstable, aloof, disenchanted. He acts only to relieve the tedium of life or to avenge himself on the society he despises. There is also in Platonov a little of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* — that proud young nobleman, self-centered and cruel in love. There is also in Platonov an aspect of Chatsky from Griboedov's social satire *Wit Works Woe*. He is the social conscience of the Russian intellectual, railing at society's injustices, knowing he can do nothing to change them.

In summary, Platonov was the legacy of many literary personae, six portraits combined. The neophyte dramatist Chekhov was so passionately intent on creating a heroic type for the Russian stage that he attempted to combine all past portrayals into one. He was stung by the rejection of this youthful work by the Maly Theater, where he had been intent on making his debut. He turned to the writing of short stories for the next few years while he finished his medical studies.

IVANOV

It was in 1887 that Chekhov received a commission to write a full-length play from the Korsh. This was one of the first commercial theaters established since the czar's edict allowing commercial theaters. At last, a point of dramatic focus had presented itself, and a prestigious Moscow theater had given him *carte blanche*. Here was the opportunity to make his mark as a serious dramatist. He could accomplish onstage what Pushkin, Lermontov, and Turgenev before him had accomplished, to create a "type of literary significance" for the theater, but in a new, original incarnation. In a burst of excitement, Chekhov wrote his new play, *Ivanov*, in ten days. He delivered it to the Korsh, confident in its success. Imagine, then, his bewilderment when it was met with wildly divergent critical and audience response. There were reviews of praise and condemnation, and even fist fights in the theater lobby. What frustrated Chekhov most was his failure, once again, to create an original heroic type for the Russian theater. He was told that Ivanov came across either as an unsympathetic scoundrel or as a rehash of the Russian "superfluous man," a figure from nineteenth-century Russian literature. This confounded Chekhov, and it turned him off serious playwriting for eight years.

However controversial, *Ivanov* had a great impact on the Moscow theater scene. It enhanced Chekhov's reputation as a successful writer. Chekhov, however, was dismayed by what he perceived to be a misunderstanding by the critics and the public of his serious dramatic intentions. They also seemed to misunderstand his central character, Ivanov, a portrait of a "man of the eighties," a liberal idealist who could not effect social change. Chekhov's first response was to turn the blame upon himself and his shortcomings. Clearly, he must be a failure as a dramatist, he thought. "Apparently it's too early for me to begin writing plays," he wrote to his publisher on December 20, 1888.

DISAPPOINTMENT AND SUCCESS

Nonetheless, the decade of the 1880s, the Moscow period, marks the period of greatest productivity in Chekhov's literary career. It also saw his remarkable rise to fame and popularity among the Moscow *literati*. From 1880–87, he contributed almost 400 humorous sketches and short stories to numerous literary publications of the day. He used a variety of *noms de plume*, including "Antosha Chekhonte." Among the stories were "My Brother's Brother," "A Doctor without Patients," and "A Man without a Spleen." Then, in 1884, he received his medical degree. He installed his family in a modest town house on Sadovo-Kudrinskaya Street in Moscow. There the young Dr. Chekhov lived with his large family, practicing medicine and literature at the same time. His fame grew. He acquired a noted publisher, Suvorin. His stories began to be published in collections to widespread popularity. Meanwhile, despite what he perceived his failure as a serious dramatist, Chekhov turned to a dramatic form that came easily to him: the vaudeville.

"LIKE OIL FROM THE DEPTHS OF THE BAKU"

In the 1880s, the vaudeville was one of the most popular forms on the Moscow stage. This popular, eclectic, low-comedy genre had its origins in Paris street theater. The vaudeville found its way to the Russian stage in the 1830s where it gained popularity. This was mostly because, as pure entertainment, it was the only form that could get past the stern Imperial censorship implemented by Czar Nicholas I. An indication of its popularity is that 40 percent of the repertoire at the Aleksandrinsky Theater in St. Petersburg during the 1840s consisted of vaudevilles. Some were translated from French and German. Others were Russian versions based on a fairly fixed formula according to conventions. These included stock settings and characters, formulaic plots, rapid-paced action, all culminating in a happy ending. By the time Chekhov arrived on the theater scene in the 1880s, the Russian vaudeville, a popular form for over half a century, was so overused that it was in a state of ossification.

Bruised by his unsuccessful attempts at writing serious drama, Chekhov eagerly turned to the vaudeville. From 1886–89, he wrote seven short plays that he classified in the vaudeville genre. Their subtitles — farce, monologue, one-act play, and so on — varied. *The Bear* (1888) would be the most popular. It became a personal favorite of Tolstoy, and it earned Chekhov more money than any of his short stories. Equally popular was *The Proposal* (1888), a favorite of the czar. He arran for its performance at his summer residence at Czarskoe Selo in 1889. These vaudevilles were joined by *On the Harmful Effects of Tobacco* (1886), *Swan Song* (1887), *The Tragedian in Spite of Himself* (1889), and *The Wedding* (1889). They seemed to pour from him as effortlessly as "oil from the depths of the Baku," as he put it in a letter to his publisher Suvorin dated December 23, 1888. They also placed Chekhov stage center in the Moscow theater scene. They captivated the public. They also elicited the critical recognition he had craved.

Moreover, Chekhov managed to create innovative variations to the vaudeville's conventions, while still preserving its ability to entertain. He took stock character types (like the inept suitor in *The Proposal*) and, either through parody or subversion, humanized them. He created new types as well — such as the pathetic hen-pecked schoolteacher in *Tobacco*. He brought a new sense of the absurd to the vaudeville through exaggerated behavior and physical actions (in *The Bear*). He introduced innovative usage of language. Indeed, he endowed the vaudevilles with a Russian flavor. Through this experimentation, Chekhov reaffirmed the classical strength of comedy as a vehicle of serious social commentary and thought. He satirized contemporary topics, poking fun at feminism, the greedy middle class, the ineptitude and self-importance of government institutions, to mention only a few. Above all, he introduced into the vaudeville genre an element of the tragicomic. Ironically, then, Chekhov made his mark on the Moscow theater scene with a comedic form that came easily to him, not the tragic form he struggled to create. In doing so, he succeeded in elevating the vaudeville into an art form, and he provided supreme entertainment as well as insight into the human condition.

In a three-year period he experienced whirlwind popularity as a vaudeville writer. In this period he also published more than 300 of his short stories. This placed Chekhov in the front ranks of Russian writers by the age of twenty-eight. In 1888, he was awarded the prestigious Pushkin Prize by the Imperial Academy of Sciences in Petersburg. In 1889, he was elected to the Society of Lovers of Russian Literature. Nonetheless, this popularity could not assuage the frustration at not yet finding his serious dramatic voice. On October 10, 1888, he wrote to Suvorin, "Everything I have written, everything I received the prize for, will live no more than ten years in people's memories." He harbored resentment for the success the humorous muse brought him so easily, and for the difficulty he had in the serious vein. Meanwhile, Chekhov struggled to rewrite *Ivanov* for its St. Petersburg production in 1889. Even though the rewriting process brought critical success, still it did not satisfy him. Clearly, he was frustrated that somehow the serious dramatist in him had not yet found a voice. In any case, he felt the public was not ready to hear it.

THE WOOD DEMON: A COMEDY IN FOUR ACTS

Smarting from the controversy surrounding *Ivanov*, and ever eager to please the audience and the critics, Chekhov next wrote a long romantic comedy. *The Wood Demon* (a "comedy in four acts") premiered on December 27, 1889, at the Abramov Theater in Moscow. With its uniform critical failure, Chekhov's worst fears were reconfirmed regarding his dramaturgical skills, and he forbade its publication. Indeed, the literary committee of a St. Petersburg theater advised him to stick to writing stories. It was the response to this third full-length work that drove Chekhov to bring the Moscow period of his life to an end.

Chekhov was bored by the superficialities of fame, peeved by the Moscow literary scene, and unfulfilled by his success as a humorous writer. In particular, he was wounded by the criticism of his plays and frustrated by what he saw to be his failures. The death of his brother, Nikolai, of consumption, grieved him and made him fearful for his own health. So Chekhov sought an escape from his dramaturgical efforts. He wished to purify himself of the only source of bitterness in his life to date: the theater.

A JOURNEY TO SAKHALIN

In 1890, Chekhov made the historic journey across Siberia to the island of Sakhalin off the Pacific Coast. His aim was to study the penal colonies and penal codes. In seeking to give expression to another side of himself — the doctor and humanitarian — the journey concluding the Moscow period was nonetheless born of spiritual need for Chekhov the serious playwright. This need was finding a voice even before the opening of *The Wood Demon.* It was a journey that provides a special landmark for Chekhov the dramatist — the beginning of a six-year hiatus in serious full-length playwriting. On this journey and in the years of personal growth to follow, Chekhov gained a vital feeling of personal freedom. This, more than the acquiring of technique and skill, permitted the four major plays to be born.

THE MELIKHOVO PERIOD: 1892–99

The decade of the 1890s when Chekhov was in his thirties marks the turning point from humorist to serious dramatist.

His arduous journey by land to Sakhalin, and back by sea, took over a year and had a significant spiritual impact on him. The separation from Moscow life was crucial in giving him the perspective he knew he needed for his development as a dramatist. Once back in Russia, wanderlust overtook him again, and he left for Western Europe. Finally, in 1892, he fulfilled a dream. He purchased an "estate," called Melikhovo (actually, a picturesque *dacha* on several hundred acres of land) about sixty miles southeast of Moscow. Here he chose to do his writing away from Moscow and his family. They subsequently joined him there nonetheless.

Once installed in Melikhovo, he plunged into community activities. He practiced medicine from his tiny "estate," joining vigorously in the fight against the cholera epidemic. He built schools with his own funds, and he started other programs to benefit the peasant population. During this period, his productivity in short story writing decreased to a handful per year.

Still, it was a gratifying period for Chekhov. The presence of nature, which he romanticized in his plays of the '80s, was now a real part of his life. Many of his young artist and literary friends flocked there from Moscow to enjoy the idyllic setting and to walk through the woods. The beauty of the surroundings, the distraction of the young visitors, and the whirlwind of the community activities further served to distract him from his ever-present illness.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF AN ARTIST

There was a seven-year hiatus between the opening of *The Wood Demon* in 1889, Chekhov's third full-length play and a critical failure, and the writing of *The Seagull* (the first of what would be called the four major plays). During that time, a variety of factors contributed to Chekhov's personal and artistic growth. He had a sense of personal feeling gained by taking leave of his family and Moscow. The journey he took to Sakhalin on a humanitarian mission influenced him deeply. Meanwhile, he was nourished by his retreat to Melikhovo and the Russian countryside he loved. The practice of medicine as a country doctor nurtured him as well. In this period he pursued his personal relationships with artist friends, which served as material for his plays. As his health failed, he had a sense of the finiteness of life. He had a sense of responsibility as an author of the *fin de siècle* and a new centennial. He also sensed the decline of Russia, paralleling his own decline. In that period, his productivity diminished to the point where he wrote only one more vaudeville and a dozen or so short stories from 1891–95. More importantly, it was a time of personal and artistic transformation, which yielded the four major plays he would write from 1896 to 1904.

THE FIRST OF THE FOUR MAJOR PLAYS

In a letter to Suvorin dated October 21, 1895, Chekhov wrote the following:

> Can you imagine — I am writing a play . . . not without pleasure, though I abuse the conventions of the stage terribly. It's a comedy, there are . . . four acts, landscapes (view over a lake); a great deal of conversation about literature, little action, tons of love.

Nowhere in the letter does he comment on the source of inspiration for his first major play, *The Seagull*. This letter, in fact, is the first mention of it. Yet it must have already been taking shape in his dramatic imagination.

Set on an estate in the countryside by a lake, the play tells the story of an aspiring young avant-garde playwright, Treplev. He wants to stage his new play to impress his mother and her lover Trigorin, an established short story writer. Treplev enlists his young lover, Nina, an aspiring young actress, to perform in his play. Covering three ensuing years of their lives and the tragic events that unfold after that fateful performance one innocent summer night, the play deals with love, art, nature, death, and, above all, the question of what it means to be an artist. It details the risks one must take to create "new forms" for the theater, as Treplev calls them. It also looks at the price one must pay and the lengths to which one must go to be an artist, including the destruction of one's self and one's loved ones.

For his play, Chekhov clearly drew upon events in the lives of his artist friends who were visiting Melikhovo. These included the suicidal artist Levitan, and no less than three young women named Lydia, all of whom were hopelessly in love with Chekhov at the time. Indeed, there is the suggestion that Treplev and Trigorin, the two writers in the play, are aspects of Chekhov the writer himself. In Chekhov's ensuing correspondence, behind a tone of self-deprecation and flippancy, there is a sense of excitement that he had written something new.

THE SEAGULL: A RESOUNDING FAILURE

The ill-fated story of *The Seagull's* first production is legendary in theater history. By September, it was too late to be included in the prestigious Maly Theater's repertoire in Moscow for the current season, where Chekhov had hoped to have it staged. Instead, it was offered to the Aleksandrinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, where Chekhov's reputation as a writer of vaudevilles was well known. Amusingly enough, the play made it past the Imperial censor. (One of the few changes requested was that a line indicating that Treplev's mother, the actress Arkadina, was "smoking, drinking, and living openly with that novelist" be struck from the script!) Unhappily, the play, directed by the theater's stage manager, had only nine days of rehearsal, on the fourth day of which the actress playing Nina was replaced by the well-known actress Vera Kommisarzhevskaya. She was, according to Chekhov, the only one in the cast who had any sense of his play. Thus in an atmosphere of artistic disunity, ill-preparation, and utter dread, Chekhov attended the disastrous opening night on October 17, 1896. After hearing the boisterous, derisive laughter in Act One during Nina's poetic speech in Treplev's play, Chekhov took refuge in the dressing rooms and ultimately fled the theater, vowing never again to write another play.

AN HISTORIC MEETING

While Chekhov was nursing his dramaturgical wounds, a momentous dinner meeting took place at the Slavyansky Bazaar, a famous Moscow hotel, on June 22, 1897. Playwright/critic/dramaturg Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and actor/director Konstantin Alekseev, otherwise known as Stanislavsky, had a famous meeting. Out of that historic eighteen-hour conversation, the Moscow Art Theatre was born.

It was a theater dedicated to rebellion against the highly styled theater of the nineteenth century. Its two founders set out to establish new standards for work. They wanted to create a theater that would match and even surpass the Maly. They sought to create a true ensemble theater based on a method of realistic acting and production. Stanislavsky's aim was a new acting style based on truth and feeling. Nemirovich wanted to encourage and develop new writing for the theater. Together they solicited resources and attracted a vibrant new company of young actors. A number of these actors were Nemirovich's own acting students.

CHEKHOV AND THE MOSCOW ART THEATRE

First and foremost, their goal was to produce *The Seagull*, a play by the new playwright, Anton Chekhov, in their inaugural season. Nemirovich admired the play passionately. He went so far as to say that it was the only new play that excited him and that Chekhov was the only contemporary dramatist of value.

Chekhov was approached, but he was reluctant. He had been traumatized by the negative criticism of *The Seagull*'s first production at the Aleksandrinsky Theater the previous year. Fortunately, Nemirovich persisted, and finally Chekhov relented. The production was directed by Stanislavsky. He also played Trigorin (a performance of which Chekhov was highly critical) opposite a passionate young actress and student of Nemirovich named Olga Knipper. (She was later to be Chekhov's leading lady and his wife.) The second production in the theater's first season, it opened on December 17, 1898, to ecstatic audience response and critical praise. Knipper reports in her memoirs that so excited were the cast members on opening night that they took valerian drops to stay calm.

How could the play that had received such poor reviews only two years before in St. Petersburg have become so huge a success in Moscow? The answer, of course, is by virtue of the passion that the members of this young company had for Chekhov's work. It also was a result of their understanding and appreciation of its newness and its

aesthetic. With that opening, the Moscow Art Theatre became "Chekhov's Theater," and *The Seagull* became its emblem — even to this day.

Chekhov never quite recovered from the fiasco of *The Seagull*'s initial premiere. He lapsed into a new kind of detached anxiety about playwriting. He was unable to trust the affirmation of this unexpected, exhilarating triumph and the promise it held for the future. Even though he ultimately wrote three more masterpieces, he would never overcome his sensitivity to the vicissitudes of the theater. In writing a play about a seagull that was shot and eventually stuffed, could he have been anticipating what might happen to him as a playwright, once he ventured to write in a new form?

DRAMATURGICAL MYSTERY

Even before the Moscow Art Theatre produced *The Seagull* and well before its first, provincial production, Chekhov had already written his next play, *Uncle Vanya*.

Of all the major plays, *Uncle Vanya* is the one least mentioned in Chekhov's correspondence. Indeed, the actual date of the writing of *Uncle Vanya* remains a mystery in literary history. One suspects this was deliberately created by its author who was protecting himself from what he perceived to be his chronic failure as a serious dramatist. Most speculate that it was written sometime between November 1895, after the completion of the first draft of *The Seagull*, and December 2, 1896, when Chekhov first mentions it to his publisher. "My plays are being printed," he complains, "with amazing slowness . . . two full-length plays are not yet included in any collection: *The Seagull*, known to you, and *Uncle Vanya*, unknown to anyone on earth . . . "

Uncle Vanya was again set in the Russian countryside with an ensemble cast of characters. It tells the story of the arrival of an eminent professor for a summer sojourn on the family estate. There its owner (Vanya) and a country doctor (Astrov) fall in love with the professor's bea[illegible] young wife. Whiling the summer away in fruitless love intrigue, the characters struggle with the realization that their dreams and passions will never be fulfilled. They are trapped in this country life that is both a haven and a prison. With autumn, aging, and the shadow of death encroaching on them, they realize that work is their only salvation. The play begins and ends with an unanswered question: "Will we be remembered?"

There was a second reason for Chekhov's reticence about his new play. The text of *Uncle Vanya* is a skillful reworking of *The Wood Demon*, the earlier work whose critical failure in 1889 had wounded him so deeply. The dramaturgical transformation is dazzling, demonstrating Chekhov's acquired skills as a dramatist. He reworked the plot and reimagined the characters, altering the tone from a romantic comedy to a deeper tragicomedy. Also of significance is the metamorphosis of the play's setting. The Russian countryside is transformed from an imaginary place of frivolous romance to a place where the real hardships of provincial life and the spiritual isolation are now depicted. This transformation comes from Chekhov's life in Melikhovo. It reflects his experiences both as a landowner and a country doctor. Chekhov's romanticization of nature in the 1880s had deepened into a broader perception of nature. It was now not only a place of beauty but also of mystery and even danger. It was a place of forces beyond the control and comprehension of man.

A SECOND SUCCESS

The first productions of *Uncle Vanya* took place in 1897 in several provincial Russian theaters with positive results. At first, the Imperial censors banned its production. They expressed dismay that anyone would aim a gun at an eminent Russian professor. Despite everything, however, approval was finally granted.

Still reeling with the success of *The Seagull*, Stanislavsky and Nemirovich pressured Chekhov to give them *Uncle Vanya* for their second (1899) season. Unfortunately, Chekhov had already promised it to the Maly Theater for its first professional production. As it happened, however, the Maly demanded radical rewrites of the play. Chekhov refused. In the end, he gave the rights to Nemirovich and Stanislavsky. The play opened at the Moscow Art Theatre on October 26, 1899. Olga Knipper played Yelena. Stanislavsky played Astrov and was the production's director. Though reviews were mixed, the audiences were very moved. It was considered the second great success in the collaboration of Chekhov and the Moscow Art Theatre.

While these productions of Chekhov's plays by the Moscow Art Theatre may have been successful, still there were artistic tensions. Working in the theater, and with Stanislavsky, had always been a source of anxiety for Chekhov. This was true even though he was fascinated by all aspects of preproduction. Indeed, he insisted on being informed regarding all aspects of rehearsals, demanding reports even when he was away from Moscow. As for Stanislavsky, he was, as usual, overextended. He was working both as actor and director in other productions that second season, as well as managing his family's factories. Consequently, he frequently missed rehearsals. Nemirovich had to see to it that Stanislavsky learned his lines, that he not knock props and furniture around during rehearsals, and that he not indulge in uncalled for theatrics. Displeased, Chekhov wrote to Olga on October 4, 1899: "When Stanislavsky directs, he's an artist, but when he acts, he's just a rich young merchant who wants to dabble in art."

In March 1897, following the completion of *Uncle Vanya*, Chekhov experienced his most violent hemorrhage to date, causing him to face the seriousness of his condition. His doctors urged him to move to the South. With reluctance, Chekhov gave up his medical practice at Melikhovo. He started to spend longer periods of time in Yalta, convalescing, the result being that he was unable to attend the Moscow Art Theatre openings of either *The Seagull* or *Uncle Vanya*. It was not until the spring of 1900, to celebrate the centennial and to honor their beloved author, that the Moscow Art Theatre toured their production of *Uncle Vanya* to Yalta. They performed it there for him before an audience that included Rachmaninov, Tolstoy, Bunin, Kuprin, Gorky, and others. It was an exciting time. Chekhov entertained the troupe nightly. He was exhilarated, exhausted, and in love once again with the theater. At the production's close, the Art Theatre troupe brought the swing and the bench from Act One of *Vanya* and placed it in Chekhov's garden near his orchard of almond trees.

THE THREE SISTERS: A PLAY FOR OLGA

Now considered the Art Theatre's playwright-in-residence, Chekhov's bond with the company was further strengthened by a blossoming romance with its leading lady, Olga Knipper. A former student of Nemirovich, this fiery young actress had played the roles of Arkadina and Yelena. Chekhov now considered her the "interpreter" of his roles. Chekhov and Olga had become lovers in the summer of 1900. After she returned to Moscow in August to prepare for the upcoming theater season, Chekhov sat down and wrote the play that would be the first written expressly for the Moscow Art Theatre, *The Three Sisters*. The role of Masha was meant for Olga.

The Three Sisters tells the story of the Prozorov family. The three sisters and a brother live in a remote provincial town. Here, they come to terms with their hopes for love, success, and their ultimate dream of moving back to Moscow, the city of their childhood. In the course of the play, which spans three years of their lives, each of the Prozorovs faces acute disappointment and severe loss, and they achieve none of their dreams. All the philosophizing of the men they admire and their visions for a shining future have come to naught. As the eldest sister, Olga, realizes, "we shall vanish, we shall disappear without a trace." At the play's end, like the characters in *Uncle Vanya*, the three sisters find that the only way to live is to endure . . . and to work.

It was Chekhov's most ambitious work to date with the largest number of characters and the most complex plot. He struggled with the writing, continuing to express self-doubt as to his dramatic skills.

Chekhov attended the first reading of the new play by the company in the fall of 1900. Discouraged by the perplexed response of the company, frustrated with anxiety over the upcoming rehearsals and the requested rewrites, and plagued by his ill health, Chekhov retreated to Nice. From there he mailed the rewrites to Nemirovich. He wrote to Olga daily, begging for details of the rehearsal process. He was wary of Stanislavsky, who was again directing. According to Chekhov, Stanislavsky's tendency was to interpret Chekhov's plays as tragedies and to pace them slowly. This frustrated Chekhov deeply. At the eleventh hour, Stanislavsky took over the role of Vershinin, under Nemirovich's direction. Meanwhile, Chekhov had fled from Nice to Italy, and he was unreachable on opening night, January 31, 1901. Indeed, the news of the triumphant opening did not reach him till after he returned to Yalta in February.

On May 25, 1901, following the January opening of *The Three Sisters*, Chekhov and Olga were married in a church outside Moscow. Owing either to Chekhov's anxieties or his love of practical jokes, the couple planned a reception where family and friends awaited them. They then deliberately didn't appear; they went to a church alone at a separate location. They were married with no witnesses from the family to whom he had been devoted all his life.

THE ART THEATRE IN ASCENDANCE

Now considered the rising star in the Russian theater, the Moscow Art Theatre received, in 1901, a heavy subsidy from Morozov. This would allow the troupe to move into a modern building with updated equipment. Also in 1901, thanks to Chekhov's persuasive efforts, the young playwright Maxim Gorky began working on his first plays, *Small People* and *The Lower Depths*. When they were done, he sent them to the Art Theatre. By 1902, the Art Theatre's supremacy was established, with Chekhov's three plays continuously performed in the repertoire.

Olga [illegible]gic miscarriage in February 1902 kept her out of the season in the spring. Fortunately, after a five-month convalescence with Chekhov, she was back in Moscow, performing with the company.

THE CHERRY ORCHARD: THE FINAL PLAY

Meanwhile, Stanislavsky, Nemirovich, and Olga pressured him continually for a new play. In 1903, Chekhov's health was in such a steep decline that he could barely write more than a few lines a day. In Yalta, lonely and ailing, he nonetheless struggled to write the play he'd promised Olga, to cheer her up after her loss. Its title — *The Cherry Orchard.* Whereas his other major plays took two months each to write, he struggled with this play for months.

Finally, he sent the manuscript from Yalta in October 1903. Stanislavsky organized a reading immediately. He then telegrammed Chekhov with his ecstatic congratulations, reporting how the company had wept when they read it. This infuriated Chekhov, who had subtitled the play "a comedy." He insisted on coming to Moscow and attended rehearsals in order to keep an eye on Stanislavsky.

Rehearsals were a torture for him. He remonstrated Stanislavsky continually over his elaborate direction and insistence on overloading the production with gratuitous sound effects. Ever eager for good reviews, Stanislavsky decided to schedule the opening night on January 17, 1904 — Chekhov's birthday. He wanted to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Chekhov's work as a writer as well. Stanislavsky also hoped that the sight of the ailing playwright would soften any potential critical blows. The reluctant Chekhov had to be coerced onto the stage, coughing, after the third act. There was a forty-five-minute opening night testimonial. He could barely stand, and he was embarrassed by the elaborate wreaths and gifts. Despite the audience's emotional response to his much-weakened appearance, Stanislavsky's plan was not altogether successful. Again, the critical reviews were mixed.

THE LONG SHADOW DARKENING

The Cherry Orchard was by far the longest in the writing of any of the four major plays. It took ten months, due largely to the constant interruptions of visitors and his declining health. "My darling," he wrote to Olga on October 12, 1903, "how hard it was for me to write that play." The long shadow of his illness was darkening.

That Chekhov knew this would be his last is perhaps the source of the play's inspiration. He felt the end of his own life approaching, but he also felt keenly the turning tides of a new century. He recognized, in a nondidactic way, that it was the end of an era for Russia and the dawn of a new one. Even in his initial vision of the play — an old lady, an old manservant, an orchard all in white, and ladies in white dresses — the elements of the old, the new, the end, the beginning are central. This play would be somewhat different from the previous three. As Chekhov pointed out, there was no gun, no doctor, and no love. These elements were consistently present in all his other plays. Perhaps this insistence that the play be called a comedy reflected his wish to end his literary oeuvre with a vision of optimism. In the subtle mixture of comedic and dramatic tones of the play, he was also making his own sober prediction about the future.

In this final play, Lyubov Ranevskaya, a landowner, returns from abroad. She and her brother confront the necessity of either paying the mortgage (long in arrears) or selling their crumbling family estate, which had been in their family for generations. Chekhov chose his characters carefully, each representing a different segment of a changing social order. There were, among others, the impoverished but elegant landowners Lyubov and Gaev; the capitalist Lopakhin who wants to buy the estate in order to cut down the cherry orchard and build summer cottages for renters; and Lyubov's daughter, Anya, and a young revolutionary student, Trofimov, who represent various points of view of the new generation. There is also a governess, Charlotta, of unknown nationality, representing the displaced people in a society in flux, and an ancient servant, Firs. He is the last servant on the estate, one who had refused his freedom from his masters in the Emancipation of 1861.

In *The Cherry Orchard,* Chekhov saw a dying Russia through the eyes of a dying man. "Good-bye old life, hello new life," cry out the new generation. They are represented by Lyubov's daughter, Anya, as the family is finally forced to abandon their estate, while no one knows what the future will bring. There is only the unknown, the mysterious, represented by the strange sound of a breaking string far in the distance — the most haunting premonition in all of Chekhov's work.

THE FINAL BOW

From February until October 1903, as he struggled to write *The Cherry Orchard,* Olga, Stanislavsky, and Nemirovich pressured him. They may not have realized how seriously ill Chekhov was. In fact, there were days when he could only write a few lines, owing to the increased feeling of weakness, headaches, and the constant coughing. Thankfully, he was able to complete it, and *The Cherry Orchard* opened on his final birthday: January 17, 1904.

Three months following the premiere of *The Cherry Orchard,* in response to his declining health, Chekhov's doctors sent him abroad to Germany with Olga Knipper. They took up residence at a spa in Badenweiler. The story of his death and burial reads like one of his own later, ironic stories. On the night of July 2, Chekhov asked his wife and the German doctor for a glass of champagne. After drinking it, he said: "Ich sterbe."

He died peacefully. Ironically, his body was shipped to Russia by train in a car marked "oysters" (one of his favorite indulgences). The train was met in the Moscow station by a military band. It was not for Chekhov, but for a high-ranking military official on the same train. He was buried in the cemetery of the Novodevichy Monastery, the burial site of the mother of Olga, Masha, and Irina in *The Three Sisters.*

To the very end, he felt misunderstood as a dramatist, despite all the accolades his major plays had brought him. Weeks before his death, he wrote to Olga about *The Cherry Orchard,* lamenting Stanislavsky's interpretation of the play as a tragedy instead of a comedy, as he had intended.

OLGA AFTER ANTON

After Chekhov's death, Olga remained with the Moscow Art Theatre, performing all the roles in her husband's plays into her eighties. A famous story reports that, after she retired from the stage, one evening she was sitting in a theater box during a performance of *The Three Sisters.* She was displeased with the actress's interpretation of the role her husband had written for her, and she was heard to call out Masha's lines from her seat in the auditorium.

THE ART THEATRE AFTER CHEKHOV

In the decade following Chekhov's death, the Art Theatre struggled with many vicissitudes, including the loss of Gorky as successor to its playwright-in-residence Chekhov. They also lost Morozov's financial support and experienced critical failures. There was growing tension between its founders, Stanislavsky and Nemirovich. The company's first European tour in 1906 launched its international reputation just at a crucial moment when it was in danger of collapse. A system of studios within the company was introduced, decentralizing the artistic leadership even more. By the time of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the Art Theatre was at its lowest ebb, and in 1921, its subsidy was threatened. In an effort to survive, it decided to tour Berlin, Paris, and the United States from 1922 through 1924.

The tour, however, only further depleted the energies of its leaders and actors. Nonetheless, it kept the theater's artistic spirit alive and brought Chekhov's plays to new audiences. It also brought the Art

The[illegible]s acting style to the attention of American audiences and artists. This ultimately changed the course of the American theater. In Moscow, too, the Art Theatre has survived with its internationally renowned theater school and classical repertoire, which still includes all the plays of Anton Chekhov. The Moscow Art Theatre remains one of the leading theaters of the world.

CHEKHOV'S LEGACY

Chekhov's major plays take place in his own times and are set on country estates — or, in the case of *The Three Sisters*, in a grand house in a provincial town. They are inhabited primarily by the landed gentry and other members of the educated and privileged classes. While Chekhov's settings and their inhabitants may have not been new to the Russian theater, his treatments of them were. Seen as a whole, the four major plays had a new and distinct presence all their own on the Russian stage. Clearly, the public, the critics, and the actors of Chekhov's times who saw and performed in his plays recognized their "newness." Despite his agonizing doubts as to his own abilities as a serious dramatist, Chekhov, too, knew that he was writing "new forms."

This "newness" is challenging to define and describe. Chekhov broke free from the conventions of Ostrovskian drama and its standards of plot and characterization, which had influenced the Russian theater since the 1850s. The meaning of the terms "realism" and "naturalism" as applied to Chekhov's plays, which one encounters in literary criticism, can be problematic. This is because the definitions of these terms change with every decade and the appearance of more "new" writers for the stage, whose work challenges us to redefine our terminology. Chekhov himself scoffed at the description of his plays as "realistic." He said that one could hardly surgically remove a nose from a portrait, substitute it with a real one, and still call it art. His contemporaries recognized this newness in the major plays. Stanislavsky and Nemirovich thought Chekhov to be a genius, admiring the freshness and simplicity of the plays. Gorky noted the originality of the form and the broad scope of the ideas. Knipper spoke of the remarkable world of the Chekhovian play and how actors loved to live in it.

Chekhov himself put it best when he said he strove to put "life as it is" on the stage. This is what he set out to do in *Ivanov* in the 1880s and had to struggle for two decades to give it expression in the later major plays.

THE NATURE OF THE NEWNESS

The sense of "newness" lay in a unique combination of dramatic elements. First, Chekhov boldly disregarded Aristotelian rules of dramaturgy pertaining to action and character. He used a consistent four-act form with a deliberate lack of strong dramatic plot. There was an absence of a central heroic character, replaced by an ensemble that represented all strata of Russian society. Certainly, there were remarkably rich individual character portrayals. These were alive, detailed, and gracefully drawn. The atmosphere was evoked by a very specific mise-en-scène. Chekhov used the simple details of everyday life, surrounded by the sense of a vaster landscape. He evoked the passage of time, while at the same time creating a very special, unique tragicomic tone.

Second, Chekhov introduced a new "non-Aristotelian" notion of dramatic action, to, as he said, depict "life as it is" on the stage. In the major plays, there are no "Ivanovs" who shot themselves onstage. All significant action takes place offstage, while onstage there is everyday life: arrivals, sojourns, departures, and the trivialities of daily existence. As Chekhov once remarked to the writer Goroditsky, as quoted by Gilles:

> In life, one does not shoot oneself in the head, hang oneself, or declare one's passion at every fencepost, and one does not pour out profound thoughts in a constant flow. No, mostly one eats, drinks,

> flirts, makes stupid remarks: that is what should be seen on the stage. One must write plays in which people come and go, have dinner, talk about the rain, play cards — not because this is the author's whim but because this is what happens in real life. . . . Nothing must be fitted into a pattern.

Third, Chekhov introduced "living characters" to the Russian stage. His characters were full human portrayals with rich inner lives, emotional and psychological complexities, spirituality, and colorful outward "behavior." For the Moscow Art Theatre, whose founding purpose was to create a new school of acting for the Russian stage, these new plays and characters were ideal.

VISUAL AESTHETIC

Chekhov also brought a strong new visual aesthetic to the Russian stage. His mise-en-scènes are sharp and specific for each of the four acts. He gives time of day, season, climate, light, sound, and the strong presence of nature and the elements. Serving as the backdrop to the details of everyday life, these richly textured settings create a mood, as the story moves from act to act, from exterior to interior — or reverse — as spaces contract, empty, and darken, as weather changes, as time passes. Specific scenic elements, such as a mounted seagull, a samovar, a piano, a clock, or sounds, such as a night watchman knocking, a lonely gun shot, a breaking string, an axe falling against a tree, stand out in sharp relief. Like a Pointillist painter, Chekhov introduced a new aesthetic, one of detail, translucence, and depth. His plays have an evocative atmosphere all their own.

COMEDY OR TRAGEDY, OR BOTH?

Whether Chekhov's plays were comedies (he being alone and adamant in this opinion) or dramas or tragedies, as Stanislavsky maintained, is a topic that has provoked misunderstandings and misinterpretations of Chekhov's plays then and today. The debate was alive throughout the production of the four major plays at the Moscow Art Theatre. It came to a peak during the preparation for the production of *The Cherry Orchard*. Chekhov insisted it was a comedy, but Stanislavsky wanted to direct it for tragic effect. When Stanislavsky pointed out the many references in the text to the characters who speak "in tears," Chekhov retorted that that was not what he meant. Some theater historians maintain that his irritability on this subject was further exacerbated by his worsening health. Perhaps he deliberately titled it a comedy because he knew it was his last work, and he wanted to end his literary oeuvre as such. In the end, one must search to find the intent behind his insistence, to do his plays justice on the stage.

Finding the special tone in a Chekhov play — also referred to by Nemirovich and Stanislavsky as the "Chekhovian" mood or atmosphere — is dealing with both perspectives — the comedic and the tragic. This allows them to be coexistent, rather than mutually exclusive. Indeed, it was the struggle with this disagreement that brought Stanislavsky to the realization that he expressed in *My Life in Art*. He said that the characters in Chekhov's plays do not indulge in their own sorrow but rather reach, as Chekhov did himself, for life, joy, and laughter. They want to live life to its fullest. It is their struggle in face of the insurmountable obstacles in life that is both comedic and tragic at the same time.

For theater artists of every generation, understanding Chekhov the man and his very special vision of life will help to understand why he called his plays comedies and why his plays conclude, as Astrov puts it, with "*finita la commedia!*" The plays are Chekhov's special vision of the comedy of life itself. Thus, the characters live through the tragic events of the play, laughing through their tears, as the stage directions indicate. Meanwhile, the larger worldview — the tragicomedy of life that Chekhov has written — comes to life on the stage.

A PLACE IN HISTORY

How would Chekhov have wished to be placed in dramatic literature? First, as a profoundly modest and self-effacing writer, he repeatedly wrote that he never expected his work to be remembered after his death. His short story writing came easily to him. He never had faith in his abilities as a dramatist, so he had no expectations of immortality. Furthermore, he came from a literary tradition where authors came almost exclusively from the privileged, landowning classes. As the grandson of a serf and the son of a shopkeeper, he was well aware of his humble origins. So imagine how amazed he would be if he knew that his name is now placed among the great Russian authors — Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Turgenev, Tolstoy — whom he so greatly admired. He would be more amazed to know that he is considered his country's greatest playwright, not to mention world famous.

Second, as a writer who repeatedly resisted labels (realism, naturalism, symbolism), he would not want to be categorized. To some extent, one might say that he satirizes the Russian symbolist movement of the day in his treatment of Treplev's play-within-the-play in *The Seagull.* The exotic elements of the symbolist movement fascinated him, and one can argue that there is a strain of symbolism in the four major plays. Nonetheless, one cannot call Chekhov a symbolist writer. Chekhov still defies categorization, despite literary critics' attempts to do so over the past century.

For example, Chekhov's plays, with their nonaction, paved the way for Samuel Beckett's. Nonetheless, Chekhov cannot be considered solely an existentialist (though there may be elements of that philosophy in his plays). He belongs to no school, to no trend or literary tendency. "I write about life as it is," he repeatedly said. So labels such as realism, naturalism, and so forth don't serve Chekhov's work. No, his vision is far broader and deeper. Indeed, consider the wide divergence of contemporary writers and artists who claim Chekhov as their major influence. These include the European playwrights Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Brian Friel, and Tom Stoppard. American writers — like Edward Albee, John Guare, David Mamet, Maria Fornes — were influenced by him as well. Filmmakers Ingmar Bergman and Woody Allen are among the many who acknowledge Chekhov as their first and foremost influence.

Chekhov's great contribution to dramatic form lies in creating the "bridge" from the classical Western dramatic tradition to the modern era and inviting his successors to cross it. With only four plays, he was able to create that bridge. Bascially, he forged the two classical forms of tragedy and comedy into a form for the modern era — "tragicomedy."

Today, literary historians place Chekhov in the front ranks of world dramatic literature. Ultimately, from Chekhov's point of view, it was not the legacy of his work that concerned him, nor his place in dramatic literature. As he said himself in a letter to Lazarev dated October 20, 1888, "All that I write will be forgotten in five to ten years, but the path paved by me will be free and clear — in this lies my sole merit and contribution."

For Chekhov, the freedom of the writer in his own times to create his own "new forms" is the legacy he wished to leave. This is how he wished to be categorized and remembered. As Treplev says in *The Seagull:* "It's not about forms — old forms, new forms — it's about writing, not bound by any forms at all, just writing, freely, from the soul."

CHEKHOV AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

"It's a fine thing to be able to remember such a man," remarks Gorky of Chekhov in his *Reminiscences.* "A feeling of joy immediately returns to your life, a clear sense of purpose fills it once more." It is only one of many such appreciations of Chekhov by his numerous friends and acquaintances.

During his lifetime, Chekhov carried on a voluminous correspondence. He wrote over 4,000 letters to family members, fellow writers, publishers, critics, admirers, and friends. These letters cover a variety of topics, including his attitudes toward views on life and literature and his philosophy of writing. He also wrote of his career, his plays, the contemporary theater, and his fellow artists and writers. The quantity of these letters and the wide variety of recipients indicate that Chekhov was basically a gregarious man who loved people (although in later years, as his illness took over, he became more reclusive and ill-humored). He also used his correspondence to express his views on the subject matter that concerned him most — writing and the theater.

This correspondence is also a treasure trove of information on how Chekhov viewed his contemporaries. In turn, his fellow artists and writers wrote memoirs and reminiscences that shed light on Chekhov and how they viewed him.

DOSTOEVSKY AND TURGENEV

Among the great writers who were Chekhov's contemporaries, Dostoevsky had died in 1881, and Turgenev in 1883. Chekhov never met them, as he was only in his early twenties at the time of their deaths, still a medical student, and only a fledgling writer. He had read all their works thoroughly and held them both in awe. He recognized their greatness. However, in later years, he expressed reservations about their writings. He admired Dostoevsky's prodigious oeuvre, but found his novels long and pretentious. Dostoevsky's Slavophilism and religious views were widely divergent from Chekhov's own. As for Turgenev, he admired *A Month in the Country*, whose setting and coterie of characters served as a model for his four major plays. However, he found Turgenev's plays to be lightweight. He didn't admire his female characters, finding them affected and false. Of Turgenev's prose writings, he admired only *Fathers and Sons*. Chekhov became impatient with critics who drew parallels between his work and Turgenev's. "Only a fraction of what he wrote — an eighth to a tenth, say — will last," Chekhov wrote to Olga Knipper on February 13, 1902. "All the rest will be buried in archives in twenty-five to thirty-five years to come."

TOLSTOY AND GORKY

Tolstoy and Gorky (along with Chekhov) were the foremost men of letters of his times. Chekhov developed a close relationship with both. Tolstoy (1828–1910) was the "elder statesman" and father figure, over thirty years Chekhov's senior. While Chekhov did not agree with all of Tolstoy's views (especially his evangelical teachings), he had great admiration for his work and his venerable position in Russian culture. Portraits of Tolstoy and Turgenev graced the walls of his house in Yalta. When he first met Tolstoy in September 1895, he was greatly impressed with his moral authority and his charisma. "He is nearly a perfect man," Chekhov was said to have remarked.

By the time they met face-to-face in 1895, Chekhov had achieved fame as a leading young prose writer of the day, so Tolstoy gave serious consideration to his work. By all reports, Tolstoy admired Chekhov's prose writing but did not care for his plays (with the exception of *The Bear*, which delighted him). Indeed, he made an effort to develop a friendship with Chekhov, to exert a paternal influence on him as a writer, although Chekhov offered a quiet resistance to these attempts. Tolstoy called *The Seagull* weak. He told Nemirovich that *Uncle Vanya* lacked tragic circumstances and that the Art Theatre's production substituted atmosphere and theatrical effect in its place. Moreover, Tolstoy was so outraged by the courtship by Vanya and Astrov of Yelena, a married woman, that he reportedly insulted one of the actors after a performance. He further criticized Chekhov's plays for their trivialities and for having no positive heroes or revolutionaries. (That was precisely the point, Chekhov replied!) Later, according to Troyat, Chekhov remarked, with laughter: "Tolstoy once told me: 'As you know, I detest Shakespeare. And your plays are worse than his.'" The writer Ivan Bunin recalls Chekhov saying: "What I particularly admire in Tolstoy is the contempt he feels for all us writers — not even contempt; he simply considers us all nonexistent."

BAS BELIEFS

Regarding their basic beliefs, both writers were deeply concerned about the plight of the peasant on the one hand and the lassitude of the intelligentsia on the other. However, Chekhov differed from Tolstoy in two principal regards. Chekhov rejected Tolstoy's belief in Christianity as the main source of moral strength for the Russian peasant. He also rejected the idea of Christianity's ability to cure all evils. As well, Chekhov rejected the methods of social reform advocated by Tolstoy. As a doctor, Chekhov wanted a thorough study of the diseases of society to be made before remedies were suggested. Chekhov considered the ones Tolstoy advocated — like compulsory community programs including physical work for all, and so on — to be superficial and faddish. In turn, according to Bruford, Tolstoy, remarking on the clinical aspects of Chekhov's objective writing, told Gorky that Chekhov would have written better had he not been a doctor.

Despite their differences, however, there was a sincere mutual admiration and an abiding affection of a father/son nature. While in Yalta, they visited on a number of occasions, always memorable to Chekhov. Then in 1900, they were both elected to the Academy of Sciences, which had established a Pushkin Section for Russian Language and Literature. Chekhov and Tolstoy were now considered equal in stature.

In 1903, when Chekhov's health was in decline, Tolstoy tried to cheer him by sending him an inscribed photograph and a list of thirty stories he considered to be Chekhov's finest. (He divided them into two categories of "first" and "second" quality.) He often was known to remark, as Troyat reports: "Chekhov is Pushkin in prose." On other occasions, he compared Chekhov to Maupassant, or to the Impressionist painters. Though Tolstoy lamented that modern Russian writers were not at all Russian in their thought, Chekhov was a glaring exception. "Now you," as Simmons in his biography notes, he once said to Chekhov, "You are Russian. Yes, very very Russian."

HEKHOV AND GORKY

Chekhov also developed a close relationship with Maxim Gorky (1868–1936). Gorky was a young playwright eight years his junior. As Tolstoy mentored Chekhov, Chekhov in turn mentored Gorky. Their correspondence began with a letter from Gorky to the playwright Chekhov with ecstatic praise for the Art Theatre's production of *The Seagull.* (He was equally enthusiastic about *Uncle Vanya.*) When they met in Yalta in 1899, they struck up a friendship immediately. They spent days discussing art, literature, and politics. It was a relationship of mutual admiration. Chekhov admired Gorky's spontaneity, fierce idealism, and passion for the common man, while Gorky admired Chekhov for his humanity, modesty, and self-effacing qualities. Gorky joined Rachmaninov, Bunin, and Kuprin at the performance of *Uncle Vanya* in Yalta, in honor of the centennial. Chekhov and Gorky so enjoyed each other's company that they traveled together for two weeks that summer of 1900 in the Caucasus. Together, they shared their views of the future of Russia. Gorky, a Marxist, dreamed of revolution; whereas Chekhov hoped for a slower transformation from the czarist regime into enlightened liberalism. Wrote Gorky of his friend: "No one understood so clearly and so shrewdly as Anton Chekhov the tragedy of the trifles of life; no one before him had been able to draw such a mercilessly honest picture of dull, shameful lives . . ."

While both Tolstoy and Gorky were outspoken social activists, it is interesting to note that Chekhov, in his own quiet way, was even more of one. He campaigned against famine, fought epidemics, built schools and public roads in his district around Melikhovo, and endowed libraries. He helped to organize laboratories and gave thousands of peasants free medical treatment. He also planted gardens and trees. He mentored dozens of fledgling writers and helped them find publishers. Meanwhile, he raised funds for human causes and dozens of other pursuits to help his fellow man.

In 1929, the Russian émigré poet Boris Poplavsky commented:

"Dostoevsky cannot help us live, he can only help us when we quarrel, separate, die. Tolstoy perhaps could, but how revolting is his eulogizing of bourgeois prosperity. . . . Chekhov — yes, Chekhov can help us live."

CHEKHOV THE CORRESPONDENT

Chekhov corresponded with dozens of others, including his publishers Nikolai Leikin and Aleksey Suvorin. He wrote to many writers, including Ivan Bunin, Aleksandr Kuprin, Vladimir Korolenko, and Alexey Pleshcheyev. He knew many artists, literary figures, and actors of his day. He was a close friend of the painter Isaak Levitan, and he knew the painter Ilya Repin. He had met the composer Sergei Rachmaninov. He corresponded with the choreographer Sergei Diaghilev and the composer Pyotr Tchaikovsky. He maintained a steady correspondence with Stanislavsky, Nemirovich-Danchenko, and numerous actors at the Moscow Art Theatre. The mutual correspondence between Chekhov and Olga Knipper is a treasure. It includes 400 letters each, approximately, during their courtship and marriage. He also wrote encouraging, supportive letters to numerous young writers who looked to him as a mentor.

In turn, the artists of the day who knew him wrote about him extensively and affectionately in their memoirs. The reminiscences of Ivan Bunin, Aleksandr Kuprin, Nemirovich, Stanislavsky, Olga Knipper, and many others are filled with fond detail of their conversations with Chekhov. They also provide physical descriptions (his smile and other personal characteristics), his jokes, and his profound insights. Above all, they are filled with expressions of respect and admiration for Chekhov as an artist and human being.

In their writings, Chekhov's contemporaries acknowledged him as a writer of the highest order. They placed him in the ranks of Gogol, Dostoevsky, Gonacharov, Turgenev, and Tolstoy. What the critics could not perceive in Chekhov's work, his contemporaries pointed out and admired. They noted the quiet confidence of his voice, the economy of his style, the lack of judgmental tone, the gentle, subversive irony, the breadth and depth of his vision.

His contemporaries recognized he had introduced a new way of thinking and writing in Russia. "The paths I have opened up will remain sound and intact," he said to Gorky. "That is my only value." Bunin, in his reminisces, commented on Chekhov's characteristic self-effacement. "Even though he occupied an eminent place in literature, he was not conscious of his worth." He also remarked, "He was the same with everyone, whatever their status in society." Said Kuprin: "No one could leave him without being overwhelmed by his immense talent and one's own mediocrity."

CHEKHOV'S WORLDVIEW

"You ask: what is life?" writes Chekhov to Olga Knipper not long before his death. "That's exactly like asking: what is a carrot? A carrot is a carrot, and nothing more is known about it." In a nutshell, there we have Chekhov's view of the universe, the world, philosophy, and life.

Chekhov had his finger on the heartbeat of Russia. As a grandson of a serf, a son of a shopkeeper, and an admirer of the gentry, he understood all classes in his culture. As a doctor, he understood people and cared about the quality of their lives. As a social activist, he served mankind. As a Russian, he loved his country, knew its terrain, traveled broadly. As a writer of the *fin de siècle* and the centennial, he felt a responsibility to write about his Russia and his times — like his character Trigorin in *The Seagull*. His vision was broad; his understanding was deep.

Chekhov's plays are seemingly about the landed gentry, set on country estates where people come, people go, and nothing else happens. However, this impression is deceptive. They are the settings on which the story of his times is played out. *Ivanov* presents the tragedy of the "man of the eighties" in Russia. He is an educated, well-intentioned man who realizes that he can do nothing to address the ills, injustices, and hypocrisies of his land and his people and their intran[illegible]nt way of life. *The Seagull* dramatizes the struggle of the artist and his new voice in a culture where art is stagnant and there is no support for new forms. *Uncle Vanya* dramatizes the tragicomedy of country life, where men and women are trapped by nature and by human nature and can never escape. *The Three Sisters* presents an ensemble of characters at the centennial year in the remote provinces. They are stifled, isolated, guarded by a military troop that cannot defend it against the enemy (backwardness), unable to reach the Moscow that signifies their dreams and their hopes for a future and a better life, unable to see into their future. Finally, *The Cherry Orchard* dramatizes the end — of Russian life as Chekhov knew it, and of Chekhov's own life. His ensemble of endearing, lovable, naïve, flawed characters trapped in a vast land, in an unjust social system, and in their own foibles as human beings cannot change and cannot stave off the inevitable.

Viewing the four major plays as a whole, one can appreciate the breadth and depth of his very special vision. The universality of his themes: love, art, nature (and human nature), death, his passionate love of his country, and his understanding of so many of its aspects, his perception of the passage of time, his subtle sense of history — all contribute to make him a lasting author for our times and those to come. There is also the humanity of his characters: their desires, their weaknesses, their limitations, their dreams and longings, their valiant struggle to love, to endure, to have hope, and to have faith. They want to understand, in the face of all obstacles, "why the cranes fly," as Masha says in *The Three Sisters*. They also experience a desperation to be remembered, somehow, not knowing if they will be.

"MY HOLIEST OF HOLIES . . ."

In a letter to the writer Grigorovich, dated September 10, 1888, the twenty-eight-year-old Chekhov remarked: "I have no philosophy. I change it every month." That is not surprising. Descended from serfs,

raised among shopkeepers, he nonetheless admired the nobility for their way of life. On the one hand, he felt great compassion for the peasants and their plight. On the other hand, he hobnobbed with the gentry, the *literati*, and the scientists. On the one hand, he mistrusted religion and the rigid orthodoxy of his parents, which he viewed as hypocritical. On the other hand, he recognized the importance of spirituality in human existence. This was exemplified by characters like Sonya in *Uncle Vanya*.

Chekhov rejected labels and stereotyping. He didn't use Slavophil, Westernizer, liberal, conservative, populist, *narodnik*, Bolshevik, optimist, pessimist. He saw labels as misleading, keeping people from seeing the deeper truths. As he wrote to Suvorin in May 1888: "It's about time that writers admit that you can't figure anything out." Nevertheless, Chekhov did have a prescribed set of values and a consistent view of life. As he says in a letter to Pleshcheyev in October 1888:

> My holiest of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and absolute freedom — freedom from violence and freedom from lying, in whatever forms they may take. This is the program I would follow if I were a great artist.

As an artist, he felt his duty was (as expressed in letters to Kiselev and Suvorin) "to be as objective as a chemist" and "not to be the judge of his characters." Rather, he tried to "depict his characters in a true light" and "to pose questions not to answer them." Above all, he championed the notion of freedom — personal, artistic, and spiritual freedom. In a letter to Suvorin, dated January 7, 1889, he wrote:

> Write a story about me: how a young man, the son of a serf, a former shopkeeper, a choir-boy, a school boy, taught to respect rank, to kiss the priests' hands, to worship strange thoughts, to be thankful for his daily bread — a young man who appreciated a frequent beating, went to school without boots, fought with his fists, teased little animals, loved to dine at rich relatives', played the hypocrite before

God and his fellow man only to satisfy his sense of worthlessness — write how this young man is squeezing the slave out of himself, drop by drop, and one morning awakens and feels that slave's blood does not flow in his veins, but real human blood.

CHEKHOV THE HUMANIST

As an adult, Chekhov rejected his father's religion as another kind of labeling. Through his writing, he created his own religion — humanism. His humanism was born of his practice as a doctor, his own abuse as a child, and his steadfast loyalty to his family and friends. It encompassed his capacity for love, compassion, and forgiveness and his sense of humor at his own frailties. This humanism pervades his work. The facets of his humanism were his love of life and his true understanding of its value — of that one lost patient, as Dr. Astrov laments. It also showed his sense of compassion for the human condition and his understanding of human nature and human fallibility. He steadfastly refused to judge his fellow man. He sought to understand him, rather than to condemn him.

While he was aware of the political writings of his day — Marx, Lenin, and so on — Chekhov himself was not a "political writer" *per se*. He did not engage in political polemic in his plays and stories (except in instances like Trofimov in *The Cherry Orchard*). There Chekhov smiles compassionately at a character who believes so blindly in revolutionary propaganda. Instead, humanism was his political affiliation. In his letters, he spoke out against social injustices — such as the inhumane conditions of the penal colony in Sakhalin, or anti-Semitism in the Dreyfus Case in 1898. He also wrote about discrimination against Gorky by the Sciences and Letters after the czar voiced his displeasure about Gorky's reelection. More than specific political points of view, Chekhov was concerned that people live their lives with truth, honesty, and kindness and personal redemption — through work.

Otherwise he kept his eye focused on the big picture — the great sweeping changes that were occurring in his land. The details of everyday life and the foolish preoccupations of the landed gentry that littered his plays were placed there for a reason. They made the backdrop — with its inexorable changes — all the more vivid.

CHEKHOV THE IRONIST

Thus, we perceive the remarkable Janus-like vision that Chekhov had of the century in which he lived and the new century ahead. We see the events he foresaw and did not live to see. In retrospect, knowing what we know now of Russian and world history of our century, the speeches of his characters Astrov, Vershinin, Tusenbach, Lopakhin, and Trofimov haunt us with their prescience.

Ever objective, Chekhov agreed with all his characters. Like Vershinin, he hoped for happiness on earth for generations to come. However, like Tusenbach, he perceived that there are forces in the universe beyond our control. These forces are beyond our grasp and understanding. They determine the future, no matter what we say or do on earth. Like Masha, he still persisted in asking "why," not expecting an answer.

Ultimately, then, there is Chekhov the ironist, who sees the fierce truths of life beyond the efforts of man, beyond history. In these gentle, subtle, evocative plays, he says, like Chebutykin, that "it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter."

This vision and insight was enhanced, in the end, by the fact that Chekhov, from age twenty-eight, knew how short his own life would be. Only a man and a writer like Chekhov could have recognized this mortal fact as a gift with which to enrich his art so that others might benefit.

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DRAMATIC MOMENTS

from the Major Plays

The Seagull 52
written 1895, premiered 1896

Uncle Vanya 59
written 1896, premiered 1897

The Three Sisters 66
written 1900, premiered 1901

The Cherry Orchard 74
written 1903, premiered 1904

On the Harmful Effects of Tobacco 81
written 1886–1903

These short excerpts are from the playwright's major plays. They give a taste of the work of the playwright. Each has a short introduction that helps the reader understand the context of the excerpt. The excerpts illustrate the main themes mentioned in the In an Hour essay and are in chronological order.