Study Guide

SEATTLE REPERTORY THEATRE

The Cherry Orchard

By Anton Chekhov
March 21-April 14, 1990

Directed by Daniel Sullivan
Scenic Design by Ralph Funicello
Costume Design by Ann Hould-Ward
Lighting Design by Pat Collins
Sound Design by Michael Holten
Production Dramaturgy by Mark Bly

CAST
Richard Anthony
John Aylward
Jeannie Carson
Peter Crook
Woody Eney
Lou Hetler
Nancy Hume
Laura MacDermott
William Biff McGuire
Marjorie Nelson
Marianne Owen
William Ritchie
G. Valmont Thomas
R. Hamilton Wright
Wendell Wright

PRODUCING PARTNER:
Shearson Lehman Hutton Inc.

This production is made possible, in part, by The National Endowment for the Arts; The Corporate Council for the Arts; The Seattle Arts Commission, City of Seattle; and The Washington State Arts Commission.

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This Study Guide was written by David Hlavsa.

Synopsis

> *Act I: the Cherry Orchard is in danger of being sold. Act II: the Cherry Orchard is going to be sold. Act III: the Cherry Orchard is sold. Act IV: the Cherry Orchard has been sold. As for the rest: life.*
>
> —Jean-Louis Barrault

The widowed Madame (Mme.) Ranevskaya has been abroad for five years with her lover, a parasite who has taken advantage of her and spent all of her money. She returns to her estate to find that it has been heavily mortgaged to pay for their extravagances, and that it is to be auctioned. Generous and scatter-brained, she seems incapable of recognizing her desperate situation. Gayev, Ranevskaya's brother, makes some impractical suggestions, but his chief hope lies in an uncertain legacy or a rich marriage for Anya, Mme. Ranevskaya's young daughter. She, in turn, is attracted by the feckless student Trofimov and his dreams of social progress.

The only apparently feasible proposal to save the cherry orchard comes from Lopakhin, a merchant whose father was once a serf for the Gayev family. He suggests cutting down the famous cherry orchard and dividing the land into plots for summer cottages. The idea of destroying such beauty is rejected as a sacrilege, and with no specific plan in mind for saving the estate, the family drifts aimlessly but hopefully toward the day set for the auction.

On that very evening, Mme. Ranevskaya gives a party that she can ill afford. In the midst of the festivities, Lopakhin arrives and happily announces that he has acquired the estate and intends to carry out his suggested plan for cutting down the orchard.

The estate and the orchard now gone, the family prepares to leave. Lopakhin fails to propose to Varya, Mme. Ranevskaya's adopted daughter, who becomes a housekeeper for others. Forgotten in the confusion is the very old and ailing Firs, the devoted former family serf. As the sound of an ax rings from the cherry orchard, he lies down, a symbol of the passing of an era.

Characters in 'The Cherry Orchard'

Landowners & Aristocracy

Ranevskaya (rah nef ska´ ya): A middle-aged widow, owner of the estate and the orchard. Her husband, whom she married over the objections of her family, was a commoner, a lawyer, a drunkard with a "genius" for debt. Soon after his death six years ago, her seven-year-old son, Grisha, drowned. Grief-stricken, she nonetheless ran off with her lover to Paris, where they squandered all her money. Her lover, who is ill and wants her help, still writes to her from Paris, but she refuses to answer his letters. She is generous and extravagant to a fault.

Gayev (gah´ yef): Her brother, close to the same age. A man given to intolerably sentimental speeches. He is disdainful of anything he regards as cheap or lower-class. Lopakhin's ideas for solving the estate's financial problems are distasteful to him. Still, Gayev calls himself a "man of the 1880s," that is, a liberal, a man concerned about social justice. As such, he is

Chronology

1838	First Russian railway.
1853	Tsar Nicholas I begins the disastrous Crimean War with Turkey, England, France and Sardinia.
1855	Death of Nicholas I. His son, the more liberal Alexander II, quickly negotiates an end to the war.
1859	Darwin publishes Theory of Evolution.
1860	Anton Pavlovich Chekhov born in Taganrog, Russia.
1861	Alexander II issues the Edict of Emancipation freeing all Russian serfs (one-third of the population).
1863	Abraham Lincoln formally issues the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring all slaves within the rebelling southern states free.
1872	First volume of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* passes the censor and appears in Russian translation.
1874	First Impressionist exhibition held in Paris.
1875	Chekhov's father goes bankrupt. The family flees to Moscow. Chekhov remains in Taganrog.
1879	Chekhov enters Medical School of Moscow. There, as a way of earning money, he begins to send short stories to humor magazines.
1881	Assassination of Alexander II. Accession of his son, the repressive Alexander III. Death of Fyodor Dostoevski.
1884	Chekhov gets his medical degree; by now he has had over 300 pieces published, mostly under various pseudonyms.
1887	Chekhov's first produced play, *Ivanov*, creates a scandal in Moscow. A collection of his stories, *At Twilight*, is awarded the Pushkin Prize by the Russian Academy of Science.
1890	Despite his ill health, Chekhov travels to the Russian penal colony of Sakhalin Island and spends a year documenting conditions there.
1891	Chekhov buys an estate at Melikhovo, a small town near Moscow.
1891-1892	Crop failures lead to widespread famine in Russia.
1891-1903	Construction of the 5,500-mile Trans-Siberian Railway.
1894	Alexander III dies. His son, Nicholas II, succeeds him.
1896	Premiere of *The Sea Gull* is a dismal failure.
1898	Revival of *The Sea Gull* is an enormous success.
1899	Chekhov writes *Uncle Vanya*.
1901	*The Three Sisters*. Chekhov and Olga Knipper marry.
1903	*The Cherry Orchard*
1904	Chekhov dies of tuberculosis in Badenweiler, Germany.
1904	Russia suffers several humiliating defeats in territorial battles with Japan. Factory workers, protesting conditions and pay, march on the Tsar's palace. Troops fire on the crowd, killing 130 people.
1905	General strike spreads across Russia. Nicholas II is induced to sign a manifesto establishing a representative government. Einstein publishes Theory of Relativity.
1910	Leo Tolstoy dies.
1914-1918	World War I.
1917	Russian Revolution. Nicholas II abdicates.

The Emancipation of the Serfs

In 1861, the year after Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was born, Tsar Alexander II issued the Edict of Emancipation, legally freeing one-third of the Russian population from serfdom.

Before emancipation, serfs were neither allowed to travel without permission nor to own property. Though they generally worked the land for their own sustenance, serfs were typically obliged to pay heavy taxes or perform extensive services. Landlords had the right to judge and sentence them. By the 18th century, serfs had become the pawns and base of credit of the gentry. They had come to be treated like livestock. Public auctions normally included the sale of serfs with that of horses, dogs and cattle.

The new legal freedom granted the peasants in 1861 did not necessarily improve their lot. The laws governing emancipation were complex, poorly understood and poorly implemented. Further, in order to own more than a tiny portion of the land they had (in most cases, farmed for generations), serfs needed to buy it. The result was that many peasants who were badly off before were entirely dispossessed. By 1878, only 58 percent of the peasantry had sufficient land to support themselves. The remaining 42 percent had received land so small in area or poor in quality that they lived under the constant threat of starvation and sickness.

Nonetheless, as Chekhov was to document in *The Cherry Orchard*, the gentry was dissolving as a class. Increasingly, their estates were being acquired and broken up by merchants, foreign investors, and a small but growing number (three to five percent) of wealthy peasants. Without a slave economy, the aristocracy was going broke.

Anton Chekhov

Chekhov's Youth

Chekhov's grandfather was a serf, a clever and ambitious man who, even before Emancipation, managed to buy freedom for himself and his sons. He became steward of an enormous estate and did quite well, even leaving his family an inheritance.

Chekhov's father, Pavel Jegorovich, was less successful. Using his inheritance, he established his family in Taganrog, a small seaport in southern Russia, and set up a kind of general store and speakeasy. He was an unpleasant, corrupt and utterly inept businessman. One visit was usually enough for the shop's patrons. The main reason the shop lasted as long as it did was, no doubt, that Taganrog was a port town with a constant supply of new customers.

Another reason was that Pavel Jegorovich kept the shop open 18 hours a day. Anton was the third child of six (four brothers and a sister); he and his two older brothers took turns minding the often painfully cold and dark store.

After closing the shop late in the evening, Pavel Jegorovich, who was something of a religious fanatic, would force his family to spend long hours in church, standing or kneeling (since Russian orthodox churches do not encourage sitting), praying and singing in the choir, which he organized and led. Often, they would not get home from church until dawn, only to be told, "It's not worth going to bed. You'll have to open the shop in an hour's time."

"In my childhood," wrote Chekhov, "I had no childhood. I remember that my father started on my education, or, more simply, to beat me, before I was five years old. When I woke each morning, my first thought was: 'Shall I be beaten today?'"

No wonder then that even at the end of his life when he was writing *The Cherry Orchard,* Chekhov was at best ambivalent about and at worst disdainful of his peasant roots. His determination to get on in the world and his shame at the barrenness and brutality of his upbringing is reflected in several of the play's lower-class characters.

Though education was to be the way out of his predicament, Chekhov was not a spectacular student and often failed his examinations. To him, school was an endless litany of useless information learned by rote, and, in retrospect, Chekhov had almost nothing good to say about his teachers. The one exception was a teacher with a great love and enthusiasm for classic Russian literature. Through him, Chekhov became interested in writing.

His first glimpse of the theatre was at age 13. A play called *La Belle Helene* was staged at the local theatre by a touring troupe. Though the acting was amateurish and the blue sky backdrop was a bit wrinkled, Chekhov was entranced. He didn't miss a single performance.

Since permission from the school authorities was required to attend the theatre, Chekhov frequently had to resort to disguise. In order to get past the faculty members stationed at the doors to check on the illicit presence of any of their pupils, he used character makeup, wore spectacles, and sometimes even put on a false beard.

Soon after his discovery of the theatre, Chekhov wrote his first dramatic pieces, pseudonymous caricatures of local public figures, some of which were actually performed as curtain-raisers for touring dramas. Written in school notebooks, they were all destroyed immediately after being performed and are now lost.

In 1876, Pavel Jegorovich finally went bankrupt and was forced to flee to Moscow to avoid being imprisoned for his debts. Most of the family went with him, but Anton stayed behind to finish his education. He sold their home and what was left of their furniture and made what living he could by tutoring. His family, nearly penniless and living in a strange city, was partly dependent on him for support.

In his letters, Chekhov tried to bolster their spirits with amusing stories, but his mother didn't appreciate the humor: "We have received two letters from you full of puns and jokes, when we only had four kopeks for food and light," she wrote. "We were expecting you to send us some money, it was very disappointing, probably you don't believe us, but Masha has no cloak and I have no warm boots, so we just stay at home."

Chekhov never forgot the desperation and humiliation of poverty.

"What writers of the nobility acquire 'gratuitously,' by right of birth," he wrote, "commoners buy at the price of their youth. Try, then, to write the story of a young man, a serf's son, a former shop clerk, church chorister, schoolboy, university student, trained to bow his head and kiss priests' hands, subjugated to the ideas of others. Tell how this young man tries to rid himself of the slave that is within him and how, awakening one fine morning, he becomes aware that it is no longer slave's blood that runs through his veins, but a real man's blood."

Chekhov and Science

In 1879, still burdened with the financial woes of his family and determined to make his fortune, Chekhov left Taganrog at last and entered medical school in Moscow. As a way to make some extra money, Chekhov began to submit anecdotes and short stories to various Moscow humor magazines.

In the five years it took him to get his degree, he had over 300 pieces published. Still, he regarded his literary pursuits mainly as an extra income and an enjoyable diversion. It was not until Chekhov received an effusive letter of praise from the eminent writer, Dmitri Grigorovich, that he began to take his art more seriously and to publish consistently under his own name instead of employing humorous pseudonyms. Though he always made light of his literary efforts, by 1886 he was serious enough about them to set down a set of aesthetic principles: "(1) absolute objectivity; (2) truth in the description of people and things; (3) maximum brevity; (4) boldness and originality; (5) compassion."

To his great astonishment, Chekhov soon found himself something of a celebrity. In 1887, his collection of stories, *At Twilight*, was awarded the prestigious Pushkin Prize.

Chekhov's scientific training had great influence on his perception of the world and his development as a writer. Throughout his life, Chekhov never stopped practicing medicine. ("Medicine is my lawful wife, literature my mistress," he wrote. "When I tire of the one, I spend the night with the other.") In fact, Chekhov's writing has a kind of "bedside manner," a mixture of compassion and necessary distance.

Unlike the great novelist of his day, Leo Tolstoy, who maintained that a writer is obligated to take a moral stance in his work, Chekhov tried to come to his work without preconceived ideas. "My knowledge of natural sciences and scientific methods has made me careful," he wrote, "and I have always tried, when possible, to take into consideration the scientific data." Chekhov did not want to tell his reader about what life ought to be, he wanted to show it for what it was.

None of Chekhov's characters is his mouthpiece. Though they often voice their opinions at great length, Chekhov scrupulously avoids taking sides. Actually, what Chekhov's characters say is usually less important than what they do not say. For example, in *The Cherry Orchard*, every moment that Mme. Ranevskaya and her brother talk about other things is a moment they are not saving themselves from financial ruin. One of the most moving and frustrating scenes in the play is near the end when, despite everyone's expectation (including his own) that he will, Lopakhin does not propose marriage to Varya.

This is why almost nothing "happens" in *The Cherry Orchard*. "In life," Chekhov observed, "one does not shoot oneself in the head, hang oneself, or declare one's passion at every fencepost, and one does not pour out profound thoughts in a constant flow. No; mostly one eats, drinks, flirts, makes stupid remarks: that is what should be seen on the stage." Between these acutely and ironically observed bits of seeming trivia, Chekhov's characters (as we all do) play out the drama, comedy and pathos of their lives.

Chekhov's Politics

When Chekhov arrived in Moscow, Alexander II, perhaps the most progressive tsar ever to rule the country, was in the midst of carrying out a series of sweeping reforms of his bureaucratic and authoritarian government. In part, he was spurred on by a certain new kind of elite — the intelligentsia (the word had appeared for the first time in 1866) — that was becoming aware of itself. This community, which included university students and graduates, intellectuals and artists, was at first vital, articulate and vocal.

Chekhov had very little to do with the political discussions of the 1880s. His friend, Narodin, described him as closed in, withdrawn. As Chekhov himself admitted, "I still have no clear views, whether in politics, religion or philosophy. I change my ideas every month, and in fact that is what compels me to limit myself to describing how my heroes love, marry, raise families, and die, and how they talk."

In 1881, the Tsar was brutally assassinated, and his son, Alexander III, who considered his father's death conclusive proof of the dangers of relaxed rule, embarked on a crusade of systematic repression. He greatly tightened censorship of literature and the press, cracked down on the universities, and did everything possible to restore the former power and wealth of the landed gentry. In the face of the reaction unleashed by the new Tsar, some groups became violent; terror, the weapon of the revolutionaries, developed into a regular campaign, and several ministers of the government were assassinated within a few short years. The intelligentsia, however, turned away from politics and languished in discouragement and apathy.

Though he was never particularly optimistic or cheery, Chekhov was distressed by the creeping fatalism and weepy "philosophizing" of the intelligentsia. Instead of preaching about social ills ("The intelligent man likes to learn," he wrote, "the imbecile to teach."), Chekhov set out to study and, where possible, correct them. In 1890, though he already had serious symptoms of tuberculosis, the disease that would eventually kill him, Chekhov made a hazardous 5,000-mile journey to the Russian penal colony of Sakhalin Island to document conditions there. He spent nearly a year there as an observer, interviewing every one of the island's 10,000 prisoners and guards. His book, *The Island of Sakhalin*, is a dispassionate, clinical depiction of nearly unimaginable depravity and misery. At first, Chekhov's research received little public notice in his own land. It was, however, much read and discussed outside Russia by experts on penal law and prison management and finally attracted the government's attention. As a consequence, living conditions on Sakhalin Island improved, schools and hospitals were built, and corporal punishment was abolished.

Throughout the 1890s, Chekhov not only wrote prolifically, but also kept up a regular medical practice ministering (usually at no charge) to the peasantry near his estate outside Moscow, organized relief efforts for the victims of serious outbreaks of famine and cholera, and donated a sizeable portion of his income to build schools, libraries and medical clinics. In fact, once he and his family had achieved a reasonable level of comfort, Chekhov gave away so much of his income that, strapped for cash, he was forced to sell the rights to his complete works for far below their financial worth.

The aristocratic world of *The Cherry Orchard*, with its pervasive listlessness, was for Chekhov not a philosophical statement about the emptiness of life, but an observation concerning a certain class of people who, in their despair, find it deplorably difficult to pull themselves together. Chekhov often considered the lives of his subjects stupid and boring, but, far from simply parodying or giving up on them, he managed to show what a waste of humanity, love and potential their inaction actually was.

At the top of his voice, Chekhov demanded the right to battle not people themselves, but their violence and falsehood. As the English director, Peter Brook, points out, "What is essential is to see that these are not plays about lethargic people. They are hypervital people in a lethargic world, forced to dramatize the minutest happening out of a passionate desire to live. They have not given up."

Chekhov's Humor & the Awareness of Death

> *Living with the knowledge of eventual death is already not very pleasant, but living with the knowledge that one is going to die before one's time has come is absolutely absurd.*
>
> — Chekhov

By the time he started on *The Cherry Orchard* in 1902, Chekhov was a very sick man. Always somewhat suspicious of women ("These delightful creatures," he wrote, "give love and in exchange they strip a man of his youth."), he had resisted marriage until the previous year. Now he could not be much of a husband to his still young and vital wife, actress Olga Knipper; the irony was not lost on him.

He had made the mistake of telling the directors of the newly founded Moscow Art Theatre that he had an idea for a new play. Now they and Olga (perhaps not aware just how serious his condition was) were hounding him to finish *The Cherry Orchard*. The Moscow Art Theatre had just built a new theatre; to open with a new Chekhov play would all but ensure success.

Chekhov's doctors warned him not to travel, to stay at his country home and rest. His wife, who, as an actress, needed to remain in Moscow, felt terribly guilty, but Chekhov insisted that she not give up her career for his sake. He visited her more frequently than was good for him. In the city, it took him all of a half-hour to ascend the three flights of stairs to their apartment. At times Chekhov was so weak that he could barely manage to write half a dozen lines in a day.

As a doctor, he was well aware that he was dying and that *The Cherry Orchard* was probably his last major work. But he refused to become morbid in his view of the world; "not a drama," he called the play, "but a comedy, and in places even a farce."

Director Konstantin Stanislavski disagreed. Stanislavski (who is now known mainly for developing a very influential set of principles for naturalistic acting) saw the play as a social drama, possibly even a tragedy, and swayed the cast to his point of view. Chekhov, who was very sensitive about the interpretation of his work, had feuded with this headstrong man before. In fact, on the night of the dismaying premiere of Stanislavski's production of *The Sea Gull* in 1896, Chekhov had written in his notebook, "Never will I write another play or allow one to be staged." (The play went on to become the Art Theatre's first great success, and Chekhov grudgingly forgave what he saw as Stanislavski's needless tinkering.) Chekhov tried to win the cast over to his side, but to no avail: "I can't get it clear in my own mind," he finally wrote. "Either the play is no good or the actors don't understand me."

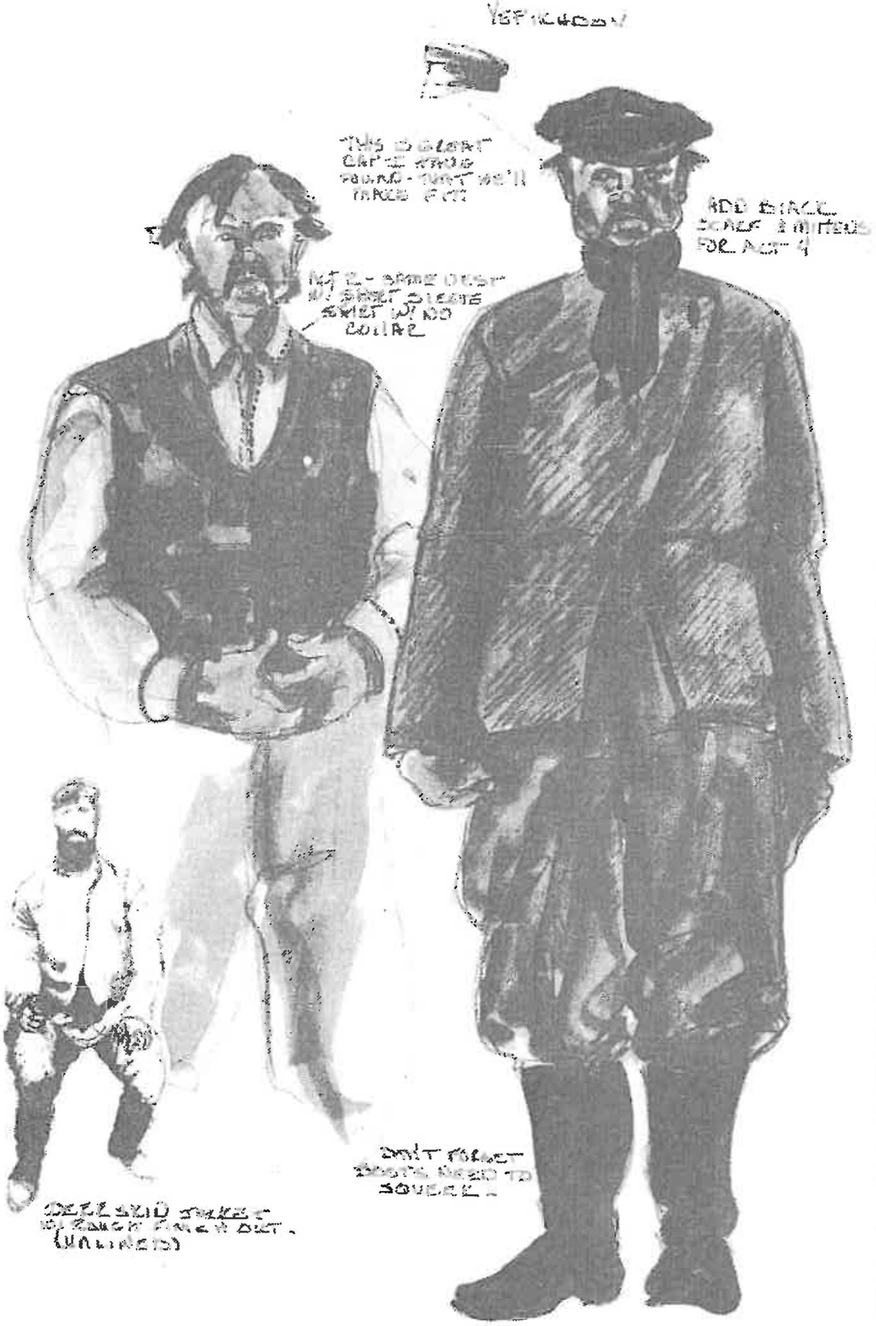
At the play's premiere, despite the audience's apparent enthusiasm for his play, Chekhov still felt the actors had missed the point of what he had written: "Is that really my *Cherry Orchard?* Are those my characters? Except for two or three of the parts, none of that is mine. I describe life. Granted it's dreary, middle-class life, but it isn't hateful, tear-jerking life. They start by turning me into a weepy writer and then just a bore. Whereas I've written plenty of books full of happy stories."

Chekhov must have felt somewhat vindicated by the mixed critical response to the production. Led by the Art Theatre's advance publicity to expect a "serious drama," critics generally were thrown by the play's comic elements and did not know quite what to make of it.

In Chekhov's plays, the awareness of death is balanced with the desire to live. "His characters possess a sense of the present moment, and the need to taste it fully," writes Peter Brook. "His awareness of death, and of the precious moments that could be lived, endow his work with a sense of the relative; in other words, a viewpoint from which the tragic is always a bit absurd."

Chekhov died in 1904 at the age of 44 at a spa in Badenweiler, Germany. The funeral was an appropriate mixture of irony and pathos. His coffin arrived at the Moscow train station in a greenish freight car on which the word "OYSTERS" was painted in large letters. A military band began to play a stately and mournful tune, and the funeral procession began to form. As the band marched away, the procession followed until, after a time, somebody realized that they were following the coffin of General Keller, who had been killed in Manchuria. The mistake cleared up, the mourners reached the correct location and Chekhov was laid to rest. The crowd had swelled considerably by this time, and as the family wished Chekhov eternal peace, there was a great deal of swearing, pushing and shoving in the background as people struggled to get a better view.

Years before, Chekhov had written in his notebook: "Watching from a window as a funeral went by, someone said: 'You, you're dead and they're taking you to the cemetery; me, I'm going to lunch.'"


YEPIKHODOV
THIS IS GREAT CAP I HAVE FOUND - THAT WE'LL MAKE FIT
ADD BLACK SCARF & MITTENS FOR ACT 4
ACT 2 - SAME VEST W/ SHORT SLEEVE SHIRT W/ NO COLLAR
DON'T FORGET BOOTS NEED TO SQUEAK.
DEERSKIN JACKET W/ ROUGH FINISH OUT. (UNLINED)

Ann Hould-Ward's costume sketches for Yepikhdov, the clumsy clerk, in SRT's production of *The Cherry Orchard.*

The Rep's Production

Directing & Design Choices

Director Daniel Sullivan sees *The Cherry Orchard* as a play about "the terrible expectations of family life." The characters have such difficulty in communicating with one another not because they are too far apart, but because they are too close. "They know each other too well," he says.

The family's problems are made worse by encroaching technology and change. Unable to face what is happening to the world around them, they pull inward and become terribly self-involved. "If this family had a television set," says Sullivan, "they'd be sitting around it all the time."

In rehearsing the show, rather than working on developing a collective vision of the play with the cast as a whole, Sullivan plans to emphasize each character's very individual and separate perception of reality. "I want people to pursue the play in 100 different directions," he says. "Hopefully, we'll all end up in the same place."

Sullivan and designer Ann Hould-Ward have extended this idea to the costumes. Rather than giving the show a "designed" look by choosing a limited color palette for all the costumes, Hould-Ward has started the design process by selecting chromatically unrelated swatches of fabric. In collaboration with each actor, she will design "from the inside, out" an entirely separate and distinct costume. Each character will then appear, as people do in life, having made his or her own choice about what to wear.

This true-to-life approach to the production's costumes also reflects the director's ideas about style in *The Cherry Orchard*. Sullivan believes that many directors of Chekhov's plays miss the writer's realistic intent and either (as Stanislavski did) make the play seem unduly wistful and morose, or else inappropriately antic and farcical. According to Sullivan, trusting Chekhov's writing and honoring the reality of the situations Chekhov depicts will allow both the sadness and the humor of the play to emerge.

Sullivan also feels that many past productions of *The Cherry Orchard* put too much emphasis on the orchard itself. He believes that, as the characters have lost touch with one another, they have also lost the ability to appreciate the orchard. Further, as set designer Ralph Funicello points out, the worst destruction in the play is not the cutting down of trees but the breaking up of the family, the estate and the house.

Therefore, though part of the play calls for an exterior setting, Funicello plans to define the stage with large walls which will not move or change during the course of the play. The walls will sometimes be treated as part of a room, but mostly are intended to constantly refer the play's events to the house and its loss. To reinforce the visual motif even further, Sullivan and Funicello had the idea of using a large dollhouse as the centerpiece for the first and fourth acts, which both take place in a former nursery that has been converted into a library. During the second act, which takes place outside, the dollhouse will appear suspended at the back of the stage as if the audience were seeing the actual house in the distance. (During this act, the audience will also be able to see a forest upstage — not just of cherry, but of other trees, as well.)

In grounding this production of *The Cherry Orchard* in realistic and human concerns, the director and designers hope to bring out what is contemporary and, in fact, universal in the play. "The play is not particular to that specific era or social climate, because it's about people missing each other," says Sullivan. "That's the human part. That's what makes the play for all time."

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