

A Serious Condition

By David Hlavsa

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

In 1902, when he began writing *The Cherry Orchard* at age 42, Anton Chekhov's long struggle with tuberculosis had made him so weak that on some days he could barely manage to write half a dozen lines. As a medical doctor, Chekhov was well aware of the gravity of his condition. Still, he refused to become morbid. The playwright, who had always found humor in the direst of circumstances, was amused to find himself writing "not a drama, but a comedy, and in places even a farce."

Chekhov found the play's 1904 premiere production unduly morose. Its director, Konstantin Stanislavsky, acknowledged that some scenes were humorous, but saw *The Cherry Orchard* as a near-tragedy, a social drama of the minor rural nobility compelled to give way to the new rich.

The critics, led by the Moscow Art Theatre's advance publicity to expect a serious drama, were thrown by the play's comic elements and did not know quite what to make of it. In general, however, the first-night audience received *The Cherry Orchard* with enthusiasm. The play was yet another "success."

But Chekhov was not pleased. "Is that really my *Cherry Orchard*?" he wrote. "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."

It has never been easy to bring out the fullness of Chekhov's humor on stage; his comedy is fundamentally disturbing and ambivalent, and, while



Anton Chekhov

Chekhov's compassion for his characters is always in evidence, there is more than a bit of aggression toward them in his writing. The moment we are in danger of feeling sorry for any one character, he or she will suddenly do something hopelessly foolish. Chekhov's humor pulls the rug out from under his audience just as life pulled the rug out from under Chekhov.

Born in 1860 in the provincial town of Taganrog, Chekhov was the son of a shopkeeper and the grandson of a serf. His alcoholic father, Pavel Jegorovich, frequently beat him and compelled him to work long hours in the shop. Inept as a businessman, Pavel Jegorovich finally went bankrupt in 1876 and was forced to leave town to avoid imprisonment for his debts. With the family now dependent on him for support and determined to make his fortune, Chekhov left Taganrog as soon as he could and entered medical school in Moscow.

Like the former serf, Lopakhin, in *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov would always carry with him a mixture of disdain for the brutality and poverty of his upbringing and pride in his own

achievements. An ambitious, hard-working young man, Chekhov both admired and resented the provincial gentry who had acquired their wealth and position simply by right of birth.

Now, as a way to make ends meet, the young medical student began to submit anecdotes and short stories about peasants and aristocrats to various Moscow humor magazines. In 1887, when his collection of stories, *At Twilight*, was awarded the prestigious Pushkin Prize, he was astonished to find himself becoming something of a celebrity. Though in private he was extremely diligent about his craft, Chekhov often made light of his literary efforts. "Medicine is my lawful wife, literature my mistress," he wrote. "When I tire of the one, I spend the night with the other."

His public flippancy about writing was uncharacteristic of the time. In the 1880s, the intelligentsia, frustrated by the repressive rule of Czar Alexander III, was engaged in a bitter internal debate over the role of literature in Russian society. Intellectuals who, under the relatively liberal regime of Alexander II, had been active in encouraging reform of the authoritarian government, now languished in discouragement, apathy and impotent bickering.

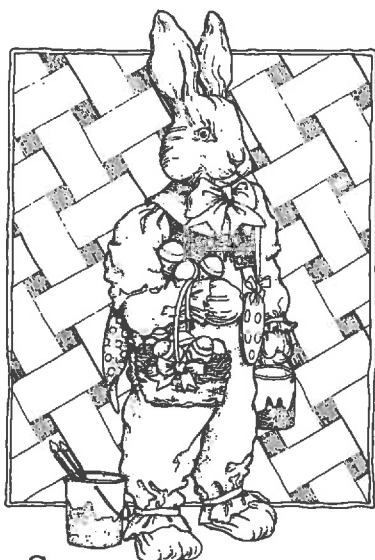
Chekhov had very little to do with this political and artistic infighting. His friend, Narodin, described him as closed in, withdrawn. As Chekhov himself admitted, "I still have no clear views, whether in politics, religion or philosophy. I change my ideas every month, and in fact that is what compels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

Some of Chekhov's contemporaries were angered by what they saw as his refusal to take sides. Though fond of him personally, novelist Leo Tolstoy, who felt strongly that art should serve some prescriptive moral purpose, was a particularly harsh critic of Chekhov's work. When, with avuncular serious-

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ness, the great man confided to Chekhov, "You know I can't stand Shakespeare, but your plays are even worse than his," Chekhov laughed so hard that his glasses fell off his nose.

Though Chekhov professed neutrality on philosophical issues, he nonetheless had very strong convictions. The first of these was that his writing be absolutely truthful. "In life," he wrote, "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."

And it was through these acutely observed details that Chekhov expressed his disappointment with a society he saw as stagnant and self-indulgent. Everyone in *The Cherry Orchard*, from servants to intellectuals to aristocrats, is absurdly, pathetically obsessed with the most minuscule of personal problems. They are utterly unable to comprehend the magnitude of the social change which threatens to engulf them at any moment. Therefore, though the playwright does not tell his audience what ought to be done, his plays cry out for action.

Chekhov himself was not a bystander but an activist. Instead of preaching about social ills, he set out to correct them. In the 1890s, Russia's peasant population (which had been "emancipated" from serfdom in 1861 but was still desperately poor), suffered terribly

from severe crop failures and outbreaks of cholera. Throughout this period, 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 starving and sick, 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.

Personally, Chekhov was an exceedingly gentle man. But the creeping fatalism and weepy philosophizing of the intelligentsia distressed and angered him. Always receptive to genuine people, he was nonetheless capable of being abrupt and occasionally even savage with those who were filled with their own importance. He loathed pretense. The worst victims were those socialites who, completely missing the irony of his work, thought to impress Chekhov by holding "Chekhovian" conversations with him. When one of them, with labored sighs, told him how gray and monotonous life was and what anxiety troubled her soul, adding, "It's a sickness," Chekhov snapped, "Of course it's a sickness! It's called 'chronic affectation.'"

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 awfully difficult to pull themselves together. Chekhov often considered the behavior of his subjects stupid and boring, but, far from giving up on them, he used his keen sense of irony to show what a waste of humanity, love and potential their inaction actually was.

At the top of his voice, the playwright



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demanded the right to battle not people themselves, but their paralyzation in the face of blatant violence, falsehood, and self-deception. 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."

In *The Cherry Orchard*, the awareness of death is balanced with the desire to live. Chekhov's terminal illness strengthened rather than diminished the vitality and humor of his work. "His characters possess a sense of the present moment, and the need to taste it fully," writes 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."

David Hlavsa heads the theatre department at Saint Martin's College in Lacey, Washington.

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