

Chekhov's Gun

This is the text of a talk commissioned by the BBC for inclusion in Radio 3's 'The Essay' series, following my production of 'Uncle Vanya' at the Bristol Old Vic (an stf/BOV co-production). It was broadcast on the 27th January 2010.

It's Monday October 28th. Twenty people assemble in the Bristol Old Vic rehearsal room for a read-through of Chekhov's Uncle Vanya - a new co-production between Bristol Old Vic and my own company, Shakespeare at the Tobacco Factory. Nine actors, three stage management, set & costume designer, costume supervisor, lighting designer, sound designer, production manager, producer, myself - the director - and my assistant.

One question always intrigues and concerns me on these occasions: just how free are we, in this rehearsal room, to make this play anew? How many choices have already been made? How many remain? What shadows, if any, are cast across us?

Time is a real constraint – we've only four weeks to rehearse before we move onto the stage. And so is the budget. We've already had to scrap our first design – far too expensive. But that's actually been liberating. Harriet de Winton has replaced a great house, placed obliquely, but massively across the stage with an entirely open space backed by a great cyclorama. Onto that Tim Streader, our lighting designer, will project wonderfully changing skies. The set as such will be a single planked ramp, needing only light, furniture and two skeletal, flown window pieces to take us from garden to music room, to drawing room and to office. So, there are many options still open. Coming to the Old Vic's Theatre Royal from our usual venue, the in-the-round studio space of the Tobacco Factory, this is now more familiar territory. Not for the first time in my career I thank my stars for a tight budget.

And we've been allowed to extend the theatre's forestage to what was probably the original 18th century plan. That brings the action within the embrace of the wonderful, horse-shoe shaped auditorium. We'll have the simplicity and the intimacy we crave - and immediate contact between actor and audience. The text includes three soliloquies – often felt to sit uncomfortably in a realist drama and so muttered by the actors in private reverie. I think we should address them directly to the audience – use their elements of debate, self-justification, confessional. Allow the play to recognise the audience's presence.

The biggest constraint, of course - I've chosen the cast. 70% or more of the director's job, they say. What if I've made some terrible mistakes? What if the actors simply don't get on?

And those shadows? What about more than a century of theatrical tradition? Chekhov is the most revered of all modern playwrights. And sometimes he's played as if one's in church. Will that influence us, consciously or unconsciously? The 'Chekhov music', they call it. A sort of tonal wash. And also an idea of a specifically Russian personality – have we all got to take on something that is essentially foreign to us?

Only four Chekhov plays are regularly revived - The Seagull, Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters and The Cherry Orchard. That's a huge weight of reverence, and of arguments over ways and means, focussed on only what - about 10 hours of drama? Most actors and directors want a piece of it. Many have deeply-cherished notions of how they would interpret a certain part, or a certain play if they ever got the chance. Many famous actors and directors have had their chance and the collective memory of their work hangs heavy.

Even just knowing who's been cast is a factor. Michael Redgrave was a famous Vanya,

followed by Peter O'Toole, Timothy West, Simon Russell Beale. Olivier was a famous Astrov (playing this 37 year old character at the age of 56, incidentally); more recently Patrick Malahide, Antony Sher, Linus Roache, Neil Pearson. I saw none of these, yet I can glimpse them all in my mind's eye; and during the audition process, try as I might, I can't shake them. To a small but irreducible extent the tradition is part of the play.

I do have concerns about one or two characters. Though not actually about Vanya himself. Simon Armstrong has just played Julius Caesar and Enobarbus in our Shakespeare season at the Tobacco Factory; my instinct that he's our Vanya doesn't waver and he's my first booking. He will be passionate, belligerent, an emasculated *male*, an unwilling 'uncle', not a self-pitying fustpot.

Astrov I'm far less clear about. And he seems to be the most prized role in the play. That's worrying in itself – there are a lot of agendas out there, a lot of well-formed foetuses waiting to be born – and I don't know yet how to read him.

He's a single, country-gentleman doctor, an enthusiast for forests and an early prophet of climate change. He's possibly in a mid-life crisis; he seems to be asking himself that age-old question, 'Is this it?'. But he functions well enough, as a horticulturalist and as a doctor; he deals selflessly with starving peasants and epidemics of typhus; he has an acute conscience about an operation that went wrong. But he also has an inflated sense of his own value. He has a fastidious concern that a young lady should not see him without his tie, but a surprising capacity for drunken vulgarity. These are some elements of a complex personality. None of them defines him as one theatrical type or another.

He's loved - has been for six years, she claims - by Vanya's niece, Sonya, though he seems oblivious of her devotion. He's attracted instead by Yelena, the young and beautiful second wife of Serebryakov, retired professor of Art and in his brother-in-law Vanya's view a 'dried fish', 'a sort of scholarly kipper'.

The Serebryakovs have only recently taken up residence - with Sonya, Vanya, his old mother Maria, their bankrupt neighbour Telegin and the old family nurse, Marina - in the remote family estate. They are exiled there - by the poverty of retirement - from their true milieu in metropolitan St Petersburg. Their marriage has quickly died; he is increasingly tetchy, she increasingly bored.

What happens – or doesn't happen - between Astrov and Yelena reveals how ingrained expectations of theatre - expectations Chekhov set out to overturn - can so easily derail his intentions. He was bewildered when the committee that had to approve the play for the Imperial Maly Theatre in Moscow, objected to the 'grand passion' that suddenly erupted between Astrov and Yelena in Act Three. Chekhov scribbled 'what grand passion?' in the margin of their report, refused to alter a word of the text and gave the play instead to the independent Moscow Art Theatre. But this didn't kill the idea that Astrov is madly in love, or that there is tragedy in his sudden estrangement from Yelena in Act Four. Olga Knipper, cast as Yelena, alerted Chekhov to the way the director, Stanislavsky, who was playing Astrov himself, was feeling the moment of their parting. Chekhov responded:

'You write that Astrov behaves to Yelena like a man passionately in love, "clutching at his feelings like a drowning man at a straw". But that's not right, not right at all! Astrov likes Yelena, she attracts him by her beauty, but in the last act he knows that nothing will come of it, that Yelena is disappearing forever, and he talks to her in that scene in the same tone as he mentions the heat in Africa. He kisses her quite casually, to pass the time.'

What Astrov has wanted of Yelena, and knows now he won't get, is sex. He's wary of love and marriage (as Chekhov was himself). And there's not a hint of any attempt to persuade Yelena to repudiate her husband, let alone to elope.

This ought to be quite clear. But traditionally the theatre has cast unconsummated grand passion as 'tragedy'; and unconsummated sexual desire as 'farce'. The serious-minded Stanislavsky leant towards tragedy – and perhaps the actor in him yearned to play it. But Chekhov is writing in neither genre – he is actually busting them apart, trying to teach us a new way.

So who is Astrov? A romantic hero, tragically denied his true love? Certainly not. Well, perhaps an inversion of that - an anti-hero, an embittered prophet, burning up in unsatisfied desire, drinking heavily, wilfully denying himself salvation in the shape of the devoted and good-hearted Sonya? - who, incidentally, if she would only let her hair down and change those dowdy clothes might make him suddenly see her anew?

No. These are merely theatrical questions, and merely theatrical answers. Trite categorisations from a library of fictional types, conceived to tug at the heart-strings, not to explore human nature. They offer roles for charismatic, starry actors, as theatre has always done, but only in the limited tonal spectrum that was 19th century theatre.

And they are not what Chekhov was about. He wasn't interested in the old theatrical worlds. He'd little interest in heroes, or in villains; or in the tiny minority of the human race who are kings, queens, captains of industry, serial murderers, magicians, or whale-hunters; or, in terms of context, in revolutionary movements or political assassinations – though both these were to hand in Chekhov's Russia if he'd wanted them. As he repeatedly urged his Art Theatre colleagues to recognise, his people are ordinary people - *ordinary, ordinary*, people - whom he found, and portrayed, as absolutely fascinating. That gun, that we knew must fire at some point in *The Seagull*, and does so tragically, reappears in *Uncle Vanya*, but suddenly and without warning (it hasn't hung on the wall from the beginning) and without serious consequences. Chekhov insisted Vanya's bungled attempt to kill his brother-in-law is not a drama, merely an incident. In *Three Sisters* the shot that kills Tusenbach in the duel (Chekhov's last gunshot) is heard only faintly in the distance, its retreat a symbol, if you like, of this revolutionary playwright's wish to rid the theatre of what is purely theatrical, and to teach us about a new kind of theatre, one that offers a richer and truer account of life.

What I think this asks us to do – and it's a particular lesson for me as a director – is to drop our concepts, our grand designs and to trust in the life of the play. I think we've yet to learn this. Chekhov productions are still vitiated by the idea that the plays offer us *opportunities* – as actors to play out sentimentalised versions of ourselves, as directors to demonstrate that we, alone, have discovered the key to Chekhov's *meaning*. I hope we can practise self-denial on both fronts.

After days of interviews, and a few sleepless nights, I choose Paul Currier for Astrov, an actor who has given some wonderful performances at the Tobacco Factory and, whilst he has a real presence on stage, is devoid of actorish show, is habitually subtle, economic and understated. Together I know we can wipe the slate clean and build a new Astrov from the ground up. I have no clear idea of the end of that process, but that's as it should be.

Yelena and Sonya also take a lot of thought. You may have gathered they are stepmother-and-daughter. Sonya is Serebryakov's child by his first wife, Vanya's sister. Chekhov states baldly that Yelena is 27, but omits to give Sonya an age. She is typically – and perfectly legitimately -

played younger, at 18 or 20, but the really interesting contrasts between them are in background and expectations. These will be in clearer focus if there isn't an arbitrary contrast in age. In the course of the play, they become rivals to some degree. A volatile kind of sisterhood seems the best route. My choice is vast - there are so many good young actresses in their 20s and so little work for them to do - but I choose Daisy Douglas, who has worked on Chekhov with me before, for Sonya, and an actress new to me and to the company, Alys Thomas, for Yelena.

I am confident they both come without baggage - without any brimming-over instinct to play tragedy or pathos; that they will be precise, unselfish and enquiring. Two more exciting journeys with as yet unknown destinations.

Ian Barritt as the selfish Serebryakov, Avril Elgar as the grandmother, head perpetually stuck in obscure political tracts, Jacqueline Tong as Nurse Marina, with a kindly meant cliché and a herbal tea for every occasion, David Plimmer as a self-deprecating Telegin genuinely handy on the guitar, and Dan Winter as the sole representative of the estate's workforce complete the ensemble.

And it must be an ensemble. The medium must reflect the message. Chekhov's forensic interest in the dynamics of ordinary but intertwined lives demands we be alive to every aspect of their complex interaction. Directing *Three Sisters* at the Tobacco Factory four years ago, I was astonished at the degree to which Chekhov could hold so many personalities in his head at once; how each one's self-definition could adjust to each new grouping, with each new entrance or exit, with each shift in alliances in the drawing-room or around the dining-table. These were new demands on me as a director, and new tools to take to other plays by other writers. Whatever *Uncle Vanya* is we must trust will emerge from the most scrupulous, open-ended enquiry we can manage. There is a subtle stagecraft at work, but we needn't be conscious of it, certainly not at the beginning.

What of his *meaning*? What's Chekhov *saying*? Have we no responsibility for this? I'm not sure that we have. A play is one writer's imagining of life; it will be coloured by his own experience, it will be partial. Meaning might be divined from that. But the art of great drama is to see beyond partiality; as free as possible from the dictatorship of opinion, bias and prejudice, as well as from religious or political belief. Working with Chekhov, we must leave all our baggage behind – bin the actorish yearnings to weep or stamp impressively, to offer the bleakest ever Astrov or the most gloriously indolent Yelena; bin the directorish intent to dictate to the audience how it should see or feel. Great drama doesn't offer answers – it'd be so much the meaner if it did. It offers tools of empathy and observation that may perhaps help us to grope towards understanding.

On the opening night five weeks later I hadn't a clue what people would make of it – least of all the London critics, who would bring their own hopes and fears about another *Vanya*, one that was taking them 120 miles from home. I don't know yet what I bring away from it myself, apart from pleasure that it was found fresh, both funny and moving, and that all the performances were well received. My guess, my hope is it will subtly infiltrate my imagination and I'll carry it with me as part of my seeing and my feeling. In theatre and in life.

Should drama, should *play* be any more than that?