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FIVE PLAYS

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ANTON CHEKHOV

Five Plays

Ivanov, The Seagull,
Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters, and
The Cherry Orchard

Translated and with an introduction by
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Oxford New York
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
Oxford New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland
and associated companies in
Beirut Berlin Ibadan Nicosia

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Introduction © *Ronald Hingley 1977*
The five plays first published by Oxford University Press, London:
Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters, The Cherry Orchard (1964); Ivanov, The Seagull (1967),
© *Ronald Hingley 1964, 1967*
Ivanov, The Seagull, Three Sisters *first issued as*
an Oxford University paperback 1968,
© *Ronald Hingley 1968*
Uncle Vanya *and* The Cherry Orchard *first issued as*
an Oxford University Press paperback 1965,
© *Ronald Hingley 1965*
This collection first issued as a World's Classics paperback 1980
Reprinted 1983, 1984, 1985

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich
Five plays.—(World's classics).
I. Hingley, Ronald II. Series
891.7'2'3 PG3456.A13 80–40258
ISBN 0–19–281548–2

Printed in Great Britain by
Hazell Watson & Viney Limited
Aylesbury, Bucks

INTRODUCTION

FEW playwrights of the last two or three hundred years have had a greater impact than Anton Chekhov, and this despite his relatively small output. He left behind only five truly outstanding plays, all of four acts, and it is these which form the present collection.

Omitted from this volume are the ten one-acters, mainly farces, though several are masterpieces in their own limited genre. Omitted also are the two early four-acters, *Platonov* and *The Wood Demon*. Neither is a major work, but they will receive more prominence in this introduction than the one-acters, since both have a considerable bearing on the author's evolution.

Important though the theatre was to Chekhov, he worked for it only sporadically and neglected it for years on end; to a large extent his playwriting was overshadowed until the end of his life by the claims of narrative fiction. Chekhov the short-story writer was constantly developing and perfecting his craft; his stories take up six or seven times as much of his collected works as does his drama; he frequently referred to narrative as the 'wife' to whom he considered himself respectably united for life, and to the theatre as his fickle and temporary mistress. Yet to many of his admirers Chekhov still remains the great dramatist whose stories are less significant than his plays.

Chekhov's preoccupation with the theatre ebbed and flowed throughout his life from adolescence onwards. It may be traced back to his school days in the early 1870s, and it ended only with his death in 1904. He loved the theatre and he hated the theatre. Now he would plan to write a hundred one-act plays a year; then, claiming to be disgusted with the stage, he would assert his intention of never penning another word of drama.

Chekhov was born in 1860 in Taganrog, a small and declining port on the Sea of Azov, six hundred miles south of Moscow. He was the third of the six children of a struggling and eventually bankrupt grocer. This pious martinet beat and bullied his offspring, but also ensured that they obtained a good education. At the Taganrog classical *gimnaziya*, or grammar school, Anton developed his early flair for the dramatic, displaying a love of practical jokes, mimicry, play acting. A skilled comic actor with a strong instinct for entertaining, he could imitate his elders' speech, walk, and gestures. His targets ranged from

eccentric grammar school teachers, aged professors, and fatuous minor clerics to the Town Captain, in effect Taganrog's Governor. From such antics it was a short step to improvised charades and amateur theatricals at which Anton would impersonate a dentist or an aged village sacristan. More orthodox theatrical performances also took place, often at the homes of school friends. Himself the main organizer and producer, the boy is said to have written many plays of his own, only to destroy them. He also acted in established plays, including Gogol's famous comedy *The Inspector General.*

Comic acting figures little in Anton's mature years, for he gradually lost the knack or the interest. But an allied childhood pursuit, theatre-going, was to remain with him for life. Taganrog's theatre gave him the opportunity to see the classics of the Russian stage, including Ostrovsky's plays; light opera such as Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène*; and a stage adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin.*

Though Chekhov's efforts as a schoolboy playwright have not survived, he did not leave this interest behind when—in 1879, as a nineteen-year-old youth—he packed his bags and left Taganrog for Moscow. Here he joined his impoverished family, precariously established in the city for several years, and enrolled as a medical student. The five-year course, which he completed in 1884, was exacting. Meanwhile he had also managed to establish himself as a writer of sorts: he had become the increasingly prolific author of comic short stories and sketches published in a wide variety of periodicals. These trifles earned him enough to relieve his family's extreme poverty.

The same cannot be said of his dramatic writings of the period. Chekhov's earliest extant play was neither published nor performed during his lifetime, but was found—lacking any title—among his papers after his death and brought out posthumously in 1923. It is now known as *Platonov*, from the name of the principal character. Though the manuscript bears no date, the play may be assigned to 1880–1, partly on the evidence of Chekhov's youngest brother, Michael. His memoirs have the second-year student Anton offering *Platonov* to a well-known actress, Mariya Yermolov, and hoping to have it staged at the Moscow Maly Theatre. That the play was turned down is not surprising, on grounds of length alone; at 160 pages it would take about as long to perform as *Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters,* and *The Cherry Orchard* put together.

Platonov eschews Chekhov's usual hints, half-statements, and eloquent silences, being as exuberant and outspoken as the later plays are

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evocative and reticent. Another contrast lies in the degree of emphasis placed on action. For a writer in whose later works 'nothing happens', the Chekhov of *Platonov* makes far too many things happen. One of his heroines tries to throw herself under a passing train, on stage, and is saved by a horse thief who is later lynched by enraged peasants; the same young woman also saves her husband from being knifed and later tries to poison herself by eating sulphur matches. The play ends with a murder, its hero being shot in a fit of passion by one of three discarded or would-be mistresses. This concludes a sequence of intermeshed amatory and financial intrigues vaguely reminiscent of Dostoyevsky and revolving round a sexually irresistible village schoolmaster.

Absurd though *Platonov* must sound in this brief digest, and even more absurd though it may appear to those who read it through, the play has been successfully staged and contains many pointers to the mature Chekhov whose later techniques were very different. Nor can there be much doubt that the young man himself took his first extant play seriously at a time when most of his stories were still in a lighter vein. It would seem that his first interest as a would-be creative writer was the stage, not narrative fiction. And it was probably disappointment over the rejection of *Platonov* that temporarily diverted him from attempting any more serious plays for about six years. Periods of neglect were also to follow the unsuccessful production of his *Wood Demon* in 1889, and the disastrous flop of his *Seagull* in 1896.

Meanwhile the drama's loss was becoming more and more the short story's gain. After graduating as a doctor in 1884, Chekhov began practising his new profession at once. This was never to become his full-time occupation, however, and although he hesitated between letters and medicine for a while, it soon became obvious that authorship was his chief vocation. Throughout the 1880s he was gradually abandoning his early facetious narrative vein, and producing stories more and more imbued with his own characteristic blend of poignancy, astringency, detachment, and carefully controlled humour. Meanwhile he continued to reside in Moscow, helping to provide for his parents, and also for his youngest brother and sister until they were old enough to fend for themselves.

When, in 1887, Chekhov reverted to serious dramatic writing he did so by invitation. A well-known impresario—F. A. Korsh, proprietor of a Moscow theatre specializing in farces—suddenly commissioned him to write a four-act play, probably expecting the dramatic

equivalent of the early comic stories on which alone the young man's reputation rested. The result was more than Korsh had bargained for: *Ivanov*, the work with which the present volume begins. This indeed does provide light entertainment in quantity, but it is also a disturbing and profound problem-drama.

The first draft of *Ivanov* was dashed off at high speed between 20 September and 5 October 1887, each act being rushed to Korsh so that he could submit it to the dramatic censor and put it into rehearsal. On 19 November, exactly two months after Chekhov had first set pen to paper, *Ivanov* received its Moscow première at Korsh's theatre. This first night developed into one of the scandals 'without precedent in theatrical history' that figure so prominently in Russian stage annals. One theatre critic spoke of a 'storm of applause, curtain-calls and hissing', claiming that no author of recent times had made his bow to such a medley of praise and protest. The hissings and protests were partly due to the defects of the performance, for the play had been grossly under-rehearsed by actors who barely knew their parts.

It was not so much the quirks of the performance as Chekhov's controversial script that stimulated a response varying from extreme enthusiasm to extreme disapproval. Yet the general bewilderment did not derive from any obscurity in what is basically a simple plot. The play's main character, a landowner in his thirties called Nicholas Ivanov, has a Jewish wife, Sarah, who is dying of tuberculosis. Ivanov should have taken the sick woman to a warmer climate, thus giving her some hope of recovery, but instead he is busy seducing the daughter of a rich neighbour. For this caddish behaviour he is repeatedly castigated by his wife's plain-speaking young doctor, Eugene Lvov. Sarah dies, and Ivanov marries again, but is subjected by Dr. Lvov to an especially severe final denunciation. This occurs on the very wedding day, when the young doctor turns to Ivanov with a reprimand so violent that, in the version of 1887, it causes the bridegroom to expire from shock on stage. In the final version of this much-revised ending, as translated in the present volume, he shoots himself.

Running an estate, coping with peasants, farming scientifically, falling into debt, marrying a doomed wife of alien faith—it had all been too much for Ivanov, whom we observe collapsing under the strain throughout the play's four acts. That his conduct is reprehensible must be admitted. But what on earth was there about it to tax an audience's comprehension? Or to provoke such violent reactions in the theatre? Only this: that the author, in so far as his attitude seemed to emerge

from the dialogue of his characters, came nowhere near outright condemnation of Ivanov. Indeed, far from pillorying that spineless individual as an arrant scoundrel, Chekhov seemed rather to sympathize with him, while displaying marked hostility towards the well-meaning young doctor who so persistently attempts to persuade Ivanov to do his duty by the dying Sarah.

Could the wicked Ivanov conceivably be Chekhov's hero? And could the priggish, self-righteous Dr. Lvov be his villain? Indeed they could, as is clear beyond a doubt from lengthy explanations in the author's correspondence. From these we also learn that the riddle of *Ivanov* did not lie in any obscurity of the script, but simply in Chekhov's failure to adopt a conventional moralizing attitude. Yet the play does have its own unconventional, paradoxical, characteristically Chekhovian moral: Do not moralize. Do not be too ready, that is, to imitate the stuffy Dr. Lvov by condemning a man, that all too complicated mechanism, on the basis of his behaviour. An immoral scoundrel may be a better human being than a self-righteous prig.

By comparison with Chekhov's later pioneering drama, *Ivanov* now seems old-fashioned. One reason is the presence of a message, however paradoxical; another is the concentration on a single hero around whom all the action revolves; yet another lies in the emphasis placed on carefully orchestrated dramatic crises. Chekhov gave the audience 'a punch on the nose' at the end of each act. So he himself pointed out at the time, not realizing that in his later dramatic career the cunningly sprung dramatic climax would give way to something far more impressive: the yet more cunningly sprung, anti-dramatic anticlimax. From crises to letdowns: such, in brief, is Chekhov's evolution as a playwright.

While remaining comparatively conventional in structure and technique, the thematically startling *Ivanov* is yet a triumph of craftsmanship. The scenes are well put together; the dialogue is subtle and lively; the background is suitably light, introducing several comic minor characters who might have stepped straight from the better passages of Chekhov's early comic stories.

Ivanov, Chekhov's first dramatic work to appear on a public stage, immediately established its author as a figure to be reckoned with in the Russian theatre. This impact was reinforced when the play went into production in St. Petersburg in January 1889 after extensive revision. By contrast with the mixed reception given to *Ivanov* in

Moscow in late 1887, the St. Petersburg production was a resounding success. And Chekhov was by now very much a man of the theatre who was often seen with actors and actresses, a familiar figure in stage circles in both Moscow and St. Petersburg. He advised on the production and casting of his own and others' plays; and he wrote, between 1888 and 1891, his five famous one-act farces: *The Bear, The Proposal, A Tragic Role, The Wedding,* and *The Anniversary.* Yet he was anything but stage-struck. The modern theatre was to him 'a skin rash, a sort of urban venereal disease'. Narrative was his legal wife, he was once again insisting, whereas the drama was merely his 'flamboyant, rowdy, impudent, exhausting mistress'.

At the end of the decade this disillusionment was increased by the failure of the new four-act play with which Chekhov followed *Ivanov: The Wood Demon,* written in 1889. Here is a comparatively lightweight effort, but one of crucial importance since it was to become the raw material for the mature drama *Uncle Vanya.* That masterpiece contains large chunks of dialogue quarried directly from *The Wood Demon,* and several characters with the same or similar names; yet it differs so markedly in tone and content that one hesitates to call the earlier play a draft of the later. For the moment, though, we are concerned with *The Wood Demon* alone. It underwent many tribulations of its own long before Chekhov was thinking of it in terms of *Uncle Vanya.*

Chekhov called *The Wood Demon* 'a long romantic comedy'; it presented 'good, healthy people who are half likeable; there is a happy ending; the general mood is one of sheer lyricism.' A happy ending! That seemed a sinister augury. Could the play be shaping as one of those exceptional life-affirming moral tales, written under the influence of Tolstoy, which figure disastrously in Chekhov's fiction of a few years earlier? Fortunately, no. The play was indeed to turn out the romantic comedy that Chekhov had called it, yet with no little infusion of implied moralizing. After contemplating the negative, feckless, world-weary, demoralized Ivanov, we now meet more positive types; a very nest of Lvovs or potential Lvovs. In the character of the 'Wood Demon' himself (Michael Khrushchov), Chekhov seems to commend the virtues of charity, contrition, and commitment to a good cause: nature conservation. Then again, a beautiful young wife seems to be applauded for 'sacrificing herself' to her elderly, gout-ridden husband, while another character describes himself as having made ostentatious public confession of his sins.

That one should repent of one's sins, behave tolerantly, eschew malicious gossip: these are no bad guides to conduct. Yet to preach a worthy cause is not necessarily to compose a great work of art. With Chekhov, such implied exhortations were often aesthetically counterproductive. That he himself later found those of *The Wood Demon* unsatisfactory we know because he threw out all this moralizing when he converted the play into *Uncle Vanya,* which lacks such affirmations or certainties. Its characters move among shadows; the ground is nowhere firm beneath their feet; virtue goes wholly unrewarded.

By October 1889 the completed *Wood Demon* had been passed by the censor and was promised to two actor friends of Chekhov's for benefit performances at the Moscow Maly Theatre and the St. Petersburg Alexandrine Theatre. But both these prestigious projects fell through, and Chekhov resignedly sold the play to a Moscow house, Abramov's, which was on the verge of bankruptcy. Here *The Wood Demon* received an inadequate first performance on 27 December 1889, and it was taken out of production shortly afterwards. Thereafter Chekhov rejected all requests to stage or publish the play. Ten years later he remarked that he hated it and was trying to forget it.

Uncle Vanya—so different from, yet so extensively based on, the earlier play—is a pioneering dramatic masterpiece; from which it by no means follows that the relatively conventional *Wood Demon* is a resounding failure. Chekhov, in his disillusioned later phase, was too hard on the earlier play—still eminently stageable, as shown by the fine production with which the British Actor's Company toured Britain and the United States in 1973–4. At the time, though, the disappointment aroused by *The Wood Demon* was so acute that Chekhov abandoned serious dramatic writing during the period between the completion of that play in late 1889 and the writing of *The Seagull* in 1895. He abandoned it, that is, with the exception of any work on the conversion of *The Wood Demon* into *Uncle Vanya*: an operation, conducted in total secrecy, which may have fallen within this period.

Though we do not know precisely when the transformation took place, we can be fairly certain that it was either in 1890 or at least five years later, not at any intermediate point. This seems clear from Chekhov's statement, made in April 1895, that he had 'written nothing for the theatre during the last five or six years'. That the new drama had taken shape by November 1896 we learn from a reference of that date to the intended publication of Chekhov's collected plays. In this book my own feeling that the undatable *Uncle Vanya* is Chekhov's

first fully mature play is expressed by the order in which the works are printed. This is in principle chronological. Since the chronology of *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya* simply cannot be established, I have not only been free to indulge my editorial taste in the matter, but have actually been compelled to do so.

So much for when the metamorphosis of *The Wood Demon* into *Uncle Vanya* took place. But what about the far more tantalizing problem of how it was brought about? To compare the earlier play with the later is to study the transformation of a gifted but uncertain, hesitant, and immature artist into a creative genius. In creating a new play out of an old one, Chekhov reduced the length by about a third and scrapped four major characters entirely. Yet he somehow retained substantial sections of the original dialogue while converting a play of action into a play of mood, and turning a piece of light entertainment into a work of genius. I know of no parallel for such a process; there is certainly none in Chekhov's other works. Everything that had been too clear-cut and brightly lit in the earlier play has become enchantingly indefinite, blurred, and atmospheric. For instance, the unfortunate Uncle *George* Voynitsky, who had straightforwardly shot himself in Act Three of *The Wood Demon*, is replaced in the later play by the more puzzling Uncle *Vanya* Voynitsky whose main achievement or non-achievement is to fire a revolver at the hated Professor Serebryakov—and, of course, to miss. Then again, each play has its 'Sonya'. But how different the two girls are. *The Wood Demon*'s had been an elegant, rather silly, rich young woman who was cloyingly paired off in the finale with Michael Khrushchov, the play's doctor-forester. *Uncle Vanya*'s Sonya is a less handsome, more sensitive girl. She too loves the play's doctor-forester, Astrov—the counterpart to *The Wood Demon*'s Khrushchov, but a more subtly drawn character. And this later Sonya's love remains unrequited, since Astrov barely notices her, having eyes only for the beautiful Helen Serebryakov.

The conclusion of *Uncle Vanya* leaves the frustrated Sonya and her frustrated uncle facing a boring future together. This non-solution contrasts vividly with the fates of their counterparts in the earlier play: Sonya evidently destined to live her life happily ever after, her uncle dead by his own hand. Thus had *The Wood Demon* offered a tragic Act Three followed by a happy ending in Act Four, and no nonsense about either of them. With *Uncle Vanya,* though, we shall do better to look neither for tragedy nor comedy, but to realize that we have entered a strange anti-climactic, anti-romantic, anti-dramatic world

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such as had never existed on the stage before Chekhov, a world with its own laws, its own dimensions, its own brand of humour.

The period between the conception of *The Wood Demon*, in 1888, and the publication of *Uncle Vanya*, in 1897, had seen major changes in Chekhov's life. Weary of Moscow after residing there during the whole of the 1880s, he spent most of 1890 on a long and adventurous journey to the Russian penal settlement on Sakhalin Island, which lies to the north of Japan. In 1892 he embarked on another adventure by buying a farm at Melikhovo, a village about fifty miles south of Moscow. Here he spent seven years as a country squire, rural doctor, and author. It was his most prolific period as a short-story writer. But these were fallow years for dramatic writing until, in October 1895, he settled down to create *The Seagull* in a small cottage on the grounds of his estate. The first reference in his correspondence to the new drama occurs on 21 October 1895, when he speaks of enjoying the work; of playing fast and loose with stage conventions; of providing a landscape with a view of a lake, a lot of talk about literature, little action, and a hundredweight and a half of love. One month later Chekhov reports the play finished and is still harping on his rejection of theatrical conventions. 'I began it *forte* and finished it *pianissimo*, contrary to all the laws of the theatre'. As these comments indicate, *The Seagull* abandoned the traditional concentration on a single star part and on the strong, carefully prepared dramatic crises that had characterized *Ivanov*. *The Seagull* stands, as it were, halfway between that earlier four-acter and Chekhov's mature drama.

From all Chekhov's major plays, earlier or later, *The Seagull* differs in the sombre tone of its last act. It differs, too, in concentrating so heavily on the experiences of creative and performing artists—two actresses and two writers. And it differs yet again by a somewhat self-conscious flaunting of 'modernistic' devices. There is the heavily obtruded symbol of the shot seagull, which represents the wanton ruining of Nina's life by Trigorin. No other such ponderous symbol, Ibsenite rather than Chekhovian, occurs anywhere else in the Russian master's work. Another 'modernistic' feature of *The Seagull* is the interrupted play-within-the-play of Act One. This rhetorical monologue by a World Spirit is itself a fragment of non-realistic drama, such as his Russian contemporaries called 'decadent'. 'We need new forms,' proclaims Chekhov's Treplev, the author of that encapsulated playlet; this same sentiment was constantly on Chekhov's mind when he was writing *The Seagull*.

Though many dramatic novelties were to come from Chekhov's pen in the future, such items as dead fowl and tirades—however ironically intended—by a World Spirit were not to be among them. His new, unfamiliar, and as it was later to prove, still transitional dramatic technique contributed to the initial spectacular failure of *The Seagull*. Indeed, its first performance at the Alexandrine Theatre in St. Petersburg was perhaps the most traumatic episode of Chekhov's life. It occurred on 17 October 1896, almost a year after the play had been completed, the interval having been largely devoted to tiresome negotiations with the dramatic censor.

The real cause of the play's failure lay less with Chekhov's unorthodox text than with the circumstances of the performance. For some reason a popular comic actress, Elizabeth Levkeyev, had chosen it for her benefit night, the twenty-fifth anniversary of her debut on the stage. She was one of those 'fine old character actresses' who has only to emerge from the wings to provoke eruptions of mirth. Her large following consisted of unintellectual fans who liked their bit of fun, and who, if they knew Chekhov's work at all, would have been familiar only with the comic writer of the 1880s.

Miss Levkeyev's fans were bound to be disappointed at not seeing her—as they naturally expected on her own benefit night—in the actual play. That was quite out of the question, though, for the mere appearance on stage of so robust, so earthy, so grand a comic old trouper would have torn the delicate fabric of Chekhov's eccentric drama to ribbons. Thus was the failure of *The Seagull* doubly assured in advance. The audience was in a mutinous mood even before the curtain had gone up on the fateful night. Enraged by the absence of their favourite actress from the cast, these lovers of broad farce were not going to put up with any decadent highbrow rubbish. Knowing little or nothing of Chekhov, they cared still less about 'new forms', whether in the theatre or anywhere else.

The Seagull would thus have been foredoomed even if it had not been grossly under-rehearsed by a cast that barely knew its lines and had little confidence in the text. The actors and producer took the play seriously, but the decision to stage it at only nine days' notice was absurd. Chekhov himself had arrived in St. Petersburg in time to attend rehearsals. Visiting the theatre every day, he discussed interpretation with the actors, stressing the need to avoid theatricality. According to the producer, 'everything that could be done in this incredibly short space of time, with only eight rehearsals, for so subtly

shaded a play as *The Seagull* . . . was done.' But it was not enough, and the author himself was left with no illusions about the prospects for 17 October.

The events of the unhappy first night exceeded his most gloomy forebodings, and have inevitably been described as 'a spectacle truly unprecedented in the history of the theatre'. As the play proceeded, spectators in the front rows demonstratively turned their backs on the stage, hissed, whistled, laughed, and started rowdy private conversations. The uproar increased until the play was inaudible. Chekhov left the auditorium in Act Three and sat in a dressing-room. After the performance he left the theatre and wandered the streets on his own; not until 2 a.m. did he return to his lodgings, where he told his host that he would never offer another play to be staged even if he lived another seven hundred years. How profoundly distressed he was by *The Seagull*'s failure, inevitably shattering to so sensitive an artist, is evident from the way in which he later harped on this 'fiasco beyond my wildest imaginings'. It wasn't so much *The Seagull*'s failure that grated on him, he said, as the failure of his own personality.

In March 1897 Chekhov was found to be gravely ill with tuberculosis. Ordered by his doctors to winter in the south, he most unwillingly moved his home from Melikhovo to the Crimean resort of Yalta. But although he was henceforward a semi-invalid and had again abandoned all thought of writing for the stage, he was once more to be restored to the theatre by the theatre itself. In 1898 a newly formed company, the Moscow Art Theatre, persuaded him to permit the staging of his disgraced *Seagull*. On 9 September, on his way through Moscow to the Crimea, he attended an early rehearsal of this play; the date is also memorable as that of his first meeting with Olga Knipper —one of the new company's leading actresses, who was to become his wife three years later. Thus did the ailing Chekhov acquire intimate links with the theatre during his last seven years of life; this despite being 'exiled', as he called it, in uncongenial Yalta during most of the theatrical seasons.

The association between author and theatre first attracted attention with the Art Theatre's first performance of *The Seagull* on 17 December 1898. This took place in the author's absence and in an atmosphere of impending doom. What of his ill-starred play should flop again? Might another such fiasco conceivably prove fatal to the ailing author? Among those most closely concerned were Olga Knipper and the Art Theatre's co-founders—Constantine Stanislavsky, Russia's most

famous actor-manager, and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. Himself a playwright, Nemirovich-Danchenko was particularly concerned that *The Seagull* should succeed, since it was he who had taken the initiative in overcoming Chekhov's objections to the resuscitation of a work associated with so many painful memories.

When the curtain rose on *The Seagull*'s first act, members of the cast were very agitated. Everyone had taken valerian drops—the tranquillizer of the period—while Stanislavsky, as Trigorin, found it hard to control a twitching of the leg. As Act One proceeded audience reactions were hard to gauge, and when the curtain came down the house seemed frozen into immobility. Standing on the stage, Olga Knipper fought to control hysterical sobs amid the silence until, at last, when it seemed that not a single clap would reward so carefully nurtured a production, 'like the bursting of a dam, like an exploding bomb a sudden deafening eruption of applause broke out'. Members of the audience rushed the stage amid tears of joy and kissing so general as to recall the Orthodox custom of ritual osculation at Easter. People were 'rolling round in hysterics', says Stanislavsky, who himself celebrated by dancing a jig. After the remaining three acts had been received with comparable enthusiasm. Nemirovich-Danchenko sent an ecstatic telegram to Chekhov in Yalta. It recorded a colossal success with endless curtain calls and was signed 'mad with joy'. The shameful fiasco of the St. Petersburg first performance had been wiped out.

The links between Chekhov and the Art Theatre became stronger still in the following year, when the company staged a showing specially for the author in an empty theatre after the season had closed. But a slightly jarring note now appears. Though too polite to say so directly, Chekhov was downright disgusted by Stanislavsky's performance in the part of Trigorin. This serves to remind us that the Chekhov–Stanislavsky axis never developed into an idyll of cooperation. And famous though Stanislavsky's 'method' has rightly become for sponsoring an ultra-naturalistic technique of acting, his procedures were never naturalistic enough for the exacting Chekhov. Rather were they too flamboyant and excessively 'theatrical' in the traditional sense. Too tactful or too evasive, perhaps, Chekhov never succeeded in adequately putting across his own conception of the plays to those who produced and performed them. He was loath to tackle those responsible directly, preferring to express his dissatisfaction in scathing, sibylline asides to his intimates.

Meanwhile the Art Theatre had enthusiastically put a second Chekhov

play, *Uncle Vanya*, into production, and on 26 October 1899 it received its first Moscow performance. Once again the author was absent, and once again he was bombarded with congratulatory telegrams in his Yalta villa. As soon became evident, *Uncle Vanya* had not quite repeated *The Seagull*'s success, but Chekhov was sufficiently encouraged to plan a new play to be called *Three Sisters*, the first of two great dramas that he was to write especially for Stanislavsky's company in the last years of his life. Chekhov was encouraged to press on with the work when, in April 1900, the Moscow Art Theatre toured the Crimea, making it possible for him to see productions of *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya* before audiences on what was now his home territory.

By mid-October of the same year Chekhov had completed *Three Sisters* and taken the manuscript to Moscow. But when he read the long-awaited text to the Art Theatre actors and producers it fell flat. It was unplayable, they found; it contained no proper parts, only hints.

Why did *Three Sisters* so disappoint its first interpreters? Like all Chekhov's serious drama it has the air of seeming to make, yet of never quite making, some statement about human life. One main theme is provincial frustration as it affects the three daughters and son of the deceased General Prozorov. Andrew Prozorov would have liked to be a professor in Moscow, but he works for the municipal council of which his wife's lover is chairman. The three girls are all disappointed in love: Olga regrets being an old maid, and Masha has married the wrong man; Irina's fiancé—unloved at that—is killed in a duel in Act Four. Olga dislikes being a schoolmistress, Masha dislikes being a schoolmaster's wife, Irina dislikes working in a post office. But all their problems would, they fervently believe, magically disappear if they could only fulfil their burning ambition to return to Moscow, their childhood home. These unhappy, ill-organized women are contrasted with their vulgar, insensitive, selfish sister-in-law Natasha. She intrudes on the ménage, marries the brother, fatuously dotes on her children, and converts the Prozorov family house into the opposite of a home.

But what do we learn from this? Is the play sad or funny? Does the tragedy reside in the characters' failure to rise to the level of tragedy? Or are they not tragic even in that restricted sense? Since these questions have never been fully resolved, we need not wonder that the first cast of *Three Sisters* was so baffled.

In December, Chekhov left Moscow, where the Art Theatre was

still wrestling with rehearsals of *Three Sisters*, and went to Nice. He was still revising and copying the text, and sent off improved versions of Acts Three and Four within a few days of his arrival. From Nice he also wrote polemical letters on the play, providing insights into his view of the theatre. As usual, Stanislavsky as producer simply could not get anything right. 'Four responsible female parts, four educated young women: I can't leave them to Stanislavsky with all my respect for his talent and understanding.' Chekhov was anxious that the predicament of Masha, played by Olga Knipper, should not be falsified by over-acting. Olga might therefore play Masha with feeling, 'but not desperately'. She must not look sad, because 'people who have long been unhappy, and grown used to it, don't get beyond whistling and are often wrapped up in their thoughts'. Nor should Masha be seen leading her equally unhappy sister Irina around by the arm in Act Three. That was inconsistent with the play's mood. 'Don't you think Irina can get about on her own?' Then again, in Act Three, Natasha should not, Chekhov told Stanislavsky, wander about the stage putting out lights and looking for burglars under the furniture. She should cross the stage in a straight line without looking at anybody or anything, like Lady Macbeth with a candle. 'It's quicker and more frightening that way.'

It was, as always, Stanislavsky's exuberance that Chekhov most feared. How on earth could his drama of understatement be conveyed by such a dedicated apostle of overstatement? Why must Stanislavsky make such a cacophonous din with the off-stage noises in Act Three? True, the town is supposed to be on fire at the time, the alarm is being rung on church bells, and fire engines are clattering about. But that was no reason to overdo things. 'The noise is only in the distance: off stage, a vague, muffled sound.' Nor, after Tuzenbakh's death in the off-stage duel of Act Four, need his body be solemnly borne across the stage, as Stanislavsky at one time proposed. So subtle an internal drama would be wrecked by these heavy-handed methods. Chekhov felt. But at one point he did require an actor to pull out all the stops: when denouncing the horrors of provincial life in Act Four Andrew Prozorov should be 'very excited', and 'just about ready to square up to the audience with his fists'. Very excited! Though a quiet tone might often be appropriate with Chekhov, this instruction is a warning against *any* glib generalization about him or his work.

Primed with advice from Nice, the Moscow Art Theatre presented its first performance of *Three Sisters* on 31 January 1901: the third

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