One Hundred Years of Habitude: Russian Comedy on the British and American Stage

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Abstract

This study investigates the causes and effects of the ways in which Russian comedy has been understood by British and American scholars and theatre practitioners from the time it was introduced in the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day. For the purpose of this investigation two Russian playwrights were selected: Anton Chekhov and Aleksandr Griboedov. Chekhov's phenomenal influence on theater and literature is widely known. Griboedov is hardly a household name in Britain and America, although he is considered one of the founding fathers of Russian realistic drama, and his verse comedy *Woe from Wit*[1] is revered as a literary and satirical masterpiece in Russia.[2] Numerous productions of Chekhov's plays have been staged by British and American theater companies. Chekhov was so cordially accepted into the British canon that "during the '70s and '80s [of the 20th century] the number of productions was second only to Shakespeare's."[3] One question, however, kept eluding an answer for a long while: why, despite Chekhov's claim that he was writing comedies, were they produced as tragedies or dramas? Perhaps that predominant view on Chekhov's

[1] The name of Griboedov's most famous comedy has been translated differently: the clumsy literal translation as *Woe from Wit* is one of the first and therefore most common. *The Misfortune of Being Clever, The Importance of Being Stupid, Woes of Wit,* and simply *Chatsky* are the variants.

[2] Sara Stanton and Martin Banham, *Cambridge Paperback Guide to Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 151.

[3] Svetlana Klimenko, "Anton Chekhov and British Nostalgia," *Orbis Literarum* 56 (2001): 122.

dramatic work not only skewed the perspective on Russian comedy in general, but also influenced assumptions about other Russian plays yet unknown to the English-speaking public.

I hypothesize that there are three major factors that contributed to the twentieth-century understanding of Russian comedy in England and the USA: a specific development within Russian comedy and Russian criticism on their native soil, namely, the high emphasis on comedy as a means of social satire in the context of a long tradition of censorship in Russia and a high degree of political motivation in Russian criticism; the differences in emotional expression between Russian speakers and Anglophones that often led to misreading and misinterpretation of characters' motives; and finally, the socio-cultural circumstances that helped to shape the first impression of Russian comedies on English-speaking audiences.

In testing my hypothesis, primary sources are analyzed, such as Chekhov's and Griboedov's notebooks and letters, and the texts of their respective plays. Critical and scholarly views on the subject are examined for the purpose of finding the reasons behind inconsistent and at times contradictory interpretations of Chekhov's and Griboedov's creative heritage. The issue of translation is also taken into consideration. The thesis demonstrates the specific set of circumstances that shaped the last century's vision of Russian comedy and explains why it is set to change.

Note on the Spelling of Russian Names

I use a contemporary convention of the spelling of Russian names throughout my own writing. However, due to changing conventions and the relative looseness in transcription of Russian names, a variety of forms of the same names exists in other peoples' work. While quoting these sources I retain the original spelling of the source.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

When the first ever full-scale British production of Griboedov's[4] *The Misfortune of Being Clever*, which Mary Hobson (2005) called "one of the most original and sparkling works of all Russian Literature,"[5] was staged by Jonathan Kent at Almeida Theatre in 1993, it opened to polarized reviews. Newly translated and adapted by Anthony Burgess as *Chatsky*, it failed to impress some of the reviewers who hadn't recognized it as anything of much substance or relevance, while others opted for dismay at the fact that the masterpiece hadn't been introduced to the public earlier. Some criticized the play's "flimsy plot" and its "self-indulgent" main character. Others called it a comedy that "remains something of a one-joke play, and, as Chatsky[6] himself, Colin Firth has some difficulty explaining to us why the character should have become the Russian Hamlet":[7]

> It's like Hamlet – a big classic which again is quite exciting because nobody here knows it at all. I'd never heard of it before. It's the only thing

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[4] Aleksandr Griboedov's name has different spellings in different English-language sources. The spelling *Griboedov* will be used unless the spelling differs in the source quoted. Variants can be: Alexander Griboyedov, Aleksander Griboedoff, or Aleksandr Griboedov.

[5] Mary Hobson, *Aleksandr Griboedov's 'Woe form Wit' A Commentary and Translation* (Lampeter, Ceredigion, Wales: The Edwin Meller Press, 2005) xi.

[6] *Chatsky* is the name of the protagonist.

[7] Sheridan Morley, "Russian Grotesques Trying to Be Clever," rev. of Performance *Chatsky*, dir. Jonathan Kent, *International Herald Tribune* 24 March 1993.

> he's written [. . .] What we're doing is a classic as a new play. The Anthony Burgess part of it is very much a new play. If it's one part Griboyedov, it's certainly one part Burgess. I think he's done a dazzling translation – one of the most exciting modern language [sic] I've ever come across in my life.[8]

Subsequently, the question arises: how has, in Charles Spencer's words "one of [Russia's] most famous plays, more than Chekhov, and … the most quoted from in Russian literature," made the impression of "a curiously un-engaging play, which expends a lot of energy attacking obvious targets at wearisome length?"[9] Was it the fault of the translator, director, the cast, all of the above, or perhaps of a certain public expectation of what a Russian drama, claimed to be comedy should be; expectation that has been formed during the past century almost solely on the basis of Chekhov's plays, which he called comedies?

The criticism of drama is shrouded in ambiguities. Due to the sheer number of components within any given performance, it is a paralyzing task to dissect the dramatist's philosophy as interpreted by the director and the cast for the viewing pleasures of the audience and critics of any given day. When the aforementioned participants' input is garnished by a variety of socio-cultural perceptions, and, in the case of Russian drama in the English-speaking world, the necessity of translation which adds yet another layer of possibility for misinterpretation, the business of untangling the

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[8] Colin Firth, interview with Jenny Scott, *Times* [Richmond, UK] 30 April 1993.

[9] Charles Spencer, rev. of performance *Chatsky*, dir. Jonathan Kent, *Daily Telegraph* 18 March 1993.

inherent qualities of a particular work becomes a tedious business indeed. "Enumerating the stripes of the tulip"[10] soon turns into enumerating the stripes of the tiger. The unyielding facts just defy any coherent explanation in an ever-changing landscape of thought and interpretation.

The time comes however, when this landscape shifts and settles, if only briefly, to shed some old habits and false assumptions and offer a fresh perspective on the new way ahead. I believe that the last two decades have brought precisely that kind of shift to the perception of Russian drama, particularly the Russian comedy. The causes are numerous, the fruits of this development are of a different flavor, but the shift is happening nevertheless. Although some critics, scholars and theatre practitioners whose work will be discussed further missed the facts of changing reality (ex.: Hristić, Rubzov, etc.) and added new implausible and unsupported readings which turned the art of some Russian playwrights into something it was never meant to be, others (ex.: Gottlieb, Frayn, etc.) have noticed and analyzed the new facts, thoughts and findings to tie up some loose ends and to illuminate previously missed connections. The goal of this research is to trace the causes and effects of both the initial misinterpretations and the subsequent evolution of perception of Russian comedy on the British and American stage.

The reasons Alexander Griboedov and Anton Chekhov were selected for this research are compelling and numerous. First of all, both authors claimed that their respective works were comedies. Only one of them was believed by the critics and

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[10] Laurence Senelick, *The Chekhov Theatre: A Century Of The Plays In Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 4.

theatre-goers. This fact is of high interest to the present study. Both authors' involvement with theatre began with composing curtain openers and vaudevilles for renowned actors' and actresses' benefits. Both Chekhov's and Griboedov's works are widely quoted in their native land, although Griboedov's has the upper hand in this. The differences are numerous. The tremendous impact of Chekhov's work on the twentieth-century theatre is widely recognized, while Griboedov is practically unknown to English-speaking audiences. Chekhov's plays are written in colloquial Russian prose, while Griboedov's are in verse. Griboedov was born into the landed gentry and Chekhov was a grandson of an emancipated serf. Chekhov was a doctor at the end of the nineteenth century, while Griboedov was a diplomat in the first third of it. Chekhov died of consumption at the age of forty four; Griboedov was torn to pieces by an angry Persian mob when he was ten years younger. The themes of fruitless rebellion, odd exits, the syncopated accents of seemingly non-advancing plot, the absurdity of symbiotic stagnation, and the comedy of it all are traceable in both Chekhov and Griboedov's plays. Using different creative means, both authors however choose the character comedy bordering on farce as their palette. Together with the Bible, neoclassical Russian poet-fabulist Ivan Krylov and Shakespeare, Griboedov's verse comedy *The Misfortune of Being Clever* is a principal source of Chekhov's quotations in his letters.[11] For various reasons both authors were often misinterpreted, and only recently that the re-evaluation of their heritage has begun and the critical opinion of their art is starting to shift. In what direction is this shift happening? How wide is its amplitude? What impact, if any, has it made on theatrical

[11] Anton Chekhov, *Letters of Anton Chekhov,* ed. and trans. Michael Henry Heim, introduction Simon Karlinsky (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) x.

practice? All these questions are considered in the course of this work.

Given the large scope of the inquiry and the volume of critical work on the different components of the subject of interest, no exhaustive answers are possible or intended in this research. A compilation of existing tendencies is offered, as well as some new considerations seemingly missing from the current body of critical inquiries. For example: the broader issue of emotional universals (as discussed in the field of linguistics and anthropology) has recently begun to penetrate the field of humanities and cross-cultural studies. I consider this discussion to be highly relevant to theatre practice and criticism.

An unbiased and balanced analysis of the history of Russian theatre remains to be put together in the future. Meanwhile I feel it my duty to note the sometimes tendentious nature of research and theatrical reviews, on both sides of the Russian border. On the one hand, some Western scholars, who were rightfully outraged by the political pressure applied to Russian authors by the ruling powers, sometimes tend to miss particularly Russian traits that contributed to the development of Russian theatre. Simon Karlinsky, for example, in his *Russian Drama: From Its Beginnings To The Age Of Pushkin* (1985) stops short of inquiring into some features of early Russian theatre that can shed some light on the further development of comedy on the Russian stage. The connection of early religious plays with the farce of folk performances leaves Karlinsky irritated by their eclectic nature. This irritation prevents his noticing a profound influence that suppressed folk farces had on the development of Russian theatre. On another hand, as recently as 2004, some Post-Soviet Russian scholars had continued to follow a long-standing tradition of simplistic utilitarianism and coerce authors' intentions into their own dubious

agenda.[12] The latter tendency played a major role in the perception and interpretation of both Griboedov's and Chekhov's work in the land of their birth.

[12] Commentary to Griboeov's *Woe from Wit* by Rubzov et al. is a good example of this approach. "Gore ot uma: 'strannaia' komediia 'strannogo' sochinitelia" employs fallacious argumentation to promote Russian Orthodox doctrine using material of Griboedov's play. The authors of the commentary assert that the spirit of enlightenment that inspired the protagonist was a cause of all his grievances. The remarkable fact remains that this publication was intended for teachers of Russian literature and was published in Moscow by The Institute of The World Literature in the year 2004.

Chapter I

A Note on Specifics in Development of Russian Theatre and Russian Comedy

In the minds of theatre-going audiences and sometimes of theatrical critics, Russian comedy occupies a peculiar place. Chekhov's (*The Seagull*, *The Cherry Orchard*, etc.) and Gogol's (*The Inspector-General*) comedy, which is better known to the English-speaking public, is often discussed as more than comedy, tragicomedy, or not comedy at all, and therefore should be transferred into the domain of other genres. Although the history of Russian theatre is not a subject of this research, a brief glance at the evolution of the genre would be instrumental to finding the root causes of this genre confusion in relation to Russian comedy. While examining the history of Russian theatre the emergence of two intertwined trends become evident.

First, the genre of tragedy as such has never fully materialized on the Russian stage. The major reason was state and church censorship unwelcoming to any other than the "official" interpretation of Russian historical events and uninterested in the world of ideas. Imperial censorship began under Catherine the Great and became complete by 1856, five years before the abolition of serfdom.[13] During this time many plays were written and staged, but the imperial theatre wasn't available to any native dramas that can be considered tragedy.

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[13] Joyce Vining Morgan, *Stanislavski's Encounter with Shakespeare. The Evolution of a Method* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980) 1.

For example, Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*,[14] although written in 1825, wasn't approved for performance until 1866 and in fact was only staged as a drama[15] in 1982 by the Taganka Theatre in Moscow, and then in 2007 in the US, in English, and as a reconstruction of Meyerhold's long-unrealized directorial concept of 1936.[16] In the early Russian theatre, apart from the translated and adapted plays of Shakespeare, Voltaire and Racine, there were few Russian authors who, inspired by the great, created their own pseudo- or neoclassical tragedies: Sumarokov's *Horev*, *Sinav and Truvor, Yaropolk and Dilitza, Dmitri the Impostor,* Knyazhnin's *Rosslav, Vadim of Novgorod* and *Ozerov's Death of Oleg* and *Dmitry Donskoy*.[17] Although based on the events of Russian history, they failed to achieve the status and depth of high tragedy. In his *Introduction to Russian Comedy of the Nikolaian Era* (1997b), Lawrence Senelick notes that "tragedy, as practiced in Europe, has never taken root in Russian literature to the same depth that comedy has."[18]

Second, the imperial or state theatres were fundamentally alienated from folk tradition in both language and performances. The extreme "asceticism of the Greek Orthodox Church […] really made the natural development of a national theatre

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[14] It is interesting to note the sub-title of this play: *The Comedy of the Distress of the Muscovite State, of Tsar Boris, and of Grishka Otrepyev (Комедия о настоящей беде Московскому государству, о царе Борисе и о Гришке Отрепьеве*) and realize that the word *comedy* (*комедия*) as used by Pushkin in its archaic meaning that stands for *entertainment* with an implication of an artifice, a crafted show.

[15] *Boris Godunov* was a basis for Mussorgsky's opera.

[16] See Quiñones 1 for production of Godunov in Princeton's Berlind Theatre.

[17] *Dmitry Donskoy* became a source of Griboedov's parody *Dmitry Drianskoy* that he wrote while being a student.

[18] Senelick x.

impossible."[19] Folk oral poetry and performance of "*skomoroshina"*[20] have never found their place in the Russian theatre. Born out of pre-Christian traditions just as the early Greek comedy, *skomorokhi* – the first entertainers of Russia – were harshly persecuted by the Church to almost non-existence long before Catherine the Great's decree that established the Russian Theatre in 1756. Leach and Borovsky, like many others, note the scarcity of documentary evidence of *skomorokhian* performances:

> There can be few important social groups in medieval and early modern Europe that are as tantalizingly ill-documented as the *skomorokhi*, the professional entertainers of old Russia. Until the end of the seventeenth century, Russia's written culture was dominated by the Orthodox Church, and the vast majority of books and manuscripts were religious in character. Since Russian Orthodoxy was also characterized by an extreme ascetic distaste for the things of the world, and most particularly for "devilish" secular entertainment such as music and dancing, the only Russian-language sources relating to the *skomorokhi* are those in which their activities are condemned as sinful. Though references to the *skomorokhi* go back to at least the eleventh century, a large number of the documents in which they are mentioned date from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, [. . .] In the *Stoglav*, the proceedings of the Church

[19] Bertha Malnick, "The Origin and Early History of the Theatre in Russia," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 19 (1939-1940): 203.

[20] Extemporaneous or traditional show combining oral poetry, topical humor accompanied by musical instruments performed by *skomorokhi* – traveling or local performers.

> Council called by Ivan IV in 1551, the entertainment of the *skomorokhi* and other social practices seen to subvert the interest of church and state were branded as "Hellenic devilry."[21]

By the middle of the seventeenth century a decree had been issued by czar Alexis prohibiting the following:

> … to dance, play games or watch them; at wedding feasts either to sing or play on instruments; or to give over one's soul to perdition in such pernicious and lawless practices as word-play, farces and magic. To wear masks or *skomorokhi* clothes, to be *skomorokhi* or to play on *gusli*,[22] *bubni*,[23] *gudki*.[24] Offenders for the first and second offence are to be beaten with rods, for the third and fourth to be banished to the border towns.[25]

The cheerful force of the folk comedy outlived the brutal punishments and bans in bits and pieces of *balagan* – a seasonal fairground performance, and *riazhenye* – Christmas and Shrovetide masks, but no original form of *skomoroshina* has ever become an organic part of the Russian theatrical tradition**.** Furthermore, precisely because of its prolonged persecution by the church, the folk farcical performance acquired a subtext of

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[21] Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky, ed. *A History of Russian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 19.

[22] A sort of harp.

[23] A sort of tambourine.

[24] A sort of flute.

[25] P. I. Ivanov*, Opisanie Gosud. Razryadnago Arkhiva,* quoted in Malnick 203.

something unruly and unmanageable.[26] So, when the long suppressed celebratory spirit of genuine Russian farce began seeping through the porous barriers of the newly established theatre, it helped the young comedy to acquire a national specificity. Meanwhile the void in the permissible forms of theatrical entertainment was quickly filled by the translations and adaptations of German and French comedies and, finally, satirical plays by Sumarokov[27], Fonvizin[28] and the Empress herself, whose characters' prototypes were supplied by their contemporary compatriots. Although the Empress wrote one or two satirical comedies and was the first to introduce Russian peasants onto the stage, by no means was her work an organic development of the folk drama, but rather resembled French pastoral pictorials of the time. Lawrence Senelick (1997b) observes that: ". . . not until the late 1850s, with the emergence of Ostrovsky, were playwrights free to copy the language heard in the streets."[29]

Highlighting the importance of farce in the development of any theatre, Robert Stephenson (1960) writes: "Early farce covered the range of the comic theatre; it *was* that theatre. Until comedy as such appeared, there was no cognate form against which to measure farce, as such [sic]."[30] As the natural development of early Russian comedy was

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[26] Note: this function is exploited by Chekhov in *Three Sisters* when Natasha protests against *riazhenye* (in translation: *entertainers, mummers*, etc.) appearing in Prozorov's house in Act 2.

[27] Variation of spelling: Sumarokoff.

[28] Variation of spelling: Von-Wizin.

[29] Senelick x.

[30] Robert C. Stephenson, "Farce as Method," *The Tulane Drama Review* 5. 2 (Dec. 1960): 85.

interrupted at its core, comedy in the form of farce and satire acquired the flavor of a forbidden fruit: rebellious or, at best, "sanctioned" entertainment. The later development of Russian drama only amplified this perception. It became a core of Russian theatre and the genre of choice. As the genre evolved, comedy more often than not turned into a character and social satire with perhaps a much higher chance of passing the censor. By the time Griboedov was born, thirty-nine years after Catherine's Decree, a theatre-going public well-acquainted with comedy was firmly in place.

Griboedov, as many others before and after him, became a victim of the plague of censorship. Written in 1823, when its author was twenty eight years old, his *The Misfortune of Being Clever* wasn't allowed for publication or production as a whole until 1861 – the year of the abolition of serfdom, forty years after Griboedov's death and a year after Chekhov's birth. The public only read it in the form of hand-written copies. In his letter to Prince Vyazemsky, Griboedov (1824) writes: "My dear Prince, do not hope for my comedy, it will never be permitted; it is good that I was prepared for the outcome and therefore will not lay any extra blame on my fate . . . ."[31] What Griboedov couldn't be prepared for was the fact that he posthumously will be hailed by the Russian critic Aleksandr Herzen (1864) as a Decembrist and near a revolutionary**.** The role of Russian criticism in Chekhov's myth-creation has been noted and researched in the course of the twentieth century. The reviews of the production of *Chatsky* in Almeida production suggest that it may have fallen into a trap of false myth just as *The Seagull* and *Cherry*

[31] A.S. Griboedov, *Polnoe sobranie Sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, ed. S.A. Fomichev, vol. 3: *Pis'ma, dokumenty, sluzhebnye bumagi* (Sankt-Peterburg: Dmitriĭ Bulanin, 2006) 72, trans. mine.

Orchard did before it. The common Russian perception, created by the Russian and Soviet critics and rarely questioned, that Chatsky was simply an eloquent rebel might have colored Kent's directorial vision.

Chapter II

The Role of Russian Criticism in Myth Creation

> "Who are these judges?"
>
> - Aleksandr Griboedov[32]

> "In general, Russia suffers from a frightening poverty in the sphere of facts and a frightening wealth of all types of arguments."
>
> - Anton Chekhov[33]

Just as what would happen later to Chekhov's plays, Griboyedov's oeuvre became a subject of myth-creation by Russian critics. Paradoxically, the fact that it wasn't allowed for publication or production as a whole until many years after it was written didn't protect it from many discussions in the far from free press. It circulated in the form of hand-written copies for more than four decades and was published in extracts. But when the influential Russian critic Aleksandr Herzen[34] seized upon its subject, he was mostly interested in the social satire of the play. Herzen's article "The New Phase of Russian Literature" (1864) was one of the influential and repeatedly quoted sources that closely linked play's protagonist Chatsky as well as Griboedov himself to the 1825.

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[32] *The Misfortune of Being Clever*, Act II, scene 5.

[33] Letter to A.S. Suvorin, February 23, 1890.

[34] Specific trends in 19th-century Russian criticism and revolutionary thought were insightfully presented by Tom Stoppard in his trilogy *The Coast of Utopia,* 2002.

Decembrist uprising[35] contrary to the fact that secret societies were actually satirized pitilessly in the play – and endowed him with sentiments and aims he hardly had:

> The author has ulterior motives, and the hero of the comedy is only the embodiment of those motives. The character of Chatsky, melancholic, retired into his irony, trembling with anger and full of dreamy ideals, appears at the last moment of the reign of Alexander I, on the eve of the uprising on St. Isaac's Square, is a Decembrist, is a person who completes the era of Peter I and tries to discern, at least on the horizon, the promised land [...] which he won't see. He is being listened to in silence, as the society he addresses takes him for a madman – a violent madman – and taunts him behind his back. [36]

This opinion was echoed by many. Even in 1993, it seems, the Almeida's *Chatsky* was produced under the influence of a similar perception, noted by critics:

> […] he has about him a suitably confused, melancholy despair, and he is the only one of the company written or viewed sympathetically: but nothing he ever does, such little as it is, really commands our respect or

[35] December the 14th of 1825 is the day of the Decembrist's revolt, a conspiracy concocted by a secret society of officers and the troops loyal to them. The aim of the uprising was the abolition of serfdom and a constitutional monarchy. The revolt was hampered and suppressed by the end of the same day. A few officers of the uprising including the leader, Prince Trubetskoy, didn't actually show up, which caused confusion amongst the loyal troops from the very beginning. The Decembrists' revolt was given a prominent position in the history of revolutionary movement by Soviet historians (see M.Nechkina *The Uprising of December 15, 1825* (*Vosstanie 14 Dekabria, 1825 g.)* Moskva, Izd-vo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1951)

[36] Herzen 208, trans. mine.

> interest, and there is a sharp clash between the realism of his delineation and the cartoon nature of the caricatures placed around him.[37]

The major contradiction of Herzen's judgment, so typical of Russian criticism of the nineteenth century onward, is seldom if ever addressed: the individual characters' features and developments that are of interest to the author are being sacrificed to the social and political interests of the critic. This happened to Griboedov's work as much as with that of Chekhov's. The "authoritarian" opinion of Russian critics, translated or expressed in English could have influenced the opinion of the Anglophones.

So, what was this play whose comedic zest became a source of inspiration for many, including Chekhov, and whose lines became proverbs? Written in rhymed iambic verse with lines of variable length, it narrates the story of its protagonist Chatsky's unfortunate return to the house he frequented as a child after three years' absence. In Griboedov's own words (letter to Katenin, 1825):

> The plot is pretty clear in its goals and execution: a girl, who is herself not stupid, prefers a fool to an intelligent man (not that intelligence is a common thing amongst us, no! In my comedy there are 25 fools and one reasonable man); and this man is of course in juxtaposition with the surrounding society; nobody understands him, everybody is unforgiving of the fact that he is different from them. At first he is merry and it's a flaw:

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[37] See Sheridan Morley's Review.

> "Jokes! Nothing but jokes! It never seems to fail,"[38] when he jokes about some mutual acquaintances (but what to do if they don't possess a single noticeable noble feature). His jokes are not acrimonious, until he is driven out of his wit, however: "A viper, not a man!"[39] And then, when it comes to a certain person "one of ours" – anathema to him: "He's envious and proud and full of wicked spite!"[40] If he can't stand vileness, then: "A Carbonari! Revolution!"[41] Someone out of wickedness starts a rumor that he is mad; no one believes it, but everybody repeats it.[42] The voice of the general reprehension soon reaches him, as well as the reason for the dislike of the girl, who is the only reason for his arrival to Moscow. He spits out his distress and off he goes.[43]

Bringing back his tender love for his childhood sweetheart Sofia and his ever so ruthless wit to each and every member of stale Moscow society, his hopes get destroyed by the same people he thinks he knows so well. Sofia, it turns out, is in love with the most insignificant and un-heroic, her father's secretary, Molchalin, who only plays along out

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[38] Alan Shaw, *Alexander Griboyedov, The Woes Of Wit, A Comedy In Four Acts.* Foreword and translation of Griboyedov's *Gore ot Uma* into English (Tenafly: Hermitage Publishers, 1992) 59.

[39] Hobson 28.

[40] Hobson 100.

[41] Hobson 38.

[42] A direct contradiction with the mentioned above Herzen's assertions can be observed.

[43] Griboedov 90, trans. mine.

of fear for his career while he much prefers Sofia's maid – Lisa. While disentangling this intrigue, Chatsky encounters old acquaintances of all ranks and ages, whose society clearly caused his "passion for travel" in the first place. He is clearly not interested in anybody but Sofya, but she doesn't return the sentiment:

> CHATSKY[44]
>
> Come, if not you, what's to astonish me, anyhow?
>
> What else in Moscow can be new?
>
> Last night there was a ball, tomorrow there'll be two.
>
> One got engaged, another met reverses,
>
> The same old talk, the same old album verses.
>
> SOFYA
>
> Poor martyred Moscow! You've seen such a lot.
>
> Where is it better?
>
> CHATSKY
>
> Where we're not.[45]

The main force that drives the action of the play is the characters. It is their reactions, speeches and dialogues that determine the matter of this play. The idiosyncrasies of those characters are of interest to Griboedov:

> Portraits and only portraits make up comedy and tragedy; however, there are features in them characteristic of numerous other people, sometimes of

[44] "Chatsky" and "Sofya" – Shaw's transcription.

[45] Shaw 27.

> the entire human race, in so far as every man resembles the members of his own two-legged fraternity. I hate caricatures; you won't find a single one in my scenes.[46]

There is a note (June, 1826) in what was preserved of Griboedov's papers entitled: "The Character of My Uncle," that testifies of his interest in people whose features are picturesque enough to be used in building the characters of his plays:

> Here is a character that almost entirely disappeared in our time, but was prevalent twenty years ago, the character of my uncle. I will leave it to the historians to explain why in the generation of that time there was that mix of vices and courtesy; courtly manners on the outside and a complete absence of any feelings on the inside. It was already common to duel then, but everybody was happy to cheat – women in love, men in cards or in any other way; in service, bosses implicated their underlings in all sorts of low dealings by promises they couldn't keep, by protection they couldn't provide, but the officers, loyal followers until the first eclipse, paid them in-kind! To put in simpler terms: everybody had dishonesty in his soul and falsity on his tongue. It seems that it's different now, or not, but my uncle belonged to that epoch. He fought Turks like a lion in the time of Suvorov,[47] then groveled in everybody's drawing rooms and lived on gossip in retirement. Sample of his morals: "I, brother. . . ."[48]

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[46] Griboedov, letter to Katenin, February 14th, 1825. Quoted in Hobson 205.

[47] Nikolai Suvorov was a famous general during Russian-Turkish war of 1789-91.

[48] Griboedov 372, trans. mine.

The description immediately brings to mind a dialogue between Famusov, Sofya's father, and Chatsky in Act 2, scene 2:

> You're arrogant, the lot of you!
>
> You ask your fathers what they used to do.
>
> As models for you, they'd be splendid.
>
> There is me, for instance, or the late lamented
>
> Maxim Petrovich: Silver plates? My uncle bought
>
> A pure gold service. Had a hundred men to serve him.
>
> Fine horses, orders – worked hard to deserve'em.
>
> He spent an age at court. And what a court!
>
> It's all so different nowadays.[49]

This dialogue is also a remarkable example of Griboedov's illustration of a heated but failed communication, the quality seemingly characteristic of Russian dialogue that will be later explored and mastered by Chekhov. Chatsky and Famusov's exchange is a brilliantly realistic presentation of this trait:

> CHATSKY
>
> … Though everywhere people like to grovel and bow,
>
> Laughter intimidates, and shame restrains them now;
>
> It doesn't pay: of their kind even czars are weary.
>
> FAMUSOV
>
> My God, a revolutionary!

---

[49] Hobson 36.

CHATSKY

The world's no longer like that, I'm afraid.

FAMUSOV

A dangerous person!

CHATSKY

People breathe more freely,

And no great clamor for the rank of clown is made.

FAMUSOV

The things he says! And vouched for it! Really!

CHATSKY

To yawn at a patron's ceiling without relieve,

Sit silently at table, shuffle and fuss,

Hold someone's chair, pick up a handkerchief.

FAMUSOV

He wants to preach licentiousness!

CHATSKY

Some travel, or live in the country as they please…

FAMUSOV

He doesn't recognize authorities!

CHATSKY

Some serve not men but principles…

FAMUSOV

I would forbid such gentlemen, on pain of death,

To come in shooting distance of the capitals.

CHATSKY

Well, I will let you catch your breath…

FAMUSOV

I've no more patience, now, enough.[50]

Exchange goes on until it reaches a crescendo of a total absurd:

FAMUSOV (Seeing and hearing nothing)

They'll haul you into court,

And that's the long and short.

CHATSKY

Someone is here to visit you.

FAMUSOV (Seeing and hearing nothing)

I won't hear it—to court!

Another line of broken communication is developed between Chatsky and his beloved Sofya. As he holds her in high esteem and is smitten, he deems her different from everyone else and is completely puzzled by her coldness toward him. As can be expected by everyone but Chatsky, the irritation he causes by his "presumptuous" and "carbonari's" behavior breeds a vicious response from the society. Sofya starts a rumor that he is mad and, picked up by everybody, it comes back to Chatsky. He learns that Sofya is the source of it just as he learns of her love for Molchalin, when simultaneously Molchalin's partiality to Lisa is revealed. The inevitable denouement causes yet another

[50] Act 2, scene 2, trans. Shaw 36-39.

outburst – Chatsky's venomous denouncement of all in Moscow and a call for his carriage in the desperate flight from all the woes. The last word in the play however belongs to Famusov, Sofia's father, whose main concern at that moment is his imagined reaction of the influential Moscow matron, Princess Marya Alekseevna:

FAMUSOV

Well, you can see the man's out of his head.

Seriously, isn't it true?

Madman! What's all that nonsense that he said?

Obsequious! Father-in-law! So down on Moscow, too!

You're determined to be the death of me.

I haven't enough grief as it is?

Oh, Lord, just wait and see

What princess Marya will say to this![51]

Leading his hero to the last blow he receives from Sofya, Griboedov creates a denouement that is anything but a happy ending of a traditional neo-classical comedy of the time: no marriage, no reconciliation and no hope for any further positive development. The fact that Famusov is the last character to speak is revealing. The suggestion that life goes on, just as it did before the arrival of Chatsky is a powerful signal that holds a clue to the meaning of the whole play and illuminates Griboedov's creative thought. In the same letter to Katenin (Feb. 14th of 1825,) Griboedov responds to Katenin's "there is more gift there than there is art" critique:

[51] Act 4, scene 15, trans. Shaw 112.

> It's the most flattering praise you could have said; I don't know if I am worth it. Art just consists of the forgery of a gift. I say, the one who only possesses a learned art, knowledge acquired by sweating of how to please theorists, e.g. do foolish things, the one who has more ability to satisfy school requirements, conditions, grandma's fables than his own creative force should break his palette, and throw his brush, chisel and quill out of the window. I know, every craft has its tricks, but the less of them the better is the result; and isn't it best to stay away from them altogether? *Nugae difficiles*. I write as I live: free and free.[52]

Just as Griboedov at age 30, Chekhov (Oct. 4, 1888) at age 28, echoes the sentiment in his letter to Pleshcheyev that his "holy of holies is … the most absolute freedom imaginable." His creative credo seems to mock many critical tendencies of the time and the time to come:

> The people I am afraid of are the ones who look for tendentiousness between the lines and are determined to see me as either liberal or conservative. I am neither liberal, nor conservative, nor gradualist, nor monk, nor indifferentist. I would like to be a free artist and nothing else.[53]

Manifesting a trait worthy of being a featured in Griboedov or Chekhov's play, Herzen and many other critics after him failed to either notice or comprehend the character of Repetilov. Repetilov holds a key to understanding Griboedov relationship with secret

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[52] A.S. Griboedov 90, trans. mine.

[53] Anton Chekhov, *Letters of Anton Chekhov,* ed. and trans. Michael Henry Heim, introduction Simon Karlinsky (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 109.

societies of the time. Repetilov, whom Chatsky encounters at the ball in Famusov's house, is an embodiment of an inspired philistine. He is an English club member, a drunk, a witness and a participant of "a super-secret brotherhood." He talks about "subjects of a serious nature"[54] and is quite thrilled with the company he keeps. Griboedov[55] employs this character to satirize the secret societies:

REPETILOV

Congratulate me. I've become more steady.

I've met these brilliant men. I don't roam all night long.

CHATSKII[56]

Here, for example?

REPETILOV

Oh, one night is no great wrong.

But ask me where I've been.

CHATSKII

I think I've guessed already.

The Club?

REPETILOV

The English club. To tell the truth I've come

Straight from a really noisy session.

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[54] Shaw 95.

[55] Hobson 124.

[56] "CHATSKII" – Hobson's transcription.

I gave my word. I'm pledged to silence. Please, keep mum.

We've a society with meetings on oppression

Each Thursday. You should hear the plans we've made.

CHATSKII

Ah brother. I am afraid.

The Club, you say?

REPETILOV

Why, yes.

CHATSKII

Police department histories!

A splendid way to get kicked out, you and your mysteries.

REPETILOV

There is nothing to get scared about.

We talk so loudly that no one can make it out.

When they begin to wrestle with their parliaments and juries

And Byron and debate away like furies

On vital points, I keep my mouth shut as a rule.

It's all too much for me. And I feel such a fool.[57]

How, after reading this and other Chatsky-Repetilov's exchanges, Herzen could conclude that Chatsky (and Griboyedov himself) was a *Decembrist* may only be explained by the highly politically charged climate of Russian literary criticism. A draft of a letter to his

[57] Hobson 124.

close friend Alexandr Odoyevsky (1828), who implicated himself in the failed Decembrists' plot and as a result had to go to exile, only confirms Griboedov's lack of any esteem to the conspiracy:

> . . . My poor friend and brother! Why are you so unhappy. . . I don't dare to offer any consolation in your present misfortune! But the consolation exists for people with mind and heart. When suffering a deserved punishment, one can become a noble sufferer. There is an internal life, independent of the external one. . . But to whom I am telling this? I left you before your exultation in 1825. It was instantaneous and now you are likely the same tame, intelligent, and wonderful Aleksandr as you were in Strenla and in Kolomna in Pogodin's house. […] Who drew you in this catastrophe? [In this mad conspiracy! Who destroyed you!!][58] Although younger, you were more solid than many. It's not you who should have mixed with them but they who should have borrowed your kind heart and your intelligence. Fortune has determined differently; enough of this.[59]

The sentiment expressed in this letter is consistent with that expressed by Griboedov in his play and contradicts Herzen's speculations of Griboedov's motives.

In her monograph *Aleksandr Griboedov's Woe from Wit*, Mary Hobson (2005) gives a scrupulous and detailed account of a multitude of publications that discussed Griboedov's work and life. Many of them influenced the way Griboedov and his play

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[58] Crossed out in the original.

[59] Griboedov 143, trans. mine.

were seen by the public. The above-mentioned Herzen, who simplified *Woe from Wit* to the level of a political pamphlet; Belinsky, who in the messianic zeal of his *Literary Reveries* (1834), denounced all of the Russian literature that was not concerned with social ills; in the Soviet time it was Militsa Nechkina which, as Hobson suggests, "…must be read with Soviet history in mind."[60] Herzen, Belinsky, Pisarev and others, however, should be read with Russian history in mind. The peculiarity of the development of Russian literature and criticism was described by Prince Peter Kropotkin in 1901, in his series of lectures on Russian literature that he gave at the Lowell institute and published in 1905:

> . . . The reason why literature exercises such an influence in Russia is self-evident. There is no open political life, and with the exception of a few years at the time of the abolition of serfdom, the Russian people have never been called upon to take an active part in the framing of their country's institutions. The consequence has been that the best minds of the country have chosen the poem, the novel, the satire, or literary criticism as the medium for expressing their aspirations, their conceptions of national life, or their ideals.[61]

Kropotkin's evaluation of "the best minds" could be a subject of another argument, but the fact that literary criticism in nineteenth century Russia became highly politicized, a tradition that deepened and broadened in the Soviet Russia, was observed by numerous scholars and theatre practitioners. Tom Stoppard's trilogy *The Coast of Utopia* (2002),

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[60] Hobson xx.

[61] P. Kropotkin, *Russian Literature* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1905) v.

whose theme is exactly that, exploration of "the best minds" of the second half of nineteenth century Russia, is only one example. Unfortunately, the habit of a socio-political reading of works of literature for a long time overshadowed many artistic inquiries and contributed to the formation of a simplistic utilitarian cliché. *Woe from Wit* was perceived by critics as almost a political pamphlet, despite its literary brilliance and its importance in the development of Russian comedy as an art form.

A lot was written by critics about the play. The social and political implications were discussed and the vividness and expressiveness of language were mentioned. One of the first who started to talk about its artistic merit was Goncharov, the author of *Oblomov*, the famous novel that is said to capture the essence of the Russian character. Being an author himself, he was capable of understanding the dramatic and literary value of the play:

> This is exquisite, intelligent, graceful and passionate comedy in the same technical sense, right to the finest detail; but barely perceptible for the viewer, because it is masked by the typical faces of heroes, brilliant panache, place, age, beauty of language, all the poetic force, so abundantly poured into play. In comparison, its action and its actual intrigue, seems pale, odd and almost useless.[62]

He also expresses his conviction that the language and the poetry are the moving force for the likes of Pushkin's and Griboedov's creation for the theatre:

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[62] I.A. Goncharov, *Million Tezanii*, <Lib.ru: Библиотека Мошкова>, свидетельство о регистрации СМИ Эл No ФС 77-20625, first published *Vestnik Evropy* 3 (1872) n.pag., trans. mine.

> An actor, just as a musician should work through and find the sound of his voice, the intonation which should be used for each particular verse. To do just that means to comprehend the exquisite critical reading of Pushkin's and Griboedov's language.[63]

Developing his argument, Goncharov turns his discussion to "types" and immediately resorts to generalization. In other words, the Griboedov's creative work of building characters is of no interest to Goncharov and he misses the opportunity to realize a major feature of Russian comedy: that it is character based. Instead, he switches to "types" and immediately starts applying semi-political slogans:

> The role of Chatsky is that of a sufferer: but it cannot be any other way. This is the role of all Chatskys; although it is the role of a winner in the same time. But they don't know about their victory; they only sow what the others reap, and this is their principle suffering.[64]

There is nothing in the text of the play that allows for this conclusion. Equally there is nothing to support the following statement from the same essay:

> Chatsky is inevitable whenever one century changes to another one. Chatskys' position on the social ladder is diverse, but the role and fate of all is the same, from large public and political personalities, controlling the destiny of the masses, to a modest position in a close circle.[65]

It is not entirely clear why Goncharov sounds reasonable when he discusses the poetic

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[63] Goncharov, n.pag., trans. mine.

[64] Goncharov, n.pag., trans. mine.

[65] Goncharov, n.pag., trans. mine.

value of the play or the necessity of the ensemble performance and the attention to rhythm and language, which are, in his opinion, necessary to bring out all the riches of the play, and completely feverish when he begins to generalize about "the types of Chatskys," but unfortunately his article is a quite typical artifact of the time. Just as Chekhov later would, Griboedov valued creative freedom and was curious about human limitations. It was not the society that was the subject of his satire but the people of which the society is comprised. Unfortunately, the richness of literary material wasn't always recognized by Russian critics, as their main interest laid elsewhere: namely, politics.

The tendentious nature of research and theatrical reviews pertaining to the specific trends in 19th-century Russian criticism spread across national boarders. Discussions and conclusions reached by some scholars on the nature and the features of Russian comedy are politically charged. For example, a specialist in Russian theatre, the esteemed American scholar Simon Karlinsky (1985), in his *Russian Drama: From Its Beginnings To The Age Of Pushkin* incidentally applies modern concepts like "anti-feminism" to his argument about *The Misfortune of Being Clever* – which was written in 1823, long before feminism even appeared as a political and social movement. Karlinsky's inclination to the spare usage of time- and place-sensitive terms is often disruptive to his own argument. For example, in his introduction to *Letters of Anton Chekhov* (1993), he constantly refers to the time of Chekhovs' life as Victorian era, thus forcing unnecessary associations on the unassuming reader. In tracing the origins of Griboedov's inspiration, Karlinsky asserts that the playwright had borrowed from his contemporaries Shahovskoy's and Khmelnitsky's earlier plays while Mary Hobson in her

thorough research presents evidence of co-authorship of some of those plays.[66] Karlinsky's lack of interest in the specifics of the impressionistic and "overly-emotional" Russian nature prevents him sometimes from recognizing certain peculiarities in the development of the comic tradition in the Russian theater. He notes that:

> … in the 1960s an angry editorial in the official party journal *Communist* charged that one of Leningrad's theaters[67] had an outrageous notion of staging *The Misfortune of Being Clever* as it was staged today. The idea seems eminently workable: different as Soviet society is from Russia under Alexander I, it contains recognizable specimens of the types Griboedov described.[68]

He has no intention however to explore the subject of the "Russian type" as a source of comedic inspiration or compare it with any other "types" any further. Although sometime clouding his judgment, Karlinsky's anti-soviet sentiment and a passionate desire to unearth the truth about the nature of Chekhov's talent and aspirations yielded a most concise summary of the conflict between Chekhov's creative heritage and the nature of Russian criticism of the time, the criticism that bred the Soviet critical school and penetrated the English-speaking world:

> Chekhov's quarrel with the critical establishment is one of the central facts

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[66] Hobson 153-180.

[67] Karlinsky refers to the production of *Gore ot Uma* in BDT (Bol'shoy Dramatichesky Teatre) in 1964. Web access at: Three Sisters. Tovstonigov BDT 1973. Web access at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHTjnaqBixc>

[68] Karlinsky 310.

> of his literary biography. The issues debated and the positions taken are enormously important, and they touch the very mainsprings of Russian cultural life both in nineteenth century Russia and the present-day U.S.S.R. the circumstances of Chekhov's advent as a serious writer have almost no precedent in Russia or any other literature. His acclaim by the reading public of the 1880s and '90s, the recognition of his talent by the finest older writers of his time were accompanied by a steady stream of jeremiads by leading literary critics, lamenting Chekhov's lack of human concern and of moral principles, warning their readers that this writer was dangerous and that by writing the way he did he was betraying the humanitarian tradition of his native literature. When fifteen years of this sort of attack failed to halt the spread of Chekhov's reputation, a new generation of critics managed to reduce the complexities of Chekhovian concern and compassion to their own moaning and melancholy level and thus at last co-opt him into the very tradition to which he was so alien and so opposed.[69]

This new generation of critics split into two like a two headed dragon – the Soviets and the émigrés – played its role in creating the myth whose existence lasted for a good part of the twentieth century on both sides of the Russian border. But critics weren't the only factor contributing to interpretation of Russian theatre. The directorial reading that has begun with Stanislavsky amplified the misconception and skewed the perspective on the objects of satire even further.

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[69] Simon Karlinsky, introduction, *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, by Anton Chekhov, ed. and trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 3.

Chapter III

Interpreting Chekhov: Stanislavsky's Effect

> "The stage demands a degree of artifice […] you have no fourth wall. Besides, the stage is art, the stage reflects the quintessence of life and there is no need to introduce anything superfluous to it."

> "A real nose stuck through a portrait is natural enough, but it doesn't constitute art."
>
> - Anton Chekhov[70]

Were Konstantin Stanislavsky a film director, his naturalistic approach to performance at the time he staged *The Seagull* would inflict a lesser damage to the perception of Chekhov's plays. The myth surrounding Chekhov's art might have never been concocted, the comedy in Chekhov's work for the theatre wouldn't be muddled and destroyed, and the Chekhov's heritage would reflect the image of the author, who has nothing to do with nostalgia or melodrama.

The speculation of this kind could never be proved, but the crucial role that Stanislavsky's interpretation of Chekhov's work played in the creation of Chekhovian myth can not be neglected. The combination of a new form of drama with a new form of performance made an impression of such magnitude that it reverberated throughout the world for almost a century. It took almost the same amount of time to separate the two

[70] V.E. Meyerhold, *On Theatre,* ed. A.B. Fevralsky, et al. (Moskva: Iskusstvo 1968) 30.

and understand their effects on each other. The common knowledge has it that the first production (1896) of the comedy *The Seagull* by the Alexandrinsky Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg was a disastrous flop and that only Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre, one of the first private theatres in Russia, saved the play (and thus the playwright) and made it a triumphant success two years later. The failure of the Alexandrinsky production is conveniently blamed on the innovations of Chekhov's playwriting to which the general public wasn't ready, and the triumph of MAT's production was attributed to the Stanislavsky's directorial genius. In the course of the twentieth century this myth was challenged more then once by scholars who realized the discrepancies between the bright, ironic and lucid Chekhov's writing, his own very active and constructive lifestyle and melodramatic and slow paced Stanislavskian interpretation, the interpretation that had a lasting effect and was amplified by yet another myth – the myth of Stanislavsky system.

So what did happen in 1896 at the Aleksandrinsky and how different was the later production of Moscow Art Theatre? What was ventured and what was gained and to whose benefit? What was muddled and lost, and to whose dismay? These questions were asked by Karlinsky and Gottlieb, Frayn and Senelick, and since the last quarter of the twentieth century, but not necessarily by some Russian critics, for example Anatoly Smeliansky, who in 2000 kept repeating the same mantras: "Chekhov deliberately obscured plot, refused to express his own ideas through the dialogue and monologues and coldly distanced himself from his characters, not identifying with any of them," and "It's impossible to understand why the three sisters never got to Moscow" or "His characters are defined by the 'out-of-joint' world that gave rise to new causes and effects in both life

and in drama."[71] It is worth remembering that by the time the Aleksandrinsky accepted *The Seagull,* it successfully staged *Ivanov.* The production was greeted with enthusiasm by the public, and "at the cast party, toasts compared the play with Griboedov's classic comedy *Woe from Wit*."[72] *Ivanov* (1887) and *The Wood Demon* (1889) were produced all over Russian provinces, extending the discussions of plays' artistic merits beyond the capitals.

As the legend has it, the first production of *The Seagull* was one of the famous occurrences of the first-night audience failing to understand and appreciate a new creation that was supposed to introduce some kind of a new form or attitude. In the case of *The Seagull* though, one particular aspect of the premier night played a crucial role: the fact that Levkeeva, a renowned comedianne, requested the play for her benefit. She didn't have any intention of appearing in it, but her name as well as that of Chekhov, who was known for his humorous short stories and one-act farces, attracted the audience that enjoyed simple and easy fun. The fact that the play was under-rehearsed[73] is secondary considering the type of the attending public. Levkeeva was particularly popular with merchant class theatre goers. They were the majority of the public that night.
The subtleties of high comedy that Chekhov intended didn't work for that audience at all. Hissing and sporadic mocking laughter of the spectators marked the evening.

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[71] Anatoly Smeliansky, "Chekhov and the Moscow Art Theatre," *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, eds.Vera Gottlieb and Paul Allain (UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 31.

[72] Senelick 22.

[73] "Of the eight rehearsals held on stage of Grand Duke Michael Theatre, […] the first two took place without most of the leads" (Senelick 30).

During the subsequent performances to "the sold-out house and a more discerning audience, *The Seagull* became an artistic triumph." Vera Komisarzhevskaya, the actress who played Nina in the Aleksandrinsky's production, in her letter of October 21, 1896 wrote to Chekhov: "I've just returned from the theatre, dear Anton Pavlovich. Victory is ours. The play is a complete unanimous success, just as it ought to be, just as it had to be. How I'd like to see you now, but what I'd like even more is for you to be present and hear the unanimous cry of 'Author'." [74] It is after seeing a performance at the Aleksandrinsky and not a later production at Moscow Art theatre, Anatoly Koni[75] wrote a letter that helped Chekhov to feel "reassured now and [can] think about the play and the production without revulsion:"[76]

> The Seagull is a work whose conception, freshness of ideas and thoughtful observation raise it out of the ordinary. It is life itself on stage with all this tragic alliances, eloquent thoughtlessness and silent suffering—the sort of everyday life that is accessible to everyone and understood in its cruel internal irony by almost no one, the sort of life that is so accessible and close to us that at times we forget you're in a theatre and you feel capable of participating in a conversation taking place in front of you.[77]

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[74] Vera Komisarzhevskaya, letter to Anton Chekhov, 21 October 1896, *Letters of Anton Chekhov* 283.

[75] Anatoly Fyodorovich Koni (1844 – 1927) was a progressive lawyer and a theatre lover.

[76] Anton Chekhov, letter to Anatoly Koni, 11 November 1896, *Letters of Anton Chekhov* 287.

[77] Anatoly Koni, letter to Anton Chekhov, *Letters of Anton Chekhov* 285.

That *cruel irony of life* is present in all Chekhov's work including even the most impartial and grueling *Journey to Sakhalin,* a documentary account of the Far East penal colony. The combination of the exposure of the cruel irony of life and the refusal of a ready-made judgment are the two features of Chekhov's work that render it susceptible to misunderstanding. That "cruel irony of life," however, was illuminated by the exposure of the characters themselves. Their inability to hear, to understand, to function is the object of Chekhov's satire. Just as Griboedov before him, Chekhov satirized shortcomings of his characters, without giving any recipes, ruthlessly he exposed their vices. His letters and notebooks reveal the spirit of the author himself, who discusses his subjects with intelligence, humor and sometimes almost prophetic insight. The experimentation with the new forms was appreciated by Nemirovich-Danchenko, Stanislavsky's future partner and a playwright as well as a director. When the time came to look for the repertory for the newly established Moscow Art Theatre, whose ambition was to create a new type of theatre, he suggested *The Seagull*, of which Chekhov wrote in his letter of October 21, 1895 to his close friend and publisher Aleksandr Suvorin:

> I am writing a play that I probably won't finish until the end of November. I can't say I am not enjoying writing it, though I am flagrantly disregarding the basic tenets of the stage. The comedy has three female roles, six male roles, four acts, a landscape (a view of the lake), much conversation about literature, little action and five tons of love.[78]

While begging Chekhov to give his permission to stage *The Seagull* in MAT,

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[78] Anton Chekhov, letter to Aleksandr Suvorin, 21 October 1895, *Letters of Anton Chekhov* 277.

Nemirovich-Danchenko (May 12, 1898) insisted: "If you won't give it to me, you'd kill me, as *The Seagull* in the only modern play that moves me as a director, and you are the only modern writer who is interesting for the theatre with an exemplary repertoire."[79] The other letters from Chekhov's correspondence reveal a pushy and slightly manipulative Nemirovich-Danchenko and a subtle and hesitant Chekhov. It can be read between the lines that Chekhov would much rather had *The Seagull* staged at the Maly theatre[80], and that Nemirovich-Dancheko bet on the play to build a reputation of MAT. Although accepting Nemirovich-Danchenko's suggestion to stage *The Seagull*, Stanislavsky failed to understand all the subtleties: "I understand only that the play is talented, interesting, but I don't know what approach to take to it."[81] Moreover, he wasn't interested in understanding them. What he was interested was his own directorial experiments and success for his creation – MAT. Although the famous Stanislavsky's system was yet to be conceived and later misinterpreted in its own accord, Stanislavsky's main interests lie

in the sphere of the craft of acting and production rather than a faithful interpretation of the author's intentions and ideas. This craft was his subject and his muse.

One of the most concise and comprehensive assessment of the history and the heritage of Stanislavsky's work is *Stanislavsky in Focus* by Sharon Carnicke (1998). Her well documented research aims to disentangle various misconceptions and

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[79] Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, letter to Anton Chekhov, 12 May 1898, *Perepiska A.P. Chekhova v dvux tomakh*, ed. Gromov et al., vol 2 (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaya literature, 1984) n. pag. trans. mine.

[80] Maly Theatre was considered the most progressive theatre at the time and had the best company of actors.

[81] Senelick 38.

misperceptions of Stanislavsky's heritage on both sides of the Atlantic. Shaped by the twentieth century censorship of the Soviet era on the one hand and the commercialism and popularity of psychoanalysis on another hand, the Stanislavsky's work became a source of two distinctly different approaches to acting. One was the Soviet version of Stanislavsky's system based on physical action. Stanislavsky's interest in yoga and Eastern practices based on the unity of body and spirit and their application to acting was pruned from all Russian publications and practices. Another was the American Method, which was developed on the bases of the inadequately communicated Stanislavsky's ideas and the poorly translated, abridged and strictly copyrighted publications of Stanislavsky's writing.[82] Until the fall of the Soviet Union, Stanislavsky's work was never published in full neither in Russia nor outside of it. Only recently, after the archives of Moscow Art Theatre became accessible, the full analysis of his ideas and his character became possible. The evidence of Stanislavsky's and Chekhov's correspondence however, testifies of the fundamental misunderstanding by Stanislavsky of Chekhov's philosophy and Chekhov's disagreement and frustration with Stanislavsky's approach to staging his plays. The fatal role that Stanislavsky played in the creation of Chekhovian myth was noted by Karlinsky (1973) in his commentaries to *Letters of Anton Chekhov*:

> The whole melodramatic story of the revival of *The Seagull*, supposedly brought out of the total obscurity by the Moscow Art Theatre and staged by it at the cost of endangering Chekhov's life and health, is entirely disproved by the published correspondence between Chekhov and

[82] For more, see Sharon Marie Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus* (New York: Routledge 2009).

> Nemirovich-Danchenko, yet such is the prestige of Stanislavsky's name that the story goes on being sited even by people who have read the pertinent letters.[83]

While with a journalistic precision Doctor Chekhov exposes his character's lives – looking at the symptoms he diagnoses the malaise – Stanislavsky creates an illusory, life-like production that fascinates public by itself and where the literary base becomes not only secondary but looses all the energy, lucidity and tension of the text. While Chekhov provokes his public to laugh at the silliness, exaggerated reactions, inability to listen; laugh at themselves and not at each other as he knew they can, laugh in order to recognize the ridiculous shortcomings in themselves, the shortcomings that breed their "tragedies," Stanislavsky turns farce into melodrama, exploits a meditative rhythms to construct the "atmosphere," naturalistic settings, and sound effects. As a doctor, Chekhov wanted a cure: "Man will only become better when you make him see what he is like."[84] His comedy is a comedy of characters, and Russian characters at that. But during his lifetime his patients proved incurable: "You tell me that people cry at my plays," Chekhov writes in a letter, "I've heard others say the same. But that was not how I wrote them. It is Alexeyev [Stanislavsky] who made my characters into cry-babies. All I wanted was to say honestly to people: 'Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!'"[85]

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[83] Karlinsky, commentary, *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, by Anton Chekhov, 393.

[84] Anton Chekhov, *Chekhov's Notebooks*, trans. S.S. Koteliansky and Leonard Wolf (New York: The Ecco Press, 1987) 94.

[85] Gottlieb 190.

At the time Stanislavsky began to work on *The Seagull*, he was extremely impressed by the German company of the Duke of Meningen that toured Russian in 1885. He attended rehearsals and performances and studied their techniques of accurate and naturalistic historical productions. In tracing the origins of Stanislavsky's interest in naturalism Joyce Morgan (1980) in her *Stanislavski's Encounter with Shakespeare* recounts the Meininger's methods characteristic of his productions:

> Both Antoine in France and Stanislavski, in Russia, were profoundly impressed by this court theatre from the obscure German state. The Duke of Saxe-Meningen was not only its director, but also its scene designer. His handling of scenic production demanded historical naturalism, and, to achieve it, the devoted collective work of actors and technicians together. His demands and methods were a revelation. […] Setting was carefully related to play, period, and to the actor. Crowd scenes were planned, and rehearsed for credibility. A large range of sounds effects were used to heighten the emotional impact, as were lighting effects.[86]

In his production of *Tzar Fyodor Ioanovich* Stanislavsky found it effective to bring the real peasants on stage and use "costumes from a flophouse."[87] In his attempt to salvage Chekhov's heritage from the damage inflicted by Stanislavsky's interpretation, Simon Karlinsky, only credits Stanislavsky with creating "a theatre that was to become the only acceptable model for all theatres in a state supposedly founded for the benefit of workers

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[86] Morgan 17.

[87] Karlinsky, commentary, *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, by Anton Chekhov, 392.

and peasants."[88] Karlinsky denies him any ability "to deal with literary complexity or to perceive a value of novelty and originality."[89] Whether or not this opinion can be proven is a subject of another research, but the disagreement between Chekhov and Stanislavsky is a well documented fact. Stanislavsky thought *The Seagull* to be a romantic melodrama and *Cherry Orchard* to be a tragedy. He directed actors according to his vision. The technique of naturalistic production was the one he thought appropriate for *The Seagull*, if only because it was a technique he mastered and succeeded with in *Tsar Fyodor Ioanovich*. The action was painfully slow, thus ruining any possibility of the effective delivery of a joke or a dynamics of anything but a pompous melodrama. In his letter to Gorky, Chekhov (May 9, 1899) described his impressions from the rehearsal:

> I saw *The Seagull* with no scenery; I can not judge the play in cold blood because the Seagull acted disgustingly, all the while sobbing violently, and Trigorin[90] (the writer) walked on stage and spoke like a paralytic, he had "no will", and the performer understood this in such a way that it was sickening to watch.[91]

The pacing was so slow and the pauses so long that Chekhov wanted the play to end with act three.[92] No wonder Chekhov was taken aback by the treatment of his work. It was *his*

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[88] Karlinsky, commentary, *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, by Anton Chekhov, 392.

[89] Karlinsky, commentary, *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, by Anton Chekhov, 393.

[90] Trigorin was played by Stanislavsky.

[91] Anton Chekhov, letter to Gorky, 9 May 1899, *Perepiska Chekhova*, trans. mine.

[92] Senelick 50.

ideas being distorted while those of Stanislavsky's were gaining success, as the public was taken and moved by the "miserable fate" of Nina and the sounds of rain and wind. This success only straitened Stanislavsky's conviction that he had chosen the right way. All other Chekhov's plays were directed in a similar manner at The Partnership for the Establishment of Public Theater,[93] and although Chekhov still tried to adjust some of Stanislavsky's ideas,[94] it seems that his simplistic approach exasperated Chekhov a great deal. Five years later, when Stanislavsky was defacing yet another comedy *Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov was writing to his wife Olga Knipper (March 29, 1904): "Stanislavsky is playing disgustingly in Act IV, drags everything painfully. How awful! The act, which must last for 12 minutes maximum, you drag for 40 minutes. I can only say one thing: Stanislavsky ruined my play."[95] He continues in his letter of April 10, 1904[96]:

> Why posters and newspaper ads persistently call my play drama? Nemirovich and Alekseev [Stanislavsky] positively see nothing of what I wrote, and I am ready to swear that they, both of them[97], hadn't read my play carefully. Forgive me, but I assure you of that. I mean not only the scenery of the second act, which is so horrible, and not only Kharutina, who was changed to Adurskaya, who does the same thing and nothing of

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[93] In was initial name of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko's theatre. The name Art Theatre was offered by Chekov and was established later.

[94] See 1904 Chekhov's correspondence with Stanislavsky, *Perepiska Chekhova*.

[95] *Perepiska Chekhova*, trans. mine.

[96] Chekhov, letter to Olga Knipper, 10 April 1904, *Perepiska Chekhova*, trans. mine.

[97] Chekhov refers to Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko.

what I wrote.

Stanislavsky indeed succeeded with his directorial vision of a melodrama *The Seagull* and all other melodramas into which he turned Chekhov's plays. There were three major ingredients that assured that success: timing, décor and ambient noise of sound effects. When rhythm and speed are skewed, the characters become unrecognizable, the accents shift to the wrong places, the wrong associations form. Paradoxically, the power of performance together with the unusual dramaturgy created the effect of such a magnitude that it resonated straight into the myth that was further straightened by Stanislavsky's own memoirs: *My Life in Art*, a creation that allowed Karlinsky to question Stanislavsky's judgment. That myth was one of the factors that contributed to almost a century of misperception of Chekhov. The naturalistic performance that Stanislavsky found fit for the occasion defeated the very purpose of Chekhov's writing as well as the essence of the genre of comedy. It also manifested Stanislavsky's failure to consider the organic development of Russian comedy by shifting the focus from the subjects of irony – the characters – to the perceived tragedy of their circumstances. The same naturalistic approach was taken by Stanislavsky in his work on *Woe from Wit* in 1904 and 1913, but the embedded artifice of form – rhymed verse – prevented Griboedov's play from a complete distortion. Stanislavsky played a role of Famusov in both productions and used the play's character study in his *Actor's Work on Himself*.

Sidetracked by Stanislavsky's treatment of Chekhov's drama, Chekhov's native audience failed to recognize itself as the real subject of his satire as much as it failed to recognize the satire itself and credit Chekhov with the new form in comedy. The further development of Russian theatre especially its Soviet stage preserved this perception as in

time capsule for almost a century. First, there was an the initial change of audience – from mainly educated theatre goers, before the revolution of 1917, to the proletarian masses, who, although they completely missed the subtleties of Chekhov's exposé of the flaccidity and blindness of the humans of his concern, were very receptive to slapstick and took any opportunity to laugh just as Levkeeva's fans did 1896. Senelick in *The Chekhov's Theatre* describes the phenomenon using the example of Uncle Vanya:

> The old MAT crowd had held the high calling of professor in veneration and used to be shocked by Vanya's disrespect until they came to understand Serebryakov's hollowness. The new spectators shared Vanya's opinion from the onset, seing the Professor as the outrageous, heartless no-talent. They didn't get Luzhinsky's[98] academic in-jokes about Heidelberg accent . . . but, inured to street fighting, they roared with laughter when the pistol shot frightened him. The proletarian public was also more demonstratively sympathetic to the plight of Vanya and Sonya and and wept loudly during the last scene. [99]

Then, after Meierhold and Vakhtangov experiments, mostly with farces, the social realism as an art doctrine of Soviet Russia took over and all productions had to adhere to its principals. The ready made social utilitarianism was applied to Chekhov and Griboedov, and, until the new Soviet intelligentsia adopted the classics as a venue of expression of its own dissent, their play were simply played as a social satire on the

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[98] Actor who played the role of Professor Serebriakov.

[99] Senelick 134.

bourgeoisie. Stanislavsky, adapting to the proletarian values, contributed to the new vision:

> … let [Lopakhin] chop down with all his might whatever has outlived itself, and let the girl [Anya], who with Petya Trofimov forecasts the advent of a new era shout to the whole world: "Greetings, new life!" – and you will understand that The Cherry Orchard is alive for us, a close, contemporary play, that Chekhov's voice resounds in it cheerfully, provocatively, for it looks not backward but forward.[100]

This quote is characteristic of Stanislavsky's utilitarian approach to literary sources he worked with, and lack of concern for author's true aspirations. Just as he was unconcerned with Chekhov's philosophy and found it suitable to the needs of his young theatre, he was quite ready to twist it once again for the need of survival of this theatre under the Soviet regime.

Stanislavsky's System, which was essentially a workbook of an active director and a trainer in perpetual state of development, as well as the abridged and misinterpreted versions of it gave life to both Russian socialist realism and American method acting. Although the first attempt to introduce the English-speaking audience to Chekhov was made by George Calderon in 1909 in Glasgow, it was in the form of Stanislavsky's production all four Chekhov's major plays were introduced to the rest of the world during his European and American tour of 1922-4.

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[100] Stanislavsky, quoted in Senelick 122.

Chapter IV

Translation, Transmission, and Transformation:

Critics, Directors, and Emotional Universals

> "Of course the translator is the person who is directly mediating the language to you and giving you access to all these worlds that you otherwise wouldn't be able to enter."
>
> - Christopher Hampton[101]

Britain and the United States were introduced to Russian drama in different times and under different circumstances: the end of the nineteenth century for Britain, and the beginning of the twentieth in the US. In Britain, the acceptance of Chekhov's drama led to a phenomenon known as "British Chekhov," as well as further fruitful inquiries into the content of Chekhov's dramatic output. In the United States, Stanislavsky's ideas became a focus of attention in the theatrical community, the authority of this Russian director and his craft overshadowed public attention to dramatic sources.

There are however some similarities in the initial stages of the acquaintanceship. According to "the critical fashion [which] was to consider the Russian 'soul' gloomy . . . each new writer had to be bent to fit the expectation."[102] Just as in the case of

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[101] Christopher Hampton, "Word Play With Christopher Hampton of 'The Philanthropist'," interview with Erik Piepenburg. *New York Times* April 23, 2009.

[102] Charles Meister, "Chekhov's Reception in England and America," *American Slavic and East European Review* 12 (February 1953): 110.

"rudimentary and derivative"[103] Russian literature, the introduction to which came in the period of Russo-phobia in the second half of the nineteenth century, the process of acceptance of Russian drama was not a simple one. By 1909, when the first performance of Russian drama took place[104], Griboedov, Ostrovsky and Gogol were translated and read by the literati and some curious readers, and an aura of the exotic was formed. In accordance with the last third of the nineteenth century's ethnocentric approach to criticism, the assessment of Russian drama had to first pass through a stage of observation and comprehension of the unfamiliar and unfamiliar humor is the hardest thing to comprehend.

One of the early, if not the earliest, events in the process of British familiarization with the Russian theatre was the play *The Storm* by Aleksandr Ostrovsky. A Sunday lecture on and dramatic reading of the play took place on January 14, 1894.[105] The second milestone was placed in 1909: Lidia Yavorskaya's[106] performances at His Majesty's Theatre in London and George Calderon's[107] first English language production

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[103] Gilbert Phelps, "The Early Phases of British Interest in Russian Literature," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 38, 91 (June 1960): 416.

[104] *The Seagull* at Glasgow Royal Theatre.

[105] Kate Sealey Rahman, "Ostrovskii on the British stage: 1894 – 1928," *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 34, 9 (2004).

[106] Lidia Yavorskaya worked for Korsh theatre in Moscow and is said to be a prototype of Arkadina in *The Seagull.* While in Russia, she was prevented by Chekhov "from performing in any of his plays [because] the showy melodramatic acting style for which she was noted, was ill-suited to his plays" (Jan McDonald, "Naturalism and The Drama of Dissent," Chekhov *on the British Stage*, ed. Miles 36).

[107] George Leslie Calderon (1869-1915) – a translator and a playwright.

of *The Seagull* at Glasgow Royal Theatre. Although the opinions of Yavorskaya's talent weren't necessarily flattering, they are quite revealing when it comes to assessing the specificity of the melodramatic performance by a Russian for the English-speaking audience of the time. In her Article "Ostrovsky on the British Stage," Kate Rahman quotes a critic for *The Athenaeum* of December 11, 1909:

> "[…] 'hysteria seems to be the note of her art', but qualified this statement with the assertion that 'she is far from being monotonous or consistently lachrymose'. He went on to note that 'on the whole she produced a very favourable impression', describing Yavorskaia [sic] as 'a woman of graceful carriage and fine presence, an actress of unusual emotional sensibility', before noting, perhaps rather dryly, that '…in her capacity for abandoning herself to the luxury of grief she has no equal on the English stage.'[108]

"The luxury of grief" defines one of the keys to understanding manyfold question on the traits of Russian character, Russian theatre – of which Stanislavsky, with his relentless pursuit of perfection of the craft was a representative, and the Russian comedy – of which Chekhov was a brilliant master. The comedy which among other things satirized tendency to luxuriate on grief was paradoxically diluted in MAT's performances by the directorial habit to exploit public's love of melodrama.

To shed some light on this seemingly national feature, one may turn to the latest

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[108] Kate Sealey Rahman, "Ostrovskii on the British Stage: 1894 – 1928," *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 34. 9 (Summer 2004). University of Toronto, Academic Electronic Journal in Slavic Studies <http://www.utoronto.ca/tsq/09/rahman09.shtml>.

research in the field of linguistics and anthropology which only in the last twenty years has begun to penetrate the field of humanities, comparative literature and criticism. The studies of feeling and emotions, that weren't available at the time Russian drama crossed national borders, suggest a very specific perception of feelings and emotions in any given culture. These findings may very well help to explain reception of foreign art, literature and drama when it is experienced in a different way in different cultures. In her cross-cultural linguistic study of emotion, Anna Wierzbiscka observes the fact that feelings and emotions have come to the forefront of interdisciplinary investigations in the field of humanities and social and biological sciences. In her article "Emotional Universals" she points out the differences in perception of emotions in different cultures; particularly in Russia and Engand. She focuses her research not only on the perception of emotions and feelings but also on the physical manifestation of them, which is essential for discussing theatrical practice. The interpretation of characters' behavior or author's intent often falls short precisely for this reason: the imposition of one culture's sensitivities onto a different one's. Considering the degree to which the interpretation of characters' feelings and emotions influences the analysis of their behavior and therefore their motives, I find Wierzbiscka's article, and her research in general, to be very important to the subject of present inquiry.

In view of the application of emotion to theatrical practice, one may also want to consider how physical interpretation of the character affects the reading of this character in different cultures. Wierzbiscka's research and exposure of "the tremendous stress on emotions and on their free expression, the high emotional temperature of Russian discourse, the wealth of linguistic devices for signaling emotions and shades of

emotions"[109] may help to uncover the reason why Gottlieb judges the characters' behavior as solely a function of Chekhov's technique:

> In *The Bear*, in *The Proposal* and *The Anniversary* there are in total 33 occasions in which one character or another 'swoons'; situations, other people, or emotions cause a physical reaction which, invariably, is out of all proportions to the cause. The discrepancy between the extreme physical reaction and the situation causing it is the source of farce and slapstick but, as always with Chekhov, it too makes its own ironic point: the very discrepancy between cause and effect heightens the ridiculous in character and situation.[110]

Although Chekhov undoubtedly ridicules his characters' reactions, his other aim seems to illustrate their inherent and extreme inability to calmly face the reality of life, and not only to create "slapstick." The confusion is understandable: although Vera Gottlieb's parents moved to England from Riga (after the Soviet invasion of Latvia), she herself was born in Cambridge and was essentially British. Comparing Russian and British attitudes Wierzbiscka (1999) states:

> In [British] culture where it is common to regard "composure" as a person's "normal state", phenomena such as joy, despair, shame, or fear may indeed be viewed as a "departure" from the normal "baseline state".

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[109] Anna Wierzbiscka, quoted in Aneta Pavlenko, "Emotions and the body in Russian and English," *Pragmatic & Cognition* 10:1/2 (2002): 212.

[110] Vera Gottlieb, *Chekhov and the Vaudeville: A Study of Chekhov's One-Act Plays*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 56.

> The English adjective *emotional* (with its implication of something unusual if not slightly reprehensible), reflects this perspective very clearly, but in a way, so does the noun *emotion* itself, because (unlike *Gefuhl*e[111] or *chuvstva*[112]) it links the idea of cognitively based 'feelings' with that of 'bodily events'.[113]

As Chekhov intended to satirize Russian excessive reactions, his displeasure with Stanislavsky's treatment of his work is especially ironic because Stanislavsky employed in his productions the very trait Chekhov set out to expose. It is also quite clear why the *Athenaeum* critic wasn't much impressed with Yavorskaya's acting: the exaggerated emotions resonate with completely different expectations in a British viewer than in a Russian one.

The British public was more fortunate than the American one, with the possibility to form its own opinion about Chekhov before being exposed to Stanislavsky's interpretation during his European and American tours of 1923-4. Jan McDonald's article "Naturalism and the Drama of Dissent" (1993), discusses five productions of Chekhov in Britain before the Great War – the period during which the introduction to Chekhov's dramaturgy took place. Of these productions, George Calderon's *The Seagull* of 1909 in Glasgow Royal Theatre was considered the most successful. Equipped with his own translation, clear directorial vision and thorough rehearsing, Calderon produced a

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[111] Feelings (German).

[112] Feelings (Russian).

[113] Anna Wierzbiscka, "Emotional Universals." *Language Design* 2 (1999): 26.

theatrical event that, if not making Chekhov's philosophy entirely clear to the public, had the directorial intention to do so[114]. While others[115] failed to achieve any unity of the effect, due to the lack of rehearsal time and the destruction of the rhythm and balance of the play, Calderon was credited by critics and reviewers with achieving a great ensemble work with his Glasgow troupe: "To catch and give expressions to Tchekhov's [sic] intentions is not an easy matter, and it says much for the company that they presented so good an ensemble."[116] Calderon's understanding of the ensemble work as well as his comprehension of the physicality and sensuality in Chekhov's plays allowed him to produce the atmosphere characteristic of the Russian theatrical tradition, tradition that was formed long before Stanislavsky. Commenting on one scene, Calderon wrote: "The conversation and behavior of the personages have nothing to do with the action of the piece, but are directed to convey the atmosphere of tedium and heat."[117]

It's been noted that the pre-war British productions were too slow at times. This phenomenon could be partially explained by the impossibility of lively and dynamic performance in the absence of a clear understanding of the characters' motives and

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[114] "Calderon spent two years (1895-7) in Russia, learning the language, immersing himself in the literature and 'absorbing a profound and thorough way of thought, supporting himself by writing articles and giving lessons in English.' Calderon's own plays were produced by Independent Stage Society between 1909 and 1912, and although they never attracted much public favour, were worthy *pièces à thèse*. Calderon was eager to introduce Russian drama to English-speaking public and sought no lesser expert than Meyerhold on what was most exciting on the current scene." (Senelick 132).

[115] Adelphi production of *The Seagull* (March 1912) and Stage Society's Cherry Orchard (May 1911).

[116] *The Stage* (4 November, 1909) (qtd. in McDonald).

[117] Jan McDonald, "Naturalism and the Drama of Dissent," *Chekhov on the British Stage*, ed. Patrick Miles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 38.

behavior. It is fair to say that the same causes might have contributed to Stanislavsky's productions as well.

However successful Calderon's *The Seagull* was in Glasgow and less so in London in 1911, it was the theme of disillusionment that was played – which was probably the easiest target for a foreign interpretation. Only a deep study of the national character could have produced different results. Precisely for the reason that Chekhov's aims were only partially understood was it possible to endow Chekhov's plays with the theme of disillusionment and nostalgia – that flourish during and after the Great War. The popularity of Chekhov in Britain grew from this period onward and formed the roots from which further critical thoughts sprang. It is not that the peculiar trends of Russian characters attracted the British public, but its own idiosyncrasies that were mapped onto foreign material.

One production of 1926 played a very important role in making Chekhov more accessible to British theatre goers. Fyodor Komisarjevsky's *Three Sisters* proved to be a pivotal point for Chekhov's work in Britain. Komisarjevsky wasn't interested in clarifying Chekhov's intentions; he was interested in staging a play that he knew and making it accepted by the British audience. For this purpose he employed two major means: editing out some text and speeding up the performance. If the first one couldn't help with understanding Chekhov's philosophy, the second one at least could help with feeling Chekhov's art. Komissarjevsky emphasized the love stories of the play, made "plain" baron Tuzenbach into a handsome juvenile lead, turned Vershinin into a romantic hero, but in the absence of gratuitous pauses and silences Chekhov's text, however abridged, came to life. Natural accents, helped by the ones created by Komissarzhevsky,

conveyed the energy characteristic of Chekhov's play. [118] Although Komis' – as he was called by his British colleagues – work on Chekhov was more of an interpretive adaptation, it retained some quality of the original that contributed to the developing interest in Chekhov in Britain as well as to the misperception of his work.

The disillusionment of war and creative developments in British drama provided some new ways of looking on Chekhov's work. One of the admirers of Chekhov's art, Bernard Shaw was not only capable of discerning and appreciating Chekhov's humor, but also wrote his famous *Heartbreak House*, inspired by Chekhov's work. Anna Obraztsova (1993) in her article "Bernard Shaw's Dialogue with Chekhov," discusses some similarities in Shaw and Chekhov's relationship to the genre of farce and vaudeville. She claims that "for all their differences Shaw and Chekhov were two European dramatists of the turn of the century with the most highly developed sense of comedy."[119] Although Shaw saw the comic nature of Chekov's plays, he was partly responsible for connecting the circumstances of Chekhov's characters with those of the British landed gentry, thus creating a superficial association and unconsciously leading the public in the wrong direction: "…these intensely Russian plays fitted all the country houses in Europe in which the pleasure of music, art, literature and the theatre had supplanted hunting, shooting, fishing, eating and drinking. The same nice people, the

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[118] Robert Tracy, "Komissarjevsky's 1926 *Three Sisters,*" *Chekhov on the British Stage*, ed. Patrick Miles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 65-77.

[119] Anna Obraztsova, "Bernard Shaw's Dialogue with Chekhov," *Chekhov on the British Stage*, ed. Patrick Miles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 46.

same utter futility."[120] But, as Senelick points out that: "Shaw, after all was not English. He was Irish, and as a percipient Irishman, instead of alienating Chekhov by remarking 'How Russian,' immediately spotted similarities."[121] Perhaps those perceived similarities caused Shaw to speak about "nice people." The fact that those "nice" people were observed by Chekhov as being perfectly capable of doing pretty harsh things to each other somehow escaped Shaw's attention.

Shaw's assumption of the "nicety" of Chekov's characters produced yet another false note in understanding Chekhov's philosophy that spread across stages around the world. It is enough to read Chekhov's notes and letters to find examples of his clear and distinct voice contradicting this assumption. "Arkadina is a deceitful, unintelligent woman, quickly shifting from one mood to another, but Dyuzhkova[122] shows us a clever, good, truthful woman … Not a bit like my actress Arkadina," – Chekhov writes to Suvorin of his discontent with the first production of *The Seagull*. "There are so many idiots amongst ladies. But everybody is so used to it, that nobody takes notice," he writes,[123] and characters of *Three Sisters* immediately come to mind: Olga with her constant preoccupation with being married "even to an old man," Irina with her perpetual failure to comprehend what is happening in her life and inability to remember a word of Italian, Masha with her blind and voracious love, and their repetitive refrain "Moscow,

[120] Obraztsova 44.

[121] Senelick 135.

[122] Actress who played Arkadina for the Alexandrinsky production of 1896.

[123] Chekhov, *Notebooks*.

Moscow!" Not until 1920 were Chekhov's personal letters published in English, but his short stories and one-act farces are equally telling. The desire to show people the irony of their "bad and dreary" lives oozes from every line of his every story. The same sentiment drives his earliest play *Platonov* (1878),[124] the play that arguably held all the features of his later mature plays. The novelty of Chekhov's approach to drama was instantaneously recognized and then diluted by the conventionally melodramatic reading of the contemporary theatre. Shaw's interpretation of Chekhov's work and mapping of what in Chekhov was an illustration of an overemotional self-indulgence onto the British "nostalgic" mood of the time deepened the gap between the facts and their interpretation.

Each of the leading productions, Fagan (1925), Komisarjevevsky (1926), Guthrie[125] (1933) and Saint-Denis[126] (1938), all contributed to both the growing popularity of Chekhov and the misunderstanding of the essence of his art. The positive outcome for British theatre consisted of embracing the possibilities of ensemble acting, as Stanislavsky's theatre seemingly provided the clue of how to handle Chekhov's plays.

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[124] Platonov, involuntary and inexplicably successful womanizer denouncing everything and everybody starting with his own father, is entangled with at least four women, including his own wife. He is finally shot by the one of these women, who is a wife of his best friend.

[125] Tyrone Guthrie's Cherry Orchard was part of the 1933 season which included *Henry VIII* and *The Tempest* at the Old Vic. The intention was to expose Chekhov to a broader audience and make a play "more a comedy rather than a prose poem" (Senelick 145).

[126] "The production is also noteworthy as the first real attempt to apply Stanislavskian principles to a professional English production of a classic. Rehearsals began just after Saint-Denis had completed an exhaustive study of *An Actor Prepares* . . . that had been published the previous year." (Senelick, the Chekhov's Theatre, 146) Excerpts of the Saint-Denis revival production at the Royal Theatre Company of 1961 are available on youtube.com. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eeFMWSbincc&feature=related>

Yet another factor that should be taken into consideration while assessing the possibility of misinterpretation is translation**.** While attempting to explain Chekhov's popularity in England, Svetlana Klimenko (2001), in her article "Chekhov and British Nostalgia," discusses the language of Chekhov's plays. Klimenko follows the accepted Stanislavskian reading. She builds her argument on the premise that it is "human longing, which is the true object of Chekhov's dramatic exploration."[127] While doing so however, she brings to light an interesting problem of Russian-English translation. Klimenko touches upon the subject of Russian syntax and its "lack of predication," that seems challenging to many translators, as they turn it into a stylistic device. Illustrating her argument by a passage from *The Seagull* done by three different translators – Frayn, Gems and Stoppard – Klimenko claims that they attempt to reproduce Russian syntax in their translations. What sounds natural and fluid to a Russian, produces a peculiar dreamy and nostalgic effect in English:

> … the effect of Chekhov's dialogue for us lies in the precision and scrupulousness. Chekhov renders our conversation just the way it is. Which doesn't mean that the conversation is not illogical. Only, probably, Russians don't expect logic of a conversation, or they expect a different kind of logic than the English.[128]

The examples of the effects produced by translators as interpreters of an author's philosophy and style are numerous. The fact that Grivoedov's play was not successfully

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[127] Klimenko 132.

[128] Klimenko 130.

staged outside of Russia due the lack of an adequate translation speaks for itself. Translation of drama for production is a famously daunting task. If this drama is a comedy, the task becomes gargantuan. In Michael Frayn's words: "Translating a play is rather like writing one."[129] Every missed subtlety affects the image created by the author. Doctor Chekhov's respect for precision comes from his character and his profession, thus omitting his precision amounts to a disregard of his artistic style. When he uses vague syntax, it is not because his writing is vague, but because his character is vague. Even more distortion comes from changing the style and mood of a character's lines. Looking at several translations of the same lines, one can observe how translation equals interpretation. For the purpose of illustration I will use Masha's lines from *Three Sisters* Act 3. It's a scene of Masha's telling her sisters of her love for Vershinin.[130] The lines were translated respectively by Constance Garnett (1916), Elizaveta Fen (1951,) Michael Frayn (1983) and Paul Schmidt (1997):

> I want to confess my sins, dear sisters. My soul is yearning. I'm going to confess to you and never again to anyone. . . . I'll tell you this minute [*softly*]. It's my secret, but you must know everything. . . . I can't be silent . [*a pause*]. I'm in love, I'm in love . . . I love that man. . . . You have just

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[129] Anton Chekhov, *Plays: The Seagull, Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters, The Cherry Orchard and Four Vaudevilles*, translated and introduced by Michael Frayn (London: Methuen London Ltd, 1988) 353.

[130] Russian is as follows: "Мне хочется каяться, милые сестры. Томится душа моя. Покаюсь вам и уж больше никому, никогда... Скажу сию минуту. (Тихо.) Это моя тайна, но вы всё должны знать... (Пауза.) Не могу молчать... Я люблю, люблю... Люблю этого человека... Вы его только что видели... Ну, да что там. Одним словом, люблю Вершинина..." (Chekhov, *Tri Sestry*, Act 3).

seen him. . . . Well, I may as well say it straight out. I love Vershinin. (Garnett)

My dear sisters, I've got something to confess to you. I must get some relief, I feel the need of it in my heart. I'll confess to you alone, and then never again, never to anybody! I'll tell you in a minute. [*in a low voice*]. It's a secret, but you'll have to know everything, I can't keep silent any more. [*pause*]. I am in love, in love. … I love that man. . . . You saw him there just now. … Well, what's the good? I love Vershinin. (Fen)

Dear sisters, I want to make a confession. I think I shell die if I don't say it. I am going to make my confession to you, then never to another soul . . . I am going to say it this very minute. (*Quietly*.) It's my secret, but you both must know it . . . I can't not say it . . . (*Pause*.) I am in love, I am in love . . . I am in love with that man. The one you saw just now . . . Oh, what's the use? – I am in love with Vershinin. (Frayn)

My dear sisters, I want to confess something. I want to bare my soul. I want to confess something to you, and then I never want to say another word about it ever again. I want to tell you everything right now. (*Quietly*.) It's my secret but you should know it anyway . . . I can't keep it to myself anymore. (*Pause*.) I am in love, I am in love . . . I love that man, the one you saw just now. Well, that's it. I love Vershinin. (Schmidt)

Somewhere between those lines, one may hope to find Chekhov's Masha. It is remarkable however, how all four of the translators chose to go about the very first line, one of the numerous lines which hold a key to the character of Masha. Chekhov uses the Russian verbal construction "*Мне хочется,*" a transitive reflective verb in the passive voice with no direct parallel in English. It can be translated into English just the way it was done by Garnett, Frayn and Schmidt: *I want*. However, there is a direct parallel of "I want" in Russian: *я хочу*, but Chekhov doesn't use this construction. It is out of character and the circumstances clearly demand something more oblique. So, Chekohv uses "*Мне хочется"* and it beautifully fits the bill, because instead of a clearly indicated will or desire it indicates a fancy or a mood. A more precise translation, it seems, could be equally idiomatic *I am in the mood for.* Just as in "*I am in the mood for singing*" or "*I am in the mood for crying*" Masha says: "I am in the mood for confessing, my lovely sisters." Chekhov's use of *милые* (*lovely*) instead of *дорогие* (*dear*) may very well make no difference in English, but in Russian the former has a very slight connotation of condescension: exhausted, just as her sisters are, by the sleepless and stressful night, and immediately after being called "stupid" by her older spinster sister Olga, Masha, trapped in a loveless (for her) marriage, fell into *a mood* for confessing that she was in love with a man – a father of two and a husband of a woman who, in search of his attention, acquired a habit of attempting suicide. Yes, one may argue, but Chekhov wasn't a moralist, and wouldn't ever judge Masha's longings and actions. He wouldn't and he didn't, but he employed language to reveal his character's inmost motives and feelings and therefore, I believe, the subtleties of other language can be equally employed for the best translation of the original. Fen attempted the translation of this subtlety, but in her:

"My dear sisters, I've got something to confess to you," the emphasis is transferred from Masha's *mood* to the undefined (*something*) *object* of confession. Garnett went even further and by adding "sins" to the equation completely mislead the readers about the nature of Masha's character. The way all four translations rendered Masha's speech made her more innocent than she comes across in Chekhov's own words. In a letter to his wife Olga, who played Masha, he gave her directions: "Remember, you are the angry and giggly one." [131] In his next letter, answering Olga's questions about the character he writes: "Masha's confession in Act 3 is not a confession, but a frank talk. Lead nervously, but not desperately, do not cry, smile though rarely so; mainly feel tired at night. And make it feel that you're smarter than your sisters; consider yourself smarter, at least."[132]

It is not easy to keep track of the original author's intentions and the accents put in his texts after other numerous interpretations already influenced public opinion. For instance, when Klimenko points out that "all Chekhov's characters indulge in philosophizing"[133], I see the key word as "indulge" and not "philosophizing," as she habitually insists. Self-indulging was a constant trait of Chekhov's characters and a subject of his satire in both his stories and his plays. Just one example is the above-mentioned Vershinin, who is habitually presented by critics and directors as a typical "Chekhovian" character, an "incurable romantic" who talks about a bright future. It often escapes their attention though that he is the husband of a woman whose sanity he most

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[131] Chekhov, letter from Nice to Olga Knipper, 20 Jan. 1901, trans. mine.

[132] Chekhov, letter from Nice to Olga Knipper, 21 Jan. 1901, trans. mine.

[133] Klimenko 125.

probably ruined by his amorous inclinations toward other women (which Chekhov lets his readers know in the very first scene where he introduces Vershinin[134] – "the lovelorn major,"[135] as he is remembered by the sisters, even back then when they knew him in Moscow) and the father of two girls, whom he presumably had to take care of during the fire (but failed to do so, as he was visiting Masha at the time.) Another example is the self-indulgent Irina, wallowing in her complaint of not being able to remember the Italian word for ceiling, but not even considering of picking up a book in Italian (not to mention the impression suggested by Chekhov that her initial knowledge of the language likely wasn't too good to start with, as not remembering the Italian word for window or a ceiling is not the same as not remembering Petrarca sonnet, or Dante's verses). This type of behavior is characteristic of Chekhov's heroes throughout his art. The inertia, impotence, laziness, inability to comprehend their own shortcomings and act upon their perceived convictions is the recurring theme of not only Chekhov's but other Russian authors' work, including Griboedov. The ways this work was and still is interpreted sometimes are as paradoxical as they are ironic. In Chekhov's words, uttered to Stanislavsky, who was asking for yet another clarification about a character: "It's all in the text."[136]

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[134] Had David Magarshack (1972) noticed those details while working on his *The Real Chekhov*, he would probably have known better than to assert that Vershinin was Chekhov's mouthpiece.

[135] *Three Sisters,* Act 1, trans. Elizaveta Fen.

[136] Anton Chekhov, quoted in Karlinsky, commentary, *Letters of Anton Chekhov* 393.

When R. E. C. Long (1902), one of the first translators of Chekhov's stories, called Chekhov's characters "repugnant,"[137] perhaps he was closer to the true meaning than the legions that came after and endowed Chekhov's plays with lofty idealism, longing, nostalgia and tragic circumstances as a cause of his characters' fates. Chekhov is not "indulging" in observing human sufferings and creating a meal out of it as Dostoyevsky could, but exposing the symptoms in the hope of finding a cure. The power of his art lies in the most optimistic belief that despite their "repugnancy" humans are capable of feeling "five tons of love," and can progress as soon as they "have a look at [them]selves and see how bad and dreary [their] lives are!"

However, neither the British nor American publics were prepared to even guess, let alone consider, the educational aspect of Chekhov's writing. In the first decade of the twentieth century in the United States, where Russian drama, comedy or not, wouldn't be even considered a curious conversation topic at the time, Chekhov was known as a short story writer. Critical reflections on Chekhov's dramaturgy varied from "Chekhov's characters were all fit subjects for the psychiatrist, and his dialogue nothing but a series of semi-articulated hysterical ejaculation"[138] to "Chekhov had a Greek aptitude for a peaceful, beautiful, spiritual existence, and his melancholy was the natural result of opening his eyes to a world of horror and ugliness."[139] When in 1908 *Cherry Garden*

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[137] Meister 110.

138 Leo Wiener, quoted in Charles W. Meister, "Chekhov's Reception in England and America," *American Slavic and East European Review* 12 (Feb., 1953): 111.

[139] Moissaye Olgin quoted in Meister 115. Olgin was a Russian-born journalist, who moved to USA in 1915.

[sic] was translated by a Yale professor, Max Mendel, he introduced the play that "left behind the hopeless conditions of Russian society to open up a new, bright page full of hope for a better future."[140] Obviously the famous Chekhovian understatement and the well-known feature of Russian literature "reading between lines" were yet to be comprehended.

Although some attempts to stage Chekhov's farces were made by Chicago amateurs in 1913 and by the Washington Square Players in New York, until Stanislavsky brought the Moscow Art Theatre to New York in 1923, Russian drama in general and Chekhov's in particular were virtually unknown to the American theater-going public. While British critics and practitioners expressed a productive curiosity in Chekhov's dramatic work, American ones were hostile more often than not. In his article "Chekhov's Reception in England and America," Meister (1953) gives the account of the *Nation* reviewer who wrote of the Washington Square production of *The Seagull*: "it [is] absurd for an American even to try to take seriously the neurasthenic maunderings which in this play are paraded in the guise of dramatic complications." Given the political and literary climate of the time, it would be impossible to expect the American public to have grasped material that proved inaccessible to even some critics and directors of the author's native land. Discussions of Chekhov's energy and humor didn't start until later, and even then they were considered more of a directorial fancy than a feature of Chekhov's writing.

But while in Britain the literary merits and innovations of productions of Chekhov bred however slowly an ongoing curiosity and attempts of decoding the unfamiliar

[140] Meister 112.

dramatic language, in the United States most of the productions were based on superficial assumptions rather than a fundamental thought. That is why Stanislavsky's and the MAT's interpretations seemingly filled the void of misperception and were hailed as the ultimate truth. The phenomenon of the American relationship with Chekhov was at that time characterized by his vicarious status – secondary to Stanislavsky's theatre. In his monograph *The Chekhov Theatre*, Laurence Senelick (1997) gives a historical overview of émigré sources of the growing popularity of Stanislavsky's approach to acting in the United States. Richard Boleslavski, former MAT actor and Stanislavsky's student, who directed two plays for Neighborhood Playhouse in 1923, Leo and Barbara Bulgakov who staged *The Seagull* in 1929, and many more:

> Even though they may have been exposed to Stanislavsky in limited doses and at discrete moments in the development of his ideas on acting, this exposure became their stock-in-trade. Voluntarily or not, their pedagogic value was enhanced by an intimation of proximity to the godhead, an expertise at imparting the magic gospel. And the gospel that Stanislavsky had suavely interpreted was the plays of Anton Chekhov. To stage them was to borrow luster from MAT.[141]

While in Britain, Calderon's and Komissarzhevsky's directing styles contributed to interest and curiosity toward dramaturgical material, in the United States the Eastern European actors were attempting to mimic Stanislavsky, whose directing was least concerned with being faithful to the author's intentions. Solely for the reason of not

[141] Senelick 176.

understanding Chekhov's philosophy, the fact of which Stanislavsky himself mentioned on more than one occasion.[142] Stella Adler who briefly worked with Stanislavsky in Paris was a faithful transmitter of his analysis of Chekhov, of which the very characteristic is: taking the characters' words at the face value and missing all the irony of misplaced sentiments and thoughts,[143] although "she did insist on comedy in the plays."[144]

American theatre practitioners, who were going through their own struggle between commercial theatre and artistic aspirations, were more impressed with the quality of acting, enabled by numerous rehearsals in the subsidized repertoire theatre. Chekhov's plays were revived by Stanislavsky for his European and American tours of 1923-4 in the form they were performed at the very beginning of the century, while his thinking about the craft of acting had already moved forward. But that wasn't communicated to the American public which took the production at face value. Thus Chekhov became a vicarious means of reaching the level of professed former glory of the Moscow Art Theatre. For the next thirty years Chekhov's works were staged predominantly, in one way or another, as a morbid interpretation of Method acting, which

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[142] For example in his *My Life in Art* he wrote: "While Nemirovich-Danchenko was talking about The Seagull, I liked the play. But as soon as I was left with the text alone, I was bored again. Meanwhile I had to come up with the staging and planning, as I was more than anyone else familiar with this kind of work," trans. mine.

[143] See Stella Adler at Stella Adler's Studio. (Web access at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nuse3OlS8Dc>.

[144] "…she told me that when she was with the Group Theatre she went to visit and work with Stanislasky and came back to tell them they had Stanislasky's approach to Chekhov, or at any rate his method of acting, all wrong. She did insist on the comedy in the plays," Jeremy Geidt, "Re: Thesis at the Donut," message to the author, 16 May 2011.

claimed to be the Stanislavsky's system. Only after the Actor's Studio founder Lee Strasberg, a self-proclaimed Stanislavsky disciple and acting guru, failed to effectively direct *Three Sisters* in 1963, did the thought of separating Chekhov's plays from Stanislavsky's ideas on acting not seem that heretical any more. "The slow sleepwalking"[145] of the Method applied to Strasberg's *Three Sisters* proved highly unconvincing during the London International Theatre Festival. However in the United States, the separation of directorial vision from the dramaturgical material didn't cause any more interest in Chekhov himself. Productions that followed turned Chekhov's plays into vehicles for directorial ambitions and experiments.

[145] Senelick 290.

Chapter V

The Last Three Decades and The Present Day

> "When we did *Wild Honey* on Broadway[146] the producers said: 'Can we take Chekhov's name off of it? His name is poison on Broadway.'"
>
> - Michael Frayn[147]

Over the last three decades the ethnocentric approach to criticism is being enriched by an introduction to cross-cultural studies. Earlier translations are being evaluated and new ones are appearing. The collapse of the Soviet Union opened up previously inaccessible archives. Long-standing myths have begun to crumble under the weight of facts.

Frayn (1988), in the detailed introduction to his translation of Chekhov's major plays and farces, discusses some of the changes that he saw happening in the field. He summarizes the influences of Stanislavsky and British assumptions of the elegiac nature of Chekhov's plays, and observes the tendency of oversimplifying Chekhov's humor. While expressing his disagreement with the latest trend, he attributes it to the influence of

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[146] Virginia Theatre, 36 performances, 1986-87.

[147] Michael Frayn, "Noises on, with Anton Chekov," interview with Jerry Tallmer. *The Villager* 76, 25 (Nov. 8-14) 2006.

David Magarshak, "one of the most distinguished of Chekhov's translators,"[148] and his *Chekhov the Dramatist*:

> In the past most directors seem to have agreed with Stanislavsky. More recently the pendulum has swung the opposite way, and it has become fashionable to establish the comic nature of all these four plays by presenting the characters as ludicrously self-obsessed grotesque, and by supplying sight-gags that the author overlooked. This may be another result of Magarshak's eccentric influence. In his book *Chekhov the Dramatist* he urges that The Cherry Orchard is simply a funny play in its entirety. He even manages to find the last scene funny, where Firs is left locked into the empty house for the winter. He argues that the stage direction says merely that Firs is lying motionless, not dying, and that someone will shortly realize what has happened and come back and release him. This seems to me frankly preposterous.[149]

Indicative of the discussions on Chekhov's work is the projection of the disputants' wishful thinking onto Chekhov himself. While Magarshak finds it appropriate to imagine a happy ending, with the implication that comedy should only have a happy ending, Frayn refuses to believe that Chekhov could find death ludicrous.[150] By refusing to take

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[148] Frayn xvi.

[149] Frayn xxii.

[150] However, just by a simple verification of the time during which the play was written, one can realize that doctor Chekhov was dying of consumption. The concept of death may have been rendered ludicrous and gratuitous in his mind. So was a perceived end of Firs. This simple fact of human existence that doctors are aware of more than anybody else may seem ludicrous to make into tragedy.

sides and staying faithful to his status of "a free artist and nothing else" Chekhov makes an easy target for this kind of approach. What eventually defies this projection and simplification of any kind is the underlying complexity of his thought and expression, a complexity that, when devoid of meaning, manifests itself in the form of bad theatre. So, a simple indicator of a well done Chekhov production is whether or not invoking Chekhov's name is needed to justify bad choices: the closer the interpretation is to the original, the fewer questions are left unanswered.

There is a difference in the "post-Stanislavsky" approach to Chekhov (and subsequently other Russian plays) between Britain and the United States. While theatre practitioners in Brittan are more open to revising their previous assumptions and exploring the actual facts, in the United States old habits die much harder. Just as with the Actor's Studio fiasco of *Three Sisters* and through the sixties, Chekhov's actual *credo* was of little concern to American theatre practitioners. The accepted wisdom was good enough for the inception of a new scenic or directorial concept or an assertion of a slow-paced revival piece. Perhaps, one of not so many exceptions was Nikos Psacharopoulos, who was staging Chekhov on the regular basis throughout his career during his tenure at the Williamson Theatre.[151] Although his understanding of Chekhov was more of a "traditional" one, he was able to appreciate and emphasize the sensual aspect of characters' motives and interactions, which in turn helped to convey the dramatic vitality of the plays themselves:

> His Mediterranean temperament, colleagues claimed, alienated him from

[151] See Senelick for review of various performances: *The Seagull* (1962, 1968, 1974), *The Cherry Orchard* (1965, 1970, 1976, 1987), 291.

> the Method; when there was a danger of the work becoming too internalized or too small, he would reach for opera. This operatic attach was a complete defiance of the accepted idea of a languid, delicate Chekhov. Rehearsing *The Cherry Orchard* in 1980, Psacharopoulos wanted Ranevskaya to be a passionate woman, who hurled herself at things with a tremendous appetite[152], but he felt afoul of how Colleen Dewhurst saw her role as a "Chekhovian".[153]

It seems that the American way of handling Chekhov crystallized itself into two major trends: directorial self-expression and the rare traditionalists' revival – both have nothing to do with Chekhov's subtle character-building and his tongue-in-cheek irony – a fact that bothered not the postmodernists who seemed happy to compile their creations out of barely digested assumptions of the people before them. On the cusp of eighth decade of the twentieth century, a Romanian director Andrei Serban's productions[154] introduced American audiences to the possibility of handling Chekhov as a little less than a museum exhibit but a little more than a Broadway caricature.[155] After he staged *Three Sisters* in

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[152] This reading is to be discerned from Chekhov's text and his notes.

[153] Senelick 292.

[154] Andrei Serban directed *The Cherry Orchard* (1977), *The Seagull*, and *Three Sisters* (1983).

[155] The good example of the Broadway stylization of Chekhov was a 1973 show entitled *The Good Doctor*. Neil Simon wrote a play that consisted of bits and pieces of Chekhov's stories and plays that he considered a Chekhovian comedy. "The error of equating the life of pre-revolutionary Russian intellectuals with that of the East European Jewish villagers was compounded here" (Senelick 295). The Senelick's definition of Chekhov's characters as "Russian intellectuals," however, also seems quite out of place.

The American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge 1983 and *Uncle Vanya* in La MaMa in New York, the critical consensus was reached that "he has a stunning visual sense but is incapable of producing a coherent reading of Chekhov."[156] Few more A.R.T productions of Chekhov were characteristic of the directorial self-expression approach. Ron Daniel's *The Seagull* (1992), David Wheeler's *Uncle Vanya* in David Mamet's translation[157] (1998). Robert Brustein's *Three Farces and a Funeral* (2001) was an fruitful attempt to bring public's attention to a burlesque and farcical nature of Chekhov's humor, but János Szász's *The Seagull* of 2009 once again turned formalistic and therefore flat.

The Eighties only brought further simplification and schematization of the attitude toward Chekhov's texts. Senelick, in his *Chekhov's Theatre*, points out to the fact that:

> The early generation of American playwrights . . . had rarely been tempted to tamper with his plays. A later generation, largely university bred, were more haunted by Chekhov's specter, and needed to exorcise his influence by 'translating' him. In most cases, like Van Itallie, they neglected what would seem to be the preliminary initiation in such a rite of passage: learning Russian.[158]

Given the previously mentioned cultural differences in the perception and interpretation of thought and feelings, and often a personal lack of curiosity, some conclusions don't seem especially surprising. David Mamet for example decided that *The Cherry Orchard*

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[156] Senelick 299.

[157] Mamet worked from the literal translation of Vlada Chernomirdik.

[158] Senelick 302.

is "a series of scenes about sexuality, and particularly frustrated sexuality."[159] However, one may wonder, with such a simplistic attitude to dramatic material, why turn to Chekhov in the first place?

Today, despite countless productions throughout the world and the extensive body of critical research on Chekhov, it doesn't seem that any consensus has been reached on the actual meaning of his philosophy and his art. Multiple discussions about his innovation in dramatic form, the psychology of his "drama," and the immensity of his influence on Western theatre, have left him, according to Vera Gottlieb (1982) "perhaps most misunderstood both by his contemporaries and by later critics and producers: concentrating on the content, many reached mutually contradictory conclusions as to the tone and intentions of Chekhov's work."[160]

In testing the validity of Chekhov's claim that he was writing comedies, Gottlieb elucidates the discrepancy between Chekhov's intent and the later interpretation of his work. In her scrupulous and highly contextualized *Chekhov and the Vaudeville* she organized her discussions around Chekhov's lesser known one-act plays. She keeps her analysis firmly grounded in the context of Russian theater and the history of vaudeville in Russia. She examines Chekhov's style and technique from his earlier plays, which she defines as farce-vaudevilles, all the way to his latest most famous plays. Gottlieb points out that: "Chekhov achieved for vaudeville what he also achieved with the short story: he 'humanized' the 'stock' characters and made them realistic complex individuals."[161] In

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[159] David Mamet, quoted in Senelick 303.

[160] Gottlieb, *Chekhov and the Vaudeville* 1.

[161] Gottlieb 44.

tracing Chekhov's creative journey she finds convincing ways to justify Chekhov's claim that he was a comedy writer. Her conclusion that: "Chekhov's conviction that life must be faced 'as it is' in order to … 'create another and better life' is both a denial of the inevitability of tragedy, and the affirmation of man's potential"[162] although viable, seems a little generic. Tragedy as a concept is not a feature of Chekhov's philosophy. Human perception of the tragedy that stems from features of character itself seems ludicrous to Chekhov, as he sees it as a manifestation of a character's shortcomings, and therefore treatable. In no play of his are the circumstances beyond characters' control. This particular trend sets Chekhov's drama apart from tragedy altogether. Moving and pathetic as their circumstances may be, they could have been reversed or otherwise changed by the characters' choices – choices that they never make.

One of the first attempts to reevaluate the concept that Chekhov was a delicate bard of an era past was Jonathan Miller's *Three Sisters* (1976), which was "first seen in Guildford in April 1976, and subsequently transferred to the Cambridge Theatre, London, on 22 June of that year.[163] Perhaps for he first time in the history of British Chekhov, serious attention has been paid to the underlying comedy. Although Gottlieb claims that comedy "has been played up, but only as an aspect of dramatic form – not as a method of raising the issues through ironic detachment,"[164] the process of separating Chekhov's work from this misplaced assumption began in earnest with this production. Miller's

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[162] Gottlieb 190.

[163] David Allen, "Jonathan Miller Directs Chekhov," *New Theatre Quarterly* 5. 17 (1989): 52.

[164] Vera Gottlieb, "The Politics of British Chekhov," *Chekhov on the British Stage*, ed. Miles 148.

Three Sisters marked a new attitude toward Chekhov's writing – paying attention to it and looking for answers *in the text*. Senelick's summary of the production's "innovation" speaks of the insights previously absent in rendering Chekhov elsewhere in Britain:

> … he worked against the notion of the sisters as glamorous and sensitive 'grade-A girls … pathetically defeated by the mediocrity of provincial life.' In his view, they are quite ordinary and their life in not tragic. Janet Suzman made Masha affected and pretentious, full of contempt to others, and in love with the stout and elderly bore. The most eye-opening performance was Angela Down's Irina: stiff, starchy, abrasive. She had none of the appealing femininity of Beatrix Thompson in Komis's version or Peggy Ashcroft in Saint-Denis, but the lines certainly support an emphasis of the self-absorption of youth.[165]

Peter Hall used a new translation of *Cherry Orchard* by Michael Frayn for his production at the National in 1978. Not only was he well equipped with the text of a playwright and a professional translator, he was prepared to look at Chekhov's text afresh:

> His characters are so self-absorbed they are almost indifferent to other people's troubles. They blame others for being sad; they very rarely sympathize with them. From this total absorbtion [sic] in self comesChekhov's comedy, for it means that every character sayssomething surprising. It's a quite harsh atmosphere, but loaded with action.[166]

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[165] Senelick 310.

[166] Peter Hall, quoted in Senelick 313.

The critics however stayed indifferent to the new attitudes, which indicated that at least at that time in Britain, the majority of them weren't dissatisfied with the treatment of Chekhov and felt quite cozy with the Chekhov they grew up with. Hall concluded that "the English prefer a Chekhov full of gentle pathos to a comic or passionate one."[167] Thus both qualities fundamental to Chekhov's work were disregarded.

It seems that the Hall's observation has a broader implication: the specifics of the history of producing Chekhov's plays in the twentieth century suggest that not only the English, but the majority of the public, critics and theater practitioners prefer their Chekhov to be "full of gentle pathos" rather than what he actually was – a virtuoso master of the exposé of the ludicrous in human nature be it in life or in death, the faults that could be cured given the patients' attention to their "illnesses." This attention would require transcending the habitual complacency, self-indulgence, inability to communicate, cruelty, and many other traits that often seem an inherent part of human character. Chekhov was so far ahead of his time and so optimistic was his outlook that he believed that at some point in time people would be able to hear what he was saying.

In January of 2007, Jan Rickson's production of *The Seagull*[168] opened in the Royal Court Theatre in London and quickly received critical acclaim. In 2008, it traveled to Broadway where it ran from September to December and was equally well received. Although differing in opinion about its various aspects, all critics spoke in unison when it came to the fresh take on the comical in Chekhov's play in both Christopher Hampton's

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[167] Peter Hall, quoted in Senelick 314.

[168] The Seagull, Act III, at the Walter Kerr Theatre. Kristen Scott Tomas as Arkadina, Mackenzie Crook as Treplev. Web access at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfOW3vvWLrg&feature=player_embedded>

new translation and Jan Rickson's direction. Kristin Scott Thomas' "deceitful and manipulative" Arkadina, a ridiculous little stump for stage in the play within the play and the dynamic rhythm of the performance rendered Rickson's *The Seagull* the best *The Seagull* I have ever seen. The fact that BAM's audience seemed to appreciate the liveliness of the almost farcical though touching performance was the most wondrous. It seemed that even in America some qualities of Chekhov's comedy could resonate if properly done. The stereotypical reading and interpretation of Chekhov's plays, confining them to the genre of melodrama or tragedy, had been broken. Perhaps this particular production will broaden the public's view of what Chekhov's comedy actually is.

All new translations, productions and scholarly inquiries of the last three decades have contributed to this shift in perception. Michael Frayn (1988), Tom Stoppard (1997), Paul Schmidt (1997), and Christopher Hampton (2007) are but a few who took upon themselves the task of clarifying some melodramatic or ambiguous readings. "Somehow we have a tendency to dilute what in Chekhov is always very crisp and quite blunt, actually. Chekhov used to be thought of as a lyrical, melancholy kind of writer, and he isn't. He's a very muscular, energetic, clear, lucid writer," Hampton said during an interview with NPR on October 3 of 2008. However, in the same interview he also voiced the common perception of Stanislavsky as the one who after the initial failure of *The Seagull* in 1896 "…rescued and remounted it, and persuaded Chekhov to come back to see it properly done."

The tradition of Stanislavsky's productions ploughed its way through almost the whole century both in Russia and abroad. Although his interpretation of Chekhov is only one chapter in the history of Russian theatre abroad, it was a formidable one and

hopefully it is coming to an end. However as recently as 1995, Jovan Hristić in his article "Thinking with Chekhov" presents his readers with the statement that: "The evidence of Stanislavsky's Notebooks" demonstrates that Stanislavsky's directions are "almost invariably complimentary rather than contradictory to Chekhov."[169] No doubt, many more articles and productions questioning Chekhov's own words will appear, but the amount of evidence collected and studied in the twentieth century offers the hope that a better understanding of what Chekhov actually did will supplant that of Stanislavsky and the ones who believed him. As soon as the true meaning of Chekhov's comedy is perceived, the task of uncorrupting other Russian playwrights including Griboedov will hopefully begin. Russian nineteenth century criticism as a phenomenon was already touched upon by Tom Stoppard in his *The Coast of Utopia*. Eventually, the Soviet critics who contributed to the misrepresentation of Russian authors' beliefs will be exposed. The false assertion of political affiliations or the lack of such wouldn't skew the actual characters and their literary aspirations, and perhaps new facts will come to life.

As the "traditional" reading of Chekhov's plays and his work in general has begun to shift, interest in Griboedov's *The Misfortune of Being Clever* has also increased, and multiple translations have appeared. The most notable have been Alan Shaw's 1992 verse translation *Woe of Wit*; Anthony Burgess' 1993 verse translation and adaptation *Chatsky,* which was used for the aforementioned British production at Almeida theatre; and Mary Hobson's *Aleksandr Griboedov's Woe From Wit: A Commentary and Translation* of 2005. As both Chekhov and Griboedov belong to the same tradition of

[169] Jovan Hristić, "Thinking with Chekhov: The Evidence of Stanislavsky's Notebooks," *New Theatre Quarterly* 42.11 (1995): 175.

Russian theatre, theatre that requires a long and detailed look free of political speculation, the questions of the misinterpretation of Griboedov's play at the Almeida can be answered with a degree of certainty. First of all, Anthony Burgess' translation, although retaining the vivacity and luster of the original, assumed a commonly accepted view on Chatsky as a hero, whose main preoccupation was a political one, and all the ambiguities of the hero's "wit" worked into Griboedov's play were lost, making the play flat. Burgess' adaptation rendered obscure Russian references into relevant and highly charged British ones, turning the play into a political pamphlet. Thus, for example, Chatsky's lines (the translation is close to the original content)[170]:

> And auntie? Still the maidenly Minerva?
> Still serving Catherine the First with fervour?
> House full of wards and pug-dogs? By the way,
> The education of today.
> Can it be still be same as ever?
> Do they recruit a whole regiment of teachers? Hire
> The greatest number at the least expense? How clever
> Such teachers are they scarcely pause to inquire.
> On pain of fines we're forced in Russia,
> To count any foreigner in town
> A sage, though he's a half-taught usher.

in Burgess's adaptation become (although the verse is much closer to Griboedovian poignancy):

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[170] Act 1, scene 7, trans. Mary Hobson 26.

Your aunt, I know, was rather good at hating

Ninety years a royal maid in waiting

And still a maid? Isn't she married yet?

She used to keep a panther as a pet

But now, I hear, it's pugs and unmarried mothers,

And exiled Muslims. They are now our brothers,

I hear, revising Christian infamies,

Blessing our polygamic tendencies.

As for the Moscow dialect – my limbs

Go weak at its new-fangled acronyms.

As can be seen in this example, Burgess' translation-adaptation, although bringing Chatsky's sentiment closer to the British public, renders him more as a political critic of a traditionally "brooding" Russian disposition. Second, the tradition of the Russian theatre with its focus on the characters rather than their circumstances still seems somewhat vague to British theatre-goers; thus the anticipation of the plot[171] and action rendered the viewers unreceptive to the intricacies of a comedy of Muscovite manners. Given the time elapsed since the British exposure to Chekhov, one may hope that the acquisition of some understanding of the specific features of Russian literature and drama would be discernable; but still only the doom and gloom of the mysterious Slavic soul is a stereotype. Perhaps this is a legitimate perception. However, there is so much more in the best manifestation of Russian comedy that perhaps it is worth knowing.

[171] See Sheridan Morley's review.

Although the cinematic interpretation of Chekhov wasn't in the scope of this research, perhaps it is worth mentioning Nikita Mikhalkov's *Unfinished Piece for the Player Piano* (1978), as it was a certain departure from the accepted in Soviet Union version of Chekhov. Loosely based on *Platonov*, the script[172] brilliantly executed by the cast[173] brought to life the ruthless Chekhov's irony perhaps for the first time in the history of Russian Chekhov. Twenty years later, another performance broke through the barrier of simplification and convention. This time it was *Woe from Wit* of the Company 814 in Moscow,[174] where the colloquial Griboedov's verse achieved the poignancy of everyday dialogues, and the characters that used to be one-dimensional caricatures acquired life and motivations.

It is remarkable to find a deep similarity between Griboedov's Sofia and Chekhov's Masha from *Three Sisters*, Griboedov's Chatsky and Chekhov's Platonov, Griboedov's Repetilov and Chekhov's Trofimov, all representative of the traits peculiar to Russia and yet recognizable elsewhere. Chekhov's characters and their sentiments from *Three Sisters,* and their predecessors in *The Misfortune of Being Clever,* seem to be in relationship far closer than just the literary one. Perhaps for this very reason the main preoccupation of both authors was first and foremost to portray a local and not universal malaise. If it so happened that this resonated across the border, perhaps some universal cure for facing the reality of misconception and failed communication can be found.

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[172] Written by Aleksandr Adabashyan and Nikita Mikhalkov.

[173] Kalyagin as Platonov, Shuranova as Anna Petrovna, Yelena Solovey as Sophia Yegorovna, Yevgenia Glushenko as Sashenka, and others.

[174] Produced by Oleg Menshikov (also performed the role of Chatsky), directed by Galina Dubovskaya <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYxxcSBxRtM>.

Epilogue

Together with changes in the world at large, a shift is happening in the inter-cultural studies. Less "final" sentences are being pronounced by critics and more new facts are being considered. Although no exhaustive answers were possible in the space allocated for this study, I hope that some "stripes of the tulip" were enumerated. Obviously, there are many more left. But just as eternity is ahead of humanity, there is a hope that false myths will eventually dissipate. Possibly "three hundred years from now."

Paradoxically, due to the prolonged "reign" of Soviet authorities, known for their universally dogmatic approach, and keeping old habits and attitudes as in a time capsule, the progress made by British scholars and theatre practitioners on uncovering the true meaning of Chekhov's philosophy has surpassed the Russian one. The collapse of the Soviet Union and a simplification of cultural relations is the backdrop of a new day in the life of the Russian theatre, but some habits are slow to change. In 2009, the *Guardian'*s theatrical blog by Noah Birksted-Breen entitled "Dear Russia, The Plays Are The Thing" urges Russia to "start promoting its wonderful classic theatre abroad, where it is virtually unknown":

> What is remarkable about the Russian classics, other than the sheer quantity of them, is the vast difference of style. While Russian playwriting only spans a short period – some 200 years – the writing is surprisingly varied. This isn't just a question of genre: Russian classics were responding to shifting political systems. So the fundamentals of

> playwriting were also changing: who the plays were written for and why they were written.

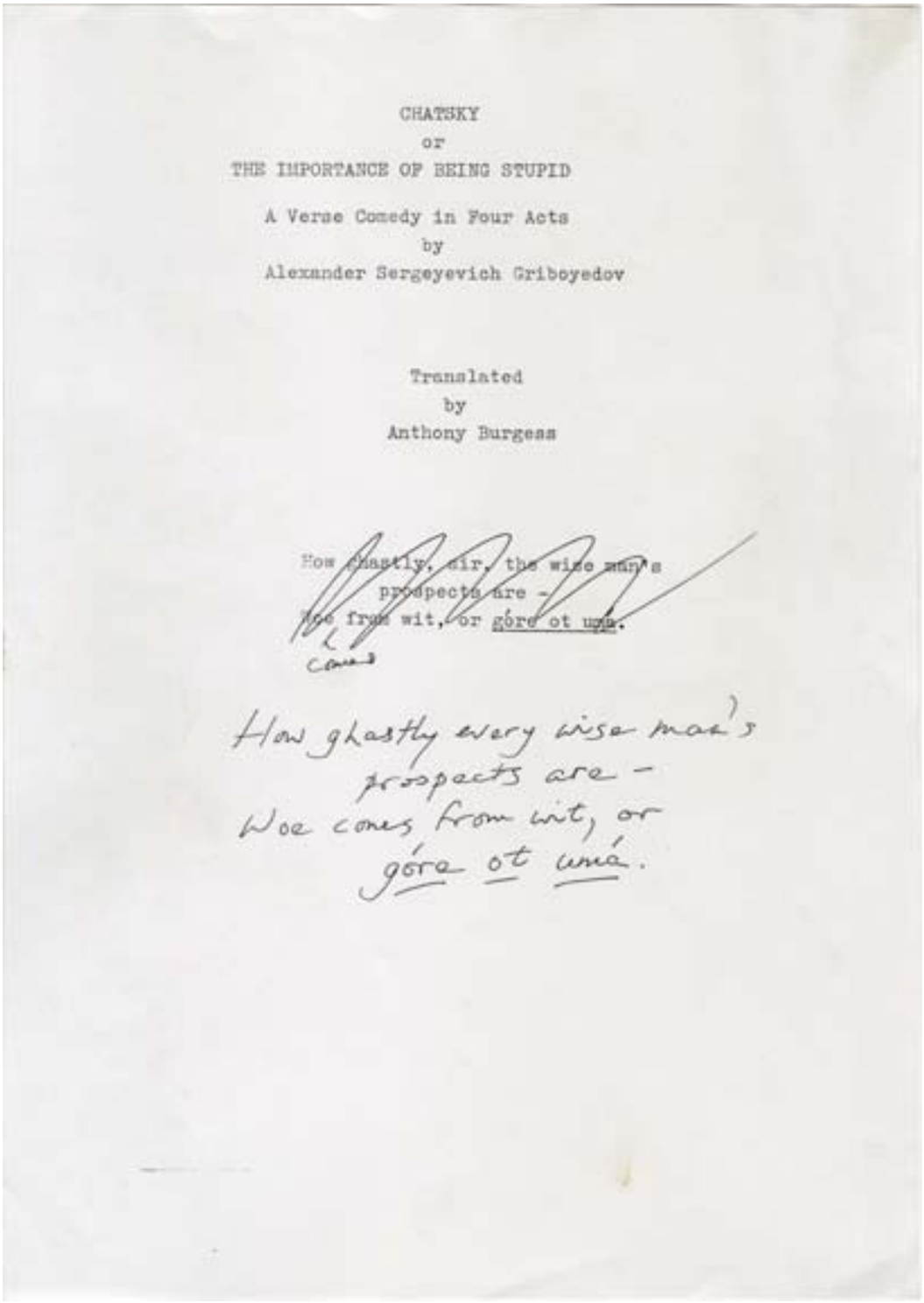
It may be that the author's opinion about the causes of literary diversity in Russia is a matter for separate research, but before Russia starts promoting its Classics, some habitual readings of them may need to change both inside and outside her borders.

Figures

Fig. 1. Oil portrait of Griboedov as a youth, by an unknown artist. (Reproduced in Hobson 2005)

Fig. 2. Sketch of Griboedov by Pushkin. (Reproduced in Kelly 2006)

Fig. 3. Lithograph of Griboedov by Borelia, 1860 (Reproduced in Leach and Borovsky 1999)



CHATSKY
or
THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING STUPID

A Verse Comedy in Four Acts
by
Alexander Sergeyevich Griboyedov

Translated
by
Anthony Burgess

How ghastly every wise man's
prospects are -
Woe comes from wit, or góre ot uma.

How ghastly every wise man's
prospects are -
Woe comes from wit, or
góre ot umá.

Fig. 4. Title page of Anthony Burges's type script of translation and adaptation of Griboedov's play. 1993 (Harry Ransom Foundation)

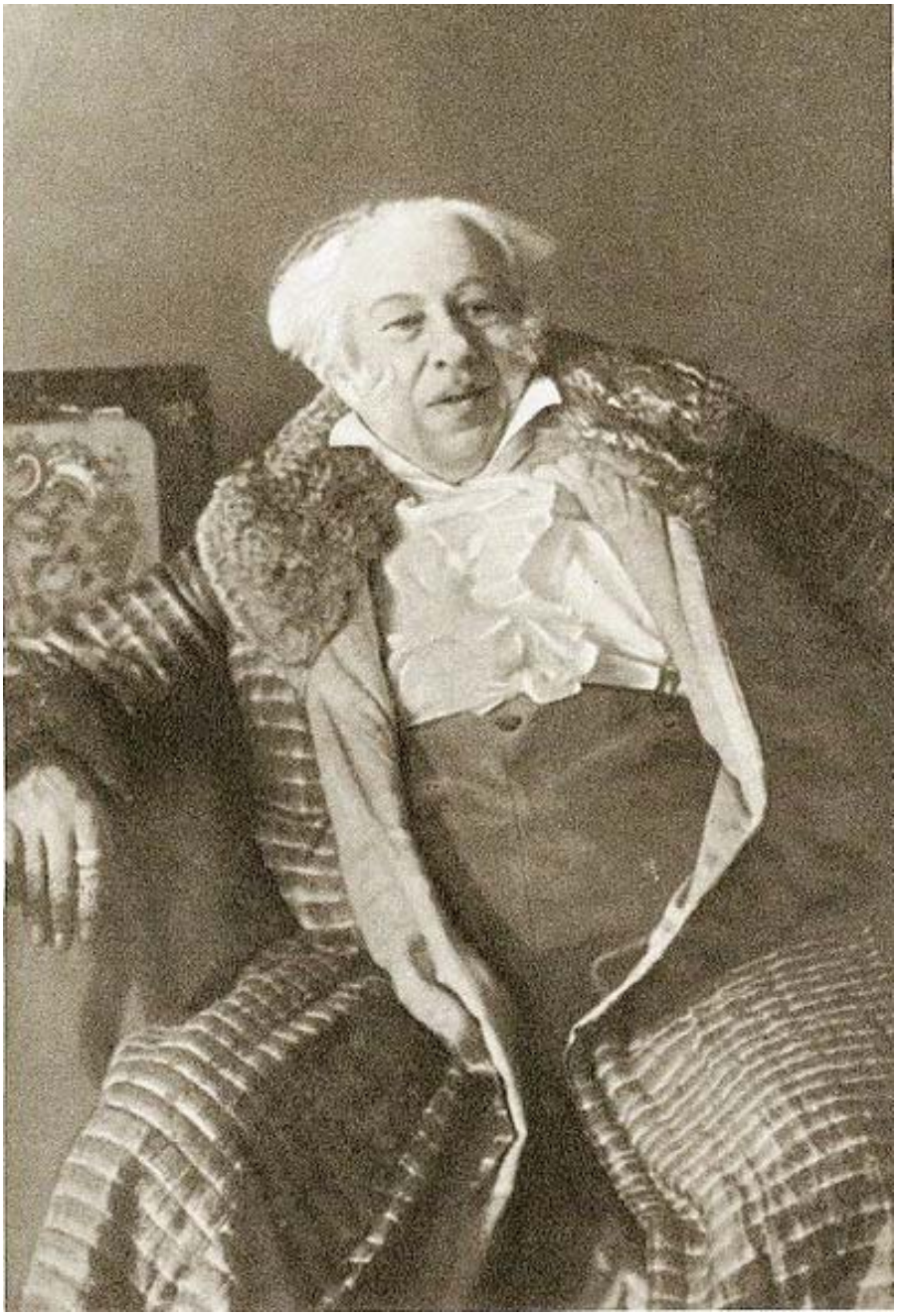


Fig. 5. Stanislavsky as Famusov in *Woe from Wit*. MAT Production. Moscow 1914 (New York Public Library. Image ID: TH-63583, The Wikimedia Foundation)

Fig. 6. *Chatsky*. Almeida Theatre Production. London 1993. Colin Firth as Chatsky, Jemma Redgrave as Sophia. (Photographs by Ivan Kyncl, from the Almeida Theatre programme)

Fig. 7. Chekhov in 1888. Ten years after writing *Platonov* in 1878 and ten years before MAT production of *The Seagull* 1898

Fig. 8. Vera Komissarzhevskaya as Nina in Act I of the first production of *The Seagull*, Aleksandrinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg, 1896 (Reproduced in Senelick 33)

Fig. 9. Konstantin Stanislavsky's production of *The Seagull*. Moscow Art Theatre, Moscow, 1898. (from Goudarstvenny Centralny Teatralny Musei imeni Bakhrushina.

Fig. 10. Konstantin Stanislavsky's production of *The Seagull*. Moscow Art Theatre, Moscow, 1898. Stanislavsky as Trigoirn, Lilina as Masha, Roksanova as Nina (from Goudarstvenny Centralny Teatralny Musei imeni Bakhrushina).

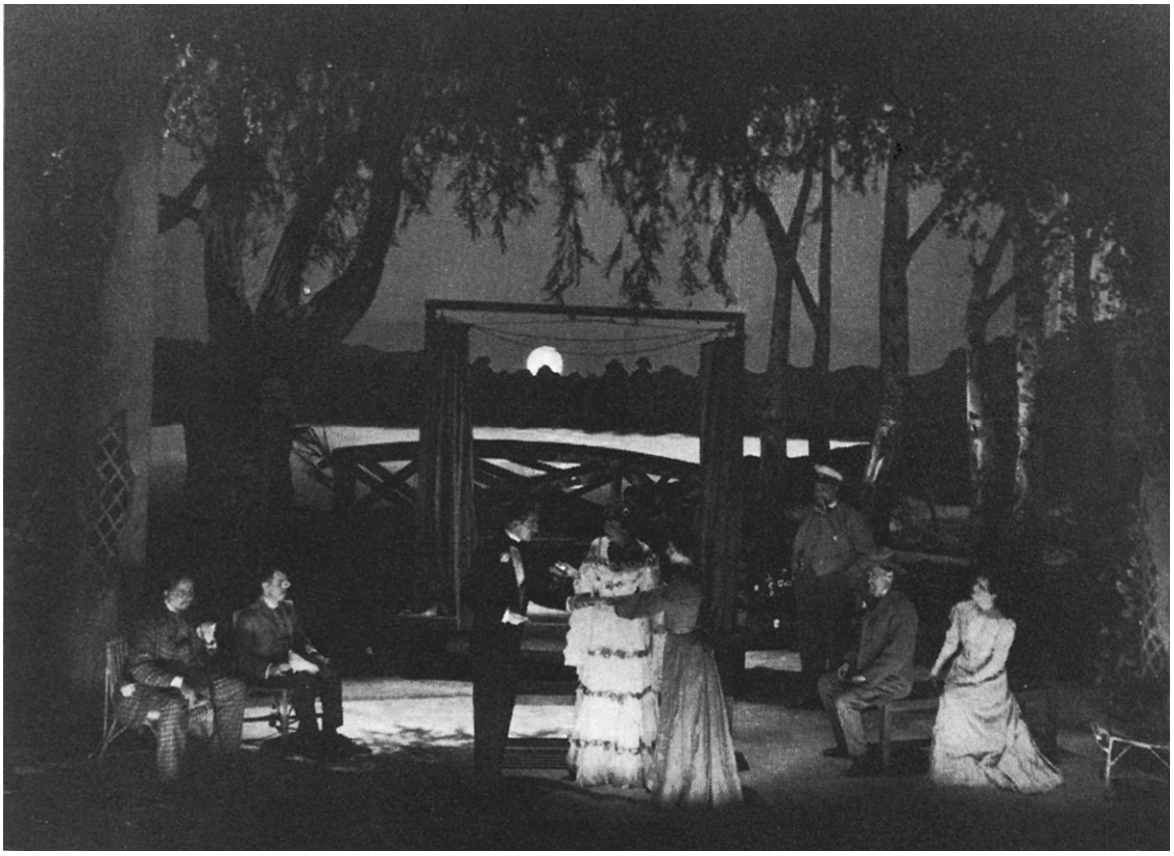


Fig. 11. Act I of Theodore Komisarjevsky's production of *The Seagull*, New Theatre London, 1936. Frederick Lloyd as Sorin, Ivor Bernard as Medvedenko, John Gielgud as Trigorin, Edith Evans as Arkadina, Peggy Ashcroft as Nina, George Devine as Shamraev, Leone Quartermaine as Dorn and Clair Harris as Paulina (reproduced in Senelick 161)

Fig. 12. Act III of *Three Sisters* by Michel Saint Denis, Queen's Theatre, London 1937. Michael Redgrave as Tusenbach, Frederick Lloyd as Chebutykin, Peggy Ashcroft as Irina, John Gielgud as Vershinin and Leone Quartermaine as Kulygin (Reproduced in Senelick 148)

Fig. 13. Tyron Gutrie's *Cherry Orchard*, Old Vic, London 1933. Elsa Lanchester as Charlotta and Charles Laughton as Lopakhin (Reproduced in Senelick 145)

Fig. 14. Nemirovich-Danchenko, production of *Three Sisters*. MAT, Moscow, 1940

Fig. 15. Mummers. Act II, *Three Sisters* Nemirovich-Danchenko's production MAT, Moscow, 1940 (from Goudarstvenny Centralny Teatralny Musei imeni Bakhrushina. <http://www.allchekhov.ru/theater/history/>.

Fig. 16. Mummers. Act II, *Three Sisters.* Georgy Tovstonigov's production of, BDT, Leningrad 1965 (from Goudarstvenny Centralny Teatralny Musei imeni Bakhrushina <http://www.allchekhov.ru/theater/history/>.

Fig. 17. Jan Rickson's production of *The Seagull*, Royal Court Theatre New York tour. 2008 Krisen Scott Thomas as Arkadina, Peter Sarsgaard as Trigorin (*New York Times*, September 24, 2008) <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/28/theater/28mcgr.html>

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