

Notes from the Translator:

Grief, Release, and Comedy in *The Cherry Orchard*

by Richard Nelson

I've spent the better part of the last year working on a new translation/adaptation of *The Cherry Orchard* for the Huntington. It's a great play, my favorite of Chekhov's works. In fact, it has grown far greater in my mind after working so closely with it. I'm simply in awe, and as a playwright, so very humbled.

I've translated nearly all of Chekhov's other plays, but this is my first foray into *The Cherry Orchard* — something I had longed to do for a long time. In working on the play in this manner, I was surprised when I realized I'd never truly understood the back story before — it's often overlooked when the play is spoken of, and yet it's the basis for everything that unfolds. We know that the play begins when Madame Ranevskaya returns to the family estate after five long years away, and that she returns nearly destitute. But why did she flee in the first place? It seems important to uncover Chekhov's secrets here, particularly since it goes a long way to explaining why Chekhov calls this a comedy.

About six years ago, Ranevskaya's husband died of drink. She started an affair with a new man, and almost immediately, her son Grisha accidentally drowned in the river. Racked with guilt and grief, she runs away, leaving her eleven-year-old daughter Anya and her twenty-one-year-old adopted daughter Varya behind on the estate. Ranevskaya's lover pursues her, finds her in Menton, where he then falls ill. She takes to nursing him, escaping her own problems in the process; when he recovers, a numbness descends on her as she must once again deal with the reality of having lost her son. She and her lover move to Paris, whereupon he steals her money and abandons her. Anya, now seventeen, is sent with a governess to retrieve her mother in March or April, immediately preceding the action of the play. She finds Ranevskaya's life a mess, and with the bare funds available, they all make it back to the family estate. Here the play begins; it is May.

If we examine this series of events, it becomes clear that the main event prior to the start of the play is the drowning of Grisha — it's what Ranevskaya runs away from, and what she returns to. The spine of the story, then, is grief and the surmounting of grief. Mr. Chekhov certainly is clear: Act I takes place in the nursery, and Grisha was the last occupant of that room. Ranevskaya insists upon being in the nursery, and surely the rest of the family must be acutely aware of what that means. Trofimov's return — that too is about coming back to a wound, having



Richard Nelson



Kate Burton as Anya and Maria Tucci as Varya in the Williamstown Theatre Festival production of *The Cherry Orchard* (1980)

been Grisha's tutor. This play, then, is in part about trying to heal this wound of Ranevskaya's — she couldn't do it abroad, she must do it here on the estate. Act II takes place around a broken-down shrine and gravestones — in other words, a cemetery — very near the river where Grisha drowned. Act III is like a wake, with musicians and drink. And here we begin to understand that Chekhov is bringing us through the stages of the grieving process with Ranevskaya.

Yet the question remains: faced with the imminent loss of the estate, why doesn't Ranevskaya simply rent out the land and save herself financially? An easy answer is

that she can't face change, and she's part of an old aristocracy that won't adapt to new social and economic realities. There is certainly truth to this interpretation, but for me, it seems the real reason is because she can't be the one to chop down the orchard, yet she needs it sold and razed so she can heal and move on. In Act IV, we learn she is finally sleeping again, that she's calmer — she's healing! Guided by Chekhov, we move from grief, to confronting that grief, to healing. And ultimately that is why it is a comedy, because it, like Shakespeare's great problem plays, ends well.



"Bird-Cherry Tree. Early 1880s." Painting by Russian artist Isaak Levitan.

Chekhov as Inspiration:

Notable Actors Reflect on the Russian Master

When Nicholas Martin decided to take on *The Cherry Orchard*, it was due to a perfect confluence of events. Two favorite collaborators — Kate Burton and Richard Nelson — were available and interested in the project, and both Martin and Nelson had been yearning to work on *The Cherry Orchard* for some time. The play spoke to Martin in its timelessness: “Chekhov is too great to be reduced to a single concept, philosophy, or political agenda — this is why he remains relevant,” he notes. As Nelson prepared his new translation, Martin looked to great actors and directors for their thoughts on Chekhov; the following quotations felt particularly relevant:

Austin Pendelton

“Trofimov [in *The Cherry Orchard*] is deeply in touch with not being in touch! I don’t know of another character exactly like that. There is joy and a passion and an electricity about his every waking moment that he manages to achieve without being in touch with large areas of himself. Only a genius would write a character like that, because that’s not supposed to happen in reality, although we know so many people of whom it’s true.”

Blythe Danner

“When I said Masha’s [in *The Three Sisters*] line: ‘My man, where’s my man?’ — it used to give me goosebumps! ... Somehow, though, talking about it, the words suggest only one aspect, and it’s not just that. It’s not just the sexual need. It is more than that, it transcends that. It is really — the hunger to fill one’s soul. ... It’s the essence. Chekhov’s genius is that he can articulate these universal longings so precisely, so simply. He leads you where you need to go.”



Blythe Danner in *The Three Sisters* (1976)

Nikos Psacharopoulos

“Chekhov defies interpretation. It’s so brilliantly written. Only the most arrogant people believe they can go to a rehearsal ready to do Chekhov, they fall flat. I always find new things in Chekhov. I learn more than I teach. If you come to rehearsals with your five set ideas, you’re sunk. ... You can’t recreate the world of the play according to what you already know, only according to what you’re discovering.”

Tom Brennan

“It’s not that you play Chekhov sentimentally or poetically. You’ve got to somehow make the thing real and at the same time get the beauty of expression that he’s written in it. ... The beauty of expression, the soul comes out in the speeches the characters have. As an actor if you have any soul at all, you want to do Chekhov.”



Louis Zorich and Olympia Dukakis in *The Seagull* (1974)

Olympia Dukakis

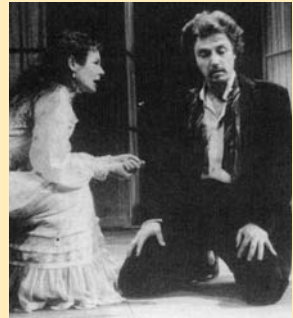
“These people are really on the edge. They’re on the edge! Things are scary for some of these people, if not all of them. That’s an important element, that their lives are not in balance. ... The clock is running out on these people, and when that element is there, people behave unreasonably, and things happen to them. ... It’s so brave. I mean, here we are knowing that we’re going to die and we get up. ... Often when people talk about ‘Chekhovian’ they mean a kind of sentimentalized mood, they don’t mean character.”

Louis Zorich

“We see it in our parents, we see it in our children, things that — it’s the essence of Chekhov, the longing, the longing, such longing.”

Christopher Walken

“I think those characters in Chekhov really are right, as they say, in your face. They are big people, they are the kind of people that you notice when they walk into a restaurant. They are life loving and fun loving and they love to eat and drink and fight and cry. ... I think American people are a working kind of people, and I think Chekhov’s Russians are like that, too. And passionate, capable of big mood swings, and a little bit larger than life.”



Diane Wiest and Christopher Walken in *Ivanov* (1983)

The quotations and images above were excerpted from the book, The Actors Chekhov: Interviews with Nikos Psacharopoulos and the Company of the Williamstown Theatre Festival, written and edited by Jean Hackett (Smith and Karus, 1992).

A Snapshot of History:

Chekhov in 19th Century Russia

1855 Tsar Nicholas I dies and is succeeded by Alexander II

1860 Anton Pavlovic Chekhov is born

1861 Tsar Alexander II abolishes serfdom with his Emancipation Edict, setting the stage for revolutionary ideas and movements that would manifest themselves by the end of the 1800s

1879 Chekhov enrolls in university to study medicine

1881 Alexander II is assassinated and is succeeded by Tsar Alexander III

1884 Chekhov begins his medical practice

1887 In St. Petersburg, *Ivanov* is Chekhov's first theatrical success

1888 Chekhov begins to publish his short stories

1892 Sergei Witte, minister of finance, launches an ambitious program of industrialization; the middle class rapidly expands

1894 Alexander III dies and is succeeded by Nicholas II

1895 Vladimir Lenin is arrested for revolutionary activities; the Moscow Art Theatre opens; Chekhov writes *The Seagull*

1896 *The Seagull* suffers a disastrous opening in St. Petersburg

1897 The Social Democratic Party is founded; Chekhov is diagnosed with tuberculosis

1898 Marxist groups unite under the umbrella of the Social Democrats; *The Seagull* receives a successful production at the Moscow Art Theatre

1899 The Moscow Art Theatre premieres Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*

1900 The population of Russia exceeds 100 million; Moscow's population reaches 1 million

1901 *Three Sisters* opens; Chekhov marries actress Olga Knipper



Anton Chekhov, 1904

1903 Sergei Witte is dismissed by Nicholas II

1903 The Social Democratic Party splits into Bolsheviks (led by Vladimir Lenin) and Mensheviks (led by Julius Martov)

1904 The Trans-Siberian Railroad is completed; *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov's final play, opens at the Moscow Art Theatre under the direction of Constantin Stanislavski; on July 2, mere months after the premiere, Chekhov dies

1905 Revolution: Cossacks fire on peaceful protesters in St. Petersburg; protesters march on the Winter Palace and workers' councils are created; Tsar Nicholas II issues the October Manifesto which establishes Russia's first parliament, the Duma