

Vanya

by Anton Chekhov
a new version by Tom Wood

Study Guide

THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE ENGLISH THEATRE
PROGRAMMES FOR STUDENT AUDIENCES
2004-2005 SEASON

Marti Maraden
Artistic Director, English Theatre



NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE
CENTRE NATIONAL DES ARTS

This Study Guide was written and researched by **Jim McNabb** for the National Arts Centre English Theatre, March 2005.

This document may be used for educational purposes only.

Main Stage Media Partner



About this Study Guide

This Study Guide is formatted in easy-to-copy single pages. They may be used separately or in any combination that works for your classes. The colour page is intended for classroom display, but may also be photocopied for students. Here is an outline of the contents of each page with suggestions as to its use.

Page(s)		May Be Used To
2	About The Play - plot synopsis, cast of characters.	Aid students in appreciating the script and performance
3-4	Who Helped Put this Production Together? Biographies of the director and designers.	Aid students in writing a review and help them relate to the production
5	Comments from Writer Tom Wood	Provide students' enrichment
6-7	A Biography of Anton Chekhov	Provide students' enrichment
8-9	Converting the Demon – Chekhov's struggle in writing <i>Uncle Vanya</i>	Help students relate to the production; provide an activity
10-11	The Canadian Connection – Russian Emigration to Western Canada	Provide enrichment and basis for an activity
12-13	Activities Before and After Viewing	Foster students' active appreciation of the play and its issues
14	Russian Arts and Culture	Provide enrichment and basis for an activity
15-17	Excerpt from the script of <i>Vanya</i>	Provide a classroom activity
18	Books, Videos and Websites of Interest	Provide reference material for activities
19	Theatre Etiquette	Prepare the class for the theatre experience
20	Map of Western Canada (colour page)	Display in the classroom
21	Acknowledgements	

About the Play

Characters in the Play

Characters in the Play		Actor
Nana	Housekeeper, in her 60s, native woman	Wilma Pelly
Michael Astroff	Local doctor and environmentalist, 39	David McNally
Vanya	Farmer, 52, bachelor	Tom Wood
Vera	His mother, 75	Barbara Reese
Sonya	Vanya's niece, Alexander's daughter, 30	Catherine Fitch
Alexander	Vanya's brother-in-law by a first marriage, 65	Grant Reddick
Elena	Alexander's second wife, 31	Jan Alexandra Smith
Waffles	Family friend, farm hand, 40 something	Pierre Brault

Plot Synopsis

The routine of Vanya, his niece Sonya, and the rest of the household has been disrupted by the extended visit of Alexander, Vanya's brother-in-law, and his second wife, the young and beautiful Elena. Alexander is a self-centered, cantankerous and pretentious retired professor of art who has decided to spend the summer on the farm bequeathed to his daughter Sonya by Vanya's father. Elena finds farm life boring in the extreme. Vanya resents the attention demanded by the visitors but at the same time secretly finds Elena unbearably attractive. Dr. Michael Astroff who has been called repeatedly to attend to Alexander's petty complaints has also secretly fallen in love with Elena. Sonya has resented Elena taking the place of her dead mother but decides to patch things up and reveals to Elena that she secretly adores Michael, who in turn doesn't seem to know she's alive. Vanya rants of his disappointment in life, not having accomplished anything important, and having had to financially support his brother-in-law's studies and expensive tastes for years. Michael finds his life as a country doctor exhausting and boring but has recently become obsessed with environmental issues which no one else finds interesting in the least. When Vanya professes his love to Elena she finds it annoying. However, when Elena, at Sonya's urging, asks Michael if he cares for Sonya, he also reveals his passion for Elena, a moment overheard by Vanya. Elena is now determined that she and her husband must leave the farm as soon as possible. Meanwhile, however, Alexander has decided to sell the farm and invest the profits, a suggestion that the already overwrought Vanya finds so outrageous that he tries to shoot Alexander but misses repeatedly. The crisis quickly passes and each makes up with former foes. When Alexander and Elena finally leave, Vanya and Sonya resume their work and return to their lonely existence bleakly looking towards their future.

Time and Location

The Summer and Fall of 1928 on a large thriving farm in Northern Alberta. The verandah of a two-story farmhouse and some of the yard, and later the large living room/dining room of the house.

Who Helped Put this Production Together? (page 1 of 2)

New version of Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* by: Tom Wood

Director: Bob Baker

Set and Costume Designer: Leslie Frankish

Lighting Designer: John (Jock) Munro

Sound Designer: Michael Becker

Stage Manager: Michelle Chan

Assistant Stage Manager: Stéfanie Séguin

This is an NAC English Theatre/Citadel Theatre (Edmonton) coproduction.

Selected Biographies

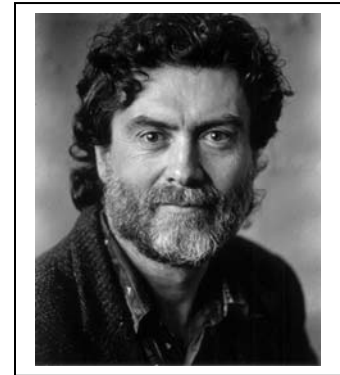
Bob Baker, the Director, was born in Edmonton, Alberta. He studied at the University of Alberta. He was artistic director of Edmonton's Phoenix Theatre from 1982 to 1987 guiding the company towards contemporary works with social commentary, an element which still marks his work. During his tenure that company's subscriptions increased by a remarkable 1000%. From 1990 to 1998 he was director of Canadian Stage in Toronto and there directed, among others, Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*, and the entire Tony Kushner 7-hour epic *Angels in America*. He took over the artistic directorship of the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton in 1999 and remains in that position to the present day. He was responsible for such award winning productions as *Popcorn*, *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, and *Little Shop of Horrors*. Among other companies where he has directed are the Stratford Festival, Vancouver Playhouse, and the NAC.



Leslie Frankish, the Set and Costume Designer, is also a native of Edmonton, Alberta, but is currently based in Ontario. She is best known for her 11-season association with the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake. Some of the shows she designed there are *Pygmalion*, *The Lady's Not For Burning*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *The Children's Hour* and *All My Sons*. She has also designed for Citadel Theatre (*Little Shop of Horrors*), National Arts Centre (*Hard Times*) and Canadian Stage. She won a Dora Mavor Moore Award for her costume design for the latter's production of *Into The Woods*. She has said of the working process, "I think the strength of a set is to not only create a physical environment, but an emotional environment. That's the part I love, to be able to say something with solid matter."

Who Helped Put this Production Together? (page 2 of 2)

John (Jock) Munro, the Lighting Designer, has worked in Canada, the U.S. and Europe in the fields of theatre, opera and dance. His 20-year design career includes credits in most major theatres across Canada, with over 40 productions for the NAC, including *Mary's Wedding*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Marriage of Figaro*. He has designed lights for many shows at the Stratford Festival (*The Cherry Orchard*, *Henry V*, *Treasure Island*), Canadian Stage in Toronto (*Into the Woods*), Centaur Theatre in Montreal (*My Fair Lady*), Neptune Theatre, Theatre Calgary, Theatre New Brunswick, the Canadian Opera Company, and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens.



Here's what Jock Munro has to say about lighting:

"I think that the first thing that I learned about lighting design was that there are no real rules involved and that, as long as I remembered this, then my lighting would remain fresh and interesting to me and hopefully to the audience and to the people that I collaborate with.

"I find that kids who take conventional approaches whereby they study in theatre schools and then become assistants to established artists at various reputed institutions like Stratford and the National Arts Centre have a kind of fast-track to the knowledge process. Very often they become very useful to the institutions for their knowledge. At the same time they often are denied the fundamental experiences that you get when you are actually producing your own theatre and making decisions yourself among your own peers. I think it's really important to place more emphasis on that than on getting formal training. After you've gotten the buzz and you've become intoxicated, if you want to enhance your knowledge in certain areas, then it's worthwhile to go back to the institutions and find a niche. I found my niche though being a stagehand. You can be an assistant. You can be a production assistant. I think the key is to be around people who really, truly love what they are doing first, although they might not necessarily know what they are doing.

"Theatre is interesting because it's a very collaborative process. Typically I'm working with a director, a set designer, a costume designer and a sound designer too. That means that there are a number of perspectives that are brought into any particular script. Typically the director has the final say in where we go conceptually with a piece but we all have an opportunity to influence that direction and typically that direction is based on the script. As such, my studies in English and philosophy have enriched my ability to take a look at a text and react to it in my own way so that I can bring to the table what I consider to be an informed perspective. Then we negotiate the project's process and it's always quite enriching. Projects basically come out of a bond of trust that you have created. As I have progressed throughout my career I have gravitated to people who I feel a common bond with; who I seem to be able to communicate with. We establish a trust and then we go about our project. Very often I will work with someone for three or four years and we will have a particularly creative time and then, for whatever reasons, we will go our separate ways and new bonds will be established. It's an extremely communal approach to the arts."

For more advice and quotations by Lighting designers from Canada and United States visit the website of the American Association of Community Theatre:

http://www.aact.org/cgi-bin/webdata_quotes.pl?cgifunction=Search&Category=Lighting

Comments by Writer Tom Wood



The prolific Edmonton-based actor/playwright/ director's 2004–05 season at the Citadel Theatre includes performing the role of Big Daddy in the Citadel's lush production of Tennessee Williams' still-sizzling *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, remounting for a fifth season (and starring in) his own adaptation of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, and directing a modern American adaptation of Ovid's classic *Metamorphoses*.

Still, the most ambitious classic spin in a season of classic spins has got to be Wood's engaged adaptation of Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, a personal favourite of the accomplished playwright whose writing career dates back to the early 1980s and national successes like *North Shore Live* and *B-Movie: The Play*.

Coproduced by the NAC English Theatre and the Citadel, *Vanya* reunites the exceptional creative team of playwright Tom Wood, director Bob Baker (the Citadel's Artistic Director), and set and costume designer Leslie Frankish. *Vanya* makes its world premiere in Edmonton on March 24 and transfers to the NAC stage in April (opening April 21).

Why *Uncle Vanya*, and why now? "*Uncle Vanya has always been my favourite Chekhov play, and perhaps the most powerful of his works, but every version I've ever read had been adapted in the '30s or '50s. The language was always so stilted,*" says Wood, who's no stranger to the delicate art of adaptation: besides the aforementioned *A Christmas Carol*, he's rewritten Goldoni's *Servant of Two Masters* and an upcoming reworking of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*.

Wood says the start of this project was anything but straightforward. "*I was doing some research for the hundredth anniversary (in 2005) of the province of Alberta,*" he recalls. "*As I dragged up all these archival photos, I realized that the people in the pictures were living in much the same climate as Chekhov was writing about, and that many of the Canadian settlers I was looking at were Russian and Ukrainian immigrants facing the same kind of horrific loneliness he describes in the play.*"

By a happy coincidence, the retrospective nature of *Vanya* also makes it particularly appropriate for a centenary tribute. "*The characters speculate about what their descendants will remember them for a hundred years hence and what will they make of them. We're in much the same situation today, facing difficult times and wondering how history will remember us,*" he notes.

Having decided on the geographical setting for his play—the rich though harsh farmland 100 miles north of Alberta's capital city—Wood then started looking across the century of his home province's history for a chronological setting. He settled on the late 1920s, between the First World War and the start of the Great Depression/Dust Bowl drought. "*It seemed such a great fit, especially given the doctor's passion for taking care of the land that had just been recently opened up, and his concern about proper cultivation and crop rotation.*"

Wood is particularly pleased to be able to share this theatrical homage to his home province's centenary with a central Canadian audience thanks to its NAC connection. "*I'll be interested to see what Ottawa audiences think of the Alberta setting—whether they react differently from the Edmonton audiences,*" he says. "*Of course, Chekhov's characters and the underlying message of the play are universal; I think everyone will respond to those.*"

Thanks to Gilbert A. Bouchard, Edmonton, for original interview material.

A Biography of Anton Chekhov (page 1 of 2)

Anton Chekhov (1860 – 1904) is one of Russia's most beloved storytellers and recognized as one of the greatest playwrights of modern times. He won the Pushkin Prize and he is known for his short stories and his plays, works which often combine elements of both comedy and tragedy. He was especially fond of vaudevilles and French farces but his longer more serious plays established him as one of the world's most influential dramatists of all time. In all he wrote almost 500 short stories, most of them of a comic nature, ten short plays which he referred to as "Vaudevilles", and six full-length plays.

Anton Chekhov was born on January 17, 1860, in the port town of Taganrog in the Ukrainian part of Russia near the Black Sea. The third of six children, he was the son of a grocer and grandson of a serf who had bought his freedom before emancipation. Although he was confident and outgoing as a child, he was also a quiet observer and imitator of human traits even at a young age, a quality that stayed with him throughout his life. While a child, he was gifted at organizing his siblings into performing improvised plays for the entertainment of family and guests. As a boy, he loved attending the theatre in Taganrog and was adept

at disguising himself as an adult and slipping in unaccompanied. These performances then became the bases for play-acting in the Chekhov living room. His ability at writing and performing comedic pieces soon became recognized by the community. When he was 15, however, the family grocery store went bankrupt, his father abandoned them and the rest of the family was forced to leave for Moscow to live with relatives and find work. Young Anton remained behind to finish his schooling, making ends meet by tutoring other children.



Chekhov was quoted as saying that medicine was his lawful wife and literature was his mistress, and he remained devoted to his two professions throughout his life.



House where Chekhov was born.

After graduating with honours, Anton followed the family to Moscow and was able to enroll in Moscow University in Medicine on a scholarship. Now as head of the household and a full-time student, he supported the family by writing short humorous stories which became very popular in the literary magazines of the day. By the time he graduated as a doctor in 1884, he had, with unbelievable speed and skill, written almost 500 short stories, some of which he sold to journals but most of which he published in collections. He often depicted silly social situations, marital problems, farcical encounters between husbands, wives, mistresses, and lovers, and the whims of young women, the latter topic being one which Chekhov had not much personal knowledge since he was terribly shy with women even after his marriage years later. Tolstoy, an older Russian contemporary of Chekhov's, was a great influence on the young writer and medical student.

A Biography of Anton Chekhov (page 2 of 2)

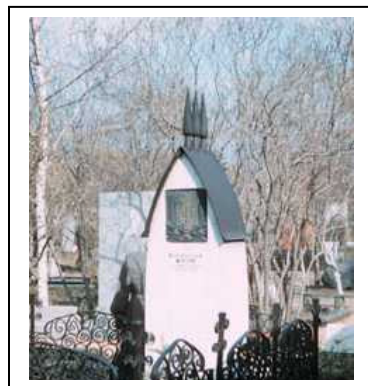
His first attempts at writing serious plays were rejected, so he turned to writing a number of short comedies which gained great popularity with the Moscow audiences, so much so that he was awarded the Pushkin Prize for Literature in 1888.

Chekhov developed his concept of the dispassionate, non-judgmental author and outlined his ideas in a letter to his brother Aleksander: "1. *Absence of lengthy verbiage of political-social-economic nature*; 2. *total objectivity*; 3. *truthful descriptions of persons and objects*; 4. *extreme brevity*; 5. *audacity and originality*; avoid the stereotype; 6. *compassion*." This writing style was a complete departure from that of the theatre of his day.

His early full-length plays – *Ivanov* and *The Wood Demon* – were not successful but around the turn of the century, he wrote four full-length plays which were commentaries on Russian society and which have gained him lasting acclaim: *The Sea Gull* in 1896, *Uncle Vanya* in 1896 (a derivative of his play of 1889, *The Wood Demon*), *The Three Sisters* in 1901, and *The Cherry Orchard*, his last great play, in 1904. These were produced in association with directors Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko of the Moscow Art Theatre. Chekhov used ordinary conversations, pauses, non-communication, non-happenings and incomplete thoughts to reveal the truth behind daily life. This Naturalistic style challenged actors and required a revolutionary movement in acting and play production. His characters belong often to the provincial middle class, petty aristocracy or landowners of pre-Revolutionary Russia. They contemplate their unsatisfactory lives but are unable to make decisions and help themselves when a crisis breaks out.

The five-year friendship and marriage of Anton Chekhov and the actress Olga Knipper, who created many of the central female roles in his plays, is one of the most extraordinary love stories in the theatre. Separated as a result of Knipper's work at the Moscow Art Theatre and Chekhov's illness which kept him in Yalta, their relationship flourished and overcame great obstacles through a constant stream of letters.

The tuberculosis that Chekhov contracted at an early age had worsened while he was working as a doctor in a remote prison camp in Eastern Siberia. He gave up his medical practice and retired to a warmer climate in the south of Russia which allowed him more time to write. By 1904, the condition had



become critical and he was ordered to spend time at a German spa but he died there in July, soon after the successful opening of *The Cherry Orchard* at the Moscow Art Theatre. The style of his stories, novels, and plays, emphasizing internal drama, characterization, and mood rather than plot and focusing on the tragicomic aspects of ordinary events, had great influence on later writers.

Chekhov's grave in the cemetery of the Novodeviche Monastery.

Converting the Demon (page 1 of 2)

by Ryan McKittrick
Associate Dramaturg, American Repertory Theater, Boston

This article originally appeared in the house programme for the American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.)'s November–December 2002 production of *Uncle Vanya*, translated by Paul Schmidt, adapted and directed by János Szász. Reprinted with permission.

“I hate the play and I’m trying to forget it,” Anton Chekhov wrote in 1899 about *The Wood Demon*, an early version of *Uncle Vanya*. *“It would be a real blow to me if some unknown force were to drag it out of obscurity and bring it to life. There’s a fine example of perverted parental love for you.”*

The torturous path from *The Wood Demon* to *Uncle Vanya* makes Chekhov’s rejection of the first script understandable. During *The Wood Demon* premiere in 1889, actors from a rival theatre, jealous that they hadn’t received Chekhov’s latest play, howled, whistled, and jeered from the boxes. The din of the audience made it impossible to hear the players, but it didn’t make a difference since the actors forgot their lines and the actresses were atrocious. The audience booed, and Chekhov had the play withdrawn immediately from the repertory. Concerned that the sprawling script was as much to blame as the actors, he refused to include *The Wood Demon* in the first comprehensive edition of his works. Chekhov’s loathing for his play has been shared by most producers since the premiere: *The Wood Demon* wasn’t staged again in Moscow until 1960.

Humiliated by the critics’ lambasting of what he had described as his “*big romantic comedy*,” Chekhov resolutely turned his back on the theatre after *The Wood Demon* fiasco and refocused his energies on his primary profession: medicine. In the spring of 1890, he left Moscow for the island of Sakhalin, a notorious penal colony on the Pacific frontier of the vast Russian empire. After a gruelling three-month, trans-Siberian odyssey, Chekhov reached the desolate island and spent four months studying the inhabitants’ savage living conditions.

Sometime between Sakhalin and 1896, Chekhov revisited *The Wood Demon* and transformed his “*romantic comedy*” into “*scenes from country life*.” When exactly Chekhov reworked the play is a source of critical debate, though most scholars date the revision to 1896, when the playwright mentioned his new script in a letter to his publisher Alexei Suvorin.

Chekhov began by pruning *The Wood Demon*, eliminating three of the major characters and combining an alcoholic flirt with the eponymous conservationist to form one character, Dr. Astrov. By trimming the cast, Chekhov heightened the tension among the characters. The opening act of *The Wood Demon* is unfocused; in *Uncle Vanya*, however, the first act immediately establishes the two triangular tensions of the play. Sonya and Yelena both find themselves drawn towards Astrov, while Astrov and Vanya compete for Yelena’s attention.

Converting the Demon (page 2 of 2)

In *The Wood Demon*, Chekhov develops sexual tension slowly through hide-and-seek flirtations. In *Uncle Vanya*, crisscrossed desires quickly force the characters into more intense sexual strife.

Chekhov retained much of the structure and language of the second and third acts of *The Wood Demon* in *Uncle Vanya*, but he completely rewrote the climax. In *The Wood Demon*, George, the precursor to Vanya, shoots and kills himself at the end of the third act. In *Uncle Vanya*, the title character takes aim at the Professor, misses, and lives to face the humiliating consequences of his failed homicide.

The Wood Demon ends in a sentimental series of reconciliations and eleventh-hour disclosures of love — a “*happy ending*,” as Chekhov described it, brought about by the characters’ reflections on George’s suicide. The fourth act of *Uncle Vanya* doesn’t have this tidy sense of comic completion. Almost all of the characters are left unfulfilled, forced to accept their frustrated desires and move on with their lives.

The audience had scoffed at Chekhov’s conventional resolution to *The Wood Demon*, but the ending of *Uncle Vanya* had a completely different impact. People saw their own doubts and fears played out in the characters’ struggle to find meaning in their existence. When Maxim Gorky saw *Vanya* in Nizhny Novgorod, he penned an enthusiastic letter to Chekhov: “[I] wept like a female... I went home stupefied, shattered by your play... I felt as I watched its characters as if I were being sawn in half by a dull saw. Its teeth go straight to the heart, and they make the heart clench, groan, cry out... Your Uncle Vanya is an entirely new form of dramatic art, a hammer you use to beat on the empty pate of the public.”

Quotations taken from *The Oxford Chekhov*, edited by Ronald Hingley, and *The Chekhov Theatre*, by Laurence Senelick.



A scene from Act I of the premiere production with Olga Knipper as Yelena (with umbrella)

The Canadian Connection - Russian Emigration to Western Canada (page 1 of 2)

Tom Wood, who adapted Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, noted that a substantial portion of the population of Northern Alberta stemmed from Eastern Europe, especially the Ukraine and Russia, immigrants who must have faced many of the same lonely conditions examined by Chekhov in his play. For Wood, it made sense to relocate his version of the play in Alberta. What is this Canadian-Russian connection?

During his tenure as Prime Minister of Canada from 1896 to 1911, Wilfrid Laurier and his government brought about a radical change in attitude to immigration, opening the doors to people from many different lands instead of largely from those of the founding nations of Great Britain and France. The opening up of the West necessitated the construction of a transcontinental railway, the creation of new provinces (Saskatchewan and Alberta in 1905) and agricultural development. To populate and farm this developing land the country looked to the "stalwart peasants" of Central and Eastern Europe. By an aggressive advertising campaign potential immigrants were offered, for the filing fee of \$10, a free quarter-section (160 acres or approximately 400 hectares) of good land. Some 300,000 Ukrainians were soon settled on Western Canadian soil along with a mass of other Eastern Slavs.

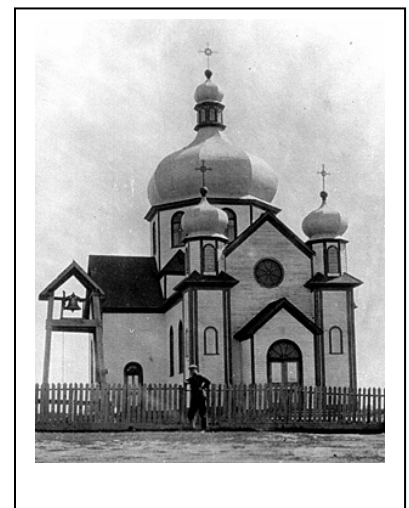
These three cards advertise "160 acres of free land in Canada" in Croat, Ukrainian and Czech, respectively. Thousands of these cards in many European languages, were circulated by mail in eastern and central Europe between 1900 and 1905. See also the colour page (20) showing a map of Canada dating from around the turn of the last century, encouraging settlement of Western Canada.

Religious persecution caused the emigration of two pacifist sectarian groups from Russia - the Mennonites and the Doukhobors. Their decision to locate in Canada stemmed from the generous concessions granted by the Dominion government with respect to communal settlement, religious freedom, and exemption from military service.



The political, social, and economic conditions prevailing in the Russian lands during the four decades following 1880 encouraged the emigration of good peasant folk, including the Russian Jews displaced by repeated pogroms*, as well as other subjects from the western territories of the Empire including Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Moldova. Emigration to Canada was halted by the Russian Revolution of 1917 in which the Tsarist regime was overthrown and replaced by Bolshevik rule and then by the outbreak of the Russian Civil War of 1918-21. This conflict

*organized persecution, often officially prompted, of a minority group.



A Ukrainian Church in Alberta

The Canadian Connection

- Russian Emigration to Western Canada (page 2 of 2)

between the White Russians and members of the Bolshevik Red Army resulted in thousands of refugees having to seek safety and new lives in France, Britain, Switzerland, China, and other countries for a number of years before eventually coming to Canada. The economic contributions of the Slavs to Canada were substantial: as farmers, they cleared and cultivated vast areas of land in the prairie provinces; as farm labourers, they facilitated the increased production of wheat by Anglo-Canadian farmers; and as unskilled workers, they provided the brawn and hard work required by railroad, mining, and lumbering enterprises. Indeed, the economic potential of these immigrants was strong enough to override certain initial reservations Anglo-Canadians had towards the cultural traits of this “new” type of immigrant. Not only in Western Canada but throughout the country, the Slavic immigrants of the turn of the last century have enriched Canada immeasurably both economically and culturally.

Just east of Edmonton the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village (<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/ukrainian/welcome.htm>) has been established as an open-air museum built to resemble a pioneer settlement in east central Alberta. Buildings from the surrounding communities have been moved to the Village and restored to various years within the first part of the 20th century. The house shown in the photo to the right is called the Hawreliak House. In 1928 it was home to a family of 11 and a hired man. If *Vanya* had been set in Alberta, we might imagine that this could be the farm home depicted.



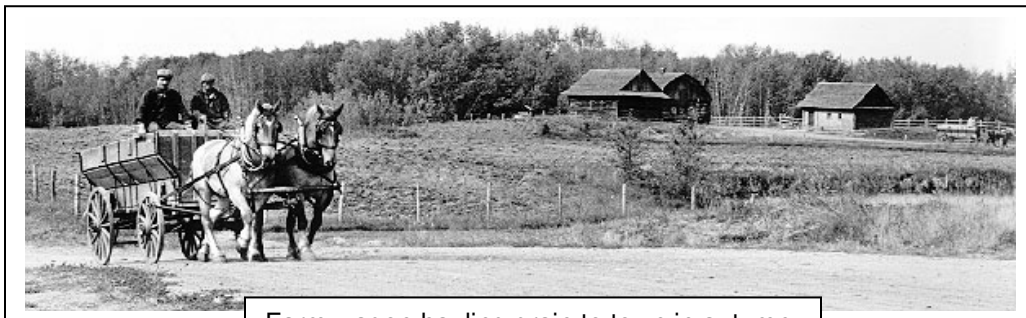
Written with help from the following websites:

<http://www.rootsweb.com/~abcamros/Immigration2.htm>

<http://home.merlin.mb.ca/~rfmorris/Featuring/Immigration/Ukrainian.Immigration.html>

http://collections.ic.gc.ca/heirloom_series/volume7/countries/russia.html

<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/ukrainian/welcome.htm>



Farm wagon hauling grain to town in autumn



On September 1, 1905 Alberta became a Canadian province. The National Arts Centre is helping to celebrate the centennial with a two week festival of theatre, dance, music, film and other cultural events. Visit <http://www.albertascene.ca/> to learn more about the artists and events.

Activities Before and After Viewing the Play (page 1 of 2)

Pre-performance Activities

1. Assign the preparation of the short scene from *Uncle Vanya* found on pages 15-17 herein for presentation in class. (For copyright reasons this adaptation is not the one used in the NAC production. The complete text of the version used here as translated by Marian Fell can be found on <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext99/vanya10.txt>). The scene included here is for one male and one female. An excellent scene for two females, Yelena and Sonia, can be found on this website half way through Act 2. The students may choose to work in pairs or in teams of three, one of whom is the director for the scene. They should work on blocking/movement, characterizations, and effective delivery of lines. The scenes could be thoroughly memorized before performance, or if time is limited, a reading with scripts in hand. After studying this scene which is more accurate to the 1896 Russian version of the play, the students should then compare it to the same scene in Tom Wood's adaptation at the NAC.
2. Chekhov wrote in a tsarist, pre-revolutionary Russia where land ownership still followed a stagnant, almost feudal system. Assign a research project on Russian 19th century history, culture or social history for a clearer understanding of the attitudes and motivations of the characters. There is a wealth of web-sites available on the internet which may be accessed by using a Google or Yahoo search.
3. Assign a research project on the various Canadian theatre companies mentioned in the biographies (pages 3-4). Nowadays, each major Canadian city has at least one professional theatre company. Where there are more, the companies often bend toward a specialized program devoted to new Canadian works, classics, musical theatre or a variety of offerings. Students may visit the websites of the companies mentioned and discover how each puts together its season to compete for audiences. A Google search can give the sites for theatre companies in each city. A very useful start could be <http://www.canadiantheatre.com/>.
4. Refer to pages 10-11 on Russian Immigration and assign a research project on the emigration of Russian and Ukrainians to Western Canada in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Students can discover how this ethnic group (and others) contributed to the fabric of Canadian culture. Students should start with the websites listed on page 18 of this guide. Refer to the Map of Canada on page 20.
5. Because of Chekhov's new style of realistic or naturalistic playwriting, a new style of acting developed to make the characters onstage more believable. The originator of this style of acting was Konstantin Stanislavsky. His work was picked up by Americans in the early part of the 20th century and called "Method Acting", which is the basis for most of our film and stage acting today. Students may research this style of acting to find out exactly what is meant by the term and how it affects stage and film acting by accessing web-sites on Stanislavsky, the Group Theatre, Harold Clurman, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner and The Actors' Studio.

Activities Before and After Viewing the Play (page 2 of 2)

6. Improvisation work along the themes of *Vanya* might be a fun way for students to relate to the play. Suggested scenarios might involve:
 - a house guest who has overstayed his/her welcome,
 - catching a best friend flirting with your boyfriend/girlfriend,
 - confronting a relative or friend who you feel has taken advantage of your generosity,
 - confessing to the boyfriend/girlfriend of your sibling that you are in love with him/her,
 - listening to a detailed but boring story from someone you secretly admire,
 - telling the above mentioned story to someone you secretly admire in an attempt to impress.
7. The NAC's website for Arts Alive <http://www.artsalive.ca/> and the Theatre Ontario web-site at <http://www.theatreontario.org/> each contain a great deal of useful information on jobs in the theatre, training, and classroom activities involving theatre. A research project could be assigned on any of these topics.

Any trip to the theatre should also involve the students being made aware of proper theatre etiquette while at the NAC. A handout is available on page 19.

Post-performance Activities

8. While the play is still fresh in their minds, have your students write a review for the production of *Vanya*. Have them read reviews in *The Citizen* or *Xpress* to give them an idea of the standard approach to theatrical criticism. A suggested outline for writing a review can also be found online on page 12 of: http://www.nac-cna.ca/en/allaboutthenac/publications/chekhov_guide.pdf. Students may have received programs at the matinée or may refer to pages 3-4 of this Study Guide (Who Helped Put the Production Together?) to use for the correct information about the production in their reviews. The areas the review should cover, in general and more specifically when merited are: all design elements (set, lighting, sound, and costumes), performances of the actors, the direction, the basic narrative and the central theme(s).
9. If the students worked on the scene from *Uncle Vanya* (translation by Marian Fell) (pages 15-17 herein) set in Russia in 1896, have them discuss the effectiveness of Tom Wood's adaptation which is relocated in Northern Alberta in 1928. A point of discussion might be, should classics, such as Chekhov, Shakespeare, Molière, or Sophocles be rewritten.
10. Have the students read pages 8-9 of the Study Guide relating Chekhov's revisiting of his play *The Wood Demon*, which failed initially but which was later reworked successfully. Points of discussion might be in what other directions Chekhov could have taken the play by changing the ending, making scenes take a different turn, elimination of still more characters, etc. Students might also discuss other plays that they have read in English class and how they might choose to change those scripts.

Russian Arts and Culture – 19th Century

Russian Literature experienced a Golden Age from 1820 to 1880 with novelists Turgenev (*Fathers and Sons*), Tolstoy (*War and Peace*) and Dostoevsky (*The Brothers Karamazov*). From 1880 to the Bolshevik Revolution (which overthrew the monarchy and established a socialist state in 1917), the so-called Silver Age expanded the importance of Theatre (Anton Chekhov, Makim Gorky), Music (Peter Tchaikovsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Modest Moussorgsky) and Ballet (*“Swan Lake”*, *“Sleeping Beauty”* and *“The Nutcracker”*), as well as Visual Art and Literature.

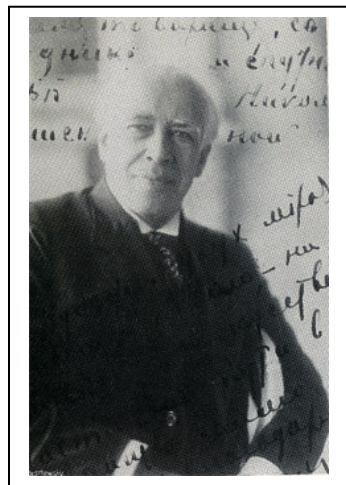
An extremely popular form of theatre in the latter part of the 19th century was the French-inspired Vaudeville. “Vaudeville” (from “voix de ville” – voices of the city streets) consisted of a variety of musical, dance, light comedy and melodrama offerings. Chekhov called his short plays Vaudevilles although they clearly had much more substance to them than the normal light plays of the time.

In Moscow, the state-sponsored Bolshoi Theatre was home to opera, ballet and classical music. The Moscow Art Theatre, which opened in 1898 under the direction of Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, was devoted mainly to theatre performances, particularly those of Chekhov.



The Moscow Art Theatre

Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) was a theatrical director, teacher, and actor. As a director, he stressed ensemble acting as well as complete coordination of all phases of production. His outstanding productions included many of the plays of Chekhov, in which he tried to strip away mannered acting clichés and instead to enter the emotional core and complex psychology of the characters. Stanislavsky stressed the importance of the actor's inner identification with the



character and the actor's natural use of body and voice. His training, now termed the Stanislavsky method, or “Method” acting, had a vast influence on modern schools of acting. In New York City the Actors' Studio adapted many of his ideas to its use. See Stanislavsky's *An Actor Prepares* (tr. 1936), *Building a Character* (tr. 1950), and *Creating a Role* (tr. 1961). The great actor, Michael Chekhov, nephew of Anton Chekhov, brought Stanislavsky's techniques to the United States and taught many fine actors at the Actors' Studio.

Excerpt of Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*

(translated by Marian Fell) (page 1 of 3)

from <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext99/vanya10.txt>

Astroff has been giving Helena a lengthy explanation, complete with maps and charts, of his theories on the need for society's greater concern for preserving the environment. Helena interrupts.

HELENA I know so little about such things!

ASTROFF There is nothing to know. It simply isn't interesting, that's all.

HELENA Frankly, my thoughts were elsewhere. Forgive me! I want to submit you to a little examination, but I am embarrassed and don't know how to begin.

ASTROFF An examination?

HELENA Yes, but quite an innocent one. Sit down. [They sit down] It is about a certain young girl I know. Let us discuss it like honest people, like friends, and then forget what has passed between us, shall we?

ASTROFF Very well.

HELENA It is about my step-daughter, Sonia. Do you like her?

ASTROFF Yes, I respect her.

HELENA Do you like her -- as a woman?

ASTROFF [Slowly] No.

HELENA One more word, and that will be the last. You have not noticed anything?

ASTROFF No, nothing.

Excerpt of Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*
(translated by Marian Fell) (page 2 of 3)

- HELENA [Taking his hand] You do not love her. I see that in your eyes. She is suffering. You must realize that, and not come here any more.
- ASTROFF My sun has set, yes, and then I haven't the time. [Shrugging his shoulders] Where shall I find time for such things? [He is embarrassed.]
- HELENA Bah! What an unpleasant conversation! I am as out of breath as if I had been running three miles uphill. Thank heaven, that is over! Now let us forget everything as if nothing had been said. You are sensible. You understand. [A pause] I am actually blushing.
- ASTROFF If you had spoken a month ago I might perhaps have considered it, but now --[He shrugs his shoulders] Of course, if she is suffering - but I cannot understand why you had to put me through this examination. [He searches her face with his eyes, and shakes his finger at her] Oho, you are wily!
- HELENA What does this mean?
- ASTROFF [Laughing] You are a wily one! I admit that Sonia is suffering, but what does this examination of yours mean? [He prevents her from retorting, and goes on quickly] Please don't put on such a look of surprise; you know perfectly well why I come here every day. Yes, you know perfectly why and for whose sake I come! Oh, my sweet tigress! don't look at me in that way; I am an old bird!
- HELENA [Perplexed] A tigress? I don't understand you.
- ASTROFF Beautiful, sleek tigress, you must have your victims! For a whole month I have done nothing but seek you eagerly. I have thrown over everything for you, and you love to see it. Now then, I am sure you knew all this without putting me through your examination. [Crossing his arms and bowing his head] I surrender. Here you have me--now, eat me.

Excerpt of Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*
(translated by Marian Fell) (page 3 of 3)

HELENA You have gone mad!

ASTROFF You are afraid!

HELENA I am a better and stronger woman than you think me. Good-bye.
[She tries to leave the room.]

ASTROFF Why good-bye? Don't say good-bye, don't waste words.
Oh, how lovely you are -- what hands! [He kisses her hands.]

HELENA Enough of this! [She frees her hands] Leave the room!
You have forgotten yourself.

ASTROFF Tell me, tell me, where can we meet to-morrow? [He puts his arm
around her] Don't you see that we must meet, that it is inevitable?

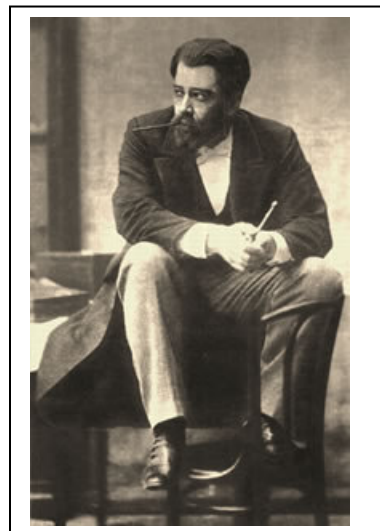
[He kisses her. VANYA comes in carrying a bunch of roses, and stops in the doorway.]

HELENA [Without seeing VANYA] Have pity! Leave me, [lays her head on
ASTROFF'S shoulder] Don't! [She tries to break away from him.]

ASTROFF [Holding her by the waist] Be in the forest tomorrow at two o'clock.
Will you? Will you?

HELENA [Sees VANYA] Let me go! [Goes to the window deeply embarrassed]
This is appalling!

Konstantin Stanislavky as
Doctor Astroff



Books, Videos, and Websites of Interest

Websites of Interest



http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/actors_studio.html

A website devoted to The Actors' Studio in New York explaining the philosophy of "The Method" inspired by Stanislavsky as taught there.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext99/vanya10.txt>

The complete text of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* as translated by Marian Fell. A handy source for scene material.

<http://home.merlin.mb.ca/~rfmorris/Featuring/Immigration/Ukrainian.Immigration.html>

http://collections.ic.gc.ca/heirloom_series/volume7/countries/russia.html

<http://www.whitepinepictures.com/seeds/iv/48/history2.htm>

http://www.albertasource.ca/aspensland/eng/society/article_pogrom_to_prairie.html

Websites outlining the immigration of Russian and Ukrainian settlers to Western Canada.

Movies of Interest



The Cherry Orchard (2003); director Michael Cacoyannis, starring Charlotte Rampling and Alan Bates. The film is a very straightforward staging of the drama, which tells the story of the downfall of an aristocratic feudal family that can't adapt to the post-emancipation Russia. Slow moving but good. (2 hr. 17min.). Available at Glebe Video International, 237-6252.

Vanya on 42nd Street (1994); director Louis Malle, starring Julianne Moore as Yelena and Wallace Shawn as Vanya. An excellent version of Chekhov's comedy of lonely despair and yearning for love on a provincial farm. The film is shot in a dilapidated New York theatre as a rehearsal which comes to life when the actors become completely immersed in their roles. (1 hr. 59min.) Available in video at the Ottawa Public Library. Also available at Glebe Video International, 237-6252.

The Sea Gull (1968); director Sidney Lumet; starring James Mason, Vanessa Redgrave, Simone Signoret. A rather slow-moving (even for Chekhov) rendition of Chekhov's classic of emotional upheaval on a country estate concerning a young poet/playwright in love with an actress who is in love with a novelist who is in love with the poet's mother who is in love with herself. (2 hr. 21min.) Available at Glebe Video International, 237-6252.

Books



The Actor's Chekhov written and edited by Jean Kackett. A Smith and Kraus Book; 1992. Interviews with Nikos Psacharopoulos and the company of the Williamstown Theatre Festival on experiences directing and acting Chekhov's works.

Theatre Etiquette

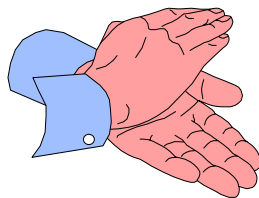
Please take a moment to prepare the students for their visit to the National Arts Centre by explaining good **Theatre Etiquette** which will enhance the enjoyment of the play by all audience members:

1. *Vanya* will be performed in the Theatre of the NAC. Matinées at the NAC are for students and the general public. It is important for everyone to be quiet (no talking or rustling of materials) during the performance so others do not lose their immersion in the “world of the play”. Unlike movies, the actors in live theatre can hear disturbances in the audience and will give their best performances when they feel the positive involvement of the audience members. The appropriate way of showing approval for the actors’ performances is through laughter and applause. For the enjoyment of all, people who disturb others during the show may be asked to leave the Theatre.

2. *Vanya* is set in the early part of the 20th century before phones and pagers. It is important that there be no electronic devices used in the Theatre so that the atmosphere of the play is not interrupted. Cell phones, pagers and anything that beeps must be turned off. Cameras and all other recording devices are also not permitted in the Theatre.

3. Unlike movies, theatre seats are assigned to patrons according to row and number. It is important to find the seat indicated on the ticket rather than moving around and disturbing others. It might be wise for teachers to pass out the tickets before arriving at the Theatre so students can make sure in advance that they are sitting beside the friend of their choice. Remember that in the NAC Theatre, all odd numbered seats are on one side and all even are on the other, so, for example, seats 12 and 14 are actually next to each other.

4. The play is performed in two acts with a 15-minute intermission. However, a trip to the washroom before the play starts is a good idea. Anyone leaving during the show may unfortunately not be allowed back into the Theatre.





NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE
CENTRE NATIONAL DES ARTS



**Imperial Oil
Foundation**

*NAC English Theatre High School Matinées are
supported by
the Imperial Oil Foundation*

*NAC Study Guides are supported by
the National Youth and Education Trust
with special thanks to TELUS, Founding Partner of the Trust,
SunLife Financial, and CGI Group Inc.*