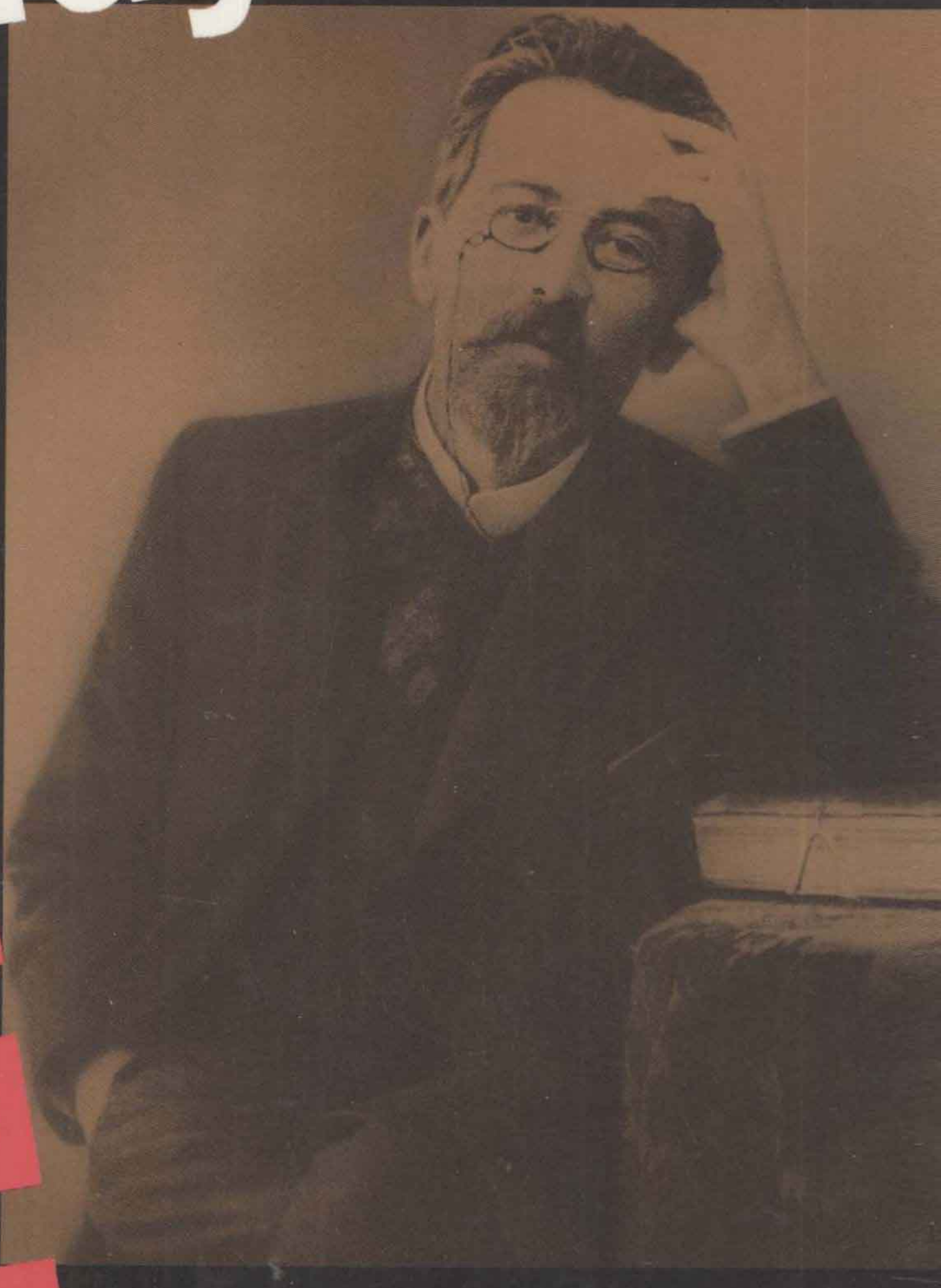
RICHARD GILMAN

Chekhov plays



an

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CHEKHOV'S PLAYS

An Opening into Eternity

Richard Gilman

Yale University Press ■ New Haven and London

Designed by Jill Breitbarth and set in Garamond type by
Keystone Typesetting, Inc., Orwigsburg, Pennsylvania.
Printed in the United States of America by BookCrafters, Inc.,
Chelsea, Michigan.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Gilman, Richard, 1925–
Chekhov's plays : an opening into eternity / Richard Gilman.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-300-06461-6 (cloth)
0-300-07256-2 (pbk.)
1. Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich, 1860–1904—Criticism and
interpretation. I. Title.
PG3458.Z8G5 1995
891.72'3—dc20 95-10913
CIP

A catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and
durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book
Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

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For Yasuko Shiojiri, my wife

Preface

A respectable if rather drab and characterless district near the center of Moscow in March 1989. It's a gray Sunday morning and I'm standing with a talented young theater teacher and critic named Sergei and a friend of his, the sixteen-year-old daughter of a prominent professor of drama. We're in a side street called Sadovaya-Kudrinskaya off a wide boulevard down which we've just traveled on a clanking trolley, and we're waiting to be allowed into a small two-story house, which was once a private residence and is now a museum. The young woman calls my attention to a little metal plate on the wall near the front door on which is inscribed "A. P. Chekhov, Dr. of Medicine" in fading cursive Cyrillic script.

When my hosts for this trip had asked me for a list of the places I most wanted to visit in Moscow, I'd put this house near the top. Chekhov, my guidebook had told me in its sober and careful prose, had "resided and practiced medicine at this address" from 1886 to 1890 after getting his M.D. at the age of twenty-four in 1884. I know of two other Chekhov houses, one at Melikhovo, where he spent some summers and other periods in the late eighties and early nineties, and the other at Yalta, where he lived most of the time during his last years and which I'm going to visit later on.

We continue to wait outside the Moscow building, whose original red color is badly faded; Chekhov once described it as looking like "a chest of drawers."[1]

But after a while the museum opens and we go in, exchanging our presumably dirty shoes for the ill-fitting canvas slippers they always give you to wear in places like this.

Inside we walk at first among reminders of Chekhov's career as a physician, including a cracked brown leather doctor's satchel and a group photograph of his graduating class from Moscow University's Faculty of Medicine. Anton is one of the tallest among the two dozen or so earnest, somewhat stiffly or archly posing young men in black suits and white shirts, and he does not yet wear a full beard or his familiar pince-nez.

Chekhov several times referred to medicine as his "lawful"[2] or "legal" wife and to literature as his "mistress"; when he got tired of one, he said, he would go to the other. In fact, of course, the relationship was a good deal more complicated than that, and after I remember the quote and remind Sergei of it, I make a mental note to put the subject on some future agenda of Chekhov study. (One thing I will come upon is this variant concerning his writing: "Narrative is my legal wife and drama a flamboyant, rowdy, impudent, exhausting mistress."[3] That this description was accurate is borne out by the fact that Chekhov constantly complained about the difficulty—sometimes it seemed the impossibility—of writing plays, while writing fiction seems to have given him no such trouble.)

Along with the mementos of his "wife" in the first sense are some of his paramour, especially from the early years of their liaison: copies of a few of his first collections of stories; original issues of the weekly magazines in which he published his first humorous sketches under the noms de plume, among others, "A Physician without Patients" and "Antosha Chekhonte." (The latter name was given to him by one of his high school teachers in Taganrog, the nondescript little city on the Sea of Azov where he was born and lived until he was nineteen.) Some of the journals, which have names like *The Dragonfly, Alarm Clock,* and *Splinters,* are reminiscent of the old London *Punch,* with histrionic black-and-white illustrations on their covers.

In his small, rather dark study you can see his black wooden desk, his walking-stick, pens, a marble inkwell with two little pots flanking a metal horse, and the blotter he used. Here he wrote a number of stories and possibly worked on two plays, *Ivanov* and *The Wood Demon,* although he seems to have done a great deal of his writing during those years at the various weekend or summer homes he rented (and, in the case of Melikhovo, later bought) in the countryside around Moscow or a little further south. What look like galley

proofs with corrections on them lie on the blotter, which impresses me as an astute note of realism, though I can't believe the proofs are authentic.

His bedroom and that of his sister Maria, who lived with him here and served as his assistant and hostess, are extremely small, with space enough only for narrow beds on which lie plump white comforters, for little marble washstands and, in Masha's room, for an easel. She was a rather talented artist several of whose paintings, most notably portraits of Anton and their older brother Alexander, hang on the walls of the main room. (Three of Chekhov's four brothers were also variously gifted; the youngest became a solid success as an educator.) Chekhov's mother, Yevgenia, and his younger brothers Mikhail (Misha) and Nikolai lived here too, the crowded household, for which Anton was the main, if not the only, economic support, being joined for a time by an aunt and a cousin; all their rooms were on the second floor, which isn't open to the public.

Two weeks later and seven hundred miles further south I'm at the Chekhov house in Yalta. Walking in the garden with my interpreter and guide, Nina, and the curator of the place—or, as everyone engaged in any of a wide range of formal cultural or intellectual activities in this country seems to be known, the resident "scholar"—I'm told that Chekhov himself carried up from the seashore, at least a couple of miles away down a winding road from the hillside where the house is perched, all the stones that cover the circling path, and planted many of the trees and shrubs we walk among, although he could scarcely have lived long enough to have seen more than a few of them grow to any size. And where could he have gotten the physical strength for it, I wonder.

Inside the museum, an oddly shaped three-story white structure about which Chekhov once said that it would make a perfect target if the British fleet were ever to bombard Yalta, I'm shown another cane, a pair of pince-nez that, placed on a shelf behind glass, looks like an artifact from some archeological dig, and another scruffy doctor's bag, which I didn't expect to see, since I hadn't thought he'd practiced medicine at all during those last few years.

An especially touching object in the dining room is an oblong of red cloth, like a shawl or banner, with a sewn inscription that reads: "To our dear Anton Pavlovich." This was a gift from the Moscow Art Theater; a number of the members, including Olga Knipper, the actress whom Chekhov married in 1901, arranged a Crimean tour in order to visit him at a time when his health made it more difficult than ever for him to travel up to Moscow.

A lovely photograph shows the group with him in the middle; from either

side their heads are leaning toward him, most likely so they can all get into the frame of the picture, but looking as though they're propping him up with their love. On a wall covered with grey paper in a gold fleur-de-lis pattern I see an ancient telephone with a nearby slate for jotting down notes, and then I come upon another familiar photo, this one of Chekhov in a long black overcoat buttoned to the neck, wearing a black fedora and looking down at two small dogs at his feet. To see these well-known photos in the place where they were taken gives me a peculiarly strong sense of access to the past.

More paintings by Maria are on the walls. I'm told that she was the museum's curator for many years until her death in 1957 (fifty-three years after Chekhov's!) at the age of ninety-three. (Olga outlived him by an equally astonishing stretch; she continued to act nearly until her death in 1959, also at ninety-three.) I learn much later that Maria never married, having been fiercely—some would say excessively, even ruinously—devoted to her brother, first to his existence and then to his memory and name.

Earlier I went to the adjacent Conference Center, itself a minimuseum. There, by a most satisfying coincidence, the annual meeting of the Chekhov Society, with scholars from all over the Soviet Union, was holding its opening session. After Nina spoke to the chairman, I was summoned to the podium and graciously, if rather terrifyingly, invited to address the gathering—to talk about Chekhov from the point of view of an American admirer, it was suggested.

So I arranged myself at the lectern and ad libbed my way through fifteen or twenty minutes of an inevitably rambling and disjointed appreciation of Chekhov's distinctive genius. I remember saying something spirited in defense of his comic gifts, so often lost sight of, and I was thankful that I could recall some passages from the stories and especially bits of dialogue from the plays well enough to quote them. I ended with a gentle (if in retrospect rather banal) reminder that Chekhov belonged to all of us, having transcended national and cultural boundaries the way great artists always do.

Though I could see a frown here and there—a specialist's resentment of an amateur? a Russian chauvinist's of an American?—I was given a generous round of applause at the end, having evidently passed whatever test may have been implicit in my appearance. After that I sat down and listened to several other speeches, and as I sat there, with Nina whispering bits of translation into my ear and my own senses picking up other bits of meaning, there began to form in me the genesis of this book. I had already published a long essay on Chekhov in my book *The Making of Modern Drama*, and for years I had been

"honesty," his "generosity" as both a man and a writer, the spaciousness of his "humanity" ("An author must be humane to his fingertips," he once wrote[5]), leaving little doubt that such qualities had been missing for generations from Soviet civic life.

How impressed I was by the way this writer, so lacking in the usual devices of literary seductiveness, so deliberately "small," unaggressive and ungodlike, continued to live so efficaciously in the minds of these people, how his stories and plays and the exemplary self that hovered behind their making went on animating and sustaining civilized men and women here. "Am I not fooling the reader, since I cannot answer the most important questions?" Chekhov wrote.[6] But like Thomas Mann—who years after Chekhov's death remarked in an appreciative essay that he hadn't answered any questions at all and thereby had kept to the proper role of the artist—these people weren't seeking any solutions from him, nothing like a literary package of aid and credits.

There wasn't a trace of anything cultic or runic about the proceedings, as there so often is in our own "higher" literary studies of a proprietary kind. Throughout the morning I felt a sense of intimacy, of unexploitative, non-professional possession, something I'd like to call "amorous" interchange between these scholars and teachers and a living body of work, a *living writer,* as indeed I usually felt whenever I talked about Chekhov to anyone in this highly literate country.

"Ah, he used to sit right there!" the curator of the Yermolova Museum in Moscow, my friend Sergei's mother, told me one afternoon as she pointed to a chair at one end of a large dining room table. It was as though she were literally recalling the scene instead of having simply assimilated handed-down remembrances. "He would always sit in that place, and he would give the most elegant toasts at dinner parties." Mariya Yermolova, the great turn-of-the-century Russian actress, never performed in a Chekhov play, but she cultivated his friendship.

And I remembered how at the Stanislavsky Museum a staff member had described to me some costumes from an early (could it have been the original?) production of *Three Sisters* with exclamations about Chekhov's taste: "He saw it that way—Irina in white, Masha in black. . . ."

Now I remembered that Chekhov, understandably unhappy at how, when he became well known as a playwright, people began using him as a guide to attitudes toward life, a source of quick wisdom or hints about "interesting" behavior, had once written that "everybody goes to the theater to see my [plays]

toying with the idea of writing a thorough study of his full-length plays. Until now I had thought that my extravagant admiration for Chekhov as both a writer and a man didn't constitute a sufficient reason or qualification for writing a book about him. But it struck me now, as I listened to his Soviet enthusiasts, that it wasn't a disqualification either.

On the surface the talks resembled the sort of thing one hears at academic symposia and Modern Language Association conventions, though they were considerably less full of arid Talmudic inquiry, little strands of "significance" pursued to their most remote ends. ("All aesthetic discussions just exhaust me and seem like continuations of the scholastic disputes with which people wearied themselves during the Middle Ages," Chekhov once wrote.[4]) But there was a redeeming vein of personality and ardor on which I think he would have looked kindly had the conference been devoted to someone other than himself. It was a dimension of feeling unlike anything I'd ever come upon at gatherings devoted to intellectual or cultural proposals, a dimension that indeed has been all but banished at certain professional levels among us. It turned itself into a persistent theme or approach, something that went much beyond the technical or analytic or exegetical.

Again and again these Soviet critics and professors, men and women of a great range of age and, for all I knew, of personality and temperament, spoke of Chekhov's art and life as exemplary, as constituting a deep spiritual resource for human beings today. There hadn't been anything like this unanimity in his lifetime, I was thinking; alongside the admiration so many people expressed for him, savage attacks had been made on the political and ideological "neutrality" of his writing and on its artistic "inconclusiveness."

Even before the talks began you could feel his presence in the circumstances and the setting. In the side rooms off the small auditorium, more artifacts were on display—another of his desks, more manuscripts—and the meeting hall was presided over by a huge blown-up photograph of Chekhov wearing pince-nez and with one of his characteristically benign expressions, a look that belies the toughmindedness of his work. The poster, a smaller copy of which now covers a wall in my study at home, bore the legend "Chekhov: The Years at Yalta," the theme of this year's Chekhov Society meeting.

And now that presence, that tutelary spirit, was invoked as a criticism of and corrective to the actuality of these . . . "troubled" times, I was about to write, but as I remember the political atmosphere in which the talks took place, "desperate" would be more nearly true. The speakers kept bringing up Chekhov's

to learn something instantly . . . to make some sort of profit, and I tell you I have not the time to bother about that *canaille*."[7] The uncharacteristic expletive rose from his wish to protect his art from all the reductive uses people sought to make of it, and that wish was protected at the conference. For I detected very little that was sentimental or utilitarian about the attitudes expressed in this forum, whose communal aspirations struck me as being directed toward the exactness of feeling, the daring and precision of honesty that had distinguished Chekhov, and no hints about behavior were being sought.

I walk along the seaside avenue called the Esplanade, in Yalta, the faded resort on the Black Sea whose reputedly salubrious climate at one time attracted many invalids and convalescents, along with a wealthy and, in their own minds at least, fashionable crowd. (The tsars kept a palatial winter home nearby; the Yalta Conference was held there in 1945, and you can see the places Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin occupied at the long table.) After several earlier visits, Chekhov settled here in 1898 to try to preserve the remnants of his shattered health. He could breathe a little better here, or so he thought, or so the doctors told him—how strange it was that he shied away from diagnosing his own tuberculosis. Yet for all its languid charm and the house on the hill with its grounds so lovingly laid out (Chekhov also bought another little piece of property just outside town), he could still call Yalta "a lousy dump."[8] He yearned for Moscow's pleasures and excitements and, most of all, for Olga, whose flourishing career with the Art Theater, which he fully encouraged, kept them so often apart during the few years of their marriage.

As I walk along under a pale April sky, I bring to mind Chekhov's immensely delicate sad story "The Lady with the Pet Dog" (variously translated as "The Lady with the Dog," "Lady with Lapdog," and "The Lady with a Small Dog"). Its central characters strolled this wide, once fashionable thoroughfare, now gone severely to seed. After many vicissitudes and much struggle, the adulterous yet strangely chaste and innocent lovers are temporarily reunited, although they are still legally barred from marrying. A long time ago I committed the story's last words to memory, and now I summon them up: "It seemed to them that in only a few more minutes a solution would be found and a new, beautiful life would begin; but both of them knew very well that the end was a long, long way away and that the most complicated and difficult part was only just beginning."

As I walk on, I think of the grave antiromanticism of this passage, its refusal

of either consolation or despair, the sense it gives of existence as poised between fact and desire. *Fact* and *desire:* I turn the words over in my mind and can't think of a better, tighter formulation for the way Chekhov treats the tensions of ordinary experience in both his fiction and his plays.

The street has made me think of the story, and this adds to something I've gratefully noticed before: as I move around the country, I'm continually remembering Chekhov stories and plays, inspired by an incident, a face, a venue—some theater or other, this seaside resort—or even by an object such as a samovar, which always makes me think of *Uncle Vanya,* or an old clock, which brings to mind *Three Sisters.* This kind of evocation doesn't happen to me with Turgenev or Tolstoy or even Dostoevsky, who for all the admiration I have for him never gives me the sense of familiarity, the imaginative closeness I feel with Chekhov.

Two Soviet warships ride at anchor far out in the harbor on this afternoon that has suddenly turned sunny. People are lined up on a pier to buy tickets for what I guess are excursions on a newly spruced up coastal vessel. In how many Chekhov stories do people flee by water (on rivers, usually) from complicated love affairs or problematic selves? Taking me by surprise, several couples in warm-up suits jog by, like eerily transplanted yuppies.

Many people, almost all of them women, wait with disciplined resignation for the opening of shops which you can be sure have very little on their shelves. The street is full of soldiers, the way streets are everywhere in this country that seems to feel itself under perpetual siege. They're mostly army officers (and as such never fail to remind me of *Three Sisters*), the younger ones taller and leaner than those of the upper ranks, many of whom look like Marshal Zhukov of my World War II memories—square, barrel-chested, moving like a small tank. Unaccountably, I see very few navy men, just an occasional sailor swaying along with that universal peculiar rolling gait.

I sit down on a bench to rest and after a while a plainly dressed middle-aged man comes up and gently pats me on the shoulder. He saw me last night being interviewed about Chekhov on Crimean television, he says, and noticed my picture in the paper, accompanying a news story on my appearance at the scholarly conference. He hands me the paper; there I am, bearded, gesturing, a Chekhov fanatic described in the caption as a friendly visiting American scholar. I ask him if I might keep the paper, to which he assents by patting me on the shoulder once again.

In a plaza off the Esplanade a large flaking billboard displays heroic-sized workers with square jaws and flaxen hair. A mother, father, and two children; the parents thrust their fists into the future, as if heeding the sign's exhortation: "The motherland is calling you to new successes in labor."

At the Chekhov Memorial Theater in downtown Chekhov Square—both renamed some time after his death in 1904—a festival of his plays is going on in conjunction with the scholarly meetings. On successive evenings I see an elaborate, overwrought operetta made from his short farce, *The Wedding*; a plodding, laborious *Ivanov* performed by a visiting company from Poland; and a sparkling, enormously inventive *Uncle Vanya,* the work of a troupe called the Youth Theater of Lithuania, whose name derives not from the ages of its members but from its mission of bringing "good" theater to younger audiences. I can't remember a Chekhov production I've enjoyed more, even if my intimate knowledge of the text sometimes falters at the language barrier.

Chekhov is everywhere. Back in Moscow I go to see *Three Sisters* at the Art Theater, a revival of the famously far-out production by the famously far-out director Oleg Yefremov. Much as I detest this version's avant-garde tics, its insufferable artiness, just to see the familiar characters and the scenes I know so intimately is enough to give me pleasure.

I walk through the crowded, slush-filled streets of the capital, with its heavy, dour architecture; jostled by rude people with glum faces, I think of the half-dozen or more times in Chekhov's stories when someone is dreaming of Moscow or praying to be there, and of the supreme presence of Moscow-in-the-mind that runs through *Three Sisters.*

Chekhov has been around me from the beginning of my visit, even before I touched the ground of Russia more than a month ago. Several rows of birch trees rose from the flat, wintry earth surrounding Moscow's Sheremetivo Airport. "Dear, modest birches," Chekhov called his favorite tree, which is also my favorite. As we waited for the plane to taxi to a stop at the terminal, I looked out at my first horizon in this country I sometimes think I've known first and best through its writers, and especially Chekhov; I wanted to murmur, sentimentally it will be thought, but perhaps also as a talismanic exhalation, a "dear, modest birches" of my own.

Back in the familiar precincts of my life, I meditate for two or three months and then get ready to begin this book. First I catch up on the Chekhov

literature, reading most of what I've missed that's been published since my *Making of Modern Drama* came out in 1974. The reading confirms me in a long-standing suspicion that there's still no fully satisfying book on the plays as a whole. (Robert Brustein's Chekhov chapter in his *Theater of Revolt* is full of useful material, while among the best of the more recent writers on Chekhov are Laurence Senelick and Richard Peace.) So I decide that I'm going to write this book for the same reason people write seriously on any subject—that they perceive a space waiting to be filled.

Time and again I've been struck by the thinness of so many explorations of Chekhov's work, the lack of sensibility exercised on a writer with perhaps the most exquisite sensibility of all. Apart from the dwindling but stubbornly persisting ideological interpretations and the more recent structural or deconstructionist assessments, one main deficiency of much writing about Chekhov is paradoxically due to the immense esteem nearly everyone else has for him, an admiration which unfortunately is most often nebulous and soft-minded in the extreme.

Because he has so largely been seen as a comparatively "unconscious" artist, an *artless* one, so to say, by temperament a realist for whom accurate perception was enough and by strategy a conservative in matters of technique, the revolutionary nature of his writing, particularly of his dramatic work, has seldom been noticed. He is considered "modern," all right, but hardly on the same level of originality and innovation as Joyce or Proust, Strindberg or Pirandello. This attitude is especially damaging to the criticism of his plays, no matter how otherwise astute. His seeming lack of sustained plots, conclusive dénouements, and, most of all, aggressive technical inventiveness has led to his often being spoken of as a playwright of "mood" and "atmosphere," a miniaturist of emotions, the serene recorder of the "bittersweet" minutiae of everyday life. These tiresome assertions are wholly wrong, and their effect is to reduce Chekhov's imaginative size and convert his radical orchestrations into a kind of high-level program music.

Apart from that, there exists a fairly widespread idea that for all the virtues of Chekhov's plays, his stories are superior. Ronald Hingley, a British translator and biographer, insists that of Chekhov's "mature stories" and "mature plays," the "former constitute by far the more significant body of work."[9] And V. S. Pritchett, who ought to know better, writes about Chekhov that "his genius . . . lies above all in his creative gifts as a writer of short stories . . . his plays derive directly from his stories, in which . . . the texture is far richer."[10] The texture of

the stories is in no way "richer" than that of the plays, which, moreover, have connections to some of the stories (connections I intend to look into) but don't at all "derive" from them. To think that they do is to be blind in at least one important sector to both fiction and drama.

Chekhov's "genius" is found equally in the fiction and the plays, which Hingley and Pritchett might have seen if they didn't share that obstinate notion among literary people that theater is an inferior art—inferior, that is, to "creative" prose and poetry. It isn't inferior and Chekhov's pliant artistry is precisely the proof: no writer has ever surpassed him as a master of both fiction and drama, creating each with so nearly equal brilliance.

Without directly studying the fiction (which is beyond the scope of this book), I intend to trace some of the true connections between the stories and the plays. They exist, as we'll see, not so much in the realm of literal plots or subjects as in that of something much more subtle and delicate: what I'd like to call "imaginative ideas," a matter of webs and lacings of felt experience finding expression now in narrative prose and now in histrionic—dramatic—utterance.

It's not a question of richer or thinner texture but of different weaves, different ways of composition. As an example of what I mean, take this fragment from Chekhov's story "The Cossack": " 'You are not kind, you know . . . ,' said Maxim, looking into his wife's face. And for the first time since his marriage he perceived that his wife was not kind." The experience of such a birth of awareness about the deficiencies of a lover or a mate is to be found in Chekhov's plays, too: Nina's sudden revelation about Konstantin in *The Seagull,* Andrei's more gradual one about Natasha in *Three Sisters.* They don't "derive" from "The Cossack," they share its sensibility.

To go back to the Chekhov literature. There are some splendid essays on the individual plays, to which I'm much indebted—Francis Fergusson on *The Cherry Orchard*; Eric Bentley on *Uncle Vanya*; Robert Louis Jackson on *The Seagull*—but these pieces are thirty, forty, and nearly fifty years old. The single best study of the whole of Chekhov's dramatic work, by David Magarshack, was originally published in 1952 and wasn't entirely adequate to begin with. As I'll take up later in the book, Magarshack offered a valuable new perspective on Chekhov's growth as a dramatist by drawing a distinction between his early plays of "direct action" and the later "indirect" ones.

But this perspective doesn't go far or deep enough, and much less satisfying are thematic readings, some of them by Soviet scholar-apologists of various eras, with their ideological and quasipolitical axes grinding, and others by

Americans or Britons or Frenchmen who can't shake free from the idea that plays are really dramatized novels, with a story to tell rather than embody.

One more point. The argument has been made by scholars of the former Soviet Union and others that Chekhov's plays are solidly anchored in a native context and a particular time, not to be dislodged except at great and even mortal risk. I think the vision here is severely crimped. The modest, clear-eyed observer and elogist of his own culture, Chekhov is a poet of our lives too, an artist whose work doesn't simply survive but *continues,* moving most easily from the specificities of time and place to new ones, which it then makes its own; I find it impossible to separate most of what he wrote from the essential textures of life at this moment.

Of all writers I think him among the most readily transportable, the most able to transcend historical context and geographical limit, suffering the fewest losses along the way. And this is because I know of no writer who better exemplifies—radiates—the imperishable relationship between being and expression, the "universality" of which connection doesn't need to be demonstrated. It's the relationship that, I hope, will animate this book, in subtle, tacit ways usually, I suppose, but sometimes directly, as I try to trace Chekhov's nature and circumstances in his choice of forms, and to discover our own nature and human circumstances in the forms as he realized them in dramas.

Flannery O'Connor once wrote that "you use reality to make a different kind of reality."[11] I hope to show how those two kinds of reality—of being and expression, shall we call them?—stand in relation to each other in Anton Chekhov's plays.

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATIONS

Translations or "adaptations" of most of Chekhov's full-length plays aren't in short supply; near my desk, for example, I have precisely a dozen English versions of *Three Sisters,* together with a batch of *Cherry Orchard*s, and several *Uncle Vanya*s and *Seagull*s. *Ivanov*s and *Wood Demon*s are scarcer, though, and as far as I know there is only one English rendering of the full text of *Platonov,* by David Magarshack, which I'm obviously compelled to use; fortunately, he does a more than serviceable job. When, however, we look at how the other plays have been turned into English, the range of integrity and accomplishment is remarkably wide, moving from the early mistake-ridden and awkward