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My Chekhov

By John Freedman

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I am cheating by calling this piece "My Chekhov."

First, I blatantly pinched the idea from Marina Tsvetayeva, who wrote "My Pushkin," one of the most famous essays in Russian literature. I make no pretentions of competing with Tsvetayeva, but I do want to conjure some of the simplicity and sincerity that a title like this implies. Second, I have no idea who my Chekhov is.

This, however, is the perfect opportunity for me to try to figure it out. The 150th anniversary of Chekhov's birth arrives on Friday, Jan. 29. All of Russia, nay, much of the world, will be buzzing about Anton Chekhov.

Chekhov belongs to the world. In Russia he is Russian. In England he is English. In the United States he is American. Here I am, an English-language American critic in Russia, and I don't know what to make of him.

For starters, I have collected a few of the epithets others commonly toss at Chekhov as if he were a dart board.

Gentle. Tender. Compassionate. The bard of twilight Russia. Sweet. Killer of human hopes. Melancholy. Realist. Hyper-realist. Father of the absurd. Progenitor of stream-of-consciousness.

In a piece of mine that will run in The Moscow Times on Wednesday, director Dmitry Krymov intriguingly calls Chekhov "a formula of misfortune" and says his characters resemble "Chernobyl mushrooms" because they are so blown out of proportion.

Is it any wonder I'm confused?

Look above at the sculptures Leonty Usov has made of Chekhov in his marvelously chaotic studio in Tomsk. They are filled with humor, stoicism and, most of all, mystery.

One summer I traveled to Taganrog, the city on the Azov Sea where Chekhov was born. I was there to make a documentary film, and the idea was to get as close to the writer as possible. I visited the house in which he was born, the classrooms and detention cell that he frequented at the gymnasium he attended, his father's store where he worked, the beautiful town theater that he attended, the impressive local library that he later stocked with free books when he was a famous writer, and I walked along the sleepy town streets and the bare banks of the Azov where, surely, he did too.

These were all moving experiences, there is no doubt. But I cannot truthfully say they made me feel any closer to Chekhov than I had been before.

Our film crew took a trip into the steppe that surrounds Taganrog, the gorgeous, rolling countryside whipped by hot winds and covered by an endless sea of waving, golden grass. I can feel my throat constricting from the heat even now, 2 1/2 years later in the frigid Moscow winter. We sat and waited for the sunset, an extraordinary moment when the sun ballooned, a fiery orange, and then was doused in the horizon as the wind died down and the burning furnace of heat ever-so-slightly lost its edge. It went from unbearable to merely oppressive.

What I sensed out there at that moment was not Anton Chekhov, the writer, but Antosha, the unruly kid who was constantly in trouble with his teachers and his parents, the little rascal who hated studying Greek, hated working in his father's store and hated having to get up at five in the morning to go to church. He most likely was a good kid, but he was always in hot water because he was looking for something in himself that no one else could see. He didn't know what it was yet, either. He just knew it was there.

Even in the stifling heat, the steppe is a place of magnificence and raw freedom, a place in which it seems you can inhale deeply and breathe in the entire universe. It seems to have no limits. It seems to neutralize &mdash or, at least, suspend &mdash all the restrictions you know you are bound to live by.

Doesn't that sound like Chekhov?

Incidentally, the producer hated the film I made. My Chekhov was not his at all, and he was not happy about that.

Whenever I think of Chekhov, I think of a cartoon strip I found decades ago in the New Yorker. I used to keep the clipping with me everywhere I moved, but at some point I inadvertently let loose of it. Now it's nothing but a concept in my head.

Six frames. Six people pictured. Each lists the major influences on their lives. A teacher names her own teachers "and, of course, Anton Chekhov." A writer names great writers "and, of course, Anton Chekhov." A painter names great painters "and, of course, Anton Chekhov." A grease monkey in an auto repair shop names his uncle, his high school buddies "and, of course, Anton Chekhov."

That is Chekhovian humor, by the way. You may not actually laugh when you read through to that last frame, but the impulse for humor &mdash paradox and rhythm mixed with something indefinably but unmistakably related to the truth &mdash is there, and it hits you between the eyes.

Chekhov hits you between the eyes. Time and again he strips away nonsense and leaves you with the hard truth. Understatement is one of his gods. That often gets mistaken for tenderness, when it is nothing of the sort.

In his story "Rothschild's Fiddle" Chekhov wrote about a 70-year-old man who spent 50 years with his wife but didn't notice her until she died. That's understated, but it sure isn't "melancholy" or "compassionate." It's devastating is what it is. It is life-shattering. It is a thunderbolt striking from on high. It is more, I suspect, than any man could bear to know. That surely is why, in Chekhov's story, the man dies before long.

I have seen hundreds of productions of Chekhov's plays and stories. I have seen them done in every style imaginable &mdash straight, crooked, grotesque, sardonic, comic, tragic, musical, mystical, melodramatic, epic, intimate and realistic. I have seen them done as if they were wacky comic strips come to life, as if they were films, as if they were Barbara Cartland romances. I have seen them done with ruthless impertinence and suffocating reverence. I have seen them last over five hours; I have seen them played in one-fifth that time.

Every one, regardless of what I thought about them, were reflections of someone's Chekhov. What a wealth of impressions!

I hesitate to name the Chekhov productions that made the biggest impression on me. I will certainly slight someone. On the other hand, the temptation is irresistible. These shows, in no particular order, invariably come to my mind when Chekhov does. They help define him for me, as I struggle to do that on my own.

Christoph Marthaler's production of "The Three Sisters" for the Volksbuhne of Berlin was set in an old folks' home. The sisters were all in their sixties or thereabouts. It made their constant talk of the future lives they hoped to live utterly devastating.

Eimuntas Nekrosius's bold and dynamic "Three Sisters" for the LIFE Festival of Vilnius. The moment when Von Tusenbach prepared to go off to die in a duel was crushing. Nekrosius dragged it out for what seemed to be 20 minutes as the nerve-wracked actor, fork and knife flailing and flashing in the air, sat at a table and kept eating and eating and eating, utterly unable to get his fill.

Kama Ginkas's trilogy of dramatized short stories &mdash "The Lady With the Lapdog," "The Black Monk" and "Rothschild's Fiddle." In each of these productions Ginkas stripped away the cliches that cling to Chekhov and bared the working mechanisms of art and humanity both. Each of these pieces was in its own way a gauntlet thrown at God. Yes, we know who wins, but the three instances of rebellion were stunning in their theatrical prowess and the power of their insight.

(For those who have access, incidentally, the Russian Culture channel will broadcast televised versions of Ginkas's productions on Jan. 30, Feb. 6 and Feb. 13 at 10:20 p.m.)

My Chekhov arises from the impulses I continue to receive. It is a living, breathing, changing attitude. That means there are times I am absolutely fed up with him, or, at least, with the drivel and sycophantic veneration that some feel compelled to foist on him. And it means that there are times when I am speechless with gratitude for the opportunity this writer provides me to see so deeply and clearly into the workings of the human condition.

A visit to the steppe can change my view. A Christoph Marthaler production can renew it. A Leonty Usov sculpture can reframe it. My sense of Chekhov is incomplete. He always leaves me perplexed and curious to know more. Rather like life itself.

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