

## Chapter 5. *Uncle Vanya*: 'A Glimmer of Light Shining in the Distance'

*Futility and fatality, the unromantic fatality of everyday events, the overwhelming weight of boredom and banality are its central themes.* (Marc Slonim)<sup>1</sup>

*The spine of the play: to make life better, find a way to be happy.* (Harold Clurman)<sup>2</sup>

*Uncle Vanya*, which received its Moscow premiere in October 1899, appears to be in many ways a more conventional play than *The Seagull*. One reviewer of the Moscow Art Theatre 1924 touring production commented that '*Uncle Vanya* is a play not far removed in construction from the old time melodrama thrillers of the American stage'.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the play's apparent simplicity, it has proved to be just as open to radically opposing interpretations as any of Chekhov's dramas. Both in Russia and the West, the gloom and doom version of *Uncle Vanya* has tended to predominate with both critics and directors. Fiona Scott-Norman, a Melbourne critic reviewing Gale Edwards' 1991 production, baldly states, '*Vanya* is about the futility of life'. She argues that, even though the play may not have had this pessimistic meaning at the time it was written, now, 'in our modern, Godless, society, that is the only interpretation, because we cannot share the hope of Sonya that we will find peace when we die'.<sup>4</sup> Certainly Oleg Yefremov's Moscow Art Theatre production that toured to London in 1989 carried on the Stanislavskian tradition of presenting Chekhov's dramas as if they were tragedies. This bleak view of Chekhov almost inevitably leads to critics and reviewers inappropriately associating his cautiously optimistic vision of reality with the 'nothing to be done' school of Absurdism. So, Milton Shulman begins his review of Yefremov's production as follows:

Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* has never been a barrel of laughs but the Slavic gloom into which it is plunged by the Moscow Art Theatre's production at the Lyttelton is not merely dramatic but philosophical. Everything from the vast set wreathed in mist and gardens steeped in dead brown leaves to the movements of the actors carrying their burdens of despair like heavy knapsacks, proclaims a mood almost as glum as a light comedy conceived by Samuel Beckett.<sup>5</sup>

In the light of such depressing interpretations, it may appear surprising that a critic of the standing of David Magarshack should sum up his analysis of the play by confidently asserting that the 'principal theme of *Uncle Vanya*, therefore, is not frustration, but courage and hope'.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that *Uncle Vanya*, in common with many of Chekhov's other dramas, has been interpreted in a variety of ways led the *Melbourne Times* critic, Chris

Boyd to make the ludicrous suggestion that the play might not mean anything at all:

*Uncle Vanya* is surely Chekhov's most beguiling and baffling play. Though its portentous themes peel through the 20th century, one must first ask, is Chekhov really attempting to *say* anything? The play is, after all, open to countless readings.<sup>7</sup>

Since any director will inevitably 'impose an interpretation' on a play such as *Uncle Vanya* and make it 'say' something, it is surely wiser that such interpretative decisions be guided by informed critical argument, rather than simply suggesting that the play should mean whatever the director wishes it to mean.

Chekhov originally offered *Uncle Vanya*, which had played successfully for two years in the provinces, to the Moscow Maly Theatre, one of the oldest state theatres, rather than to the Moscow Art Theatre. However, every play produced in state theatres had first to be passed by the official Theatrical and Literary Committee. When this august body decided that the play could not be presented until certain changes had been made, Chekhov withdrew his offer from the Maly and offered it to the Moscow Art Theatre instead. For all of his reservations about Stanislavski's production of *The Seagull*, Chekhov seems to have appreciated the fact that this new, private theatre company which would perform his play without alterations was likely to be more attuned to the nature of his innovative dramaturgy than the more traditional government-controlled theatre company. He was not disappointed, for although the first night of the Moscow Art Theatre production of *Uncle Vanya* did not elicit as rapturous a response as that accorded the first night of their production of *The Seagull*, nevertheless the play became an enormous success. A month after it opened, Chekhov wrote enthusiastically to A. L. Vishnevsky, the actor who played the role of Uncle Vanya, about how grateful he was to have discovered the Moscow Art Theatre:

... I thank heaven that after having sailed the sea of life, I have finally landed on so wonderful an island as the Art Theater. When I have children, I will force them to pray to God eternally for all of you.<sup>8</sup>

The relatively small amount of correspondence and contemporary commentary concerning the Moscow Art Theatre production of *Uncle Vanya* that has survived is particularly revealing in respect of the increasing tensions that were beginning to develop between the two founders of the Art Theatre. Nemirovich-Danchenko clearly felt that he had a deeper understanding of Chekhov's play than Stanislavski, and he was not frightened to express this view in his correspondence with both the playwright and the director. An examination of this artistic quarrel, combined with Chekhov's own recorded comments about this production, supply directors of today with valuable hints about how the playwright and the two

theatrical directors of the Moscow Art Theatre thought *Uncle Vanya* should be interpreted. The fact that artistic consensus was reached may go some way to explain why this production was such a success. Three days before the play opened, Meyerhold wrote to thank Chekhov for having given him some useful advice on how to approach the role of Johannes in Hauptmann's *Lonely People*. In the course of this letter, he described his impressions of how Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko were conducting the rehearsals of *Uncle Vanya*:

The play is extremely well put together. What I note most of all in the production as a whole is the sense of restraint from beginning to end. For the first time the two directors complement each other perfectly; one, a director and actor, has great imagination, although inclined to go too far in the actual staging; the other, a director and dramatist, defends the interests of the author. And he seems quite evidently to have the upper hand. The frame does not hide the picture. Not only are the basic ideas carefully preserved by not burying them in a heap of useless details, they are rather skilfully brought out.<sup>9</sup>

Meyerhold clearly suggests that Stanislavski normally lacked 'restraint' but that, in this case, his tendency to invent all sorts of extraneous business, which buried the central ideas of a play, had been kept in check by Nemirovich-Danchenko. Meyerhold knew that Chekhov would be sympathetic to such criticism of Stanislavski, as the playwright had only recently written a letter to him in which he had warned the actor that he would have to resist the director's tendency to go for exaggerated effects that were theatrical rather than lifelike.<sup>10</sup>

In his memoirs, *My Life in the Russian Theatre*, Nemirovich-Danchenko recalled Stanislavski's love of both melodramatic excess and naturalistic exaggeration in the preparation of his *mise-en-scène*.<sup>11</sup> Stanislavski's obsession with what Meyerhold called the 'heap of useless details', which had been a feature of his earlier work, affected the early rehearsals of *Uncle Vanya*. Benedetti notes that 'Stanislavski found his way into the character of Astrov with difficulty', and this 'insecurity in the early stages of rehearsal' manifested itself in a tendency for him to become 'overactive'. Astrov was given all sorts of irrelevant 'business' by the actor:

Thus he wandered round the house and garden, noting everything, examining the plants, picking the heads off dead flowers. Above all he swatted mosquitoes ... The production plan contains instructions to everyone to swat them and even, as an added protection, to put handkerchiefs over their faces.<sup>12</sup>

In his memoirs, Nemirovich-Danchenko could not resist quoting Chekhov's humorous criticism of this weakness in Stanislavski's approach to the role:

Like every innovator he [Stanislavski] fell into extremes, but as every detail went through my direction I was in a position to cast aside anything that seemed superfluous or questionable.

Within a year, in *Uncle Vanya*, he would cover up the head against mosquitoes, would stress the chirp of the cricket behind the stove; for these effects theatrical criticism would go to great lengths to abuse the Art Theatre. Even Chekhov, half jesting, half in earnest, would say: 'In my next play I'll make the stipulation: "The action takes place in a land which has neither mosquitoes nor crickets nor any other insects which hinder conversation between human beings."'13

At the time of the first Moscow Art Theatre production of *Uncle Vanya*, Nemirovich-Danchenko was much more upset by Stanislavski's work on the play than the entry in his memoirs indicates. In a long letter written on the day the play opened, he complained to Stanislavski about the way the production had developed. He felt that, due to the restricted rehearsal times, he had not been able to communicate to the director certain major reservations that he had about some of his directorial decisions. Nemirovich-Danchenko laments:

... we have so little time for discussion that one cannot negotiate fully and logically. And we both are aware that it is awkward to disagree during rehearsals. It is embarrassing in front of the actors, don't you think?14

Claiming to be attempting to satisfy the needs of 'the interesting and better part of the public' rather than merely the reviewers, Nemirovich-Danchenko, apart from insisting that Stanislavski know Astrov's lines better, asked him to make certain changes to the production. One of these 'concessions' that he felt 'obliged' to ask for concerned the theatrical business that Stanislavski had devised for himself:

1) in your role as Astrov I don't want a handkerchief on your head to keep off mosquitoes, it's a detail I simply cannot take. And I can tell you for certain that Chekhov won't like it; I know his tastes and creative nature extremely well. I can tell you for certain that this particular detail doesn't introduce anything new. I'll wager that it will merely be numbered among those 'excesses' which just irritate and bring no advantage either to the theatre or to the work you are doing ... Finally, even from the point of view of real life it is far-fetched. In short I cannot find any appreciable argument for it, not one serious argument of any kind whatsoever. And precisely because there is no argument for it I cannot see why you won't give it up when I ask you.15

At first, Stanislavski refused to give up these bits of business, clinging to them as if they were some sort of security blanket. So, as Benedetti notes, 'the handkerchief and the mosquitoes remained. Only gradually, as rehearsals progressed and confidence grew, did the welter of detail disappear.'16 The

artistic 'restraint' that Meyerhold had noticed developing during rehearsals in the production as a whole was gradually incorporated by Stanislavski into his own performance as Dr Astrov and, to his surprise, this resulted in a characterisation that was universally admired. He is reported to have said to Olga Knipper in astonishment: 'I do nothing and the public loves it.'<sup>17</sup>

The useful lesson that can be learnt from Stanislavski's experience in playing the role of Astrov is that much of the art of acting Chekhov lies in the ability of the actor to play his or her role with an almost classical simplicity. Chekhov's advice to the actors rehearsing in Karpov's St Petersburg production of *The Seagull* remains as useful for today's actors and directors as it was in 1896. 'Above all,' Karpov reports Chekhov saying, 'avoid theatricality. Try to be as simple as possible. Remember that they are all ordinary people.'<sup>18</sup> Stanislavski came to see the value of such an understated approach to characterisation.<sup>19</sup>

As a director, Stanislavski never overcame his habit of burying the central ideas of Chekhov's plays in 'a heap of useless details'. It was Meyerhold who pinpointed the potential for Chekhov's plays to be treated in this manner. As the Russian critic S. Balukhaty noted:

In Meyerhold's opinion the use of images which are impressionistically scattered onto a canvas makes up the basic characteristic of Chekhov's dramatic style; it provides the director with material suitable for filling out the characters into bright, defined figures (types). Hence, the characteristic enthusiasm of directors for details which distract from the picture as a whole.<sup>20</sup>

One of the clearest examples of the kind of problems that arise from such excessive 'filling out' of a character can be seen when one examines the performance given by Antony Sher as Astrov in Sean Mathias' 1992 production of *Uncle Vanya*. Anyone who has seen Sher's performances as the homicidal Richard in *Richard III*, or as the arch hypocrite Tartuffe in Molière's play of the same name, will realise that this actor has a highly theatrical and often idiosyncratic approach to his roles. Christopher Edwards, in his review of Mathias' production, thought that Sher's performance as Astrov was 'vital', but makes the damning comment that 'Sher will never be a true ensemble actor, I imagine'.<sup>21</sup> Other reviewers echo this criticism. Malcolm Rutherford of the *Financial Times* pointed out that Sher 'must be one of the hardest actors to discipline to a team performance, particularly when he is not the captain'.<sup>22</sup>

Nothing is more fatal in playing Chekhov than if an actor draws attention to himself as a star performer rather than as a member of an ensemble, but this was precisely what Sher appears to have done. Kenneth Hurren in the *Mail on Sunday* talked about 'a couple of "actorish" performances' which marred what was otherwise felt to be a fine production. Sher's performance Hurren described as 'amusingly full of tricks from some actors' handbook'.<sup>23</sup> Many reviewers noted

the self-centred nature of Sher's performance. Even Christopher Edwards, who liked his interpretation of Astrov, pointed out that Sher 'cannot help but grab attention and he goes about it with his usual thoroughness here'.<sup>24</sup> The most revealing review of Mathias' production and Antony Sher's performance was that written by Charles Spencer for the *Daily Telegraph*. Spencer's analysis of why this *Uncle Vanya* 'misses greatness', despite having the services of 'an exceptionally distinguished cast', suggests that this production fell into the trap of being overtly theatrical rather than attempting to be natural and lifelike:

In Sean Mathias's staging you are too often aware that you are watching unusually gifted actors *acting*. The best Chekhov productions create the illusion that you are watching not a carefully constructed play but the untidy sprawl of life itself. Here there's a self-consciousness, a determination to be fresh and original at all costs. Mathias appears to have little time for the art which conceals art.<sup>25</sup>

Chekhov's commitment to the use of the conventions of realism meant that, unlike Mathias, he was attempting to create art in a form that by definition tried to hide its artifice. Sher, consciously or not, adopted the piece of 'business' with the handkerchief which Stanislavski had so loved and which Nemirovich-Danchenko had so despised. Spencer, like Nemirovich-Danchenko before him, points to the inappropriateness of such theatrical trickery:

I must confess that I have a particular problem with Antony Sher, greatly admired by many, who plays Astrov. Mr Sher is famous for his hyperactive flamboyance and he is unable to repress it even in Chekhov. The Doctor makes his first entrance drenched in sweat and panting for breath before going through an elaborate ritual of wetting a handkerchief and placing it absurdly on his head. Of course all of this is meant to show that Astrov has just ridden a long way and that it's very hot, but what you actually think is here's old Antony Sher indulging in another elaborate piece of business. How long, you wonder, will it be before he's lying prone on the floor? Answer: about two minutes, and he has plenty of other tricks up his sleeve as the evening wears on.<sup>26</sup>

Sher's performance as Astrov epitomises the kind of histrionic excess that Chekhov constantly railed against. The playwright's love of brevity and understatement is constantly attested to in the advice he gave to other writers during the whole of his career. So, in a letter written just prior to the Moscow Art Theatre production of *Uncle Vanya*, we find Chekhov explaining what he found 'lacking' in Maxim Gorky's writing:

I'll begin by saying that in my opinion you lack restraint. You are like a spectator in a theater who expresses his enthusiasm so unreservedly that he prevents himself and others from listening.<sup>27</sup>

A few weeks later Chekhov elaborated on this criticism. Having praised Gorky's talent, he added:

The only weak point is the lack of restraint, the lack of grace. When a man expends the fewest possible movements on a given act, that is grace. In your movements one is aware of superfluity.<sup>28</sup>

It is precisely this 'lack of grace' that characterised Antony Sher's performance. By doing too much he made the play's central action more difficult to read.

Gregory Mosher's television version of *Uncle Vanya* did not simply fail to follow Chekhov's advice about the play, but instead appeared to be perversely trying to incorporate as many of the elements that the author had specifically objected to in Stanislavski's production. This Anglo-American venture, produced by the BBC in association with WNET New York in 1990, involved a stylistically uneasy combination of British and American actors. The verisimilitude that Chekhov's drama demands was destroyed by having Serebryakov played by the Scottish actor, Ian Bannen, while his daughter, Sonya, was played by the American actress Rebecca Pidgeon. Having heard Dr Astrov, the man she loves, state that the only thing that still thrills him is 'beauty', Sonya laments:

SONYA. [*Alone.*] Oh, how dreadful not to be beautiful. It's dreadful. And I know I'm not beautiful, I know, I know, I know. Coming out of church last Sunday I heard some people talking about me and one woman said, 'She's such a nice, kind girl. What a pity she's so plain.' So plain.<sup>29</sup>

The problem in this production is that dramatic credibility is further strained by the fact that, no matter how hard she tries to deny the fact, Ms Pidgeon is a remarkably beautiful woman. The result is that she appears to be remarkably lacking in perception about her own appearance and Dr Astrov seems to be simply blind. Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio is appropriately beautiful in the role of Helen, Serebryakov's young wife, but her strong American accent again has the effect of drawing attention to the incongruity of mixing actor nationalities in a production otherwise attempting to achieve complete realism.

Mosher's directorial perversity however is even more evident in his rejection, conscious or otherwise, of Chekhov's advice on how he wished certain sections of the play to be performed in order to avoid misinterpretation. Olga Knipper, who was playing the role of Helen in the Moscow Art Theatre production, had had difficulty in arriving at a satisfactory interpretation of the role, with the result that her performance on the opening night was unsatisfactory.<sup>30</sup> She wrote to Chekhov about her difficulties in accepting some of Stanislavski's ideas on how to play certain scenes. Knipper wrote that she was:

... rather put out by a comment of Stanislavski's on Astrov's last scene with Helen [*Yeliena*]. He wants Astrov to address Helen as an ardent lover seizing

on his passion as a drowning man clutches at a straw. In my opinion if that were the case Helen would follow him and wouldn't have the courage to answer, 'You really are absurd'. On the contrary, he speaks to her in the most cynical way, even somehow making fun of his own cynicism. Am I right or not?<sup>31</sup>

Chekhov's response was clear. As far as he was concerned, Stanislavski's interpretation, as presented by Knipper, was totally incorrect. To play Astrov as an ardent lover, Chekhov claimed, was 'Wrong, quite wrong'. The playwright then provided an extremely lucid explanation of why such an approach was incorrect:

Astrov is attracted to Helen [Yeliena], she captivates him with her beauty, but in the last act he already knows there's nothing doing. He knows Helen's going away for good so far as he's concerned and in this scene he speaks to her in the same tone as when he talks about the heat in Africa. And he kisses her quite casually because he has nothing better to do. If Astrov makes a great to-do about this scene the entire mood of Act Four, which is quiet and apathetic, will be ruined.<sup>32</sup>

This potentially useful advice was ignored in Mosher's production. Ian Holm, a deeply gloomy Astrov, played this scene with the same passionate intensity advocated by Stanislavski, while Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio's Helen wept tears of anguish at her inability to find the courage to have an affair with the tortured doctor.

Ronald Hingley claims that Chekhov 'found Stanislavski's interpretation over-flamboyant'.<sup>33</sup> One can only speculate on what the playwright would have made of Mosher's directorial embellishments to *Uncle Vanya*. One of the most glaring examples of this American director's distortion of Chekhov's meaning occurred at the climactic moment in Act Three when Vanya makes his inept attempt to shoot Serebryakov. At this point in the play Marina is comforting Sonya while, off-stage, Vanya and the Professor appear to be continuing their earlier on-stage quarrel. Chekhov's text runs as follows:

MARINA. ... Don't grieve, my poor darling. [*Looking at the centre door, angrily.*]  
Dear me, the feathers are flying. A plague on those geese!  
[*A shot off stage. HELEN [Yeliena] is heard to scream. SONYA shudders.*]  
MARINA. Oh, a curse upon you!  
SEREBRYAKOV. [*Runs in, staggering and terrified.*] Stop him, stop him! He's gone mad!  
[*HELEN and VOYNITSKY [Vanya] are seen struggling in the doorway.*]  
HELEN. [Yeliena] [*Trying to take the revolver from him.*] Give it to me. Give it to me, I tell you!  
VOYNITSKY. [Vanya] Let me go. Let go of me. [*Frees himself, runs in and looks around for SEREBRYAKOV.*] Where is he? Ah, there he is. [*Fires at him.*] Bang!

[Pause.] Missed him, did I? Missed him again, eh? [Angrily.] Oh, hell, hell! Hell and damnation! [Bangs the revolver on the floor and sinks exhausted in a chair.

SEREBRYAKOV looks stunned.

[HELEN leans against the wall almost fainting.] HELEN. Get me away from here.

Take me away, I don't care if you kill me, but I can't stay here. I can't.

VOYNITSKY. [Desperately.] Oh, what am I doing? What am I doing?

SONYA. [Quietly.] Nanny darling! Nanny!

CURTAIN.<sup>34</sup>

At this point in the play, we have an almost perfect example of Chekhov's tragi-comic technique. This highly melodramatic scene, replete with two pistol shots, may initially suggest to an audience that Vanya has committed suicide off-stage, like Treplev in *The Seagull*. Chekhov then increases the theatrical excitement by introducing the theatrical twist of having the possibility of suicide removed and replacing it by the even more dramatic situation of a potential murder occurring on-stage. Having developed the melodramatic possibilities of the scene to their utmost, Chekhov then proceeds, through the use of comic bathos, to transform it into something that, if it were not also potentially tragic, would be akin to farce. Effective tragic action turns into empty comic gesture.

In Mosher's production, the off- and on-stage shots are present, as in Chekhov's script, but the director adds an extra piece of stage business that is entirely at variance with the tragi-comic tone of the play. After David Warner as Vanya says 'Bang!', he is given a line which he delivers in a quietly menacing fashion. That line — 'All right. All right. One more time.' He then slowly approaches Serebryakov, who stands stock-still, fearlessly staring Vanya in the eyes, points the revolver under the professor's chin and then pulls the trigger. A click rather than an explosion is heard, and Vanya then '*sinks exhausted into a chair*'. Mosher's interpolation is certainly highly theatrical and is part of a tradition of melodramatic overstatement that accorded with Stanislavski's taste for excess, but it is the complete antithesis of the Chekhov's artistic attempt to 'show life and men as they are, and not as they would look if you put them on stilts'.<sup>35</sup>

Chekhov's advice to the actress playing the role of Sonya provides further evidence of his deep desire to avoid externalised melodramatic performance. In her *Reminiscences*, the actor I. S. Butova recounts Chekhov's comments:

Anton Pavlovich once saw a performance of *Uncle Vanya*. In the third act Sonya went down on her knees on the line 'Father, you must be merciful!', and kissed his hands. 'You mustn't do that, that isn't what drama is', said Anton Chekhov. 'The whole meaning or drama of a person lies internally, not in outer manifestations. There was drama in Sonya's life prior to this moment, and there

will be subsequently, but this is just an occurrence, a continuation of the pistol shot. And the pistol shot is not a drama either, but an occurrence.<sup>36</sup>

Almost all of the directorial flourishes introduced by Mosher in his production of *Uncle Vanya* helped to transform the play into an extremely portentous and bleak tragedy. Chekhov's ironic humour, which is found, for example, in Vanya's ludicrous attempt to shoot the professor, was almost totally submerged in the gloomy fatalism that predominated in this version of the play. What was missing in this production was a sense of the dualistic vision of reality, inherent in Chekhov's works, that manifests itself in the form of synthetic tragi-comedy. In all of Chekhov's plays, and in *Uncle Vanya* in particular, the vision of reality is expressed in terms of both a short view and a long view. The short view is essentially pessimistic and is expressed in a tragic form, while the long view is essentially optimistic and is associated with the comic aspect of the play. Dr Astrov and Sonya are the two characters in the play who embody the combined short and long views of life. Arriving at an appropriate interpretation of these roles can be the key for a director seeking to find that delicate balance between hope and despair at the heart of Chekhovian tragi-comedy. It is, of course, up to any given director to find the specific *mise-en-scène* that, at the particular time of his or her production, will realise that interpretation for an audience.

While Dr Astrov is not a portrayal of Chekhov himself, the playwright invested this character with many of his own beliefs. In particular, Chekhov's dualistic vision of reality is reflected in Astrov's alternation between moods of hope and despair. Just as the terminally sick Dr Chekhov knew that, from his individual short-term view, there was little he could do to improve humanity's lot during his brief lifetime, so Dr Astrov, in his darker moods, is depressed by the fact that his own puny efforts seem pointless and will even fail to be noticed. At the beginning of the play the overworked doctor is in just such a depressed mood. He has just lost a patient and this reminds him of the limitations of his profession and his own inability to significantly improve the lot of the peasants. Astrov, in this mood, loses the scientific objectivity that is vital for survival in the profession of medicine where the inevitability of death is a given. He recounts how his personal emotions became involved when his patient died. This leads him to voice his current feeling that perhaps his work, and life in general, are futile:

ASTROV. ... They brought someone in from the railway, a switchman. I got him on the table to operate, and damned if he didn't have to die on me under chloroform. Then just at the worst possible moment my feelings did come to life and I felt as guilty as if I'd murdered the man. I sat down and closed my eyes like this. And I thought of the men and women who will be alive a hundred or a couple of hundred years after we've gone, those we're preparing the way

for. Will they have a good word to say for us? You know, Nanny, they won't even remember us.

MARINA. Men may forget, but God will remember.

ASTROV. Thank you for saying that. You put it well.<sup>37</sup>

Astrov's long-term epic vision of a better life, evidenced by his reference to the future generations for whom he and others are working, is at this point eclipsed by his short-term sense of futility. What we witness here is a momentary loss of faith on Astrov's part. We later find out that, unlike Marina and Sonya, Astrov has no belief in God to sustain him. In Act Two, after having drunk too much vodka, he embarks on a late-night talk with Sonya in which he describes this lack of faith and sense of hopelessness by using a metaphorical image:

ASTROV. ... You know, sometimes when you walk in a wood on a dark night there's a glimmer of light shining in the distance, isn't there? Then you don't notice how tired you are or how dark it is or how the thorns and twigs hit you in the face. As you well know, I work harder than anyone else round here, the most awful things are always happening to me and there are times when the whole business really gets me down. But for me there's no light shining in the distance.<sup>38</sup>

Despite Astrov's awareness that from his personal individual viewpoint there is no hope, he nevertheless continues to behave in a manner that takes into account future generations. Like Chekhov, he continues to practise medicine and also, like the playwright, he plants trees in order to halt the environmental degradation that would adversely affect the living conditions of those yet unborn. Though Dr Astrov does not appear to believe in any afterlife, he retains his faith in the idea of creating a better future for humanity. When Astrov describes the ways in which the Russian forests 'are crashing down before the axe',<sup>39</sup> he does not ascribe this ecological disaster to fate. According to Astrov, it is human beings who are responsible because they have chosen to behave in this irresponsible manner:

ASTROV. ... Man has been endowed with reason, with the power to create, so that he can add to what he's been given. But up to now he hasn't been a creator, only a destroyer. Forests keep disappearing, rivers dry up, wild life's become extinct, the climate's ruined and the land grows poorer and uglier each day.<sup>40</sup>

The fact that Astrov says that man has been a destroyer 'up to now', implies that in the future he could be a creator. If the degradation had come about because it was in the nature of things to degenerate, then Chekhov would indeed have presented a world view in which there was 'nothing to be done'. However, Astrov's argument suggests that the disasters that occur to the environment are the result of 'no-one doing anything'. It is 'all because man's so lazy'<sup>41</sup> that he 'destroys everything with no thought for the morrow'.<sup>42</sup> Astrov has little faith

in the present but it is because he does have faith in the 'morrow' that he plants his trees:

ASTROV. ... You don't take any of this seriously, and — and perhaps I really have got a bee in my bonnet. But when I walk past our village woodlands which I've saved from the axe or hear the rustle of my own saplings, planted with my own hands, I feel that I too have some slight control over the climate and that if man is happy a thousand years from now I'll have done a bit towards it myself. When I plant a young birch and later see it covered with green and swaying in the breeze my heart fills with pride ...<sup>43</sup>

While Helen may be indolent and incapable of involving herself in any useful occupation, she is intelligent enough to see her own lack of worth when compared to Astrov. She admits to Sonya that she is 'just a tiresome character and not a very important one',<sup>44</sup> but she recognises, like Sonya, that part of what makes the doctor attractive is his belief in the possibility of creating a better future:

HELEN. [Yeliena] ... he has courage, flair, tremendous vision. When he plants a tree he's already working out what the result will be in a thousand years' time, already glimpsing man's future happiness. People like that are rare and should be cherished.<sup>45</sup>

Astrov's vision is not one that includes personal happiness. The vodka he drinks may temporarily anaesthetise the pain of enduring the grinding nature of his work, but what sustains him is faith in the future. The passion he shows for his research into and documentation of the environmental degradation of his district is made abundantly clear in the long speeches that Chekhov gives him in Act Three, when he explains his research to Helen. It is only when he realises that she is not really interested in environmental issues and has something else on her mind that he stops his heartfelt description of his work. There is absolutely no sense of irony in these speeches, but rather a tone of serious commitment:

ASTROV. ... The general picture is one of gradual and unmistakable decline, and it obviously needs only another ten or fifteen years to become complete. You'll tell me it's the influence of civilization, that the old life obviously had to make way for the new. All right, I see what you mean. If roads and railways had been built in place of the ravaged woodlands, if we had factories, workshops and schools, the peasants would have become healthier, better off and more intelligent. But you see, nothing of the sort has happened.<sup>46</sup>

It is only when Astrov realises the real purpose of Helen's private consultation that the bantering ironic tone appears. He wags his finger at her and calls her 'a little box of tricks', 'little vampire', and a 'beautiful furry little weasel'.<sup>47</sup> Attracted as he is to Helen's beauty, he evinces no real passion for her. Indeed,

when the time comes for him to say goodbye, he realistically appraises the situation by pointing out to Helen that their would-be affair was really only a comic interlude which for a brief time took the place of his real passion:

ASTROV. ... No sooner do you and you husband turn up in this place than people here who are getting on with their work, all busy creating something, have to drop everything and do nothing all summer but attend to you and your husband's gout. You two have infected us all with your idleness. I've been under your spell and I've done nothing for a whole month while all the time people have been falling ill and the villagers have been grazing their cattle in my newly planted woods ... And I'm quite sure of this. If you'd stayed on here we'd have had a full-scale disaster on our hands. It would have been the end of me and you wouldn't have come out of it too well either. All right then, off with you. The show is over.<sup>48</sup>

When directors overemphasise the 'love' between Astrov and the professor's wife they push the play towards the type of clichéd boulevard dramas that Chekhov was trying to avoid. Chekhov depicts Astrov in an anti-romantic fashion, not as some thwarted passionate lover but as a realist who sees life without illusions and endures. It is Uncle Vanya, or Uncle Johnny as he should be in English, who attempts to be the passionate lover, and Chekhov depicts his attempts at seduction in a comic fashion.

Nothing could be more ludicrous than Vanya's perfect comic entrance bearing autumn roses for Helen and finding her in the arms of Astrov. It is Vanya who, having wasted his own life, blames the professor for his own lack of vision and then makes the comically ludicrous claim, which even he realises is silly, that, but for the professor, he would have been a man of genius:

VOYNITSKY. [Vanya] My life's ruined. I'm gifted, intelligent, courageous. If I'd had a normal life I might have been a Schopenhauer or a Dostoyevsky. But I'm talking nonsense, I'm going mad. Mother dear, I'm desperate. Mother!  
MRS. VOYNITSKY. [*Sternly.*] Do as Alexander says.<sup>49</sup>

Vanya's pain is real, but his reaction to what is in effect a mid-life crisis is ludicrously inappropriate. Here he acts with a lack of maturity and emotional independence similar to Treplev in *The Seagull*, but in this case it is even more grotesque as Vanya is middle-aged and still behaves like a child in his mother's presence. It is Astrov who is forced to make Vanya face the harsh reality of his life when the unhappy self-pitying man asks the doctor to help him either to create a new life or help him out of this one. Astrov gives advice to Vanya similar to that which Dr Dorn had given to Sorin in *The Seagull* when that character bemoaned his un-lived life. He refuses to bolster Vanya's illusions:

VOYNITSKY. [Vanya] ... What am I to do? What am I to do?  
ASTROV. Nothing.

VOYNITSKY. Give me some medicine or something. Oh my God I'm forty-seven. Suppose I live to be sixty, that means I still have thirteen years to go. It's too long. How am I to get through those thirteen years? What am I to do? How do I fill the time? Oh can you think — ? [*Feverishly clutches ASTROV's arm.*] Can you think what it would be like to live one's life in a new way? Oh, to wake up some fine, clear morning feeling as if you'd started living all over again, as if the past was all forgotten, gone like a puff of smoke. [*Weeps.*] To begin a new life — Tell me, how should I begin? Where do I start?

ASTROV. [*Annoyed.*] Oh, get away with you. New life indeed. Our situation's hopeless, yours and mine.

VOYNITSKY. Is it?

ASTROV. I'm perfectly certain of it.

VOYNITSKY. Please give me something. [*Pointing to his heart.*] I've a burning feeling here.

ASTROV. [*Shouts angrily.*] Oh, shut up! [*More gently.*] Those who live a century or two after us and despise us for leading lives so stupid and tasteless, perhaps they'll find a way to be happy, but as for us — There's only one hope for you and me, that when we're resting in our graves we may have visions. Even pleasant ones perhaps. [*Sighs.*]<sup>50</sup>

While he holds out no hope for any salvation in his own lifetime or in any afterlife, Astrov is able to endure because of his faith in future generations. Astrov is one of those characters in Chekhov's plays and short stories who embody what Morris Freedman has called 'Chekhov's morality of work'. The importance of interpreting this character in terms both of his short-term pessimism and his long-term optimism cannot be overstressed as it is only when both are realised on stage that Chekhov's tragi-comic vision can be experienced by an audience. Freedman is accurate when he points to the centrality of Astrov in the action of *Uncle Vanya*:

It seems to me especially meaningful that the most energetic, the most vital, the most balanced, the most intelligent, and, all in all, the most attractive person in the play carries the point that work as it has meaning after death is the only good and meaningful work that we can ultimately do.<sup>51</sup>

Sonya shares Astrov's faith in the efficacy of work but, unlike him, she is consoled by her belief in God and an afterlife. It is this faith that allows her to endure her individual pain at not being loved by Dr Astrov. The inconsolable Vanya, having lost his faith in the usefulness of work, comes to the realisation that he has wasted his life. While Chekhov may not have believed in God, there is little doubt that he could appreciate the sustaining power of such a belief for those who could have faith. Both Astrov's faith in ecology and Sonya's faith in God could be interpreted as a rather blatant thesis, advocating the need for faith, were it not for Chekhov's ironic undercutting of their most committed utterances.

Astrov's examination of the maps that show the ecological damage occurring in Russia and his fervent resolution to do something to reverse this process is undercut by the fact that Helen [Yeliena] is far more interested in him as an attractive man than as a visionary man of ideas. The scene witnessed by the audience is not one in which an environmental thesis is driven home. Instead, the scene is one of comic 'crossed wires' in which the committed Astrov is so engrossed in advancing his thesis that he is comically unaware that Helen [Yeliena] is not listening to his ideas.

In a similar fashion, Sonya's long speech of faith at the end of the play is undercut by the fact that she is preaching to the unconverted. Vanya appears to have little faith in the existence of Sonya's God and, even though he has now resumed working, he no longer has faith in the value of work. Sonya's lyrical last speeches are played against a background of Vanya's quiet sobbing. There is no need for the actor to convey any tone of irony in Astrov's speeches about his faith in ecological management. Helen's amused response to his 'lecture' provides the scene as a whole with that tone. Similarly the actress playing Sonya can let the character's faith in the afterlife shine out in all its sustaining commitment at the end of the play. The sharp juxtaposition of Sonya's hope with Vanya's despair undercuts the power of her polemics while it enriches the tragi-comic complexity of the play's conclusion:

SONYA. Well, it can't be helped. Life must go on. [*Pause.*] And our life will go on, Uncle Vanya. We shall live through a long succession of days and endless evenings. We shall bear patiently the trials fate has in store for us. We shall work for others — now and in our old age — never knowing any peace. And when our time comes we shall die without complaining. In the world beyond the grave we shall say that we wept and suffered, that our lot was harsh and bitter, and God will have pity on us ... And we shall find peace. We shall, Uncle, I believe it with all my heart and soul ... Poor, poor Uncle Vanya, you're crying. [*Through tears.*] There's been no happiness in your life, but wait, Uncle Vanya, wait. We shall find peace. [*Embraces him.*] We shall find peace.<sup>52</sup>

Regardless of whether audience members share Sonya's faith in the compensating rewards of the afterlife, it does seem to be important that the actor playing the role should show that Sonya believes what she says. Imposing an ironic undercutting of this last speech of Sonya's makes the play into an unremittingly bleak experience that is alien to the tragi-comic experience that occurs when Chekhov's vision of reality is fully realised. For this reason, the kind of interpretation of the role of Sonya given by Frances de la Tour in Christopher Fettes' critically acclaimed 1982 production is appropriate and did not warrant Francis King's final criticism. Having praised this actor for bringing 'her incomparable gift for pathos to the role of the plain, yearning Sonya' and saying that she was able in her performance to 'wring the heart', King comments:

My only criticism of her performance is that, when she delivers that last pitiable speech in which she tries to comfort Vanya with a promise of final rest, she does so as though Sonya really believes what she is saying. I am sure that she does not.<sup>53</sup>

I can find no supporting evidence, either external or internal, for King's assertion that Sonya doesn't believe what she says. Again Freedman seems to me to be nearer the truth when he says that, in the world of *Uncle Vanya*, 'perhaps the only meaning in life is to be found in looking for meaning in life'.<sup>54</sup> While no specific faith is valorised by Chekhov in *Uncle Vanya*, the necessity of having something to believe in is advocated by the playwright. To deny this leads to the sort of misinterpretation made by Eric Bentley in his well-known article on the play. Bentley refuses to see Astrov's position as in any way positive or normative and proceeds to give a character analysis that, if it were to be followed in a production of the play, would result in an essentially absurdist version of the action. In Bentley's view, Astrov is like all of the characters in the play — a daydreamer who talks but does nothing:

Astrov is not to be congratulated on his beautiful dreams; he is to be pitied. His hope that mankind will someday do something good operates as an excuse for doing nothing now. It is an expression of his own futility, and Astrov knows it. Even in the early version he was not really a Wood Demon. That was only the ironical nickname of a crank. In the later version even the nickname has gone, and Astrov is even more of a crank. When Yelena [Helen] arrives he leaves his forests to rot. Clearly they were no real fulfillment of his nature but an old-maidish hobby like Persian cats.<sup>55</sup>

Dr Astrov may appear to be a crank to those characters who do nothing to improve life, but to those, such as Sonya, who work, he appears to be almost heroic. It is hardly surprising that in Act One, when confronted by Sonya's adulation and the other characters' scepticism at his attempts to do something to save Russia's forests, he should cover his embarrassment by calling himself a 'crank'. Astrov's real attitude is revealed in his long late-night discussion with Sonya, when, having drunk a lot of vodka, he pours out his feelings to her. He admits that he may appear odd to others, but that is only because these others think 'shallow little thoughts' and 'not one of them can see farther than the end of his own nose'.<sup>56</sup> It is quite clear from his behaviour and the tone of this speech that Astrov is frustrated by the small-mindedness of those around him who, because of their irresponsible lack of effective action, make him seem the odd one out. No one else seems to be doing anything:

ASTROV. ... They come crawling up to you, look at you sideways on and then complain. 'Oh, he's a psychopath' or 'He talks a lot of hot air'. And when they don't know how to label me they say, 'He's an odd fellow, odd.' I like forests.

So that's odd. I don't eat meat, so that's odd too. They don't have straightforward, decent, free relationships any more either with nature or with other people. That's gone entirely. [*Is about to have a drink.*]<sup>57</sup>

If one grants the fact that Astrov and, to a certain degree, Sonya are normative characters in *Uncle Vanya* who embody Chekhov's morality of useful work, then it becomes difficult to justify absurdist critical interpretations of the play, such as that put forward by Eric Bentley, or bleak productions, such as that of Gregory Mosher. In most productions of the play that I have seen, Marina's simple expression of faith that, even though future generations may not remember the work people like the doctor have done to improve people's lives, 'God will remember' was followed by a bitter response from the doctor. Astrov's line, 'Thank you for saying that. You put it very well',<sup>58</sup> was delivered in an extremely patronising manner, with heavy irony, implying that this silly old woman was clearly talking nonsense. If we accept that Chekhov presents faith, whether in future generations or in the afterlife, as infinitely preferable to the inertia and despair that results from having no faith in anything, then it is quite possible that Astrov's reply to Marina, the one person he admits having 'a soft spot for',<sup>59</sup> might more appropriately be delivered without irony. It then becomes the expression of genuine gratitude at being reminded that it is more productive to have faith in the long view rather than succumb to the despair that results from concentrating only on the short view of life.

It is clear that Chekhov, the scientifically trained materialist, did not believe in God. But he equally felt that humans needed to believe in something in order to avoid the despair and inertia that results from an acceptance of the absurdity of life. In March 1892, in a letter to a friend, he wrote: 'I have no religion now'.<sup>60</sup> Chekhov expresses here a similar perception to that voiced by Astrov in *Uncle Vanya* when that doctor was at his most depressed: 'there's no light shining in the distance'.<sup>61</sup> Chekhov, however, even in his darkest moments, did not entirely accept this bleak perception. He felt that some kind of disease was afflicting him.

Chekhov's own double perception of short-term hopelessness and long-term faith was, as we have seen, reflected in the seemingly contradictory beliefs of Dr Astrov, whose concern for the future seems to be combined with a personal fatalism. A brief entry in his *Notebooks* captures perfectly Chekhov's own contradictions where the question of faith was concerned. It reads: 'He was a rationalist, but he had to confess that he liked the ringing of church bells'.<sup>62</sup> To claim categorically that God either exists or doesn't exist was seen as simplistic by the playwright. Chekhov's views on the whole question of faith were complex. In his diary he once wrote:

Between 'There is a God' and 'There is no God' lies a great expanse which the sincere sage traverses with much difficulty. The Russian knows only one of

these two extremes, for the middle ground between them does not interest them. Hence, he usually knows nothing or very little.<sup>63</sup>

Chekhov's *Notebooks* are littered with comments concerning the need to have a purpose in life. It is not difficult to see how Astrov's aim to improve the environment for future generations would be seen as admirable by the person who wrote: 'We judge human activities by their goal; that activity is great of which the goal is great.'<sup>64</sup> It is also clear that the expressions of faith made by such characters as Marina and Sonya were unlikely to have been seen as the naive mumblings of a pair of misguided believers by the person who wrote:

Faith is a spiritual faculty; animals have not got it; savages and uncivilized people have merely fear and doubt. Only highly developed natures can have faith.<sup>65</sup>

Three years before he died we find Chekhov still concerned with advocating the need to have some kind of faith. So, having given details of the advanced stage of his illness, he warns his friend, Victor Mirolubov, against becoming a follower of a philosophical society created by Vasili Rosanov, but suggests that he still hold on to his beliefs, even if only in his 'own decency': 'One should believe in God; if one doesn't have faith, though, its place should not be taken by sound and fury but by seeking and more seeking, seeking alone, face to face with one's conscience.'<sup>66</sup>

Organised religion, like organised political parties and movements, was inimical to Chekhov but, as I argued earlier, this does not imply that he had no use for faith in a general humanist sense.

If directors of *Uncle Vanya* were to take account of Chekhov's own beliefs, they might see more clearly how inappropriate it is to interpret Astrov as a bitter failure crushed by the boredom and inertia that surrounds him, and they would not trivialise the vision of reality expressed by characters like Sonya and Marina. A balance between hope and despair needs to be realised on stage in any production that hopes to adequately present Chekhov's play.

Gary Saul Morson has written one of the more useful recent articles on Chekhov in general, and on *Uncle Vanya* in particular, in which he provides valuable insights that are of great use to directors. In the first place, he reminds us of some of Chekhov's concerns that permeate both the form and content of his plays:

It might be said that the fundamental theme of Chekhov's plays is theatricality itself, our tendency to live our lives 'dramatically'. 'True life' does not generally conform to stage plots, except when people try to endow their lives with a spurious meaningfulness by imitating literary characters and scenes ... That is what Chekhov's major characters typically do. His plays center on histrionic

people who imitate theatrical performances and model themselves on other melodramatic genres.<sup>67</sup>

As we saw in the previous chapter on *The Seagull*, characters such as Masha, Sorin, Treplev and Irina constantly overdramatise their situations. They vainly and ludicrously try to give their prosaic lives the kind of significance that characters in romantic melodramas have. It was precisely Voynitsky's tendency to fantasise his own pathetic life that led to Astrov and Sonya attempting to make him face the reality of his life. Typical of Uncle Vanya's fantasised dramatic scenarios is the one in which he imagines what his life might have been if he, instead of the professor, had married Helen. In one of those undisguised soliloquies that function rather awkwardly in this essentially realistic drama, Voynitsky plays the role of a young lover in his imagined drama:

VOYNITSKY. [Vanya] [*Alone.*] She's gone. [*Pause.*] To think that ten years ago I used to meet her at my sister's when she was only seventeen and I was thirty-seven. Why didn't I fall in love then and ask her to marry me? It would have been the most natural thing in the world. And she'd be my wife now. Yes. And tonight the storm would have woken us both. She'd be scared of the thunder and I'd hold her in my arms and whisper, 'Don't be afraid. I'm here.'<sup>68</sup>

Chekhov's parodic use of romantic melodrama undermines any heroic potential in Vanya's reverie. The audience should see a forty-seven-year-old man behaving in an entirely inappropriate manner — like an adolescent dramatising his sexual fantasies. The choice of who to cast in the role of Vanya is important, since it is vital that the character does not assume heroic dimensions. It is essential that the appropriate physical events be created on stage in order to trigger the desired physic events in the audience. Michael Redgrave's playing of Vanya in Stuart Burge's 1963 television production of Laurence Olivier's Chichester Festival production gave the character a deeply tragic quality partly because the actor's nobility was transferred to the character. The casting of the less heroic Wallace Shawn in Louis Malle's 1994 film, *Vanya on Forty-Second Street*, by contrast was a key factor in highlighting the comically ordinary nature of 'Uncle Johnny'. For Chekhov's tragi-comic characterisation to be achieved on stage, it is vital that an audience sees the gap between Vanya's claim that he could have been a Schopenhauer and his actual ordinariness. As Morson observes:

In most plays, people behave 'dramatically' in a world where such behaviour is appropriate. The audience, which lives in the undramatic world we all know, participates vicariously in the more interesting and exciting world of the stage ... In *Uncle Vanya*, by contrast, the world in which the characters live resembles everyday life, but the characters nevertheless go on behaving 'dramatically'. Consequently, actions that would be tragic or heroic in other plays here acquire tonalities of comedy or even farce.<sup>69</sup>

In *Uncle Vanya*, Chekhov creates situations that are potentially tragic for the play's nominal protagonist. Despite this, Vanya's attempts to have himself seen as a person of tragic stature are constantly undercut by Chekhov. Vanya's ludicrous attempts to seduce Helen [Yeliena] and kill her husband make him comically pathetic rather than tragically heroic. His claim that Serebryakov stopped him from being a Schopenhauer or a Dostoevsky is a further example of his comic tendency to overplay his part. Vanya can attack Serebryakov for acting the role of an important scholar who pretends to know all about art, but he seems largely unaware of his own role-playing. Again, Morson makes an astute observation about the difficulties that face the actor playing one of those characters who overdramatise their lives:

One reason the play has proved so difficult to stage in the right tonality — as critics and directors have constantly noted — is that the actors must overact and call attention to their theatrical status *but without ceasing to play real people who truly suffer*. They must not over-overact. Their performance must allude to but not shatter the dramatic frame.<sup>70</sup>

By actively subverting the theatricality of melodrama, Chekhov produces a kind of drama in which there are no clear-cut heroes or villains. Harvey Pitcher is surely correct when he says that, though some Chekhovian characters are more sympathetic than others, it is dangerous to take sides in their presentation. No character should be judged by the director and actor to be 'good' or 'bad'. As Pitcher says:

To regard the Professor, for example, as an 'evil exploiter' and Vanya as a 'virtuous victim' misses the whole point of Vanya's portrayal, which is to show the plight of a man who really has no one but himself to blame for the mess that he has made of his life.<sup>71</sup>

Vera Gottlieb has pointed out that, in many recent British productions, the decision to interpret Chekhov's plays without due regard to their 'sad comicality' has resulted in grave distortions of their meaning:

Thus the interpretation of the plays as tragedies simply ignores both the content *and* the form; while those productions which have recently played up the comedy have also failed to fuse form and content exactly because the comedy has not been seen as emanating from the philosophy and ideas of the plays — comic styles have been explored, but not the serious function of the comedy.<sup>72</sup>

The delicate balance between the comic and the tragic is difficult, but not impossible to achieve. In a 1990 production of *Uncle Vanya* directed by Paul Unwin, the role of Vanya was performed by Timothy West in a manner that led Christopher Edwards, the theatre critic of the *Spectator*, to describe the performance as 'the most convincing performance of the part I have seen'. What

Edwards saw was a performance in which the 'sad comicality', alluded to by Gottlieb, was clearly achieved:

... Vanya's spluttering rages and the truculent moodiness that lie behind them expose the 47-year-old as a dour, immature adolescent. It is Vanya's tragedy to be ridiculous. The famous moment where he fires at the Professor and misses, twice, sums Vanya's life up. Farcically, he has missed all of his opportunities. But this is precisely what makes the play so affecting. When he bursts into tears of frustration West is both ridiculous and heart-rending at the same time.<sup>73</sup>

If the critic for the *Guardian*, David Foot, is to be believed, however, the same production failed to create the requisite tragi-comic balance for the production as a whole, mainly as a result of the bleak manner in which Patrick Malahide interpreted the role of Astrov. Foot had no problem with this interpretation, since he wrongly assumed that the vision of reality embodied in Chekhov's play is completely tragic. 'Paul Unwin, the director, is faithful enough to the pessimistic spirit of the play', Foot claims and, consistent with this one-sided view, proceeds to praise the actor's interpretation of the doctor's role:

Patrick Malahide's Astrov, wearisome, embittered, idealism painfully thwarted, is portrayed with unrelenting despair. Here is both the most complicated and interesting character on view.<sup>74</sup>

If Unwin tipped the balance of his production towards the tragic, then the Renaissance Theatre Company production, jointly directed by Peter Egan and Kenneth Branagh, overbalanced the play towards the comic. The company advertised their production on the poster as 'The Bouncing Chekhov', which, as Allison Pearson noted, made it appear that 'Anton Pavlovich, the master of sleight of mind and heart, needed the *Carry On* treatment'. Pearson described the effect of this particular approach:

Half the cast act as though they are in a Chekhov play: their vivid inner lives surface in details which suggest they have made the long mental journey to the Serebryakov estate. The rest have apparently taken an *Awayday* to Ayckbourngrad. It is a missed opportunity with a great play that is all about wasted chances.<sup>75</sup>

Pearson's last comment highlights the fact that the particular tonality chosen by a given director does not simply affect the style of production, it largely determines the meaning of the play. Vera Gottlieb goes even further when she points out that such directorial decisions have a political dimension to them. She argues that Chekhov uses comedy for philosophical and political purposes. Comedy is used as a kind of 'alienation effect' that works against the creation of any 'cathartic experience' and highlights both the choices that the characters have made and the fact that they could have made different choices. The

distancing effect of comedy allows spectators to see the situation more clearly than if they are encouraged to have the kind of uncritical empathetic response that pure tragedy tends to promote.

Chekhov seems to have been acutely aware of the function of comic distancing well before Brecht popularised the idea. He explained to Suvorin what a writer had to do to awaken the reading public's awareness: 'One must shock it, rather, and then it will think more.'<sup>76</sup> It was by using the 'shock' of comic incongruity in *Uncle Vanya* that Chekhov was able to make his audiences see how many of the characters had wasted their lives. Chekhov's purpose in doing this was to raise the consciousness of the audience to a level that might make them question the ways in which they are leading their own lives. Morson suggests that the self-dramatising characters who refuse to face reality in *Uncle Vanya* act as reminders to audience members of their own escapist tendencies:

... the audience contemplates real people — people like themselves — who live citational lives, that is, lives shaped by literary role-playing, lives consisting not so much of actions as of allusions. We are asked to consider the extent to which our own lives are, like the title of the play, citational.<sup>77</sup>

Morson's argument suggests that Chekhov's plays are part of that time-honoured tradition that employs comedy as a form of social corrective. This certainly seems to be consistent with Chekhov's comment in his *Notebooks* that: 'Man will only become better when you make him see what he is like.'<sup>78</sup>

As with Morson, Gottlieb's analysis is significant because it restores the emphasis on the function and purpose of Chekhov's plays at a time when far too many productions of his plays are simply exercises in the creation of mood:

... the debate about tragedy and comedy goes deeper than questions of content and form, and becomes a philosophical and political debate. To put it crudely: the tragic view of human impotence in the face of seemingly inevitable forces, implies an *acceptance* of the world order as it manifests itself and works out its design in the characters on stage. The assumption of human impotence, the acceptance of 'that which is', the belief in ungovernable external forces, and the insistence on 'absolutes', all become part of a retrograde world view. This philosophy, I would suggest, was complete anathema to Chekhov, whose concern as a scientist and as a writer was with the exposure of contradictions, and not an annulment or denial of contradictions. His aim was to expose, and not to tranquilize, what Coleridge called 'the lethargy of custom'.<sup>79</sup>

*Uncle Vanya* is a play about lost opportunities that embodies an implied criticism of the behaviour that produces such wasted lives. It only makes sense to criticise or blame people or characters if they are seen to have the freedom of action that makes them responsible for their behaviour. The characters in this play are not the helpless playthings of fate. Chekhov's criticism of his characters

is not however expressed polemically — in his dramatic universe there are no villains to be vilified or heroes to be the subject of adulation. The devastation of the environment that is recorded in *Uncle Vanya* has come about not because humans are venal, but because, as Astrov says, 'they're backward and ignorant'<sup>80</sup> and 'man's so lazy'.<sup>81</sup> Because the playwright believed that ignorance can be cured by education, and laziness by work, Chekhov's vision of reality always expresses long-term hope. An understanding of Chekhov's vision of reality will inevitably lead directors to create the physical events on stage that will cause the audience to experience the appropriate psychic events. Consequently, it is vital that this optimistic element be present in productions of this play. *Uncle Vanya*, as Allison Pearson points out, depicts a 'recognition' situation in which, 'the characters have measured out their lives in linseed-oil bills and snowy days around the samovar, only to be agonisingly awakened to the might-have-beens and the should-have-beens by the arrival of outsiders.'<sup>82</sup>

The past life *has* been wasted and the present life, 'life as it is', *is* awful; but the future, 'life as it should be', *may* well be better if humans can learn from their mistakes. In the short term, there is nothing for the characters to do but endure. This does not mean that they should sit around and mope but, rather, do as Astrov and Sonya and even Uncle Vanya do in their different ways: work. Chekhov believed that 'the power and salvation of a people lie in its intelligentsia, in the intelligentsia who think honestly, feel, and can work'.<sup>83</sup> This idea was to be of central importance in his next play, *Three Sisters*.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Slonim, M., *Russian Theater from the Empire to the Soviets*, Methuen, London, 1963, p. 128.

<sup>2</sup> Clurman, H., 'Director's Notes for *Uncle Vanya*', in *On Directing*, Collier Macmillan, New York, 1974, p. 261.

<sup>3</sup> Anon., *World*, 29 January 1924.

<sup>4</sup> Scott-Norman, F., *In Press*, 3 July 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Shulman, M., *Evening Standard*, 15 September 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Magarshack, D., *Chekhov the Dramatist*, Eyre Methuen, London, 1980, p. 225. Richard Gilman, in an article in which he took the Broadway theatre reviewers to task for what he felt was their inept criticism of Mike Nicols' 1973 production, made a similar point to Magarshack when he said that none of these critics 'said the important non-clichéd thing about *Uncle Vanya*: that like the other three last great plays of Chekhov it is not about failure but about *stamina*'. (Gilman, R., 'Broadway Critics Meet *Uncle Vanya*', *Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 13, February–April 1974, p. 68.)

<sup>7</sup> Boyd, C., *Melbourne Times*, 10 July 1991.

<sup>8</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. L. Vishnevsky, 3 November 1889, in Yarmolinsky, A., *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, The Viking Press, New York, 1973, p. 355. Nemirovich-Danchenko records several other favourable comments made by Chekhov about the time that *Uncle Vanya* was produced: 'Anton Pavlovitch's feeling for the Art Theatre grew steadily. I remember the dates when there were letters from him containing such expressions: 'I am ready to be a door-keeper in your theatre'; or 'I envy the rat which lives under the walls of your theatre'; or, in answer to a disturbed letter of mine ... 'A trembling note is audible in your words. Oh, don't give up! The Art Theatre is the best page of that book which will one day be written about the contemporary Russian theatre. This theatre is your pride; it is the only theatre that I love, though I haven't been in it even once.' (Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., *My Life in the Russian Theatre*, Geoffrey Bles, London, 1968, pp. 195–6.)

<sup>9</sup> Meyerhold, V., Letter to A. Chekhov, 23 October 1899, in Benedetti, J., *The Moscow Art Theatre Letters*, Routledge, New York, 1991, pp. 58–9.

<sup>10</sup> A reading of Chekhov's letter to Meyerhold written in early October 1889 (see Benedetti, J., op. cit., pp. 56–7) must surely explode the myth, largely created by Stanislavski in his *My Life in Art*, that Chekhov was incapable of giving actors any useful advice. Stanislavski would have his readers believe that Chekhov, when asked to talk to actors about his plays, 'would grow confused, and in order to find a way out of this strange situation and get rid of us, he would take advantage of his usual statement: "Listen, I wrote it down, it is all there."' (Stanislavski, C., *My Life in Art*, Eyre Methuen, London, 1980, p. 361.) In fact, Meyerhold, who was acknowledged to be one of the Moscow Art Theatre's most talented actors, actively sought Chekhov's advice. 'Dear and respected Anton Pavlovich, ... I have been given the role of Johannes in Hauptmann's *Lonely People*. Would you help me to study this role? Write and tell me what you expect from someone playing the role of Johannes? How do you see Johannes? (Meyerhold, V., Letter to A. Chekhov, 29 September 1889, in Benedetti, J., op. cit., p. 55.) Meyerhold's reaction to Chekhov's detailed advice shows that he found the playwright's comments on role interpretation to be lucid, perceptive and useful to the actor. 'I clasp your hand warmly and thank you for having pointed out what you thought was typical of Johannes. Only someone like you could be content to sketch in the general characteristics yet with such mastery that the character emerges with complete clarity ... Moreover everything you indicated ... immediately suggests a host of details which are in tonal harmony with the basic tonality of the portrait of an intellectual who is lonely, elegant, healthy and at the same time sad.' (Meyerhold, V., Letter to A. Chekhov, 23 October 1899, in Benedetti, J., op. cit., p. 58.)

<sup>11</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko's description of Stanislavski's *mise-en-scène* for *Tsar Fyodor* provides ample evidence that this director adored melodramatic excess. Employing 'movements, costumes and properties, by no means always historically accurate', Stanislavski set about creating his grandiose spectacle: 'If the original hats were high, he must make them excessively high; if the sleeves were long, he must make them so long as to necessitate their being continually tucked in; if the door in the manor was small, he had to reproduce a door so small as to force the actors to bend low in order to pass through. He had read somewhere that the boyers, in appearing before the Tsar, bowed thrice to the ground. Well, in our rehearsals the boyers got down on their knees, touched the floor with their foreheads, rose and went down again — not less than twenty times ... And from this bright piling up of colours, images, outcries, we had to turn about-face to the sad everyday realities of Chekhov.' (Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., op. cit., pp. 153–4.) Stanislavski found this 'about-face' much harder to achieve than his partner.

<sup>12</sup> Benedetti, J., *Stanislavski: A Biography*, Methuen, London, 1988, p. 93.

<sup>13</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., op. cit., p. 163.

<sup>14</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., Letter to C. Stanislavski, 26 October 1889, in Benedetti, J., *The Moscow Art Theatre Letters*, p. 59.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>16</sup> Benedetti, J., *Stanislavski: A Biography*, p. 94.

<sup>17</sup> Stanislavski, C., quoted in Benedetti, J., op. cit., p. 97. The actor Leonid Leonidov has left a graphic description of how effective Stanislavski's histrionically low-key performance was: 'I have seen many good performances and many great actors, but never have I experienced anything like it before. I realised what it was: here one believed everything; here was no trace of theatricality; it almost seemed that there were no actors on the stage and no previously contrived *mise-en-scènes*. Everything was so simple, just as in real life, but beneath this simplicity one became aware of the seething cauldron of human passions.' (Leonidov, L., quoted in Magarshack, D., *Stanislavsky: A Life*, Faber and Faber, London, 1986, p. 192.)

<sup>18</sup> Chekhov, A., quoted in Magarshack, D., *Chekhov the Dramatist*, p. 184.

<sup>19</sup> At this time, Stanislavski was in the process of discovering through practice the key elements of what would later become his system of acting. His much admired playing of Astrov had been preceded by an equally truthful characterisation of Lovborg in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabbler*. This performance, according to Benedetti, marked a critical moment in Stanislavski's development as an actor. 'It is difficult to locate precise turning points in an actor's career but it is worth noting that this performance follows immediately on the encounter with Chekhov and the demands his plays made on the actor's inner life. In subsequent seasons Stanislavski gave performances in which the psychological is emphasized rather than external appearance and technique.' (Benedetti, J., op. cit., p. 87.)

<sup>20</sup> Balukhaty, S., quoted in Bitsilli, P., *Chekhov's Art: A Stylistic Analysis*, Ann Arbor, 1983, p. 116.

<sup>21</sup> Edwards, C., *Spectator*, 7 March 1992.

- <sup>22</sup> Rutherford, M., *Financial Times*, 27 February 1992.
- <sup>23</sup> Hurren, K., *Mail on Sunday*, 1 March 1992.
- <sup>24</sup> Edwards, C., loc. cit.
- <sup>25</sup> Spencer, C., *Daily Telegraph*, 27 February 1992.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to M. Gorky, 3 December 1898, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 320.
- <sup>28</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to M. Gorky, 3 January 1899, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 323.
- <sup>29</sup> Chekhov, A., *Uncle Vanya*, in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 3, Oxford University Press, London, 1964, p. 40.
- <sup>30</sup> Knipper resisted Stanislavski's direction in this production and the result was that, on opening night, she acted poorly. Nemirovich-Danchenko reported to Chekhov that 'Knipper caused us great annoyance. At the dress rehearsal people said she was fascinating, enchanting, etc. Today she got flustered and overplayed the whole part from beginning to end.' (Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., Letter to A. Chekhov, 27 October 1889, in Benedetti, J., *The Moscow Art Theatre Letters*, p. 63.) Knipper knew that she had performed badly and in a letter to Chekhov, having said 'I played so appallingly — why?', she attempted to give an explanation for her failure. 'The problem to my mind is this: they wanted me to forget my own conception of Elena because the director found it boring but I had not been able to carry the idea right through. They imposed a different conception on me on the grounds that it was essential for the play. I held out for a long time and was still opposed to it at the end ... On the first night I was infernally nervous and simply panicked ... If I had been able to play the way I wanted, probably the first night would not have worried me so ... It's awful to think of the future, of the work ahead, if I have to resist the director's yoke again.' (Knipper, O., Letter to A. Chekhov, 27–29 October 1889, in Benedetti, J., op. cit., p. 65.)
- <sup>31</sup> Knipper, O., Letter to A. Chekhov, 26 September 1889, quoted in Hingley, R., op. cit., p. 301. The role of Astrov was one of Stanislavski's most successful portrayals. Nemirovich-Danchenko wrote to Chekhov: 'We present Astrov as a materialist in the best sense of the term, incapable of loving, relating to women with elegant cynicism. There is sensitivity but no passion there. And all this in that half-joking form women find so attractive.' (Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., quoted in Benedetti, J., *Stanislavski: A Biography*, p. 96.) Olivier's justly famous interpretation of Astrov in his 1963 production of the play followed closely the kind of approach outlined by Nemirovich-Danchenko.
- <sup>32</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to O. Knipper, 30 September 1889, quoted in Hingley, R., op. cit., pp. 301–2.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 301.
- <sup>34</sup> Chekhov, A., *Uncle Vanya*, pp. 56–7.
- <sup>35</sup> Chekhov, A., quoted in Fen, E., ed., *Chekhov Plays*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1954, p. 19.
- <sup>36</sup> Butova, I. S., *Reminiscences*, quoted in Worrall, N., *File on Chekhov*, Methuen, London, 1986, p. 48. Hingley has pointed out that the incident referred to in Butova's work 'actually precedes the shot and does not follow it as Chekhov is made to suggest'. (Hingley, R., op. cit., p. 302.)
- <sup>37</sup> Chekhov, A., *Uncle Vanya*, p. 20.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 38–9.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 27.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 28.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 27.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 48.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 28.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 42.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 48.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 49–50.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 63.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 55.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 60–1.
- <sup>51</sup> Freedman, M., 'Chekhov's Morality of Work', *Modern Drama*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1962, p. 88.
- <sup>52</sup> Chekhov, A., *Uncle Vanya*, p. 67.

- <sup>53</sup> King, F., *Sunday Telegraph*, quoted in *London Theatre Record* for 15 July–15 August 1982.
- <sup>54</sup> Freedman, M., op. cit., p. 89.
- <sup>55</sup> Bentley, E., 'Chekhov as Playwright', *Kenyon Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Spring 1949, pp. 233–4.
- <sup>56</sup> Chekhov, A., *Uncle Vanya*, p. 39.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 20.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 39.
- <sup>60</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to I. L. Leontyev-Shcheglov, 9 March 1892, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 202.
- <sup>61</sup> Chekhov, A., *Uncle Vanya*, p. 39.
- <sup>62</sup> Koteliansky, S. S. and Woolf, L., eds, *The Notebooks of Anton Tchekhov*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1967, p. 61.
- <sup>63</sup> Chekhov, A., quoted in Simmons, E. J., *Chekhov: A Biography*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1963, p. 588.
- <sup>64</sup> Koteliansky, S. S. and Woolf, L., op. cit., p. 6.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 26. Given such positive views towards people with an ability to believe in something greater than themselves, it should not be so surprising to discover that, as Simon Karlinsky puts it: 'Chekhov's own favourite among the hundreds of stories he wrote was *The Student*, a very brief story that, in moving and utterly simple terms, states the case for the importance of religious traditions and religious experience for the continuation of civilization.' (Karlinsky, S., 'The Gentle Subversive', Introduction to Karlinsky, S. and Heim, M. H., *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1975, p. 13.)
- <sup>66</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to V. Mirolubov, 17 December 1901, in Hellman, L., *The Selected Letters of Anton Chekhov*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1955, p. 296.
- <sup>67</sup> Morson, G. S., 'Prosaic Chekhov: Metadrama, the Intelligentsia, and *Uncle Vanya*', *Tri-Quarterly*, No. 80, Winter 1990–91, p. 134.
- <sup>68</sup> Chekhov, A., *Uncle Vanya*, p. 35. Chekhov gives Helen a similar type of undisguised soliloquy in Act Three when she meditates out loud about her feelings for Astrov. Despite having increasingly mastered the conventions of realism in *Uncle Vanya*, Chekhov had not yet found a way of entirely avoiding the use of pre-realistic stage conventions.
- <sup>69</sup> Morson, G. S., op. cit., p. 135.
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 136. It was precisely because of Anthony Sher's tendency to 'over-overact' in Sean Mathias' 1992 production that his performance as Astrov was marred.
- <sup>71</sup> Pitcher, H., *The Chekhov Play*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1973, p. 7.
- <sup>72</sup> Gottlieb, V., 'The Politics of British Chekhov', in Miles, P., ed., *Chekhov on the British Stage*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 153.
- <sup>73</sup> Edwards, C., *Spectator*, 17 November 1990.
- <sup>74</sup> Foot, D., *Guardian*, 10 November 1990.
- <sup>75</sup> Pearson, A., *Independent on Sunday*, 18 August 1991.
- <sup>76</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 17 December 1891, in Friedland, L. S., *Chekhov: Letters on the Short Story, the Drama, and Other Literary Topics*, Dover Publications, New York, 1966, p. 102.
- <sup>77</sup> Morson, G. S., loc. cit.
- <sup>78</sup> Koteliansky, S. S. and Woolf, L., op. cit., p. 15.
- <sup>79</sup> Gottlieb, V., loc. cit.
- <sup>80</sup> Chekhov, A., *Uncle Vanya*, p. 48.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 27.
- <sup>82</sup> Pearson, A., loc. cit.
- <sup>83</sup> Koteliansky, S. S. and Woolf, L., loc. cit.