

dramatic interlude 5

Dreams

Featured plays:

The Three Sisters by Anton Chekhov
(1901)

Bitter Cane by Genny Lim (1989)

(NOTE: The scripts for these plays, along with additional background information, are available in the companion anthology to this text, *Life Themes: An Anthology of Plays for the Theatre*.)

What we dream for ourselves may barely resemble the lives for which we settle. But even if none of them come true, dreams get us out of bed and into the world, suffering what Shakespeare calls "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" each day. If we did not believe things could get better (and dream that they will get way, way better), many of us could (and do) sink into stagnancy and despair. In both of these plays, people are stuck someplace they do not want to be, doing jobs they do not want to do, and tolerating people they do not want to see, but holding on to the possibility that if they try harder, they will free themselves of these deadly circumstances. In *The Three Sisters*, the dream is to leave a dead-end town for the bright lights of the big city, where magic and opportunity awaits. In *Bitter Cane*, it is to make money in a faraway country and return home secure. If the nature of drama is conflict, watching these characters take their dreams and bump them up against their realities is the stuff of theatre—occasionally inspiring, more often heartbreaking, and always compelling.

The Three Sisters (1901)

Setting: A remote small town in Russia, around the turn of the century

Characters

The Prozorov family, brother and sisters:

Andrey, male heir, in charge of the family property
Olga, eldest, unmarried, teaching
Irina, youngest, still open to possibility
Masha, middle sister, caught in a loveless marriage
Antip and Ferapont, faithful old family servants



T. Charles Erickson

FIGURE D5.1 The realistic style of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* asks only that the audience accept the fourth-wall convention and doesn't venture into more unconventional territory.

Natasha, Andrey's girlfriend, later his wife
Kulygin, Masha's husband and teacher at the same school as Olga
Army officers stationed at the local outpost:
Baron Tusenbach
Tchebutykin
Solyony
Fedotik
Roday
Vershinin

The Prozorovs' dream is to move to Moscow, which has come to represent all that is sparkling, refined, and engaging in life. Even the weather there is better:

OLGA: Today we can keep the windows wide open, but there are no leaves on the birch trees yet. In Moscow, by this time, everything is in bloom. I remember everything there, even if it has been eleven years.

The play opens on Irina's 19th birthday, which comes exactly a year after the death of Colonel Prozorov, the family patriarch. The lives of all the family have been altered, and not for the better, with feelings of restlessness and sadness dominating:

MASHA: When father was alive, there were as many as 40 officers at our birthday parties. It was loud and joyous, but now, here's only a man and a half.

All the sisters are smarter than their beloved brother, Andrey, who unfortunately, due to the tradition of the times, controls the family budget. Over the course of the play, he succumbs to the questionable charms of a vixen (Natasha) who at first seems merely ignorant and vulgar:

MASHA: Oh, how she dresses! Not just unattractive or ugly, but—pathetic. Colors you've never seen together before. And things like—fringe. And her cheeks! Andrey isn't in love—I can't believe it! I just can't. Andrey has taste.

But he is in love. He marries Natasha, and she gradually turns into something of a tyrant, taking over the house, carrying on a flagrant affair with another man, throwing the beloved old servants out into the cold, and, upon the birth of her child, constantly claiming he is a prodigy:

NATASHA: Bobik understands everything! I say "Good morning dear!" And he gives me a special look. You think I'm only a mother talking, but no! No! He's an unusual child.

SOLYONY: If this child were mine, I would have fried him in a skillet and eaten him.

All the other characters are living lives of quiet sadness and desperation. Andrey mortgages the house to pay gambling debts, limiting the possibility that anyone will ever escape this town. Olga works her way up to headmistress at her school, but she finds little genuine satisfaction in her work. Masha plunges into a briefly joyous but dead-end affair with Vershinin. Irina accepts a proposal of marriage from the Baron Tuzenbach and briefly glimpses a life of contentment (though not love)

until he is killed in a duel by a rival. All long for something better, often beginning to believe it will not happen in their lifetime, sentiments effectively capsulated by Vershinin:

VERSHININ: Oh, I think a better life just has to come. We won't share in that life of course, but we are living for it now, starting to create it, I think it's going to grow out of our suffering. I have to believe that.

Perhaps the most brutal blow to whatever has been diverting and pleasing in the sisters' lives is the removal of the military base and an end to that kind of companionship:

MASHA: The military are in this town, at any rate, the people who are most decent, educated, and honorable. . . . But most of the people in this town are crude and unfriendly.

The play ends as it begins, with only the three sisters alone together, embracing each other and trying to face the future:

OLGA: Oh dear sisters, our life isn't over yet. We'll live! The music plays so joyously, and perhaps tomorrow—or the day after—we'll know why we live and why we suffer. If we only knew!

Here is a combined scene from *The Three Sisters*, as translated and adapted for the stage by Robert Barton in *Life Themes: An Anthology of Plays for the Theatre*. In Act Three, the sisters' lives are becoming ever more restricted as Andrey's wife, Natasha, takes over the house. Outside, the whole town is on fire and the sisters wait helplessly for news. Masha's bumbling husband, Kulygin, has joined them.

MASHA: [*lying down*] Are you asleep, Fyodor?

KULYGIN: Huh?

MASHA: You ought to go home.

KULYGIN: Dear Masha, sweet Masha.

IRINA: She's tired. Let her rest, Fedya.

KULYGIN: I'm going, I'm going. My magnificent wife. I love you, my one and only.

MASHA: [*angrily*] Amo, amas, amar, amamus, amaris, amant.

KULYGIN: [*laughing*] No, really, what an amazing woman. Seven years we've been married, but it seems like only yesterday. An amazing woman. I am content, content, content.

MASHA: I'm bored, bored, bored. [*She sits up.*] There's something I can't get out of my head. I can't stay silent. I mean about Andrey. He's mortgaged this house to the bank and his wife has grabbed all the

money! But the house doesn't belong just to him, but to all four of us! How could he?

KULYGIN; Well, he owes a lot of money.

MASHA: But it's outrageous. *[She lies back down.]*

KULYGIN: You and I aren't poor.

MASHA: No, I don't need anything. It's the injustice that makes me furious. *[pause]* Go home, Fyodor!

KULYGIN: *[kissing her]* You're tired, rest a bit. I'll sit and wait for you at home. Sleep . . . *[going]* I'm content, I am content, I am content. *[He goes out.]*

IRINA: Our Andrey has grown petty and small. He's dried up and aged since he married that woman! He has no spark. He's stopped preparing to become a professor altogether. Yesterday he was actually bragging about being on the county council, which is run by Protopopoff. The whole town's talking and laughing and he's the only one who knows nothing and sees nothing. And now, even during the fire, he just sits in his room and plays the violin. *[nervously]* It's a nightmare. *[crying]* I just can't bear any more! I can't! *[sobbing aloud]* I can't . . .

[OLGA enters]

OLGA: *[alarmed]* What is the matter, what is it, my darling?

IRINA: *[sobbing]* Where's it all gone? Where is it? Oh, my God, my God! I've forgotten everything. I've forgotten. It's muddled in my head. I don't remember what the Italian word for window is, or the ceiling there. I'm forgetting it all, life's slipping away and we will never go to Moscow. I realize that now—we'll never go.

OLGA: Oh my sweet love . . .

IRINA: *[restraining herself]* Now I know misery. I thought that answer was work, but I'm sick of it! First telegraph operator, now council secretary, and I despise everything they give me to do. My brain's dried up. I'm getting thin, ugly, and old, and there's no satisfaction of any kind. Life no longer has any sense of possibility. Why haven't I killed myself? I can't understand why . . .

OLGA: Don't cry, my little girl, don't cry.

IRINA: I'm not crying. I'm not. I'm sick of it. All that is over.

OLGA: My angel, I'm talking to you as a sister and friend, if you want my advice, marry the Baron!

[IRINA weeps silently.] You respect and value him. He's not good looking, but he's decent. I myself would marry without love. I'd marry anyone who proposed if he was an honorable man. I'd even marry an old man. I would.

IRINA: I kept believing I'd meet the real one in Moscow. But it's no more than a silly dream . . .

OLGA: *[embracing her sister]* My dear, beautiful sister. I understand it all. When the Baron left the military and came to see us in civilian clothes, he seemed to me so homely that I actually cried. He asked, "Why are you crying?" How could I tell him! But if God grants that he marry you, I'll be so happy.

[NATASHA crosses the stage from the right door to the left, without speaking, a candle in her hand.]

MASHA: *[sitting up]* She walks about as if she was the one who started the fire.

OLGA: Masha, you old silly! You are the silliest one in our silly family. *[a pause]*

MASHA: I need to confess, my precious sisters. I'll die if I don't say it. *[quietly]* And you know it before I speak it. *[a pause]* I love . . . that man . . . Vershinin.

OLGA: *[going behind her screen]* Stop it. I won't listen.

MASHA: What can I do? First I thought he was strange, then I felt sorry for him. Then I began to love him . . . to love his voice, his words, his little girls, even his misfortunes.

OLGA: *[behind the screen]* I'm not listening!

MASHA: Oh, Olga, you're the silly one. I'm in love—that's my fate. And he loves me. Is it wrong? *[taking IRINA by the hand and drawing her nearer]* You read novels and think you understand all about love, but when you fall in love yourself, you begin to see that you know nothing. My loves, my sisters. I've confessed to you, now I'll be silent. I will.

IRINA: What a night! *[a pause]* Olga! *[OLGA looks out from behind the screen.]* Did you hear? They're taking the brigade away from us.

OLGA: That's only a rumor.

IRINA: We'll be all alone . . . Olga!

OLGA: Yes?

IRINA: I respect the Baron, I value him, I'll marry him, all right? Only let's go to Moscow! I beg you, let's go! There's nothing in the world like Moscow! Let's go. Olga! Please! Let's go!

[CURTAIN]