

Chapter 6. *Three Sisters*: ‘Oh if we could only know!’

*In his plays he [Chekhov] expresses the view that it would take at least two to three hundred years, or perhaps even a thousand years, to bring about a cardinal change in human nature, and in the *Three Sisters* he makes the idealist Vershinin his mouthpiece on the future of mankind.* (David Magarshack)¹

And really the whole structure of the play is designed to undercut Vershinin. He insists that life is always becoming ‘steadily easier and brighter’. But more than three years go by in the course of the play, and nothing changes – not at any rate for the better – nothing even begins to change. (Michael Frayn)²

Three Sisters, more than any of Chekhov’s plays, has been read as a deeply pessimistic, almost nihilistic play, by many critics, both in Russia and in the West. Beverly Hahn described it as ‘a profoundly sad play’, before adding, ‘Lionel Trilling calls it one of the saddest works in all literature’.³ Many productions have likewise been extremely bleak affairs. Chekhov’s so-called ‘pessimism’ led one reviewer of Theodore Komisarjevsky’s 1926 London production to describe the playwright as ‘the dramatist of disillusionment, of frustrated hopes, and of human failure’.⁴ In 1984, Simon Karlinsky optimistically claimed: ‘In the West, the durable cliché of the morose, despondent Chekhov has lately been caving in under the onslaught of informed critical writing and of the productions of the plays that do not reduce them to gloom and twilight.’⁵ Karlinsky’s observations have turned out to be a case of wishful thinking because, two decades later, many critics and directors continue to regard Chekhov as a pessimistic Absurdist before his time. Richard Gilman, in a much praised book on Chekhov’s plays, having given his chapter on *Three Sisters* the mock-Beckettian subtitle ‘I Can’t Go On, I’ll Go’, proceeds to explicitly link Chekhov with that Absurdist dramatist. We are told that Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* has such profound affinities with *Three Sisters*.⁶ After claiming that what Chekhov dramatises is not an *action* but a *condition*, Gilman outlines his Absurdist ‘nothing to be done’ reading of the play:

That *Three Sisters* doesn’t seem to be taking us anywhere is, once again, a matter of Chekhov’s having written it so that we see time’s effects not as rational or even irrational consequences, not as consequences at all but as an accumulation, like the sand that more and more covers Winnie in Beckett’s *Happy Days*, where time is rendered in a visual metaphor. Eventful immobility, or movement around a still center, or a circle, or a series of flat planes rather than a more or less straight line — any of these images will help free us from an inherited,

chronologically and narratively anchored way of looking at *Three Sisters*, a perspective disastrous to understanding.⁷

Like many critics who analyse *Three Sisters*, Gilman correctly indicates the importance of 'time' in this play, but his assumption that Chekhov's use of time is similar to the way Beckett uses the concept is unwarranted and, to use his own expression, 'disastrous to understanding'. The kind of stasis that is presented in *Happy Days* and that is given verbal form by Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot* has little to do with Chekhov. When Pozzo cries out: 'Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! ... one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you?',⁸ he is indeed presenting a non-chronological picture of time. In Beckett's Absurdist world there is, as Estragon says, 'Nothing to be done'.

Chekhov's world, by contrast, is deeply embedded in chronological time. His audiences are shown characters who are quite literally 'wasting their time'. As I argued earlier, Chekhov's play does not depict a world in which there is nothing to be done, but one in which 'no one is doing anything'. Through their own inertia and passivity, the characters in *Three Sisters* make their lives absurd. They may abdicate their responsibility for action and even see themselves as 'Beckettian' fated characters, but this is not what the overall action of Chekhov's play depicts. Chekhov employs the idea of time passing as a warning and, in this, is closer to Andrew Marvell's concept of time than Beckett's. Marvell was acutely aware of how short a time human beings have on earth and so wished to avoid wasting it:

But at my back I alwaies hear
Time's wingéd Charriot hurrying near:
And yonder all before us lye
Desarts of vast Eternity.⁹

Chekhov, like Marvell, is implicitly reminding his audience not to waste their lives in the way that the characters on-stage waste theirs. Far from being static, time in Chekhov's plays runs away so fast that characters are bewildered at its speed. Andrew, at the end of the play, begins his vivid description of the wasted lives of the Prozorovs and those like them with an anguished version of the 'ubi sunt' theme: 'Where is my past life, oh what has become of it ...?'¹⁰

Critics such as Gilman and, as we shall see, such directors as Mike Alfreds privilege the nihilistic characters such as Dr Chebutykin who espouse an Absurdist view of life.¹¹ Chebutykin's point of view, however, is not identical to the playwright's view expressed in the action of the play.¹² As Howard Moss has noted:

The doctor may comfort himself with bogus philosophy and claim nothing matters but the others tend to confirm not his thesis but its perverse corollary.

By the indecisiveness of their actions, by their inability to deal head-on with what is central to their lives, they make, in the end, what matters futile.¹³

The kind of Absurdist interpretation advocated by critics like Gilman continues in more recent productions of *Three Sisters*. In 1986, two years after Karlinsky had heralded the demise of the 'gloom and twilight' school of Chekhov, Mike Alfreds directed the play in a manner that led Michael Billington to describe this painfully drawn-out production as 'the most unrelievedly tragic *Three Sisters* I have seen for some time'.¹⁴ Alfreds discussed his interpretation of the play with David Allen who quotes the director as saying:

Chekhov calls *Three Sisters* a drama. It is certainly not a comedy, although it is full of bitter ironies and has comic moments. It is a dramatic play that is aspiring towards tragedy (although it does not quite fit the classic definition of tragedy — none of the characters has true tragic stature) ... The play discloses a world in which people are lost ... The active theme of the play is how people cope with failure, either by constructing fantasies of a future happiness, or withdrawing into cynicism, or by trying to pretend that all is well ... There needs to be in performance too, an emotional danger, and a sense of a desolate emotional landscape.¹⁵

Here is Gilman's Beckettian Chekhov realised with a vengeance! As Sheila Fox commented after seeing Alfreds' production: 'This is bullet-in-the-back-of-the-neck Chekhov. Three and a half hours of full-throttle futility and hopelessness.'¹⁶

With some exceptions, notable for their rarity, there have been few productions in the West that have presented *Three Sisters* as a truly optimistic drama. Even Magarshack, who pioneered the attack on the pessimistic school of Chekhov interpretation, could find little evidence to support the more extreme Soviet readings which see in his work a powerful prediction of the bright future that was to result from the Communist Revolution of 1917. As Magarshack points out, Chekhov 'was never impressed by the facile optimism of the revolutionaries who believed that by sweeping away the old order they would establish peace and harmony on earth'.¹⁷

Karlinsky may have been rather too hopeful in his claims about the 'caving in' of the 'gloom and twilight' school of Chekhov interpretation. He was more accurate about the ways in which, 'In the Soviet Union, the equally short-sighted image of the politically correct proto-bolshevik Chekhov, bequeathed by the Ermilovs of the 1930s and 40s'¹⁸ was giving way to more balanced views of his work. It is rare today for characters such as Trofimov in *The Cherry Orchard* or Vershinin in *Three Sisters* to be performed as though they were the heroic mouthpieces of Chekhov's supposedly radical revolutionary ideals. The pessimistic 'Absurdist' Chekhov is certainly more in evidence today than the

optimistic 'Soviet' version, but neither of these polarised readings of his plays does them justice. The complexity of Chekhov's vision of reality is lost when the plays are interpreted in a monopathic manner. Many reductionist readings result, at least partially, from a simplistic reading of the playwright's 'political' stance. As Vera Gottlieb claims: 'The ideas voiced in all of Chekhov's work, whether literary or dramatic, are certainly not those of a reactionary, nor indeed of a revolutionary, but of a progressive or humanist.'¹⁹

Mike Alfreds' 'reactionary' interpretation of *Three Sisters* delivered the clear message to the audience that hopelessness was the core feature of the human condition and that, as one reviewer put it, 'Chekhov is really writing about the illusion of happiness, the absurdity of our quest for it'.²⁰ It was just such an extremely pessimistic reading that led Michael Billington to conclude his review of this production with the heartfelt cry: 'What I hunger for is more of the peculiar Chekhovian balance between hope for the race and deep personal despair.'²¹

Given Stanislavski's propensity to interpret Chekhov's plays as tragedies, one might have supposed that he would be the director accorded the dubious honour of having initiated the long line of gloomy productions of *Three Sisters*. Perhaps surprisingly, Stanislavski's production eventually turned out to be one which presented a balance between 'hope' and 'despair'. As Nick Worrall has noted, 'Chekhov himself was well pleased with the production which, when he saw it in September 1901, he said was staged better than the play was written'.²² Worrall points out that Stanislavski's 'production of *Three Sisters* can be described as an ideological fusion of opposites — form and content, positive and negative, optimism and pessimism, meaning and non-meaning, and even, "East" and "West"'.²³ The Soviet critic, N. M. Stroyeva quotes evidence from Stanislavski's production score that suggests an unusual sensitivity on the director's part towards the more positive aspects of Chekhov's vision of reality. Stanislavski stated that those working on the production should do nothing that would cause them 'to miss our main quarry, which is to present the author's final and optimistic summing up, which compensates for the many sad parts of the play'.²⁴ So Stroyeva argues that:

The surmounting of the sorrow at the end of this play is the most important task of all for a director. He sees the 'affirmative thought of the author' as Chekhov's characters, even in times of deepest personal grief, find the strength to raise themselves to the level of dreams about the future happiness of humanity. Stanislavski directed that Olga's final words be spoken 'as buoyantly as possible'.²⁵

Stanislavski did not arrive at his balanced interpretation of *Three Sisters* immediately. It seems likely that he once again relied on Nemirovich-Danchenko

to clarify for him the meaning of the play. Certainly, as Worrall points out, Nemirovich-Danchenko 'had a greater enthusiasm, initially, for the work of Chekhov than did Stanislavsky'.²⁶ Furthermore, apart from having a greater artistic affinity with Chekhov than did Stanislavski, Nemirovich-Danchenko was also closer to the playwright in matters of ideology. The 'progressive or humanist' Chekhov had a concern for social issues that was shared by the co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre. As Senelick points out: 'The Art Theatre was liberal but far from radical; its social conscience resided mainly in Nemirovich, for Stanislavsky was essentially apolitical'.²⁷

Nemirovich-Danchenko's contribution to the production of *Three Sisters* was attested to by A. L. Vishnevsky, the actor cast as Kulygin, in a letter to Chekhov,²⁸ but his efforts were not publicly acknowledged. Worrall comments: 'Despite the significant part played by Nemirovich-Danchenko in rehearsals, especially during January, the only directors' names to appear on the production poster were those of K. S. Stanislavsky and V. V. Luzhsky'.²⁹ Nemirovich-Danchenko had less of a problem than Stanislavski in acknowledging the artistic contribution made by his co-director in the initial production. In *My Life in the Russian Theatre* he wrote: '*The Three Sisters* has remained the best production of the Art Theatre, not only because of the superb ensemble, but also because of the fine *mise-en-scène* by Stanislavsky'.³⁰

In 1940, two years after Stanislavski's death, the eighty-three-year-old Nemirovich-Danchenko undertook his own production of *Three Sisters*. His reading of the play was certainly a more optimistic one than Stanislavski's. Laurence Senelick outlines some of the differences between the two Moscow Art Theatre directors' views of the play's action:

In 1901, Leonid Andreev had declared the play's theme-song to be 'To want to live, excruciatingly, agonisingly, painfully to want to live!' But Stanislavsky had notated this tune so as to be sung, 'It's impossible to live'. Nemirovich, in line with Stakhanovite optimism, chose to sing two different tunes: longing for a better life (not a plangent, whiny longing to escape life, but something active though devoid of the element of struggle), and deep faith in the future, in Tusenbach's storm about to break over the land and sweep away deceit, money-grubbing and antipathy to work. The characters were seen not as futile and trivial, but as fine minds in magnificent and handsome bodies. They were to be interpreted in a style of 'virile strength'.³¹

Nemirovich-Danchenko's reading of *Three Sisters*, which he outlined in his autobiography, aptly illustrates the ways in which it is so easy to lose the precarious balance between 'hope' and 'despair' that is so important an element of Chekhov's vision of reality. Writing in 1938, only two years before his relatively optimistic production of the play, but referring to the original 1901 production in which he had collaborated with Stanislavski,

Nemirovich-Danchenko describes what he took to be the vision expressed in the play:

The events of the play crept along even as life itself during this epoch, in a tired sort of way, without any visible logic. Human beings acted under the influence of chance happenings; they did nothing to build their own lives. Here is the substance of his first act: a birthday party, the spring, gaiety, birds singing, bright sunshine. And of the second act: triviality gradually takes into its hands the power over the sensitive, nobly inclined human beings. Of the third act: a conflagration in the neighbourhood, the entire street is aflame; the power of triviality grows intenser, human beings somehow flounder in their experiences. The fourth act: autumn, the collapse of all hopes, the triumph of triviality. Human beings are as chess pawns in the hands of invisible players. The absurd and the pathetic, the noble and the worthless, the intelligent and the stupid, are all interwoven ...³²

Statements such as, 'Human beings acted under the influence of chance happenings', and, 'Human beings are as chess pawns in the hands of invisible players', can easily be interpreted as existential statements about the hopelessness of the human condition. This is the 'Absurdist' Chekhov, who supposedly depicts a world in which there is 'Nothing to be done'. This is precisely how the right-wing reactionary critic of Suvorin's *New Times*, Viktor Burenin, interpreted the 1901 production. Chekhov, he claimed, 'is the minstrel of hopelessness'.³³ But, as Vera Gottlieb has convincingly argued, 'Chekhov is *not* Beckett'.³⁴

A closer look at Nemirovich-Danchenko's analysis of *Three Sisters* reveals a more balanced and less pessimistic reading than appears at first sight. When he writes, 'they did nothing to build their own lives', he implies that it was possible for these characters to have created better lives for themselves, but that, by their inaction, they abdicated their responsibility to do so. Chekhov's characters in *Three Sisters* and, indeed, in all of his four major plays, behave in a ridiculously unreasonable way in the face of the social situation in which they find themselves. They behave foolishly and, to a large extent, create their 'silly trivial lives' themselves. The American woman who, having seen a production of *Three Sisters* in 1942, observed that she 'could not see much sense in three adults spending four acts in *not* going to Moscow when all the time they had the price of a railroad ticket'³⁵ was perhaps more perceptive than is generally acknowledged. There *is* something ludicrously 'incongruous' about the Prozorov sisters not doing anything. Again Gottlieb perceptively notes that Chekhov's characters carry 'some measure of responsibility for their own lives, and it is partly this which in Russian terms makes the plays *comedies*'.³⁶ The characters make their lives pointless by their refusal to act.

Gottlieb has argued elsewhere that our conventional view of farce and comedy where 'situation or circumstance dictate character and action — and render

characters impotent' — a view which has much in common with 'Absurdist' work — is contrasted in Russia by what is 'virtually an oppositional reading' in which comic and farcical 'action and circumstance arise largely *from* character: there is potential for change, albeit often unrealised on stage'.³⁷ Because they do nothing effective to alter their situation, Chekhov's characters become, at least potentially, the objects of comedy's critical laughter. Chekhov's comedy accords with the Classic and Neo-Classic 'social corrective' theories of comedy and depends on the belief that humans are corrigible. Again, Gottlieb is surely correct when she points out that: 'The *leitmotif* of play after play is '*tak zhit nelzya*' — one cannot and must not live like that'.³⁸ Chekhov uses farce and comedy to achieve a similar aim to that espoused by Molière, who claimed that 'the purpose of comedy is to correct the vices of men'.³⁹ Gottlieb is again perceptive when she claims that Chekhov 'uses farce, as he does melodrama, to expose the farcical'.⁴⁰

As we shall see, Stanislavski did not find it easy to see the comedy in Chekhov and, according to Senelick, the 'brightness' of the first production of *Three Sisters* 'was dimmed by the "lachrymosity" which Chekhov complained Stanislavsky had added to his work and which intensified over time'.⁴¹

Three Sisters was the first of Chekhov's plays to be written specifically for the Moscow Art Theatre and the playwright attended the first reading of his initial draft to the company on 29 October 1900. The reading was followed by a discussion which, according to Stanislavski, angered Chekhov: 'After the reading of the play, some of us, talking of our impressions of the play, called it a drama, and others even a tragedy, without noticing that these definitions amazed Chekhov'.⁴² The playwright walked out of the meeting and, when Stanislavski called on him at his hotel, he found Chekhov still furious:

I do not remember ever seeing him so angry again ... But the real reason (for Chekhov's anger) was that he had written a happy comedy and all of us had considered the play a tragedy and even wept over it. Evidently Chekhov thought that the play had been misunderstood and that it was already a failure.⁴³

Simon Karlinsky has argued that the above account given by Stanislavski is a piece of revisionism, written decades after the event, that bears little relation to the facts. He claims that Stanislavski's 'interpretation of the play is flatly contradicted by Chekhov's own letters at the time he was writing *Three Sisters* and by all the other contemporary documentation we have, in which *Three Sisters* is invariably referred to as a drama'.⁴⁴

Chekhov wrote to Olga Knipper expressing his doubts about Stanislavski's ability to respond sensitively enough to his new play. 'Let it lie on the table a bit ... Four important female parts, four young women of the upper class; I cannot leave that to Stanislavsky — with all due respect for his gifts and

understanding. I must have at least a peek at the rehearsals.'⁴⁵ Edward Braun has argued that Chekhov feared that Stanislavski might caricature the military characters in the play: 'Reluctant to surrender all control to Stanislavsky, Chekhov nominated in his absence a certain Colonel Petrov to act as military consultant on the production.'⁴⁶ According to Harvey Pitcher, 'Chekhov had made up his mind in advance that the play was bound to be a failure'. The playwright had reached this conclusion as a result of being 'alarmed by reports of how Stanislavsky was interpreting *Three Sisters*'.⁴⁷

Whatever the truth of Stanislavski's version of what happened at the first reading of *Three Sisters* and Nemirovich-Danchenko's claim that Chekhov 'several times repeated "I've written a vaudeville piece!'",⁴⁸ Chekhov set about rewriting the play. When it was completed he did not call it "a Comedy", which had been his genre description of *The Seagull* and was to be his description of *The Cherry Orchard*, nor did he choose a rather vaguer description similar to "Scenes from Country Life" that he had used to characterise *Uncle Vanya*. Instead, whether ironically or not, he chose to call *Three Sisters* "a Drama". Nemirovich-Danchenko's failure to 'understand why he called his play [a vaudeville]',⁴⁹ and the response of the Moscow Art Theatre personnel after the first reading may have made Chekhov decide on this generic classification. He wrote to Vera Kommissarzhevskaya that the play 'has turned out to be boring ... its mood, I am told, is gloomier than gloom'.⁵⁰

Stanislavski tended to assume that it was Chekhov, and not himself, who had misinterpreted the plays. In 1907, he confidently asserted:

As a matter of fact he never was able to criticise his own plays and he always listened to the opinions of others with interest and astonishment. The opinion that astonished him most of all — to the day of his death he could not accept it — was that his *Three Sisters* (and later *The Cherry Orchard*) was a serious drama of Russian life. He was sincerely convinced that it was a gay comedy, almost a farce.⁵¹

Stanislavski appears to have lacked a clear idea about what kind of play he was directing. In 1909, he wrote to Baron Drizen and, as Laurence Senelick states, 'confusedly tried to explain'⁵² his approach to the play:

We understood one thing: the play needed sadness and affliction. We attain this sadness by means of laughter, since three quarters of the play rests on laughter. For the audience, however, there was no laughter, the play emanated an appalling sorrow.⁵³

Stanislavski's confusion about the precise type of play he was dealing with may have arisen as a result of his growing awareness that neither Chekhov's extreme view of the play as a comedy/farce, nor his own equally one-sided view of the play as a tragedy/serious drama, adequately described the nature of *Three Sisters*.

In his 1901 production of the play, Stanislavski worked against his natural bent by attempting to incorporate the more optimistic and comic aspects of the play. With the benefit of hindsight, he writes in his memoir, *My Life in Art*:

The men of Chekhov do not bathe, as we did at that time, in their own sorrow. Just the opposite; they, like Chekhov himself, seek life, joy, laughter, courage. The men and women of Chekhov want to live and not to die. They are active and surge to overcome the hard and unbearable impasses into which life has plunged them.⁵⁴

Achieving an appropriate balance between 'hope' and 'despair' and between the 'absurd' and the 'pathetic' in any production of *Three Sisters* depends to a large extent on how a director interprets particular characters. What Joseph Wood Krutch once said about interpreting Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* applies with equal validity to *Three Sisters*: 'Everything depends on, as the phrase goes, which side the author is on'.⁵⁵ Much of Chekhov's play concerns itself with deliberations about 'the meaning of life'. Indeed, as Daniel Gillès correctly observes:

The meaning of life ... It is this question, continually stated or implied but never resolved, on which the whole play is founded. Around this central theme Chekhov built his drama like a musical composition, a series of questions in many voices that cross, harmonise, contradict one another, soar, or sink in despair.⁵⁶

Since it is Tuzenbach and Vershinin who carry on much of the explicit discussion about the meaning of life in this play, the way they are interpreted is crucial. The degree of sympathy or antipathy the audience feels towards particular characters is largely determined by the director's interpretation. A director of *Three Sisters* who instructs the actor playing Vershinin to present the character as though he were merely a garrulous windbag mouthing empty platitudes will inevitably lead an audience to discount the import of this character's speeches. Since Vershinin expresses the view that life, though difficult, does have meaning and will gradually improve through human effort, any interpretation that makes him a fool effectively negates his ideas. The voice of 'hope' is in this way effectively silenced and 'despair' at the meaningless of life becomes the predominant vision of reality expressed.

In Mike Alfreds' 1986 production of *Three Sisters*, we find a clear example of how the director's decision to devalue Vershinin led to a bleak reading. One must assume that Alfreds believed that the author was *not* on Vershinin's side, since he gave his audience little room to find anything of value in Vershinin's ideas. David Nathan's review of the production mentioned 'John Price's Vershinin whose own pretensions to philosophical depth have never seemed so shallow',⁵⁷ while Michael Coveney observed that 'John Price makes of Vershinin's

philosophising an acknowledged bore factor'.⁵⁸ Here was 'the windbag as local saint'.⁵⁹ In Alfreds' production Vershinin was not simply presented as being intellectually shallow but was also an emotional cripple. Eric Shorter wryly commented: 'Is John Price's Vershinin capable of deep feeling? Probably not.'⁶⁰ With such a demolition job carried out by Alfreds on the major voice of optimism and hope in the play, it is hardly surprising that most reviewers shared the opinion expressed by Helen Rose that 'this twitchy nervous production, suffused with doom from the outset, offers an unrelievedly pessimistic view of human hope'.⁶¹

Seemingly, it is difficult for critics and directors to avoid polarised readings of Chekhov's characters. Vershinin in *Three Sisters* is presented either as 'a marrowless colonel whose integrity is questionable from the start',⁶² a person whose 'only conversational topic' is his 'philosophy which he trots out at any opportunity', and which is made up of 'trivial ideas',⁶³ or as an 'idealist', Chekhov's 'mouthpiece on the future of mankind'.⁶⁴ *Three Sisters*, possibly more than any other Chekhov play, has been subject to polarised readings both by critics and directors. When the gloom and doom 'Absurdist' reading is rejected, it is often replaced by a reading of unalloyed optimism, but this is just as limiting and reductionist a view as the pessimistic one. An advocate of the 'Absurdist' Chekhov, Richard Gilman, finds little difficulty in characterising the optimistic Soviet reading of the play as 'pernicious nonsense'. Presumably assuming that he — unlike those pesky Bolshies! — writes from an ideologically free position, Gilman attacks this 'misreading by Chekhov's countrymen and women': 'Where ideology enters, Soviet (to stick to the now outdated word) criticism of Chekhov has been especially guilty of distortion in regard to the subject of the future in his plays, wishing to turn him into a prophet of the age that followed his, the bolshevik millennium'.⁶⁵

The problem with Gilman's argument is that it only attacks straw men such as the Soviet critic Vladimir Yermilov who simplistically describe Chekhov's characters as happy martyrs, willing 'to postpone love and happiness to the future, for those who come after them',⁶⁶ but fails to see that his own view of a Beckettian Chekhov is as simplistic a piece of 'pernicious nonsense' as that peddled by Yermilov.

Michael Frayn is one of several writers who, despite alluding to evidence that would suggest the inadequacy of any one-sided view of the play and its characters, nevertheless plumps for a reading that invalidates any of Vershinin's 'philosophy' and places Chekhov in the 'nothing to be done' school. Frayn correctly highlights the importance of the particular moment in history when *Three Sisters* first appeared:

The play was written, it is true, at the beginning of a new and hopeful century, when belief in progress was high, and when the pressures upon the archaic

despotism of imperial Russia were plainly becoming irresistible. Many people shared with Vershinin and Tusenbach the vision of a future in which everything would in one way or another be totally changed. Some influential commentators have argued that Chekhov was one of them ... But he made it abundantly clear in his letters ... that the characters in his plays express their own views, not his.⁶⁷

The fact that characters such as Vershinin 'express their own views' does not mean that Chekhov did not share many of that character's beliefs. That Chekhov is *not* Vershinin any more than he is the nihilistic Chebutykin, does not mean that he is absent from his work.⁶⁸ The relationship between the beliefs of the author and those of his characters is an ambiguous and complex one. To begin with, Chekhov rejected the overly simplified characterisation that was common in melodrama. In his early play *Ivanov*, he had attacked the simplistic value system of Lvov, who classified people as 'either saints or blackguards.'⁶⁹ Chekhov's characterisation of Vershinin is essentially non-judgemental. He is neither a villain nor a hero. In certain ways he is portrayed unsympathetically and yet he expresses ideas for which the author felt great sympathy. Vershinin may indeed be a weak man, a philanderer, someone who does not live up to his ideals, and someone who *is* a windbag, but this does not invalidate what he says. Chekhov's strategy is to present a gap between the admirable things that his characters say about what must be done to make life better and the disastrous failure on their part to actually do anything to bring this better world into being. There is nothing wrong with Vershinin's dream for a better future, any more than there was anything wrong with Martin Luther King's 'dream' of a non-racist society in the United States, although, unlike the civil rights campaigner, Vershinin fails to turn his talk into action.

Three Sisters begins on a note of hope and optimism that is even reflected in the weather: '*Outside the sun is shining cheerfully*'.⁷⁰ Both Olga and Irina are, quite literally, full of the joys of spring. Almost immediately, however, their vision of happiness, symbolised by their desire to return to an idealised 'Moscow', is immediately undercut by the negative comments of Chebutykin and Tuzenbach who are having a quite separate conversation in the neighbouring room:

OLGA. ... Heavens, how marvellous! When I woke up this morning and saw the great blaze of light and knew that spring had come — I felt so happy and excited, I felt I just had to go back to Moscow.

CHEBUTYKIN. [*To SOLYONY and TUZENBACH.*] Not a chance in hell.

TUZENBACH. Absolute nonsense of course.⁷¹

Chekhov thus prepares his audience for the disillusionment of at least two of the Prozorov sisters. Masha, the unhappily married third sister, is barely

included in her sisters' dream of a better future, but their brother Andrew is part of the 'Moscow' myth that is deflated by the next room commentators:

OLGA. Yes, to Moscow! As soon as we can.

[CHEBUTYKIN *and* TUZENBACH *laugh.*]

IRINA. Andrew's probably going to be a professor and he won't live here anyway. There's nothing stopping us except poor Masha here.

OLGA. Masha can come and spend the whole summer in Moscow every year.

[MASHA *softly whistles a tune.*]

IRINA. I only pray it will work out all right.⁷²

The dreams of the Prozorovs are empty precisely because they are not backed up by actions. Merely praying for something to happen does not produce results in Chekhov's world.

In *Three Sisters*, Chekhov again takes up the theme of wasted lives. Andrew [Andrey], instead of becoming a professor, as he had hoped, has become a county councillor working for the man who is his wife's lover. He comes to see that he has failed to realise his potential:

ANDREW. [Andrey] Where is my past life, oh what has become of it — when I was young, happy and intelligent, when I had such glorious thoughts and visions, and my present and future seemed so bright and promising? Why is it we've hardly started living before we all become dull, drab, boring, lazy, complacent, useless and miserable?⁷³

Unlike Sorin and Vanya, whose bad faith leads them to blame others for their plight, Andrew, while not taking responsibility for his failure, at least does not blame others for his inaction. Masha is one character who acknowledges herself as the cause of her failure, but she can only cope with this admission by denying its importance in words that echo the leitmotif of Chebutykin. Immediately after '*the muffled sound of a distant shot*' that signals Tuzenbach's death, the distressed Masha cries out: 'I've made a mess of my life. I don't want anything now. I'll be all right in a moment — It doesn't matter.'⁷⁴ It is the alcoholic and depressive Dr Chebutykin who most fully acknowledges his own responsibility for failure. Chekhov even cut the line, 'I've done nothing all my life and I've never had time to do anything all my life',⁷⁵ probably because this might have suggested that the doctor was shuffling off his responsibility for his inaction. In the final version of this speech of Chebutykin in Act I, the self-hating doctor bitterly blames himself for his failure and almost complete withdrawal from involvement in life. He offers no excuses:

CHEBUTYKIN. [*Laughs.*] You know, I've never done a thing and that's a fact. Since I left the university I haven't lifted a finger, I've never even read a book. I've read nothing but newspapers.⁷⁶

Chekhov's lifelong interest in community welfare and education suggests that his attitude, the attitude he wished his audiences to have, towards the kind of wilful ignorance and lethargy epitomised by Chebutykin, was a negative one. Dr Astrov in *Uncle Vanya* has much in common with Dr Chebutykin, but their respective modes of behaviour in the face of life's hardships differ markedly. Like Dr Chebutykin, Dr Astrov has had to put up with a hard life and has suffered the anguish of losing patients during operations. Like Chebutykin, Astrov cannot find consolation in the idea of any transcendental significance to life. He honestly admits, 'there are times when the whole business really gets me down. But for me there is no light shining in the distance. I don't expect anything for myself any more and I don't care for other people either.'⁷⁷ Unlike Chebutykin, however, Astrov involves himself in life. As he rightly claims: 'I work harder than anyone else around here.'⁷⁸ He has made a continuing intensive study of the environmental degradation affecting the neighbourhood and is doing something to improve the present situation. The positive attitude that Chekhov has toward this active character is in sharp contrast to the negative attitude he has toward Chebutykin, whose response, even to the senseless killing of Tuzenbach which he did nothing to stop, is to lapse into lethargy and mouth his nihilistic catch phrase:

CHEBUTYKIN. [*Sits down on a bench at the back of the stage.*] I'm worn out.

[*Takes a newspaper out of his pocket.*] They may as well have a cry. [*Sings softly.*]

Tararaboomdeay, let's have a tune today. Anyway, what does it all matter?⁷⁹

Chekhov has no need to say explicitly that Chebutykin's behaviour is irresponsible and untenable. All he has to do is depict Chebutykin as he is and leave the audience to evaluate his behaviour.

Chekhov's desire to avoid any explicit judgement of his characters is often forgotten by directors. This is especially the case when dealing with the character of Natasha. Perhaps taking their cue from a comment in one of Chekhov's letters to Stanislavski, in which he asked that Natasha cross the stage 'à la Lady Macbeth, with a candle',⁸⁰ critics and directors turn Natasha into a melodramatic villain. Even Magarshack, who points out that Chekhov 'warned the actor playing Solyony not to make him "too coarse", that is to say, not to make him into a melodramatic villain',⁸¹ characterises Natasha in just such a 'coarse' manner. He calls her behaviour 'vindictive' and describes her as 'a ruthless predator'.⁸² Later on in his analysis, he refers to 'Natasha's truly devilish behaviour'.⁸³ Demonising of Natasha is taken to its ultimate extreme in Brustein's melodramatic interpretation of *Three Sisters*. Since he believes that 'the conflict between culture and vulgarity provides the major theme',⁸⁴ Brustein describes Chekhov's characters in black-and-white terms. The three sisters become synonymous with 'culture' and Natasha with 'vulgarity'. He reads Chekhov's characterisation as though he were analysing Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata*:

Women, to be sure, often play a destructive role in Chekhov's plays ... Natasha ... is unique in the blackness of her motives. She might be a member of the Hummel family of vampires: sucking up people's nourishment, breaking foundations, speculating in houses. She is a malignant growth in a benevolent organism and her final triumph, no matter how Chekhov tries to disguise it, is the triumph of pure evil.⁸⁵

What is lost by such a judgemental interpretation of Natasha is any sense of Chekhov's implied criticism of the ineffectual passive behaviour of the Prozorovs. One director, Jonathan Miller, was aware that the traditional reading of Natasha's character as some sort of satanic force was not supported by Chekhov's text:

The worst thing one can say about her is that she knows exactly what she wants. She simply embodies the general banality of the sisters' environment, without conscious vindictiveness or any recognition of what she is doing. Once she has a stake in the big house, the sisters simply become an irrelevance in her life and, however wounding her treatment of them, her mind is on other things at the time.⁸⁶

Harvey Pitcher notes that, while Natasha may be 'an odious character ... there is such an impatient desire to find someone to blame in *Three Sisters*, such a gleeful rush to castigate Natasha for her most obvious failings, that comment on her has often been very superficial'.⁸⁷

In order to restore the 'objectivity' of Chekhov's characterisation of Natasha, directors need to do something akin to what Peter Brook did for the characters of Goneril and Regan in his production of *King Lear*. Brook refused to present Cordelia as a Cinderella figure who is destroyed by her two ugly sisters. Instead, Brook took the Chekhovian approach of objectivity and refrained from judging Goneril and Regan, allowing them to be played in a morally neutral fashion from their own point of view.

With the notable exception of Miller's production, Natasha has rarely been played in English-speaking countries in a non-judgemental way. Because she is seen as 'common' and the three sisters as 'cultured', directors have tended to present the play from an upper-middle class elitist standpoint, and middle-class audiences have been only too happy to identify with the dispossessed sisters and hate the *arriviste* Natasha. The snobbery inherent in this standard interpretation is well brought out by Marina Majdalany in an article in which, while attempting to 'maintain objectivity' and resisting 'the temptation to redress the balance by tilting it in Natasha's favour', she tries to give her 'a fair appraisal':

While all commentators of Chekhov's play dwell at length upon the aesthetic longings of the three sisters and tenderly evoke their sensitivity bruised by frustration, no comparable sympathy is extended to Natasha, their brother's young wife. She is indeed vain, selfish and even ruthless, as she has been

categorised; but what all these attributions have crowded out is the fact that, first and foremost, she is a disoriented *petite bourgeoisie*, socially insecure and lonely in an alien and hostile environment.⁸⁸

The hostility addressed towards Natasha by the three sisters takes the form of a kind of 'effortless superiority' that is akin to the patronising behaviour practised in England by the 'gentry' towards the 'great unwashed'. Olga and Masha deride Natasha's lack of dress sense; they laugh at her attempts to speak one of the foreign languages that they have been fortunate enough to have learnt, but have largely forgotten; they patronisingly explain that her inappropriate behaviour is the result of not having been brought up in the way that they have.

Once we step back from the judgemental position in relation to the characters in *Three Sisters*, we find much of the behaviour of the 'malignant growth' at least understandable, and much of the behaviour of the 'benevolent organism' reprehensible. How fair is it that critics and directors alike harshly censure Natasha's affair with the successful Protopopov while 'not a word condemns Masha's passion for Vershinin'?⁸⁹ Masha betrays a husband who, for all his limitations, works hard and loves her, while Natasha betrays a weak lazy gambler who can say of her: 'there's something degrading about her too, as if she is some kind of blind, groping, scruffy little animal. She's not a human being anyway.'⁹⁰ Why is it that Masha's behaviour is seen as less reprehensible than Natasha's? Natasha's dismissal of the Prozorovs' old servant of thirty years, Anfisa, on the 'economic rationalist' grounds that 'she can't work any more'⁹¹ is certainly cruel. However, the public humiliation that Masha inflicts on her cuckolded husband when, in reply to his saying to her, 'You're really a marvellous creature. I'm happy, happy, oh so happy', she sharply retorts, 'I'm bored, bored, oh so bored',⁹² is hardly less vicious. As Majdalany justly observes: 'For all Masha's extolled sensitivity, the callousness she displays towards the long suffering Kulygin is breathtaking, even by modern standards.'⁹³

Three Sisters is not simply about a clash between 'culture' and 'vulgarity', but a confrontation between contrasting groups of people, one of which is 'passive' and the other 'active' in the face of life's problems. Just as in *The Cherry Orchard* Chekhov was to juxtapose Lopakhin's active entrepreneurial approach to the problem of saving the estate with the ineffectual passivity of Gayev and Mrs Ranevsky, so in this play similar opposing groups are contrasted. Harvey Pitcher points out the significance of this juxtaposition:

In the characters of Natasha and the unseen, but not unimportant Protopopov, Chekhov was introducing representatives of a new and rising middle class; and it is impossible not to contrast what these two achieve in the play with what the Prozorovs fail to achieve.⁹⁴

Majdalany likewise has noted how Chekhov incorporated the social background of his time into both *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*: 'It is well known that Chekhov observed the social change that was taking place in Russia, of which the dominant feature was the emergence of the new commercial middle class, and dramatised it through Natasha and later, in *The Cherry Orchard*, through Lopakhin.'⁹⁵

The general theme of wasted potentiality is given specific application in Chekhov's depiction of the failure of the intelligentsia and the gentry to adjust to the changing social circumstances. As Pitcher puts it:

The sheltered lives of families like the Prozorovs, who were conscious of their social and cultural superiority, and whose house had until recently been full of orderlies ready to carry out their slightest wish, may tend to sap all personal initiative and to produce a charming but ineffectual breed. *Three Sisters* shows clearly how the upper classes could no longer rely on this position of unchallenged superiority, and how their authority might rapidly pass to more vigorous elements from classes below. Andrew has to take orders from Protopopov, just as Natasha assumes the position of authority in the sisters' household.⁹⁶

Natasha's vulgarity triumphs largely because she actively pursues her aims for herself and her children, while the Prozorov family fail to do anything to stop her. The result is that they are progressively driven out of their house. It is important that the significance of Natasha's development from the shy, awkward outsider of Act I into the confident householder of Act IV should not be lost on an audience. If Natasha's rapacious behaviour is meant to be viewed negatively, so also is the effete inactivity of the Prozorovs. As Majdalany acutely observes:

In observing this evolution, the audience should recognise that Natasha's 'sins of commission' are balanced by the Prozorovs' 'sins of omission'. The asperities of her selfishness collide with the granite of their egotism: she is vulgar and strives to become genteel; they are refined and never even attempt to groom her understanding or her manners. She grasps, they withdraw; she pushes, they recoil.⁹⁷

The playwright presented his audience with provincial Russian society as he saw it. As Ronald Hingley notes, 'Chekhov's works abound in denunciations of provincial Russian towns'.⁹⁸ Provincial towns, including his birthplace, Taganrog, seemed alike in their sterility. In 1887, at Easter, Chekhov described his hometown in a manner that suggests both his awareness of the potentiality of the place and his disgust at the way that potentiality has not been realised:

Sixty thousand inhabitants busy themselves exclusively with eating, drinking, procreating, and they have no other interests, none at all. Wherever you go

there are Easter cakes, eggs, local wine, infants, but no newspapers, no books ... The site of the city is in every respect magnificent, the climate glorious, the fruits of the earth abound, but the people are devilishly apathetic. They are all musical, endowed with fantasy and wit, highstrung, sensitive, but all this is wasted.⁹⁹

This cultural desert is very little different from the one agonisingly described by Andrew in the last act of *Three Sisters*. Life as it is lived in the Prozorovs' hometown — 'a provincial town, — it might be Perm'¹⁰⁰ — has become totally trivial. Andrew's own failure to realise his potential is part of a social malaise that has infected the whole society:

ANDREW. [Andrey] ... We've never produced a single scholar, or artist or anyone with a touch of originality ... All these people do is eat, drink and sleep till they drop down dead. Then new ones are born to carry on the eating, drinking and sleeping ... the children are crushed by vulgarity, lose any spark of inspiration they might have had, and — like their fathers and mothers before them — turn into a lot of miserable corpses, each exactly like his neighbour.¹⁰¹

The Prozorov sisters, their brother Andrew, Tuzenbach, Vershinin, Chebutykin, in fact most of the characters in the play apart from Natasha and the servants, are highly educated, yet all of these members of the intelligentsia manage to waste their lives in precisely the way that Andrew describes in his long 'disguised soliloquy' near the end of the play:

ANDREW. [Andrey] ... And to save themselves getting bored to tears and put a bit of spice in their lives, they go in for all this sickening gossip, vodka, gambling, litigation. Wives deceive their husbands and husbands tell lies and pretend they're deaf and blind to what's going on ...¹⁰²

The intelligentsia may well be wasting their lives, but Chekhov nevertheless does not give up faith in progress. Science and the work of inconspicuous individuals will, Chekhov asserts, eventually bring about an improvement in humanity's lot. The fact that the vision of a more hopeful future is carried by fallible characters such as Vershinin is further evidence of how great a gap there is between 'life as it is' and 'life as it should be'.

Stanislavski's dealings with Chekhov led him to recognise the playwright's cautiously optimistic vision of reality:

Anton Pavlovich was very offended when he was called a pessimist ... Anton Pavlovich was the most optimistic believer in the future I ever met. He would sketch with animation and faith a beautiful picture of the future life of Russia. As for the present, he related to it honestly and was not afraid of the truth.¹⁰³

Chekhov's 'optimism', however, did not involve a belief in the transformation of Russian society through revolution, as the Soviet critics and directors tried

to suggest. Rather, as a follower of Darwin's theories, Chekhov saw change as a gradual evolutionary process. Chekhov depicts what he sees and what he sees does not reflect the kind of vision that Soviet artists admire in which active heroes change the world. Part of the suffering that these characters endure lies in their consciousness of the gulf that has opened between their words and their actions, between their dreams and the reality they live. Vershinin, for example, is perfectly well aware that his behaviour, especially with regard to his affair with Masha, has not been admirable. Alone with Olga just before his departure he asks her forgiveness:

VERSHININ. Ah well, thank you for everything. And if there's been anything at all amiss, please forgive me. I've talked much too much. Please forgive that too. Don't think too badly of me.¹⁰⁴

The fallibility of Chekhov's characters is of central importance in the total action of the play. It is only by making perceptible the gap between what characters say and what they do that the playwright can lead members of his audience to recognise their own failure to bring about social improvement in Russia. The critique of Vershinin's behaviour made by Pitcher is essentially valid. He states: 'Vershinin's fine words and noble aspirations have never been matched by any comparable achievements in his personal life; and this combination of noble sentiments with practical ineffectuality seems to epitomise the well-meaning Russian liberal of the late nineteenth century.'¹⁰⁵

What Pitcher says about Vershinin applies with equal validity to most of the characters in *Three Sisters*, particularly to the Prozorov family. This failure to match word with deed was intended to strike a chord of recognition in the audience. There is, for example, nothing inherently stupid or wrong with Irina's lyrically expressed ideal that 'Man should work and toil by the sweat of his brow, whoever he is — that's the whole purpose and meaning of his life, his happiness and his joy.'¹⁰⁶ Chekhov would almost certainly have felt great sympathy with Irina's sentiment, if not her manner of expression. However, what he presents to his audience is not some mouthpiece for himself, but a silly young woman who, as her sister Olga says, 'wakes at seven and lies in bed at least till nine, just thinking'.¹⁰⁷ The comic incongruity that results from the perception of the gap between Irina's words and her deeds is highlighted when Chekhov provides Olga with the stage instruction: '*Laughs*'. It is Irina's behaviour, not her ideas, that is laughable.

In similar fashion there is something comical about the aristocratic Tuzenbach, who, on his own admission, has 'never done a hand's turn'¹⁰⁸ all his life, agreeing with Irina about the supreme value of work. However, even if we find it incredible that Tuzenbach would ever have made a success of working in a brickworks, we should not discount his arguments in favour of work. Although the Soviet critics failed to see that there was a gap between the content of

Tuzenbach's 'visionary' speech and his own behaviour, they were nevertheless correct not to discount that content. Tuzenbach's stirring words, written in 1900, must have seemed a remarkable example of Chekhovian prescience to those who lived in the exciting period immediately after the Russian revolution of 1917. It is not surprising that Tuzenbach's fallibility should have gone unnoticed when the triumphant Bolsheviks read or heard his rousing speech:

TUZENBACH. ... The time has come, an avalanche is moving down on us and a great storm's brewing that'll do us all a power of good. It's practically on top of us already and soon it's going to blast out of our society all the laziness, complacency, contempt for work, rottenness and boredom. I'm going to work and in twenty-five or thirty-years' time everyone will work. Everyone.¹⁰⁹

Often in a Chekhov play, a character, however blind to their own failings, will highlight the mistakes of others with perfect lucidity and may, sometimes unknowingly, destroy the illusions of another character. We saw earlier how Olga's and Irina's dream of getting to Moscow was undercut by the apparently unrelated comments of Chebutykin and Tuzenbach. Vershinin continues this explosion of the sisters' 'Moscow myth' by presenting what he sees as its reality. Moscow conjures up thoughts for him that are depressing, even suicidal. In contrast, he sees the place where the sisters live in a positive light:

VERSHININ. ... You have a good healthy climate, what I call a real Russian climate. There are the woods and the river, and you've silver birches too. Charming modest birches, they're my favourite tree. This is a good place to live.¹¹⁰

Vershinin's comments serve to highlight the fact that there is very little that is wrong with the physical environment in which the Prozorovs live. What makes the place intolerable is the way the inhabitants live their lives. Instead of making use of the talents and educational privileges they have been given, the Prozorovs have started to go to seed since the death of their father. Andrew talks of their father having 'inflicted education on us', and confesses, 'since he died I've started putting on weight and in one year I've filled out like this, just as if my body had shaken off some kind of burden'.¹¹¹ In the course of the play, Chekhov makes it quite clear to his audience that what this member of the intelligentsia has cast off is the burden of responsibility. Having been born into an educationally privileged level of society, Andrew wastes his many talents and, instead of fulfilling his achievable dream to become a university professor, turns into a compulsive gambler who whines about his failure. He sells his and his sisters' share of their inheritance to pay his gambling debts, yet, significantly, even though his sisters know what he is doing, they do nothing to stop him.

Masha, infected by the same malaise of idleness and negativity as her brother, also denies the value of her education. 'Knowing three languages is a useless

luxury in this town,' she asserts, then adds, 'We know much too much.'¹¹² It is this denial of the value of education and, in particular, its power to effect improvement in the quality of life, however minimal, that draws from Vershinin the first of several 'philosophical' speeches. The audience's reading of the content of these speeches depends on whether this army officer is taken seriously. There is considerable evidence to suggest that Chekhov had a high estimation of the cultural standing of such officers. Following the 1874 army reforms of General D. A. Milyutin, the Russian army became associated with education. According to Hingley, 'The army became a place where peasants first learnt to read and write ... Chekhov was sympathetically disposed towards the Russian Army'.¹¹³ Stanislavski quotes Chekhov as saying that he didn't want the soldiers in *Three Sisters* to be presented as caricatured 'heel-clickers':

'There's none of that,' he argued rather heatedly, 'military personnel have changed, they have become more cultured, many of them have even begun to realize that in peacetime they should bring culture with them into remote backwaters.'¹¹⁴

The association of education and culture with the military is pointed out by Masha in the play when she compares civilians with the military:

MASHA. ... Other places may be different, but in this town the most decent, the most civilized and cultivated people are the military ... But civilians in general are often so rude, disagreeable and bad-mannered.¹¹⁵

Despite his tendency to be long-winded, there is no reason to doubt the probable truth of Vershinin's claim that the Prozorov sisters can make a contribution to the improvement of society. Vershinin's speech has a variety of effects on his listeners. Andrew slips away '*unobserved*' — he appears to be a lost cause — but it is this speech that brings Masha to life for the first time in the play and marks the beginning of her attraction toward Vershinin. While Vershinin is clearly not Chekhov's alter ego, many of the sentiments that he expresses are similar to those we know Chekhov believed in. In performance, it becomes necessary not to present Vershinin as someone who talks nonsense, but as someone who is attractive because of his commitment to positive ideas. When played in the committed way I have suggested, it is hard to imagine how an audience would not see some validity in Vershinin's 'aria':

VERSHININ. Oh, what a thing to say! [*Laughs.*] You know much too much. I don't think there exists, or even could exist, a town so dull and dreary that it had no place for intelligent, educated men and women. Let's suppose that among the hundred thousand inhabitants of this town — oh, I know it's a backward, rough sort of place — there's no one else like you three. Well, you obviously can't hope to prevail against the forces of ignorance around you. As you go on living you'll have to give way bit by bit to these hundred thousand people and

be swallowed up in the crowd. You'll go under, but that doesn't mean you'll sink without trace — you will have some effect. Perhaps when you're gone there will be six people like you, then twelve and so on, and in the end your kind will be in the majority. In two or three hundred years life on this earth will be beautiful beyond our dreams, it will be marvellous. Man needs a lift like that, and if he hasn't yet got it he must feel he's going to get it, he must look forward to it, dream about it, prepare for it. That means he must have more vision and more knowledge than his father or grandfather ever had. [*Laughs.*] And here are you complaining you know much too much.

MASHA. [*Takes off her hat.*] I'm staying to lunch.¹¹⁶

Hingley argues that changes Chekhov made to the script 'serve to emphasize his [Vershinin's] lack of interest in what anyone else has to say'.¹¹⁷ Chekhov had rewritten Vershinin's response to Tuzenbach's claim that to create a better future 'we must get ready for it and work for it'. Originally Chekhov had Vershinin reply: 'That may well be so.' His revision was: 'Yes, yes of course.' Hingley claims that this revision is a 'casual' remark. However, even the revised line — 'Yes, yes of course' — need not be said 'casually' or in a dismissive way. Any good actor could deliver that line 'enthusiastically' and thus portray Vershinin as deeply interested in Tuzenbach's observations. Such readings are dependent on directorial decisions. It is perfectly possible to interpret Vershinin's quick changing of the subject after Tuzenbach joins in the conversation as a realisation on his part that his 'aria' is socially inappropriate. He has only a little earlier said to Andrew, 'I'm afraid your sisters must be rather bored with me already'.¹¹⁸ Having made such a long and serious speech, it is quite in character for Vershinin to become aware that he has been talking too much. He realises that, while this is a topic that he feels passionately about, it is hardly the time or the place to embark on a philosophical debate with Tuzenbach. Thus, when Tuzenbach joins in the conversation by arguing that we must work now to bring about a better future, Vershinin agrees, but proceeds to change the subject, so as not to bore the ladies. He resorts to small talk about 'what a lot of flowers' there are in this 'splendid house'. This equally playable interpretation of Chekhov's text avoids presenting Vershinin as the self-centred egotist that Hingley depicts.

Despite his belief that people should work, Tuzenbach denies the efficacy of any human effort to improve life. It is in response to his pessimistic view that, even in two or three hundred years 'life itself won't change',¹¹⁹ that Vershinin puts forward what is essentially an expression of his own faith in progress. The discussion between the two military men is a variant on the nature/nurture debate that is still an issue today. Vershinin's argument is remarkably similar to Chekhov's own belief in the possibility of gradual progress that can be brought about through the nurturing efforts of humans working to improve what has

been provided by nature. Like Dr Astrov in *Uncle Vanya*, Vershinin sees little chance of immediate rewards for human effort, but passionately believes in the long-term benefits:

VERSHININ. ... My hair's going grey now and I'm growing old, but the trouble is I know so precious little. Still, when it comes to the things that really matter, there I do know my stuff pretty well, I think. And I only wish I could make you see that happiness — well, we haven't got it, we've no right to it, in fact it isn't meant for us at all. Our business is to work and go on working, and our distant descendants will have any happiness that's going. [*Pause.*] I won't have it, but my children's children may.¹²⁰

Tuzenbach presents the argument in favour of a fixed idea of nature. His views, while not as nihilistic as those expressed by Dr Chebutykin, are nevertheless close to the 'nothing to be done' school of thinking, since he believes that nature programs all behaviour including that of humans.

TUZENBACH. ... Forget your two or three hundred years, because even in a million years life will still be the same as ever. It doesn't change, it always goes on the same and follows its own laws. And those laws are none of our business. Or at least you'll never understand them.¹²¹

To illustrate his views, Tuzenbach compares human behaviour to that of the migratory habits of cranes who 'still keep flying without ever knowing why they do it or where they're going'.¹²² This view of nature and life as being without purpose was one that Chekhov denied. As someone with a belief in scientific progress, Chekhov could not help regarding such fatalistic views as life-denying.

Certainly, while Chekhov does not explicitly judge Tuzenbach, he provides the newly invigorated Masha with a powerful speech which undermines Tuzenbach's idea that life is programmed and purposeless:

MASHA. But what's the point of it all?

TUZENBACH. The point? Look, it's snowing out there. What's the point of that? [*Pause.*]

MASHA. I feel that man should have a faith or be trying to find one, otherwise his life just doesn't make sense. Think of living without knowing why cranes fly, why children are born or why there are stars in the sky. Either you know what you're living for, or else the whole thing's a waste of time and means less than nothing.¹²³

Even though Masha is deeply unhappy at having to say farewell to Vershinin, she expresses her faith in the idea of life having a purpose. Tuzenbach had asserted that humans, like the cranes, live 'without knowing why they do it or

where they're going'. Originally Masha's speech finished by rejecting the inevitability of this state of ignorance:

MASHA. Oh, listen to the band. They're all leaving us, and one has gone right away and will never, never come back, and we shall be left alone to begin our lives again. {We must go on living, we must. I shall go on living, my dears, one must live. [*Looks upwards.*] There are migrating birds up there, they fly past every spring and autumn, they've been doing it for thousands of years and they don't know why. But they fly on and they'll go on flying for ages and ages, for many thousand years, until in the end God reveals his mysteries to them.}¹²⁴

Chekhov cut the lines {...} at the request of Olga Knipper, who was playing Masha. She had written to him and asked: 'Does it matter if I make a cut in my last speech? If I find it difficult to say?'¹²⁵ Chekhov had also been asked by Nemirovich-Danchenko to make cuts in the final speeches of the play: 'About the 4th act. It needs cutting. I've just sent you a telegram but, to give a few details, three long speeches for the three sisters is not a good idea. It's both out of key and untheatrical. A cut for Masha, a big cut for Irina. Only Olga can offer some consolation. Yes?'¹²⁶ Whether or not these cuts were desirable is open to question. Certainly, Chekhov agreed to make them, but we should still note the importance that he gave, even in the final version, to the expression of hope by all three sisters. In Chekhov's final version it is Olga who most fully expresses both the anguish the Prozorovs feel in the face of 'life as it is' and the hope that all three sisters have that one day they will come to understand the purpose of life. Olga's speech reiterates Vershinin's vision of life in which the present generation must prepare the way for a better life for those yet unborn:

OLGA. ... Oh, my God! In time we shall pass on forever and be forgotten. Our faces will be forgotten and our voices and how many of us there were. But our sufferings will bring happiness to those who come after us, peace and joy will reign on earth and there will be kind words and kind thoughts for us and our times.¹²⁷

Chekhov concludes the play by juxtaposing the nihilistic Chebutykin's 'Nothing matters' with Olga's repeated wish that 'we might find out what our lives and sufferings are for'. She does not doubt that things do matter, that life does have a purpose, but she longs for that purpose to be revealed: 'If we could only know, oh if we could only know!'¹²⁸

Like Vershinin, the three sisters believe in the possibility of a better future and all of them have some inkling of how they might make some contribution to help realise this future. Irina believes that the purpose of life 'will be known one day ... but till then life must go on, we must work and work and think of nothing else'.¹²⁹ The three sisters all assert the value of that quintessentially Chekhovian virtue of endurance and this is combined, as it was by Nina in *The*

Seagull and Sonya in *Uncle Vanya*, with a faith in the future. It is left to Vershinin in his parting speech to elucidate the means by which this better future can be achieved. If played sympathetically, Vershinin's final philosophical 'aria', without resorting to judgemental preaching, can suggest to an audience ways in which they can do something to improve the condition of their own lives:

VERSHININ. ... Life isn't a bed of roses. A lot of us think it's a hopeless dead end. Still you must admit things are getting brighter and better all the time, and it does look as if we'll see a real break in the clouds before very long ... Oh, if that could only happen soon. [*Pause.*] If we could only combine education with hard work, you know, and hard work with education.¹³⁰

It was to be in *The Cherry Orchard* that Chekhov would show his audience, even more explicitly than in *Three Sisters*, the failure of an educated class who don't know how to work. In that last play, we find in the character of Lopakhin a more sympathetic representative than Natasha of that class which, while knowing how to work, lacks education.

It should be clear that fallible creatures like Vershinin need not be presented as knights in shining armour in order for their ideas to be given some validity. It should also be clear that this validity is necessary if Chekhov's vision of reality is to be realised on stage. The ideas of Vershinin and Tuzenbach as well as those of the nihilistic Chebutykin and Solyony need to be balanced against each other. The 'philosophers' in *Three Sisters*, despite their personal inadequacies, must be seen as 'serious' people in order for their ideas to have any value for an audience. To privilege the more nihilistic characters, as so often happens in productions today, is to distort the Chekhovian vision.

It is not surprising that there are certain moments in history when the Chekhovian preferred reading that I am advocating seems more pertinent than at other times. One can see why, after many years of Stalinist oppression, the hopeful vision of reality expressed by Vershinin would sound rather hollow to an audience grown cynical after having experienced the failure of the Bolshevik dreams. One important Russian production, that I believe attempted to realise the kind of balance between hope and despair that I have suggested is at the heart of the Chekhovian vision, was that directed by Georgii Tovstonogov in 1965. The historical moment gave this director the opportunity to present Chekhov's *Three Sisters* in a way that neither distorted the playwright's vision nor presented a world view that seemed too removed from the audience's own experience.

Tovstonogov's production occurred towards the end of the 'Thaw', a brief period of liberalisation in Russia after years of Stalinist oppression. At the time, it became possible again to express Chekhov's sense of hope in a possible better future without resorting to the blind optimism of the more extreme Soviet

productions. Equally, because the 'Thaw' was a time of hope, the bleak 'Absurdist' approach to the play did not seem to be appropriate. Comparing his interpretation with that made by Nemirovich-Danchenko in his 1940 production, Tovstonogov pointed out the ways in which his approach was different. He argued that Nemirovich-Danchenko's production suggested 'that the blame for a ruined life lay beyond the limits of human personality. Fine and noble people were victimised by the times and the social order.'¹³¹ This depiction of Chekhov's characters as sensitive victims unable to do anything to control their fates seemed questionable to Tovstonogov:

Is it only environment that prevents people from living fully, intelligently, and beautifully? It is important to assert that it is not something or someone from outside that destroys, but that the Chekhovian characters themselves — intelligent, subtle, suffering people — destroy one another by their own passivity and irresolution.¹³²

Instead of assessing whether Tovstonogov's reading of the play accurately produces the action implied by Chekhov's playtext, Senelick uncharacteristically resorts to stereotyping the director as a Soviet stooge. He asserts:

A modern Soviet conscience had to attribute much of the fault to the characters themselves and their weak wills. Their indifference and cruelty had to be faced up to, not justified.¹³³

It not true that Tovstonogov 'had to' attribute the fault to the characters. Rather, he recognised that Chekhov's play contains an implied criticism of the behaviour of his characters which was intended to induce spectators to look critically at their own 'silly trivial lives'. Tovstonogov was able to see the action of Chekhov's play clearly partly because he was not drawn into a 'saints or blackguards' approach to the playwright's work. He saw the problems that result from such polarised readings. If the 'gloom and twilight' version of Chekhov has become the default reading of *Three Sisters* in the Western world, then the 'welcome bright world' version became the default reading in Soviet Russia. Tovstonogov wished to avoid both extremes in his own production:

In opposition to the notion of Chekhov as pessimist, another extreme attitude arose: interpreters began to look for traits of the fighting revolutionary in Chekhov's heroes. His protagonists were credited with a strong will and much energy, with courage and optimism. Historical and psychological truth was sacrificed to this conception.¹³⁴

Tovstonogov's belief that, in *Three Sisters*, Chekhov 'not only sympathises with his heroes and loves them, but also judges them in anger'¹³⁵ is, I would argue, essentially accurate. Chekhov's 'judgements', however, always remain implicit rather than explicit. Chekhov rarely loses his 'objectivity', even in

depicting a character such as Natasha. He allows the audience to make their own judgement of her behaviour. Tovstonogov's balanced approach resulted in a production that, while different from Nemirovich-Danchenko's 1940 version, did not contradict it. His 1965 production may not have been 'permeated with faith in a better future' as he claimed Nemirovich-Danchenko's 1940 production had been, but, by directing his production 'against "the slave in man", as Chekhov put it, against the amazing ability of the intelligentsia to find justification for its inertia and indifference',¹³⁶ Tovstonogov did not exclude the possibility of creating a 'better future'.

Three Sisters is possibly the most difficult Chekhov play to classify in terms of its genre. Chekhov called it 'A Drama in Four Acts' and this at least suggests that he was aware that it was darker in tone than his other plays. He admitted as much in a letter to Vera Kommissarzhevskaya:

Three Sisters is finished... The play has turned out dull, protracted and awkward; I say — awkward, because, for instance, it has four heroines and a mood, as they say, gloomier than gloom itself ... My play is complex like a novel and its mood, people say, is murderous.¹³⁷

It has, as Gordon McVay has noted, 'inspired a bewildering variety of interpretations': '*Three Sisters* has been viewed both as a tragedy and as a comedy, as a poignant testimony to the eternal yearning for love, happiness, beauty and meaning, or as a devastating indictment of the folly of inert gentility and vacuous day-dreaming.'¹³⁸

Certainly, the play continues the exploration of life as a constant struggle between hope and despair that had been so movingly dramatised in *Uncle Vanya*. It is easy to see why the tragic theme of loss and waste can easily overwhelm the theme of faith in a better future and lead directors to interpret the play as a lament. It remains important however to constantly attempt to present a balance between the darker and brighter elements of the play. McVay is one critic who is aware of the dual nature of *Three Sisters*. While asserting that the play is 'a profoundly serious piece in the questions it raises', he notes the fact that 'hardly any theme or character in the play remains untouched by laughter'.¹³⁹ McVay's analysis of *Three Sisters* is one that any director might well keep in mind when directing this play. He accurately describes the balance that needs to be struck in performance between presenting the bleak reality that Chekhov describes with cool objectivity and communicating the underlying aim of suggesting possibilities for changing that reality for the better:

In *Three Sisters*, the burden of sorrow and non-achievement is balanced, and even perhaps transcended, by the yearning for happiness and fulfilment. The portrayal of life as it is engenders a longing for life as it should be.¹⁴⁰

Chekhov's objectivity and his overall aim should co-exist in any production. In his final play, *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov perfected the synthesis between these two elements of his dramaturgy.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Magarshack, D., *The Real Chekhov*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1972, p. 126.
- ² Frayn, M., *Chekhov Plays*, Methuen, London, 1988, p. lix.
- ³ Hahn, B., *Chekhov: A Study of the Major Stories and Plays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979, pp. 284–5.
- ⁴ A. E. W. in *Star*, 17 February 1926, quoted in Emeljanow, V., ed., *Chekhov: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1981, p. 300.
- ⁵ Karlinsky, S., 'Russian Anti-Chekhovians', *Russian Literature*, Vol. 15, 1984, p. 183.
- ⁶ Gilman, R., *Chekhov's Plays: An Opening into Eternity*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1995, p. 148.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 159.
- ⁸ Beckett, S., *Waiting for Godot*, Faber and Faber, London, 1965, p. 89.
- ⁹ Davison, D., ed., *Andrew Marvell: Selected Poetry and Prose*, Harrap and Company, London, 1952, p. 84.
- ¹⁰ Chekhov, A., *Three Sisters*, in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 3, Oxford University Press, London, 1964, p. 133.
- ¹¹ Not all of Chekhov's depictions of medical men are sympathetic, and we should be aware that sympathetically drawn characters like Dr Dorn or Dr Astrov are no more to be identified with Dr Chekhov than is Dr Chebutykin. Chekhov follows the advice given to his elder brother Alexander that the dramatist should never identify with his characters. 'Who wants to know about my life and yours, my thoughts and your thoughts? Give people people – don't give them yourself ...' [Chekhov, A., Letter to A. Chekhov, 8 May 1889, in McVay, G., *Chekhov's 'Three Sisters'*, Bristol Classical Press, 1995, p. ix.]
- ¹² In a similar way, the 'Absurdist' view expressed by Macbeth in which he depicts life as being 'full of sound and fury, signifying nothing' is not the view expressed by Shakespeare in the play as a whole.
- ¹³ Moss, H., 'Three Sisters', *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 30, No. 4, 1977, p. 531.
- ¹⁴ Billington, M., *Guardian*, 3 April 1986.
- ¹⁵ Alfreds, M., quoted in Allen, D., 'Exploring the Limitless Depths: Mike Alfreds Directs Chekhov', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 8, November 1986, p. 332.
- ¹⁶ Fox, S., *City Limits*, 3 April 1986.
- ¹⁷ Magarshack, D., loc. cit.
- ¹⁸ Karlinsky, S., loc. cit.
- ¹⁹ Gottlieb, V., 'The Politics of British Chekhov', in Miles, P., ed., *Chekhov on the British Stage*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 148.
- ²⁰ Coveney, M., *Financial Times*, 2 April 1986.
- ²¹ Billington, M., loc. cit.
- ²² Worrall, N., 'Stanislavsky's Production of *Three Sisters*', in Russell, R. and Barratt, A., eds, *Russian Theatre in the Age of Modernism*, Macmillan, London, 1990, p. 27.
- ²³ Worrall, N., op. cit., p. 2.
- ²⁴ Stanislavski, C., quoted in Stroyeva, N. M., 'The *Three Sisters* at the MAT', *Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1964, p. 52.
- ²⁵ Stroyeva, N. M., op. cit., p. 51.
- ²⁶ Worrall, N., op. cit., p. 11.
- ²⁷ Senelick, L., *The Chekhov Theatre*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 64.
- ²⁸ See Worrall, N., op. cit., p. 5.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ³⁰ Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., *My Life in the Russian Theatre*, Geoffrey Bles, London, 1968, p. 210.
- ³¹ Senelick, L., op. cit., p. 189.

- ³² Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., op. cit., p. 207.
- ³³ Burenin, V., quoted in Senelick, L., op. cit., p. 65.
- ³⁴ Gottlieb, V., 'Chekhov in Limbo: British Productions of the Plays of Chekhov', in Scolnicov, H. and Holland, P., eds, *The Play Out of Context: Transferring Plays from Culture to Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 171.
- ³⁵ Corrigan, R., 'The Plays of Chekhov', in Corrigan, R. and Rosenberg, J. L., eds, *The Context and Craft of Drama*, Chandler Publishing Company, Scranton, 1964, p.139.
- ³⁶ Gottlieb, V., loc. cit.
- ³⁷ Gottlieb, V., 'Why this Farce?', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 27, August 1991, p. 224. The essential difference between the oppositional philosophies of farce and comedy according to Gottlieb 'is that whereas "absurdism" demonstrates that "life" is absurd, and much French and English farce places its emphasis on situation, Chekhov's emphasis is on the absurdity of his characters'. (p. 226.)
- ³⁸ Gottlieb, V., 'The Politics of British Chekhov', p. 148.
- ³⁹ Molière, *Defence of Tartuffe*, 1669, quoted in Brownstein, O. L. and Daubert, D. M., eds, *Analytical Sourcebook of Concepts in Dramatic Theory*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1981, p. 93.
- ⁴⁰ Gottlieb, V., 'Why this Farce?', p. 225.
- ⁴¹ Senelick, L., op. cit., p. 66.
- ⁴² Stanislavski, C., *My Life in Art*, Eyre Methuen, London, 1980, p. 371.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Karlinsky, S. and Heim, M. H., *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1975, p. 393.
- ⁴⁵ Chekhov, A., Letter to O. L. Knipper, 15 September 1900, quoted in Valency, M., *The Breaking String*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1966, p. 208.
- ⁴⁶ Braun, E., *The Director and the Stage*, Methuen, London, 1982, p. 67.
- ⁴⁷ Pitcher, H., *Chekhov's Leading Lady*, John Murray, London, 1979, p. 83.
- ⁴⁸ Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., op. cit., p. 209.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Chekhov, A., Letter to V. Kommissarzhevskaya, 13 November 1900, in Yarmolinsky, A., *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, The Viking Press, New York, 1973, p. 383.
- ⁵¹ Stanislavski, C., 'Memories of Chekhov', in Hapgood, E. R., ed., *Stanislavski's Legacy*, Max Reinhardt, London, 1958, p. 98.
- ⁵² Senelick, L., op. cit., p. 59.
- ⁵³ Stanislavski, C., Letter to Baron Drizen, 3 November 1909, quoted in Senelick, L., op. cit., pp. 59–60.
- ⁵⁴ Stanislavski, C., *My Life in Art*, pp. 373–4.
- ⁵⁵ Krutch, J. W., *'Modernism' in Modern Drama*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1953, p. 128.
- ⁵⁶ Gillès, D., *Chekhov: Observer without Illusion*, Funk & Wagnalls, New York, 1968, p. 319.
- ⁵⁷ Nathan, D., *Jewish Chronicle*, 11 April 1986.
- ⁵⁸ Coveney, M., loc. cit.
- ⁵⁹ Ratcliffe, M., *Observer*, 6 April 1986.
- ⁶⁰ Shorter, E., *Daily Telegraph*, 3 April 1986.
- ⁶¹ Rose, H., *Time Out*, 9 April 1986.
- ⁶² Styan, J. L., *Chekhov in Performance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1971, p. 151.
- ⁶³ Melchinger, S., *Anton Chekhov*, Frederick Ungar, New York, 1972, p. 140.
- ⁶⁴ Magarshack, D., loc. cit.
- ⁶⁵ Gilman, R., op. cit., p. 176.
- ⁶⁶ Yermilov, V., quoted in Gilman, R., loc. cit.
- ⁶⁷ Frayn, M., op. cit., p. lviii.
- ⁶⁸ Maurice Valency makes the interesting observation that Chekhov, far from being 'absent' from his plays and 'detached' from his characters, is 'present' and 'engaged' with them. He states: 'In *The Three Sisters*, Vershinin evidently speaks for Chekhov, and his views are clear. But Chebutykin also speaks for Chekhov, and his views are equally clear ... The indeterminate area between faith and scepticism

measures the extent of Chekhov's spiritual discomfort. Vershinin speaks for his faith; Chebutykin, for his doubt.' (Valency, M., op. cit., p. 243.)

⁶⁹ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 30 December 1888, in Karlinsky, S., op. cit., p. 79.

⁷⁰ Chekhov, A., *Three Sisters*, p. 73.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., p. 74.

⁷³ Chekhov, A., *Three Sisters*, p. 133.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 136.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 312.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 77.

⁷⁷ Chekhov, A., *Uncle Vanya*, pp. 38–9.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 38.

⁷⁹ Chekhov, A., *Three Sisters*, p. 138.

⁸⁰ Chekhov, A., Letter to C. Stanislavski, 2 January 1901, in Karlinsky, S., op. cit., p. 391. Chekhov in this letter was not so much emphasising Natasha's evil qualities as trying to stop Stanislavski from introducing a piece of inappropriate 'business' for Natasha. As Stroyeva notes: 'Originally, as Stanislavsky had written Chekhov, the plan was to have "Natasha go through the house at night, putting out lights and looking for burglars under the furniture"'. (Stroyeva, N. M., op. cit., p. 48.) Chekhov tactfully steered Stanislavski away from this rather crude send-up of Natasha by suggesting a more subtle theatricality. 'It seems to me, though, that it would be better to have her walk across the stage in a straight line without a glance at anyone or anything à la Lady Macbeth, with a candle — that way it would be much briefer and more frightening.' (Karlinsky, S., loc. cit.)

⁸¹ Magarshack, D., op. cit., p. 138.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 181.

⁸⁴ Brustein, R., *The Theatre of Revolt*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1964, p. 160.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 157–8.

⁸⁶ Miller, J., quoted in Allen, D., 'Jonathan Miller Directs Chekhov', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 17, February 1989, pp. 56–7.

⁸⁷ Pitcher, H., *The Chekhov Play*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1973, p. 127.

⁸⁸ Majdalany, M., 'Natasha Ivanovna, the Lonely *Bourgeoise*', *Modern Drama*, Vol. 26, 1983, p. 305.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 307.

⁹⁰ Chekhov, A., *Three Sisters*, p. 130.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 112.

⁹² Ibid., p. 118.

⁹³ Majdalany, M., loc. cit.

⁹⁴ Pitcher, H., op. cit., p. 123.

⁹⁵ Majdalany, M., op. cit., p. 308.

⁹⁶ Pitcher, H., op. cit., p. 124.

⁹⁷ Majdalany, M., op. cit., p. 306.

⁹⁸ Hingley, R., *Russian Writers and Society 1825–1904*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1967, p. 170.

⁹⁹ Chekhov, A., Letter to N. A. Leykin, 7 April 1887, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 46.

¹⁰⁰ Chekhov, A., Letter to M. Gorky, 16 October 1900, in Friedland, L. S., *Letters on the Short Story the Drama and Other Literary Topics by Anton Chekhov*, Dover Publications, New York, 1966, p. 156.

¹⁰¹ Chekhov, A., *Three Sisters*, p. 133.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Stanislavski, C., 'A. P. Chekhov at the Arts Theater', in Turkov, A., ed., *Anton Chekhov and His Times*, University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville, 1995, p. 116.

¹⁰⁴ Chekhov, A., *Three Sisters*, p. 135.

¹⁰⁵ Pitcher, H., op. cit., p. 126.

¹⁰⁶ Chekhov, A., *Three Sisters*, p. 75.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 76.

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- 108 Ibid.
- 109 Ibid.
- 110 Ibid., p. 81.
- 111 Ibid., p. 84.
- 112 Ibid.
- 113 Hingley, R., op. cit., pp. 208–9.
- 114 Stanislavski, C., op. cit., p. 111.
- 115 Chekhov, A, *Three Sisters*, p. 95.
- 116 Ibid., p. 84.
- 117 Ibid., p. 311.
- 118 Ibid., p. 83.
- 119 Ibid., p. 98.
- 120 Ibid., p. 99.
- 121 Ibid.
- 122 Ibid.
- 123 Ibid., p. 100.
- 124 Ibid., p. 138 and {p. 311}.
- 125 Knipper, O., Letter to A. Chekhov, quoted in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 3, p. 311.
- 126 Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., Letter to A. Chekhov, 22 January 1901, in Benedetti, J., ed., *The Moscow Art Theatre Letters*, New York, 1991, p. 99.
- 127 Chekhov, A., *Three Sisters*, p. 139.
- 128 Ibid.
- 129 Ibid.
- 130 Ibid., p. 135.
- 131 Tovstonogov, G., 'Chekhov's *Three Sisters* at the Gorky Theatre', *Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1968, p. 149.
- 132 Ibid.
- 133 Senelick, L., op. cit., p. 204.
- 134 Tovstonogov, G., op. cit., p. 148.
- 135 Ibid., p. 149.
- 136 Ibid., p. 153.
- 137 Chekhov, A., Letter to V. F. Kommissarzhevskaya, 13 November 1900, in McVay, G., op. cit., p. xvi.
- 138 McVay, G., op. cit., p. v.
- 139 Ibid., p. 67.
- 140 Ibid., p. 19.