

Introduction

For better or worse, Chekhov's major plays were written at a time when the stage director was becoming a dominant factor in the modern theatre. (Laurence Senelick)¹

It is the total incomprehension of the central themes of Chekhov's plays that explains why directors are so prone to indulge in wild fantasies. (David Magarshack)²

Throughout his life, Anton Chekhov was highly critical of many features of the theatre of his day. His negative attitude towards directors and actors who presented his plays in a manner that displeased him led Chekhov to make the acerbic comment, 'The stage is a scaffold on which the playwright is executed'.³ Even the director who did the most to establish Chekhov's fame in the theatre, Konstantin Stanislavski, did not escape the playwright's anger. The depth of Chekhov's discontent with theatre artists is well documented. As Philip Callow points out:

There is no doubt that Chekhov was disillusioned with contemporary theatre from the outset. He commented bitinglly, to various correspondents, on the egotism and obtuseness of actors, not to mention their incompetence; on the limitations of the repertoire, the stupidity of directors, the passive acceptance of audiences. He engaged in a war of attrition with the theatre of his day, even when a theatre under Stanislavsky devoted itself to him, and he invariably lost. Stanislavsky, a pioneer of the experimental new drama, was for Chekhov a more complex foe, stubbornly refusing to see that tragedy could be depicted through comedy.⁴

My own study of the playwright and the experience of having acted in and directed several of his plays has led me to the conclusion that Chekhov had valid grounds for his animosity towards interpreters of his plays. From the time when they were written to the present day both critics and theatre directors have regularly misinterpreted Chekhov's plays.

A claim such as this immediately raises the question of what constitutes a valid interpretation. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the advent of postmodern theories of literature, it has become increasingly difficult to talk with any sense of authority about a playwright's intentions, or to argue that any particular interpretation of a playwright's work is more accurate than any other interpretation. Thirty years ago, it was not uncommon for critics and directors to confidently assert that their job was to provide an interpretation that would accurately reflect the playwright's intention. Today, many critics and directors not only assume that there is no sense in talking about the author's intention, but also believe there should be no limitation at all on interpretation.

Today there is no generally accepted way to approach the critical and stage interpretation of plays.

The claim that Chekhov's plays are often misinterpreted is clearly not in accord with those postmodern theories that deny the very possibility of valid interpretation. Consequently it is important to outline what the critical assumptions are that underpin this study. This work expresses the view recently voiced by Jonathan Miller, the English director, that there are two extreme critical positions relating to theatrical interpretation that must be avoided:

At the moment there are two millstones of folly which are threatening to grind the theatre into a state of pulverised idiocy. On the one hand, there is the existing notion that there is some sort of canonical version, the original version, the version which would most have pleased the playwright, the version that most realises the playwright's intention. And on the other, the notion that there is no such thing as the playwright's intention, that there is no such thing as a standard canonical formal meaning in a text, and that actually these texts constantly renew themselves under the pressure of interpretation, which allows there to be almost anything and the text is taken as an unstructured thing altogether. Both of these seem to me to be a misunderstanding of what the nature of a text is.⁵

While there are no definitive versions of Chekhov, there are 'preferred readings' or 'valid interpretations'. Clearly, directors who deny the need for any interpretation and produce what I call 'texts on legs' will reject the idea that a plurality of readings is possible. Equally, the idea that there may be 'invalid interpretations' will have little appeal to postmodern directors who deny that plays have any inherent meaning and choose to create theatrical events that have only a peripheral connection with the author's playtext.

The aim of this study is to provide insights that will help students, directors and actors to 'read' the plays in a manner that will assist in the creation of valid versions. In order to make clear the assumptions that underpin this study of Chekhov, it is necessary to understand that in the field of Theatre Studies a play does not exist as a single text. There are two separate but related texts: the written playtext and the performance playtext. The author's playtext is inevitably mediated in the production of the performance text. There are still critics who argue that such mediation is unwarranted. They argue that playwrights should be allowed to speak for themselves in the performance text without the intrusive mediation of other theatre artists like directors. This critically discredited view has been given a new lease of life recently as a result of its being adopted by conservative critics and audiences as a means to attack more extreme postmodern theatrical interpretations. It is still quite common to hear theatre-goers and critics harking back to some mythical golden age when the director didn't exist and the playwright's play delivered itself to the audience

without having to be interpreted. As Jonathan Miller stated in an impromptu talk he gave at the Adelaide Festival in the late 1970s on the topic 'Directing the Classics', certain people still believe that the director "should simply act as a butler ushering the work of the great classic onto the stage and then retire gracefully into the wings".⁶

The desire for an unmediated, uninterpreted performance that will let the playwright speak for himself can never be satisfied, for, as Peter Brook has pointedly asserted, 'if you just let a play speak, it may not make a sound. If what you want is for the play to be heard, then you must conjure its sound from it.'⁷ Brook's views are echoed by Miller when he baldly asserts that 'the act of interpretation is absolutely essential ... The so-called pure version of the bard speaking for himself hasn't ever and will never happen.'⁸

Both Miller and Brook are theatre directors and consequently it is not surprising to find them defending the creativity of their task and rejecting the passive 'butler' idea of direction. However, not all playwrights are totally happy about giving directors a free hand when it comes to interpreting their works. Knowing that their plays will inevitably be mediated through the work of directors, actors and designers, many playwrights have commented on the danger that the author's vision may be lost or falsified in production. Chekhov, for instance, constantly expressed deep dissatisfaction with what directors and actors did to his plays. Like his character Treplev, the tortured playwright in *The Seagull*, Chekhov saw much that was wrong with the theatre of his time. His blunt comment on Stanislavski's interpretation of *The Cherry Orchard* clearly expresses his belief that his playtext was not adequately realised in Stanislavski's performance text: 'All I can say is, Stanislavski has wrecked my play.'⁹

If Chekhov was unhappy about the treatment meted out to playwrights in his own time, he would probably be even less contented in today's theatrical milieu where the playwright's status relative to that of the director has diminished. Critics and directors such as Basil Ashton who argue that 'a director is only of any use when he serves the dramatist and allows the public to see and understand what the dramatist intended'¹⁰ have become an endangered species. The artistic 'creativity' of the modern director has become privileged above the contributions of all other theatre artists, including the once dominant playwright. We go to see Brook's *Lear* and Zeffirelli's or Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet*, not Shakespeare's plays. The poster for Barry Kosky's Australian production of *King Lear* made no mention of Shakespeare at all.

In the current world in which 'director's theatre' dominates it has become difficult to argue for the primacy of the playwright's play in the complex and composite art of theatre-making. Defenders of the playwright's supreme contribution have come under attack for their failure to accept the implications

of postmodern critical theories, particularly deconstruction, which assert that the existence in any meaningful sense of the 'playwright's play' is a fiction.

The decision to privilege the playwright's function over that of the director, or conversely, to privilege the director's function over that of the playwright, radically affects what we are likely to see in the theatre. We need to decide on the relative status of the playtext and the performance text.

This study aims to assist directors and students of theatre to see *what* Chekhov's plays are about, and *how* the playwright provides his interpreters with clues about how to realise the action of his plays on stage. The intention is to stimulate theatre practitioners to create productions that are theatrically rich 'valid versions' of the play. The need to find the right balance between validity and originality in interpretation is the director's constant aim and there is no fixed way of achieving this goal. As Richard Hornby observes: 'although there might be one best way for a particular company to perform a playtext at a particular time, in a particular theatre, and at a particular period in their development, there is obviously more than one way of performing it in general.'¹¹

The initial task of this study will be to examine the writings of Chekhov in order to ascertain what vision of reality is embodied in his plays and to elucidate how he dramatised that vision. Evidence will be drawn from Chekhov's plays, short stories and letters, as well as from the vast corpus of Chekhov criticism.

One can safely assume that most playwrights write with performance in mind. They write in a linguistic code, producing strings of words that will eventually be spoken by actors. They sometimes also write stage instructions and notes that suggest, to some degree, how they think their plays should be staged. These words, the literary playtext, are interpreted by a reader, critic, or director. In the case of the director, this interpretation is then re-encoded in terms not of a written code but a performance code involving a plethora of sub-codes including casting, vocal interpretation, facial expression, gesture, make-up, costume and movement within the dramatic space.¹² This total performance code, or performance text, is then interpreted by each member of an audience.

There are two distinct acts of interpretation that are of interest to any critic. The first involves the task of interpretation and translation undertaken by the director. This is a twofold task. Initially, the director analyses a playtext in order to find out what they believe the author's play is about: what constitutes the play's overall action and what vision of reality is expressed in it. Then, having explored these questions of interpretation, the director proceeds to the second task of translating their understanding of the literary playtext into the performance text by utilising the performance codes that are embodied in the work of actors, set and lighting designers, etc. Thus the director has to both interpret the play's meaning and find suitable theatrical means to translate that intellectual and emotional understanding into a 'readable' performance text.

This movement from page to stage involves the director in the difficult task of finding an objective correlative for their understanding of the play.

The second act of interpretation is undertaken by the members of any audience who witness the performance text. Martin Esslin, despite flirting with the view that, since no two audience members will ever interpret a performance in *exactly* the same way, the performance text is 'open to any interpretation that a reader or viewer may bring to it',¹³ concedes that a knowledge of how the signifying systems of the performance code work should 'help the director to attain a higher degree of certainty that he will actually convey the meaning he intended, at least to the majority of the audience'.¹⁴ Some consistency of reception is therefore possible in this second act of interpretation which can be suitably characterised as a movement 'from stage to audience'.

The chain of communication from the playwright to the audience has three main links. Firstly, there is the *playwright's playtext*, which is in the form of a written text that contains a series of encoded signals with potential for realisation in performance. The second link we may call the *director's performance text*, which involves the twofold task of a decoding interpretation of the playwright's playtext and a re-encoding of that interpretation in theatrical terms using the services of actors, designers, etc. The third major link in the communication chain is made up of the *audience's decoding* of the director's performance text.

The communication chain is, of course, far more complex than the above model suggests. If, for example, an audience member has studied the playwright's play and decoded or interpreted it in a way that is markedly different from the director's, then that audience member's decoding of the director's performance text may well result in a baffling and possibly irritating experience. These intertextual considerations, while they point out the 'interference' that is involved in the lines of communication between the playwright's play and the audience, mediated as it is through the director's interpretation and its realisation in terms of the various performance codes, should not lead to the conclusion that no communication is possible. A reasonably competent audience member can hear and see productions of plays and distinguish between those which are recognisably intelligible versions of the playwright's play and those which are not. Clearly there is a marked difference between the more direct way an author of a novel communicates with their readers and the ways in which playwrights have to communicate with audience members. The novelist does not have to go through the mediation of directorial interpretation and translation into performance codes which can lead playwrights like Chekhov to suffer the agonies that result from too much 'interference' by directors.

The chain of communication from the playwright to the audience includes reference to the problematic concept of 'the playwright's play' which is rejected in much current literary theory. Attempts to set limits on critical or directorial

interpretation through appeals to concepts such as authorial intentions and authorial meanings have been vigorously attacked. So Barthes, in his seminal essay 'The Death of the Author', written in 1968, asserted that individual readers are free to choose any meaning they wish from the text they read.¹⁵ As Selden notes: 'The reader is thus free to enter the text from any direction; there is no correct route.'¹⁶ The logic of such a position in terms of the theatre is that a director can 'read' a play in any way they wish and then, presumably, the audience members can also read the resulting performance in any way they wish. The very idea of a production of, let us say, Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* as opposed to Brook's *Uncle Vanya*, for instance, becomes unintelligible since the author is no longer to be considered of importance in the determination of the play's possible meanings. Andrei Serban in his production of this play at La Mama in New York in 1983 fully accepted his right to read the play freely. He chose to introduce such 'creative' moments as having 'Vania sitting on the professor's lap and the professor lecherously pawing Elena'.¹⁷ And why not, if anything goes?

It is precisely this totally anarchic view of interpretation that needs to be questioned, for in order to have even the possibility of supplying insights that might help students, directors and actors understand Chekhov's plays, one needs to be convinced that the playwright has *some* authority in the complex process of interpretation. The relationship between authors and their interpreters needs to be further examined.

Both Peter Holland and Michael Quinn¹⁸ have illuminated this problematic relationship. Quinn begins his article with a useful statement about the complex nature of theatrical interpretation as it is perceived today:

Play production involves the activity of an entire collective, and the relations among the many agents of the theatrical performance often become extremely complex. The relation between the author of the text and the stage director is perhaps the most difficult of these to sort out and understand, for those occupying the roles often claim a kind of primary or founding status.¹⁹

Arnold Wesker, a playwright who, like Chekhov, felt that his works were often misinterpreted, passionately argues the case for the primacy of the playwright over the director's function. In an article significantly titled 'Interpretation: To Impose or Explain', Wesker puts forward the extreme form of the argument that privileges the playwright over the director:

Let us remind ourselves of something that is perhaps forgotten. The raw material of the playwright is his individual experience of life. This experience is a kind of chaos into which occasionally there shines a light, a tiny light of meaning. A small part of the chaos is identified, sometimes comprehended. The playwright gives this chaos a shape, an order. He calls it a play ... The original play should

be considered the primary work, the director's production the secondary work. But a strange metamorphosis is taking place: the director is treating the play as *his* primary source, as *his* raw material to do with it how he fancies. The playwright endures the life and from it shapes a play, the director then robs, scavenges, rapes it.²⁰

Chekhov felt a similar anguish to Wesker when he saw his own plays misinterpreted. The gap that he perceived between his playtexts and the performance texts that they were transformed into led him to lose some of his initial love of the theatre. In a letter to Suvorin, his friend and publisher, in 1898, Chekhov declared:

Formerly I had no greater delight than to sit in a theatre, but now I sit there feeling as though at any moment someone in the gallery will shout: 'Fire!' And I don't like actors. The change is due to my being a playwright.²¹

Chekhov became so disillusioned with theatrical misinterpretations of his plays that, at various times, he declared that he would never again write for the stage.

The idea that the director should be privileged over the playwright has been given support by modern deconstructive theory. Gerald Rabkin puts this theoretical position starkly when he claims that:

Since the director is the main instrument of interpretation in the theatre of our time, the playwright holds no more privilege over the director than literature holds over criticism.²²

This stretches the idea of 'interpretation' to a point where it loses its primary meaning. The Macquarie Dictionary defines the verb to 'interpret' as: 'to set forth the meaning of; explain or elucidate'. Consequently, to critically interpret a play would mean 'to set forth the meaning of a play; to explain or elucidate a play'. This implies that there is a pre-existing entity to be interpreted. It would more accurately reflect Rabkin's actual argument if he replaced 'interpretation' with the word 'creation' since it is this latter word which best describes what he sees as the actual functional achievement of the modern director. This becomes obvious when one looks at another revealing statement in Rabkin's article entitled 'Is There a Text on This Stage?: Theatre/Authorship/Interpretation':

If it is as valid to speak of performance text as of written text, the vital theatrical problem is the relationship between the two, for in the dominant hierarchical model in western culture the performance text is offered as an interpretation — a reading — of the dramatic text. The rise of 'director's theatre' mirrors literary criticism's movement from the emphasis upon the immanent 'meaning' of literary texts to the acceptance of the processes of reading and interpretation which determine meaning.²³

The Macquarie Dictionary provides another definition of 'interpretation' that suggests a much stronger connection between the playtext and the performance text than that put forward by Rabkin. This definition refers specifically to theatrical interpretation. To theatrically interpret a play is 'to bring out the meaning of (a dramatic work, music, etc.)'.

Neither of the two extreme critical positions dealing with the importance placed on the playwright's or the director's contribution to the theatrical event is satisfactory. On the one hand there are those who are convinced that the meaning of any play lies in the literary playtext and that any theatrical interpretation of that text will debase that meaning — a meaning that can only be perceived by an elite! So Harold Goddard gets rid of the thorny problem of the relationship between the literary playtext and the performance text by denying the validity of performance. In what seems to be a perverse sort of bardolatry, he argues that drama:

... must make a wide and immediate appeal to a large number of people of ordinary intelligence ... The public does not want the truth. It wants confirmation of its prejudices ... What the poet is seeking, on the other hand, is the secret of life, and, even if he would, he cannot share with a crowd in a theatre, through the distorting medium of actors who are far from sharing his genius, such gleams of it as may have been revealed to him. He can share it only with a few, and with them mostly in solitude ...²⁴

One must presume that Goddard sees himself as one of 'the few' with a direct line through to the genius of Shakespeare. By receiving a playwright's work in solitude without the mediation of the theatre and all of its performance codes, a critic like Goddard can deceive himself into thinking that his interpretation of Shakespeare is identical to the meaning intended by Shakespeare. No one will be able to contradict him — Shakespeare is dead and Goddard is in solitude!

It is just this sort of ridiculous search for a single meaning that leads some critics and audience members to seek a 'definitive' production of a play. In effect, what seems to happen is that these particular audience members have in their minds some preconceived image or idea of the play's meaning. This image or idea, which they assume to be the playwright's meaning rather than their own interpretation of the play, is compared with the actual production they are witnessing. If the production mirrors their own idea of the play they regard it as successful while, if it fails to mirror their own idea of the play, they claim that the directors and cast have presented a distortion of the playwright's play.

The fact that no single meaning of a play exists, and consequently no definitive theatrical interpretation of a play is possible, does not imply that plays can mean anything and that *any* theatrical interpretation is acceptable. Even the deconstructionists find this conclusion difficult to accept. Rabkin has tried to

extricate the deconstructionists from a critical position that appears to deny the possibility of artistic discrimination. He uses the term 'misreading' to mean any and all interpretations and, in so doing, removes the useful distinction between an acceptable reading or interpretation and a misreading or misinterpretation:

But how, then, does one avoid excusing weak or banal productions as necessary deconstructive strategies? How does the audience, the critic discern which directorial 'manhandling' is valid, which simplistic reduction or mere caprice? Deconstruction does not assert that anything goes, that all interpretation is equal. The Yale deconstructors have warned against the freedom of mis-reading. All mis-readings are not equally valid. [Hillis] Miller insists that the reader is *not* free to give the narrative any meaning he wishes, but that ... meaning emerges from a reciprocal act in which interpreter and what is interpreted both contribute to the making or the finding of a pattern.²⁵

Hillis Miller's comment raises more questions than it answers. Should a director concentrate on 'the finding of a pattern' in the play or focus their activities on 'making a pattern'? The first approach assumes that there is a pattern, presumably created by the playwright, which is to be found in the play, while the second approach effectively makes the director the author of the work. Is the director who 'makes a pattern' interpreting the play or creating it? Interpretation and creativity need not be antithetical. It is important to recognise that some playtexts are more 'open' to the possibility of a range of acceptable readings or interpretations than others. Plays such as *Hamlet* and *The Cherry Orchard* may well have various patterns that can be realised on stage in different productions and thus encourage directorial creativity. A melodrama such as *Lady Audley's Secret* may be more 'closed' in terms of the possible patterns of interpretation. It may not allow for as great a 'plurality of readings'.

Harold Goddard, when assessing the rival claims of the playwright and the director, avoids dealing with the difficult question of the relationship between the literary text and the performance text by simply rejecting the value of the performance text altogether. In a similar manner, those who wish to privilege the performance text tend to regard the literary text as a mere pretext. One can see some validity in such a position when one is dealing with unscripted performance-art creations. Theatrical events such as happenings, much experimental performance art and improvisational theatre allow the directors or performers a free hand in the 'making of a pattern'. This is surely because the performance text is the only text. There is no prior literary text whose pattern a director might try to find. However, the kind of critical stance which claims that plays which have a literary text really exist, or can be understood, *only* in performance leads, as Richard Levin has pointed out, to all sorts of problems:

If a play really exists only in performance, then, since there would be no way to determine *which* performance (since that would bring us back to the author's

text, and so confer 'reality' upon it as well), it would have to mean *any* performance. This would mean that any alterations made in the text during any performance, even including actors' errors, would become part of the 'real' play. Then there would be no 'real' play, but only the aggregate of all the different performances, which would all be equally legitimate, since the author's text, and hence his meaning, could no longer be relevant, and the sole criterion for judging them would be whether each one 'worked' in its own terms. But then it would make no sense to say that a play can be really understood only in performance, because there would be no independent 'reality' apart from the performance that could be understood. Thus the assertion that a play can be understood only in performance would seem to be either tautological (if the play and the performance are identical) or self-contradictory (if they are not).²⁶

There is no way of excluding the author and the literary text when questions of interpretation arise. What needs to be worked out is the precise nature of the relationship between director and playwright in what Hillis Miller called 'the reciprocal act' of theatrical interpretation.

There is in fact no need to privilege either the playwright or the director. Peter Holland has argued that Stanislavski's despotic control over the production of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* privileged the director over the playwright. In order to redress this imbalance he claims that:

There is of course no reason why the deprivileging of the director should make the writer privileged in turn. If the director no longer has control in an absolute way as in the past, then we should not assume that the writer can therefore choose to fill the vacuum. The writer's reading is only one among competing preferences.²⁷

It is now generally, though not universally, conceded that due acknowledgement of the playwright does not involve the consequent downgrading of all of the other theatre artists involved in the group creation of a production. It is difficult to take seriously the idea that the playwright's play has some golden nugget of meaning embedded in it which the director digs out, and hands over to the actors who, in turn, hand the unchanged ore over to an audience to take home and add to their wealth of experience! The meaning of a play is never a stable object that remains unchanged through the mediation and transformation processes that constitute theatrical production. What is actually seen as meaningful in a play varies from director to director, from generation to generation, and from culture to culture. Consequently, the most interesting and enduring plays seem to be those that invite a plurality of readings or interpretations. As Jonathan Miller commented in his Adelaide Festival talk: 'What is so interesting about rich complex works of the imagination is that you can still focus on different levels at different periods.'²⁸

Bernard Beckerman makes the additional important point that a variety of possible readings is inevitable regardless of whether we tend to privilege the playwright over the director or vice versa:

As we become aware of how successive generations have responded to specific plays, we come to see that a text does not have a single ideal manifestation. Instead it experiences a succession of transformations. Whether one chooses to consider these diverse transformations as complementary expressions of a single textual core or to see them as independent reconstructions of a potential but incomplete idea, the existence of valid alternate versions of a text emphasizes our obligation to see a play as a complex of dynamic possibilities.²⁹

What is also significant about Beckerman's comment is that he realises that the fact that there will always be differing interpretations does not mean that all interpretations are acceptable. The idea of 'valid alternate versions of a text' not only opens the possibility for an infinite number of possible versions but also implies that there are or can be 'invalid' versions. Possible theatrical interpretations or readings must allow for possible misinterpretations or misreadings. There have been productions of *Hamlet* where Ophelia's madness has been presented in a sadly lyrical manner, others in which her madness has been portrayed in a violent and frightening way. Both of these approaches are possible interpretations and are certainly not contradicted by the text. However, a production in which Ophelia is presented as not being mad at all constitutes a misinterpretation since all the available evidence in the playtext suggests that she goes mad.

Whether Stanislavski's production of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* should be regarded as one valid interpretation amongst the multiplicity of possible interpretations or as a misinterpretation, as Chekhov claimed, is open to debate. If we still wish to distinguish between theatrical interpretations that are valid and those that are not, we need to establish workable criteria to allow us to make such a distinction.

Few critics have written anything that is particularly helpful on this topic. One notable exception is Roger Gross, whose book *Understanding Playscripts: Theory and Method* is both clear and subtle in its explication of the complexities involved in theatrical interpretation. Several of Gross's insights underpin my critical assumptions in this study of Chekhov. Gross uses the twin concepts of 'parameters' and 'tolerances', which he borrows from the fields of mathematics and mechanics, as analytical tools to help directors arrive at a valid, or as he calls it, 'correct' interpretation:

A 'correct' reading is one which fully rationalizes the playscript so that the performance based on it is coherent and complete without contradicting or omitting any of the requirements of the Commanding Form.³⁰

The 'parameter' that any director considers when interpreting a playscript involves asking the question: 'What *must* happen in a production of this play?' As Gross defines it:

The parameter is that in a variable system which remains constant while other factors change. The playwright may be said to have established a parameter, certain Psychic Events which must occur if the play is to be considered an acceptable version of the playscript.³¹

By 'Psychic Events' Gross means the 'understanding' that an audience has as a result of seeing the 'Physical Events' on the stage:

Physical Process is pre-verbal, pre-conceptual. It is what is; when it is noticed, the noticing is a Psychic Event. Physical Processes are the 'matter' of drama. Psychic Events are what Physical Processes provoke in our minds, and that is what really counts. Physical Processes are the medium by which Psychic Events are communicated from artist to audience. Only when an appropriate Psychic Event occurs in the mind of the audience or the interpreter has the play 'succeeded'. Only Physical Processes are actually on stage. Psychic Events, Dramatic Actions for example, exist only as mental events in the audience and as sign-potential of the play/script.³²

Later Gross defines the Aristotelian concept of the overall action of a play in terms of Psychic Event:

The simplest definition of 'the Action' is 'the Master Psychic Event' of the play. That is, the play as a whole seen as one Psychic Event.³³

An Ophelia who never goes mad may be considered a misinterpretation if, as a result of omitting the Physical Event of Ophelia's madness specified in the playtext, we destroy the required Psychic Event that constitutes one of the parameters of *Hamlet*.

The 'tolerance' as defined by Gross involves the director asking the question: 'What may *not* happen in a production of this play?':

The tolerance of a system is the degree to which factors may vary and still perform their functions in the system. The playwright may be said to have established tolerances, certain limits within which Psychic Events must occur if the play is to be considered an acceptable version of the playscript.³⁴

The manner in which any given Ophelia goes mad allows for a great range of interpretations that are within the tolerances of the playscript. Serban's decision to have Professor Serebryakov 'lecherously pawing' Helen in his production of *Uncle Vanya* lies outside the tolerances of that playscript and is an example of what the critic Stark Young scathingly described as 'virtuosity':

Directors move more toward virtuosity when they take the play only as material for some idea that they wish to express. They are not concerned with giving us the play's idea so much as their own. An extreme virtuoso in the theatre uses the play as the other sort of director uses the actors or the décor, it does not provide the main idea or the mood of the theatre work but is employed to express his idea. He does not develop the play for what is in it but uses it to create a sort of drama of his own. He distorts the play and forces it to ends not its own but his.³⁵

To be sympathetic to Young's viewpoint does not mean that one approves of 'museum theatre' or conservative productions of plays or wishes to deny the creativity of directors, designers and actors. When Peter Brook sets *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a white box with characters swinging on trapezes, or when Jonathan Miller sets *The Merchant of Venice* in nineteenth-century London, they are not being virtuosos in the sense implied by Stark Young. Rather, they are aware that plays and audiences exist in time and that their task as directors is to make plays from the past speak to an audience of today. They realise that, in order to achieve this goal, plays need to be constantly re-interpreted. The effect of seeing such productions is that, as a result of the directorial transformations made in production, the audience comes away with a clearer and deeper understanding of the play.

This experience is superbly described by Rodney Ackland after witnessing Miller's 1976 production of *Three Sisters*. When he went to see the play, he carried with him his vivid memory of Komisarjevsky's famous 1926 production. Miller's production forced Ackland to see that Komisarjevsky's interpretation was not the only possible way of presenting Chekhov's play:

... all these unimaginable years later, I could perceive, quite clearly in my mind's eye, an image of Trixie Thompson [the actress who played Irina in Komisarjevsky's production] as she was in the first act, with her delicate, flower-like beauty and her tremulous hopes of happiness, a perfect paradigm of all Chekhov's young girls, the 'little victims' who, all unconscious of their fourth-act doom, do, in the first act, play. This, surely, was the only possible Irina, the true Irina of Chekhovian intent.

But here, before my present eyes, was a determined young person in a stiff and starchy high-necked dress, abrasive and unyielding in manner as the material the dress was made of. And she too, according to Dr Miller and Miss Angela Down [the actress who played Irina in Miller's production], was supposed to be Irina. I found this difficult to accept. I resisted it. I hated it! But gradually, reluctantly and fighting every inch of the way, I was won over.

Obliged by this new approach to give a truly 'cool, hard' hearing to Irina's lines, sure enough, they gave little evidence of the tenderness, the sympathy, the delicacy of feeling which I had taken for granted to be hers.³⁶

Clearly Miller convinced Ackland that his production was in some sense justified by the text and made sense of the text in 1976. In Gross's terminology, the Physical Events used by Komisarjevsky in 1926 which seemed to produce appropriate Psychic Events in audience members did not seem to Miller to be appropriate to his understanding of the play in 1976. Consequently, Miller required a new set of Physical Events to produce the appropriate Psychic Events. These transformations wrought upon the play by Miller are not pieces of virtuosity but necessary ways of communicating the action of Chekhov's play. Without such transformations of the Physical Events, without re-interpretation, Chekhov's play would not deliver itself to a modern audience.³⁷

The general line of argument put forward by the critic and director Jonathan Miller suggests that the relationship between the director and the author is neither one of self-effacing subservience nor of self-aggrandising arrogance. The director in this view is neither 'butler' nor 'virtuoso'. The 'reciprocal act' of theatrical interpretation, while it demands the freedom necessary for the director to find the appropriate Physical Events to realise the play's Psychic Events, necessarily denies the director total freedom to create whatever they wish if the realisation of the play's Psychic Events remains the objective of that director.³⁸ Where Gross talks of 'parameters' and 'tolerances', Miller talks of 'determinancy' and 'indeterminancy'. Both acknowledge the existence of the playwright's play. There may not be clearly defined 'nuggets' of meaning to be dug out of the playscripts and delivered to audiences, but the playscripts do at least define and limit the possible meanings. We cannot define all of the valid potential meanings of a given playtext, but we can often exclude certain readings as being too far-fetched. Jonathan Miller, when discussing how knowledge of a play's historical context partially determines meanings, wittily illustrates this point:

That is why, in fact, one speaks of the indeterminacy of works of art and plays in particular. It is not that they are totally undetermined, or undeterminable, because there are certain things that are obviously determined — to a very large extent — by their actual linguistic structure. When Hamlet says 'To be or not to be' it is quite clear that he is not talking about making raspberry jam.³⁹

What needs to be established is not some spurious hierarchy that privileges one theatre artist over another in the creation of the theatrical event, but some means of deciding how the various artists are to function creatively in relation to each other. It is here that the idea of 'priority' becomes more important than 'privileging'. The work of the playwright is prior to, though not necessarily more important than, the work of directors and actors. In a production of

Chekhov's *The Seagull*, the work of the director and of the actors is clearly as necessary to a performance of the play as are the playwright's words. All are necessary and none are by themselves sufficient, but there is a sequential order in which work has to be done to produce the play. It is in this 'sequential' rather than any 'privileging' sense that the playwright's play takes priority over the work of the director and of the other theatre artists.

Today, when directorial and critical virtuosity is rampant, it is salutary to be reminded of the importance of priority of the literary text. It is significant that one of the major criticisms made about Stanislavski's productions of Chekhov's plays was that, by privileging the contributions of the director and actor in the theatrical creation, and by failing to accept the importance of the playwright's play, he failed to create the Master Psychic Event of Chekhov's play for the audience.

Necessarily, this study concentrates on examining the literary rather than the performance texts of Chekhov's plays. They will be examined from the point of view of a director, actor or student of theatre who wishes to discover how these plays might be interpreted in production. This study will mainly deal with the *playwright's playtext*, and the *director's performance text*. It will not deal directly with the *audience's decoding* of the *director's performance text*.

The reason for this approach should be fairly clear by now. The overall aim of this work is not to legislate what actual productions of Chekhov should look like but to suggest approaches to interpretation that should produce richer, more valid versions of these plays in production. Jean Howard is correct when she claims that 'there is a crucial difference between examining the plays viewed as blueprints for performance and examining the plays as enacted in *particular* performances'.⁴⁰ Actual productions referred to in this study will be used to illustrate the extent to which they failed or succeeded in fulfilling the specifications of the play's 'blueprint'. The precise relationship between the actor's approach to building a character and the director's approach to the communication of the idea of the play, between what Gross calls the 'fictional' and the 'functional' versions of the play, will be dealt with more fully in the chapters that analyse Chekhov's plays. While the two approaches are clearly related, they are not identical.

The emphasis placed on the playtext in this study in no way denies the creativity of a director. Due emphasis needs to be placed on both the author's and the director's artistic input. Tyrone Guthrie is surely correct when he argues, in defence of Stanislavski's and Nemirovich-Danchenko's approach to Chekhov's plays, that 'they were surely entitled to their view of what the script meant to them; and as directors of the production, were not only entitled but bound to interpret it in their way'.⁴¹ Guthrie realises that any interpretation must depend upon the amount of information and knowledge the director has about the play.

He acknowledges that Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko will no doubt 'have been very much influenced by the author's disagreement and will have made many changes, often against their better judgement; but without their being able to help it, the interpretation will have, in general, been what *they* make of the script'.⁴²

The act of 'transposing a written work from the imaginary realm of reading to the concrete realm of the stage'⁴³ is the director's task but, as the French director, Jean Vilar, has pointed out, that task can be carried out sensitively or stupidly. Vilar's rhetorical question to would-be directors, 'Can one interpret something one doesn't understand?'⁴⁴ is clearly to be answered in the negative. He implies that there is a literary text that needs to be understood by the director before they can intelligently transform it into a performance text. Because Vilar felt not enough attention was being paid to the playwright's play he added: 'One can never read the play often enough. Actors never read it often enough.'⁴⁵

Vilar's words echo those of Chekhov who complained that both Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko did not pay close enough attention to his playscripts. In a letter to his wife Olga Knipper on 10 April 1904, the dying playwright fulminated about the Moscow Art Theatre co-founders for having misinterpreted his last play: 'Nemirovich and Alekseyev positively do not see in my play what I wrote, and I am ready to vouch that neither of them read *The Cherry Orchard* through carefully even once.'⁴⁶

Both Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavski record Chekhov's advice to actors concerning how to play certain roles. Neither director found his advice either clear or helpful. Nemirovich-Danchenko claims that 'Chekhov was incapable of advising actors, even later when he came into contact with the actors of the Art Theatre. Everything appeared so comprehensible to him: "Why, I have written it all down", he would answer.'⁴⁷ Stanislavski noted that Chekhov's reticence to talk about his plays was habitual:

It may seem strange, but he could not talk about his own plays. Feeling as if he were being questioned himself by a judicial examiner, he would grow confused, and in order to find a way out of the strange situation and to get rid of us, he would take advantage of his usual statement: 'Listen, I wrote it down, it is all there.'⁴⁸

Regardless of Chekhov's belief that his dramas were perfectly clear, both critics and directors have interpreted his plays in markedly different ways. My re-examination of Chekhov's plays will concentrate on establishing precisely 'what is there'. We can then discover some of the 'parameters' and 'tolerances' of Chekhov's drama and, as a result, suggest possible valid interpretations of his plays, and in addition explain why some other versions of his dramas are

misinterpretations. In particular we should be able to find out why critics and directors alike have arrived at such widely divergent interpretations of his work.

In Chekhov's lifetime there was considerable critical disagreement amongst Russian critics concerning both the nature and value of his literary creations. Since that time the critical fluctuations, both in Russia and abroad, have become polarised into the 'gloomy' and 'positive' schools of Chekhov criticism. It is not surprising to find that Soviet critics have tended 'to find and accentuate optimistic and positive values in Chekhovian drama and to emphasise that the author had a message for the masses',⁴⁹ nor is it strange to find many Western critics discovering the 'existential' even 'absurdist' pessimistic Chekhov whose plays show us 'that time cannot be slowed or reversed, that human nature cannot be reformed or revitalised'.⁵⁰

Both Soviet and Western critics necessarily approach Chekhov from their own ideological standpoint and the patronising attitude that is often expressed by Western critics towards the 'optimistic' Soviet reading of Chekhov often stems from a failure to see that we have our own biases. As Tulloch perceptively notes: 'For too long Western critics have pinpointed the value-laden assumptions of Soviet interpretation of Chekhov without equally questioning their own epistemologies'.⁵¹

Chekhov's complex attitude toward both life and art make any simple pigeonholing of his vision of reality under headings like 'optimistic' or 'pessimistic' wholly unsatisfactory. As Joseph Wood Krutch has pointed out, 'if he had been simply unconcerned with the future and engaged in nothing but a defence of his dying aristocrat, he would merely have been a possibly interesting conservative'.⁵² Such 'gloomy' Western interpretations of Chekhov are no more, and no less, satisfactory than the 'uplifting' interpretations of the early Soviet critics who tried to make of Chekhov 'a sort of John the Baptist of the Revolution preparing the way for the appearance of Lenin'.⁵³

Even amongst critics who share similar ideologies there is disagreement about the nature of Chekhov's works. Just as critics in the West argue about whether Chekhov's works should be classified as being optimistic or pessimistic, so Marxist critics squabble about the nature of the playwright's vision of reality:

A.V. Lunacharskii, People's Commissar of Public Education and himself a playwright, was very positive about Chekhov, whom he believes to have been 'in love with life', while the Bolshevik ideologue P. I. Lebedev-Polianskii found only 'hopeless pessimism' in Chekhov.⁵⁴

Depending upon whether directors have been convinced by the 'gloomy' or the 'positive' school of critics, Chekhov's plays have been produced in a manner that emphasises either their tragic potentialities (as Stanislavski insisted) or their comic possibilities (as Chekhov advocated).

It was not simply the 'pessimism/optimism' and the consequent 'tragic/comic' dualism that fascinated Chekhov but also such potentially antithetical pairings as 'science/art', 'ideal/real', 'mask/face', and 'outer life/inner life'. The new form of drama that he devised to express the complex relationship between these various dualities was itself dependent on the formal duality of text/subtext. The examination that follows will demonstrate the ways in which productions of Chekhov's plays that foreground either the tragic or comic elements to the exclusion of the other are misinterpretations. One-sided productions falsify the playwright's vision of reality embodied in the overall action of the plays and affect the manner in which the action is expressed. The form and content of Chekhov's plays depend upon the inter-relationship and tension between the polarities of gloomy negativity and facile optimism. Indeed a central unifying thread that connects all of Chekhov's writings is his attempt to recognise, relate and reconcile a whole series of dualisms.

It is when critics and directors concentrate on one element of these dualisms and ignore the other that one-sided and reductionist readings of Chekhov occur. Productions of Chekhov's plays that over-emphasise either the outer surface reality of the text or the inner hidden reality of the subtext will inevitably be 'thin'. The plays are constructed in such a way that their full complexity and richness can only be realised in performance when emphasis is placed on the dynamic relationship between the outer and inner reality, between the text and the subtext.

Any polarised reading inevitably posits an 'either/or' approach whereas a 'both/and' interpretation of Chekhov more accurately describes both the vision and form of his works. An examination of just *how* Chekhov manages to write in such a way that the 'characters and situations' can be seen simultaneously as both tragic and comic and the play as a whole can be interpreted simultaneously as both pessimistic and optimistic needs to be explored. This study will have achieved its aim if it persuades directors and critics to attempt to create rich, balanced and complex readings of Chekhov's plays by avoiding simplistic polarised readings of these works.

ENDNOTES

¹ Senelick, L., 'Chekhov on Stage,' in Clyman, T. W., ed., *A Chekhov Companion*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1985, p. 209.

² Magarshack, D., *The Real Chekhov*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1972, p. 9.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Callow, P., *Chekhov: The Hidden Ground*, Ivan R. Dee, Chicago, 1998, p. 105.

⁵ Miller, J., in Delgado, M. M. and Heritage, P., eds, *In Contact with the Gods?: Directors Talk Theatre*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1996, p. 163.

⁶ Miller, J., 'Directing the Classics', ABC broadcast of Adelaide Festival Talk, n.d.

⁷ Brook, P., quoted in Rabkin, G., 'The Play of Misreading: Text/Theatre/Deconstruction', *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1983, p. 57.

⁸ Miller, J., loc. cit.

⁹ Chekhov, A., quoted in Hingley, R., *A New Life of Chekhov*, Oxford University Press, London, 1976, p. 305. Among the more recent playwrights who have complained bitterly about the dire fate of the playwright when placed in the hands of theatre practitioners, we can include such writers as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arnold Wesker.

¹⁰ Ashton, B., Letter to *New Statesman*, 11 September 1970, quoted in Magarshack, D., op. cit., p. 7.

¹¹ Hornby, R., *Script into Performance: A Structuralist Approach*, Paragon House Publishers, New York, 1987, p. 95.

¹² The multiplicity of signifying systems that operate in any performance may be one of the main reasons why 'the stage, unlike literature, will never be subject to computerized semiotic analysis'. (Quinn, M. L., 'Reading and Directing the Play', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 11, August 1987, p. 221.) This is why Esslin, for all his attraction to semiotics, concedes that, 'it may be an over-ambitious project to reduce the semiotics of dramatic performance to an "exact science"'. (Esslin, M., *The Field of Drama*, Methuen, London, 1987, p. 51.) Chekhov, himself a trained scientist, believed that there are areas of human experience that do not provide fruitful results when subjected to scientific analysis. This study reflects both the playwright's deep respect for scientific method and his awareness of its limitations:

Anyone who has mastered the wisdom of the scientific method and therefore knows how to think scientifically undergoes any number of delightful temptations ... A physiology of creativity probably does exist in nature, but all dreams of it must be abandoned at the outset. *No good will come of critics taking a scientific stance: they'll waste ten years, they'll write a lot of ballast and confuse the issue still further — and that's all they'll do. It's always good to think scientifically; the trouble is that thinking scientifically about art will inevitably end up by degenerating into a search for the 'cells' or 'centres' in charge of creative ability, whereupon some dull-witted German will discover them somewhere in the temporal lobes, another will disagree, a third German will agree ... and for three years an epidemic of utter nonsense will hover in the Russian air, providing dullards with earnings and popularity and engendering nothing but irritation among intelligent people.* (Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 3 November 1888, in Karlinsky, S. and Heim, M. H., *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1975, pp. 121–2.)

¹³ Esslin, M., op. cit., p. 156.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁵ Barthes, R., 'The Death of the Author', in Rice, P. and Waugh, P., eds, *Modern Literary Theory*, Edward Arnold, London, 1990, pp. 114–18.

¹⁶ Selden, R., *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, The Harvester Press, Brighton, 1985, p. 175.

¹⁷ Senelick, L., op. cit., p. 223.

¹⁸ Holland, P., 'The Director and the Playwright: Control over the Means of Production', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 11, August 1987, pp. 207–17, and Quinn, M. L., op. cit., pp. 218–23.

¹⁹ Quinn, M. L., op. cit., p. 218.

²⁰ Wesker, A., 'Interpretation: To Impose or Explain', *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1988, pp. 63–4.

²¹ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 13 March 1898, in Yarmolinsky, A., *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, The Viking Press, New York, 1973, p. 308.

²² Rabkin, G., loc. cit.

²³ Rabkin, G., 'Is There a Text on This Stage?: Theatre/Authorship/Interpretation', *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 9, Nos 2 and 3, 1985, p. 155.

²⁴ Goddard, H., quoted in Levin, R., 'Performance Critics vs Close Readers in the Study of Renaissance Drama', *Modern Language Review*, Vol. 81, July 1986, p. 547.

²⁵ Rabkin, G., 'The Play of Misreading', p. 59.

²⁶ Levin, R., op. cit., p. 548.

²⁷ Holland, P., op. cit., p. 216.

²⁸ Miller, J., loc. cit.

²⁹ Beckerman, B., in Hobgood, B. M., ed., *Master Teachers of Theatre: Observations on Teaching Theatre by Nine American Masters*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1988, p. 30.

³⁰ Gross, R., *Understanding Playscripts: Theory and Method*, Bowling Green University Press, Bowling Green, 1974, p. 134. 'Commanding form' is a term Gross borrows from Suzanne Langer. 'This

“commanding form” established by the script ... does not dictate the precise nature of each textural detail of performance; *it sets limits of purpose and form within which other elements must function or dissipate the unity of the play.* Unity is achieved when each element of production is a response to the commanding form established by the script.’ (Gross, R., op. cit., p. 12.) ‘The closest the interpreter can hope to come is to construct a play which in no way violates the commanding form conceived by the author, and implied by the playscript.’ (Gross, R., op. cit., pp. 133–4.)

³¹ Ibid., p. 134.

³² Ibid., p. 53.

³³ Ibid., pp. 109–10.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 134.

³⁵ Young, S., *The Theater*, Doran, New York, 1927, p. 85.

³⁶ Ackland, R., quoted in Allen, D., ‘Jonathan Miller Directs Chekhov’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 17, February 1989, p. 54.

³⁷ The need for directors to constantly find new Physical Events to stimulate appropriate Psychic Events in spectators can be graphically illustrated if we look at one of the more obvious problems associated with a modern production of *Everyman*. Because, in the middle ages, ‘mortification of the flesh’ was seen as a virtue, a ‘good deed’, the Physical Event of the self-whipping of the character Everyman was an effective means of eliciting the appropriate Psychic response of approval from an audience. The spectators saw the character Good Deeds rise up refreshed as a result of this beating. A modern audience would probably not regard this self-flagellation as an act that they would consider to be a good deed. A director today may well wish to find some other Physical Event to replace the whipping in order to trigger the Psychic Event of ‘approval’ in the audience. This sort of transformation is more likely to communicate the meaning implied in the text than any ‘museum’ reconstruction of the original performance of *Everyman* could possibly hope to do.

³⁸ Significantly, Jonathan Miller dislikes any directorial practice that changes the Psychic Events of a play as this alters the play’s implied ‘action’. His response to those directors who make Shakespeare’s plays relevant by making them speak about today’s political and social situation is trenchantly negative. ‘What I hate is the vision of Shakespeare frog-marched into the twentieth century and made to, as it were, speak on behalf of twentieth century problems of which he had no knowledge.’ (Miller, J., Adelaide Festival Talk, n.d.)

³⁹ Miller, J., *Subsequent Performances*, Faber and Faber, London, 1986, p. 155.

⁴⁰ Howard, J. E., *Shakespeare’s Art of Orchestration*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1984, p. 57.

⁴¹ Guthrie, T., ‘A Director’s View of *The Cherry Orchard*’, in Guthrie, T. and Kipnis, L., trans., *The Cherry Orchard*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1965, p. 13.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Vilar, J., ‘Murder of the Director’, in Corrigan, R., op. cit., p. 143.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 146.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Chekhov, A., Letter to O. L. Knipper, 10 April 1904, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 466.

⁴⁷ Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., *My Life in the Russian Theatre*, Geoffrey Bles, London, 1968, p. 62.

⁴⁸ Stanislavski, C., *My Life in Art*, Eyre Methuen, London, 1980, p. 361.

⁴⁹ Moravcevic, N., ‘The Dark Side of the Chekhovian Smile’, *Drama Survey*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 1966–67, p. 244.

⁵⁰ Rayfield, D., *Chekhov: The Evolution of His Art*, Paul Elek, London, 1975, pp. 226–7.

⁵¹ Tulloch, J., ‘Chekhov Abroad: Western Criticism’, in Clyman, T. W., op. cit., p. 203.

⁵² Krutch, J. W., *‘Modernism’ in Modern Drama*, Russell and Russell Inc., New York, 1962, pp. 71–2.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 72.

⁵⁴ Terras, V., ‘Chekhov at Home: Russian Criticism’, in Clyman, T. W., op. cit., pp. 170–1.