

Conclusion

The Theatre is the world compressed, and with meaning. (Jean-Paul Sartre)¹

Question: Can one interpret something one doesn't understand? (Jean Vilar)²

Chekhov was fortunate to have had his plays performed by the actors of the Moscow Art Theatre. Whatever the agony he suffered seeing his plays presented in an uncongenial manner; whatever the limitations Stanislavski had as a director of his plays, Chekhov could not have found a group of actors more appropriately trained to perform his works. It was the system of acting devised by Stanislavski and taught to his students that made it possible for actors to explore the inner lives of their characters and to create the necessary subtext in performance. Without this acting system, there would have been no way for actors to communicate the conflict between their characters' public and private lives and thus present Chekhov's implied criticism of their failure to live up to their aspirations. Without actors capable of creating an inner life for their characters, audiences would have been able to perceive only the drab reality of 'life as it is' and would have been unaware of any implied vision of 'life as it should be'.

Today, most English actors and directors have a working knowledge of Stanislavski's acting system. However, the difference between English and Russian sensibilities creates a cultural divide that is difficult to bridge. English directors, for instance, seem to find it difficult to give due value to the positive ideas expressed by Chekhov's 'philosophers'. The difficulty stems from the fact that these characters tend to express their ideas in lengthy tirades. Such effusions are not easily accepted by English theatre practitioners and audiences brought up to value understatement or who feel that 'politics' or 'religion' are not proper subjects for polite conversation. What Gottlieb perceptively claims to be a peculiarly English phenomenon is, I would argue, equally evident in all English-speaking countries:

The question of 'positive affirmations' is, perhaps a more contentious one: there is a peculiarly English embarrassment at people or characters who 'spout' positively about life or who talk idealistically or hopefully about the future ... hence, perhaps, the difficulty English actors, directors and audiences have with characters like Vershinin or Tuzenbach or Trofimov ... Debate, which sits uneasily on the English stage, is treated as something which emanates from Chekhov's charming idiosyncratic characters, not from the whole social fabric of the plays.³

Trevor Griffiths, who wrote a new English version of *The Cherry Orchard* in 1977, was acutely aware of this Anglo-Saxon fear of public expression of emotion which he felt was especially evident in the English language itself. In one

interview he commented: 'There is something very contained about English, and when it does express deep emotion, it does so in simple rather than purple ways; in oblique and understated rather than rhetorical language.'⁴

Griffiths' solution to this cultural difference between Russian and English sensibilities was to anglicise the language of his version of *The Cherry Orchard*. It is worth noting that, whereas the critic, Kenneth Tynan, objected to the ways in which the English had transformed Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* into an English play that is 'in our image', Griffiths deliberately emphasised the fact that he had written an 'English' version. When interviewed about his version by David Allen in 1987, Griffiths commented:

My translation is specifically called a new *English* version. To say that the play will be in the English language does imply — to me, at least — that it will be *anglicised* to a certain extent; that adjustments will be made to take account of the different history and a different national, cultural structure of feeling.⁵

Another contemporary English director, Mike Alfreds, takes an opposite approach to Griffiths. Alfreds specifically avoids producing 'English' Chekhov. As David Allen has noted: 'In performing Chekhov, Alfreds argues that it is important to try to replace our Anglo-Saxon mode of emotional expression by a more extrovert, Slavic one.'⁶

Griffiths is surely correct, however, to suggest that the overt emotionalism expressed in the long idealistic speeches of characters like Vershinin, Tuzenbach and Trofimov appears excessive to lovers of English reticence. It is perhaps because English directors feel embarrassed by this extrovert expression of feeling that they avoid asking their actors and audiences to take such characters seriously. In the English-speaking world, it is easier to present such passionate characters as eccentric 'gasbags' and to comically deflate their heartfelt faith in the future. The result is that, instead of embodying what Gottlieb calls the *leitmotif* of Chekhov's dramas, '*tak zhit nelzna* — one cannot and must not live like that', British, and English-speaking Chekhov in general, 'has enforced the idea that Chekhov's plays deal nostalgically with "the tragedy of dispossession"'.⁷

As we have seen, Chekhov's plays are not simply mood pieces stuffed full of interesting 'characters' fatalistically doomed to failure. His plays are social comedies which deal with issues that are of direct relevance to the lives of the audience. They provide a comic critique of the behaviour of his characters who have abdicated their responsibility to act according to their knowledge and ideals. Gottlieb is correct when she points out that the never-ending critical discussion of whether Chekhov's plays are tragedies or comedies 'goes deeper than questions of content and form, and becomes a philosophical and political debate'.⁸ The decision to interpret Chekhov's plays as either tragedies or comedies has far-reaching ramifications. It is not simply the style of performance

that is affected, but, more significantly, the meaning of the plays that is radically altered as a result of this decision:

To put it perhaps 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 tranquillise, what Coleridge called, 'the lethargy of custom'.⁹

Chekhov's aim has not always gone unnoticed, but critics like Gottlieb, Karlinsky and Magarshack, who emphasise the central role that such an aim plays in Chekhov's work, have always been in a minority. In addition, they have almost always written in reaction against the prevailing 'Absurdist' reading of the playwright. As early as 1927, we find one such critic expressing his dissatisfaction with critics of the 'nothing to be done' school of Chekhov:

He wrote very often, not invariably, about the weak and unsuccessful ... When Chekhov presents such characters, he is not trying to rouse us into a state of false indignation against life and fate; he did not intend to put the blame for anything that is wrong with the world of men upon those vague and convenient scapegoats; he wanted us to put the blame where it belongs: on ourselves.¹⁰

I share the assumption expressed in a recent text on play directing that 'all plays, no matter how poor, have inherent meanings. Pinpointing them is often the problem'.¹¹ That problem has emerged particularly in those cases where directors have portrayed Chekhov as a proto-Absurdist and consequently have misinterpreted the meanings implied in his playtexts. The director's first function is to correctly interpret the meaning of a given playscript before embarking on the second function of finding the theatrical means to communicate that meaning to an audience. It is the first function of interpretation that I have focused on in this book.

It is an interesting fact of theatrical history that the two functions of the modern director were formerly carried out by separate people. As we have seen, Nemirovich-Danchenko saw his role in the production process as interpreter of the playtext, while Stanislavski undertook to find the theatrical means of realising that interpretation. Increasingly, Stanislavski took over both the interpretive and creative functions, and today most directors regard it as normal practice to carry out these dual functions. In some ways, this has placed an undue burden on directors. Not only are they expected to have a complete knowledge of the

theatre arts, they are also expected to be experts in literary interpretation. That this is perhaps asking too much of most directors is, I believe, acknowledged by the fact that some of the more important and well-resourced companies employ dramaturgs to take on some of the functions formerly carried out by literary interpreters such as Nemirovich-Danchenko.

It is not the business of critics such as myself to legislate how a director should realise a playwright's play. What I believe a critic can do is help directors to arrive at an interpretation that lies within the 'parameters' and 'tolerances' of the playscript. Possibly the most useful preparation a potential director of a Chekhov play can make is to read Chekhov's other plays and short stories. The plays embody an exceptionally unified vision of reality and show a progressive mastery of form and consequently they are the perfect preface to help a director understand the nature of Chekhov's dramaturgy.

I have demonstrated how and why misinterpretations of Chekhov's plays have taken place in the past and continue in the present. This book will, of course, not stop such misinterpretations from continuing to occur. My hope is that prospective directors of Chekhov will be convinced by my argument and use their theatrical skills and creativity to mount productions that do not distort the playwright's vision of reality, and successfully communicate the richness of Chekhov's plays.

ENDNOTES

¹ Sartre, J-P, Film of *The Condemned of Altona*, quoted in Hodge, F., *Play Directing: Analysis, Communication and Style*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1994, p. 47.

² Vilar, J., 'Murder of the Director', in Corrigan, R., ed., *Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, Grove Press, New York, 1965, p. 146.

³ 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, pp. 166–7.

⁴ Griffiths, T., quoted in Allen, D., 'The Cherry Orchard: A New English Version by Trevor Griffiths', in Miles, P., ed., *Chekhov on the British Stage*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 163.

⁵ loc. cit.

⁶ Allen, D., 'Exploring the Limitless Depths: Mike Alfreds Directs Chekhov', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 8, November 1986, p. 321.

⁷ Gottlieb, V., 'The Politics of British Chekhov', in Miles, P., op. cit., pp. 148–9.

⁸ Ibid., p. 153.

⁹ Ibid. Chekhov was quite aware of the importance of providing audiences and readers with a jolt in order to wake them from 'the lethargy of custom'. In a letter in which he suggested ways that Suvorin might increase the effect of his writing on his reading public, Chekhov stated: 'And why should you explain to the public? One must shock it, rather, and then it will think more'. (Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 17 December 1891, in Friedland, L. S., *Letters on the Short Story, the Drama, and Other Literary Topics by Anton Chekhov*, Dover Publications, New York, 1966, p. 102.)

¹⁰ Robinson, M., 'M. Robinson Replies to the Notion that Chekhov's Characters "Are Forever Conquered by Life"', *Adelphi*, May 1927, in Emeljanow, V., ed., *Chekhov: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1981, p. 319.

¹¹ Hodge, F., op. cit., p. 48.