

Turning Our Backs on Anton Chekhov

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If you do what I do — write about Russian theater — there is no getting away from him. He is everywhere, he haunts your every move, your every thought, your every dream and nightmare.

He is Anton Chekhov.

I have scheduled a blog about Chekhov to run at the end of January in connection with the 150th anniversary of his birth. I still intend to write that piece, but I can't help but say a few words about the big man — or, the big man's aura — right here and now.

The occasion is a performance of a bold Estonian production of Chekhov's "The Seagull" that I saw on Thursday as part of the current Stanislavsky Season theater festival. The piece was directed by Kristian Smeds for the Von Krahle Theater in Tallinn.

Chekhov, of course, is an industry. There are Chekhov newsletters and Chekhov societies and Chekhov museums and Chekhov festivals and Chekhov-everything-you-could-possibly-

imagine. There are Chekhov T-shirts, calendars, cartoons, picture books, DVDs, compact discs and coffee mugs (I have two of those myself). And there are people involved in these enterprises who take their Chekhov very seriously indeed.

Chekhov, in their estimation, requires Respect, Veneration, Faith, Love and Hope at all times and without exception. Offer anything less and you run the risk of committing aggravated criminal heresy.

Many years ago I was asked by Ralph Lindheim, the editor of the [North American Chekhov Society Bulletin](#), to write a piece for his publication. I had just published a review in The Moscow Times expressing my exasperation about the numbing waves of cookie-cutter Chekhov productions I was seeing, and Ralph decided I might be a good candidate to stir his readers up. He suggested that I write a polemical piece cutting through the sighing reverence that Chekhov studies so often drown in.

I did a long, cantankerous and — I hope — humorous article that I called "Back Off Chekhov!" I filled it with inflammatory statements and a few salient thoughts.

"I can't bear to see another 'Uncle Vanya!'" I howled. "How many times can we watch Vanya shoot at the professor and miss?!" I concluded that "Chekhov, indeed, appears to be taking vengeance on us for turning him into a mass-market item, a prime time celebrity; for expecting to find in his plays an answer to every question and a theme for every season."

Little did I know I was walking into a buzz saw.

Completely unknown to me, this article made its way back to Russia and — horrors! — offended people. I did notice that certain individuals began looking down their nose at me or refusing to acknowledge me when I walked past. But I didn't think much of it. You get used to people turning their backs on you when you've written as many theater reviews as I have.

It wasn't until years later that an old friend happened to tell me, "You really ticked off the Chekhov people with that article of yours. Do you have a copy?" I said, "You mean the North American Chekhov Society Bulletin article?" She said, "Is that the one they translated and published here?"

Boom! Everything snapped into place.

I found it rather odd that scholars could take a published article, translate it and publish it with commentary without ever bothering to ask the author or original publisher for permission, without asking the author to verify the translation or without inviting the author to participate in the discussion.

But, hey, as I say, you get used to seeing people's backs in this line of work.

Jump forward to Kristian Smeds' production of "The Seagull." Smeds did what any self-respecting contemporary visionary would do when confronted with a work that is utterly groaning under the weight of its own mythology. He created a production that does not reproduce it word for word and comma by comma, but rather he took the play on, shook it hard and created something new that responds to it.

He cut Chekhov's 13 characters down to eight. He chopped the play up, moving scenes back and forth. He introduced a bit of salty language. A male played the role of Arkadina, the popular provincial actress. A female played the role of Arkadina's brother Sorin. The major role of Dr. Dorn was subsumed into other roles. Arkadina's son Treplev was something of a punk rocker who was as intent on irritating people as in winning their love.

Smeds pulled out all the stops for the key scene in which the struggling writer Treplev tosses a dead seagull at the feet of his beloved Nina. In this show, Treplev (Juhan Ulfsak) pulled a handful of bloody, shredded beef out of a bag and shoved it in Nina's mouth.

Oh, my, but how the guardians of Chekhovian purity gasped at that!

For the record, Nina (Riina Maidre) was no slouch. She grabbed a handful of raw beef stroganoff and rammed it right back down Treplev's throat. It didn't do much to calm the fledgling writer, but it did re-establish parity between the sexes.

And then there was the beginning of Act Two — a long, wild, semi-improvised drunken scene of Masha losing it when she realizes that Treplev will never love her. It concludes with her successfully enticing Nina into a prolonged lesbian encounter.

But I'm getting ahead of my story, because most of the guardians of Chekhov's purity were long gone by the beginning of Act Two.

I know that because I saw them leave at intermission. One, who hasn't spoken to me for years unless absolutely backed into a corner, passed by me on the way out and muttered, "Now I suppose this is a Chekhov that YOU would like!"

I think she said it with a smile, but since it's the first sentence that Tatyana Shakh-Azizova has uttered to me of her own volition in a decade, I can't be sure about the sentiment behind her apparently friendly expression.

Had Shakh-Azizova, a famous and highly respected Chekhov scholar, stopped to listen to my response, rather than hurry out of the theater, she might have heard me say, "Yes. I think this is an inventive, smart and highly theatrical production."

I might have said something about the freedom of adaptation that all good theater artists use to their advantage, especially when working with a play in translation. Smeds' production, after all, was in Estonian. I might have said I thought that Smeds helped Chekhov's century-old characters come to vivid life in the world we inhabit. Every bold, even shocking, move the director made was justified and given meaning within the world of the work he created.

And what about the second act? Following the orgiastic beginning performed brilliantly and hilariously by Tiina Tauraite as Masha, Smeds threw everything into reverse. Arkadina (Lembit Ulfsak) and Sorin (Helgi Sallo) played a beautiful scene at a tea table that was so traditional they even spoke in Russian. Erki Laur, the incredibly charming actor playing the servant/stagehand Yakov, assured us that he staged this scene himself and that he dedicated his labor to — everybody ooh and ahh, now — his mother and his father.

The final scenes were staged as if they were coldly feverish thoughts running through Treplev's mind. He sat silently alone at a table and listened to the dialogues of other actors,

which were broadcast over a PA system but not performed.

These final scenes were subdued, introspective and moving.

Chekhov's corps of guardians was not there to see any of this, however. Their backs were turned.

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