

The “Vaudevilles” of Chekhov

new English versions of **Anton Chekhov**'s one-act plays
Swan Song, The Proposal, The Evils of Tobacco, and The Bear
by Morwyn Brebner and Andrew Moodie

Study Guide

THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE ENGLISH THEATRE
PROGRAMMES FOR STUDENT AUDIENCES
2002-2003 SEASON

Marti Maraden
Artistic Director, English Theatre

This Study Guide was written and researched by **Jim McNabb** for the National Arts Centre English Theatre, April, 2003.

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About This Guide

This study guide is formatted in easy-to-copy single pages. They can be used separately or in any combination that works for your classes. The two colour pages are meant for classroom display but may be photocopied also for students. Here is an outline of the contents of each page with suggestions on how you may want to use it.

Page:

The One-Act Plays – Pages 2, 3, 4, 5

Plot outlines of the four plays, character descriptions, comments and glossary of unfamiliar words.

Who Helped Put the Production Together ?– Page 6

List of cast members, the director and heads of design and production.

Activities Before Viewing the Play – Page 7

Drama, English writing and History activities.

Short Scene from *The Bear* – Pages 8, 9, 10

Activities After Viewing the Play – Pages 11, 12

Suggestions on how to write a play review.

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Suggested Movies/Reading/Web-Sites - Page 17

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May Be Used To:

Aid students in appreciating the performances; understand names in the plays.

Aid students in writing a review.

Aid teacher in preparing the class for the performance.

Provide a classroom activity.

Aid teacher in helping students reflect on and appreciate the show.

Provide students' enrichment.

Provide students' enrichment.

Aid students' connections with other arts.

Provide possible enrichment and research.

Display in the Classroom.

Display in the Classroom.

Instruct students before the performance.

≈ ***The Evils of Tobacco*** – a monologue ≈

Cast of Characters:

Ivan Ivanovich Nyukhin

(Ee-**van**' Ee-**va**'-no-veech **Nyoo**'-kheen)

- the unlucky, henpecked husband of the proprietress of the local music school and boarding school for girls.

Synopsis:

This short dramatic monologue is in the form of a public lecture given by Nyukhin at an assembly hall in a small provincial town. His domineering wife has forced him to lecture on the harmful effects of smoking, even though he himself smokes - but not in her presence. As he talks he keeps postponing the actual topic and instead fills us in on his regrets, longings and views on his wife. He wishes he could assert himself or escape from his stifling and humiliating situation but his wife has him thoroughly under her thumb.

Comments:

As in his other vaudevilles, Chekhov delighted in choosing names for characters which helped satirize their personalities. "Nyukhin" is a joke based on the verb "to sniff", a possible characteristic of the downtrodden man. Chekhov originally wrote *The Evils of Tobacco* as a farce in 1886 when he was a young medical student. He subsequently rewrote it five times, each time making it more poignant. His final version of 1902 brings out more fully the tragicomical aspects of the speaker's life. Chekhov's fascination with the coexistence of comedy and tragedy is brought to a height in his later great plays such as *Uncle Vanya* or *The Cherry Orchard*.

Glossary:

"kopek" – Coin worth 1/100th of a ruble. A ruble is the Russian unit of currency comparable to our dollar but of less value.



Interior of a 19th century theatre

≈ **Swan Song – a dramatic study in one act** ≈

Cast of Characters:

- Vasily Vasilych Svetlovidov (also known as Vasyusha)
(Va-see'-lee Va-seel'-yeech Svyet-lo-vee'-dof)(Va-syu'-sha)
- an very elderly second-rate actor
- Nikita Ivanich (also known as Nikitushka)
(Nee-kee'-ta Ee-va'-nich) (Nee-kee'-toosh-ka)
- the very elderly prompter of the run-down theatre

Synopsis:

It is late at night on the cluttered stage of a run-down provincial theatre after a performance of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. Vasily enters in his costume after playing the minor role of Calchas, the father of Cressida, an old and dignified Trojan priest. He had fallen into a drunken sleep after the performance and was left behind when the theatre was shut down for the night. Nikita enters from the cranny where he has been sleeping to try to comfort Vasily's woeful laments about his wasted life as an actor. Vasily's spirits rise as he and his elderly companion quote short scenes from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Othello* and he remembers his former glories.

Comments:

Traditional Russian names are often rather daunting to Westerners, so a word of explanation may help to clarify them. The first name is the person's "given" name. It may be followed in some cases by his "saint's name" if he was born on a particular Saint's Day. In this case, Vasily does not have a saint's name. The next name is derived from his father's name by adding "ich" (or "ova" if the person is a woman). In this case Vasily's father was also called Vasily. The final name is the family name but may have an "a" at the end if the person is a woman. To complicate things even more, the person may have one or more nicknames which often involve adding "-usha" or "-ushka" to the first part of his/her given name. When a woman married she rarely changed her family name to match her husband's.

Swan Song is a dramatized version of one of Chekhov's short stories entitled "Calchas", which is the name of the character Vasily has just been playing. Chekhov loved the plays of Shakespeare but knew them only in Russian translation. In fact, one of the first plays he ever saw as a boy was a performance of *Hamlet* in his hometown of Taganrog.

It might be interesting to note that the three short scenes performed from Shakespeare all deal with madness. The first, from *King Lear*, is spoken when the king has lost his sanity and is wandering on the moors cursing his cruel daughters and asking the gods to destroy the earth. The second, from *Hamlet*, occurs when Hamlet is pretending to be insane; and the third, from *Othello*, is when Othello is almost mad from jealousy after finding (falsely) that his wife has been unfaithful.

Glossary:

- "vaunt-couriers" – forerunners, heralds.
"germains" – the seeds from which all matter springs.
"pipe" – recorder, wind instrument.
"ventages" – stops, wind holes.

≈ **The Bear – a farce in one act** ≈

Cast of Characters:

Yelena Ivanovna Popova

(Ye-lye'-na Ee-va'-nov-na Po-po'-va)

- a pretty, young, high-spirited and vivacious widow in deep mourning, and the owner of a country estate.

Luka (Loo-ka')

- her elderly servant

Grigory Stepanovich Smirnov

(Gree-go'-ree Stye-pa'-no-veech Smeer-nof')

- a loud, overbearing landowner

Synopsis:

Seven months after the death of her husband Mrs. Popova still refuses to leave her country house or allow visitors. Smirnov arrives suddenly, and rudely demands to see her about a debt of 1200 rubles owed by her late husband. He claims that he must have the money immediately to pay his own debts. When she delays, he insists on staying until the debt is paid. As they argue he claims that women are fickle and manipulative while she claims that men are rude and unfaithful. Calling her bluff that she is a feminist, he challenges her to a duel for insulting him, a challenge which she readily accepts. When Smirnov has to teach her how to hold a pistol he realizes that he has fallen in love with the high-spirited attractive woman, while Popova realizes that she finds his macho behaviour oddly attractive.

Comments:

This short farce written in 1888 (also sometimes entitled *The Boor*) shows the characteristics of the genre in its rapid-fire dialogue, extreme emotions, chaotic arguments and surprising reversals. Chekhov demonstrates how fine is the line between fury and lustful passion, how intense emotions can easily blend from one into the other. The idea for *The Bear* occurred to Chekhov after seeing his friend Solovtsov, a huge actor with a roaring voice who reminded Chekhov of a Russian bear, play the part of a boorish suitor in a French vaudeville. Chekhov continued his naming jokes: Smirnov refers to the well-known distiller of vodka and Russian wines, Popova describes her easily excitable nature, and Luka is an old-fashioned peasant name with links to the bible. The title *The Bear* also refers to a Russian word for a gross insult.

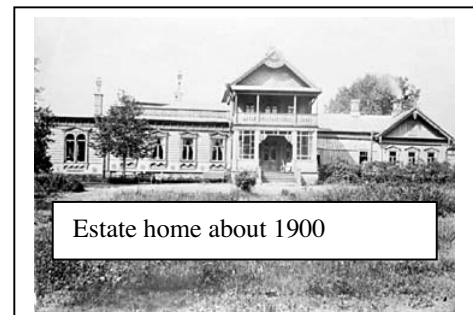
Glossary:

“deep mourning” – a year-long state observed by those who mourn the death of parents, a spouse, or a child, which involves wearing only black, including, in the case of women, a black veil over the face, as well as keeping all curtains drawn.

“Tamara” – a legendary mysterious and beautiful queen who lived in a dark tower and who lured men to their doom.

“Mortimer pistol, Smith & Wesson triple-action revolver” – handguns well suited for dueling .

“Neanderthal” – a extinct species of early humans, supposedly not very bright.



≈ **The Proposal** – a farce in one act ≈

Cast of Characters:

Stepan Stepanovich Chubukov

(Stye-**pan**' Stye-**pa**'-no-veech Chu-bu-**kof**')
- a blustery but hearty middle-aged landowner.

Natalya Stepanovna Chubukova

(Na-**ta**'-lya Stye-**pa**'-nov-na Chu-bu-**ko**'-va)
- his volatile and practical twenty-five year old daughter.

Ivan Vasilyevich Lomov

(Ee-**van**' Va-**see**'-lye-veech **Lo**'-mof)
- owner of the neighbouring estate, a high-strung hypochondriac.

Synopsis:

The action takes place in the drawing room of Chubukov's home on his large farm estate. Lomov arrives dressed very formally to ask for the hand of Natalya in marriage. When she is left alone with him so he can make his proposal first one ridiculous argument starts and then another until poor Lomov apparently has a seizure and dies. When he suddenly revives Chubukov quickly drinks to their engagement before they can fall into another fight.



Estate home about 1900

Comments:

Once again Chekhov playfully uses suggestive names for his characters. "Chubukov" suggests a long-stem Turkish tobacco pipe (a "choobook") with a clay bulb. The derivation of "Lomov" is from the verb meaning "to break, fracture", a possible reference to Lomov's delicate nature.



A drawing room, late 1800s



Peasants harvesting rye

Who Helped to Put the Production Together?

The "Vaudevilles" of Chekhov

a National Arts Centre English Theatre
world premiere production of new english versions
of *Swan Song*, *The Proposal*, *The Evils of Tobacco*, and *The Bear*
(May 22 – June 07, 2003)

Original Playwright: Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

New English versions by: Morwyn Brebner and Andrew Moodie

Director: Micheline Chevrier

Cast:-

Christine Brubaker: Natalya Stepanych / "*The Proposal*"

Douglas Campbell: Vasily Vasilych Svetlovidov / "*Swan Song*"

Peter Froehlich: Nyukhin / "*The Evils of Tobacco*" & Stepan Stepanych / "*The Proposal*"

Yanna McIntosh: Elena Ivanovna Popova / "*The Bear*"

Patrick McManus: Ivan Vasilyevich / "*The Proposal*" & Luka / "*The Bear*"

Paul Rainville: Grigory Stepanovich Smirnov / "*The Bear*" & Nikita Ivanich / "*Swan Song*"

Set and Costume Design: Judith Bowden

Lighting Design: John Munro

Original Music and Sound Design: Marc Desormeaux

Movement Director: Jo Leslie

Assistant to the Director: Nicholas Burton



Anton Chekhov

Activities Before Seeing the Play

1. Introduce the students to the four short plays by Chekhov making up the performance by handing out copies of the play synopses and characters.
2. Assign the preparation of the short scene from *The Bear* for presentation in class. (For copyright reasons this adaptation is not the one used in the NAC production.) 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, effective delivery of lines and comic timing. The scenes could be thoroughly memorized before performance, or if time is limited, a reading with scripts in hand.
3. Assign a research project on Russian 19th century history, culture or social history. There is a wealth of web-sites available on the internet which may be accessed by using a Google or Yahoo search.
4. Assign a research project on the life of Anton Chekhov. Again, there are a large number of available web-sites listed in a Google search.
5. Because of Chekhov’s new style of realistic or naturalistic play writing, a new style of acting developed to make the characters on stage more believable. The originator of this style of acting was Constantin 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 by accessing web-sites on Stanislavsky, the Group Theatre, Harold Clurman, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner and The Actors’ Studio.
6. Improvisation work along the themes of Chekhov might be a fun way for students to relate to the play. Suggested scenarios might involve:
 - trying to make a date but having the couple’s personality traits (a cold, a shy nature, an easily offended nature, a busy schedule) or external forces (interrupting friends) constantly getting in the way;
 - being required to make a positive speech on a topic that one clearly disagrees with;
 - having an argument with someone and then realizing that there is a growing attraction to that person;
 - dealing with a person which you secretly admire but who is actually in love with someone who is in love with you.
7. Have the students describe various kinds of comedy – physical, verbal, visual, situational, etc. and then, individually or in small teams, write a scene for a play or a movie which illustrates that form of comedy.
8. The Theatre Ontario web-site at <http://www.theatreontario.org/> contains a great deal of useful information on jobs in the theatre, training, 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 20.

A short scene from Chekhov's *The Bear*, adapted by Jim McNabb from a 1922 translation by B. Roland Lewis.

(page 1 of 3)

SMIRNOV: My God! I'm so angry I could tear this place apart! Where are you!?

[MRS. POPOV reenters in full mourning with downcast eyes.]

MRS. POPOV: Sir, in my period of mourning I'm used to complete quiet and I cannot stand the sound of loud talking. I'll ask you once more to please stop disturbing my house.

SMIRNOV: Pay me what your late husband owed me and I'll leave.

MRS. POPOV: I told you already, in plain language, that I haven't the money here; wait until the day after tomorrow.

SMIRNOV: And I've told you in plain language that I need the money, not the day after tomorrow, but today. If you don't pay me the money today I'll have to hang myself tomorrow.

MRS. POPOV: What am I supposed to do? Go and print some up?

SMIRNOV: So you don't plan to pay me immediately? You don't?

MRS. POPOV: I caaan nooottt.

SMIRNOV: Then I'll sit right here until I get the money. *[He sits down.]* You'll pay the day after tomorrow? Excellent! Then I'll just stay here until the day after tomorrow. *[Jumps up.]* Listen, do I have to pay my own debts tomorrow or not? Or do you think I'm joking?

MRS. POPOV: Excuse me, but you don't have to scream! You're not in a barn.

SMIRNOV: Who's talking about barns? I'm asking you whether I have to pay my debts tomorrow or not?

MRS. POPOV: You obviously have no idea how to treat a lady.

SMIRNOV: Oh, yes, I have.

MRS. POPOV: Oh, no, you have not. You are an insulting bear of a man with no manners! Respectable people don't go around speaking to ladies like that.

SMIRNOV: Well, that's news! How do you want me to speak to you? In French, perhaps! Madame, je vous prie! Thank you verry much for not geeving me my money. Pardonez me for 'aving disturbed you. What beautiful weather we are 'aving today! And how this beautiful black dress becomes your figure! Blah, blah, blah.

[He makes a low bow with mock ceremony.]

MRS. POPOV: You're not being funny, you know! I think you're crude and vulgar!

(continued)

(The Bear excerpt - page 2 of 3)

SMIRNOV: [*Imitating her.*] Not funny--vulgar! I don't understand how to behave in the company of ladies! Madam, I'll have you know that I've had more women than you've had hair styles. Three times I've fought duels over women; I've jilted twelve of them and nine jilted me. Oh, yes, oh, yes, there used to be a time when I went around acting like a fool, using lovey-dovey language, billing and cooing. I've loved and suffered and sighed and melted. I've loved passionately, madly, loved up and down the scale in every key like a squawking magpie, sacrificed half my fortune to charming women like you, but I'll be damned if I'll do it any more. I don't care about your dimples and your honey lips. ... Women are vain, and petty and deceitful from head to toe, present company excluded, of course. Just a bunch of crocodiles. [*He seizes the arm-chair and breaks it in two.*] Sorry about that. Have you ever in your life seen a woman who was really true and faithful? Never! It's easier to find a pig who can fly than a faithful woman.

MRS. POPOV: Hold on a minute. Are you trying to tell me that men are faithful in love?

SMIRNOV: Yes! Yes!

MRS. POPOV: A man! [*She laughs sarcastically.*] True and faithful in love! Well, that's news! How can you stand there and say such a thing? Men true and faithful! Let me tell you, of all the men I've known, my husband was the best; I loved him passionately with all my heart and soul and body; I gave him my youth, my happiness, my fortune, my life. I worshipped him, I tell you. And what happened? This best of all men betrayed me in every possible way. After his death I found his desk filled with love-letters and little "keep-sakes" from other women, their underwear, if you want to know. He flirted with other women, even when I was in the same room, he spent all my money and made fun of my feelings--and in spite of everything I was true to him. Oh, yes. And what's more, now that he's dead I'm still true to him. I have buried myself within these four walls and I shall wear this mourning to my grave.

SMIRNOV: [*Laughing disrespectfully.*] Mourning! What kind of a fool do you think I am? I'm on to your little feminine game. Such a secret! So romantic! Some knight will pass the castle, gaze up at the windows, and think to himself: "Here dwells the mysterious Tamara who, for love of her husband, has buried herself within four walls." Well, this knight doesn't fall for it.

MRS. POPOV: [*Springing up.*] What? You've got a nerve to talk to me like that!

SMIRNOV: You've buried yourself alive, but I notice you haven't forgotten to powder your nose!

MRS. POPOV: How dare you?

SMIRNOV: Don't scream at me, lady; I'm not your servant. I'm just calling a spade a spade. So you don't have to scream.

(continued)

(*The Bear* excerpt – page 3 of 3)

MRS. POPOV: I'm not screaming. It's you that's screaming. Get out of my house immediately.

SMIRNOV: Pay me my money, and I'll be out before you know it.

MRS. POPOV: I won't give you the money.

SMIRNOV: What? You won't give me my money?

MRS. POPOV: I don't care what you do to me. You won't get a penny! Get out!

SMIRNOV: As I haven't had the pleasure of being either your husband or your fiancé, you don't have to make a scene for my benefit. [*He sits down.*] I can't stand this.

MRS. POPOV: [*Breathing hard.*] You're going to sit down?

SMIRNOV: I already have, thank you.

MRS. POPOV: Get out!

SMIRNOV: Kindly be a little more polite!

MRS. POPOV: [*Striking her fists and stamping her feet.*] You are vulgar! You're a bear! An impossible monster!

SMIRNOV: What did you say? I'd like to know what right you have to insult me?

MRS. POPOV: Hah! Do you think just because you're so big and strong and manly and everything that I'm afraid of you?

SMIRNOV: And you think that because you're such a fetching little creature you can insult me? If you think men and women are so equal then I challenge you to a duel!

MRS. POPOV: You want to fight a duel? You're on.

SMIRNOV: Right now?

MRS. POPOV: Right now. My husband had pistols. [*She hurries away, then turns.*] Oh, what a pleasure it'll be to put a bullet through that conceited head of yours.

[*She goes out.*]

SMIRNOV: My God, what a woman!

Activities After Viewing the Play

1. The teacher could conduct a class discussion on the following topics:
Style of each short play; style of acting chosen for this show; production aspects such as costume/set/lighting design; relevance of Chekhov’s plays to today’s audiences.
2. The students could identify different kinds of comedy experienced in the play or how comedy was effectively achieved through visual, verbal or physical jokes.
3. Several of Chekhov’s one-act plays were adaptations of his own short stories. Have the students choose one of his stories and adapt it to a short scene for a movie or one-act play. The scene could be true to the period or, since Chekhov wrote about universal human nature, could be updated to a contemporary setting. A number of his short stories can be found on-line at:
<http://www.classicreader.com/toc.php/sid.6/aut.64/>
<http://www.classicbookshelf.com/library/Tchekhov/>
<http://www.bibliomania.com/0/5/frameset.html>
4. The teacher could assign as a written project a review of the NAC production of *The “Vaudevilles” of Chekhov*. A possible format for the review is included on page 12. Suggestions on writing a play review can also be found on the Theatre Ontario web-site: http://theatreontario.org/content/play_reviews.htm

Instructions on Writing a Play Review

Depending on the grade level the review may take different approaches. At the lower levels the focus could be largely on relating the story(ies) and making observations on aspects of the production. At higher levels the focus could be of a more comprehensive nature, dealing with a critical analysis of the effects of the choices made by the director / designer / composer / actor.

Organization of the review could be in the following pattern:

Paragraph one: Identification of the production with information on play title, playwright, company, venue, run of the show. Inclusion of several names of important personnel such as director, designer, and several actors is helpful.

Paragraph two: A brief plot synopsis of the play(s) giving the sequence of events. If the students have been given the material from NAC’s Study Guide they should put the synopsis into their own words or confine the synopsis to only one sentence for each play.

Paragraph three: This should include many detailed observation on the set, costumes, lights, music, in other words, the technical aspects of the production. It may also include comments on the effect of these aspects of the production, or how the aspects worked together to achieve an overall effect. What was the overall “world” of this production and how effectively was it achieved? All judgements or evaluations should be well backed up with the reasons for that decision.

Paragraph four: This should include observations on the acting and directing. Comments on the actors’ use of voice, movement, methods of characterization would be appropriate, as well as on choices made by the director to create an overall concept for the play.

Paragraph five: A summary of the student’s overall impression of the play and how well it achieved what it set out to. Did it achieve what the playwright probably intended?

A Biography

Anton Chekhov (1860 – 1904) is one of Russia's most beloved storytellers and one of the greatest playwrights of modern times. He won the Pushkin Prize and he is known for his short stories and 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, 10 short plays which he referred to as Vaudevilles, and 7 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. He was the third child of six born to 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. 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 the play-acting in the Chekhov living room. His ability at writing and performing comedic pieces soon became recognized by the community. When he was fifteen, however, the family grocery store went bankrupt, the father abandoned them and the rest of the Chekhov's were 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.



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 that 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, whims of young women, of whom Chekhov had not much knowledge - the author was 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. 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.

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A Biography (page 2 of 2)

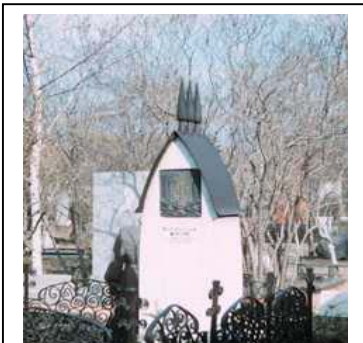
His first attempts at writing serious plays were rejected, so he turned to writing short comedies, the first of which was *The Evils of Tobacco* in 1886. This was followed in rapid succession over the next four years by the other short comedies which gained great popularity with the Moscow audiences, 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 Aleksandr: "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.

At 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. He 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 by 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.

Olga Knipper & Anton Chekhov



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

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 soon had to give up his medical practice and retire to a warmer climate in the south of Russia, which allowed him more time to write. By 1904, his condition had become critical and he was ordered to spend time at a German spa but he died there in July at the early age of 44 and soon after the successful opening of *The Cherry Orchard* at the Moscow Art Theatre. Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, one of the most influential playwrights of the modern age, is buried in Moscow.

Chronology of Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

(Source: *Moscow Art Theatre: Past, Present, Future*. Actors Theatre of Louisville with NEH support. 1989)

- 1860 Jan 17, born in Taganrog.
- 1876 Stays in Taganrog to finish school while family goes to Moscow.
- 1879 Enrolls in Medical Faculty of Moscow University.
- 1880 Publishes two stories in humour magazine.
- 1881 Writes humorous articles under pseudonyms to financially support family.
- 1882 *Platonov*, his first full-length play, is rejected by Moscow Maly Theatre.
- 1884 Total published stories number 300; graduates as a doctor; discovers first sign of tuberculosis.
- 1886 Writes first version of *The Evils of Tobacco*.
- 1887 Publishes short play, *Swan Song*; *Ivanov*, a full length play, is performed.
- 1888 *Swan Song* premieres at Korsh Theatre; writes *The Bear* and *The Proposal*; awarded prestigious Pushkin Prize; meets Stanislavsky.
- 1889 *Ivanov* staged in St. Petersburg, a great success; writes one-acts *The Wedding* and *The Tragedian Despite Himself*; sells full-length play *The Wood Demon* to Abramova Theatre, the play opens to hostile reviews.
- 1890 Travels to convict settlement on Sakhalin Island, conducts census averaging 160 interviews per day.
- 1891 Writes his final one-act *The Jubilee*; helps aid famine victims; suffers lung complications.
- 1892 Organizes famine relief mission; practices medicine, builds schools, runs an estate as a self-supporting commune.
- 1895 Writes *The Seagull*; meets Tolstoy.
- 1896 *The Seagull* premieres disastrously at Alexandrinsky Theatre.
- 1897 *Uncle Vanya* performed in provinces; builds several schools at own expense; tuberculosis diagnosed; convalescence.
- 1898 *The Seagull* premieres at Moscow Art Theatre (MAT), a tremendous success.
- 1899 Premiere of *Uncle Vanya* at MAT; first letters to Olga Knipper, MAT actress who performed in *The Seagull* – correspondence ran to 1,000 letters.
- 1901 Premiere of *The Three Sisters* at MAT; marries Knipper; continued poor health.
- 1902 Knipper miscarries; Chekhov resigns from Academy of Sciences over Gorky's exclusion; receives Griboyedov Prize for *The Three Sisters*.
- 1904 Premiere of *The Cherry Orchard* at MAT; Chekhov dies July 2.

Russian History during Chekhov's life

(Source: *Moscow Art Theatre: Past, Present, Future*, Actors Theatre of Louisville with NEH support, 1989.)

- 1855 Tsar Alexander II begins reign.
- 1860 Start of railway boom; founding of Vladivostok on East coast.
- 1861 Emancipation of serfs; peasant uprising in provinces; student disorders in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and other towns.
- 1863 Educational reform; court system introduced.
- 1864 Introduction of *zemstvos* (county councils); conquest of Central Asia.
- 1865 Press censorship reforms; attempted assassination of Alexander II; Dostoevsky publishes *Crime and Punishment*.
- 1869 Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* published.
- 1870 Municipality reforms toward self-government; Lenin born.
- 1872 Three Emperors' League established – Germany, Austria, Russia.
- 1873 Beginning of depression and industrial crisis; Tolstoy publishes *Anna Karenina*.
- 1874 Military reform; Moslem Tartars revolt.
- 1875 Southern Sakhalim ceded to Japan.
- 1876 Organization of secret society, Land and Freedom, formed against tsarist repression; first public demonstration in St. Petersburg.
- 1877 Russo-Turkish War.
- 1878 Strikes in St. Petersburg.
- 1879 Stalin and Trotsky born.
- 1880 Assassination of Alexander II; Alexander III begins reign; establishment of *okhrona* (secret police).
- 1882 Social legislation – child labor working hours; press censorship reinforced.
- 1885 Student riots lead to repressive “Rules for Students”.
- 1890 Anti-Jewish legislation enforced.
- 1891 Beginning of Trans-Siberian railroad; famine.
- 1894 Death of Alexander III; Nicholas II begins reign.
- 1898 Social Democratic party founded.
- 1899 First International Peace Conference at The Hague.
- 1900 Russian occupation of Manchuria.
- 1901 Russo-Persian Treaty; social Revolutionary party founded.
- 1904 Russo-Japanese War.
- 1905 Bloody Sunday Massacre; soldiers fire on peaceful demonstration killing 1,000 workers and students; General strike; Workers' Soviet founded in St. Petersburg Revolution; October Manifesto reforms, Duma (Russian parliament) created.

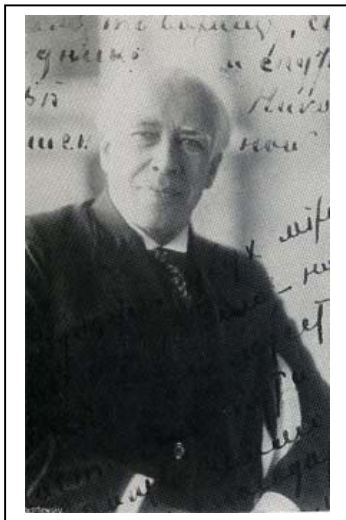
Russian Arts and Culture – Nineteen Century

Russian Literature experienced a Golden Age from 1820–1880 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 Mussorgsky) 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 nineteenth 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 melo-drama 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 Constantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, was devoted mainly to theatre performances, particularly those of Chekhov.



Constantin 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).

Suggested Movies/Reading/Web-sites

Movies



Doctor Zhivago – director David Lean; 1965; 200 minutes; starring Julie Christie, Omar Sharif, Rod Steiger, Geraldine Chaplin. Based on Boris Pasternak’s 1958 novel of the same name. A beautifully filmed story tracing the loves and fortunes of poet/medical doctor Yurii Zhivago from the latter part of the 19th century through the Russian Revolution. The film gives a strong visual sense of the period both in the countryside and the city of Moscow.

War and Peace – director Sergei Bondarchuk; 1968; 403 minutes; winner of Academy Award for best Foreign Film; in Russian with English subtitles; based on the novel by Leo Tolstoy. A huge epic costing over \$100 million (in 1968!), covering the period of Russian social and political history during the early part of the 19th century.

Vanya on 42nd Street – director Louis Malle; 1994; 120 minutes; starring Julianne Moore, Wallace Shawn, André Gregory. This film, which examines the illusion of theatre, deals with a group of actors who rehearse for a production of Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya* in an crumbling abandoned theatre on 42nd St. in Manhattan, a fitting metaphor for the decaying Russian society of the late 19th century. The rehearsal subtly becomes the bittersweet play, which intertwines with real life in a profound way.

The Seagull – director Sidney Lumet; 1968; 141 minutes; 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.

Books



Chekhov: The Vaudevilles. trans. Carol Rocamora; a Smith and Kraus Book, 1998. Excellent introductory section includes a very readable biography and discussion on the vaudeville style; excellent translations of all Chekhov’s short plays. Available at TheatreBooks, Toronto.

The Comic Toolbox: How to Be Funny Even if You’re Not. John Vorhaus; Silman-James Press; 1994. A well organized, straightforward, funny step-by-step workbook on comedy writing. Learn that comedy = truth + pain. Available at TheatreBooks, Toronto.

Farce: A History from Aristophanes to Woody Allen. Albert Bermel; An extensive examination of this popular theatre and film genre which is the ultimate tool for social commentary. Available at Ottawa Public Library.

Any of Chekhov’s major plays, particularly translations by David Mamet or Michael Frayn.

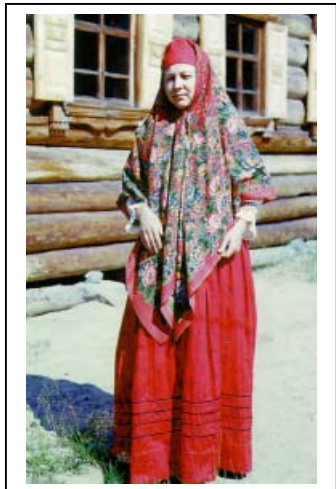
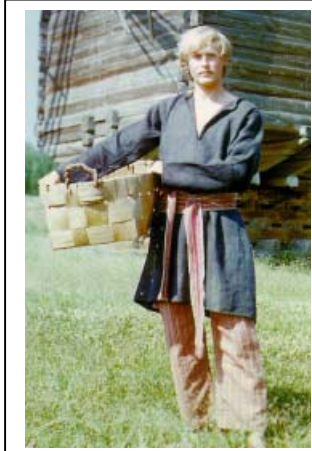
Web-sites



Biographical web-sites: <http://ibiblio.org/gutenberg/etext99/swmsg10.txt>
<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/tsehov.htm>
http://www.gradesaver.com/ClassicNotes/Authors/about_anton_chekhov.html
History of Vaudeville: <http://www.lazervaudeville.com/SGhistory.htm>

History of Russia: <http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/russian/fn9015/1800Russ.html>

Russian Folk Costumes



Costume Design for Natalya
by Judith Bowden

Photographs of Russian Folk Costumes courtesy of the Moscow Guide Web-site
<http://www.moscow-guide.ru/culture/folkart/costume/index.htm>



Maquette of the Set Design for *The Proposal*
Designer – Judith Bowden

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 the audience:

1. 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 inappropriately during the show may be asked to leave the theatre.

2. It is important that there be no electronic devices used in the theatre. Cell phones, pagers and anything that beeps must be turned off so the atmosphere of late 19th Century Russia, is not interrupted by 21st Century devices. Cameras and other recording devices are also not permitted in the Theatre.

3. Unlike movies, theatre seats are assigned according to row and number. It is important to find the seat indicated on the ticket rather than moving around 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 their best friend. Remember that in the Arts Centre 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 beside each other.

4. A trip to the washroom before the play starts is a good idea. Anyone leaving during the show will unfortunately not be allowed back into the theatre. The performance is composed of four one-act plays. There will be a fifteen-minute intermission after the first two short plays.

