

New York's Hottest Playwright? Anton Chekhov.

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"Seagull: True Story". lamama.org

Despite Russian propaganda's repeated claims that Russian culture is being "canceled" in the West, the most popular playwright in New York right now is — somewhat surprisingly — Anton Chekhov.

The writer's work is everywhere from major Broadway productions to experimental Off-Off-Broadway performances, although he had never set foot in the city himself.

Uncle Vanya

"Uncle Vanya" seems to be the hottest play in town. Last year, Steve Carell took on the title role in the Lincoln Center Theater production directed by Lila Neugebauer. The all-star cast also included William Jackson Harper as the doctor Astrov, Alison Pill as Sonia and Alfred Molina as her father Alexander. Carell's performance was quite visceral; he captured the

essence of the 47-year-old loser who spent most of his life earning rent money for his brother-in-law.

“Uncle Vanya on Huron Street” at the [Brooklyn Center for Theater Research](#) in Greenpoint sounded experimental. But the production — directed by Matthew Gasda, a playwright in his own right — turned out to be rather traditional. The stage, set in what looks like a former apartment, feels intimate. You can feel Gasda’s respect for Chekhov and his newest play, “Soonest Mended,” about an open marriage of two Brooklyn writers gone wrong, is decidedly Chekhovian.

Interestingly, despite their differences in scale and staging, both the Lincoln Center and Brooklyn Center productions rely on new translations — yet both remain strikingly faithful to Chekhov’s original text. After seeing so many Moscow productions where directors are always chasing the next bold reinterpretation, this kind of fidelity felt refreshing.

Andrew Scott’s sold-out solo version of “Vanya” at the [Lucille Lortel Theater](#) is the opposite of traditional. In this import from London, where it ran at the National Theatre, Scott plays all eight characters. The text has been heavily updated — there’s a lot of swearing, and the characters constantly call each other by name so the audience can keep track of who Scott is portraying at any given moment.

In this version, Alexander becomes a once-famous filmmaker rather than a university art professor, and Yelena and Astrov actually have a tryst instead of a modest kiss. Although the production sometimes feels like an episode of multiple personality disorder, it works more often than not — and Scott’s performance is heart-wrenching.

Cherry orchard

“The Cherry Orchard,” another London import, is playing at [St. Ann’s Warehouse](#), practically under the Brooklyn Bridge. Ranevskaya is played by German actress Nina Hoss (known for her role in “Homeland”), her young daughter Anna is played by Sadie Soverall (“Saltburn”), and Lopakhin by Adeel Akhtar (who you might have seen in the sci-fi series “Utopia”).

The minimalist set design features a Persian rug that occupies both the floor and the wall. The only reference to the titular orchard is Anna’s sweater, decorated with a couple of cherries and the phrase *ma chérie* (“my dear” in French).

Chekhov purists would be dismayed: the text is laced with expletives, Yasha is recast as a woman — which gives her affair with Dunyasha a whole new meaning — and Trofimov delivers lengthy diatribes against the “1%,” DOGE and Elon Musk.

The “Jewish band” of the original play becomes a live rock trio that plays covers of Nick Cave and Will Oldham, while characters sit among the audience, occasionally asking them to hold props for them. Another immersive element is when a random audience member is chosen as a bookcase or the aunt in Yaroslavl, who’s supposed to pay off the creditors.

Seagulls, sisters and more

Chekhov’s presence in New York goes beyond new adaptations of his plays. “Nina,” an Off-Off-Broadway show at [Theaterlab](#), is about five drama school students preparing to perform

“The Seagull” as their final production — and naturally, everyone wants to play Nina.

Written by Forrest Maloy and directed by Katie Birenboim, “Nina” captures something essential about Chekhov’s place in contemporary theater: his subjects and themes are still as contemporary as at the turn of the 20th century.

The dialogue is as sharp as Chekhov’s own and the characters have much to say about Chekhov: “They beat their meat to Anton around here,” one of them says. Another quips, “I don’t give a f*** about these sad-ass Russians.” If “Nina” returns to Theaterlab, it’s well worth catching.

Another Theaterlab production pushes the reinterpretation even further. “On the Harmful Effects of Tobacco and Other Substances” draws from dozens of Chekhov’s texts — obscure plays, short stories and even letters (Chekhov was known as a prolific letter writer).

Playwright and director Lita Lofton managed to put them together into a seamless, energetic performance, brought to life by an all-Black cast and set to a soundtrack instantly recognizable to any Russian: O-Zone and Katya Lel. Despite the title, there’s plenty of smoking and vodka drinking.

At the [“?!: New Works Festival”](#) currently running at The Brick in Williamsburg, audiences can catch “Bushwick Is My Moscow,” an adaptation of Three Sisters by Meaghan Robichaud. Consisting of just one phrase — “I am so bored” — the performance manages to condense the spirit of Chekhov’s original into just a few minutes.

One more reinterpretation of [“Seagull”](#) is coming to New York next month. “Seagull: True Story,” created by acclaimed Russian theater and film director Alexander Molochnikov and produced by [Sofia Kapkova](#), is a metafictional tale of Kon, a director based on Molochnikov himself, who fled the country after the invasion of Ukraine and is now trying to stage Chekhov’s classic.

In a moment when Russian art is often viewed through the lens of geopolitics, it’s striking that New York theater has so fully embraced Chekhov. Whether faithful to the text or radically reimagined, these productions show that his characters still speak to something deeply current.

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