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CHEKHOV AND THE AMERICAN DIRECTOR

by

Aaron Weingarten

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1972

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Robert W. Corrigan opens the Introduction to his new translation of six Chekhovian plays with the bemusing thought that "In our times no playwright is more respected and less understood than Anton Chekhov."[1] The slow acceptance of Chekhov in this country as a major world dramatist may be charted by the erratic history of Chekhovian production beginning with the first recorded performance in English of The Sea Gull in 1916 performed by the Washington Square Players at the Greenwich Village theatre, The Bandbox. This history also serves as a contrast to the influence and fascination he has had for the American theatre artist. Indeed, it was the plays of Chekhov that helped to introduce the ensemble acting technique of the Moscow Art Theatre to our shores in 1923. The effect this visit has had on our theatre practice and on such theatre organizations as the Group Theatre and the more recent Actor's Studio has been well documented.[2]

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[1]Anton Chekhov, Six Plays of Chekhov, new English versions and Introduction by Robert W. Corrigan, Foreword by Harold Clurman (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. xii.

[2]See Raymond D. Gasper, "A Study of the Group Theatre and Its Contributions to Theatrical Production in America" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University, 1955). Harold Clurman, The Fervent Years (New York: A. A. Knopf, Inc., 1945). Victor Seymour, "The Stage Director Workshop; A Descriptive Study of the Actors Studio Directors Unit, 1960-1964" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Wisconsin University, 1965).

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But the investigation of Chekhov and his relationship to the American actor and director has, as we shall see, remained largely unexplored.

For the past fifty-five years controversy has arisen whenever a declared set of principles for the interpretation of Chekhovian drama is manifested, so various and distinct have been the approaches to it. The range of interpretations undoubtedly bears witness to the vitality of the plays, and many respected and successful directors have been willing to risk their hard-earned reputations in order to find the key for unlocking their basic, hidden truths. Corrigan readily acknowledges the changing times with their accompanying insights as reasons for the plays' increasing popularity. In terms of stagecraft, however, the translator finds the elusiveness of Chekhov as great as ever, because of the persistent idea that "...his plays are thought to be moody, complex, soulful, vague and impossible to do successfully on the American stage."[3] What then can account for the viewpoint of so noted a critic as Stanley Kaufmann when, reviewing a production of The Three Sisters, emphatically stated: "This beloved play, which grows more important every year, is easy to make 'look' good, like all of Chekhov. The moody lighting, the snow, the Victorian clutter, the picturesque groupings, all these are accessible even to a modest directing talent."[4] In this opinion, he is supported in

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[3]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. xii.

[4]Stanley Kaufmann, "American Conservatory Theatre (ANTA)," New Public, November 1, 1969, p. 33.

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no uncertain terms by J. L. Styan, Professor of English Literature at the University of Michigan, who writes: "It is a commonplace that Chekhov's text 'reads badly,' but plays beautifully...."[5] It is a "commonplace" that Henry Popkin found difficulty in experiencing, especially in America, as he informs us in his Introduction to Avrahm Yarmolinsky's translation of The Cherry Orchard.

> More than most dramatists, Chekhov requires to be properly acted. It is true that no dramatist is foolproof. Shakespeare's plays can be bungled as easily as any other, but bad versions of Chekhov create remarkably unpleasant effects of lugubriousness and inertia; they foster a popular and malicious caricature of Chekhov that has long prevailed in America.[6]

Similar experiences have evidently caused Eric Bentley to rebel over the years. "Unlike many playwrights of his class, Chekhov somehow managed to get himself thoroughly accepted in the Anglo-American theatre, but at the price, apparently, of a considerable degree of misinterpretation."[7] On the other hand, a tendency toward extremes in Chekhovian production is seen by Alex Szogyi. In a preface to his own translation of Chekhov's four major plays, he writes: "Generally, we in America either exaggerate the farcical aspects of his play or fall into a heavy-handed sentimental

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[5]J. L. Styan, Chekhov in Performance (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 3.

[6]Anton Chekhov, The Cherry Orchard, trans. by Avrahm Yarmolinsky, critical material selected and introduced by Henry Popkin (New York: Avon Books, 1965), p. 14.

[7]Eric Bentley, In Search of Theatre, Vintage Books, (New York: Random House, 1953), p. 38.

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nostalgia."[8] Such varying and contradictory comments are innumerable and continue to accumulate in the columns of theatre critics and analysts whenever a new production of a Chekhovian play is presented before the public.

The heat of controversy that Chekhov seems to generate may be understandable in light of the paucity of production research given to him in America. Of the five doctoral dissertations on Chekhov sponsored by American universities, three are of a critical nature. The earliest is a sociological study of Chekhov's Russia entitled, "Anton Chekhov--The Voice of Twilight Russia," by Nina A. Toumanova, submitted at Columbia University in 1937. Then came "English and American Criticism of Chekhov" by Charles W. Meister at the University of Chicago, 1949. More recently, Nicholas Moravavich's dissertation, "Chekhovian Dramatic Innovations," was accepted by the University of Wisconsin in 1965. Of the two production theses, Robert Edward Tracy's "The Flight of the Seagull," submitted to Harvard University in 1960, dealt generally with Chekhov's plays on the English stage while "The Productions of Chekhov's Plays on the American Professional Stage" was a D.F.A. thesis accepted by the Yale School of Drama in 1964. This treatise, in the form of a general survey, was confined to the New York theatre and its sources were limited to newspaper reviews, magazine articles and books of a

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[8]Anton Chekhov, Four Plays by Chekhov, trans. by Alex Szogyi (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), p. viii.

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popular nature. Increasing interest in the staging of Chekhov as a source of study may be seen by the recent publication of J. L. Styan's Chekhov in Performance (see Bibliography). But it is more of a personal explication as the subtitle, "A Commentary on the Major Plays," suggests with footnoted references to Russian and English productions.

Although the history of Chekhovian production in Russia and in England abounds with performances since the early part of the century, it is comparatively recently that a Chekhov following has begun to be felt in America. Thus a brief history of Chekhovian production in the United States may be of help in assessing whether there is sufficient material to make a study of Chekhovian interpretation by American directors meaningful.

After the Washington Square Players' production of The Sea Gull which, incidently, was considered by an unnamed reviewer "...beyond the scope of the Washington Square Players..." but who thought the play "...an interesting piece of work...,"[9] Chekhov seems to have vanished from the American stage until the significant visit of the Moscow Art Theatre to New York in 1923 and its performances of The Three Sisters and The Cherry Orchard. Despite the excitement aroused by these Chekhovian productions and the reading of his plays by theatre people and critics alike, no attempts were made at producing them on a serious and professional level until three years later when Eva Le Gallienne introduced

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[9]N.n., "'The Sea Gull' at the Bandbox," New York Star, May 31, 1916, Robinson Locke Collection, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, Research Library of the Performing Arts, Theatre Collection, NAFR+ ser. 3, Vol. 344, p. 94.

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The Three Sisters into the Civic Repertory Theatre's program in 1926. Thereafter, that company revived three of the major plays from time to time during the next five years.

In 1929, a Broadway production of Uncle Vanya, under the direction of Harold Winston, lasted for one performance, and a year later the first major Broadway production of an adaptation of Uncle Vanya was produced and directed by Jed Harris. It starred such luminaries as Lillian Gish, Walter Connelly and Osgood Perkins. For the first time in America Chekhov proved a profitable investment, perhaps mainly because of the drawing power of the cast. The assets gained in New York, however, were completely wiped out in a national tour. After the demise of the Civic Repertory Theatre in 1931, Le Gallienne brought her production of The Cherry Orchard, starring the great Russian actress Nazimova, uptown to Broadway for a respectable run and a limited tour across the country (1932). During this period, the most intensive work with Chekhov was done in small companies, schools, and workshops run by such Russian actors, teachers, and directors as Leo Bulgagov, Richard Boleslavsky, Maria Germanov, Michael Chekhov, Benno Schneider, and Boris Marshalov.

Perhaps the most important occasion that helped establish Chekhov as a major dramatist for the American public was the Lunts' 1938 decision to present Stark Young's new translation of The Sea Gull under the auspices of the Theatre Guild with Robert Milton designated as the

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director. The occasion also marked a period in which Chekhov's plays became vehicles in special though limited productions for the most celebrated stars of the Broadway stage. The following year a one-performance production of The Three Sisters appeared on Broadway in an experimental version, and presented by a summer stock company from Maine directed by Samuel Rosen. Three years later, Guthrie McClintic assembled one of the most ambitious casts ever to be seen on Broadway for his 1942 staging of the same play.

The years following the Second World War saw an increase in the number of regional theatres. Such companies as the San Francisco Actor's Workshop and the Washington Arena Stage began adding Chekhov's plays to their repertoires. Small houses throughout the country found Chekhov easily adaptable to their thrust and arena stages. In New York, off-Broadway theatre proved to be fertile ground. In 1954, the Phoenix Theatre presented a new translation of The Sea Gull directed by its co-founder Norris Houghton while, in the same year, David Ross initiated a cycle of the four major plays in a small house on the Lower East Side, an event which started to attract star players to small off-Broadway productions. William Ball's off-Broadway production of Ivanov in 1958 was a first for the play in America and for the director's professional career.

During the thirties, the Group Theatre had made several vain attempts at reviving a Chekhovian play. In the sixties, Lee Strasberg was finally to bring forth a long-awaited production of The Three Sisters

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under the aegis of the Actor's Studio Theatre while the Group Theatre's other co-founder and director, Harold Clurman waited until 1969 to go west and direct a regional production of Uncle Vanya for a Los Angeles audience. During the same season, California played host to an English touring company of The Three Sisters in competition with the new tenants ensconced in San Francisco, the American Conservatory Theatre, which was, at the time, working on an adaptation of the same play.

Today, hardly a season passes in New York that does not see an effort at a Chekhov revival on Broadway or off-Broadway, Off-off-Broadway theatre is becoming particularly attracted to the Russian playwright and its young and unknown directors are just beginning to find the plays pliable material for experimentation.[10] The regional theatre companies have increased their productions of the plays, and they have also found their way into university theatre repertoires. Heretofore limited to occasional productions in the Ivy League schools during the thirties, they have become a staple for classroom work and college production across the country.[11]

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[10]A case in point is a loft theatre group called the Circle Theatre on upper Broadway. In the summer of 1969, they presented two different productions of The Three Sisters on alternate evenings. One was a conventional production. The other was an experimental "hippy" version in which two ladders were used for the set and the officers in the play wore long hair and were dressed in camouflaged, battle fatigue uniforms. An attempt was also made to stage the play within Brechtian production principles such as the use of contemporary slides and speaking directly to the audience.

[11]A listing of the most frequently produced playwrights places Chekhov sixth and seventh of among twenty world dramatists for the 1965-1966 and 1966-1967 school years. See Table 5 in Leighton M. Ballew and Gerald Kahan's "Production Trends in the American College and University Theatre: Problems and Prospects." Educational Theatre Journal, XX, No. 3 (1968), 453.

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This brief chronology demonstrates the increasing interest Chekhov has had for directors in the American theatre. Also evident is the lack of investigation into their struggles as they try to arrive at a meaningful interpretation of the plays for an American audience. It is the purpose of this dissertation to explore this area and will consist of a detailing of rehearsal procedures step by step in various productions in an attempt to construct a composite picture of the final results. It will also deal with somewhat more speculative areas in order to try to ascertain what the individual director was trying to achieve. Given a representative number of American directors and the availability of the research materials, the dissertation hopes to find a meaningful pattern that may lead to a more concrete method in the approach to a Chekhovian play. Such an effort may be able to point out critical and determining factors like acting techniques, rehearsal conditions, types of theatre organizations, architectural and scenic environments, and peculiar aptitudes of individual directors. Another aim is to bring to light such fresh insights into Chekhovian drama as may be contributed by the various artists, together with an exposition of their production techniques. Not the least of intentions, however, is to make the work of the most accomplished and imaginative directors serve as inspiration and guide for the many directors who may find the challenge of Chekhov irresistible.

In selecting the directors for this study, several criteria were employed.

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1. The subject, an American but not necessarily by birth, must have received his theatrical background and training in the United States.
2. Since New York City still remains the measure for high production standards, the director must have worked in New York professional theatre prior to or with the production under examination, on- or off-Broadway, the latter in an Equity house of more than two hundred seats.
3. The director must have directed a full-length play or plays of Chekhov in a professional theatre located in a major American city.
4. Sufficient primary and/or secondary sources on the director and the Chekhovian production must be available to make a study meaningful.

The ten directors who fall within this framework adequately reflect the history of Chekhovian production in this country. In chronological order, the directors and productions to be investigated are:

<u>Eva Le Gallienne</u>: As founder and director of the Civic Repertory Company from 1926 until 1931, produced and directed <u>The Three Sisters</u>, <u>The Cherry Orchard</u> and <u>The Sea Gull</u>. In 1944 she directed and starred in a Broadway version of <u>The Cherry Orchard</u>. In 1962, she organized the National Repertory Company and presented her own translation of <u>The Sea Gull</u> on tour and on Broadway. She was invited to direct her latest production of <u>The Cherry Orchard</u> in 1968 for the APA-Phoenix Company at the Lyceum Theatre.

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Jed Harris	Produced and directed an Independent Broadway production of an adaptation of Uncle Vanya in 1930.
Robert Milton: (Deceased)	Assigned to direct the first Stark Young version of a Chekhovian play, The Sea Gull, for the Theatre Guild in 1938, starring the Lunts.
Guthrie McClintic: (Deceased)	Produced and directed a 1942 all-star production of The Three Sisters in a special translation.
Norris Houghton:	As co-founder of the Phoenix Theatre, directed an off-Broadway production of a new translation of The Sea Gull in 1954.
David Ross: (Deceased)	Produced and directed a cycle of Chekhov's four major plays, The Three Sisters (1955), The Cherry Orchard (1955), Uncle Vanya (1956), and The Sea Gull (1956), all presented in his own off-Broadway theatre on the Lower East Side. In 1962, he opened a new off-Broadway house uptown with a new version of The Cherry Orchard.
Alan Schneider:	As visiting director of the Washington Arena Stage, included in the program The Cherry Orchard in the 1959-1960 season and Uncle Vanya two seasons later.
Lee Strasberg:	As Artistic Director of the Actor's Studio Theatre guided its Broadway production of The Three Sisters in 1964.
Harold Clurman:	Directed a Los Angeles production of Uncle Vanya at the Mark Taper Forum in August, 1969.
William Ball:	His 1958 off-Broadway production of Ivanov marked his professional debut as a director. As Artistic Director of the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco staged his own version of The Three Sisters which was given a cross-country tour and a Broadway presentation in the Fall of 1969.

It should be noted that the above directors are diverse enough to include almost every theatrical background and directing method used in

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the American theatre. It is a group that has been marked by such influences as those of Belasco, Mansfield, Ames, Stanislavsky, Dean, Meyerhold, as well as contemporary cultural youth movements. Of equal importance is the varied types of stages on which the plays were performed. We thus have the opportunity of examining Chekhov in such distinct theatrical environments as the conventional proscenium arch stage in the legitimate Broadway house and in the small, intimate off-Broadway theatre, the three-quarter thrust stage, the theatre-in-the-round or arena stage, and a center stage dividing the audience in half. This same diversity will be found in the background and training of the actors and other contributing artists upon whose talents the directors chose to rely. The above list will also permit us to study Chekhovian production by such organizations as the repertory company, the regional company, the actor's workshop company and the independent productions sponsored by Broadway and off-Broadway producers. Fortunately, almost every type of institution and directorial expertise has been applied to the staging of Chekhovian drama in America.

While gathering material for the study, I was particularly anxious to obtain a first-hand account of the production procedures as detailed by the directors themselves. In this endeavor, I was very fortunate in being able to arrange interviews with all the living directors with the exception of William Ball. Either the directors now deceased had written and spoken of their productions extensively or colleagues still living and involved in the production proved available and cooperative. The written materials

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that were examined consist of prompt books, personal papers, newspaper and magazine articles and reviews, biographies, and autobiographies. A most helpful source of material were the interviews given by the various collaborative artists and technicians, including actors, designers, translators, stage managers and other stage personnel. It is on such published and unpublished material and spoken confidences that this study is based.

In the attempt to gather as comprehensive an account of the productions as possible, some of which are as much as forty-five years old, it was necessary to approach the subject from several vantage points. The nature of the material thus falls into five categories. These consist of the director's theories of Chekhovian drama and production, the pre-production planning, the production procedures, evaluations of the production, and any afterthoughts that might possibly be gleaned from the event. These categories were in turn broken down into specific questions that were to be asked in the direct interview as well as when examining all available documentation. A structured form guided the gathering of material:

1. Theory

   A) Why Chekhov? What was the appeal, the challenge for the director?

   B) How did the director see Chekhov's vision and statement with regard to the world at large, society, human nature?

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C) What did the director consider the best conditions for presenting Chekhov such as type of company, architecture of stage and house, rehearsal conditions, etc.?

2. Pre-production Planning

A) What was the director's thematic concept of the play? His analysis of its form and style?

B) Text--Why was a particular translation or adaptation used? What, if any, revisions were made before and/or during rehearsals?

C) The director's analysis of the characters and their environment.

D) Visualization of the production--Preparation of the directing book if any used.

3. Production

A) Casting--What methods were used? Were actors known to director? Were they given readings? Improvisations? Interviews? Asked to bring in audition material? Any other method?

B) Early rehearsal period--Were there readings, discussions, lectures, improvisations, etc.?

C) What were the director-actor working relationships in terms of acting methods, style differences, interpretation adjustments, personality clashes, etc.?

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D) What methods did the director use for blocking, business, stage tableaux?

E) Later rehearsals--How did the director work for the pacing, mood, ensemble coordination? How much restaging and polishing, etc.?

F) Were there any problems at dress rehearsals, technical rehearsals, previews, try-outs?

G) Describe the collaboration of the director and other contributing artists regarding:

1. Scenery
2. Lighting
3. Costume
4. Music

H) Special Problems

1. Did the architecture of the stage or house create any problems for the staging of Chekhov?
2. Were there any administrative or financial problems that might have affected the presentation of the play?
3. Were there any other problems not covered above?

4. <u>Evaluation of the Production</u>

A) The director's appraisal
B) The contributing artists appraisals
C) The public's appraisal
D) The critics' appraisals

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5. After-thoughts

A) Had the director used any special methods in the staging of Chekhov?

B) Are certain aptitudes necessary for directing a Chekhovian play?

C) What would you be especially concerned with were you to direct a Chekhovian play today?

This form served as a basis for a variety of questionnaires, depending on the artist or technician interviewed. Needless to say, because of the lapse of time between the production and the interview, together with a sincere desire on the part of those interviewed to be objective as well as discreet where other artists were concerned, some of the questions remained unanswered. The filling of these gaps was attempted elsewhere and by other means.

Since the material uncovered for each director has differed widely because of the nature of the production, the individuality of the director, and the sources available, the several presentations form a mosaic eventually composing a portrait of Chekhovian production in America. Each account is that of an individual's efforts which, at times, achieves a high level of drama on its own, yet remains differentiated and distinct from the others.

The dissertation is divided into twelve chapters: the Introduction, a chapter for each of the ten directors, and a Conclusion. The last

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chapter is a comparative evaluation of the productions with judgments and conclusions culled from the evidence in the foregoing chapters together with the appropriate reservations that a study of this nature must engender. It also deals with a series of general assumptions or myths as expressed by several of the directors. Their acceptance by other directors may well have led to the discouragement of more stagings of Chekhov's plays. The entire assessment is conducted within the temporal framework that embraces the period from 1926 until 1969 (the year of the last relevant Chekhovian production when the proposal for this dissertation was submitted), with an acknowledgement for the decades that have seen a change of standards, theatre techniques, and expectations of the average playgoer.

The two appendices, although not of immediate relevance to their subject, were considered to be of sufficient interest to the reader to include them. Apeendix A contains the highlights of an interview with an actress who performed in an Israeli production of The Cherry Orchard directed by Alan Schneider. Appendix B is an authoritive description of the Alexander Technique which is employed by William Ball and the actors at the American Conservatory Theatre.

The constant reevaluation of Chekhov's basic statement as well as of his dramaturgy continues to lead to a growing awareness of his significance in the modern world. The fact that he has been embraced by the Naturalists and Realists, by the Impressionists, the Existentialists, and

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finally by the Absurdists as a representative of each demonstrates vividly enough the ability of his work to adapt to progressive changes in dramatic schools of thought. But his plays have also lent themselves to parallel advances in production techniques. The embodying of metaphysical insights that have recently been pointed out in Chekhov by such analysts as Robert Brustein, Eric Bentley, and Martin Esslin, demands further explorations into our mimetic resources. Chekhov himself prompts us for it is the organic nature of his work that idea and form be one.

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CHAPTER II

EVA LE GALLIENNE

In beginning this study of Chekhov and the American director, the work of Eva Le Gallienne must be regarded as seminal. Stark Young has acknowledged that it was she "...who with her Civic Repertory Theatre did more about Chekhov in America than any one else has done."[1] It is difficult to appreciate the sacrifice this theatre artist had made at the height of her professional career when she turned her back on the commercial theatre to form a repertory company and present plays of substance culled mainly from the European drama. By leaving Broadway and traveling south to 14th Street, she was, from 1926 until 1932, to administer and direct a company which presented to the American audience the greatest of the world's drama, including Chekhov's The Three Sisters, The Cherry Orchard, and The Sea Gull. Thereafter, she was to continue her commitment to these plays by directing and acting in them for Broadway and other repertory companies.

As far back as 1930 she was convinced that the best conditions in which to perform Chekhov were to be found in the repertory system. At that time she wrote:

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[1]Anton Chekhov, The Sea Gull, trans. from the Russian by Stark Young (New York, Samuel French, 1950), p. xl.

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> In Chekhov's plays, you cannot lie. There is no escape. You cannot express fundamental simplicity by tricks. For that reason, it seems to me, a group of people, intimately related to one another by a sincere and affectionate attitude toward the work to be expressed, have a better chance of projecting the true essence of Chekhov's plays, than, let us say, an all-star cast of superlative actors, all intent on projecting themselves as individuals.[2]

After forty years and three additional Chekhovian productions, her opinion remains unchanged. In an interview with this writer, she stated:

> At the Civic Rep, I had a permanent company. In 1944, the independent production, I had to give auditions and read people but it's not efficacious. I don't think Chekhov is good to do on Broadway. To do a Chekhov play in three weeks with actors who have never done Chekhov before whom you don't know or don't know you, it's not good for any play but I think Chekhov suffers more than any other playwright....[3]

As we shall see, Le Gallienne's experience with other repertory companies were not as fruitful nor as happy. The Civic Repertory Theatre had been conceived, formed, and administered by her own efforts; it was to become a legendary institution in the history of the American theatre.

The company existed not only for production but also as a school for young, aspiring actors to learn, to experiment and to attempt plays shunned by the commercial establishment. Jacob Ben-Ami, one of the outstanding actors of the period, who later joined the company and played Trigorin in The Sea Gull, remarked that Eva had a group of dedicated people who wanted to learn and grow. "I wouldn't say they were richly

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[2]Anton Tchekov, The Plays of Anton Tchekov, trans. by Constance Garnett, preface by Eva Le Gallienne (New York: Modern Library, 1930), p. lx.

[3]Eva Le Gallienne, Weston, Conn., interview, October 2, 1970.

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endowed with natural gifts but they worked hard and were very loyal.... The people were hers and she belonged to them and they worked together for some time."[4] Removed from the glamor and bright lights of Broadway, they were permitted to examine and explore the truths that make up "the true essence" of Chekhov's plays. "There was no sense of pressure," Miss Le Gallienne recalled, "in the sense that we thought if we all played well opening night, the play would be a success." She often tried to comfort Jacob Ben-Ami, who would be terribly nervous, by saying: "It doesn't matter. It would be nice if we played well opening night but it doesn't matter. We'll go on playing the play next year and as long as the Civic lasts. So just calm down and do your best."[5]

Perhaps because of her Ibsen translations, Le Gallienne has been more closely associated with the Scandinavian playwright than with Chekhov. When comparing the two dramatists, she said, "I think the difference is that Ibsen appeals to your brain and Chekhov appeals to your heart and your whole feeling as a human being."[6] It is this humanity that has evoked and sustained a deep response and affection for the Russian dramatist. When asked why she continually sought opportunities to direct the same plays, she replied:

> It's like dealing with life, with the truth of life, with the tenderness of life, with the pain of life, with the joy of life and let's not forget the joy for Chekhov is full of joy, full of the sense of being....But one mustn't give up the pain. I think you grow from it, with all the

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[4]Jacob Ben-Ami, New York, interview, January 14, 1971.

[5]Le Gallienne interview. [6]*Ibid.*

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> battles you go through, all the things you have to vanquish, you have to conquer in yourself and in life. These are the things that free you, that enrich you, that makes life marvelous. And that's what Chekhov is all about. We played The Three Sisters for seven years and whenever we came back to it, it was so warm and so good as if one was coming home.[7]

This regard for Chekhov's vision appears to have remained constant, since forty years earlier she had written:

> He saw with his infinite tenderness and compassion that man is neither good nor bad, happy nor miserable, but all of these things at once, inextricably woven into the fabric of the whole--the magical, joyous, heartbreaking fabric of life. His plays are made out of an overwhelming Sense of Life--"A Tragic Sense of Life" as Unamuno so beautifully puts it--but also a Comic Sense of Life. In short, a Complete Sense of Life.[8]

The plays of Chekhov continue to remain an exciting though often a frustrating challenge to this unusual theatre artist. Since her youth, Eva Le Gallienne had traveled and worked throughout Europe and when she organized the Civic Repertory Theatre, she was already studying Russian and reading Chekhov in his own tongue. Her understanding of Russian literature and drama impressed Jacob Ben-Ami and led him to remark, "I had come from Russia and was acquainted with Russian literature and I found that she had very good ideas and a very theatrical sense and was quite close to Chekhov. Chekhov was not foreign to her while with other actors and directors that I saw from time to time, they put on what was for them a 'foreign' play. That wasn't so with Eva Le Gallienne. She is European in a way."[9]

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[7]Ibid. [8]The Plays of Anton Tchekhov, Le Gallienne Preface, p. viii.

[9]Ben-Ami interview.

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Chekhov's dramatic style continues to be an enigmatic source of wonder and discovery for Le Gallienne until this very day. In her second autobiography, With A Quiet Heart, she observed, "Chekhov makes rare and unusual demands on his players, and the tools he provides as far as words and 'effective' scenes are concerned, seem disconcertingly elusive."[10] She describes how Joseph Schildkraut, who played Gaev in her 1944 production of The Cherry Orchard, continually complained that he had "nothing to do." She attempted to explain to him that "Chekhov provides no words, no specific action. Instead of doing, one must simply be, and that is no easy matter. There are no shortcuts, no props, no half-measures."[11] She has often compared the simpler interpretive demands of Ibsen to the more elusive and intangible of Chekhov and is convinced that:

> ...where Chekhov creates a series of moods and relies on the actor to fill them and realize them in tangible form, with all the resources of heart, human understanding, and technical invention at his command, Ibsen presents one with a clear and undeviating pattern, which it is the actor's job thoroughly to understand and absorb and to interpret with the utmost faithfulness.[12]

After four years of acting and directing Chekhov in repertory, Le Gallienne was honest enough to admit that she was still pursuing the subtle elusiveness of Chekhov's style.

> There is nothing in his plays of theatre-theatrical, and yet, to a worker in the theatre, his technique and craftsmanship are baffling. In the same sense the technique of Eleanora Duse's acting, called by many a

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[10] Eva Le Gallienne, With A Quiet Heart (New York: The Viking Press, 1953), p. 231.

[11] Ibid. [12] Ibid., pp. 85-86.

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> lack of technique, was but the very perfection of art, concealing technique by its sheer perfection.[13]

She has never claimed to have attained a full mastery of the necessary directorial techniques for interpreting Chekhov but her theatrical insight and her sensitivity for his plays has given her an understanding of what they demand.

> The quality of a Chekhov production depends so tremendously on what goes on beneath the lines, on the almost casual interplay between the various characters, on a truth and simplicity so thoroughly understood and digested that it becomes effective in a subtle unobtrusive way in no sense dependent on the usual theatrical externals. It is a sort of flavor that permeates the whole ensemble--a mood, an aura so delicate and special that the slightest false note on the part of even the most seemingly insignificant player in the cast can ruthlessly dispel it.[14]

The Civic Repertory Theatre opened its doors on October 26, 1926 with Benavente's Saturday Night. The critical response was disappointing and was immediately followed by the first production of The Three Sisters in English in America. The difference in preparing the two productions reveals the concern with which Le Gallienne approached her first Chekhovian production. In her first autobiography At 33, she informs us:

> Benavente's Saturday Night was "theatre." I had worked out all the technical end of the direction in the greatest detail, so as to have it all clearly established before actual rehearsals started. But The Three Sisters was so much more than mere theatre--it was almost the antithesis of it in a sense. To succeed in accurately projecting its myriad nuances and imperceptibly shifting moods, a very intimate and personal knowledge of the play must permeate everyone associated with it; the actors must become imbued with its very essence.[15]

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[13]The Plays of Anton Tchekhov, Le Gallienne Preface, p. viii.

[14]Le Gallienne, With A Quiet Heart, p. 230.

[15]Eva Le Gallienne, At 33 (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1934), p. 200.

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Three years before, the Moscow Art Theatre had visited these shores; its productions were to have a marked influence on the American theatre and on Chekhovian production in particular. Le Gallienne makes no attempt to deny that influence. "I think it helped me as a director to have seen the Moscow Art Theatre in 1923 although some three years went by before I directed anything at the Civic and so I didn't remember it so well that I tried to copy it."[16] But Stanislavsky's directing methods had already penetrated the more progressive theatrical circles and Le Gallienne instinctively saw the need to use less orthodox means in mounting The Three Sisters. Before official rehearsals began, she and her assembled company began gradually to ease their way into the play, a method never attempted before in an American production.

> I felt it would be a great help to use a completely untheatrical method of work on The Three Sisters, particularly as the company were not yet accustomed to playing together. I invited them to come and work in the country out at Westport. We took over a small inn on the Wilton Road, and for nearly three weeks worked quietly and informally on the play.
>
> We sat around in the beautiful fields and woods near Weston trying to identify ourselves with the various characters; we called each other by their names and frequently started work by discussing, in character, things not actually in the text. Then suddenly someone would give an actual cue and the discussion would be carried on in Chekhov's own words. This gave us a tremendous sense of ease and reality. It was not until we moved into town and started rehearsing on the stage that I began giving actual shape to the performance.[17]

The translations used at the Civic Repertory Theatre were those by Constance Garnett, but since Le Gallienne had been studying Russian, had many Russian friends, and had also invited Russian actors into the

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[16]Le Gallienne interview. [17]Le Gallienne, At 33, pp. 200-201.

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company (such as Nazimova and Jacob Ben-Ami), many words, sometimes whole lines were changed. In fact, whole speeches were "shook up a lot."[18] Jacob Ben-Ami complained that the translations

> ...lacked the simplicity that Chekhov uses in his own tongue and very often it becomes humorless....We changed lines during the rehearsals to get away from the literal translation because Chekhov has to be spoken and Eva Le Gallienne had a sense for the spoken word.[19]

Faithfulness to Chekhov's intention, however, remained an undeviating principle in every production. "Try to cut a Chekhov play," she once wrote, "and, if you are sensitive to the dramatic medium, you will find it impossible. You cut a small thread, seemingly unimportant, in the first act. All may be well for a time, but in the last act, you will find the other end of that thread--its ultimate purpose--its profound reason; and there will be a hole in your tapestry."[20] The unspoken word, signified or unsignified, played an equally important part in Le Gallienne's exploration of the text. "In Chekhov there is an enormous value in a rest just as in music and, of course, rhythm is essential as it is in almost any good playwright. Perhaps the most important of Chekhov's statements may be found in the pauses."[21]

The nucleus of the Civic Repertory Theatre company was created from the cast of two Ibsen productions that the director had taken on a national tour, plus some carefully selected additional actors. The first

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[18]Le Gallienne interview. [19]Ben-Ami interview.

[20]The Plays of Anton Tchekhov, Le Gallienne Preface, p. viii.

[21]Le Gallienne interview.

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season's program included plays by Shakespeare, Goldoni and Glaspell as well as Chekhov. Thus, casting for The Three Sisters had to be done with an eye to the needs of the season's total program. Neither Le Gallienne, who played the role of Masha, nor any of the other members of the company had ever acted in a Chekhov play, yet she seems to have gone forward to meet the challenge without hesitation.

> Had I said to my fellow-workers when we started rehearsals of The Three Sisters, "We must approach this play with awe. We must remember that it is a 'centrifugal' play or we must not fail to play it 'centripetally,'" I rather dread to think of what the result might have been. However, being neither a translator nor a learned critic, these words meant little to me and I found myself face to face with the problem of interpreting a great play as faithfully and as truthfully and as reverently as possible.[22]

Even in the early rehearsal period, Eva Le Gallienne does not believe in involved theoretical discussions in long readings about the table. The three weeks in Connecticut were mostly spent by the actors in learning to relate to each other rather than in discussing the meaning of the play. When rehearsals on the stage began, the actor's craft was immediately put into use. "Of course we had some readings and discussions during the early rehearsals but you can't generalize about directing. As both a director and actress I try not to approach Chekhov with too much analysis. If you're an actor, you act. I don't believe in splitting hairs."[23] Jacob Ben-Ami recalls spending as long as two days reading The Sea Gull but

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[22]Eva Le Gallienne, ed. and notes, Civic Repertory Plays (New York: Norton Publishing Co., 1928), p. 321.

[23]Le Gallienne interview.

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in Le Gallienne's later productions, actors remember only one or two readings before the actual staging.

Still, a great deal of thought and preparation went into her directorial concept before production began. Le Gallienne is well known as a strong director and the company was constantly made aware of a guiding hand. Ben-Ami, at the first rehearsal of The Sea Gull, was cognizant of it. "There was a plan unless she found it necessary to change it. Rehearsals weren't a free-for-all. There was a direction and she knew what she wanted and where it would lead to."[24] On the other hand, she always tried to keep the rehearsal periods open and flexible. She was familiar with the use of improvisations and realized that many great effects had sprung from them. Indeed, whenever possible, she encouraged experimentation in the hope that it might lead to flashes of inspiration on the part of the actors, but she remained constantly on guard against too relaxed an atmosphere at rehearsals lest it cause confusion and wasted time. She therefore saw to it that a directing book was prepared before rehearsals, but one relatively free of minute details.

> A director must have some definite things in mind but things that can be modified during rehearsals and so I do not use a rigid, unalterable book. If one can't get hidebound, a director should also never be caught short and should always have a complete scheme. He should see the play as a complete whole. You cannot superimpose upon a group of actors a finished, cut thing. It's like trying to use a set directing book which won't work for Chekhov.[25]

She was to put aside this cardinal principle in her last Chekhovian production, with unhappy results.

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[24]Ben-Ami interview. [25]Le Gallienne interview.

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Having enjoyed her first success in the theatre as an actress, Le Gallienne continued in the role even as she took on the duties of the director. Indeed, she has continued to wear both hats in the theatre, either directing and acting in the same play or alternating as actress and director in various production companies. As a director, her relationship to the actors, therefore, has almost invariably been one of respect and affection. She seems to have been extremely sensitive to the individual needs of different actors and knew the delicate balance of freedom and authority in handling them.

> As a director you can't handle actors the same way. Some directors handle all actors the same way and it is a grave mistake. Some actors you must cajole, some you bully, some you have to make them do exactly as you tell them, some actors you leave alone. A Director must be able to sense this sort of temperament. When I was a child, I disliked taking heavy-handed direction. I had to be left alone for a certain time.[26]

She insists that a good director must be not only an artist and a craftsman, but a psychologist as well. That she herself meets these criterion has been borne out by the loyalty and admiration her colleagues have steadfastly given her throughout the years. After forty-two years, Jacob Ben-Ami remembers her with professional esteem and fondness. "If there was a difference in interpretation, Eva would let you do it your way. If it worked, fine, she accepted it. She was very good to work with."[27]

When directing Chekhov, Le Gallienne prefers her actors to rely heavily on their instincts and on the text itself. She expects the actors

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[26]Ibid. [27]Ben-Ami interview.

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she works with to be competent enough to solve their own acting problems and rarely does she turn the rehearsal stage into a classroom. All discussion thus becomes a matter of interpretation. An actress who put it most succinctly was Miss Anne Meacham, who has had a long relationship with Le Gallienne and who played the role of Nina in the National Repertory Company's production of The Sea Gull.

> She rarely discussed acting techniques to solve a problem but indirectly suggested a certain attitude or a point of view in terms of the character on a particular line in order to get the result or effect she wanted but never by a kind of frontal assault. She very seldom gave a line reading.[28]

Le Gallienne considered that the craft necessary to act Chekhov was somewhat removed from the intellect, that it was one which could only be acquired by life, innate talent and incessant practice. She was vehemently opposed to actors subjectively scrutinizing their own or the character's behavior. She exhibited a rare display of impatience when she said:

> I wish actors wouldn't make Chekhov so complicated and so difficult. Of course, this, in a way, is a contradiction because you can't say that life is entirely simple. It is, of course, very complicated. And yet it's not, because there's a kind of simplicity somehow. But we always get in the way with our intellect and try to take things apart and analyze it. But you can't, you mustn't and this is what they do with Chekhov. They constantly say, "Now why does he say that line? What is the reason? What is the motivation?" It's no good. You've got to know that he says that line because it's right and that's the way he is but you can't pull it apart. I think this is fatal. If we allow our brains to interfere, we stop the source. If we can just go along with that source, that tide....But we've got to know our craft.[29]

Casting, according to Miss Le Gallienne, is one of the main difficulties in attempting Chekhov. "There are many actors who can't play

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[28]Anne Meacham, New York, interview, January 12, 1971.

[29]Le Gallienne interview.

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Chekhov at all. They do him with too much theatricality and if you try to stop them it doesn't seem to help. They just act too much."[30] As an illustration, she spoke with deep fondness of her late friend, Pepi [Joseph] Schildkraut who was "a technical type of actor" and who found it very difficult to play Chekhov.

> I remember in that last scene in The Cherry Orchard (1944) when Luybov and Gaev are by themselves in the nursery saying farewell to the house. They have nothing to say. Gaev says, "Sister, sister." And she says, "Our dear mother used to walk about this room," and he says, "Sister." That's all. Chekhov would have died if he had seen what Schildkraut tried to do by weeping desperately and screwing up his face. I said, "Pepi, if you do that, I shall be out of the door before the curtain drops." He said, "But Evale, I have nothing to say. What am I going to do?" I said, "Don't do anything, just don't do anything." But he hated it. He wanted to do something with it.... Some actors are not simple enough. I think you've got to be simple for Chekhov. You've got to--just be.[31]

To avoid theatricality in the actor, Le Gallienne attempted to stress simulation of human behavior either in the thought processes of the character or by interpersonal relationships. Her notes on The Three Sisters illustrate the practice.

> The play must not start on a gloomy note. The first speech, Olga's is a series of broken thoughts that come while she is correcting exercise books. Entrance of groups must be natural; they must come in carrying on a very real and relevant conversation. All of these people are interested in their own trend of thought. We are all, of course, but some of us have been schooled into pretending to be interested in the other fellow. Some people are more honest--that is the only difference.[32]

For this sense of reality, she depended mainly on the orchestration of the

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[30] Ibid. [31] Ibid.

[32] Le Gallienne notes, Civic Repertory Plays, p. 323.

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various levels of human behavior and on-stage improvisation was frequently utilized to achieve it. As she discussed the party scene in the first act, we are given an insight to her directorial design. "All during this scene there should be life in the dining-room, real life. I recommend conversation about relevant topics or situations--and not whispers--so that it forms a very definite pattern of sound against which the main theme, Irina and Tusenbach, is played."[33] We thus see a flexibility in the use of improvisation that many American directors and even Stanislavsky himself avoided in performance.

In the last act of The Sea Gull, the Lotto game had always presented staging difficulties in its intimacy and scenic grouping. Le Gallienne attacked the problem directly.

> The Lotto game mustn't be faked. The actors must really play the game on stage to make it come off. If you draw a three, then you say "three" and then look for a three on the Lotto card. Of course you still keep alert for your cues for the Lotto game must be interwoven with the dialogue. In fact, in all of Chekhov's plays there is an intricate pattern of ordinary behavior woven into a rich fabric.[34]

Anne Meacham may have best summarized Le Gallienne's method for acting Chekhov. She quoted the director as offering this advice to the cast before the first rehearsal began: "The only thing I want to tell you that is difficult about Chekhov is that he can't be acted."[35]

When it came to the staging of a Chekhov play, that is, the blocking and business, Le Gallienne seems to have confronted little dif-

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[33]Ibid., p. 325. [34]Le Gallienne interview.

[35]Meacham interview.

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ficulty. "Blocking and movement is ABC. That's something the actor learns like learning one's lines."[36] She appears to have relied mainly on the author's directions and the stage environment for most of her movement. Being fully aware of the staging techniques of Antoine's Theatre Libre and the Moscow Art Theatre, she had no hesitation in using them at the Civic Repertory Theatre.

> The one thing I remember doing is having several pieces of furniture, such as chairs, with their backs to the house, which the Moscow Art Theatre did all the time and in those days that was very original and it still is. Even today, I'm always saying to people, "why do you keep standing facing front all the time, why the devil can't you occasionally turn away and turn your backs to the audience or at least turn half away?" They always face front. If you can be heard, I find nothing wrong with it provided you don't overdo it. It makes the fourth wall and the environment so much more real.[37]

Such staging methods demanded a particular kind of house and here the Civic Repertory Theatre company was extremely fortunate. Finding nothing else available, Le Gallienne was forced to lease a theatre that was being used for Italian plays, and previous to that had been a burlesque house. Le Gallienne still recalls the theatre with a special fondness; it was located on Fourteenth Street just west of Sixth Avenue and has long since been demolished.

> It had a wonderful stage. A great, huge stage, a beautiful stage which was about forty feet deep and about one hundred feet from wall to wall with a fly gallery. It seated only about 1100 people so the theatre was fairly intimate. It was an old theatre. They knew how to build them then. It was built in a horseshoe and the acoustics were wonderful. I was able to play as Juliet the entire potion scene in a whisper. Of course, this is especially important with Chekhov because you can get a wide range of nuance which you can't get if you have to bellow everything out.[38]

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[36] Le Gallienne interview. [37] *Ibid.* [38] *Ibid.*

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The original prompt scripts of the Civic Repertory Theatre, now located in the Beinecke Library at Yale University, reveal little business or movement not in the original text or necessary for the activity of the play. It was only later that LeGallienne felt free to elaborate on the movement for more subtle and dramatic effects, as she did in the National Repertory Company's production of The Sea Gull. Occasionally, she introduced business or a particular physical arrangement to reveal character. At the beginning of the second act of The Three Sisters, Andrey is reading when Natasha enters. The director had her talk to Andrey as she takes the candlestick and puts it some distance away so that it won't shed enough light for him to read. He reaches out and puts it back. Le Gallienne found the physical arrangement at the end of the play important enough to include in her notes. "The last arrangement of The Three Sisters is highly important, the physical detail of which epitomizes their respective characters. Olga sits on the highest step looking straight ahead, Irina sits on the next lower step head held high looking up, still hopeful, still young. Masha, devastated by her emotions, looks down."[39]

There is no doubt that Le Gallienne came to the first rehearsal with a complete blocking scheme on paper but she never considered it arbitrary or fixed. On the contrary, she regarded a lack of groping and experimentation stultifying, preclusive of any creative contribution on the part of

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[39] Le Gallienne notes, Civic Repertory Plays, p. 327.

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the actors, closing the door to spontaneous efforts of flashes of inspiration. The scheme acted merely as a guide to avoid confusion or indecision which might instill insecurity in the actors.

Eva Le Gallienne's concept of a director is closely akin to that of Gordon Graig. She firmly believes the director must be able to work with all the creative aspects of production. Having been a part of the theatre since childhood, she has learned to sew costumes, hang lights, paint scenery, and even wield a hammer whenever called upon. "I think a director should not only be able to direct a play," she said, "I think he should be able to light it, to tell the scenic artist exactly what the scenery should be like, in other words, the entire conception."[40]

The visual elements for The Three Sisters played an especially important part in the total conception. "The set must give a sense of a house that has been lived in, a kind of intimacy. I always told my scene designer what I wanted and was very specific. But I always lit my own shows."[41] She finds the expression of mood so important that to this day she will trust only her own judgment in lighting for the proper emotional effect.

Le Gallienne regarded the costuming of a Chekhovian play of equal importance and at one point perused a huge photographic portfolio of the Moscow Art Theatre as she spoke.

> These are pictures in which the costumes look as if the clothes had been lived in for years, nothing here looks designed by a great

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[40]Le Gallienne interview. [41]Ibid.

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> costumier. They would be considered today very ratty. This is the kind of feeling I think we achieved to a great extent at the Civic. That sense of just people living, wearing old clothes that they've had for years and living with the old furniture so that there is nothing of the costume designer or the scenic designer that looks tacked onto it. I think this is important for Chekhov. We had our own costume shop and many times Aline Bernstein would buy old clothes from shops down in the Bowery so that they really looked as if they had been lived in because it's very difficult to make a costume look as if it had been worn.[42]

In The Three Sisters she had been particularly sensitive to the American audience's expectations for glamorous dress. Every effort was therefore made to stress the accuracy of the period as well as the characters.

> These people should not be spick and span like most stage people. They must be dressed in clothes that look familiar and possible. Ivan Romanitch (The Doctor) should have spots on his old uniform. They should not look smart or well-dressed because of the audience. They are people living their lives simply, not for effect.[43]

When the character demanded it, however, no expense was spared for the proper costume. For the production of The Sea Gull, Jacob Ben-Ami remembers accompanying the director and costume designer to Fifth Avenue for the dresses for Madame Arkadina. "Costumes were made when necessary. Those that were bought cost a lot of money. They bought some dresses at Bergdorf-Goodman. When they wanted silk they sometimes bought the real thing."[44] The actor frowned upon this practice, believing that the "real thing" was always best when simulated.

The Civic Repertory Theatre's productions were the first professional attempts at presenting Chekhov's plays by an American company.

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[42]Ibid. [43]Le Gallienne notes, Civic Repertory Plays, p. 324.

[44]Ben-Ami interview.

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Le Gallienne writes of the skeptical response she received from her colleagues in the theatre world.

> I was told on all sides of the rashness of such a presentation and even I, myself, far from expected the instantaneous response in the form of "sold-out" houses and public appreciation that occurred....but I was astonished at the spell cast upon the "big" public; people who listened to the first act with impatience and almost dismay; to the second act with increasing interest; to the third, spellbound, and who finally left the theatre, for some reason, probably unknown to themselves, deeply moved, frequently in tears.[45]

As we shall see, it was almost inevitable that the Civic Repertory Theatre's productions should be compared unfavorably with those of the Moscow Art Theatre. But Le Gallienne had proved that Chekhov can cross a continent and still affect a theatre audience. Her productions helped spark the courage of other American directors and their appetite for the same challenge became increasingly whetted.

When the Civic Repertory Theatre was dissolved in 1932, Eva Le Gallienne decided to bring its production of The Cherry Orchard with Nazimova uptown to Broadway. It wasn't until 1944 that she decided to attempt another Chekhovian production, also The Cherry Orchard. This time, instead of playing the role of Varya, she herself would do Madame Ranevsky under Broadway conditions. For the role of Gaev, she enlisted the services of her old friend and colleague, Joseph Schildkraut. The difficulties became immediately apparent.

> This was my first experience of directing a Chekhov play under regular commercial conditions, and as I had expected, it was by no means

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[45] The Plays of Anton Tchekov, Le Gallienne preface, pp. vii-viii.

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> easy. A group of actors accoustomed to working together over a period of years, and familiar with one another's methods and those of their director, have a distinct advantage over a company assembled for the one play only, strangers to one another, and restricted to a bare three and a half weeks of rehearsal time.[46]

She found that the need to audition and read people was not "efficacious." She had rebelled against Broadway rehearsal conditions for years and considered them "not good for any play but I think Chekhov suffers more than any other playwright."[47] She found the rehearsal environment particularly objectionable.

> On the Broadway production of 1944, we had to work right up to our only dress rehearsal in New Haven, on a bare stage, with the usual allowance of straight-backed chairs, inadequately indicating the old-fashioned, well-worn comfortable furniture to be used at performance--furniture that should give the sense of having been lived with for a lifetime and thus contribute to the ease and familiarity of the actor's playing--with no properties of any sort, under the harsh glare of the thousand-watt regulation rehearsal light, which is a torment to actors and directors alike. . . . To attempt to evoke the myriad moods and nuances of this great play under such conditions is indeed a challenge.[48]

At the Civic Repertory Theatre, the company had worked with the props, furniture and approximate lighting for the entire rehearsal period and Le Gallienne was fully aware of the psychological importance of these elements for the actor.

> These people who lived in an old house . . . there is something important about an old chair that you've known ever since you were a child. You know every bit of it. You know where there is a bit of braid sewn in. There's something about those things that in this type of play, I think is essential.[49]

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[46] Le Gallienne, With A Quiet Heart, p. 230

[47] Le Gallienne interview.

[48] Le Gallienne, With A Quiet Heart, pp. 231-232.

[49] Le Gallienne interview.

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She describes how an old actor playing the part of Firs had to struggle in rehearsal on a bleak, empty Broadway stage.

> Old Firs dies in the last moments of the play on a dilapidated sofa in the abandoned nursery. In this overwhelmingly touching scene, so simple and illuminating, every line of the actor's body must express the gentle, nostalgic mood. He goes to sleep there like a faithful old dog that has been left behind by its masters. Bogie Andrews had to try to work this out on one of the same straight-backed chairs, with his feet precariously propped up on a packing-case which the stage manager had triumphantly unearthed from a pile of rubbish in the basement. This sort of thing means that all the "fining-up" of one's performance has to be done before the public, during the out-of-town try-out. There is never any opportunity to stop and experiment with various positions, various movements, to repeat certain passages over and over again until one achieves the pattern that seems exactly right; for once the curtain has risen on the opening night one is never permitted to rehearse in the furniture, or make use of the properties, reserved for the actual performance, without calling the stage crew. This naturally means overtime, and few managements ever have the financial margin that would permit such extravagence.[50]

For Gaev's chaise-longue, two straight chairs placed side by side had to suffice.

Le Galliene is also convinced that the actor cannot play Chekhov night after night, as our commercial theatre demands.

> It is for this reason that Chekhov's plays should, ideally, be presented under the repertory system, for to demand of the actor eight times a week the intense concentration that will stimulate his imagination to this essential pitch of truth is demanding the impossible. The performances inevitably vary; such powers are not responsive to assembly-line methods.[51]

Had Schildkraut played <u>The Cherry Orchard</u> in repertory, she believes, his performance might have been consistently good. "As it was, he

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[50]Le Gallienne, <u>With A Quiet Heart</u>, p. 232.

[51]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 231.

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found it immensely tiring to force himself to the same truth eight times a week, and he missed being able to rely on the actor's tricks, of which he is a past master."[52]

Le Gallienne had always been dissatisfied with the Constance Garnett translations and so for this production of The Cherry Orchard she decided to work on a new one with the help of friends. She describes these efforts in her second autobiography.

> ... during July and August, Margaret Webster and I set to work on making a new version with the help of an old friend of mine, Irina Skariatina. We spent hours in that summer of 1943 sitting out in the garden, Irina reading aloud from the Russian text and giving us the absolutely literal translation of the meaning, which Peggy and I would put into what we hoped were suitable English phrases. In the evenings we tried the result of our labors out on Marion Evensen, who contributed helpful comment and criticism. We had great fun working in this way, and the gentle, compassionate, humorous spirit of Chekhov seemed to hover round us, encouraging us with good-natured tolerance.[53]

Although never published, the translation was attributed to Irina Skariatina alone in the theatre program.

Le Gallienne had both directed and acted in all of the Chekhovian productions at the Civic Repertory Theatre, since the element of time, the lack of pressure and the repertory conditions gave her the freedom to manage both roles. For the Broadway production, she was forced to rely on the assistance of an old friend. She had been wanting to play the role of Luybov for some time and its difficulty made her problem more acute. "I was at first very nervous at attempting Luybov Andreyevna, and was

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[52] Ibid., p. 234. [53] Ibid., p. 227.

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most grateful to Peggy Webster, who, at my request, relieved me, for the latter part of rehearsals, of my duties as director and so left me free to absorb Luybov in peace."[54] For the Broadway performance, Margaret Webster was given credit for the direction. When the company returned from a national tour and played several weeks at the City Center, Le Gallienne's name appeared on the Playbill as director.

She was not happy with the artistic results of the production but she was pleasantly surprised at its reception. "To our great joy, in spite of these many obstacles which prevented the performance from achieving the quality of perfection which was our aim, The Cherry Orchard met with great success and acclaim wherever we played it."[55]

Le Gallienne vigorously maintains that a director cannot recreate a past production of a Chekhov play. She criticized the Moscow Art Theatre productions when they visited the United States in 1965 for attempting to copy characterizations from previous productions. "It can be done for Moliere, Sheridan or stylized plays," she said, "but I don't think you could ever do it with Chekhov. Every time that I've done The Cherry Orchard, I've done it differently because you can't repeat anything with Chekhov."[56]

The difference of approach in the two productions of The Cherry Orchard may be discerned by her treatment of comedy. She was always aware that Chekhov had written "a comedy even at times a farce." She

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[54] Ibid., p. 233. [55] Ibid., pp. 232-233. [56] Le Gallienne interview.

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could hardly have been prepared, therefore, for the comments of Willela Waldorf, one of the detractors of the production, who wrote:

> At the National Theatre some good actors are playing The Cherry Orchard for laughs, and the result is one of the saddest spectacles we have encountered in years of Broadway playgoing. Oh yes, we know The Cherry Orchard is a comedy, in the stricter sense of the term, and that, contrary to general opinion, Chekhov never intended that his work should be construed as the dramatic equivalent of a funeral march. But we were hardly prepared for the display of clumsy slapstick that went on last night in and about Madame Ranevsky's heavily mortgaged estate.[57]

It was a comedy treatment she tried assiduously to avoid in her next production of the play. She may well have been thinking of the above comment when she said:

> I think that one of the great mistakes in most Chekhov productions is that they don't see the enormous humor. If they do see the humor, they make it artificial, they clown it up which is so wrong. Directors often aim at a laugh instead of the laugh coming out of the humanity of the situation.[58]

For her last two Chekhovian productions, Eva Le Gallienne was to return to the repertory system. But the conditions were hardly favorable as with the Civic Repertory Theatre. The National Repertory Theatre consisted of a seasonally assembled company and in 1963-1964 presented three plays, Anouilh's Ring Around the Moon. Miller's The Crucible and Chekhov's The Sea Gull, for a nine month national tour, performing in

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[57]Willela Waldorf, "Chekhov's 'The Cherry Orchard' Newly Produced at the National," New York Post, January 26, 1944. Collection of Newspaper Clippings of Dramatic Criticism. *T-NBL+, 1943-44, A-C. New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, Research Library of the Performing Arts, Theatre Collection.

[58]Le Gallienne interview.

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regional theatres, universities, commercial houses and even make-shift stages when a theatre was not available. The tour ended with several weeks of performances in a Broadway house. Le Gallienne shared the direction with the younger director, Jack Sydow, and selected Chekhov's play with herself playing the role of Madam Arkadina. Together, the directors auditioned many actors in order to fill the roles of the three plays and the company thus formed was given nine weeks for rehearsals. Anne Meacham, who played an important role in the company, describes the casting procedures.

> Some of the actors were asked to bring in a piece of their own material, something from the classics, and were also asked to read something from the plays to be done that season. I wasn't asked to audition because I was doing Hedda Gabler at the 4th Street Theatre [under David Ross] and had worked with Miss Le Gallienne on a television production of Therèse Raquin. She had also given me her translation of A Doll's House and I went up to her place in Connecticut to spend an afternoon working on the part of Nora with her. This gave her a chance to see me immediately under her own direction.[59]

Also invited into the company were Farley Granger, the film actor, who played Constantine; Thayer David, the character actor, who portrayed Sorin; and the English actor, Denholm Elliott, who was given the role of Trigorin in Chekhov's play.

Le Gallienne assumed the role of director for the APA-Phoenix Repertory Company in 1968 under completely different circumstances. She had been appearing in the company's production of Ionesco's Exit the King and since Ellis Raab, its Artistic Director, had been seeking a

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[59]Meacham interview.

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director to ease his burden, he asked her to participate in that capacity. She agreed and decided once again to stage The Cherry Orchard. It was to be her first Chekhovian production in which she did not appear in a role. James Whittle, a member of the company, describes how the news was received by the actors. "The entire company was excited and enthusiastic, even awed by Le Gallienne's reputation and background. They had reason to think that this would be the Chekhovian production in America. It didn't quite work out that way."[60]

From the beginning tensions and difficulties arose. Casting the play presented serious problems and as Miss Le Gallienne was an "outsider" in the company and because of bad seasonal timing, the obstacles were magnified. Harley Hackett, one of the company's stage managers, related some of Le Gallienne's casting difficulties:

> Casting was basically between Ellis Raab and Le Gallienne. Le Gallienne did not get the casting that she wanted because of the balance of the work of the company for the year. There were certain players that needed to be used and others that were overused in terms of work load. So she didn't get first choice on certain roles. Then the major roles, as I understand it, were cast after Rosemary Harris left the company and Uta Hagen was asked to do Ranevsky. I think it was Eva Le Gallienne's idea to ask Hagen and perhaps the reason why Hagen accepted the role, besides being a challenge, was a debt of gratitude to Le Gallienne for giving her her start many years ago. But the casting was a problem. I think that one of the general feelings about the production--what was wrong with it--was the casting. She was unfamiliar to everyone within the company, really, except for Ellis and one or two others.[61]

To the distress of Le Gallienne, the comedienne, Nancy Walker, a per-

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[60]James Whittle, New York, interview, February 27, 1971.

[61]Harley Hackett, New York, interview, March 10, 1971.

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former she considered wrong for the role, was brought in to play Charlotte, perhaps, because of what happened with her Broadway production.

Another problem was the pressure of time. Because of the performance schedule at night, there was a limited number of working hours. If The Cherry Orchard had been cast early, as The Misanthrope production had been, there might have been assigned what are called "work" rehearsals before a playing date was scheduled. Altogether, The Cherry Orchard was given six weeks of rehearsal, five hours per day and two hours on matinee days. On certain days Uta Hagen couldn't appear at a given time because of her teaching schedule. At other times, some leading actors would ask for a day or two off to pick up some extra money for radio and television commercials. "The Cherry Orchard ended up," the stage manager went on, "with many actors in the company who were already in the earlier productions and giving evening performances. Donald Moffat, who played Lopahin, was about the only one who was pretty much free."[62]

Le Gallienne's relationship to the National Repertory Theatre company seems to have been totally dissimilar. Anne Meacham describes its early rehearsal period:

> The very first day (I remember she has this very lovely, quiet voice) we were introduced to one another and read the play. And then we began. By the end of that first week of rehearsing, we were a company. People who had never worked together before, who had never met each other before, to all intents and purposes were complete

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[62] Ibid.

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> strangers ... there was a kind of fusion, a kind of knitting and part of that was the casting and part of that was the very .... I mean Le Gallienne did it. It was whatever she emanated during the rehearsals and the approach to her work. ...You can work together for months and never be a company. Miss Le Gallienne made us a company in six days.[63]

This warm, relaxed atmosphere lasted throughout the rehearsals and the "knitting" of the company was never lost as it toured from city to city in all kinds of difficult situations. Meacham admits that certain cliques started emerging as they always do in a theatrical company but when it came to The Sea Gull, everyone became involved with each other as the characters. "In the other two plays, there were kinds of abrasions and pressures." When pressed to describe how Le Gallienne worked with the actors, she could only say, "To try to describe how Eva Le Gallienne directs makes one feel very inadequate because it all seems so elusive. But it was a very rewarding experience." After a while she added, "The production happened so easily.... I would watch her as she would be working with two or three people and they could stop whenever they were uncomfortable and could ask questions or for an explanation or an idea for a motivation or something like that."[64]

The first day the cast was asked to read the play twice and then dismissed. The second day, they were put immediately on their feet and the blocking and business seemed to evolve with considerable ease and flow. "It wasn't just arbitrary like directors' 'business' for a particular moment or for a certain effect. It was more as if she had literally, before

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[63]Meacham interview. [64]Ibid.

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the first day of rehearsal, gotten so completely into the mind of each character in the play that anything that she suggested had been just perfectly natural business."[65]

It was almost fifteen years since she had directed The Sea Gull for the Civic Repertory Theatre and for that production the prompt script shows that she adhered closely to Chekhov's original text where movement and business was concerned. With the National Repertory Theatre's production, she seems to have felt freer to experiment with activity, especially when it revealed relationships between characters or expressed the irony of Chekhov. For example, at the beginning of the first act, Le Gallienne gives Treplev the following business as he speaks about Nina, her father and step-mother: "Takes out cigarette, has no matches--crosses to Sorin and takes a light from his cigarette."[66] We thus see intimacy between the young and old men. The last moment of the play was given a particularly wide interpretation. At the Civic Repertory Theatre, Dr. Dorn took Trigorin to stage right for his final line and curtain. In the later production, Le Gallienne added the following business:

> Instead of Shamraev replacing sea gull on Trigorin's "I don't remember," let him keep it in his hands. After sound of shot and Dorn's exit he can make cross to opposite side of archway as before - still holding sea gull. Then, when Arkadina feels faint and he pours the wine, he can put it [sea gull] down on the table for a moment, and after she

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[65]Ibid.

[66]Anton Chekhov, The Sea Gull, trans. by Eva Le Gallienne (unpublished directing book for the National Repertory Theatre, property of Miss Le Gallienne), I.4.

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> recovers and Dorn has spoken the final words of the play, he can pick it up to take it back to its place - making a joke of pretending to make it fly - This makes Arkadina laugh and, of course, he laughs too - So that the curtain comes down on this laughter - instead of on the dead cue.[67]

Le Gallienne claims that much of the business arose spontaneously. "The playing with the sea gull by Shamraev at the end came during the rehearsal. It was not planned beforehand."[68] Anne Meacham suggests that almost the entire production evolved during the early rehearsal period. "After the first two readings we got on our feet but I can't tell you by what magical process it occurred, by the end of the week, the entire play was blocked so that we all knew where we were going in it."[69]

The later rehearsal period was an equally exciting period for the cast.

> The time would come when they would run it and Miss Le Gallienne would turn around and she would pace with her back to them listening, because she has that kind of an ear and her ear would pick up even more quickly than her eye anything that was false. . . . She stimulated the imagination of the actor by stressing the relationships of the characters at the same time never telling us the kind of tempo and over-all pacing that she wanted for the play. But also encouraging the actors to behave in such a way that the result was she got her pacing.[70]

Since the National Repertory Theatre was primarily a touring company, the sets had to be simplified and so the first two acts were played on the same set with slight modifications. The same was done with the third and fourth acts. Here, again, Le Gallienne's wide theatre background

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[67] Ibid., IV.22. [68] Le Gallienne interview. [69] Meacham interview.

[70] Ibid.

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and training was brought into play. "Miss Le Gallienne had designed the show and built models of it. It was her concept. Peter Larkin took it over and added his concept to hers."[71]

The director was well aware of the difficult circumstances the cast would be forced to meet during their long, arduous tour and she made sure they were prepared not to sacrifice the creative labors of the rehearsal period. The cast received specific instructions before embarking for Greensboro, North Carolina and their first performance.

> Before setting out on tour, she warned us that there would be times when we would have to play in huge auditoriums and not to strain. We had to play The Sea Gull in Indianapolis in a 4000 seat house. She said, "Don't try to strain your voice or character or try to project but do what you do as fully and completely as possible and it will have to carry as far as it can. Chekhov works best in a small, intimate house."[72]

The tour proved to be the most difficult Anne Meacham ever played. She was not happy in any of the plays except The Sea Gull and consequently it was the only production in the repertory program she really believed in. "Many of us, I think, felt the same way so that when we could play The Sea Gull two or three times a week, we thought, 'Thank God.'"[73]

The first day of rehearsal for the APA-Phoenix production of The Cherry Orchard was a festive occasion, with the entire company in attendance, including those not in the cast, all crowded into a small clubroom located in a building on 46th Street, behind the Lyceum Theatre. There was an air of expectancy, for she had told the cast that she would

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[71]Ibid. [72]Ibid. [73]Ibid.

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read the play first. This she proceeded to do, "giving all parts an excellent reading." She then went on to discuss the characters and the background of Russia of the period. "The second rehearsal, the play was read by the entire cast followed by some discussion and then rehearsals began, by that, I mean the blocking. There were no more readings."[74]

It wasn't long before differences between the director and some in the cast began to surface. According to one member of the company, Le Gallienne seemed to be violating one of her fundamental tenets, that of directing a Chekhov play differently every time. "Eva Le Gallienne brought to this production a concept of her previous productions. . . . At first the younger actors thought her references to the other productions nostalgic and charming but soon became annoyed by them."[75]

The stage manager, whose admiration for this unusual woman has increased considerably since the production, saw something of a generation gap between her and many in the cast.

> The rehearsal period was a bit rough because of differences in work approach between Le Gallienne and the actors. I think there was more misunderstanding of the actors to her approach than the other way around. You see, she had worked with this play twice before. She knew basically what had to be done to make the play work so she emphasized in rehearsal certain things you must get to and discussed them with the actors, privately sometimes. But some of the actors working in this way felt the pressure of pleasing her with that moment she was talking about and which had to work. They got all wrapped up in doing that and lost themselves with the rest of the work of the characters so that certain characters didn't develop as fully as they should. . . . I think she would agree that she had certain preconceived

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[74]Hackett interview. [75]Whittle interview.

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> ideas about the play and had pushed them a little too hard at the beginning in order to get them.[76]

Mr. Whittle, who had a bit part in the production but who attended almost every rehearsal, put it this way: "She most often gave directions asking for results. She let the actors she knew alone for the most part. She had difficulty communicating what she wanted to the younger actors or those whose work she did not know. She seemed anxious to get the effects she had envisaged and seemed unwilling to wait. . . . Some of the actors became very insecure."[77] It wasn't long before many of the younger actors became disenchanted with the production and the atmosphere became tense.

Still, there was an effort, perhaps even a desperate one by Le Gallienne, for a certain amount of flexibility and ease. Whenever an actor brought in his own material, she acted pleased and tried to encourage and use it. Even the blocking of the play, which Le Gallienne had dismissed as the "ABC of directing," presented its own problems.

> When she was blocking the play, her preparatory work was very, very complete. She had a directing book with her and knew all of the basic moves. She would have changed them and did when certain actors asked her. She even wanted them to ask because she knew that every actor cannot do things the same way. She knows that, of course. But somehow, there was an unease. And there were little tensions. Some of the actors kept trying to please her very much. . . . Nancy [Walker] would have loved to have asked for help but didn't know how and Le Gallienne would have liked to have offered more and didn't know how.[78]

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[76]Hackett interview. [77]Whittle interview.

[78]Hackett interview.

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Hackett, as stage manager, had been in the enviable position of observing the rehearsal procedures closely. He had also given the production a great deal of thought and proceeded to give an objective analysis of what went wrong with Le Gallienne's last production of Chekhov.

> I think the production would have worked much better if all the actors had been able to do what Le Gallienne wanted from the beginning. Some of them couldn't get it and they thought others in the company should be playing their roles and so they began playing it the way the others would have. They didn't seem to be able to get the characters mainly because of a disagreement in work process more than interpretation. It was just a matter of getting lost and discouraged and particularly of two or three people. There was a time pressure, of course, I don't think the actor playing Lopahin ever felt lost particularly but he felt very strongly that he had done enough acting that he should be able to go about it in his own time and in his own way and he felt very strained and pressured to give a performance in rehearsal. He wanted to work at his own tempo. The actors who played Yasha and Dunyasha presented problems in miscasting and the actors kept getting hung up on moments that had been under discussion and while trying to work on those big moments, were not getting the groundwork that would make those moments come naturally.
>
> Le Gallienne didn't always work this way because she didn't do it with Exit the King when she was asked to help out in the directing in California. It was more of an exploratory process. She'd say, "Let's try this," or, "let's see if this will work." It was very easy. She changed many things. But you see, with The Cherry Orchard, she had done it twice with two different groups. . . . She was quite right in just about everything, I think, that is, conceptually, but perhaps because of the pressure of time and the expensive production. . . . She did everything she could and knew what was happening and couldn't seem to change the direction. Of course, when things seem to go wrong in a production, they often tend to snowball. Actors lose heart. I think she was honorable and fair all the way through.[79]

Le Gallienne did make some attempt to recreate the rehearsal conditions of the old Civic Repertory days but this too was in vain. Because of lack of space, the cast was forced to rehearse on the top floor of an old

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[79] Ibid.

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movie theatre on 96th Street and Broadway, described as having an old abandoned stage that was dark and filthy. The actors were given rehearsal props that were used up until the last week and the furniture was brought in as each piece was found. Gaev's chaise longue never appeared until the dress rehearsal and the stage manager was forced to prop up several stretchers that had been used for the War and Peace production in order to get them to recline in the right position. It proved to be extremely uncomfortable for the actor.

The later rehearsals did not bring any major changes but, on the contrary, seemed to intensify the charged atmosphere, which may have accounted for a deepening inflexibility and stubborness on the director's part. When the actress playing Varya asked for a costume change for the party scene in the third act, or at least some decorative element, which seemed only reasonable to her, Le Gallienne refused. She was to wear the same black "nun-like" dress. She was told that's what the director wore when she played Varya at the Civic Repertory Theatre, a statement which did not help to diminish the bitterness. The run-throughs became particularly painful, as James Whittle informs us:

> Le Gallienne kept interrupting the run-throughs which seemed to bother everyone. This was done until close to dress rehearsals. Lopahin finally blew up and shouted, "If you let us finish a run-through, I might see what you want." She finally began to set the play a few days before the dress rehearsals. She insisted on giving notes to the actors personally and would climb the stairs of the Lyceum Theatre to the dressing rooms, a huge climb.[80]

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[80]Whittle interview.

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It was during this phase of the rehearsal period that Eva Le Gallienne suffered a slight heart attack. Although dangerously ill, she insisted on continuing the rehearsals and stayed with the production until opening night.

Other attempts have been made to explain the underlying difficulties that haunted the director from the start,

> I think she was disappointed. I know she was disappointed in it. She hoped for a lot more. She was disappointed, I'm sure, in the casting and she was also disappointed in herself, in not being able to overcome those differences with some of the actors. . . . I'm an Eva Le Gallienne fan, very much so. I don't think there is a problem in that play that couldn't have been overcome with the proper attitude of some of the cast.

"Eva Le Gallienne," Whittle summarily added with conviction, "probably needs a company she has built herself with actors she knows and who know her and her methods of working."[81]

The stage manager came to a remarkably similar conclusion. "I am still at a bit of a loss as to why there was so much difficulty for the actors to work her way. I doubt if the company had been hers, it would have existed, I don't remember anyone questioning Ellis' [Raab] way." He preferred, however, to believe that some of Le Gallienne's theatrical wisdom and artistry managed in some way to be imparted to the cast. "One thing I remember her saying near the end of the run," he said, "was that some of the performances were not bad."[82] He agreed, for he too had seen a growth.

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[81] Ibid. [82] Hackett interview.

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Eva Le Gallienne's position as an actress, an innovator, and a director in the chronicles of the American theatre cannot be contested. As an actress, she has received universal acclaim since her youth and, as a champion for the repertory theatre system, she continues to receive the recognition of a grateful nation. As a Chekhovian interpreter, however, she has failed to elicit unanimous praise. Throughout her career from colleagues and critics alike she has repeatedly received a mixed reception for her efforts. But she is hardly one to expect or solicit praise from any source and prefers to rest on her own self-appraisal. After forty-five years, she can look back on her work with the Civic Repertory Theatre and say with detached conviction: "I think those were the best productions of Chekhov in English that I know. I think they came closer to what he intended. That may sound arrogant but I really do. I think I can look at it now quite objectively."[83]

Back in the twenties, with the memory of the Moscow Art Theatre's visit still undimmed, there were those who were not prepared to accept Chekhovian production in America on its own terms. Alexander Woollcott preferred to praise the first professional effort but only with condescension when he wrote:

> . . . a good company, directed with skill and tact and vitality, recaptured the beauty of a remote and singularly difficult play. It is probably too early to do any vociferous cheering for Miss Le Gallienne as a director for after all she must have sat with the rest of us at the feet of Stanislavsky, must have gone with the rest of us to see The

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[83]Le Gallienne interview.

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> Three Sisters in its native Russian when the great troupe for which the play was written came at last to act in New York.[84]

John Mason Brown, writing in Theatre Arts Monthly, took the same tack.

> Naturally for those who saw it, the Moscow Art Theatre's performance of The Three Sisters is re-lived in memory during each scene of the present performance. And, naturally, too, the comparison is unfavorable. . . . Obviously the fullness of that original production is not to be found in this one. The amazing thing is that the comparison offers no handicap to enjoyment, and that this present company, but recently assembled, succeeds so well in mastering so many of the difficulties that the play present. Its performance is much more than competent. It is glowing, diffuse, and patterned as a whole.[85]

On the other hand, Richard Watts, Jr. of the New York Herald Tribune saw little worthiness in the production or the play.

> Miss Le Gallienne's courage and ambitions are so commendable and her achievements so considerable that it becomes unpleasant to report the result of last evening's activities as mainly tedium. For this, the eminent Dr. Tchekhov cannot escape blame, but the production and acting did little, I fear, to make things more spirited. . . . the playing of the company served to accentuate the lethargy of the play.[86]

The production of The Cherry Orchard the following season did not fare much better although Richard Watts, Jr. was this time one of its

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[84]Alexander Woollcott, The Stage," New York World, October 27, 1926, Collection of Newspaper Clippings of Dramatic Criticism, 1926-27, T-Y. The New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, Research Library of the Performing Arts, Theatre Collection. *T-NBL+ Collection, "(Location of New York theatre reviews hereinafter identified as *T-NBL+, season, and alphabetically arranged volume)."

[85]John Mason Brown, "Escape From a Formula, "Theatre Arts Monthly, XI, No. 1 (1927), 9.

[86]Richard Watts, Jr., "Eva Le Gallienne's [sic] Acting Fails to Give 'Three Sisters' Life," New York Herald Tribune, October 27, 1926, *T-NBL+, 1926-27, T-Y.

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few unrestrained admirers: ". . . an ensemble performance with extraordinary skill. The result was a fine play so finely done as to be an authentic tribute to a first rate dramatic organization."[87] An unsigned review in The New York Times was less enthusiastic. "The company is not inspired but it plays well together. It makes a very fine and very Russian play as credible as a Russian play can be to the likes of us when it is expressed in our own tongue, and it provides an unusually interesting evening."[88] Rosamond Gilder, editor of Theatre Arts Monthly and a close friend of Le Gallienne, felt the production left much to be desired, with the performances moderately competent and a few actors abysmally bad, particularly the men. Nevertheless, "the spirit of that strange marvelous play came through in performance. The company understood what they were trying to do, even if they could not always express it."[89]

Stark Young, who was later to translate Chekhov's major plays, and who had never hesitated in giving Le Gallienne her due for her contribution to Chekhovian production, said of the 1929 production of The Sea Gull:

> The performance of The Sea Gull, the opening bill for the fourth season of the Civic Repertory Theatre, was at least fair . . . . The production

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[87]Richard Watts, Jr., "Skillfull Acting Makes 'Cherry Orchard' an Absorbing Play," New York Herald Tribune, October 16, 1928, *T-NBL+, 1928-29, C-D.

[88]N.n., "Civic Theatre Gives 'The Cherry Orchard,'" New York Times, October 17, 1928, Loc. cit.

[89]Rosamond Gilder, "Faust and Some Foreigners," Theatre Arts Monthly, XII, No. 12 (1928), 862.

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> as a whole, whatever shortcomings it may have had, was never false. However, short it may have come of that necessary utmost penetration and that mutual current among all the characters, it moved always with honesty, and with respect for the work of art in hand, and without specious and stagey yearnings-fine qualities in this theatre that radiate down into it from its leading figure, Miss Eva Le Gallienne.[90]

Richard Watts, Jr.'s review of this play was a little more sober than his review of The Cherry Orchard had been.

> . . . last night's attempt was by no means perfection. It was, however, an intelligent, reasonably well acted and honourable production of a very great play and one who saw it could hardly doubt that he was witnessing a masterpiece. It captured the values of the work adequately, and in such a use of the word 'adequate' is by no means an insult.[91]

On the other hand, Brooks Atkinson found The Sea Gull one of Le Gallienne's finest pieces of Chekhovian direction.

> When the curtain rises on this brooding Chekhov masterpiece, you may suspect that the pace of the performance is too deliberate and the silences too overwhelming. But presently you realize that all the beauty of the theatrical crafts and all the sincerity of historic feeling are evoking before your eyes a strange, sombre infinitely sympathetic sweep of truth.
>
> But it is futile to describe individually the elements in this glowing performance. Like the play, it is tenuous but meaningfrul. It is subdued in color but magnificent. And what it communicates under the surface of the drama you recognize as unalterably true.[92]

Such disagreements among the reviewers continued to pursue Eva Le Gallienne's work in 1944 on the Broadway production of The Cherry

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[90]Stark Young, "Reviewer's Pleasure," New Republic, October 9, 1929, p. 205.

[91]Richard Watts, Jr., "'The Sea Gull' is Presented at Civic Theatre," New York Herald Tribune, September 27, 1929, *T-NBL+, 1929-30, R-S.

[92]Brooks Atkinson, "Four Years of the Civic Repertory," New York Times, September 27, 1929, loc. cit.

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Orchard. The late George Freedley, then reviewing for The Morning Telegraph wrote: "It is only too bad that Miss Le Gallienne and Miss Webster have not created direction which would give the play the unity it requires. . . . as a whole, this is not a distinguished revival."[93] And yet Ward Morehouse of The New York Sun thought The Cherry Orchard ". . . is now beautifully acted by the Le Gallienne-Schildkraut company and is, indeed, a rare contribution to the local theatrical season."[94] While John Chapman of the New York Daily News considered it ". . . a lucid and affecting production which is quite splendidly performed."[95] Again, Rosamond Gilder proved to be her friend's severest critic. In her magazine, now called Theatre Arts, she observed that:

> The direction, whether Miss Le Gallienne's or Miss Webster's, has not, unfortunately, succeeded in evoking the curious emotional climate in which this play is conceived. Transplanted, translated, subjected to the quick-fire production methods economically inevitable in the present-day theatre, The Cherry Orchard suffers acutely and seems indeed to have lost much of its delicate aroma.
>
> . . . evidently remembering Chekhov's plaintive remark that he had written something in the nature of vaudeville which Stanislavsky and his company insisted on making lachrymal, this production emphasizes the humorous idiosyncracies of character with which the play abounds. As a result, the production as a whole lacks cohesion and line. It falls apart when Stefan Schnable as Lopahin, Rex O'Malley as Epihodov or Leona Roberts as Charlotta does his or her 'turn' directly to the

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[93]George Freedley, "The Stage Today," Morning Telegraph, January 27, 1944, *T-NBL+, 1943-44, A-C.

[94]Ward Morehouse, "'The Cherry Orchard,' One of the Drama Classics, Presented at National," New York Sun, January 26, 1944, loc. cit.

[95]John Chapman, "'The Cherry Orchard' is Given an Admirable, Moving Revival," New York Daily News, January 26, 1944, loc. cit.

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> audience. The result makes for hearty laughter but destroys the coherence of a play whose humors are as subtle and delicately tuned as the mind of its author.[96]

Le Gallienne seems to have fared much better when she brought her National Repertory Company to Broadway in 1964. After the curtain fell on The Sea Gull, Adlai Stevenson, then United States Ambassador to the United Nations, introduced the presentation of a silver bowl given to Le Gallienne by ANTA for her contributions to the American theatre. Howard Taubman, critic of The New York Times, added: "However, she had already spoken eloquently through Chekhov. Although the company is uneven, Chekhov's rueful mood is summoned and sustained."[97] Commenting upon the standing ovation Miss Le Gallienne had received the night before, John McClain of The New York Journal-American wrote: "The plaudits were richly deserved, in my opinion, for this is about the best production of Mr. Chekhov's introspective excursion as we are apt to see in our time. The members of the company are first class and the mountings are excellent."[98] Although there were no discordant voices in the press, there were reserved, albeit kind ones.

> It's not a memorable production because the acting is uneven, but it is competent and indicates that the cities and towns visited by the

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[96]Rosamond Gilder, "Broadway in Review," Theatre Arts, XXVIII, No. 4 (1944), 200.

[97]Howard Taubman, "Eva Le Gallienne Brings Chekhov to the Belasco," New York Times, April 6, 1964, *T-NBL+, 1963, L-N.

[98]John McClain, "Eva Le Gallienne Scores A Triple Triumph," New York Journal-American, April 6, 1964, loc. cit.

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company has been fortunate. Eva Le Gallienne, whose admirable translation of the play is used, has staged it skillfully and tastefully and she illuminates the role of Irina.[99]

Eva Le Gallienne's final Chekhovian production seems to have suffered most at the hands of the New York critics although even here there were a few stalwart admirers. Clive Barnes had a note of regret in his review.

> This most civilized of plays would enliven any season, but it might have enlivened the present season a little more had it been a little better done. The staging has been entrusted to Eva Le Gallienne, a lady who has done more than anyone for Chekhov in America, and this present production deserves and wins our respect. Yet it does not have the air of life about it. . . . This Cherry Orchard has more the air of an act of homage than an act of life.[100]

Richard Watts, Jr., now reviewing for The New York Post preferred to remain a loyal admirer. "The Cherry Orchard is one of the saddest and loveliest plays ever written, and it is being given a properly affectionate production by the untiring APA Repertory Company."[101] The most scornful and vitriolic comments Le Gallienne had ever received for her direction of a Chekhov play was given to this final production by Martin Gottfried.

> Miss Le Gallienne's Cherry Orchard is frankly boring, and too bad it wasn't The Three Sisters, which might have had the excuse of being written about boredom. No, this is merely dull. Dull and slow and un-Russian and un-Stanislavskian and, oh, just unbearable. Her

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[99](Kenn.), "Repertory Reviews: 'The Sea Gull,'" Variety, April 8, 1964, loc. cit.

[100]Clive Barnes, "Theater: APA's Homage to 'The Cherry Orchard,'" New York Times, March 20, 1968, "T-NBL+, 1967-68, A-C.

[101]Richard Watts, Jr., "Old Russia Before the Deluge," New York Post, March 20, 1968, loc. cit.

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> staging of it is just as lead-footed with not the slightest sense of ensemble work. Even the APA regulars had their troubles. . . . The production, then is not a disaster. It is worse. It is past-date culture, Theatre Arts drama, useless and ignorant of the art there is to Chekhov.[102]

At 72, Eva Le Gallienne has no intention of retiring from the stage as a director, nor will she overlook the opportunity of doing a Chekhovian play should the conditions be right. When discussing the future of Chekhovian production in America, she was convinced that a new generation was beginning to make a rediscovery of the Russian author.

> Young people seem to take to Chekhov today. I taught some classes at the White Barn during the summer and taught only three authors, Shakespeare, Ibsen and Chekhov. I found I could get a better performance out of Chekhov than the others. They couldn't understand Ibsen at all but Chekhov, they kind of went for. They loved it. I've always felt that there was a great rapport between the Russian and American people. Russians seem to have a mercurial, volatile temperament that American people seem to understand. I dare say that's one reason why they go so much for Chekhov. They do--young people adore him.[103]

It was an observation that was to be repeated by other directors of Chekhov.

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[102]Martin Gottfried, "The Cherry Orchard," Women's Wear Daily, March 20, 1968, loc. cit.

[103]Le Gallienne interview.

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CHAPTER III

JED HARRIS

The attempt to write about the colorful figure of Jed Harris, producer and director, has been a temptation for many writers; he has been used as a model for characters in two novels (Ben Hecht's A Jew in Love and Frederic Wakesman's The Saxon Charm), two plays (Hecht and MacArthur's The Front Page and Twentieth Century), as well as a Shakespearean characterization.[1] In his book of biographical portraits of entertainers, No People Like Show People, Maurice Zolotow found himself obligated to explain the inclusion of Jed Harris, who is not a performer. "He is a man of hot and violent temper, and frequently has more fire than his actors. The Harris spleen has already become a legend on Broadway."[2] To study

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[1]The English actor, Sir Laurence Olivier, had performed the role of Julian in the 1934 production of The Green Bay Tree under the direction of Jed Harris. In an interview, the actor described how he arrived at the characterization of Richard III: "First of all I had heard imitations of old actors imitating Henry Irving; and so I did, right away, an imitation of these old actors imitating Henry Irving's voice--that's why I took a rather narrow kind of vocal address. Then I thought about looks. And I thought about the Big Bad Wolf, and I thought about Jed Harris, a director under whom I'd suffered in extremis in New York. The physiognomy of Disney's original Big Bad Wolf was said to have been founded upon Jed Harris--hence the nose, which, originally, was very much bigger than it was finally in the film. And so, with one or two extraneous externals, I began to build up a character, a characterization." See "The Actor: Tynan Interviews Olivier," Tulane Drama Review T34,. XI, No. 2 (1966), 88-89.

[2]Maurice Zolotow, No People Like Show People (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 220

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Jed Harris as a Chekhovian interpreter is even more precarious and uncertain if we consider that his 1930 production of Uncle Vanya was a complete departure from the previous commercial successes that had established him as the "boy wonder" of Broadway.

In his first major production, Broadway (1926), Harris may have inspired a new approach to staging a play, which Brooks Atkinson labeled the "centrifugal" method whereby the actors whirl in a frenzy attached to the plot by the merest string. Critics regarded it as a break with the leisurely, old-fashioned theatre. This production was followed by such swift-moving farces as The Front Page (1927) and The Royal Family (1928) and Harris was inevitably typed as a producer and director of cynical, urbane, and frenetically paced melodramas and farces. Since Chekhov's plays had already been relegated to the status of classics and vehicles for theatre "art," the announcement that Harris would produce and direct Uncle Vanya immediately raised eyebrows and aroused a profound skepticism. Never before had a major American producer and director attempted Chekhov in a Broadway theatre and the playgoer awaited the production with considerable interest.

Uncle Vanya remains the only Chekhovian play Harris has directed but it initiated what has been referred to as his "Russian period." He is an omnivorous reader with an incredibly retentive memory. "Before I did Uncle Vanya," he said in an interview, "I read all the great Russian writers such as Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, Gogol, Mayakovsky,

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Chekhov's stories and letters, and so forth. . . ."[3] He had lost his vast fortune in the 1929 stock market crash, had announced to the theatre world that he was retiring from the theatre, and had spent the following year in Europe. No one took his retirement seriously and the next two years are humorously described by Zolotow:

> He returned to Broadway in 1930 and became even poorer when he embarked on a disastrous series of revivals of Russian plays. The gag around town was, "Scratch a Russian and you'll find Jed Harris." Finally, after the debacle of a Gogol comedy, Harris announced he was through with Russian plays. Richard Maney, his press agent, stated, "Mr. Harris has finally combed the last Cossack out of his curls."[4]

With the Moscow Art Theatre's visit still fresh in the memory of the New York audiences, and with the productions of Le Gallienne and of Leo Bulgakov (the Russian director and acting teacher), Chekhov's plays had become a controversial subject for critical study of staging methods. The depression period, with its accompanying interest in the Soviet Union, made Russian literature and drama increasingly popular in literary and theatrical circles. Many today are still convinced that Harris decided to do Chekhov for egoistic reasons. Joanna Roos, who played the role of Sonia in his production, was of the opinion that "he wanted to do him because everybody said it couldn't be done."[5] Zolotow seems to confirm this opinion. "He once told a friend, 'I like to produce a play that nobody

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[3]Jed Harris, New York, interview, October 16, 1970.

[4]Joanna Roos, New York, interview, September 13, 1970.

[5]Zolotow, Show People, p. 227.

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else wants to produce--or dares to'"[6] Today, when he is asked why he attempted to do Chekhov, he merely replies in his customarily impatient and off-handed manner: "Anyone who has read Chekhov will know why--his insight, the same universality that is found in all great authors. Better to ask, 'Why not Chekhov?'"[7] His former agent, the late Richard Maney, a close friend and colleague, saw a less artistic motivation. "Jed's ego is so tremendous that, by the time he finishes getting a play revised, he convinces himself he is the real author. I am sure he's convinced he is the real author of Our Town, The Heiress, The Green Bay Tree, The Front Page, and he even at times is of the opinion that he wrote Uncle Vanya!"[8] Needless to say, despite his motivations, Jed Harris' creative contribution to the production of these plays and to the American theatre remains a matter of record.

Apparently Harris had been contemplating a Chekhovian play several years before his Uncle Vanya production.

> I originally wanted to do Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard with Laurette Taylor as Madame Ranevsky ever since I saw her in James Barrie's The Old Lady Shows Her Medals. I was so moved at the end of the play that I went into the alley and wept. The stage manager saw me and apologized for the performance. He told me that Laurette was so drunk she could hardly stand up. Years later I interviewed her in my office. She wore a cloak buttoned up to her neck and her breath smelled of alcohol. Instead of The Cherry Orchard she kept talking of a play she had written that she wanted to star in. I couldn't get my ideas across to her. She finally left and I eventually dropped the thought of doing The Cherry Orchard. I descended from the glorious heights of this play to the provincialism of Uncle Vanya.[9]

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[6]Zolotow, Show People, p. 227. [7]Harris interview.

[8]Zolotow, Show People, p. 263. [9]Harris interview.

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According to Rose Caylor, Harris' translator of Uncle Vanya and widow of Ben Hecht, his decision to do the play was entirely haphazard, even accidental.

> Jed used to come up to our house in Nyack and had no intention of doing Uncle Vanya. He first came to me with a Molnar play which had never been finished. I knew Molnar. He wanted me to use my influence to put this thing over. I was working on a novel but I put it away and began writing a second act, that is, a plot, Bennie [Hecht] and I. I asked Molnar's manager if Molnar would consider the rewrite but he said no. Since he couldn't get the Molnar play and he knew I knew Russian, Jed said that he'd put on any Chekhov play if I would adapt it. I decided on Uncle Vanya mainly because I wanted to write a preface saying Vanya was a comedy.[10]

The word "adaptation" might better apply to the final text than "translation." Harris felt that Constance Garnett's version was too stiff and too English and so he proceeded to travel up to Nyack often to work on the script with Rose Caylor. "She would give the literal translation and together we would modify it for the actors."[11] Years later, she began to regret the freedom that was taken with the original text. She confessed that, "My text perverted Chekhov, I must admit. I made certain changes and omissions. I put in funny lines for Telegin in order to get laughs. Jed Harris suggested many of the changes, cuts of scenes, and directions that are in the published text."[12] Revisions of the script continued until opening night in New Haven. Lillian Gish, who played Yelena, remembers the two working together while rehearsals were in progress.

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[10]Rose Caylor (Hecht), New York, interview, January 12, 1971.

[11]Harris interview. [12]Caylor interview.

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> Rose Caylor would come in with pages of her translation and together with Jed Harris they would go over the dialogue. Jed would question her as to the subtle meaning of a certain word and then he would change it and it would be just right for the actor. Throughout the rehearsals, they would continue to change a word here or a word there or tie a speech together without changing what Chekhov had in mind.[13]

But faithfulness to Chekhov was not Harris' intention in the least. Instead, after the play had been cast, he decided to make revisions conforming the text to his actors. He believed Chekhov had written Yelena as a tease. "I decided to modify the character by making her chilled to the soul after having been married to the Professor all those years."[14] This change was confirmed by Caylor when she recalled that:

> Lillian Gish had so much dignity and one reason for the rewriting and adapting the play was to make it right for her. She was very small in her behavior and yet it was perfection. She takes in a smaller tonal range yet she was so marvelous. Astrov at one point refers to her as a wild animal, actually a skunk that roams the forest which in Russian means wild and free and beautiful. We had to change the image to suit Lillian.[15]

The freedom that Caylor and Harris took with Chekhov's original text would hardly be acceptable to the admirers of Chekhov today. For example, they cut out entirely Sonia's moving monologue in the second act. Chekhov opens his third act with a simple speech of Vanya's informing Sonia and Yelena that the Professor has something to tell them that afternoon. Harris ignored Chekhov's economic dramaturgy and felt it necessary to prepare for this speech. So we are given two pages of chit-chat between Sonia and Yelena about the neighbors of the estate who come from Bashkiria

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[13]Lillian Gish, New York, interview, November 5, 1970.

[14]Harris interview. [15]Caylor interview.

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and Moscow and the drinking of kumiss, before Vanya enters to inform the women of the Professor's desire to speak with them. Thus, we get some background of Russia, unnecessary in Chekhov, and a "well-made" build-up for the final scene in the act. At the end of the second act (the first act in Caylor's text), the tapping of the watchman, an important symbolic device, is deleted and the two women are given two lines of a song to sing.[16]

Jed Harris undoubtedly saw the inherent humor in Chekhov's play but he obviously didn't trust the American audience nor the Russian dramatist. By trying to exaggerate Chekhov's humor, Telegin's entering lines in Act III:

> I don't feel quite the thing myself, your Excellency. I have been poorly for the last two days. My head is rather queer. . . .[17]

become in Caylor's text:

> Enthusiastically I seem to have gotten your illness, Professor. There isn't a symptom you describe in the last two days that I haven't had myself. It's funny your speaking of a headache now. Why, that's what I've got myself.[18]

Although this tampering created something of a furor among the purists, the new version was widely accepted by the public and the critics alike. Interviewing Miss Caylor for his column, John Mason Brown wrote:

> In other words, as Miss Caylor points out, her deletions have been planned."to mirror faithfully Chekhov's superb intention and to reconcile changing fashion with his unchanging inner truths." To

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[16]Rose Caylor selected a Russian folk song, "Song of Azra," for this scene.

[17]Anton Chekhov, Four Great Plays, trans. by Constance Garnet (New York: Bantam Books, 1958), p. 227.

[18]Anton Chekhov, Uncle Vanya, adapted by Rose Caylor (New York: Codivi-Friede, 1930), II.62.

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> realize how skillfully Miss Caylor has done her work and to see how justifiable her changes--her substitutions, her deletions, and her occasional additions--are, one has only to journey to the Cort or to turn to the printed text of her translation. For in either case her task is executed with such tact and taste that it is impossible to tell where Chekhov ends and Miss Caylor begins. And that--even though Miss Caylor modestly denies it--is a rare accomplishment in an adaptation.[19]

During pre-production work on the play, Harris claims that the Russian's world reminded him of the French impressionist painter, Pizarro, who told his disciples to paint pictures, not life, that one must capture the enchantment of life in art and not life itself. Thus, with Uncle Vanya he had tried to find the theatrical life of the play and not merely the Russian background or flavor. Many of the endearing pet names and patronymics were discarded, although a subtle attempt was made to keep the tone somewhat Russian. "Above all," Harris emphasized, "I tried to show the enormous range of Chekhov." In staging the work, "we worked for density in the production, that is, keeping the rich tapestry and meanings so that it seemed like a fast production but it really wasn't."[20]

In trying to establish the means and methods of directing Chekhov, this study of Jed Harris may appear elusive and exasperating. It has been just so to this writer, and all the interviewing and research has shed only a glimmer of light upon the subject. When directly confronted by this question, Harris would only say:

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[19]John Mason Brown. "Two on the Aisle: Caylor and Chekhov," New York Evening Post, May 21, 1930. Rose Caylor clipping file, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, Research Library of the Performing Arts, Theatre Collection.

[20]Harris interview.

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> My method of directing is instinctual and I work unconsciously from moment to moment. I have no formula. I work like a pioneer going over unmapped territory. I try not to retrace my footsteps after the fact. I try not to explain the creative process. It does not work for any future play I might direct.[21]

Others have asked him the question and received a similar answer.

> "I don't know how I direct plays," Harris insists, with a snort. "Or what makes him improvise ideas for an awkward script. You know, I don't sit down and plot out a scheme for directing a play. Usually I'll be slouching around, maybe reading something like Mathematics for the Millions or Churchill's Memoirs--and I leave the stage problems to my unconscious. My knowledge of theatre is in my nerves, it's an instinct, I never had to learn it."[22]

When asked if he had approached the direction of Uncle Vanya differently from that of any other play, he replied by illustrating his point with one of his anecdotes--of which he seemed to have an inexhaustible supply.

> I did not direct Chekhov differently from any other author. I can only direct one way. It reminds me of a story told by Richard Rogers who was working on a musical based on a book by an Irishman, John Byrne, about an Italian, Marco Polo, which takes place in China. Rogers was asked whether the music would sound Irish, Italian or Chinese. He said that it would sound like all his music, Jewish-American.[23]

According to those interviewed, the casting of Uncle Vanya seems to have been unplanned and haphazard. Joanna Roos was cast as Sonia although Harris had never seen her act. As she recalls it, "He had heard about me from people he trusted and particularly Worthington Minor, who was his Assistant Director. Tony had seen me in Philip Barry's play, Paris Bound, in Chicago and so Jed just sent for me, had a short conversation with me and that's all."[24] Harris' account of his casting for Vanya and Astrov seemed even more casual:

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[21]Ibid. [22]Zolotow, Show People, p. 237.

[23]Harris interview. [24]Roos interview.

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> In 1930 after the stock market crash, Osgood Perkins came into the office to ask me if I had any immediate plans for a play. He was fiancially in trouble as we all were. I had been contemplating doing Uncle Vanya at the time but I hesitated to tell him. A short time later Walter Connolly came into my office asking if anything was doing. I began eyeing both of them very carefully. It occurred to me that it might work. Os might be able to do Astrov. I was sure Walter could do Vanya.[25]

It is difficult to say whether it was the vagaries of time or the capriciousness of fate which seem to play so important a part in the annals of theatrical production, but at this period, Lillian Gish, who had left Hollywood to return to New York, met Jed Harris for the first time. In her autobiography, Miss Gish recounts how a close friend, George Jean Nathan, introduced her to Ruth Gordon, whom she greatly admired, and who in turn invited her to a dinner at her apartment that was also attended by Harris. Gish had regarded George Jean Nathan as one of the most articulate and knowledgeable men in the theatre and was constantly in awe of his prodigious memory and insight. The small dinner party proved to be a thrilling and fateful evening.

> But that night, I was even more enthralled listening to Jed Harris. He glowed with love of the theatre. When I said goodnight to Ruth, I whispered: "He's wonderful! I'd work for that man for nothing." Three weeks later he called and asked me to play Yelena in Anton Chekhov's Uncle Vanya.[26]

Gish performed throughout the run of the play without ever signing a contract or discussing money. "And I never knew until the end of the first week when I was handed some money that I wouldn't be working for nothing or what I would get."[27] With the casting of Yelena, Harris went into immediate production.

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[25]Harris interview.

[26]Lillian Gish (With Ann Pinchott), The Movies, Mr. Griffith and Me. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), pp. 308-309.

[27]Gish interview.

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Joanna Roos and Rose Caylor remember the cast sitting around a table and reading the play for two days before they were permitted to get on their feet. Harris seemed to have developed an interesting and unorthodox pattern of rehearsal which has been confirmed by several sources. Joanna Roos recalls that:

> . . . we were called for rehearsal every morning for eleven o'clock (there were no Equity rules at that time) and Harris was never there. Tony Minor took the rehearsals. And then about four o'clock when we were all exhausted, Harris, who had probably just arisen from bed and who came full of beans, kept us there until nine, ten, eleven o'clock at night or whenever he felt like it. . . . He didn't do any of the blocking or get the actors on their feet. He'd let Tony do that and then he would discard almost everything good or bad because he wasn't interested in other people's work.[28]

Lillian Gish's recall is strikingly similar although less critical. "Tony Minor assisted Jed in the production," she said. "Jed is highly nervous as you see and for him to be patient and to sit there hour after hour and watch a play being rehearsed and repeated was more than I think he was capable of. He would come in and fix it."[29] This pattern of rehearsal had evidently been established earlier in Harris' directing career. Edna Ferber, co-author of The Royal Family amusingly recounts the same behavior several years before Uncle Vanya:

> At five in the afternoon, when the actors were limp with strain and exhaustion, in would glide Jed Harris, having just got up out of bed, fresh as poison ivy, and wearing a three-day beard. He would start to rehearse from the beginning, just as though the others hadn't been at it for six solid hours.[30]

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[28]Roos interview. [29]Gish interview.

[30]Zolotow, Show People, p. 250.

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Of the entire cast, Lillian Gish was to become Harris' major concern and throughout the rehearsal period a lingering doubt remained as to her ability to perform.

> Lillian Gish presented somewhat of a problem. She had come to mind as Yelena but she felt that she couldn't do the part. I believe she was close to George Jean Nathan at the time and she asked him for his advice. He advised her to try it and so she did. She had things against her from the beginning. She hadn't been on a stage since the teens. She suffered terribly from stage fright and during rehearsals she was scarcely audible. I always try to work on the level of an actor's limitations and so I did with Lillian. I merely kept giving her confidence, letting her alone and telling her she was doing well. When Lillian asked how she was doing, I'd say, "fine, fine." If anyone had asked me how she would do, I'd have to say, "I haven't the faintest idea." At the dress rehearsal, when she made her entrance in the first act, I knew she'd make it.[31]

Lillian Gish seemed to have little difficulty reliving in detail the torment she underwent on her return to the stage.

> During the rehearsals, Jed Harris let me alone, told me nothing and so hurt my feelings terribly. Here, he had top actors, all of them, Walter Connolly, Osgood Perkins, Joanna Roos, everybody, all experienced in the theatre. I was just out of movies and at that time New York and Hollywood hated one another. Anybody from the movies was in for a bad time in the theatre and I asked if I couldn't have my name changed or not used. Somehow, in my mind you couldn't see people clear enough on stage to recognize them and I could get by by being somebody else. It was a way of crawling out of the responsibility of standing up with first rate actors when I was immersed in the technique of films. So when Jed would come to my scenes, instead of rehearsing them as he did with the other actors and helping them, telling them yes or no, he just said, "Now look, you've directed films," which I had, "how would you do this scene?" Well, I thought, here I am, knowing less about this than anybody, he must think I'm hopeless or he'd help me or tell me what to do. He thinks I can't do it. I was too sensitive and frightened to even ask him at that time for help. It took me two years to muster the courage and say, "Jed, why didn't you help me in the direction of Vanya? Why was I left alone there on that stage?"

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[31]Harris interview.

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He said, "I'll tell you, I felt as if I had a bird in my hand, a frightened bird and if I had told you how to read a line and you thought you didn't get it, the bird would be gone. You see, I didn't have a contract.[32]

Harris gave Joanna Roos the same short shrift. When it came to specific direction, she felt as abandoned as Lillian Gish.

Jed didn't seem to have any method or plan. He gave us none of such things as motivations for the actors.. Really, he was unhelpful in a lot of things. I remember in the scene with Astrov when I had to give him something to eat and drink [Act II], there was quite a lot of handling of props and getting in the right position and so forth. But we had to find that out ourselves. He just wasn't interested in little business.[33]

Up to this point, the image we seem to have of Jed Harris' directing methods is a haphazard planning of production, a lack of discipline by sleeping late and coming to the rehearsals late in the afternoon, a seemingly perfunctory method of casting and an unwillingness to help the actor with concrete direction. The question arises, therefore, what was Jed Harris' creative contribution to a production that today is still considered "one of the finest examples of Chekhov drama outside the Moscow Art Theatre."[34] At first thought, the answer might appear to be that with luck and the proper timing, he had managed to assemble a talented and experienced cast that needed little help or direction. Arthur Hopkins made his reputation as a leading Broadway director by spending three years casting a play and then letting them alone to work out the problems of the script. The actors in Uncle Vanya, however, seemed to ignore their own part in the production and stressed the role played by Jed Harris. Joanna Roos

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[32]Gish interview. [33]Roos interview.

[34]Zolotow, Show People, p. 226.

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has given this point a great deal of thought and commented upon it in great detail. When asked, if Jed Harris wasn't interested in "little business," what he was interested in, she replied without hesitation:

> I would say he was interested in the flowering of the author's soul. It sounds awfully flowery for me to say that, but he would allow you to reach as far as you were able. We just happened to have this marvelous cast and we were all stretched beyond ourselves so to speak simply because he expected it. He may have given Tony [Worthington Minor] some physical directions such as having somebody move here or sitting there but even that was tentative. I remember after the shooting scene he'd say, "get back a little or come forward to this chair" and things like that but nothing planned, at least from what one can see. It was the man's personality and magnetism.[35]

Other actors in Harris' productions apparently reacted in the same vein. Lillian Gish, who admittedly received no help from him, felt compelled to add: "I shall be eternally grateful for being part of the production of Uncle Vanya. It was a privilege for all of us. And this man . . . I don't think the word genius should be used often with people but I think he was, in the theatre, just that."[36] The word "genius" appears to have been associated with Harris by many people who have worked with him. Joanna Roos claims, "He was the only man I worked for whom I thought was a real genius. You couldn't like him but you had to appreciate what he did. He simply became so immersed in the scene he was working on that we had to respond."[37] Zolotow in his portrait of Harris wrote that ". . . everybody I interviewed--whether actors or playwrights or rival producers--agreed that if the word genius fitted any one Broadway personage, it was the moody, saturnine Harris."

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[35]Roos interview. [36]Gish interview. [37]Roos interview.

[38]Zolotow, Show People, p. 243.

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Harris' casual and desultory manner in planning and casting a production is only a surface appearance. Once he gets down to work his intensity and concentration eventually begin to overwhelm his colleagues. Joanna Roos' contact with the man is as vivid today as it was then. "As an actress you can usually tell when a production has that great quality which Harris gave it. He really gave it to it. It was kind of an aura of his intense will. He had somehow made a complete entity of the production."[39] Jo Mielziner put it in similar but less flattering terms when he said, "Jed Harris is a very creative, dominant and cruel man. I can't conceive of any production he might have produced without his putting his stamp on it. He absolutely controlled and dominated the entire production."[40] Zolotow likened him to ". . . a Clyde Beatty in a cage full of high-spirited lions and tigers whom he dominates by the sheer force of his will."[41] Perhaps the most graphic description of Harris' work with an actor was again given by Joanna Roos.

> He certainly didn't shout at rehearsals so I suppose many of his directions to actors went unheard. I know I never asked him a question but that was rather characteristic of me because I had had a lot of bad directors but I appreciated Harris when I got him. It was as if something in you was right for the character and he pulled it out of you as a thread from a spider. I don't know how he did it but I think it was his own excitement.[42]

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[39]Roos interview.

[40]Jo Mielziner, New York, interview, October 23, 1970.

[41]Zolotow, Show People, p. 243.

[42]Roos interview.

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This ability to pull things out of his people "as a thread from a spider" undoubtedly depends on more than an intense will or domination. Perhaps because of the theatricality of the man, his knowledge of human nature and his methods of utilizing it when interpreting a play are invariably overlooked, as Zolotow suggests:

> He has an extraordinary capacity for drawing out people and for feeling himself into other people's life situations. He has stored up immense funds of knowledge about human beings in all situations, in all professions and spheres of life. When he tells an actor how to interpret a butler or a doctor or a giddy typist or a shy virgin his suggestions come out of a warm empathy for other people, real people.[43]

Perhaps the key to Harris' relationship to his actors and his contribution to their efforts in Uncle Vanya was expressed by Miss Roos when she said, "There are some directors who simply inspire you and don't direct you. I think the man who has to give you all the minute details of sitting and standing is really a poor director, or doesn't know how to inspire his people."[44] In another Harris production years later, this statement was repeated by another actress. Patricia Collinge, cast as the widowed aunt in The Heiress, is noted to have said after a rehearsal, "Any good director is helpful to an actor--but Jed Harris is inspiring."[45]

Despite the deliberate vagueness of Jed Harris or the emotionally amorphous language of the actors in trying to explain his approach to his work, certain specific pieces of staging may offer concrete illustrations of

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[43]Zolotow, Show People, p. 245. [44]Roos interview.

[45]Zolotow, Show People, p. 249.

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what he may have contributed to the production of Uncle Vanya. Harris himself occasionally broke down and began reminiscing as to what for him was a particularly satisfactory moment in the production.

> I tried to show Chekhov's comic range. In the shooting scene in act three, I had the professor run in followed by Vanya with the gun. The professor put on his pince-nez and indignantly asked Vanya if he had gone mad. I had Vanya point the gun at him and merely say the word "bang" which is in the original play. After a while he looked at him and said, "missed! missed!" I had no shot on the stage.[46]

Joanna Roos recalled this moment as being especially effective and said reflectively, "The point is that Harris didn't see the play as an overwhelmingly gloomy thing and that's the first time it happened here. There were so many funny things in it. The shooting for instance was hilarious and terrible . . . hilarious and terrible."[47]

The ending of Uncle Vanya is considered to be the most moving scene in the play and Harris seems to have given it an interesting touch although he admitted that the idea was not original with him.

> At the end, I had Walter Connolly's back to the audience bent over, weeping while Joanna Roos knelt beside him, both their heads together. I thought it would be more powerful not to show Vanya's tortured face. I got this idea from a Yiddish play I once saw as a young man when Rudolph Schildkraut starred in God of Vengeance when he realizes that his own daughter has been victimized by the brothels he had kept for profit.[48]

The actor Eugene Powers was helped in his characterization of the Professor when Harris modeled him after a professor he had at Yale who always held his lapels with his hands. "I told this to Gene and it worked."

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[46]Harris interview. [47]Roos interview. [48]Harris interview.

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Again, in the second act, in the scene between Yelena and the Professor, when the latter curses his old age, Harris had him look at the back of his hands and rub the skin in agony in order to gain sympathy for the character thus giving the character an added dimension. The actor's hands must have helped Harris find the key to the characterization, for Joanna Roos remembers that, "We had a marvelous actor as the Professor. He was very tall, much over six feet with enormous hands and feet, grey hair and a beard and when he moved his hands they seemed to take over the whole stage."[49]

Throughout the rehearsals, Harris felt that the map scene in the third act between Astrov and Yelena had never worked satisfactorily. At the try-out in New Haven, he attacked it differently. "I finally told Lillian that Astrov was making love to her behind his speech with the trees and the maps, that it was an indirect form of love-making. Lillian reacted accordingly and the scene immediately came to life."[50]

The fact that Uncle Vanya was the vehicle that brought Lillian Gish back to the stage gave Harris the opportunity for staging one of the production's most memorable moments. Joanna Roos enjoyed describing it in some detail.

> I remember the entrance of the whole family from the walk in the woods in the first act. He set this very carefully in the use of the voices beyond the high wall and the order in which they entered. There was a slight wait and then Lillian simply walked across the stage and into the house. It brought down the house. . . . I guess very few people

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[49]Roos interview. [50]Harris interview.

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> have had such a thrill as when she came in and walked across the stage without a word, which was such a brilliant thing for Jed to have her do. So she had that wonderful introduction to the audience before she had to speak at all. There she was with her long taffeta skirt sweeping along holding her parasol with the most controlled gait in the world. She went across the stage and up a couple of steps into the house. And the audience reacted as if some vision had appeared before their eyes.[51]

In his biography Life and Lillian Gish, Albert Bigelow Paine writes of the first time Miss Gish performed this entrance before an audience.

> It was in New Haven, on the evening of April 6, 1930, that the curtain went up on Lillian's first night in Uncle Vanya. She was nervous, after all. The moment came when Helena enters, merely to drift voicelessly across the stage. There was a burst of applause from the audience--she was not prepared for that, and was almost as frightened as on that long-ago night of the explosion at Rising-sun. She quickened her step, quickened it still more--was almost running, at the exit. Jed Harris still gives amusing imitations of this first entrance across the threshold of the new-old career.[52]

Mr. Paine was mistaken when he thought the New York audience, consisting of "typical first-nighters," the film and theatre "professionals," together with the "Chekhovians, some of them doubtful and critical," would be less willing to lend themselves to the same response. His description of the Broadway opening-night performance may give us an inkling of the mood and atmosphere that had been achieved by the director and the company.

> . . . I watched the curtain go up on a Russian garden, where Kate Mayhew was pouring tea and Osgood Perkins, in semi-Russian dress--that is to say, tall boots--was marching up and down. . . And so the action starts, and presently Walter Connolly comes yawning in, the weariest, most lethargic, ill-kempt man the stage

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[51]Roos interview.

[52]Albert Bigelow Paine, Life and Lillian Gish (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1932), p. 263.

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> has shown this season. What a contrast it all is to be smart soigne picture around the corner.[53]
>
> Voices outside, and Gene Powers, wearing long whiskers, enters . . . . Then--a beam of pure light, a radiance--floats, glides, drifts across the stage, to a long, and prolonged, salvo of applause--and then--it is not Kate Mayhew and Perkins any more or Walter Connolly and sweet Joanna Roos, but Marina and Astroff and Uncle Vanya and Sonia, figures in a sad, amusing dream--a dream that is real--truth reflected as in a looking-glass, and one no longer minds the heat, or thinks of it, or of anything except the figures that drift in and out, and carry on the dream--especially the one figure, embodiment of the Chekhov spirit--that luminous being around which all the others revolve and bruise their wings--and by and by--hours, days, maybe--time no longer counts--the futile human draws to its futile human ending, and Sonia's sweet voice is saying--to Uncle Vanya, bowed and heartbroken, like herself: ". . . we shall rest."[54]

Joanna Roos claims that she never had a conference with Harris nor did he attempt to analyze the character of Sonia for her. She regarded the working out of a characterization as one of her strengths and because of her experience with other directors learned to depend on her own talents and resources. There were times when the help of a director was needed to bring a scene to life and Harris seemed to know when to supply a necessary insight, as the actress relates:

> As I say, he gave few directions. For instance, I remember a scene between Lillian and me which took place late at night [near the end of Act II] and we had rehearsed it with Tony Minor so Jed happened to come in when we were doing that. It could be a rather melancholy scene because it was dark and late. He listened and then said, "You know, girls, this is a very happy scene. These girls have just escaped from the old man, they've made up, they were going to have music, they were two young women who are delighted to have somebody to

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[53]During the run of Uncle Vanya, Lillian Gish's first talking picture, One Romantic Night, based on Molnar's The Swan, opened at the Rivoli Theatre on Broadway. It proved to be a dismal failure.

[54]Paine, Life and Lillian Gish, pp. 276-277.

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> talk to." That's all he said. The scene became marvelous because there were two young girls laughing and crying. And then at the end when Sonia goes out to talk to her father, there was absolute quiet until Sonia comes back telling Yelena that the old man says, "no." The high spirits just collapsed. That's all he ever did about that scene. I can't explain what he did.[55]

Because of the director's desire to dominate every facet of production, a Harris venture rarely arrived at an opening night without a considerable number of tears and casualties. The production of Uncle Vanya appears notable for having had one of the most frictionless and smoothest rehearsal periods in the director's career. The Broadway theatre is replete with anecdotes of actors whose psyches and careers have been warped or destroyed by Harris' brutal hand. He nevertheless managed to accrue a following that remained loyal, and actors such as Osgood Perkins, Walter Connolly, Lee Tracy, Basil Rathbone, Walter Huston, Patricia Collinge and Lillian Gish often defended him and spoke of his help and understanding. Joanna Roos fairly quaked at her first rehearsal, expecting a holy terror and was surprised to learn that a very different mood had been prepared.

> Although he has been devastating to actors in other productions, he seemed quite gentle with those in Uncle Vanya. The atmosphere was not tense at all. . . . But I think this was a very special production of his, very near his heart, and so he was on his best behavior in his relationship with us.[56]

The fact that Harris was attempting a Chekhov play gave the whole venture a solemn and dedicated ambience that infected the entire cast and crew. "We knew from the very beginning," Miss Roos emphasized, "that the production was very, very special." The result was a certain comraderie

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[55]Roos interview. [56]Ibid.

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and affection that grew among the participants. In effect, they became a close family unit working together as an ensemble.

What may have helped to contribute to this working atmosphere was the presence of such actresses as Kate Mayhew and Lillian Gish. Miss Gish still recalls the warm affection the cast and crew had for Miss Mayhew.

> Do you know who was really the star of our production backstage? Katie Mayhew. All of the men would line up for the privilege of carrying her suitcase. She was in her eighties and everyone adored her. Jed said she was the pivot of our production. To listen to Katie talk was like reading a book on theatre history in America because she had been Laura Crabtree's understudy. She took all the other actors up to beat because of her personal character.[57]

Kate Mayhew seems to have taken Jed Harris "up to beat" as well. Because of her age he would rehearse her scenes first and would then insist on ordering a special cab to take her home. "She resented this because she wanted to walk," Harris recalls.

But it was Lillian Gish who was the real center of endearment to all concerned. Harris remembers that ". . . everybody fell in love with Lillian Gish. Os Perkins said that she was an angel who would any moment waft up into the flies, the roof would open wide and she would ascend into the heavens."[58] Joanna Roos, who regarded Harris as a man caught in the trap of his own hostilities added, "But he adored the play and he adored the cast and he especially adored Lillian." Indeed, throughout the rehearsals he appeared to be in constant awe of her "marvelous, ethereal delicacy." Everyone on stage immediately responded to the actress' seeming vulner-

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[57]Gish interview. [58]Harris interview.

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ability. "Lillian had both dignity and a child-like quality but she needed support and she got it from all of us. In fact, she floated on that support...."[59] Miss Roos thought a moment and then added, "Of course, she really is as tough as steel and her sense of concentration is incredible." She went on to describe a piece of business Miss Gish was given during the first act working on a piece of embroidery. On opening night when Miss Roos would have been too nervous to do anything more than merely do needlework at random, she was amazed to find Miss Gish carefully embroidering a leaf pattern throughout the act and finishing it before the curtain.

Lillian Gish saw a close parallel between silent screen acting methods and those of the Moscow Art Theatre. She regarded the camera as an X-ray eye that caught you the minute you stopped being a character and began to act it or indicate. It may have been her association with Nemirovich Dantchenko that prompted her to accept the challenge to do the role of Yelena, as she herself implies:

> As Griffith was the father of film, Dantchenko was the father of the Moscow Art Theatre and it was my good fortune to know him when he came to Hollywood to study film in the twenties. Through him, I got to know about the Moscow Art Theatre long before I met Jed and was asked to do Chekhov. Dorothy, my sister, and Mr. Griffith had gone to see the Moscow Art Players when they were in New York in 1923, I believe. I was in Italy making The White Sister at the time so I missed it but both of them said, "This is what we're reaching for in film. We didn't understand one word of Russian. We knew everything these people were thinking. It's concentrated thought." From this, I thought, in Chekhov I could be safe with my sense of concentration. That is, carrying a line of thought from the time you walk on to the stage until the time you walk off and that nothing distract you. It was

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[59] Roos interview.

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> difficult for me at first because the audience made noises on the first night when I was just given a walk across the stage when I heard this horrible sound. At the end of the walk, I was almost running.[60]

This warm, supportive atmosphere extended to the other contributing artists, resulting in a greater freedom of expression than was usual in a Jed Harris production. For the garden scene in the first act, Harris remembers that, "I told Jo Mielziner I wanted a rustic effect with birch trees through which pinpoints of sunlight broke through the trees. I wanted a sleepy, enchanted effect."[61] Mielziner achieved this effect with the use of a scrim and pieces of gelatin in front of the lights but he also did something never attempted before with a Chekhovian play in America--the use of stylization for a special effect. "I pointed out to Jed that I wanted to stylize the birch trees behind the wall by having them bare, tall and straight. He looked at it for some time and finally approved it."[62]

Harris had assigned the costuming of the production to an established designer of the day, but since Lillian Gish had been designing her own costumes for years, the director decided to let her have her own way. The actress explained what she was trying to achieve.

> Tappe had a whole building on 57th Street. He was the Main-Bocher of his day. He did my Orphans of the Storm costumes from my designs. I always designed my own costumes for films. I had costumes that would move because we would use our bodies, tell the story with our bodies. You couldn't move under stiff costumes. You had to have costumes that would flow and Tappe did them so well. He understood what I meant by material that would move.[63]

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[60]Gish interview. [61]Harris interview.

[62]Mielziner interview. [63]Gish interview.

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Harris claims that, "Once she put on the costumes, Lillian gained a great deal of confidence," and so he willingly sacrificed the authenticity of the designs and materials. Joanna Roos, however, recalls her deep resentment at the violation of certain artistic principles.

> I once took exception to what Lillian wore because she would not wear all of the wonderful, authentic costumes we had. She had some other designer called Tappe to make her clothes which I thought were outrageous. For example, she went walking in the woods in a dress of pink taffeta with white embroidery over it and I was infuriated. But she looked marvelous and nobody but myself ever gave it a second thought. But I was being a sort of true artist and I had real clothes of the period, rather a darkish blouse. I remember I asked Jed during a dress rehearsal if I could have something not so severe but he just dismissed it and so I wore the blouse. I thought he doesn't really know what I was all about but it was right because it somehow subdued me next to Lillian's clothes but it was right for the play.[64]

One aspect of the physical production that proved disappointing to Miss Gish was the point at which the cast was informed not to come to rehearsals because they were going to light the scenery. "I came from a medium," she said, "where you stood for hours to have your face painted with lights so that you would look the way you should look playing the character. And here they were going to light scenery and not actors."[65] She went on to describe a production in which she played Camille several years after Uncle Vanya, designed by Robert Edmond Jones. "He lighted the actors and lit the last scene in a way to make me look as if I were dying of consumption." She regarded lighting the actor equal in importance to the design and materials for the costumes.

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[64]Roos interview. [65]Gish interview.

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Although forty-one years have passed since the production, the participants still hold strong opinions as to its worth as a theatrical event. Jed Harris prefers to disparage it off-handedly. "I considered my Uncle Vanya a shallow production. I didn't really cast it with much care. I took the actors that were available at the moment. Osgood Perkins was a thin-blooded actor and not up to Chekhov."[66] But such a statement has been a habitual stance of Harris; he has been often quoted as saying that he will never direct another play, that the theatre bores him. "I went into show business because I liked to sleep late," was a continual flippancy. Joanna Roos remembers a different attitude. "Jed was extremely pleased with the production and so were the critics and the audiences and the artists." Her own evaluation was unashamedly though soberly glowing. "Jed Harris' production of Uncle Vanya was a landmark in the lives of all of us. It was an extraordinary production, an extraordinary production."[67] Lillian Gish expressed an eternal gratitude for being part of the production and considered it "a privilege for all of us." Jo Mielziner was more reluctant in his praise when he remarked, "Uncle Vanya was an unusual production. In spite of my dislike of the man, I must confess that Jed Harris was a very creative and imaginative theatre artist."[68] On the other hand, Rose Caylor, who had no reluctance to show an abhorrence for the director, was of another opinion. "I didn't like the production of Uncle Vanya. It seemed to be under

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[66]Harris interview. [67]Roos interview.

[68]Mielziner interview.

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water, that is, it wasn't clear cut."[69] The presence of Lillian Gish may have had a great deal to do with the public's response, which helped pay off the producer-director's initial investment of $8900 in ten days.

The critical reaction to the production reads like a director's dream. Beginning with the New Haven try-out, the city's leading newspaper, which never before had given an editorial to a theatrical performance, gave one the next morning to Uncle Vanya. Professor William Lyons Phelps of Yale University invited Lillian Gish to luncheon and wrote a letter to the scholarly journal, People's Forum, calling attention to the play.[70] The New Haven Register commented upon the "superb piece of staging done by Jed Harris, and the quite indescribable beauty and magic of Lillian Gish's performance as Yelena," and went on to write of the play as "surely one of the few really great plays in existence . . . a richly polyphonic drama, in which one watches the drift and flow of human life as one listens to the different voices in a Bach fugue."[71]

The Broadway opening prompted a no less enthusiastic response. John Hutchens, reviewing for Theatre Arts Monthly, had wondered how the director and producer of such fast moving productions as Broadway, The Front Page, and The Royal Family would deal with "the passive melancholy of Tchekhov." He discovered that "One result was to re-emphasize Tchekhov's very great depth, subject--like Shakespeare's--to still greater

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[69] Caylor interview.

[70] Paine, Life and Lillian Gish, p. 268. [71] Ibid.

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richness in varied treatment and exploration; another was to establish not only Mr. Harris' sensitivity to every aspect of a play, but his ability to communicate his feeling for it exactly and in his own terms."[72] Putting this production in perspective with other productions, Hutchens went on to write:

> What distinguishes Mr. Harris' production from other versions of Tchekov that have been seen here is simply the variety and the greater vitality that he has induced from an endless succession of hints and subtleties. It has the solidity of Tchekov's realism, and that realism is, of course, irrefutable; likewise it has the scintillant and more inaccessible flashes that make the Tchekov plays comedies in a wide sardonic sense. Despair pervades Uncle Vanya, but compassion illuminates it; and under Mr. Harris' direction those searching elements play against each other pulsingly.[73]

After praising the individual performances, Hutchens concluded with a note on the production's ensemble effect. "It is Mr. Harris' finest achievement as a director that from the harmony of their performance, a definite, personal style emerges for the play as a whole."[74]

Since Chekhov was being performed at the Civic Repertory Theatre on 14th Street, comparisons in production were inevitable. After praising Uncle Vanya as a production of the "highest perfection," Richard Dana Skinner in The Commonweal, went on to write:

> Miss LeGallienne has done some notable work in the revival of Chekhov's plays, and nothing one feels impelled to say concerning Mr. Harris' work should detract from the praise due her. The difference in plane between Miss Le Gallienne's productions of Chekhov

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[72]John Hutchens, "Brighter Nights," Theatre Arts Monthly, XIV, No. 4 (1930), 460.

[73]Ibid., p. 461. [74]Ibid., p. 462.

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> and this by Jed Harris is simply the difference between unusual excellence and real greatness.[75]

Stark Young too joined the chorus of accolades in his review in The New Republic.

> The whole directing is felt out with naturalness, brains and confidence. The curious plain poetry of the play is beautifully understood--the weaving of the lives one into another, the gentle humor behind its tragedy, the sense of a futility that is not futile, and, most of all, Chekhov's theme that behind all the fever and commotion life remains like bread, sleep, the hours, and the old nurse. The casting is often bold and intelligent, and sometimes a sheer stroke of genius.[76]

He did complain, albeit grudgingly, that the evening was too long, that he would have preferred the performance speeded up now and then and that the exits and entrances needed greater variety.

A run-down of the newspaper critics reveal few inhibitions in their unanimous praise. Brooks Atkinson, in The New York Times, thought Jed Harris had succeeded brilliantly:

> The simple generalities of a genius emerge as detached wisdom and beauty, leavened with the humors of compassion . . . . The story flows so effortlessly, the lines are so relaxed that you are scarcely aware that an author and a director are shaping the events of the evening. This is the high comedy of stating life accurately.[77]

He also alluded to the overall ensemble work when he added, ". . . the performance has a unity that takes no account of personality. A coherent

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[75]Richard Dana Skinner, "Uncle Vanya," Commonweal, April 30, 1930, p. 232.

[76]Stark Young, "Reviewer's Pleasure," New Republic, April 30, 1930, p. 79.

[77]Brooks Atkinson, "Generalities of A Genius," New York Times, April 16, 1930, *T-NBL+, 1929-30, T-Z.

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design in monotone, it includes every part on equal terms." John Mason Brown, reviewing for The New York Evening Post proved to be no less generous.

> Nor can they dodge the no less palpable fact that the production of Uncle Vanya which Jed Harris has made within the past week is by all odds the most deeply satisfying and generally expert performance of a Chekhov drama that has so far been offered to this town in English. It has a delicate soft beauty of its own, a fragrant haunting sadness, and a kind of luminous pallor that are not frequently encountered in this all too mundane theatre of ours. And yet it contrives to mist its melancholy with laughter; indeed to play itself in the manner in which it should be played--as an anguishing comedy that wrings the heart even while it is inviting that "continuous laughter" which Stanislavsky once described as the natural accompaniment to Chekhov.[78]

That the production was the most satisfying and expert of a Chekhovian play in English, became a recurrent theme in most of the reviewers. We have Arthur Ruhl writing in The New York Sun that "The Uncle Vanya now to be seen at the Cort Theatre is, I presume, the most perfect performance of a Chekhov play yet done in English,"[79] while Richard Watts, Jr., claimed that "Mr. Harris' production must certainly be the most brillian yet accorded a Russian play done into English...."[80] Robert Littell, who had seen four productions of Uncle Vanya in two languages, wrote in The New York World that "Jed Harris' production of Uncle Vanya is the best Chekhov that America has seen in a language it can understand."[81]

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[78]John Mason Brown, "Broadway at Last Claims Chekhov as its Own," New York Evening Post, April 16, 1930, loc. cit.

[79]Arthur Ruhl, "Second Nights," New York Sun, April 20, 1930, loc. cit.

[80]Richard Watts, Jr., "Sight and Sound," New York Herald Tribune, April 18, 1930, loc. cit.

[81]Robert Littell, "The New Play: Jed Harris Presents Chekhov," New York World, April 16, 1930, loc. cit.

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Finally, the New York American critic, Gilbert W. Gabriel, probably spoke for many a dubious theatre-goer and critic. Indeed, he seemed to be slapping the wrist of the solemn theatre artist as Chekhov himself had done in the past.

> All the wise men of Broadway had shuddered at a report that Mr. Harris intended to turn Uncle Vanya into a farce. He intended nothing of the sort. Mr. Harris simply knew how contempuous Chekhov really grew of the melancholy sing-song his plays were reduced to by the pundits of Moscow, and how he struggled against their ideal of sleepy tragedy in an arty gloom. The Harris' Vanya is authentic and exquisite comedy. It is pathos, smiling. It has a bravery about it, a buoyancy and ease, which never trespass on the author's grieving and which must nevertheless cure all future Chekhov productions of chronic "Kol Nidrei."[82]

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[82]Gilbert W. Gabriel, "Uncle Vanya," New York American, April 16, 1930, loc. cit.

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CHAPTER IV

ROBERT MILTON

"Nobody directs the Lunts," has been a popular saying in theatre circles for years. Since the history of the Theatre Guild's 1938 production of The Sea Gull, starring Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne (Robert Milton is credited with the direction), confirms this aphorism, the title of this chapter is somewhat misleading. Throughout the thirties, this most celebrated acting couple had associated themselves with America's most prestigious theatre organization; they were thereby permitted to offer a series of contemporary plays and revivals of the highest professional order. The support of a subscription list also enabled them to take their productions on cross-country tours season after season. With such plays as Idiot's Delight, The Taming of the Shrew and Amphitryon 38, they built a semblance of a permanent company by retaining a nucleus group of actors for each succeeding production. In an effort to widen their repertoire, they finally decided on Chekhov's play, although, as we shall later see, there were more compelling reasons as well. Rather than seek the services of directors they had used in the immediate past, such as Harry Wagstaff Gribble and Bretaigne Windust, the Lunts engaged a director they had not worked with for over a decade.

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The fact that Robert Milton was Russian and had often spoken of Chekhov's plays undoubtedly had great weight in the Lunts' choice. Indeed, Milton's father had been manager of the Imperial Theater of St. Petersburg, the very theatre where The Sea Gull had its disastrous world debut. Born Robert Milton Michael Davidov, the director spent his early years studying for the priesthood in Czarist Russia. At the age of twenty, he and his father started on a trip around the world by way of Siberia; when they reached New York, the older man suddenly died. Milton decided to remain rather than to return to Russia and, because of his father's background and reputation, managed to secure a position with Richard Mansfield as actor and assistant manager. He soon began directing and after the actor-manager's death went on to work under the auspices of other Broadway managers. "Naturally, Milton is proud to this day," an interviewing reporter had written, "that the first productions [in America] of The Devil's Disciple and Arms and the Man were under his direction."[1] He directed

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[1]George Hanson, "'Method' by any Name Annoys Mr. Milton," New York World Telegram, September 3, 1938, Robert Milton clipping file, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, Research Library of the Performing Arts, Theatre Collection. Robert Milton's part in these productions must be held in doubt. In Mander and Mitchenson's Theatrical Companion to Shaw and Chapman and Sherwood's The Best Plays of 1894-1899, the two plays are listed as being "presented by" (produced by) and "produced by" (directed by) Richard Mansfield respectively. In a film company bio and the 9th edition of Who's Who in the Theatre (1939), Milton is credited with having produced only The Devil's Disciple for Richard Mansfield. An article on the director's career, on the other hand, contains the following statement: "During the next few years he returned to Mansfield on several occasions, assisting with his productions of Ivan the Terrible, The Devil's Disciple, The Misanthrope and several other plays." N.n. "The Multiple Milton," New York Times, May 15, 1920, Robert Milton clipping file.

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Alfred Lunt for the first time in the 1922 production of Alfred Savoir's Banco and then in the highly successful presentation of Sutton Vane's Outward Bound in 1924. He also guided Lynn Fontanne's first Broadway success, In Love with Love in 1923.

A strong bond of interest between the Lunts and Milton was a mutual yearning to establish a repertory company. Four years before he was to join the Theatre Guild production, Milton was interviewed during rehearsals of Dark Victory, a Broadway play featuring Tallulah Bankhead.

> Probably my prejudice in favor of balanced casts as against casts featuring a very few performers who are only supported by mediocrities stems from my earliest associations with the Russian theater. . . . For a long time I have cherished the idea of a permanent troupe of actors built on a workshop basis and so managed as to insure permanence of personnel and the continuous exploitation of new and desirable dramatic material.[2]

In 1927, Milton had made an effort to organize what he called a "resident" theatre. "He has pledged himself to produce five productions this season, each to open at the Theatre Masque,"[3] was the announcement given in a New York journal. It was a venture that was never to come to fruition. Although fairly advanced in years by 1938, he seems to have been extremely agile, with a clipped British accent and a patently happy disposition. At that time a reporter wrote: "He is today a short man with gingery hair which grows in a red ring around his shiny pate. He smiles constantly and is full

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[2]Lucius Beebe, "Robert Milton: The Director's Art and Mystery," New York Herald Tribune, November 4, 1934, loc. cit.

[3]N.n., "Mr. Milton's Plan For the Masque," New York Evening Post, October 29, 1927, loc. cit.

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of gentle quips."[4] Gentleness was a personal quality ascribed to Milton by many in the cast of The Sea Gull. As a theatre director, however, the general opinion was that too much was left wanting for a Chekhovian play.

The origins of The Sea Gull production were almost accidental, according to Alan Hewitt, a young actor who had been playing in the previous Lunt productions and who was to play the small role of Yakov, the laborer. He recalled in detail the background for the Lunts' decision.

> The Lunts were doing a marvelous thing during that period while playing in Amphitryon. Several nights a week, at least three or four, after the performance, they spent at least an hour in the theatre letting young actors come and audition, letting them do whatever they pleased, scenes, individual things and so forth. They felt they had a responsibility to young actors and had the word spread around and so people made appointments to come. They spoke individually to certain people and those they especially liked or were enthusiastic about were given special letters of recommendation. It was quite a marvelous thing.[5]

At that time Hewitt was attending acting classes conducted by the Russian actor and teacher, Benno Schneider, who finally decided to have the class work on a full length play; the play chosen was The Sea Gull. Hewitt was assigned the role of Trigorin while a classmate, Alfred Ryder, played Treplev. Another classmate, Arlene Frances, was given the part of Madame Arkadina. During one of the late auditions, Ryder and Frances presented the mother-son scene in the third act. Hewitt went on to relate the effect the scene had on the stars.

> Later that night the Lunts and several members of the cast were in a car being driven to a party being given by the assistant stage manager.

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[4]N.n., "Robert Milton, Guild Director," New York Sun, April 20, 1938, loc. cit.

[5]Alan Hewitt, New York, interview, December 29, 1970.

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> Both commented on Alfred Ryder's performance and Alfred Lunt said, "God, what a good play The Sea Gull is." I said, "You're Goddam right and I've been telling you that we ought to think about doint it. There are two parts that you two should play." Lunt said, "People have been telling us that for years." I was wearing a heavy winter coat and I said, "Here, take this home and read it." The Modern Library edition of Constance Garnett's translations of Chekhov's plays was in my pocket.[6]

The following night Hewitt was called down to Alfred Lunt's dressing room and told that The Sea Gull was a play that the company had to do. Nothing more was said until a few nights later, when Hewitt was once again called down to Lunt's dressing room and told that the Garnett version was unsatisfactory. "'Now why don't you get hold of every available translation and you and Lynn then work on putting together a better acting version,' Alfred Lunt said. On the face of it, it sounds a little nonsensical but that's the way it began,"[7] Hewitt recalled. For several weeks he worked on a few pages at a time putting together what he considered the best of the various translations and then went over them word for word with Lynn Fontanne before the Amphitryon performances. Soon afterwards, official word was released that the Lunts were seriously contemplating a production of The Sea Gull. Stark Young immediately contacted the couple. "I've always hated the various translations that have been around. I have always wanted to do one," Hewitt quoted the critic and translator as saying. "So Stark moved in,"[8] he added with what sounds to this day like a sense of relief.

Stark Young has written extensively on the need for new translations of Chekhov's plays. He considered the Garnett versions as suffering

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[6]Ibid. [7]Ibid. [8]Ibid.

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mainly from a lack of theatre knowledge and a sense of "speakability." Although he was convinced that The Sea Gull was not "full blown Chekhov" and was atmospheric only in spots, his constant theme remained that the plays were neither moody, nor soulful, nor complex but rather simple and straightforward. He referred to Chekhov's special methods as "realistic-psychological," in which the surface of life reflects through dialogue the natural and familiar while underlying associations and implications echo profound and inscrutable meanings.[9]

Regarding the text used in the Theatre Guild production, Young made a particularly interesting though puzzling note. He wrote that the Lunts had ". . . an entirely honorable attitude by which there was no changing of lines, no trimming the dangerous corners of some of Chekhov's devices and motifs, no concessions to what might be easier to swallow nor more popular."[10] An examination of two Theatre Guild prompt scripts[11] reveal many omissions which were restored in the published version. These included the shortening of long speeches, the elimination of pauses, and the cutting of certain repetitive although significant phrases, such as Nina's "I am a sea gull," from the Nina-Trepelev scene in the fourth act.

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[9]Stark Young, Immortal Shadows: A Book of Dramatic Criticism, Hill and Wang (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 186.

[10]Ibid., p. 188.

[11]Anton Chekhov, "The Sea Gull," trans. by Stark Young, prompt script, Theatre Guild Archives, Beinecke Library, Yale University and New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, Research Library of the Performing Arts, Theatre Collection.

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Margaret Webster, who played the role of Masha, recalls Stark Young's presence during many rehearsals. "Somebody would complain that they didn't like this or that phrase," she said, "and he would change it a little but there weren't any basic changes."[12] It is true that none of the cuts changed the structure or sequence of the play. The question that arises, however, is whether they affected the delicate balance of Chekhov's work for the purpose of creating an acting vehicle for Broadway's illustrious couple. The imposing nature of these two extraordinary talents makes the question inevitable.

Before considering the actual production, we must ask a question that is demanded by the title of this dissertation: What contribution did Robert Milton make as director? Margaret Webster felt no reluctance in answering it. "The part that Milton played in the staging of The Sea Gull can be put in one word, 'small'"[13] Although Alfred Lunt had made one previous attempt at directing, that of the London production of Robert E. Sherwood's Reunion in Vienna and was to direct most of his own performances in the future, Miss Webster was convinced that Alfred Lunt wanted no part in directing The Sea Gull. As a member of the cast, she was ignorant of the processes that had preceded the rehearsals but it wasn't long before she began to realize what was happening after they began.

> They left, ostensibly, the conduct of the rehearsal to Milton and he called what he wanted to call, you know, for whatever a director does.

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[12]Margaret Webster, New York, interview, July 10, 1971.

[13]*Ibid*.

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> When I said "small," I meant in fact that the whole sort of imprimatus of the production almost inevitably drifted into the hands of the Lunts. What they really needed, I think, above everything else was a sort of super stage manager like the stage managers who used to be in the old days for the actor-managers, that is, to lay out the mechanical work and all that. I don't really believe the basic results depended so much on the Lunts own personal feelings about the matter.[14]

Alan Hewitt's opinion was somewhat different regarding the "imprimatus" of the production when he claimed that, "Having worked with the Lunts and having known them, Alfred Lunt is always in command. It is always Lunt's production."[15] He recalled that immediately after rehearsals began many in the cast began to feel that Milton was completely ineffectual and that necessary confidence in the director failed to materialize. "It was pretty clear and fast," Hewitt went on, "that Lunt was elbowing him out of the way at all points in the production. Lunt was taking over completely. In truth, Lunt really directed the production of The Sea Gull."[16] Maurice Zolotow confirmed this viewpoint in his biography when he wrote, "Robert Milton, a Russian-born disciple of Stanislavsky, was the director of record, but Alfred was doing most of the directing."[17]

The actor who played the role of Medvedenko, O. Z. Whitehead, was more generous in attributing a greater contribution to the director. "Robert Milton did direct the production but the Lunts themselves usually dominated him," he wrote. He remembered Milton as a kind and gentle person who had done excellent work in the past but who was getting on in

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[14]Ibid. [15]Hewitt interview. [16]Ibid.

[17]Maurice Zolotow, Stagestruck: The Romance of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, Inc., 1964), p. 226.

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years. He emphasized the fact that the Lunts never treated him with a lack of the respect due him nor did they underestimate his ability, but the actor had to admit that Milton ". . . did not have quite the strength to combat them."[18] His final assessment was, "Certainly, Robert Milton directed the play in an outward sense, but he was not able to fill anyone with an inward sense of what the play was about."[19]

The most significant comment on Milton's direction may have been offered by the translator's eloquent omission. In his review, Stark Young gave most of the space to the play and his translation. Referring to the production in his conclusion, he wrote that, "The Sea Gull, as produced by Mr. Alfred Lunt and Miss Lynn Fontanne, and presented by the Theatre Guild, is on the whole the best Chekhov production that I have seen in English."[20] He went on to comment on every phase of the presentation and the part many played in its success. The direction and the name of Robert Milton were ignored.

Contrary to such evidence as alterations in the text and the addition of certain directorial notes, references to the artistic integrity and determined honesty of the Lunts by those associated with them cannot help but be impressive. They never lost the respect or admiration of such a renowned director as Margaret Webster, who insisted, "They did not want to make it a star vehicle for themselves. In fact, they were very

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[18]O. Z. Whitehead, letter, April 13, 1971. [19]Ibid.

[20]Young, Immortal Shadows, p. 188.

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generous to the other actors. They were very easy to play with."[21] Alan Hewitt had developed a close attachment to the acting couple over the years and therefore his recollections were more emotionally colored.

> The production of The Sea Gull was absolutely never geared to exploit the talents of the Lunts. The Lunts were so proud of the company which really began with The Taming of the Shrew and was extended to Idiot's Delight and Amphitryon and finally to The Sea Gull. The Lunts were so happy with the company that there were no solo curtain calls, only full company curtain calls from The Shrew to The Sea Gull. The Lunts didn't even step out of the line. The Lunts were hopeful that they could go into repertory if they could afford it. This attitude was carried into the actual staging of the plays and people could talk up and express their opinions. In fact, in the curtain calls for The Sea Gull, in the center of the line were Nina and Treplev. The Lunts were off center. They said they had the central parts in the play. Of course, the audience knew that the Lunts were there.[22]

Unfortunately for Chekhov, and perhaps the Lunts as well, the audiences never let them forget that they were astutely aware of their presence during the performance. O. Z. Whitehead saw this as a conflict the stars did not quite know how to resolve. "Used to playing parts in which they were on the stage practically all the time, the Lunts were a little concerned that their public might expect to see them in longer parts than Trigorin and Madame Arkadina respectively."[23]

Open casting for The Sea Gull was actually limited to two roles since the others were reserved for members of the company, and Margaret Webster was given a special invitation to play Masha. The role of Nina presented the greatest problem, and the Lunts' final choice offered Uta

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[21]Webster interview. [22]Hewitt interview.

[23]O. Z. Whitehead, written answers to a questionnaire, March 31, 1971.

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Hagen a Broadway debut rarely enjoyed by a young and unknown actress. It was not purely fortune, however, since Hagen had been preparing herself for the part the winter before. Eva Le Gallienne had accepted the young actress as a protégé and had been grooming her to become a member of a permanent company for a theatre in Westport, Connecticut. Included in the program were to be the plays of Ibsen and Shakespeare, and Chekhov's The Sea Gull. Because the remoteness of the theatre did not attract the necessary talent, the project was finally abandoned. Le Gallienne wrote of the events that led to her indirect contribution to this particular production of The Sea Gull.

> Several months later, while I was in Paris, someone sent me a clipping from a New York paper announcing that Uta Hagen was to play the part of Nina in the Lunts' production of Chekhov's The Sea Gull. I was, of course, delighted, and was once again struck forcibly by the strangely logical pattern life so often follows. The Sea Gull had been one of the plays we had worked on most during those months in Westport. I myself was rehearsing the part of Nina, and Uta was studying it along with me. She was present at all our discussions of the play and knew it by heart. When the Lunts started trying out young actresses for this role--and they tried out a great number--Uta succeeded in persuading them to give her an audition and, instead of the usual reading, was actually able to present them with a real performance. Her knowledge of the play and the part, combined with her natural talent, impressed them so favorably that they decided to let her play it, and it was the first important step in her career.[24]

As he describes it, O. Z. Whitehead, the third of the outsiders of the company, made a lesser impression on the Lunts.

> One of the famous Emmet sisters mentioned me to the Lunts. As a result they asked me to come and see them at the Schubert Theatre

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[24]Eva Le Gallienne, With A Quiet Heart (New York: The Viking Press, 1953), p. 118.

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> after their matinee of Amphitryon. They spoke to me warmly. Lynn Fontanne said, "You look like an Emmet." Their stage manager handed me the script of The Sea Gull as adapted by Stark Young and said to return that evening after the performance and read the part of Medvedenko for Robert Milton.[25]

Whitehead immediately contacted his acting coach, Boris Marshalov, a former student of the Moscow Art Theatre School who had coincidentally played the same role in a Boston production directed by Leo Bulgagov.

> He made every effort to prepare me for my reading. With their stage manager reading the part of Masha, I read the first scene in the play between Medvedenko and her to Lynn Fontanne and Robert Milton. When I had finished, she said, "That was very good." "I can't do much with it yet," I said. "How could you in such a short time," she said.[26]

Despite Amphitryon 38 playing to capacity houses, the Lunts went on with their plans to interrupt the run and present a limited five week engagement of The Sea Gull before discharging a previous commitment of a London production of the Giraudoux play.

Rehearsals of a Lunt production invariably began with stage activity by the entire cast. "We got up on our feet fast. That's Lunt's way of working,"[27] Alan Hewitt remarked with emphasis. The first day may have consisted of the actors sitting around to read the play mainly for the purpose of seeing that everyone's sides were intact and to correct typing errors. Milton's attempts at directing immediately presented a problem to some in the cast, according to Miss Webster.

> I remember getting a little bit frayed with Milton because he took a tremendously long time over little details and he went over and over and over it again with the first act until I thought we would never get

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[25]Whitehead questionnaire. [26]Ibid. [27]Hewitt interview.

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> to the last act but I don't remember that we did very much reading and discussing. They weren't that kind of actor, you know.[28]

Hewitt remembers feeling a similar irritation which he describes in greater detail.

> He was giving people business long before they could even think about what they were doing. For example, he'd say to Medvedenko, "Now, why don't you polish your glasses here at this point. Take out your handkerchief and. . . ." He was giving you a meticulous piece of business like that and I remember that specifically when we weren't ready for that kind of detail. Who cares about that at the start. That's a fine point you get to later on.[29]

One reason for the Lunts getting to their feet at the earliest possible rehearsal was their well-known practice of memorizing the script before rehearsals began. "The Lunts are always letter perfect on the first day of rehearsal," Hewitt confirmed. "They knew their lines to the period. They get the words first even if it's just words in the proper order without having thought about them or thinking deeply about the character."[30] Admitting that he, himself, could not work in this fashion, Hewitt brought up a parallel that Alfred Lunt often used, that of a pianist who first gets the notes in his fingers and later concentrates on interpreting the piece of music with all its subtleties and required techniques. "I have discussed this with Alfred Lunt," Hewitt went on, "and this is his approach to a part. I have to start with who I am and what the play is about and what I am going to do to serve the author and the work. . . ."[31] Margaret Webster was less certain as to the methods used by the Lunts in appoaching a first rehearsal. "Maybe they did it with other plays," she said, "but

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[28]Webster interview. [29]Hewitt Interview. [30]Ibid. [31]Ibid.

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I'm quite certain that in the case of The Sea Gull, they didn't rehearse without their scripts although I'm sure they were very familiar with their parts. . . ."[32] The thought of complete memorization before production proved disturbing to the actress-director and later in the interview she brought the point up herself. "It's a thing that I don't like," she asserted. "I don't like it as a director, I don't like it as an actor and it would have bothered me very much. They were very familiar with it but I have no recollection that they tried to work without the script."[33]

Alan Hewitt took great pains to point out that in the thirties actors were far better equipped for their profession; directors then did not need to give them acting lessons or nurse them at every turn to achieve a performance. He was convinced that the actor was a great deal freer to improvise and to resolve problems which the director then accepted or rejected as the circumstances warranted.

Improvisation appears to have been a frequent technique of Alfred Lunt's in helping him resolve impasses. Throughout the rehearsal period Hewitt recalls Lunt stopping a scene in frustration and saying, "'Let's improvise. Forget the words. Let's just play the situation.' He was a marvelous improviser. Oh God, how many times they improvised and restaged the Trigorin-Nina scene in the second act, even out of town in Baltimore."[34] It was Alfred Lunt, too, who insisted that the off-stage supper scene in the fourth act be completely improvised for every perform-

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[32]Webster interview. [33]Ibid. [34]Hewitt interview.

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ance. This directorial device became a memorable conversation piece among theatre people because of its effectiveness as well as its being an unlikely thing for the Lunts to use. Hewitt described the off-stage happenings with relish.

> A long table and chairs were set up at off-stage left at the Schubert Theatre. We sat at a table with a tablecloth, we had wine glasses, we had cutlery, we had plates, we had food, and we were all required to sit there and eat, have conversation and laugh with the sound of food and plates, all of this going on as we improvised the lines while the Nina-Treplev scene went on on-stage.[35]

Alfred Lunt's method of approaching a part was completely his own and, though he constantly made concerted efforts to help young and struggling actors in furthering their careers, he rarely assumed the posture of a teacher. Alan Hewitt considered himself fortunate in being one of the few who was given the benefit of the star's methods and insights into acting. He described several of them in detail.

> Lunt is not an intellectual. He is more of a Stanislavsky actor than any that have studied with Strasberg or Clurman. Lunt is not somebody who can intellectualize something for you and he can't verbalize exactly what he wants. If you can tune in on his wavelength, you can get something from him just by sounds. He might say, "The way it's going is . . . ." [At this point Hewitt's voice lowered into gibberish] "Now that's not right . . ." [More gibberish] And if you knew how to work with him, you might understand what he's saying underneath and you might say, "Ah, I get it!" I remember I had a long speech in Amphitryon that wasn't working. He said to me, "You son of a bitch, you son of a bitch, you son of a bitch. Get that under it." I tried it and it worked. Clues of this sort he gave you helped, not through a long Harold Clurmanesque disquisition on the social background or psychological motives or anything like that. Lunt gave me four words that helped me enormously as an actor and I try to pass it on to other actors. There was a play I was in with him when he took me aside and said, "It's not true. It's coming out false. You're acting it.

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[35]Hewitt interview.

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> Let's do it sitting on chairs. Uh-uh, no, no, you're acting. Uh-uh, real, real." And then he said, "Tell it to me." Those four words, "Tell it to me." When I finally managed to cut out the acting, and get to the heart of things, I found it to be the hardest thing in the world just to be simple and real. You've got to be around a long while in order to be simple. That's the way Lunt would work and insist that you work.[36]

The inexperienced actors in the company of The Sea Gull were not that fortunate. O. Z. Whitehead in his first important role on Broadway with little help at his disposal found himself floundering. "I went to Boris for coaching on my part whenever I could get the chance. He helped me patiently with a part that I was hardly ready to play,"[37] he admitted. The Lunts were considerate and encouraged everyone to do his best but they did little more to aid the young actor. He remembered, however, that "Margaret Webster, who played Masha, was always kind and helpful."[38] He apparently did not feel confident in seeking the director's help. Miss Webster, who remembered Whitehead vaguely, did not regard Milton as a supportive element for the young and inexperienced actors. "I don't think Milton was very helpful to any of us in that sense," she said. "He didn't give us much assurance in those terms. What he did was much more on a mechanical level."[39]

The one who appeared to have the greatest difficulty of all in working with Chekhov was Lynn Fontanne or, rather, because of her professional stature and the importance of her role, her frustrations and unhappiness

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[36]Ibid. [37]Whitehead questionnaire. [38]Ibid.

[39]Webster interview.

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were more visible and more readily expressed. The Lunts had been in Moscow years before and had witnessed several productions of the Moscow Art Theatre. Having met Olga Knipper Chekhov, as Hewitt tells it, Fontanne had decided to model the character of Arkadina after the Russian actress, "who she thought was one of the world's worst bitches she had ever met."[40] Added to the characterization was a suggestion of Sarah Bernhardt. Her inability to accommodate these models to Chekhov's character resulted in an explosion during a rehearsal.

> Miss Fontanne was desperate. She wanted to quit. I remember we were at least two weeks into rehearsals when I saw her in tears on the stage. She had not found a way of making Arkadina work for her and said to Lunt, "Alfred, let me out. Postpone the production. Get Judith Anderson, Judith is available, she will understand this and will be able to play this much better than I can and I want you to release me." She was absolutely desperate.[41]

It may well have been this very mood of despair that prompted Alfred Lunt to alter the subtle relationships of the characters as well as the author's directions and, consequently, the production style. It was also inevitable, despite Alfred Lunt's sincere intentions, that the focus of the play began to gravitate from the young people, Nina and Treplev, to that of the characters played by the starring couple.

The first act entrance of Arkadina and Trigorin may help illustrate how the play was made to accommodate Lunt and Fontanne's adoring public. Chekhov has Arkadina enter on the arm of her older brother, Sorin, with Trigorin behind without any fanfare or preparation. In the Theatre Guild's

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[40]Hewitt interview. [41]*Ibid.*

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prompt script, we read that Arkadina's voice is heard off-stage for several moments followed by her entrance on the arm of Trigorin who is carrying her cape and footstool, and followed by the others in an anticipation of the inevitable applause. Added to this, special bits of dialogue were invented and given to Arkadina for her entrance. Throughout the play, Trigorin is portrayed as an overly solicitous lover, cowed to the point of servility. In the third act, after Arkadina has triumphed over Trigorin's attraction to Nina, Chekhov has him merely yawn with an air of helpless resignation. The Theatre Guild production transformed the moment into a romantic and ardent love scene. A contrast between the scene's published version [left] and the production script may be seen in the following:

Trigorin	Trigorin
It might be useful in a story. Yawns So, we're off. Once more the cars, stations station buffets, stews and conversations![42]	It may come in useful. Rises, embraces her So, we're off! Once more the cars, Kisses her cutlets and conversations. Long Kiss[43]

Needless to say, this interpretation was to diminish the color and complexity of the role of Trigorin to the point where a noted critic reluctantly characterized Lunt's portrayal of the writer as ". . . . a little obtuse."[44] Scenes like the above were later to bedevil the Lunts enough to solicit the directorial aid of Margaret Webster and Eva Le Gallienne.

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[42]Anton Chekhov, The Sea Gull, trans. by Stark Young (New York: Samuel French, 1950), p. 42.

[43]Chekhov, "The Sea Gull," prompt script, III.15.

[44]Brooks Atkinson, "Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne Act in 'The Sea Gull' Under the Theatre Guild's Standard," New York Times, March 20, 1938, *T-NBL+, 1937-38, S-TL.

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Another scene that may have been heightened if not transformed as a concession to Fontanne's anxieties was the third act exchange between Treplev and Arkadina. When the actress is changing her son's bandages, Chekhov has the young man kiss her fingers with affection. The Theatre Guild version injected an unmistakable Oedipal attraction with the direction: "Pull her down onto his lap,"[45] a position in which most of the scene was played. At the conclusion of the scene, immediately following a bitter argument, the playwright has Treplev sitting down and crying softly as his mother paces back and forth. Richard Thorpe, as Treplev, was given the direction. "Falls on his knees, puts his arms around her and sobs on her breast."[46] Most of the stage directions assigned to Alfred Lunt puts him in the background while Lynn Fontanne continually holds center stage. Often the audience's attention was deliberately directed towards the actress by isolating her from the group on stage. The second act rising curtain, for example, found her lying on a steamer rug downstage, left, facing the audience, while the other characters were seated together on a tree bench and chair at upstage, right.[47]

The physical staging of a play always proved to be a trying period for the Lunts, as Alan Hewitt informs us. "With Lunt it's fantastic how dissatisfied he is, how he keeps trying and trying and trying."[48]

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[45]Chekhov, "The Sea Gull," prompt script, III.8.

[46]Ibid., III.11 [47]See Figure 2. [48]Hewitt interview.

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Regardless of the critical or public reception, Alfred Lunt regarded most of his productions as failures, a thought which continually drove him to pursue a goal he knew to be non-existent. Chekhov was a particularly bewildering and elusive challenge for him. Hewitt describes how a simple blocking problem easily became an obsession for the actor.

> The most outstanding example of it all was with The Sea Gull because we got so sick of Shamreyeff's speech as they are all walking in in the first act with Arkadina on his [Trigorin's] arm and take up their positions to watch Constantine's play. We went through that for so many hours, not only in the original rehearsal period but also during the out-of-town tryouts in Baltimore and Boston. This was not Milton. It was Lunt who would say, "No, no, it's not right, it's not right. Now suppose you come in a little bit so, and then you come in so, and Lynnie, I think you sat here. . . ." Lunt took over completely.[49]

Here, too, Margaret Webster was convinced that Alfred Lunt had originally intended to leave the blocking to Milton. It was an intention that was short-lived when the actor's deep dissatisfaction began asserting itself. "When Lynn and Alfred weren't happy, they wanted to do something different. They said they weren't happy doing this or that and so in precisely that way it would drift away and depart from Milton's blocking until they got something they were happier about."[50] Exactly what Milton contributed to the physical production may never be known. A month after the opening, the director took pride in one piece of business during an interview with a reporter of the New York Sun.

> In The Sea Gull, two servants carry a trunk across the stage. Milton heaped an assortment of hat boxes, packages, etc., on top of the trunk. "It adds a certain excitement, don't you think?" he asks.

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[49]Ibid. [50]Webster interview.

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> "Just to carry a trunk across the stage is rather dull, and besides, There is something European about that heap of luggage. We've all seen porters disappear behind piles of bundles in European railway stations."[51]

Once the play was blocked, rehearsals consisted of run-throughs followed by analyses and the refinement of scenes. Often improvisations and re-blocking became a way of life for the entire company. Alfred Lunt felt most comfortable as an actor on a bare stage such as in the rehearsal period just before the scenery and lighting equipment were brought into the theatre. "Oh, you don't need anything in the theatre but actors and the audience," Maurice Zolotow quoted him as saying. "He is opposed to heavy settings and opulent costumes," the biographer wrote, "And when he staged Cosi Fan Tutti at the Metropolitan Opera House, he insisted on simplicity of decor."[52] It is difficult to judge whether Alan Hewitt spoke as a Lunt disciple or an objective oberserver when he described one particular rehearsal performance.

> We had an absolutely miraculous run-through of The Sea Gull on the Sunday night before our last week of playing Amphitryon in New York. We played it on the stage of the Schubert Theatre with the Amphitryon scenery out of the way and just the seventy foot blue velour, the Amphitryon cyc and rehearsal chairs and work lights with audience of two, Alexander Wollcott and Helen Westcott. That was, I think, possibly the most miraculous performance of The Sea Gull that was ever played. It often happens that those naked run-throughs of a play, before you get involved with the scenery and the costumes, lighting, the music, everything else . . . when it is just the playwright and the actors. Very often that is the magic time and the rest never quite comes up to it. That is pure. The perfect association of the

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[51]N.n., "Robert Milton, Build Director," New York Sun, April 20, 1938, Robert Milton clipping file.

[52]Zolotow, Stagestruck, p. 124.

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> actors and playwright with nothing getting in its way. This was one of those miracle performances.[53]

O. Z. Whitehead had been impressed enough with the very same run-through to recall it but he had also been made aware that the critic, Alexander Wollcott, had not reacted so enthusiastically to the play or the production. "The next day he wrote a note to the Lunts comparing their artistic efforts done during world turmoil to that of the monks who worked in the monasteries during the medieval ages."[54] On the Saturday night following the run-through, Amphitryon 38 closed and the next morning the company embarked by train for Baltimore. Sunday and Monday nights were reserved for technical and dress rehearsals and the Theatre Guild's production of The Sea Gull opened the following night.

Consistent with their policy of presenting their plays to the greatest artistic advantage, the Lunts had engaged the services of Robert Edmond Jones for the scenery, lighting and costumes. Since there was to be one intermission, the four acts were contained within two basic settings of which the first two exterior acts consisted of two pairs of wings augmented by a ground row and sky cyclorama for the background while the last two acts were played in a conventional box set. Scenic units for the first act, such as the stage platform, trees, benches, tables, and chairs were replaced in the second act with a tree bench, a chair, a pedestal, Arkadina's rug, several trees, and a fence. The facade of the house at

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[53]Hewitt interview. [54]Whitehead questionnaire.

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the rear was flown into place.[55] Except for a desk, a bookcase and several chairs, few changes were made between acts three and four.[56]

The Lunts were extremely pleased with Jones' scenic concept but the lighting of the first act set was the cause of one of the major crises of the production. Influenced by Gordon Craig and other continental designers, Jones believed in using a soft, chiaroscuro lighting to enhance mood. He was also undoubtedly influenced by the Moscow Art Theatre's attempts at duplicating nature whenever it reinforced an artistic purpose. Maurice Zolotow describes what happened when Jones's intentions collided with a production principle of Alfred Lunt.

> It was so dim you could hardly see the actors. Alfred played the first act, but then began criticizing the lighting so harshly that Jones broke down in a fit of weeping. It took hours to calm him. Alfred and Lynn believe in light, as much light as possible though they will accept dimming at moments to stress the mood of a scene; but essentially they believe the faces and bodies of the actors must be clearly seen from every part of the theatre. Alfred believes full lighting at its highest power is especially important in playing comedy. If he had his way, he would bring the footlights back in every theatre.[57]

Stark Young, sensitive to this difference of opinion regarding the lighting of this particular scene, later wrote in his "Notes for Actors" that "At one extreme are those who insist that, whatever else, we should be able to see the actors' faces. At the other are those who apparently believe the blacker the darkness, the bolder the realism."[58] There is no doubt where

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[55]See Figures 1 and 2. [56]See Figures 3 and 4.

[57]Zolotow, Stagestruck, p. 226.

[58]Chekhov, The Sea Gull, p. 63.

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his sympathies lay and he even conjured up the ghost of the playwright for support.

> In this scene, as always, Chekhov, we must remember, sees his characters as inseparable from the world around them. "Nature, on her part," he says in one of his letters, "becomes animated if you are not squeamish about employing comparisons of her phenomena with ordinary human activities." During this scene, therefore, the day's mood and the hour, the lights, shadows and sounds must have a very definite creative importance.[59]

Alfred Lunt remained unconvinced by the new scenic movement in the American theatre, the interpretation of the translator or any possible suggestions by the author. Alan Hewitt, a witness to the scene described by Zolotow, adds some additional details.

> Again, as an indication that Lunt was in complete control, I remember in Boston, I had started to go into Lunt's dressing room before the performance and I had stumbled on the end of a tirade of Lunt's. He was yelling at Jones who was leaving in tears, the burden of which was: "I don't care about your Goddam scenery. The lights are coming up. I can't see the buttons on Sydney's [Greenstreet as Sorin] vest. We are not playing this thing in blackness. The audience can't hear us if they can't see us and I can't see Sydney across the stage and I don't care what it's doing to your lovely effect. The lights are coming up." But then, the Lunts had control of the sets and lighting of their other productions as well.[60]

Lunt's wishes prevailed and Stark Young's disappointment was expressed in the only negative comment in his ebullient review.

> Mr. Robert Edmond Jones' design for the first act was full of a sober, virile style rare indeed in out-of-door settings. Its one defect was too much light on the side farthest from Treplev's stage, where Chekhov expressly prescribes that the scene be in dusk till Treplev's curtain rises on the lake and the moon.[61]

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[59] Ibid., pp. 63-64. [60] Hewitt interview.

[61] Young, Immortal Shadows, p. 188.

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The costuming was meticulously prepared with Lynn Fontanne given six changes of ornate and lavish dresses, all topped by a red wig she was later to discard for the tour. Alfred Lunt, resembling a Greek god, donned a blond wig, a blond mustache and chin piece for the play. Stanislavsky had been admonished by Chekhov after playing Trigorin elegantly costumed in a white suit. He was told by Chekhov that the writer should wear "torn shoes and checked trousers."[62] Above all, Trigorin was not supposed to be handsome. Lunt had either reverted to or had instinctively picked up Stanislavsky's original concept of the character and played him impeccably dressed right down to the white gloves and a walking stick. For the second act, after fishing all day on the lake, Trigorin entered wearing the following costume and accessories:

> Act II--White shirt and lay down collar, black string tie, double breasted linen tan vest, olive sack coat, pin striped light tan trousers, high button brown shoes, cornflower in button hole, light tan cap.[63]

The only person intimately associated with the production who was completely happy with the results appears to have been the translator-critic, Stark Young except for the lighting. The remaining critical notices were mixed. As expected, the public lavished its customary affection on the Lunts by filling the theatre for every performance during the limited five-week run. O. Z. Whitehead, who had never finished struggling with the role of Medvedenko, had come to the conclusion that neither the

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[62]Constantin Stanislavski, My Life in Art, trans. by J. J. Robbins (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1948), p. 358.

[63]Chekhov, "The Sea Gull," prompt script, appendix.

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director nor the stars had understood the meaning of the play. His idea may have been influenced by his teacher, who visited him after a performance, a visit which he described in detail.

> Boris Marshalov came to see the play on the second night. Both he and Richard Hepburn, a close friend of mine, spoke of the play in my dressing room. Boris said, "The performance was amusing, but it was not what Chekhov intended it to be." Richard said, "The acting seemed cynical." Boris agreed with him. My two friends felt that the performance was too hard, that Chekhov should be played with much warmth. Boris said, "It is an enormously gifted company, but none of them have learned to play Chekhov." Some days later Boris said to me, "Although Chekhov recognized the frailties of his characters, he still loved them. His characters are very human." Strong, fascinating and enormously talented, I do not think that the Lunts had the necessary gentleness and refinement to be entirely successful in Chekhov. The production was certainly interesting, but I think that it failed to move one. The Lunts seemed much happier in Amphitryon than they ever did in The Sea Gull.[64]

Margaret Webster expressed a dissatisfaction with the production, explaining that it was the first time the Lunts had played Chekhov and they were feeling their way with this difficult author. "They weren't truly at ease in that kind of a play," she said. The only one she considered absolutely right for the play was Sydney Greenstreet. She added that the Lunts "could neither free themselves of their own ways nor yield to the author."[65]

One reviewer who seemed to perceive the company's original intentions and believed they succeeded was Edith J. R. Isaacs who, commending all aspects of the production, concluded her notice in the Theatre Arts Monthly with:

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[64]Whitehead questionnaire. [65]Webster interview.

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> But it is not the excellence of the individual performance or the translation, or the validity of Robert Edmond Jones' settings, but the unity of the production that is the matter of first importance. The Sea Gull as here presented is the human comedy which we see enacted about us day by day, set in Chekhov's perspective, illumined by his artistry.[66]

Brooks Atkinson saw the performance as robustly American and animate and "full of spontaneity and fresh readings of old lines." But it shone merely on the surface of what was basically an introspective play. He saw a number of "scattered virtues" in the individual performances but left his harshest comments for one of the stars when he wrote, "As Madame Trepleff, the vain, selfish actress, Miss Fontanne cheapens the part considerably by over-acting and by gaudily wigging it." Despite the critic's deep admiration for the Lunts, he concluded his review with the sad implication that The Sea Gull may have been unsuitable to their special talents. "Something appreciative must also be said for the love of the theatre that has inspired the production. But only half of the play is to be found on the stage of the Schubert just now. It is the literal half. The other half is the genius of Chekhov's The Sea Gull."[67]

On the other hand, Richard Watts, Jr. saw the play as coming to "bitter, brooding life" in a splendid production and the Theatre Guild's most satisfying offering of the season. Admiring the Lunts' method of injecting a "whimsical" humor into the proceedings, he went on to write:

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[66] Edith J. R. Isaacs, "Revival and Survival," Theatre Arts Monthly, XXII, No. 5 (1938), 328.

[67] Brooks Atkinson, "Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne Act in 'The Sea Gull' Under the Theatre Guild's Standard," New York Times, March 20, 1938, *T-NBL+, 1937-38, S-TL.

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> . . . this new version of an old play, beautifully acted by Miss Fontanne, Mr. Lunt and an excellent company, played in Stark Young's admirable new translation and capably directed by Robert Milton against Robert Edmond Jones' effective sets, has not been so wisely given in this town within the fairly long play-going memory of this reviewer.[68]

Joseph Wood Krutch, writing for The Nation, was both surprised and pleased by the results he saw on the Schubert stage.

> Perhaps the Moscow Art Theatre and its famous method . . . are responsible for the fact that even the Lunts do not turn Chekhov's The Sea Gull into a starring vehicle for themselves. In any event, they certainly do subordinate themselves to the whole which the author was so anxious to make all important. . . .[69]

Of all the reviewers, Arthur Pollack of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle gave less space to the play and more thought to the performance. "It appears that Miss Fontanne and Mr. Lunt have wanted their production of The Sea Gull to shine rather than to glow," Pollack began his review, "as so quiet a drama should, and so they have not cared too much about burying themselves in the play. The result is a number of technically expert performances that keep the play lively, hold the attention but at the same time permit it to seem mechanical. It does shine, though, and brightly." He could not help but express an appreciation of their facility and style and went on to write:

> Nothing in The Sea Gull seems quite difficult for either of them. They skate dexterously over its surface, never fall in. Not that

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[68]Richard Watts, Jr., "The Theatre: Chekhov," New York Herald Tribune, March 20, 1938, loc. cit.

[69]Joseph Wood Krutch, "Theatre," The Nation, April 9, 1938, p. 423.

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> their playing is not conscientious. It is. They mean extraordinarily well by Chekhov. They give him a good run for his money, and the audience too. This is Chekhov done with great clarity but with perhaps not enough Chekhov. One has the feeling that it was practiced carefully but one scene at a time and then when each individual scene was considered satisfactory, all the scenes were placed end to end. That does not quite add up to the best kind of interpretation of The Sea Gull. The bloom is not there. A bright facility takes its place.[70]

This facility was emphasized when the actors' exits were often accompanied by applause after an effective scene, enough so, in fact, that the production began taking on the semblance of an "actors' holiday." "The trouble with this production of Chekhov," Pollack went on to write, "is that there is too much acting in it. All of it very good acting." Of the entire company, he singled out Sydney Greenstreet and Uta Hagen as the two actors who did not project themselves too sharply from the play. But it was another case of a critic who saw no possible reconciliation between the Lunts' unique talents and the genius of Chekhov. He concluded his notice, nevertheless, with a respectful tribute rather than an enthusiastic one. "It is all pretty brilliant. There has been no production of the play in English with such clarity and lacquered skill. The lacquer obscures the grain. There are too many actors in it."[71]

Following a summer's run of Amphitryon in London, the Lunts prepared a national tour under the Theatre Guild's auspices of three plays, Idiot's Delight, Amphitryon and The Sea Gull. The Lunts were still dis-

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[70]Arthur Pollack, "The Theatre Guild Presents Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne in Their 'The Sea Gull' at the Shubert Theatre," Brooklyn Daily Eagle, March 20, 1938, loc. cit.

[71]Ibid.

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satisfied with the last production, Alan Hewitt recalls, and invited Margaret Webster, who was no longer in the company, to restage the work. "Lynn Fontanne had rethought her part as Arkadina during the summer and they wanted Peggy Webster's help. There was no suggestion of bringing Milton back to restage it."[72] The actress-director clarified this particular point when she said:

> Well, the Lunts asked me to come to a couple of their rehearsals, but I wasn't in fact able to because I was working on something else. They didn't actually ask me to redirect it but they did ask me if I could come and look at it. I did go down--to Philadelphia--I think it was. They felt very unhappy about their scene in the third act and they wanted me to come down, take a look, and tell them what I thought. I told them I found it very difficult to pick out anything that was very wrong with it. But they were great perfectionists. They were always trying to improve on their shows.[73]

The Lunt's unhappiness with the production seems to have been fairly deep for when they learned that Eva Le Gallienne was in the same city for a series of out-of-town try-outs, they invited her to dinner in order to ask for help. In her second autobiography, she describes that particular evening.

> They had played The Sea Gull in New York for a respectable run the previous season and Philadelphia was their first stand on a tour of considerable length. But they had never been satisfied with the performance, and it is typical of the integrity and insistence on perfection of these great actors that they wished to work on the play afresh and improve their interpretation of it.
>
> As we sat in their suite in the hotel, enjoying one of Alfred's delicious suppers--for he is a master chef as well as a master player--I was told how unhappy they were in Chekhov's play, how uncomfortable and ill at ease. They felt there must be something basically wrong in their approach to it which prevented them from

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[72]Hewitt interview. [73]Webster interview.

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> enjoying the work, and asked me, as one who had had considerable experience in playing Chekhov, whether I would redirect the play for them. I felt, naturally, deeply honored and touched by this great compliment. I had seen their performance and had been somewhat disappointed in it, but had put this down to the almost insuperable difficulties of producing a Chekhov play under ordinary Broadway conditions. I was somewhat dubious of my powers to succeed where Lynn and Alfred felt they had failed, but even had I been willing to accept such a responsibility, I pointed out, I was playing and would be opening in New York in less than two weeks.[74]

The obsessive nature of the Lunts striving to improve their work has been well documented in biographies and the many anecdotes that have regaled theatre circles for years. One of their stage managers often tells the story of the night of a play's closing on tour, and it might well have been The Sea Gull, Alfred Lunt made his customary little speech to the company and added: "Don't forget rehearsal at eleven tomorrow; now we can really start to work."[75]

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[74] Le Gallienne, With A Quiet Heart, pp. 162-63.

[75] George Freedley, The Lunts (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958), p. 94.

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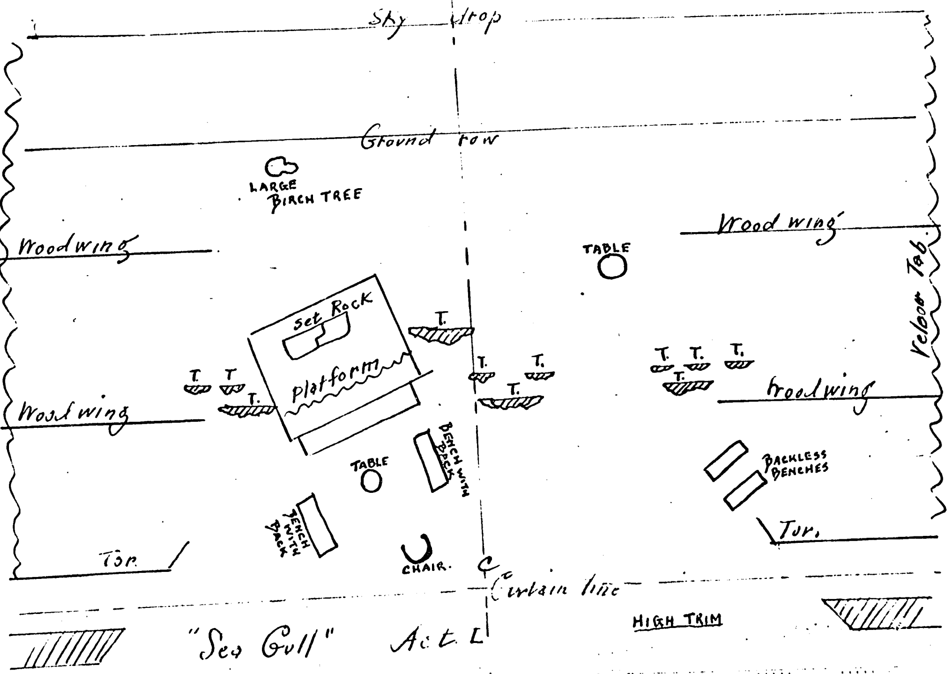

Robert Edmond Jones's Ground Plan for the Theatre Guild's Production of Chekhov's The Sea Gull. Theatre Guild Archieves, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

Figure 1

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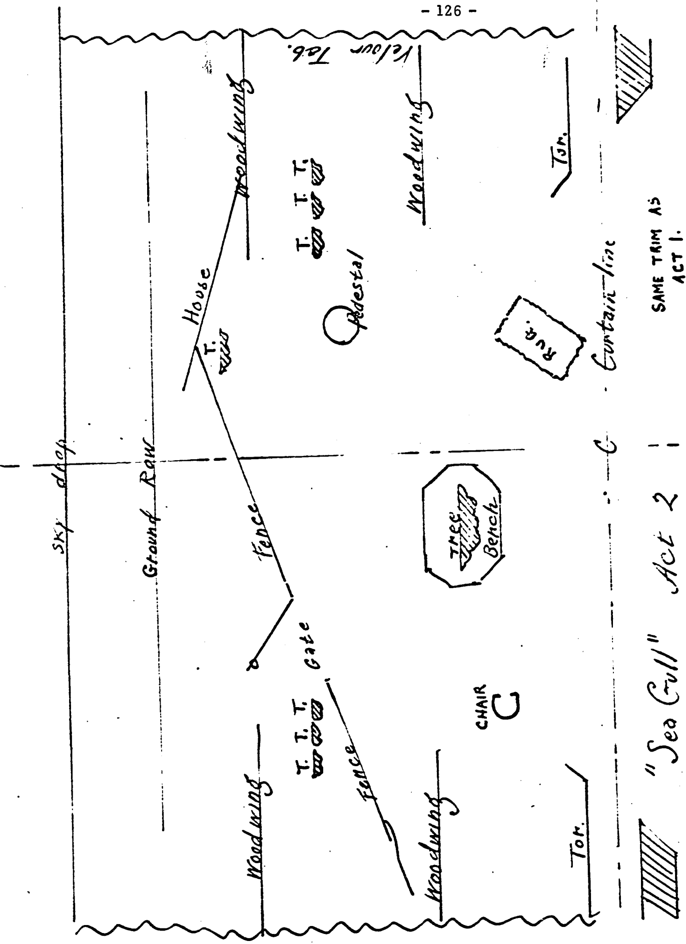

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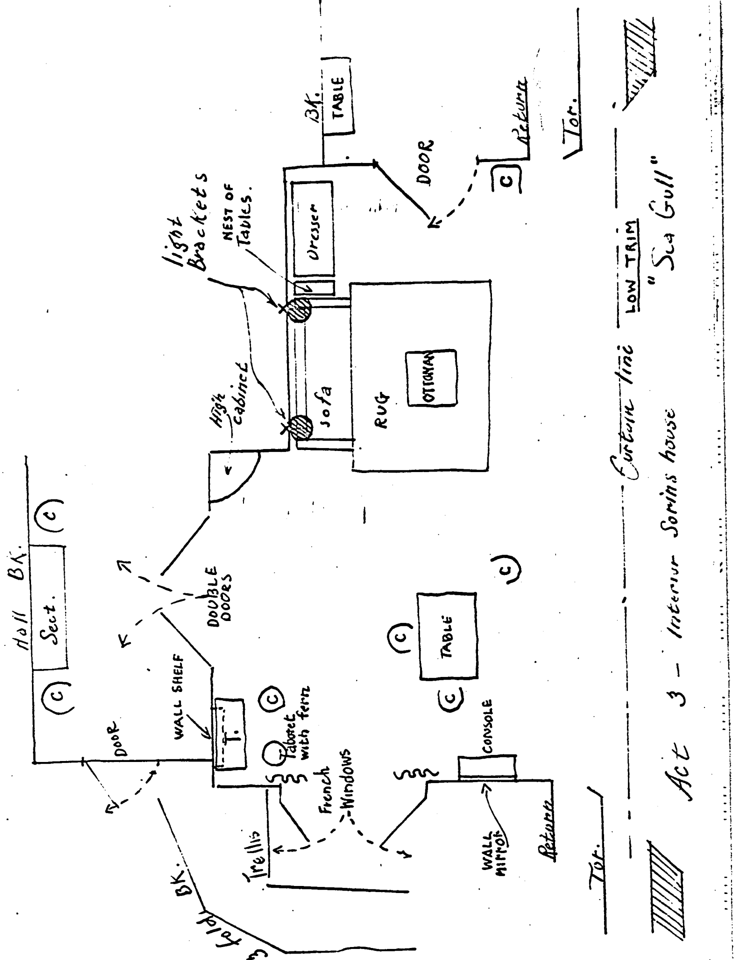

Figure 3

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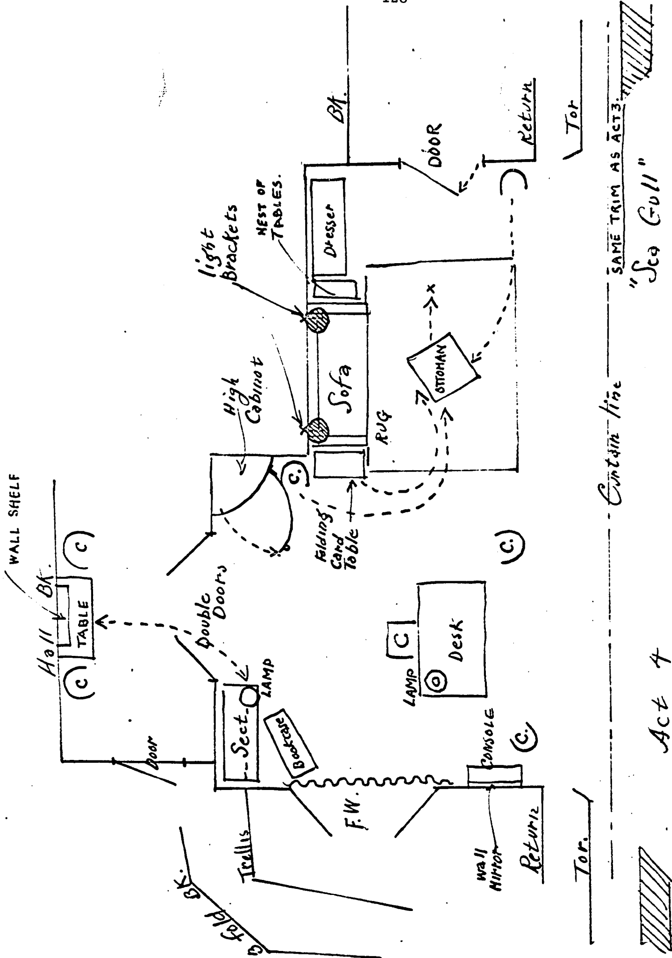

Figure 4

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CHAPTER V

GUTHRIE McCLINTIC

After the opening of Guthrie McClintic's production of The Three Sisters, Rosamund Gilder, editor of Theatre Arts, asked the director to contribute an article explaining why he decided to attempt a Chekhovian play. After some reluctance, he complied. "Well, it's been brewing with me since 1936" the article began "but this is the first time since then that it has been possible to get a cast that we felt could do it justice."[1] Ironically, casting the production, as we shall see, proved to be one of McClintic's main obstacles. Years later, in his autobiography Me and Kit, he was to relate how Ruth Gordon, who had appeared in several of his most distinguished productions, had urged him to reread The Three Sisters with the possibility of her doing the role of Masha. When he did so, however, he imagined his wife, Katherine Cornell, as Masha and Ruth Gordon as Natasha. He immediately went to San Francisco where Cornell was on tour in Shaw's The Doctor's Dilemma, read the play aloud to her and she too became enthusiastic about its possibilities. "I phoned Ruth of our scheme," McClintic wrote, "and suggested the switch in parts, and she was agreeable and excited about the whole venture."[2]

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[1]Guthrie McClintic, "Directing Chekhov," Theatre Arts, XXVI, No. 4 (1943), 212.

[2]Guthrie McClintic, Me and Kit (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1955), p. 268.

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Chekhov presented a challenge that encompassed more than the right cast or a vehicle for his wife. McClintic went on to write that:

> . . . even with the Moscow Art Players it has always had in this country a provocative but by no means unanimous press. And just as curiously, it has challenged a number of directors to bring it to life, for, by and large, it is what we of the theatre call a director's play. . . . Here, then is a play that is a director's dream. Beyond his rather meagre description of the characters and brief indication of the settings, Chekhov leaves his play to the director and actor to interpret.[3]

McClintic's propensity for the theatrical led him to dismiss the literary merits of Chekhov's plays. He preferred to regard them merely as a framework with which the director may weave a tapestry of his own design with the various theatrical tools at his command. This directorial approach to Chekhov was confirmed when Katherine Cornell, during an interview, was asked if it was true that The Three Sisters was not a very good play to read. She replied, "So true that Guthrie didn't want any of us to read the play to ourselves until he had read it aloud to us. Many of the most interesting moments have no dialogue at all, and the text is not unlike a scenario written for actors and director to embroider with their imagination and skill."[4] It is very probable that the director had been wanting to do the play since the twenties although he denies ever having seen a production of it--a denial made, no doubt, for diplomatic

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[3]McClintic, "Directing Chekhov," p. 215.

[4]Elinor Hughes, "Katherine Cornell Explains Her Choice of 'Three Sisters,'" Boston Herald, April 20, 1943, Katherine Cornell Collected Papers, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, Research Library of the Performing Arts, Theatre Collection, 8-MWEZ, n.c. 20,102.

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reasons. In the same interview, his wife recalled: ". . . neither of us had ever seen the Moscow Art Theatre production in 1923 but we had seen Eva Le Gallienne's revival a few years later."[5]

The fact that the world was in the convulsive throes of a second world war may have been another contributing motive for bringing The Three Sisters before a public apprehensive yet also determined, since he regarded the play:

> . . . not a play of an attitude, not a play with a solution, but rather a play with an awareness of all the weaknesses and strengths that human beings are heir to, suffused with an abounding faith in our ultimate destiny in which present sufferings will not be regarded as useless but directly contributive to the well-being of man in the future. Olga's final lines, "Our sufferings will turn into joy for those who live after us . . . happiness and peace will reign on earth and people will remember and bless those who live now," serve as ample testimony.[6]

As a director, Guthrie McClintic continually argued that he works only by intuition. He often claimed that he could not analyze his own work or explain why he responded to a certain play, why he felt a particular scene should be played in a certain way, or why he saw a play in one way instead of another. To him, his reactions were instinctive and individual and, right or wrong, he must be guided by them. The element of what he called "taste" was to have played an important part in determining his choices as a director. In an obituary in The New York Herald Tribune, he was quoted as having said: "So far as the theatre is concerned, I am more interested in the matter of taste than in matters of morality, philosophy,

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[5]Ibid. [6]McClintic, "Directing Chekhov," p. 212.

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aesthetics, or any other phase of the drama. To me, taste is the knack of doing a thing."[7] He particularly rebelled whenever he was asked to explain his theories or techniques of directing and replied that he had no methods, at least any that he was conscious of. At one interview, he blurted out impatiently:

> How can any director, who's any good, pretend to have a set theory about how he directs a play when every play presents a new problem, every play is a new entity? There has never been such a thing as the McClintic Theory of Direction, and, God--and McClintic--willing, never will be.[8]

Norris Houghton seems to have accepted McClintic on his own terms when he wrote: "Guthrie McClintic remains a master of the school of direction by intuition with the faults and virtues that such a method embraces."[9] But years later, in his autobiography, McClintic was to describe directing techniques that he had formulated by 1926, the year of his production of The Shanghai Gesture. "I had developed a method of rehearsal which was considered unusual at that time,"[10] he wrote. The rehearsal techniques he described for this production were to prove remarkably similar to those used for The Three Sisters, and in which intuition played less a part than conscious deliberation.

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[7]Obituary, New York Herald Tribune, October 30, 1961, p. 22.

[8]Morton Eustus, "The Director Takes Command," Theatre Arts, XX, No. 2 (1936), 114.

[9]Norris Houghton, Advance From Broadway (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1941), p. 305.

[10]McClintic, Me and Kit, p. 243.

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Unusual as his rehearsal methods may have been, they had stemmed from years of empirical training in the professional theatre. Having left his native state of Washington at the age of sixteen, he enrolled in the American Academy of Dramatic Art to become an actor. After several bit parts and many failures, he accepted a position with Winthrop Ames' production company as a talent scout traveling about the country and eventually worked his way up to the position of stage manager and assistant to the famous producer-director. This excellent training ground gave him the necessary confidence and experience to make the final jump as an independent producer and director with a production of A. A. Milne's The Dover Road in 1921.

McClintic had also argued that it was impossible for him to explain how he managed to get a production to express a desired result. He did, at times, speak in vague and emotional terms to the effect that a director's main attention should be focused on the quality of a play as a whole in order to incorporate its "higher value." It was this value that aroused his emotion and not the myriad details of human behavior. Although he regarded stage business an important part of the production, he preferred to sacrifice beautifully executed character detail to his grand design. It is this euphoric approach to a play that may have led to certain directorial effects which prompted Mordecai Gorelik to observe: "The main objective of the majority of the new directors including . . . Guthrie McClintic . . . has been the

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creation of dramatic mood and atmosphere."[11] It may also explain why Joseph Wiseman, the actor who was a later replacement for the role of Andrey, remarked that "McClintic's approach to Chekhov was very romantic."[12]

Many of McClintic's decisions to do a play stemmed from an emotional response to a first reading. It has often been stated that he had the ability to visualize a complete production from the text alone. Every good director, he maintained, must have a good visual and aural sense so that he may project the script in his imagination in terms of color, movement and characterization.

> Before I begin to rehearse a play, I know exactly how the whole production will be worked out--I see the settings and the action and the whole rhythm, pace and color of the presentation inevitably as they must be. In most cases, the actual production is as I first conceived it, though I don't always adhere rigidly to it.[13]

He felt that Chekhov's The Three Sisters depended heavily upon "mood and atmosphere" and he immediately decided to concentrate on establishing rhythm-tempo patterns that would create and sustain his conception of the tone of voice, the rhythm and intensity of the speech, the right pause--all contributing to help the actors and the audience get the "feel" of the play. Sounds, especially, were to produce a calculated mood or emotional effect. As McClintic put it, "Chekhov's plays are curiously

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[11]Mordecai Gorelik, New Theatres for Old (New York, E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1962), p. 209.

[12]Joseph Wiseman, New York, interview, October 26, 1970.

[13]Eustus, "The Director Takes Command," p. 115.

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like symphonic music. Emotion and mood are conveyed by sound as, for instance, the rustle of trees--a clock striking--Masha's whistling--the officers' singing and strumming the guitar--distant sleight bells--the beggar's accordion--"[14] The people in the play, too, immediately caught his imagination. "The play was vivid and close to me--I made no attempt to make it Russian. If those characters came alive to me on stage as they did when I read them, I would be satisfied. They are universal types and in their essence not peculiar to any country or time."[15] McClintic said little of the humor in Chekhov's play but he apparently strove for it as his stage manager, Edward Dimond, testifies:

> McClintic felt that Chekhov was a lighter playwright, that he had more humor in his plays than most people thought. He worked for a balance between humor and sadness. We got a great deal of humaneness into the characters through that balance. I know that in some of the discussions with the translator, Koriansky, they tried to get a homey quality. When they called to each other, it wasn't just saying the name but almost singing it out with a kind of affection. It gave a real family atmosphere to the scenes. Even the servants weren't really servants but members of the family. None of the stars in the show were allowed to act up or indulge themselves. I think they all blended excellently.[16]

Despite his immediate emotional responses and vague and romantic attitude when visualizing a play, McClintic was extremely methodical and disciplined in preparing for the production. All of his resources were mobilized long before rehearsals began and unmistakably conveyed to his cast and his staff.

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[14]McClintic, "Directing Chekhov," p. 213. [15]Ibid., p. 214.

[16]Edward Dimond, New York, interview, September 23, 1970.

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> All the research McClintic did was on his own and he came to rehearsals with his own book and directions in it. He had done six months to a year of work on the book before we even started to read. He was very thorough and he wouldn't have started rehearsals with this great bunch of actors unless he knew exactly where he was going. When he started rehearsals, he was dead sure what he wanted.[17]

The directing book, however, contained little more than key lines of dialogue underlined, the author's directions and a few of his own general notes. He may have known what he wanted to begin with but preferred to keep the production as fluid as possible for as long as he found it necessary. He came to the rehearsals with the entire script memorized and left it to the stage manager to record the movement; he never needed to consult the prompt book.

McClintic, like many another director, was dissatisfied with the translations available and decided to seek a new one. When it had been announced that the McClintics were planning to do The Three Sisters in a new translation, Valentina, the famous couturière, who was a friend and Moscow-born, immediately contacted them and recommended her friend, Alexander Koriansky as translator. Koriansky had been a well-known critic in Moscow before the first World War and was intimately associated with members of the Moscow Art Theatre, having seen their first Chekhovian productions. Above all, he was well versed in English. McClintic and he established a rapport at their first meeting and they immediately set to work on the text. McClintic describes the collaborative methods that evolved between the two men.

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[17] Ibid.

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> We worked together daily for over six months. He would read to me from his original Russian text. I had a secretary take down in shorthand his English as he read it. I would stop him on every speech.
> "That meaning isn't clear. Exactly what does Vershinin mean? Does he mean thus-and-so?"
> "No," would come Sascha's positive protest.
> "Well, then make it clear. How can I direct an actor when the speech is obscure?"
> Back and forth we would go until I was satisfied that I knew Chekhov's intent. Day by day, week by week, this process went on, until finally we emerged with a script in the most "sayable" English I have ever encountered in The Three Sisters.[18]

Since some liberties were taken with the script, perhaps to conform to the director's optimistic and romantic outlook, the text was listed as "prepared" rather than translated by Alexander Koriansky and Guthrie McClintic. For example, Chebutykin's final nihilistic lines, "tarara-boom-deeay! Reads his paper It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter," were cut as well as Olga's repetitive, "If we only knew, if we only knew!" Probably because of the element of time, several of Vershinin's speeches were shortened. More significantly, the character of Andrey was altered, a change made necessary, according to McClintic, because of the exigency of casting. The director claimed that he could not find the right actor to play the brother who was putting on weight and therefore had to be slightly obese. Thus, Chekhov's psychologically significant lines:

> ANDREY
>
> Yes. Our father, the Kingdom of Heaven be his, oppressed us with education. It's absurd and silly, but it must be confessed I began to get fatter after his death, and I have grown too fat in one year, as though a weight had been taken off my body.[19]

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[18]McClintic, Me and Kit, p. 269.

[19]Anton Chekhov, Four Great Plays, trans. by Constance Garnett (New York: Bantam Books, 1958), 132.

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were reduced to:

> Yes. Father, God rest his soul, ground education into us. It may sound silly but it's nevertheless true, that after his death, I began to feel as if my body had been freed from some tremendous pressure.[20]

Again, Natasha's lines in the second act, which urged Andrey to eat sour milk in order to reduce his weight, also had to be cut since a thin actor had been cast for the role.

The collaborators also decided to write in "secondary dialogue" to be used as background conversation in the first and second act as the Moscow Art Theatre had done. Although the exact words could not be distinguished by the audience, McClintic felt that they "gave life, vibration and richness to the performance as a whole."[21] Another interesting alteration of Chekhov's text was the singing of Chebutykin throughout the play, the singing and humming of Vershinin, and the lovers' duet in the third act. Here, McClintic decided to employ one melody for all, a love duet from Eugene Onegin by Tschaikovsky.[22] He may have felt this device to be a unifying agent somewhat akin to a leitmotif in a Wagnerian opera.

It was this tendency to theatrical effect that prompted the director to give conscious shape and form to a dramatic work that seemed too undeliberate and casual in its unfolding. As we shall see in his staging

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[20]Anton Chekhov, "The Three Sisters," text prepared by Alexander Koriansky and Guthrie McClintic (unpublished, personal prompt book of Mr. McClintic, 1942), I.i.17, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, Research Library of the Performing Arts, Theatre Collection, restrictive material file, #1417.

[21]McClintic, Me and Kit, p. 273. [22]Ibid.

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of the play, this propensity was not restricted to the text itself. Stark Young, in his review of the production, regretted the many liberties taken with Chekhov, commenting on "the translation's nipping and cutting and missing many of the close values that in this dramatist mean so much...." and closing his review with not a little bitterness: "I never cease to wonder as to how translators, producers, players, and what not, feel free to improve upon those whom they apparently consider great."[23]

Running his eyes down the cast of McClintic's The Three Sisters would bring tears of joy to the eyes of any Broadway producer. With such theatrical luminaries as Katherine Cornell, Judith Anderson, Ruth Gordon, Dennis King, Edmund Gwenn, Alexander Knox and Tom Powers, the question arises whether the director had intended to adapt the production in order to conform to his cast. McClintic exhibited a defensiveness in this regard since he took deliberate pains to answer such a possible charge.

> There has been a great deal written about the "name" value of our present cast and it is true that the great majority of them has basked in the transitory glory of having their names in electric lights above the plays they have appeared in. However, their name value was to us a secondary consideration. Our goal was fine actors with a certain chemical rightness for the parts we wanted them to play.[24]

Katherine Cornell added her voice in a newspaper interview. "We didn't try to pick an all-star cast. That just happened. We tried to get the people we thought were best suited for the parts."[25]

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[23]Stark Young, "The Three Sisters," New Republic, December 28, 1942, p. 857.

[24]McClintic, "Directing Chekhov," p. 212.

[25]John Ferris, "McClintic, Rehearsal," Baltimore Sun, November 29, 1942. Katherine Cornell Collected Papers, 8-MWEZ, n.c. 20,102.

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It may be that the McClintics' theatrical life had immured them within a circle of star actors and it was only natural to select among these, but it also appears that the search for a cast for The Three Sisters closely resembled a scanning of the pages in Who's Who in the Theatre. Several months after the opening, McClintic was invited by the Yale Drama School to deliver a series of lectures on his experiences as a director. He describes in detail the casting of the production and the obstacles encountered.

> To begin with, out of that cast of fourteen, we were extremely lucky inasmuch as we had five of our original choices with us. That is a very high percentage. The distinguished couple that we originally approached to do Olga and Vershinin, the Colonel whom Masha falls in love with, were unavailable.[26] Luck was again with us in that Judith Anderson was free and enthusiastic about doing it, so that took care of Olga. But then Vershinin, our leading man . . . who for Vershinin? It was May when we definitely knew our original choice would not be available. We were scheduled to open the first week of that following November--five months before rehearsals began. That seemed ample time to find a leading man. We wanted special qualities to be sure--he should be tall, pleasing looking, with good speech, and over military age. Our situation would have been possibly less difficult if we had been able to get an actor from England, but those doors are closed to us now for the duration, so the wires were kept busy here. We had seventeen refusals in all before we finally bagged our man.[27] Many had commitments and were not available; others felt that the revival of the Russian classic, which had never gone beyond the special matinee class in this country (sic), was foredoomed to failure. Four months were consumed in search of a leading man.[28]

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[26]The couple referred to was Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne.

[27]Among the actors who refused the role because of other commitments were Brian Aherne, Orson Welles, Charles Boyer and Ronald Colman. The star that was finally "bagged" was Dennis King. Telegrams and correspondence in Katherine Cornell Collected Papers, 8-MWEZ, 20,102.

[28]Guthrie McClintic, "Yale Drama School Lecture #1, November 11, 1943," quoted in John Keith Tillinghast, "Guthrie McClintic--Director," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1964), pp. 64-65.

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McClintic went on to describe his casting methods with actors he was unacquainted:

> Any sensitive person reading a part is so apprehensive and nervous--everything seems staked on this one shot--that they seldom do justice to themselves. Whereas, when they are put together with the other actors at a first rehearsal--all reading around a table--all of them are nervous together, including the director; so for that reason I almost invariably cast by talking to those actors whose work I don't already know, and endeavor to sense their qualities in regard to the part I am seeing them about. If I feel they are right, I let them read the play, then talk to them about the part, what I would like my reactions to be if they played it, and from their responses make my decision.[29]

McClintic had always been drawn to and intrigued by actors who had attained star status and whom he regarded as individuals blessed with a certain "indefinable chemical" that made the public willing to pay money to see them irrespective of the play they were in. He was willing to pay the enormous salaries they commanded since "they not only enhance any play they appear in but financially they are an insurance."[30] He considered his all-star cast a proper investment. "The Three Sisters from a box office point of view was the most successful revival of the last twenty years."[31]

Because of the personal stature and the magnetism of the individual actors, it was inevitable that McClintic's production would tend towards a glamorization of Chekhov, with the characters emerging on the stage larger than life. He favored actors who possessed highly developed speaking voices and who moved about the stage with unusual skill and grace. Often

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[29]Ibid., p. 66. [30]Ibid., p. 68. [31]Ibid., p. 65.

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referred to as "technicians," they approached their roles with detachment and objectivity rather than using more subjective and analytical methods.

McClintic continually remained sensitive to the criticism that his cast consisted of strong individuals who worked against the Chekhovian tradition of ensemble playing. He decided to answer his critics directly.

> There is always a great deal of talk by the zealous of the great advantages of a permanent repertory company--it is not my intention to go into that now beyond saying that the present company playing The Three Sisters has many of the advantages of the repertory system and none of the disadvantages. Most of them have played together before and, with two exceptions, all have been previously directed by me on numerous occasions. So there was no strain--only a happy familiarity of understanding, sympathy and desire, enriched by exciting experiences elsewhere.[32]

The actors consistently used in McClintic productions were often referred to as "McClintic's stock company." Mordecai Gorelik saw the artistic purpose behind this practice when he commented that "the value of a permanent company has been realized by producers like George Abbott, Guthrie McClintic, or The Theatre Guild, who have tried to keep a nucleus of personnel from one show to another."[33]

Guthrie McClintic's first rehearsal of The Three Sisters began with his reading the play to the entire cast assembled at his home at 23 Beekman Place in New York City. In most of his productions, he began with a full week of readings at his home instead of at the theatre. With Chekhov's play, he felt it necessary to extend these readings to eight days. In his autobiography, he explains the advantages of working there.

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[32]McClintic, "Directing Chekhov," p. 213.

[33]Gorelik, New Theatres for Old, p. 43.

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> We liked rehearsing at 23 because of the informal nature of our early rehearsals. It seemed more gemutlich than the stage of a theatre, which, today, the dictatorship of the unions have made forbidding--forbidding in atmosphere, forbidding in price demand, added to which is the annoyance of the one inadequate light bulb overhead. At Beekman Place, with the dining table extended to its full length and generously supplied with cigarettes, ash trays and ice water, we could read, relaxed and quiet--without the interruption of the chit-chat that frequently emanates from the front of a theatre. And when we would pause between acts, there was the garden to stretch your legs in and the East River to contemplate in case you wanted to end it all, or a cup of tea and a biscuit in case you needed sustenance.[34]

In his Yale lecture series, McClintic described how, sitting at one end of the table, he tried to look as if he knew more than all of the members of the cast put together although he felt nothing of the kind. After he read the play, he had the cast read without any interruptions. When they were finished they were dismissed. At this point he felt he had made a mistake in attempting Chekhov and that he had made wrong choices in casting the various roles. This depression passed when he threw himself into the second day's rehearsal. He described in detail a typical second day rehearsal, a method also used for The Three Sisters.

> The second day I stop them--the actors, I mean. I endeavor to establish mood--tempo. I describe the set to them--the time of day--the approximate lighting--and if it is a period play I try to enliven the era with anecdotes and reminiscences (not my own, God forbid) of that particular time. I try to indicate how they will look by showing them costume sketches--I describe the furniture and the props that they use--then I go back to the scene I interrupted. If there seems to be a hurdle--and there frequently is--I draw an equivalent episode which might involve them personally--entirely ad lib--that parallels the scene we are having trouble with. Then--if they grasp what I mean--we proceed. I invariably tell them I

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[34] McClintic, Me and Kit, pp. 267-68.

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> expect no immediate results--just a faint flicker of consciousness--an understanding of each other. I try not to impose myself on them--I want them to know my concept of the play, and I want to know theirs. We sometimes differ--I listen--I can have overlooked something, but I always argue. If I am convinced that I am wrong I give in--otherwise, they give in. It's unimportant who is right at this period but it is important that the approach to the play is right.[35]

Unlike many directors who leave them for the later rehearsals, McClintic tried to establish the tempo, rhythm and timing of the play during these reading sessions. Tempo, he believed, was even more a matter of sound than of movement: the quality of the tone of voice, the rhythm and intensity of the speech, the proper pause, etc. He felt that these were more easily set when reading and, once established, helped the actors to get the "feel" of the play.

Alexander Koriansky was present for all the rehearsals; the stage manager remembers his contributions to the early readings.

> They also discussed the play and the Russian translator was there too and everybody kicked things back and forth asking him manners and customs of the people of that country and time. Stanislavsky came in for quite a bit of the discussion and the general consensus was that Stanislavsky was not a stick-in-the-mud or a wooden soldier, that he was a very ambivalent character and that his methods were very fluid.[36]

One difficulty with the first few days of readings was the absence of Judith Anderson and Ruth Gordon, who were finishing a film in Hollywood. Analysis of the role of Olga [Anderson] was therefore conducted by mail and telegram.

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[35]McClintic, "Yale Drama School Lecture #4, December 30, 1943," quoted in Tillinghast, pp. 107-108.

[36]Dimond interview.

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"Guth darling--

"This in haste--will you send me a brief idea--yours--of Olga--sketches of clothes and hair--mine at moment is short and pink--so I can see her dressed and think about her your way. I really believe now that I will finish this weekend at latest early next. I cannot fly--unfortunately--but will rest and study and if you could outline movements--it would help.

"I am terribly excited and proud that you want me with you. We thought about you all day and longed to be there. How did it go? All love to you and dear Kit.

"Devotedly,
"Judy"[37]

McClintic's characterization of Olga was telegraphed immediately.

"Letter just received. Wiring in case you're leaving. Regarding dress Olga and sisters extremely conservative and simple, period nineteen hundred. Would prefer hair dark. In general the sisters are daughters of the regiment, the army is their life. It represents culture and education, secondly they have great love for each other. Olga in particular is motivated by her great love and understanding of her sisters--a desire to protect them. Her first act line 'I understand you Masha' would indicate her awareness of Masha's barren marriage--her urging Vershinin to stay for lunch is because of his effect on Masha, and again in act three her advising Irina to marry the Baron and her suddenly losing her temper at Masha's unawareness of Irina's agony when Masha comments on Natasha's walking through. But she is not cross with her a moment later when Masha confesses her love for Vershinin. It is as if she were talking to a child. And at the end of the play Olga's speech to me is a promise--Irina's determination, Masha's resignation. Hope this helps. Play beautiful. Eagerly awaiting you. Love from us both,

"Guthrie"[38]

On the ninth day, the cast moved into the Maxine Elliott Theatre. The Broadway rehearsal period normally consists of three and a half weeks, but McClintic and his wife, acting as their own producers, usually insisted

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[37]Judith Anderson, letter to Guthrie McClintic, undated, Katherine Cornell Collected Papers, 8-MWEZ, 20,102.

[38]Guthrie McClintic, telegram to Judith Anderson, Katherine Cornell Collected Papers, 8-MWEZ, 20,102.

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on four or five weeks regardless of the expense entailed. For The Three Sisters, McClintic was cautious enough to allow himself six weeks for rehearsals, which he felt he could afford since the stars had agreed to smaller salaries in order to do Chekhov's play. Once the production costs had been returned they were to renegotiate higher salaries.

The rehearsals thereafter seemed to take on a different cast. Dimond tells us, "The atmosphere of the rehearsals was very professional in which we worked all the time. Before or after rehearsals McClintic would relax and tell humorous anecdotes that would send us all into fits of laughter. But once the rehearsal was called, he was a pro."[39]

Although severe as a director, he was unusually sensitive to the individual needs of the actors and when a player failed to catch the flavor of a role, he resisted acting it out for him. Instead he would ask at first, "Why do you do that?" or "What do you think such a character would really do in such a situation?" He preferred that the actor characterize the part himself but if there was a disagreement in interpretation, he would offer his idea of what he thought the actor should work for. There were times, however, when in trying to recapture an original mood or attitude with which The Three Sisters had inspired him, his excitement would run away with him. Then he would throw aside all directorial principles and take over the roles himself. At such times, McClintic recalls:

> I acted my head off--paraphrased scene after scene, draped myself on sofas, poised halfway upstairs and made a turn to illustrate what

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[39]Dimond interview.

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> I had seen in my mind's eye. If the actor felt I was right he would do it. If not, he would voice his objection. But on both sides we were valid. On both sides we had respect for the other person.[40]

McClintic possessed one trait that often threatened to disrupt the progress of rehearsals. He had a violent temper that when unleashed had a devastating effect. Fortunately for the production, as Dimond informs us, an ameliorating influence was always present. "If he got too angry or obstreperous, Cornell was always there to offer leverage. He had a temper but he was the boss. If you opened your mouth as a stage manager, you'd probably get hit with the prompt book. He could stare you right into the wall."[41] But McClintic never berated the individual actor nor humiliated him before his colleagues. When a scene went wrong, he would dismiss the cast, send them to their dressing rooms, and go over the lines and business with the actor in private.

Another part of his method in directing The Three Sisters was never to interrupt a scene in rehearsal but to let it run its course and make his comments when it was over. He would continually rework a scene, but not in a piecemeal fashion, and each time the scene was played his suggestions were added to the next run-through. In a newspaper interview he once claimed,

> I never take notes during rehearsals; the stage manager or production assistant holds the book while I watch the scene from different locations out front. I don't interrupt. I have trained myself to remember without notes because stopping to jot things down distracts one's attention from watching.[42]

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[40]McClintic, Me and Kit, p. 275. [41]Dimond interview.

[42]Boston Herald, September 21, 1952, quoted in Tillinghast, p. 142.

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When the cast arrived at the theatre for the first time, they found many of the items that were to be used for the performance. McClintic, as a rule, found that special costumes, props, furniture and even pieces of scenery were indispensable for the actors at this stage of rehearsal. He describes this particular day with some excitement.

> We were eager to get to the Maxine Elliott Theater, which I had procured for the remaining days of rehearsal. There I had all my props, all my furniture and the dressing rooms were available to the ladies so they could don their substitute long skirts of the period--1900. On that first day at the Elliott excitement was at a high pitch. The feminine contingent had their long dresses on; the soldiers adjusted their swords and belts; the theater was dark (that is, no attraction was playing there), so there could be no interruptions; the furniture that was going to be used was on the stage to be sat on, lolled on, perched on; every prop was there--and luxury of luxuries, there would be weeks for the actors to experiment and get used to it all before an audience saw them.[43]

As for the expense these luxuries entailed, the stage manager seems to have caught the determination of the director. "It didn't matter if the property man had to be on or the electrician had to be on, they were on and that was it."[44]

A reporter, invited to attend a rehearsal at this stage, tried to capture the enthusiasm of the company.

> One of the property men is making wide sweeps with a dust cloth over the top of the grand piano ... another brightens up silver and china at a large table upstage. . . . The assistant stage manager, a piece of chalk in his fingers, is refreshing the marks on the floor. . . . "The phonograph record is here, Mr. McClintic," one of the stage hands says. "Good," the director nods. That is the record for the off-stage playing of Andrey. Miss Musgrove [Irina] has slipped into a long black robe. . . . McClintic calls for Miss

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[43]McClintic, Me and Kit, pp. 273-274. [44]Dimond interview.

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> Gordon and Eric Dressler. They move to one side of the stage and begin rehearsing a love scene. McClintic lets them alone. Directorial advice will come a little later. . . . Dennis King--"He's a wonderful director. He thinks of everything. It takes the horror off the later rehearsals when you actually know the feel of the chairs you've to sit in." Edmund Gwenn--"Yes, my boy, we're lucky to have chairs and sofas that we shall recognize. . . ." Dennis King straps on a sword and begins practicing sitting down . . . . A man arrives with a samovar. McClintic leaves his chair to inspect it. . . . Nothing casual. . . . This must be authentic. . . . [45]

For the actual blocking of The Three Sister, McClintic had come to the theatre with all the business of the play mapped out weeks before. He insisted, however, that the actors learn the lines and movement together. He fervently believed that dialogue was motivated by movement and vice versa, and it was useless to learn them separately. Once a diagram of the set was chalked on the stage floor and the furniture properly placed, the actors were told where and when as well as why to move. Each bit of direction had to be properly motivated, evolving as a logical consequence of a collaboration between the director's and the actor's understanding of that particular scene. S. J. Woolf, in an article for The New York Times Magazine describes McClintic's methods in motivating the behavior of his actors.

> "You are supposed to come in here feeling sad," he says as an actress reads her lines. "Think about being sad and what you would say. Now substitute the words of the play for your own but keep the same feeling in them." "For goodness sakes" he exclaims at another place, "You've dashed up a couple of flights of stairs. Show that you are out of breath."[46]

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[45] John Ferris, "McClintic Rehearsal," Baltimore Sun, November 29, 1942. Katherine Cornell Collected Papers, 8- MWEZ, 20, 103.

[46] S. J. Woolf, "Again That Cornell--McClintic Team," The New York Times Magazine, February 21, 1943, sec. 6, pp. 16-17.

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For movement, McClintic preferred an economy of means and a concentration of effect. He demanded that his actors discard all unnecessary gestures and he violently disapproved of "busy" actors. He was especially insistent upon his actors standing still and listening without distracting from the important action. A good example of this is in the opening scene of the play which McClintic regarded as expository. In order to protect the information relayed to the audience, he kept all movement during Olga's long speech to a bare minimum.

A good indication of the intricate planning and disciplined control McClintic maintained over the staging of the production was his ability to orchestrate the production by means of movement (vertical, horizontal and diagonal), different stage levels, volume of speech, and the use of sound. He was thereby able to insure proper focus to a scene during a complicated piece of staging. During the party scene in the first act, before the group sits down to eat, McClintic effectively switched the focus from Kuligin and Olga, who were speaking at up-stage right to Chebutykin and Masha, down left, by having Chebutykin suddenly slap his knee loudly and rise from the piano. The focus was then transferred up left to Vershinin who was on the upper level in the dining room and who loudly proposed a toast. Thus, throughout the group scenes, the audience's attention was directed from one area to another for relevant moments in the scene. Another example of the use of sound and movement for maniupulating the audience's attention is in the second act in which

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the stage is occupied by several groups. After a pause, Chebutykin, in the up-stage group, crackles his newspaper loudly, achieving instant attention through sound, and in a loud voice says that "Balzac was married at Berditcheff. That's worth making a note of. Balzac was married at Berditcheff." Tusenbach, who had been sitting with the downstage grouping, suddenly stands up on his line and this vertical movement immediately brings the focus back to the downstage area. The servants then enter to pour tea and the line of focus follows their progress between the upstage and downstage groupings. The stage thus became a fluid spatial entity containing a choreographed pattern underlined by controlled expressions of sound. This weaving pattern, together with asymetrically balanced stage pictures were a concrete manifestation of McClintic's highly developed visual and aural sense.

McClintic's theatrical flair also demanded that some scenes be heightened for great impact; the curtain of the first act is a prime example. Natasha and Andrey, embarrassed by the teasing of the guests, run from the table and go to the left archway, which is hidden from the party's view. After Andrey's proposal of marriage and a kiss, Chekhov's original text has Two officers come in and, seeing the pair kissing, stop in amazement. CURTAIN.[47] McClintic felt a need for more elaborate staging and added the following business: during Andrey's love speech, the doctor, curious to know what is going on, tiptoes from the table to catch a glimpse of the

[47]Chekhov, Four Great Plays, p. 139.

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lovers. He signals to Fedotik who brings his camera down right center, Kuligin comes down right and Fedotic snaps the picture of the final embrace. The doctor sings a line from Tschaikovsky's Eugene Onegin duet and all laugh heartily. Natasha and Andrey are oblivious to all this and the curtain falls. McClintic undoubtedly thought this made a stronger curtain and also heightened the festivities of the birthday party.

During animated scenes such as the one where the sisters learn that Vershinin has just arrived from Moscow or when they tease Andrey about Natasha, McClintic meticulously rehearsed the actors to speak with such rapid cues that they overlapped, creating a musically cacophanous effect. A sample of the Koriansky-McClintic text appears thus:

MASHA

Come, come.

ANDREY

Now, leave me alone.

) Overlap

MASHA

You are funny. The colonel used to be called the lovelorn Major and he never minded.

VERSHININ

Not in the least.

MASHA

I'd like to call you the lovelorn fiddler.

IRINA

Or the lovelorn scientist.) Overlap

OLGA

Half sings

He's in love. Little Andrey is in love!

IRINA

Bravo, bravo.... Little Andrey is in love.)[48]

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[48]Chekhov, "The Three Sisters," McClintic prompt script, I.17.

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McClintic's ear played an increasingly important part as the rehearsals progressed. When the cast reached the stage of run-throughs, the tempo-pace pattern established during the readings was more a matter of sound than movement. The stage manager offers us a vivid picture of the director's working method at this point.

> One of his habits was sitting backstage in the stage manager's corner on the floor just listening. He would just listen for the pacing and tempo. He didn't have to see it that much as to hear it. He could tell by hearing whether they were giving him what he wanted. If things were too slow, he would wait until the act was over and give notes telling some to pick things up or slow it down and so forth.[49]

He would also watch the run-throughs from every part of the house to make sure everything could be seen as well as heard. He revealed a deep concern for every member of the audience when he said:

> Every theater has what is called a 'slight line.' In some houses every important thing in the action must take place fairly near the center of the stage, or else someone off at the side won't see it. That's hard on me as a director, for I love corners, but I give up scenes in corners in certain theaters.[50]

McClintic considered the run-through stage of the production crucial, for it was at this point that he learned whether he had succeeded in achieving his goal or not. This was the period, he felt, that the director, whom he likened to a chiropractor, must put his fingers on the spine of the play, find the dislocation if there were one and snap it into

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[49]Dimond interview.

[50]Helen Ormsbee, "Producer Like a Fond Father When a Play is Coming to Life," New York Daily News, February 15, 1943. Katherine Cornell Collected Papers, 8-MWEZ, 20,102.

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place. In a newspaper interview, he compared this stage of rehearsal to giving birth to a child.

> "A play coming to life at rehearsals is like the moment when the doctor slaps a new-born baby--the baby gives a cry, and you know it's a live child," said Guthrie McClintic. He was discussing the staging of Chekhov's The Three Sisters which he directed for Katherine Cornell. "Not until the last weeks of rehearsal does a production come alive. Then one day you suddenly see it breathing. When that happened with The Three Sisters the actors all knew it. I saw them watching the scene from the sides of the stage as if they couldn't stop looking. At last the play was there before their eyes. From then on the whole cast was on its toes every minute.[51]

The final week of rehearsals was actually devoted to a series of performances before invited audiences. By this time, the costumes had been approved and were worn by the actors and the sets were in place. The director began fusing the various elements that were to make up the finished production but he still continued to refine such details as speeding up a particular scene, cutting a bit of unnecessary business, and heightening the action at certain points. Before embarking for Washington and their first out-of-town tryout performance, McClintic claimed that "The curtain didn't go up on our first performance there until every detail of the production was as smooth as we could make it. We weren't trying it on the dog. To Kit and me, the road isn't the dog."[52]

Because of McClintic's strong visual sense and his declared need for "taste" in the theatre, he considered scenery, lighting and costume a vital part of the director's total concept. He insisted, however, that these elements constantly remain subservient to the director's intentions; the

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[51] Ibid. [52] Ibid.

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designers were to remain merely members of his production staff. "Good scenery," he once said, "like well-behaved children, should be seen, not heard. It should act with the play and like good acting one shouldn't be conscious of it until one reflects."[53] Thanks to his apprenticeship with Winthrop Ames, he learned what to expect from these elements and how they should be designed and executed. He knew this despite his lack of elementary knowledge in hanging lights, drafting a floor plan or even the painting of a piece of scenery. Here, again, his sense of decor depended almost completely on his intuition--which appears to have been his source of strength in making demands in design. Jo Mielziner, who designed twenty-three of McClintic's productions, called McClintic a difficult director but stimulating and with strong opinions and convictions.

Scenically, McClintic preferred a style that has been known as "selective realism," influenced by the symbolists, which avoided the cluttered detail of naturalism. He saw The Three Sisters peopled by:

> A family of breeding and birth, whose lives seem to have stopped with his [the father's] death and the removal of the army post from the suburban town in which they live. But they are marooned there by their lack of money and their conventions. Their dream is to return to Moscow where they were born, where there is life. Moscow is a symbol, as well as a city--but they never get there. Not circumstances but character defeats them.[54]

"Breeding and birth" became the underlying visual intent made manifest by selecting furniture and dress in subdued colors which reflected an

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[53]McClintic, "Yale Drama School Lecture #5, January 13, 1944," quoted in Tillinghast, p. 86.

[54]McClintic, Me and Kit, p. 270.

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exquisitely informed taste. McClintic implied as much by nodding an acknowledgement to the British designing firm: "I must stop--but before I do I want to make a bow to Motley's for their enchanting decor--."[55]

In his sixth lecture at the Yale Drama School, McClintic described a typical conference with his designers:

> . . . we again discuss period as regards the type of room required--then the color--if it is to be wood-panelled room--the kind of wood, and whether we will have it light or dark--the depth of the room--the height--which way the doors are to open, on or off-stage--the size of them, too--also windows--the kind--whether they are to be practical or not--the color of our curtains and whether they are to be practical as well--the approximate arrangement of the furniture--the covering for the floor--how many lamps, standing or table--wall brackets, where they are placed--the time or times of the year that occur during the action of the play so that we can have the right flowers or foliage for the various scenes--and if there is a fireplace, whether it has to be practical, lit, in other words--in the event of an exterior set how literal or how suggestive are we going to be? In short, we try to face all the problems and difficulties we are likely to encounter at the outset so that we will be prepared for them later when others are sure to rise. After we have done this in the office we check with the stage of the theatre in which we are slated to appear--to see if it can comfortably or otherwise accommodate all this magic we've cooked up for it elsewhere.[56]

All this preparation, however, never ignored that fact that the setting was to be an environment for the action of the play.

McClintic's production style was easily recognized by the artistic effects of his stage settings but he was especially noted for his lighting and claimed to adhere to one cardinal principle.

> There are more theories about lights than you can shake a stick at. I have only one. I want to see my actors--see them clearly without

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[55]McClintic, "Directing Chekhov," p. 215.

[56]McClintic, "Yale Drama School Lecture #6, January 27, 1944," quoted in Tillinghast, pp. 94-95.

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> effort and have them look as well as it is humanly possible. That mysterious thing called mood or quality of the scene can come afterwards, and will come once this major need is taken care of. . . . I have been frequently accused by my scenic maestros of lighting too brilliantly for the front rows of the orchestra. Well, that is the least of my worries. I always light for the back rows upstairs--their occupants are always the people who line up for their tickets well in advance and they deserve a break. . . . This one theory of mine, I may as well tell you, is assimilated. I got it from Winthrop Ames.[57]

From his first production as a director, McClintic insisted upon supervising the lighting of his own shows in order to illuminate the actors as they moved about the stage irrespective of the effect upon the scenery. Once the actors were taken care of, he would let the designer do the best he could with the set. The effect of light was so important to him that he would disregard the source of light on the stage. To achieve the most favorable lighting angles for his actors, he would hide lighting instruments in such unmotivated areas as a bookcase, a fireplace, behind a piece of furniture or beneath a desk. Often attacked for this unusual practice, he replied: "I have never troubled about the factual sources of a light but I troubled a great deal about the effect of a light."[58] He constantly made sure that the effect would be to the utmost advantage to the actor and, above all, as his stage manager admits, his wife.

> He always knew what he wanted and what he wanted was always in the best interest of Cornell. He always used a great deal of pink, not that she needed it. He did most of his own lighting but, of course, it was a much more simplified lighting setup then than it is today with only about 150 lamps.[59]

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[57]Ibid., pp. 101-102. [58]McClintic, Me and Kit, p. 294.

[59]Dimond interview.

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This predilection for a marked visibility of his actors softened with flattering hues caused the critic George Jean Nathan to comment wryly: "There are times when one wishes he would forego the over-elaborate species of lighting favored by the late Belasco which periodically makes his stages resemble so many candy boxes with prettily colored little electric bulbs concealed in the gum drops."[60]

The Three Sisters proved to be one of McClintic's most memorable experiences as a director. "I have had many (knock wood) happy productions and rehearsals, but I can recall none that were more exciting than those of The Three Sisters."[61] The play opened on December 21, 1942 to mostly excellent notices, but McClintic seems to have been one of its most enthusiastic admirers. He describes his reaction to the production at the end of the run.

> After one hundred and twenty-two performances in New York we took it on the road. Everywhere we were acclaimed. (That sounds like every actor but it was true nevertheless.) It improved with every performance. These actors were concerned about the play as a whole. I saw it during its final week in Chicago and as I sat in the audience, which was rapt in attention and filled the theatre to overflowing, I became starry-eyed. It was so good that I forgot I had anything to do with it . . . None of the principals in the cast had anticipated this phenomenal success and all of them had new commitments, so with our banners flying high and capacity business we closed.[62]

The production had an over-all run of thirty-nine weeks, the longest run a Chekhovian play had enjoyed in America up to that time.

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[60]George Jean Nathan, Entertainment of A Nation (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1942), p. 126.

[61]McClintic, "Directing Chekhov," p. 212.

[62]McClintic, Me and Kit, p. 278.

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Among those who welcomed this new version of The Three Sisters was Rosamond Gilder of Theatre Arts magazine who found McClintic's directing style particularly appropriate for Chekhov. She observed that every actor brought an individual life to the play that created a "delicately balanced human symphony of the whole." She acknowledged the formidable difficulties of a hastily assembled group of stars for a comparatively short rehearsal period and added:

> Under Mr. McClintic's direction, however, these various American and English players have been brought together in a homogeneity all the more remarkable in view of the natural differences in their style and manner of playing. All the contradictions in method and tone have not been eliminated, in certain cases they have been consciously retained and emphasized, but on the whole the stars move together in unusual harmony.[63]

Willella Waldorf, of The New York Post, admired the production although she remained distracted by the roster of distinguished names and the audience's reaction to them.

> Obviously it was up to the stage director last night to fuse these starry elements into some sort of pattern, without which Chekhov is apt to degenerate into a windy bore. Guthrie McClintic has succeeded in doing this remarkably well for the most part, for while it is inevitably distracting to encounter a number of popular and well-known actors in parts of less importance than they usually play, to have them pause for some minutes while the audience greets them with salvos of applause, and to endeavor to fit them into the provincial home of the Prozorovs in the Russia of 1900, the performance finally settles down and moves with admirable smoothness after a somewhat erratic beginning.
>
> Miss Gordon, no mean comedienne on occasion, had only to wave an arm and the audience was in stitches. It was in times like these that our misgivings as to the "all-star revival" approach

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[63]Rosamond Gilder, "Three Sisters and A War," Theatre Arts, XXVI, No. 2 (1943), 74.

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> to Chekhov rose up again after being all but forgotten in some well directed ensemble playing.[64]

A similar comment was made by John Beaufort of the Christian Science Monitor but he was equally forgiving when he wrote:

> But what of the spectator's relation to a production like this? If he has been drawn by the play, he will expect the actors to subordinate themselves to its demands. If he has been attracted by the starriness of the occasion, he may expect solos and will have no compunction about disturbing the mood of the play--so paramount in Chekhov--to applaud his favorites. Last night's audience gave such manifestations of inconsiderateness.
>
> Guthrie McClintic's direction has placed the accent on the universal rather than the essentially Russian nature of the play. With its sad jokes, its moods, and its poignant frustrations, the drama itself could never be anything but Russian. This production, however, has neither the national homogeneity of a Moscow Art Theater interpretation nor the theatrical homogeneity of an ensemble of long standing. Nevertheless, Mr. McClintic has succeeded in directing his illustrious cast so that everyone appears to be answering to the style and concept of the production.[65]

It is curiously evident that the more glowing the review of the performance, the less enthusiasm was shown for the play. Burton Rascoe of The New York World-Telegram called the production "without doubt, an artistic event in the history of the theater." He found the play unworthy of the efforts of the cast.

> But there is such a thing as pertinence, even in the finest of stage performances, and never did a play seem more like a museum piece than The Three Sisters did last night. A very Aubusson carpet of

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[64]Willela Waldorf, "Chekhov's 'The Three Sisters' Revived by Katherine Cornell," New York Evening Post, December 22, 1942, *T-NBL+, 1942-43, SP-TH.

[65]John Beaufort, "Revival of 'Three Sisters' Presented by Miss Cornell," Christian Science Monitor, December 22, 1942, p. 4, loc. cit.

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> a museum piece, to be sure, an antique gold-plated samovar, if you will, but a museum piece just the same.[66]

Again, Howard Barnes, of The New York Herald Tribune found The Three Sisters a rare experience in play-going but considered the play "somewhat wanting." His review included a warning to the reader. "If it proves only partially rewarding it is because of the drama itself and not the fashion of the revival."[67] Robert Coleman of The New York Daily Mirror saw the evening as a great triumph for the actors and director but as for Chekhov he could only add, "The Three Sisters is a tragic study of human frustration and disintegration. Like a big sluggish river, it is not very exciting of itself to watch."[68]

Months later, Mary McCarthy felt the urge to answer these particular reviewers in the Partisan Review. She began her article with the acerbity that has established her literary reputation.

> In reviewing the current version of The Three Sisters, the New York drama critics, almost to a man, congratulated Miss Cornell on her all-star production and deplored her choice of play. What integrity, what generosity, what talent, and all, alas, wasted on an inferior play by a dramatist whom we all revere but who, it must be confessed, seems dull and bookish in these stirring times. The general impression was that Miss Cornell in her devotion to art had committed an act of desperate, if winning folly; like a great lady who loves the poor so much that she gives away her fortune to a beggar on the street . . .

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[66] Burton Rascoe, "Chekhov's 'Three Sister' Opens at the Barrymore," New York World-Telegram, December 22, 1942, loc. cit.

[67] Howard Barnes, "Cornell and Chekhov," New York Herald Tribune, December 22, 1942, loc. cit.

[68] Robert Coleman, "'Three Sisters' Packs Emotional Wallop," New York Daily Mirror, December 22, 1942, loc. cit.

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> The fact is, of course, that The Three Sisters is not an inferior play of Chekhov, at least not strikingly so. . . The fact is also that Miss Cornell, whose devotion to art is indeed painfully sincere, has given us a production that erupts heavily, like a slow volcano, over the topography of the play, so that the playgoer who would like to know what Chekhov was doing here must perform a considerable work of archaeology. . . The funereal note is struck in the opening speech and the play is driven--at a respectable speed--to its last resting-place in the fourth act. The critics then join the mourners in lamenting the fact that the play is dead.[69]

What Miss McCarthy seemed to miss most in the production was the comic element by which Chekhov's amusing characters are given an awareness of the absurdity of their position in life thus adding to the irony of the play. Given the heavy-handed characteristic of an all-star cast, these values were lost. "It is Chekhov's peculiar use of a kind of modified soliloquy to treat the theme of self-consciousness that is his dramatic signature; Miss Cornell and most of her fellow-actors handle these delicate passages as though they were either so many yards of plain expository material or interpolated operatic dirges."[70]

It should be remembered that McClintic's production was being performed during the siege of Stalingrad and that Chekhov's tragic-comic spirit had been temporarily eclipsed by the heroic image of the new Soviet man. As one reviewer saw it, thus confirming McCarthy's severest criticism, "Yes, the present is a fulfillment of the version of Vershinin. The present is writing a triumphant finish to Chekhov's saga of defeat."[71]

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[69]Mary McCarthy, "The Russian Soul," Partisan Review, March-April, 1943, p. 184.

[70]Ibid., p. 186.

[71]Robert Coleman, "'Three Sisters' Packs Emotional Wallop," New York Daily Mirror, December 22, 1942, loc. cit.

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CHAPTER VI

NORRIS HOUGTON

The inception of the Phoenix Theatre's 1954 production of Chekhov's The Sea Gull was actually in the season before the theatre organization was formed. Kevin McCarthy, who was to play the role of Trigorin, pin-pointed its beginnings when he and Mira Rostova did the Nina-Treplev scene in the fourth act at the Actor's Studio a year before the production. It was received with considerable enthusiasm.

> I think it was an enormous success because of Mira, not because of me. I was playing the part of Treplev, the part that was later played by Monty Clift. It encouraged us to do something about Mira, really. It was done because of our interest in her. That was the prime moving thing. So we said why don't we put it on and we began to work and read the play very carefully.[1]

When the Phoenix Theatre opened its doors for the first time in the Fall of 1953, Norris Houghton and T. Edward Hambleton issued a policy statement which expressed their purpose in creating a theatre where artists could work "free from the pressures of the hit-or-flop pattern of Broadway."[2] Evaluating the theatre's contribution years later, Houghton wrote: "Only

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[1]Kevin McCarthy, New York, interview, January 6, 1971.

[2]Norris Houghton, Return Engagement (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 195.

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twice before has anything comparable happened in our theatre in the last forty years: Eva Le Gallienne's Civic Repertory Theatre in the twenties, and the Group Theatre in the thirties. Those were also moments of dedication and service."[3]

The co-producers had difficulty in deciding upon the production that would round out their first season. As he himself stated, Houghton had been contemplating the possibility of doing Chekhov for some time.

> It was the end of our first season at the Phoenix Theatre and beforehand I had heard of a project that was being worked on by Montgomery Clift in the Spring of 1953. I got in touch with Clift and told him it might be a possibility for the Phoenix. Our policy was doing new plays and revivals and The Sea Gull with the availability of Clift looked like it might help round out the season. I myself had been interested in Chekhov, having visited Moscow and many rehearsals of the Moscow Art Theatre, and also never having directed a Chekhov play before, it seemed like the appropriate occasion.[4]

For more than a year, Mira Rostova, Montgomery Clift, and Kevin McCarthy had been working on a new translation of the play as well as preparing important scenes for a possible future production. When they were approached by the Phoenix Theatre, Miss Rostova felt extremely reluctant to accept the offer, on the following grounds: "I objected to the facilities and conditions under which we would have to work. The house was too big and we had no control over the production decisions such as the director, time element, and so forth."[5] Some unsuccessful

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[3]Ibid.

[4]Norris Houghton, New York, interview, September 10, 1970.

[5]Mira Rostova, New York, interview, September 30, 1970.

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attempts were made to do the play under their own auspices elsewhere. Rostova finally agreed, although with misgivings. "We were advised that we would find no perfect situation and should take this opportunity."[6]

Norris Houghton, a student of the Russian theatre since the thirties, had written Moscow Rehearsals, based in part on his observations of the Moscow Art Theatre. He had always felt that Chekhov lacked a proper audience in this country mainly because of poor translations and not until the efforts of Stark Young did the American theatregoer begin to see what Chekhov was saying in his plays. He traced other developments that contributed to a growing acceptance of the Russian dramatist.

> Then, beginning with the Group Theatre and the serious study of Stanislavsky, the way to play Chekhov became more apparent. Then, again, because of the times and the frustrations that Chekhov was writing about are coming home more to us in the forties, the fifties and sixties than in the twenties and thirties. We are feeling more sympathetic towards the characters today.[7]

On the subject of dramatic form, Houghton regarded Chekhov as one of the great innovators, since he had objectified the formlessness of life so far ahead of his day. Looking back on the development of dramatic structure, he reflected:

> The period of the well-made play no longer exists. We no longer demand that plays be based on plots with a logical dénouement and a beginning, a middle and an end. I don't know which came first, the appreciation of Chekhov or that lack of demand but certainly today plays are not that well constructed like Scribe. Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie didn't have a beginning, a middle and an end but everybody loved it and so by extension they loved Chekhov. We now know there are no resolutions to situations and

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[6]Ibid. [7]Houghton interview.

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> we used to like to have everything tied up into a neat package. Life had a form but suddenly life lost its form and Chekhov became very contemporary. In art as we go from the rigid to the seeming formless is a sign of greater sophistication. . . He was ahead of his time by at least half a century.[8]

In his analysis of the play, Houghton made an interesting and perhaps an original observation. He felt that the play broke down into its four acts according to the characters so that the first act belonged to Constantine, the second act was Trigorin's, the third was Arkadina's and the fourth act Nina's. "If you study the play," he said, "you'll find that one character dominates each act with a big climatic scene." He dismissed the thought that the theme of the play was about the struggle of the artist and the creative process. "I believe the play is about the necessity for having a reason for living, for hope, and if you lose that hope there is no point in living."[9] For this reason the play is called The Sea Gull after Nina; the fourth act is therefore Nina's act; she is the one character who claims to have found the truth while Constantine, who has lost all hope, must destroy himself. "Chekhov is making a definite statement which is that no matter how bad things are, you've got to learn to live with yourself. Perhaps you're mediocre and your talents are mediocre but you must go on."[10]

Nineteen fifty-four was the year following the British publication of David Magarshack's, Chekhov the Dramatist, in which critical evidence was assembled to demonstrate that Stanislavsky's appreciation of Chekov's

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[8]Ibid. [9]Ibid. [10]Ibid.

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plays was originally based on a misconception, that they were neither tragic nor pessimistic, that their mood was not one of frustration and melancholia but of energy and the longing to live a full life. In an article in The New York Times, Houghton regarded this as ". . . a startlingly new point of view, but it is one to which, at least in some measure, I subscribe. . . . I believe that Stanislavsky and his company came somewhat belatedly to subscribe to it also."[11] Having made a study of The Sea Gull and realizing that he would now be directing it, Houghton had already decided how the comedy and the tragedy were to be mingled in staging terms. "I was determined that it was not going to be a melancholy production," he said. After a pause, he added: "But then Rostova and Clift had their own ideas as well."[12]

Houghton was reluctant to call The Sea Gull a comedy "except in the cosmic sense." Nor was it quite accurate, he believed, to dub it a tragedy. "Rather, it is woven of the stuff of life. Like life it is compounded of laughter and tears in about equal measure."[13] Above all, he meant to avoid the charge of remoteness and quaintness; neither would he give an extremely nationalistic quality to the production. "Happily," he wrote, "I believe one does not have to worry too much about this if one trust Chekhov himself. His people and their actions

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[11]Norris Houghton, "The Sea Gull at the Phoenix," New York Times, May 9, 1954, sec. 2, p. 2.

[12]Houghton interview.

[13]Houghton, "Sea Gull at the Phoenix," p. 2.

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and reactions are so recognizable, so real, so permanently true to all human nature, that all you have to do is to present them honestly and directly and everything will take care of itself. (Needless to say, this is easier said than done!)"[14]

Houghton found the translation done by Rostova, Clift and McCarthy a "reasonably faithful" one reflecting a desire to render the Chekhov text into English with the simplicity and directness of the original. Mira Rostova describes how the three actors had fashioned the text the year before.

> I would translate the words from the Russian into English which Clift and McCarthy would try to put the English into easily spoken language. It was not a literal translation. The purpose was to carry over Chekhov's words and directions exactly without losing the nuances and hidden meanings of the Russian language. I think that Garnett is correct but too clumsy and Stark Young is too unfaithful to Chekhov.[15]

As an example of the "easily spoken language," she pointed out Medvedenko's first line in the play which was invariably translated, "Why do you always wear black?" The actors felt that "Why do you go around in black?" was more idiomatic and easier for an American to say.

Kevin McCarthy recalled the prodigious work that went into the translation and related the difficulties in detail.

> It took many, many, many hundreds of hours because of the difficulty of getting her to convey to us through our understanding of the English language and her understanding of the Russian language exactly what was the real meaning of the lines. Was it a nuance, was it lyric, was it poetic? All the Constance Garnett writing was alien to Chekhov's style which is a very simple kind of Russian as spoken and has no kind of affectation or literary graces but is very poetic because the simplicity is what brings the poetry to it. Trying to get every little measure

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[14]Ibid. [15]Rostova interview.

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> of meaning and feeling, we finally finished it. Then we gave it to Thorton Wilder to read and he immediately began to rewrite and make changes--much to our consternation. He'd say, "Nobody ever talks like that," or, "People don't say that." He just took a very free hand with what we had done but we more or less stuck with what we wrote. He wasn't interested in what we were doing, such as our obsession in the details but in the general effect of how the lines would sound. I remember one phrase when Trigorin says to Nina, "Circumstances have arranged themselves in such a way that it appears that we are leaving today."[16] That's exactly Chekhov. Wilder said, "Oh God, you can't say that." He suggested, "Well things have changed, we're going to be leaving," or something like that. We left what we had done intact.[17]

George Voskovec, who played Dr. Dorn, found some of the dialogue awkward and difficult to speak. He remembers Thornton Wilder presence at many of the rehearsals to supervise revisions of the text. But since Wilder did not know Russian he could only suggest changes if the dialogue sounded too clumsy. Wilder was a great admirer of the play but confessed to Voskovec, "I feel by instinct that this translation is not what the author had in mind."[18] Some of his revisions created a great deal of dissension between the actors and the adapters.

> I particularly remember the last line of the play, "The fact is, Constantin Garilitch has shot himself. . . ." Now, I was always unhappy about the ". . . has shot himself. . . ." It's always translated that way and I asked some people who knew Russian what I had suspected, namely, that the line is written with a preposition to the verb to shoot which makes it into shot himself to death or killed himself, which is terribly important to me. It makes it infinitely more effective and is

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[16]Close enough. The actual line as translated is: "Circumstances have unexpectedly rearranged themselves in such a way that it seems we are leaving today." Anton Chekhov, "The Sea Gull," adaptation prepared by Mira Rostova, Montgomery Clift and Kevin McCarthy (unpublished, property of Mira Rostova), II.18.

[17]McCarthy interview.

[18]George Voskovec, New York, interview, January 20, 1971.

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> more appropriate as a throw-away line at the curtain. So Wilder changed it to "killed himself...." The three were absolutely furious but in this particular case they didn't have their way.[19]

Karl Light, an actor who played the small role of Yakov and doubled as the assistant stage manager, observed: "As far as the translation was concerned, the attitude of the three was they had written the play and wouldn't let anybody play with it. It was really a rather clumsy translation."[20]

The producers of the Phoenix Theatre had accepted the three actors and the translation as a package, and casting, except for Madame Arkadina, was therefore limited to the lesser roles. Since he knew nothing of her work, Houghton had serious doubts concerning Mira Rostova playing the important role of Nina, but Montgomery Clift refused to do the play without her. "He insisted she was a very fine actress," Houghton recalled. "I understand she had a reputation as an excellent acting teacher."[21] Judith Evelyn was cast as Arkadina, the director regarding her as a more external actress than Maureen Stapleton, cast as Masha. Evelyn, playing a woman without any depth, would enhance the production by an external performance. "She seemed superficial and that was correct because Arkadina was a superficial woman, so I think. And Masha, who was a very sensitive woman, without superficialities, was played by an actress who had a certain depth."[22]

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[19]Ibid.

[20]Karl Light, Princeton, New Jersey, interview, March 19, 1971.

[21]Houghton interview. [22]Ibid.

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Kevin McCarthy was convinced, and with some justification, that the producers bought their package primarily because of the presence of Montgomery Clift, who was at the peak of his movie career. "We had a lot to do with casting but we didn't really get those we wanted," McCarthy said. The three actors, objecting to Judith Evelyn as Arkadina, preferred Stella Adler, who proved to be unavailable. Sam Jaffe materialized out of a friendship to play Sorin, and, after some search, George Voskovec was finally chosen to play Dorn. "When we finally did the play, people complained that there were about eleven different acting styles on the stage."[23]

That the company consisted of a strange conglomeration of acting backgrounds cannot be denied. Four members of the cast were from the Actor's Studio and committed to "method" acting; George Voskovec, recently from Czechoslovakia, came out of the European acting tradition; Judith Evelyn, June Walker, Sam Jaffe, Will Geer, and John Fielder had received their experience and training on the Broadway stage. The director considered this problem surmountable.

> We had actors who came from many different schools. We also had a couple of actors with accents--which is always difficult. This is not ideal but we had good actors which helped compensate for it. I didn't really feel that the stylistic differences were all that great.[24]

Two months elapsed between the decision to do The Sea Gull and the first rehearsal. The burden of his administrative duties together with the pressures of immediate casting may have given Houghton little time to prepare himself for the production. The assistant stage manager, who was

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[23]McCarthy interview. [24]Houghton interview.

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present at every rehearsal, does not recall Houghton with a directing book at any time. "I never saw him refer to one. To the best of my knowledge, he didn't do any preparation; it was as if the thing was just going to happen. I always had a feeling that he was unprepared."[25] In truth, Houghton's method of approaching a production is to keep the rehearsals extremely open and fluid. He had made a careful analysis of the play but was determined not to impose his conclusions upon the company in acting terms. "I don't work them out beforehand as part of a directing book," he said. "Perhaps I should but I never have. I think you'll find these motivations and relationships coming out of the actors."[26]

As a director, Houghton claims that he works "method," or rather an adaptation of it. His approach is highly personal as may be seen by his vagueness when trying to explain it.

> I can't really pinpoint it because I really don't know. I probably work more externally than say Kazan or Strasberg. I think what I'm concerned about mostly and especially with Chekhov are the personal relationships and discovering the motivations that affect behavior. Chekhov doesn't make any sense if you don't.[27]

Despite the theatre organization's policy statement of the artist being ". . . free from the pressures of the hit-or-flop pattern of Broadway," Houghton had many misgivings about doing The Sea Gull under the given circumstances, as had Mira Rostova. He was sure the Russians would be appalled at the thought of doing Chekhov in four weeks with a disparate group of actors who were rushed into production to round out

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[25]Light interview. [26]Houghton interview. [27]*Ibid*.

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a season. He justified the attempt, however, when he said, "In this case I felt that we could do it because Clift, Rostova and McCarthy had been working on it for many months. . . ."[28] Ironically, it was this justification that was to prove the director's greatest difficulty. By accepting the three actors and the translation as a package he had, in effect, forfeited a good deal of his authority, a situation which, in time, prejudiced his position as director. A clique within the company was immediately established, and by remaining distant and aloof from the rest of the cast, it became a divisive element throughout the rehearsals. To this day, Kevin McCarthy's attitude remains unchanged when he explains why they accepted the Phoenix Theatre's invitation and what they expected from the production.

> I don't think the director had a concept of the play. We didn't want anybody to tell us how to do it because we thought we knew how to do it better than anybody else. We knew the play better than he did. We knew the parts, we knew everything better than anybody else did. We felt our taste was better than anyone else's. We took Norris Houghton but he's more of a lecturer or something like that. . . I think ten or twelve intelligent people can put on Chekhov without a concept provided they don't have different acting styles. To get that unifying taste is what is so difficult.[29]

It wasn't long after the first rehearsal that the remainder of the company began resisting the superior posture of the three actors whom they subsequently called "the terrible threesome."

Karl Light remembers the director coming to the first day of rehearsal with a great deal of exuberance; he regarded the possibilities as unlimited

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[28] Ibid. [29] McCarthy interview.

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since they were blessed with an outstanding cast, who would be working with a great play, and he anticipated a wonderful time. "It sort of wound down from there,"[30] the assistant stage manager added. As for the early rehearsal period, Norris Houghton recalls: "We sat around a table and read for about four days in which we also had discussions, analyses of the play, studies of the characters, and various interpretations. We talked much more than we would have doing a Broadway production and my Russian experience helped to a great degree."[31]

For some of the actors, the readings did not prove to be a fruitful period. It was especially trying for George Voskovec, who describes his frustration in some detail:

> It seemed that we read the play at the beginning forever and ever and ever. Norrie was absolutely petrified of getting us up on our feet and we just read and read and read and nothing was happening. It's fine, it's a legitimate way to get into a play, particularly a play that's delicate, that is unusual and a play that requires such ensemble playing. None of the people ever worked together before except the three so there is plenty that could be achieved around the table. But the director wasn't doing anything. He was just listening and was saying, "Well, let's read it again." He was absolutely helpless in any concrete, specific direction. He would sometimes say that this should be a little faster or something as meaningless as that.[32]

Light, who was on the book all during rehearsals, expressed a similar bewilderment. "Norrie would talk about the beauty of the play. This is what got him. But it had no relationship with what the actors were really getting across. He was more concerned with the script itself rather than how the actors were making it come to life."[33]

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[30]Light interview. [31]Houghton interview.

[32]Voskovec interview. [33]Light interview.

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It became apparent that ensemble playing would be out of the question during the readings. George Voskovec was almost violent in his bitterness in explaining why.

> Norrie was in a difficult position because of the three actors. That was the main problem. For example, in those reading rehearsals, everybody would rehearse in order to read for meaning first, then would try to get some kind of characterization, get the situation and the relationships and so forth and so on, and you work. Whenever it came to a scene between the three "geniuses," they would sit close together and would read on this level [at this point he dropped his voice and began to mumble inaudibly] between themselves and even when they had scenes with others. It was monstrous, absolutely ludicrous.[34]

Light confirmed this particular problem, although with less exasperation when he said:

> You always got the feeling that the three of them were the three of them and the rest of the cast was the rest of the cast. That was because of the difference in voice volume and that the three seemed to have a working relationship with each other and they didn't seem to concern themselves with a working relationship with the other actors.[35]

Kevin McCarthy could only recall sitting around a table reading the play and nothing more while Miss Rostova found it difficult to discuss the actual rehearsal period because of her painful memories of the late Montgomery Clift.

The readings seemed to portend a deterioration of the working relationship between the actors and the director, although Houghton claimed they were productive. He did admit some tensions in Montgomery Clift, who was highly strung and was making his first appearance in New York

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[34]Voskovec interview. [35]Light interview.

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after becoming a Hollywood star. "He had been away from the New York stage for seven years," the director said, "and The Sea Gull was his only appearance, which made him feel he had a great deal at stake, while Mira Rostova had never appeared on the New York stage."[36] McCarthy regarded Houghton's role as that of a genial general manager and not much more than a traffic cop. "He was in a kind of funny position,"[37] he mused.

George Voskovec was uninhibited in describing the working relationships within the company, especially with respect to the three principles.

> Montgomery Clift and Kevin McCarthy studied with Rostova and she had a great deal of authority over them. She got their confidence and admiration and she would direct them even though the show was supposed to be directed by Norrie. These three always did their own thing, more or less, and the choices in my opinion were absolutely dreadful. The best of them was Montgomery Clift, who, I thought, was an excellent Treplev. He was good in spite of himself and his complicated theories.[38]

The "in spite of himself" referred to Clift's playing the role as a member of the beat generation with his shoulders hunched and his hands in his pockets, a style Voskovec regarded as too contemporary for an idealistic Russian youth at the turn of the century. It was a criticism that Clift was to suffer from the company, the public, and the critics alike.

Voskovec was no more generous in evaluating the director's work with the actors.

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[36]Houghton interview. [37]McCarthy interview.

[38]Voskovec interview.

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> Norris Houghton proved to be quite helpless. I was very surprised because I understood that he had some experience and knowledge of the Russian theatre. He wrote a book about the Moscow rehearsals. I was amazed because his direction consisted of telling us that it was very good and now let us do it again and better. . . . He would talk to us about scholarly details, about various interpretations and various analyses of the play but he would present them in a way that didn't help us as actors. He was like a teacher that was lecturing to us. . . . Little by little it became a thing where every man went for himself.[39]

Despite the directorial vagueness and absence of authority, the actor recalls acting relationships that began to develop through the efforts of the performers.

> When you have a powerful play like this and a director who doesn't do much, you have to do something and depend on the author and therefore some situations came to life. I remember, for instance, I developed an excellent relationship with Maureen [Masha] at the end of the first act which is important and we loved doing it. . . I also remember working privately in the theatre, while other scenes were on, with Monty who had his ideas about the scene with Dr. Dorn when they discuss Constantin's play. For that scene he had good ideas. I don't remember what they were but he contributed a great deal to the scene and wanted us very much to get together and work on it.[40]

Karl Light, too, had few kind words in the unfolding of this painful saga.

> As far as the three were concerned, most of their stuff was done privately and quietly and nobody really knew what the heck was going on there. It was a whole separate cast within a cast. Norrie is a remarkable guy because I think any other director would have blown his top at one point or another. He found himself in a very difficult position.[41]

As a young actor, Light felt a close kinship to one of the actresses and seemed to have a profound understanding of her difficulties.

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[39] Ibid. [40] Ibid. [41] Light interview.

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> Judith Evelyn, not being the actress she might have been, I suppose, really needed the help of a director and she wasn't getting it and she also needed the help of the actors around her. Sometimes she got it and sometimes she didn't. . . The fact is that Arkadina is a fantastic part and you can't treat the actress playing her as a supporting player. It's ridiculous. You need actors who can talk to each other, who can understand each other and are willing to subjugate themselves to the play and to the other actors when it's needed.[42]

When it came to the staging of the play, Light recalls that "about the end of the fourth day they got up on their feet and began wandering around the stage."[43] This loose approach agrees with the director's intentions for blocking and movement as he himself informs us:

> I believe you have to work with the environment. I worked out with the designer where the entrance from the house would be in the first act, where the entrances would be inside the house in the other acts, where the furniture was going to be placed, where, for example, the game was going to be played in the last act. Those are the physical factors to work with. A great deal emerges from the dynamics of the scene but always contained by the environment.[44]

He went on to say he was not interested in stage tableaux merely for visual effect but only as they revealed relationships within the given situation. Blocking in advance was advisable only within a limited rehearsal time such as summer stock but for Chekhov he was convinced that flexibility was of the utmost importance. He also felt a director should impose a minimum of demands as to where the actors should walk or sit and not in any arbitrary or predisposed manner. It was equally important to see that the actors were comfortable and natural in their movements. "As a rule," he said, "we worked out most of the blocking and business during rehearsal."[45]

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[42]*Ibid.* [43]*Ibid.* [44]Houghton interview. [45]*Ibid.*

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But the actors insisted there was only a haphazard design in the blocking. McCarthy believed that "we did the blocking mostly ourselves. He may have done some of it." He then added off-handedly, "we could do pretty much what we wanted."[46] Voskovec found the director's suggestions for movement equally unhelpful to the actor.

> When it was time for blocking Norrie came with designs of the sets and the stage manager indicated the sets on the floor and we started struggling through it. Norrie blocked it so painfully, so awkwardly and undecidedly and so tentatively that the actors finally did it themselves, more or less.[47]

Karl Light saw little stage guidance except for an occasional incident when someone ended up where he obviously didn't belong. "The play was pretty much blocked by the actors which I think is the way the three wanted to work. They wanted to have it evolve. But nothing ever came into sharp focus, none of the confrontations ever got anywhere."[48]

It must be said that the director, during our interview, continually made a valiant attempt at being discreet and fair to some of the actors in the company. He had obviously given the play a great deal of thought, but many of his suggestions went unheeded; he was in an awkward and untenable position. He described one moment in the rehearsal in which he failed to get what he asked for.

> There were some differences in interpretation in the staging. I remember an instance at the end of the fourth act after Nina's exit, Clift made a turn upstage at a very critical moment, in fact, just

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[46]McCarthy interview. [47]Voskovec interview.

[48]Light interview.

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> before he leaves to kill himself and Clift played the whole scene with his back to the audience. I said, "Monty, you can't play this scene without letting the audience see what you are going through." He said, "Oh, this is much too difficult. I couldn't possibly do it." I suppose not being able to share this moment with the audience may not be a matter of interpretation but of theatrical technique.[49]

"But as far as interpretation is concerned, I don't recall ever having clashes."[50] Amazingly enough, this is true, for none of the actors recalled anyone blowing up during the entire rehearsal period. The smallest spark would have undoubtedly jeopardize the production.

As the rehearsal progressed, it became clear that the production was not coming into its expected focus. Many of the scenes did not work and the run-throughs lacked cohesion and a sense of direction. At this point, McCarthy decided to invite Arthur Miller in to see what help he might offer. The actor had starred in a version of All My Sons directed by Miller and he considered the playwright one of the best directors he had worked for. "Miller came in to talk to us and made notes," McCarthy continued. "It made some difference, I think. He thought it was rather loose, flopping about the stage in an untidy way. Some actors wanted to be free, to do what they wanted, others wanted discipline and pace. There was a conflict."[51]

George Voskovec remembers the effect one run-through had on Miller, who with tears rolling down his cheeks, went backstage to tell the cast he found the play very moving and beautiful and thanked them for doing a marvelous job. "He said something excellent, that he

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[49]Houghton interview. [50]Ibid. [51]McCarthy interview.

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couldn't hear us. Arthur could hear everyone in the cast but these three principles. So he got the volume up a little bit but they went back to mumbling later on with their self indulgence."[52]

Kar Light was also impressed by Miller's reaction to the run-through. "He really had tears running down his face, not so much from the production as from the play."[53] With Houghton's permission, Miller began working with the actors but Light, too, found Miller's efforts unavailing.

> He changed some of the blocking. . . .What the performance desperately lacked was a kind of pace but even he didn't seem to pay much attention to it. It needed a rising and falling within the acts and scenes. It had no shape, no direction. They weren't going anywhere. They were just sort of roaming--meandering. Miller couldn't help too much either because he hadn't been there from the beginning or he hadn't worked on the play to the point where he knew how and where the shape should occur. The work I saw him do with people was with scenes, a scene here and a scene there. It was not related to the whole. They were aware of the problems but I kept getting the feeling from Norrie and others that it would begin to come together, everything would fall into place. But as we approached dress rehearsal, it wasn't really much better. Occasionally it would improve and then it would fall back again. I don't remember any specific thing that was said or done to attempt to tighten the production.[54]

He also sensed a significant rapport between Miller and Chekhov's text which the Phoenix Theatre director lacked. He realized the latter had an intellectual grasp of the play but was unable to translate it into terms that the actors might use. In this sense, Miller seemed to be more successful with one of the actresses.

> The best thing that came out of Miller's presence, as far as I can see, was the kind of performance he got out of Maureen Stapleton.

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[52]Voskovec kinterview. [53]Light interview. [54]Ibid.

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> She suddenly blossomed. He seemed to be able to relate what was going on with Masha and Medvedenko and Constantine. I remember he talked to her in terms of A Bronx Jewish girl whose mother told her she had to marry somebody some time along the way so she married Medvedenko because there was no choice. But the attraction and repulsion, the need to be married and the real lack of any relationship from her toward Medvedenko, and having John Fiedler play that part made it easier, that ambivalence helped the actress.[55]

By this time the production was completely out of the hands of the director and, without question, no one knew it better than Houghton himself. His study of theatre had made him fully aware of the responsibilities of the director, as he explained it: "The director has to assume greater authority as the production gets closer to the opening. He can't let a laissez faire creative activity go on indefinitely. He's got to pull everything together."[56] By opening night, The Sea Gull could only be a painful reminder of the prevalent pitfalls in theatre production in general and the disastrous intangibles that accompany Chekhov in particular.

Since the Phoenix Theatre is a non-profit institution with a low price scale, its stars and featured players were asked to work for Equity minimum. Economics also affected the physical production by way of some stylization, as Houghton informs us in an article in Theatre World.

> Exteriors, for example, present a particular problem. Today's playgoer no longer accepts the grass mats, cut borders and photographically literal backdrops that the Moscow Art theatre used in 1900. Gauze scrims that help convey distant vistas, rising mist at dusk or shimmering heat at noon, a few foreground tree trunks, the patter of sunlight or moonlight projected through leaves; it is with elements like these that the Phoenix Theatre designer and director worked to convey mood and a sense of reality in The Seas Gull.

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[55] Ibid. [56] Houghton interview.

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> It is certainly possible to present Chekhov in settings far less realistic than that (I have seen it done even in Moscow). But any such attempt, it strikes me, goes against the intent of the author, who wished his audience to feel that it is a slice of life they are beholding.[57]

He had greater misgivings about the liberties taken with the interiors, such as the elimination of solid walls because they could not afford a box set. A hanging ceiling, unsupported from beneath, indicated the contours of the room and circumscribed the action, while functional doors and windows were used at all times. Above all, careful attention was paid to the selection of period furniture, carpets and the small ornaments necessary for atmosphere. All this was displayed against a cyclorama lit an ultramarine blue, a color he often saw painted on Russian walls, together with white doors and windows.

As for lighting, Houghton did not think _The Sea Gull_ to be as poetic as Chekhov's other plays, but he felt that the falling dusk in the first act had to be carefully timed for a full effect; in the last act he had pools of light in certain areas that went up and down, like lighting the table where the Lotto game was played or the wheelchair where Sorin fell asleep or the glowing fireplace, all softly lit as a visual counterpoint to the sound of the storm and wind raging outside. "I worked on the lighting with the designer because lighting is so important in a Chekhovian production, especially in terms of mood,"[58] he said.

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[57]Norris Houghton, "Symposium--Directing Chekhov," _World Theatre_, Chekhov Centenary, IX, No. 2 (1960), 1131.

[58]Houghton interview.

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Since the director believed it was necessary to "work with the environment," it may be appropriate to ask how these surroundings were used to help the actors realize the intentions of the play. On this point, Karl Light made a particularly perceptive observation.

> The sets being stylized with the interiors not having walls sort of added to the flacidness of the show. It made it less real and less flesh and blood. The actors seemed to move in and out of nothing. It wasn't contained; the tensions, consequently, had to be in all the actors and you got no help from the set as such. It was only a suggestion of a wall and a door and that's all. The exterior sets, I thought, were much better because you were supposed to be outside and here the feeling of openness was fine.[59]

It has been mentioned that one objection Mira Rostova had for going into production at the Phoenix Theatre was the physical structure of the house. She was enough acquainted with acting techniques to know that the three of them were working with a style highly personal, intimate and subjective. The house had previously been the Yiddish Second Avenue theatre and, after being dark for many years, was inhabited by a tame revival of a burlesque show. It held over 1200 seats and the proscenium arch was approximately forty feet wide. For economic reasons, no attempt was made to decrease the stage's size, especially since the season's first three productions, a comedy, a Shakespearean play and a musical demanded the entire area. Voskovec thought the theatre had "dreadful acoustics" a fact which added to the problems of the principle actors. During the run of the play, he remembers the director and other staff members running backstage and "raising hell" over what seemed

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[59]Light interview.

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to be an impossible situation. "People are complaining . . . we are having trouble . . . they want their money back. You simply will have to speak up,"[60] the director pleaded. Karl Light, less emotionally involved in the production, offered a more objective view of the architectural difficulties.

> The stage was extremely large and that may be one of the reasons why Kevin and Mira had difficulty. The stage seemed to swallow them up and they became very small. I think, personally, it was bad for the production and bad for the actors to have so large an area in which to work. They used the whole bloody stage. I think this is one reason why Sam Jaffe didn't come off better than he did. He has a small voice to begin with. It just sort of floated up into the rafters. The only people who didn't seem bothered by that were Judith Evelyn who can project, and George Voskovec, Maureen Stapleton, and Monty who managed somehow or other not to get swallowed up by it.[61]

It should not be surprising that all those interviewed regarded the production as a failure. Norris Houghton stressed the element of time and the long rehearsal period that Chekhov requires to arrive at the subtext of his plays. "I think Chekhov has to be lived with and four weeks are not long enough," he said. When referring to the three actors and the remainder of the company, he came up with something that may sound like a contradiction.

> . . . actually their work didn't connect with other people's work and so the production never jelled. What was interesting was that the best performances were given by the people who hadn't been working on it. Actors like Maureen Stapleton, George Voskovec and Judith Evelyn did very fine work.[62]

Rostova, too, complained that the production had "no direction and all

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[60]Voskovec interview. [61]Light interview. [62]Houghton interview.

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the actors were left floundering."[63] She recalls the audience's response, which was strongly for or against the performance. "There were bravos and boos. There was no indifference."[64] It had been a long, circuitous route from the scene at the Actor's Studio and its warm and encouraging reception there. It would be of particular interest to see what she might have been able to achieve had she realized the favorable conditions she had sought.

Despite the many frustrations, George Voskovec remembers The Sea Gull as a happy experience, in that it was the first time he had been in a Chekhovian play and he had fallen in love with the part of Dr. Dorn. Nevertheless, he regarded the entire venture as a "very messy production." He had begun rehearsals with a great deal of enthusiasm since it was seemingly in good hands and he had great admiration for the goals of the Phoenix Theatre. He also insisted that there were some notable moments in the production. "I think the scene between Constantin and his mother worked beautifully,"[65] he said.

Of the four productions of that first season, according to Karl Light, The Sea Gull proved to be financially the most successful. He describes the temptation that must have gripped the producer-director. "It's just that everything fell into place so easily. It was Norrie's theatre; he suddenly got what he thought were first rate people and that was the may pole and you could dance around it. But not with Chekhov."[66] After

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[63]Rostova interview. [64]Ibid. [65]Voskovec interview. [66]Ibid.

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speaking at some length on the divisiveness in the company, he finally was forced to conclude, "The production was completely unfocussed, without form. It's one thing to have disagreements about approaches but it's quite another matter to have no idea where you're going or why. Not directed at all, I guess, is the summary I would have to give about the production."[67]

As invariably happens, the critics were kinder to the production than the artists themselves. Indeed, there were some who lauded the results. George Freedley, reviewing for The Morning Telegraph, called it a superb production and suggested the Phoenix Theatre move it uptown as they had done with a musical earlier in the season. Freedley took this opportunity to relate an experience. "It seemed to this member of the audience, who happened to be in the Green Room of the Moscow Art Theatre, in September of 1934 and met Norris Houghton, the director of this revival, that he was undoubtedly preparing for this production even then."[68] After describing a meeting with Stanislavsky and Houghton's theatre background, the critic added: "Therefore it was no surprise when Mr. Houghton assembled a company which shows the careful thinking that lies behind this Chekhov revival. This is a truly all-star cast which has no need to kneel before even the famous Lunt-Fontanne Theatre Guild revival of 1938."[69]

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[67]Ibid.

[68]George Freedley, "Off Stage--And On," Morning Telegraph, May 11, 1954, *T-NBL+, 1953-54, P-W.

[69]Ibid.

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Other reviews were less ecstatic. John Beaufort of the Christian Science Monitor expressed mixed feelings when he wrote:

> As now staged by Norris Houghton at the Phoenix Theatre, The Sea Gull would be benefited by having greater sub-surface tension. The company's capacity to sustain does not yet go deep enough. In some respects the Phoenix version is commendable. It capitalizes on the humor and on some of the tragic aspects of misdirected love. Basic conflicts are well realized.
>
> But important things are missing. To begin with, there is little feeling of ensemble about the performance. Great homogeneity was hardly to be expected from a company production assembled for this single production. But part of the problem lies elsewhere. For although Duanne McKinney's settings are boldly stylized (the dining room is enclosed by imaginary walls and a tremendously overbearing ceiling), there is no single overall acting style in evidence.[70]

After taking pains to point out the excellent performance by George Voskovec, the reviewer suggested that the public see the production since the young theatrical organization genuinely intended to serve the theatre and the play was an authentic masterpiece.

Richard Watts, Jr. of The New York Post expressed immense pleasure at seeing The Sea Gull once again but went on to chide the performance.

> Despite a cast of prominent and talented actors, it seemed to me that the performance as a whole was disappointingly colorless and unexciting. It lacked, if I may use a possibly pretentious word, orchestration, and it suggests only partially the quality of an authentic masterpiece. . . What I chiefly found discomforting in the current revival, despite some good individual performances, was the lack of a single unifying style.[71]

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[70]John Beaufort, "'The Sea Gull' in Manhattan," Christian Science Monitor, May 15, 1954, loc. cit.

[71]Richard Watts, Jr., "Problem of Reviving a Great Play," New York Post, May 11, 1954, loc. cit.

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Watts, too, found George Voskovec's portrayal the most satisfying of the evening while seeming to be bothered by the excessive mannerisms of Mira Rostova and the understatements of Kevin McCarthy and Montgomery Clift. Watts appeared somewhat at a loss when he concluded that:

> It is difficult to put a finger on exactly what fails to come to taw in The Sea Gull at the Phoenix, and it is less than just merely to say that the fourth show is not as exciting as the previous three. There is nothing really there for the Phoenix to feel guilty about. It simply happens not to be what the others were in terms of thrust and drive and compulsion.[72]

He seems to have wryly implied that Chekhov was a dramatist the Phoenix Theatre should not have attempted when he quipped: "Maybe it's Chekhov's fault."

Of all the notices, John Mason Brown's in the Saturday Review of Literature seems to have been the most incisive. After a brief critique on Chekhov's dramaturgy, he wrote: "His [Chekhov's] new dramatic form has always presented special challenges to actors. With the best of good intentions and a devotion so plain it almost hurts, the company downtown at the Phoenix has tried to meet these challenges, and for the most part failed badly."[73] Warm accolades were bestowed on Maureen Stapleton for giving "by all odds" the best performance of the evening, after which the reviewer concluded with a deep note of regret.

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[72] Ibid.

[73] John Mason Brown, "Seeing Things: The Sea Gull and the Phoenix," Saturday Review of Literature, May 29, 1954, p. 23.

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> All too plainly the production at the Phoenix has been thrown together in a hurry. This, however, is not the only trouble. The styles of playing are as mixed as the accents of the players. Worse still, Norris Houghton's direction is guilty of an equal uncertainty. It establishes no clear line, creates no cohesion, and misses nuance after nuance.
>
> The Phoenix's first season has been an excitingly distinguished and contributive one. No doubt, after such successes as Madam, Will You Walk, Coriolanus, and The Golden Apple, T. Edward Hambleton and Mr. Houghton are entitled to a failure. The pity is this failure had to be The Sea Gull, a play which many of us hold in the same affection as do those participating in its present revival.[74]

Norris Houghton is firmly convinced that a different method must be used to direct Chekhov than for any other playwright. "If a director has a strong individual style, he would probably say 'No'--that whatever he did would be in the same manner."[75] It is the underpinnings or the plays of sub-text, the things that are not said, that contain the more fruitful material for the director. "Unless you find the hidden meanings in Chekhov you miss the whole point."[76]

When asked how he would direct The Sea Gull today, Houghton replied without hesitation. "I would insist on more time to integrate the performances and even though you always have to make compromises in the theatre, I would compromise less in my casting."[77]

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[74]Ibid. [75]Houghton interview. [76]Ibid. [77]Ibid.

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CHAPTER VII

DAVID ROSS

In 1952, a young man by the name of David Ross left his native St. Paul, Minnesota for the hazards and uncertainties of New York in the hope of building a career as an actor. This pudgy, bushy-browed and chain-smoking young man, a former rabbinical student, business man and gentleman farmer, made the rounds of producers' offices and theatrical agencies without success. Deeply discouraged, he decided to apply his business acumen and savings to initiate his acting career and took a step that was to propel him into a theatrical career that he neither expected nor prepared for, that of a director. He soon embarked upon a six year cycle of Chekhov plays that was to revive an interest in the Russian dramatist. Arthur Gelb, in a New York Times article, describes the beginnings of this adventure.

> Mr. Ross, who apparently acts on the kind of instinct that only the touch of genius can bless with success, leased the Fourth Street Theatre in July, 1954, on a hot Saturday afternoon. He had attended a play there put on by another group Friday evening. He liked the cozy atmosphere (chairs arranged on two sides of the small playing platform), he couldn't find the work he wanted on Broadway, he had a certain amount of cash, he had focus--and suddenly he had a theatre. As a matter of fact, he wanted to be an actor and he bought the theatre as a showcase for his own talents.[1]

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[1]Arthur Gelb, "4th Street Miracle Man," New York Times, March 18, 1956, sec. 2, p. 1.

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The theatre, contained in an old four-story building once used as a synogogue and a catering hall, held only 143 seats. Ross immediately invested $13,000 in refurbishing the theatre, increasing its seating capacity to the off-Broadway Equity limitation of 299 seats. A year after his first Chekhovian production, the theatre became a Lower East Side landmark and Gelb was to write:

> Since the autumn of 1954 a tiny, off-Broadway playhouse called the Fourth Street Theatre has been burning with a hard, gemlike flame. It has taken Chekhov out of the attic, dusted him off and set him squarely down in the parlor--the parlor, in this case, being a narrow platform stage on Fourth Street near Second Avenue.
>
> The remarkable thing about his disinterment was that Chekhov suddenly seemed to glow with a lustre that had been lacking in many professional revivals of his plays. The Three Sisters, Fourth Street's first venture with the Russian master, was warmly received by the critics. The Cherry Orchard, which followed, was judged highly satisfactory as well. And with the present production of Uncle Vanya, this time embellished with two full-fledged stars, the playhouse has completed a near-miracle. Chekhov has become a paying, playable, palatable proposition.[2]

For the first production in his new theatre, David Ross decided to do Ansky's The Dybbuk, with himself in the leading role. He then looked for a "name" director to stage the first venture. But to his surprise all he approached turned him down. "It is typical of him," Gelb wrote, "that, instead of trying to find a younger director with less of a name, but with some solid experience, Mr. Ross decided to direct the production himself."[3] It was to be his first directorial effort. Ross resigned himself to playing a minor role and he began recruiting such experienced actors as Morris Carnovsky, Ludwig Donath, and Lou Gilbert, who at that partic-

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[2]Ibid. [3]Ibid.

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ular time were having difficulty finding work. He had also enrolled in Lee Strasberg's private acting class and solicited his teacher's help in finding the appropriate actors while notices in the trade papers helped fill many of the lesser parts. The production of The Dybbuk got fairly good notices and ran for ten weeks but the undertaking lost money at the rate of six hundred dollars a week. Little perturbed by this loss, and chalking it up as a means of getting experience, he decided to attempt The Three Sisters for his second production.

This venture proved so successful the producer-director immediately announced he was going to present a complete cycle of the four great plays of Chekhov in the firm belief that "this festival will be a full-scale presentation of an Anton Chekhov never before adequately seen."[4] The New York Times, upon hearing the news, invited him to contribute an article for the Sunday theatre section explaining the purpose behind the Chekhov cycle. Ross began with the claim that his cycle was not to be a revival in the customary sense.

> Indeed, we think that our productions, instead, will be virtually Chekhov premieres. They will be so by reason of the Stark Young translations we are using throughout (he is now completing Uncle Vanya especially for this occasion), and of course, through the interpretation, by which we hope to convey the wit, grace, and power of the original plays.[5]

He went on to justify the need for restoring the original meaning of

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[4]David Ross, "Why Chekhov?," New York Times, October 9, 1955, sec. 2, p. 1.

[5]Ibid.

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Chekhov's plays by an act of surgery in order to remove "the Chekhovian tradition," which was based upon an accumulated set of prejudices.

> That Chekhov tradition today means, unfortunately, drama loaded with bittersweet Russian gloom to begin with, and it then further offers a smattering of high, symbolic art guaranteed to be there but just beyond reach of the average audience's spiritual means. This tradition offers a nice, paralyzing experience every theatregoer ought to have, if only once--and that is about what it has been, in the past--but it is just not Chekhov. At any rate, it is not the Chekhov that will be displayed in our forthcoming cycle. This dense aura surrounding Chekhov has been fed by earlier translations, which have been few and slanted to meet the requirements of just this once-glamorous prescription, and these in turn probably stemmed from the immovable authority of Stanislavsky.[6]

Arthur Gelb saw Ross's challenge quite differently and with a more personal focus. Referring to the producer-director's treatment under psychoanalysis, he wrote: "Equipped with that commodity, and unencumbered by experience, he set about upsetting the firmly held theatrical traditions that Chekhov should be read but not seen, and that an amateur is bound to fall on his face when he is held up for judgment by professional standards."[7] The Chekhov cycle proved successful enough to prompt Ross to apply it to other dramatists and though a series of Ibsen and of Strindberg plays were similarly presented they did not produce the same response. The cycle, in effect, became Ross's justification for establishing a continuously working theatre with the ultimate goal of a permanent company. "In cycles," he once said, "you build and get to know the playwright. The group has a chance to develop artistically. If you jump around, there's

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[6]Ibid. [7]Gelb, "4th Street Miracle Man," p. 1.

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no cohesion."[8] But the cycles, as well as many of the actors, came and went and only Chekhov became the perennial guest who could be depended upon. The Fourth Street Theatre was indeed to become the home of Chekhov.

Since the reception ot David Ross's productions seems to have depended much on the theatre's physical structure, this may be an opportune time to describe the plant itself. The Fourth Street Theatre took up the basement and first floor of an old four-story building. To enter the theatre, it was necessary to go down a small set of steps into the basement, which contained the box office, the lobby and a primitive dressing room in the rear divided by a curtain. To get to the theatre, one had to ascend a flight of rickety wooden stairs which led directly into a huge room of raked theatre seats divided into two parts by a stage. The audience space nearer the stairs held about two-thirds of the house while that on the far side of the stage held the remaining third. The raised stage was nineteen feet, five inches long and fifteen feet, nine inches wide. An aisle four and a half feet wide permitted access to the farside of the stage.[9] Actors who were to make their entrances from the far corners of the stage had to take their places at the rear during the blackout and similarly, if they made an exit on that side, had to remain in the rear until the end of the act or scene. Actors were therefore continually seen scurrying to their dressing rooms at the beginning of intermissions.

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[8]Ibid., p. 3. [9]See Figure 5, p. 196.

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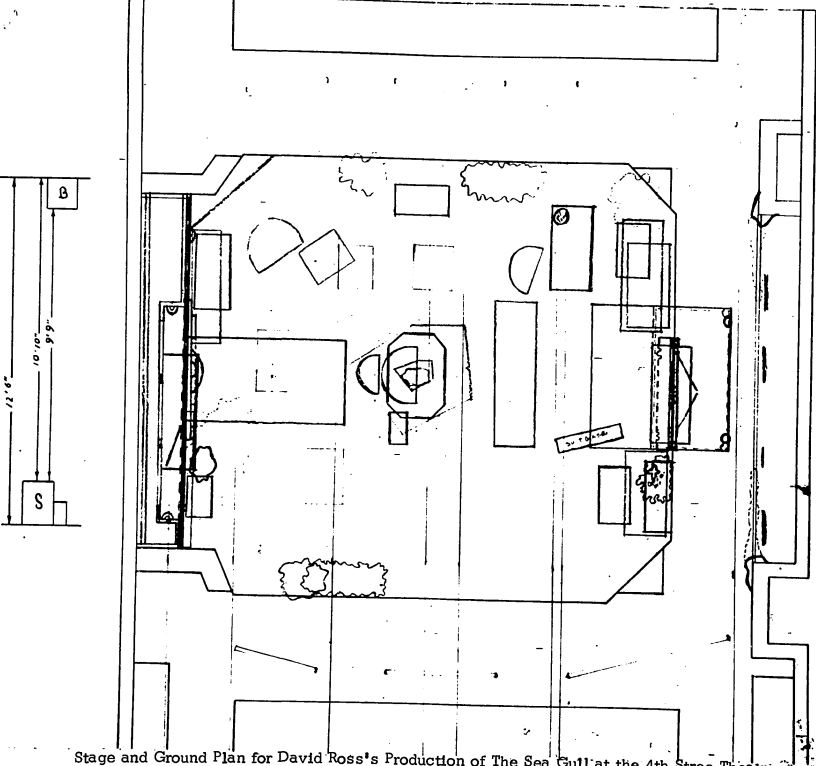

Figure 5

Stage and Ground Plan for David Ross's Production of <u>The Sea Gull</u> at the 4th Stree Theatre.

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Despite these awkward and primitive physical arrangements, the acting company and technical staff had no difficulty adapting to them. Instead, they found and exploited many of the advantages inherent in the structure. Roger DeKoven, an actor with an impressive professional background, who played Vershinin in the first production of The Three Sisters, found his experiences particularly rewarding.

> The intimate theatre made you feel that something very important was happening here and after being so steeped in craft that here we were doing something that was really a semblance of art, that was approaching art. This, in itself, was an important asset to the production. In this small, intimate theatre, you would really feel the audience enjoying it and lapping it up. The small stage, the minimal scenery and lighting definitely worked extremely well.[10]

Equally impressed with the surroundings, George Voskovec, who played Vanya in a later production, said, "I liked the stage, It was very intimate and it was very pleasant working there. It was so easy to work on it--as if you were in a room and you were very close to the audience and there was beautiful contact with it. I also saw plays there and I liked it as a member of the audience."[11] Jacob Ben-Ami had resisted working off-Broadway but accepted the role of Sorin in The Sea Gull for the following reasons:

> I had seen some of David Ross's other Chekhov productions and what I was absolutely sure of was that this intimate theatre, this small place was a Godsend for a Chekhov play. It was the intimacy because most of the actors were second and third rate. But with common sense and the intimacy and the listening to Chekhov was for me a

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[10]Roger DeKovan, New York, interview, January 8, 1971.

[11]George Voskovec, New York, interview, January 20, 1971.

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> wonderful experience and also for the audiences. In large theatres, you lose a lot of the dialogue or the colors, especially when you come to the grays. Here, you didn't have to proclaim, you could hear everything, every word, see every gesture. Here, the author was present. He was there.[12]

Later in the interview, as he began expounding on the production, he stopped for a moment and then added with some amusement:

> Luckily, the critics thought David Ross was the only one who could do Chekhov but they didn't understand about the place where Chekhov was being done. It was the intimacy of the theatre; that's what was making Chekhov come alive. . . . I probably would have been very uneasy working on that small stage if I hadn't first seen the other productions and realized what could be done with Chekhov there. I was so enchanted. I heard Chekhov. He was alive to me.[13]

Frances Cheney, who played Natasha in Ross's first production of The Three Sisters, had a more ambivalent reaction to the environment. "The house was so awful to work in, having the audience on two sides of the stage, but it also had an old world quality. It wasn't like you were in a theatre but in a room stuck right there between the people."[14]

The technical staff was equally enchanted by this unusual theatre and the exciting challenges it offered. Carol Hoover worked closely with David Ross on many of the productions as lighting designer. She enumerated some of the difficulties that had to be overcome.

> The structure of the house presented a problem. The lighting had a certain movement by fading at one spot on the stage and coming up on another. This was because of the structure of the stage and house. That's what was so exciting about working there because on Broadway

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[12]Jacob Ben-Ami, New York, interview, January 14, 1971.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Frances Cheney, New York, interview, January 19, 1971.

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> you don't have the time and you have a large stage and other more conventional problems. Of course, there were many problems because I had to light for practically two prosceniums since we had the audience on both sides of the stage so everything had to be lit from four different directions. Another problem was that the audience was so close to the stage that you had to focus the light in such a way that you got as much spread out of them as possible without having them get into the audience's eyes. It needed a very fine adjustment. Another thing was that the ceiling was very low. The stage was eighteen inches off the floor and the ceiling was only about twelve feet high.[15]

Some years after the first performances at the Fourth Street Theatre, Michael Smith, theatre critic of the Village Voice, appraising David Ross's last Chekhov production at a new theatre uptown, called the original house ". . . the clumsiest theatre in New York, but I will never forget The Three Sisters I saw there."[16]

It was David Ross's original intention to found a permanent acting company similar to the Moscow Art Theatre and the Group Theatre but, for reasons we shall later see, he had difficulty retaining his more experienced and talented actors. He was especially attracted to the "method" style of acting and thus depended on Lee Strasberg and members of Actor's Studio to help fill roles, in the eventual hope of creating an ensemble group with the Fourth Street as its home. His first Chekhov production therefore included such Group Theatre and Actor's Studio talents as Morris Carnovsky, Lou Gilbert, Philip Loeb, Roger DeKoven, Eileen Ryan and Paul Richards. Although all of these people were to drift away, the

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[15]Carol V. Hoover, New York, interview, August 1, 1970.

[16]Michael Smith, "Theatre: 'The Cherry Orchard,'" Village Voice, November 22, 1962, *T-NBL+, 1962-63, A-C.

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success of The Three Sisters helped to attract additional talent and eventually led to the appearance of stars who had heretofore resisted the call of the off-Broadway stage.

All those interviewed who had worked at the Fourth Street Theatre were of the opinion that David Ross's one major talent as a director was his unique ability to cast a play. When his theatre had become the most prestigious off-Broadway house, open casting, or what there was of it, became an elaborate and highly charged ritual. The Villager sent a reporter across town to capture the flavor of one of the casting sessions for the production of The Sea Gull that was to open in the Fall of 1956.

> Hundreds and hundreds of actors and actresses went downtown to the theatre to try out for these parts. . . . The general atmosphere was exceptionally tense. . . . All in all it turned out to be a very civilized affair. The 4th Street Theatre organized and handled the situation admirably. Tickets were issued as you walked in and each one was marked with a number. You were then informed as to just how long it might take before you were called for your interview.
>
> The readings won't be scheduled until the major parts of the play are set. The director informed me that the two roles under consideration depended upon the similarity of the actors playing the roles of Trigorin and Madame Arkadina with respect to their ages and physical types.[17]

It was Ross's intention, according to the reporter, to discover "raw talent" and so he had thrown open the roles of Nina and Treplev by putting notices in the trade papers. Nevertheless, he ended up using a member of the Actor's Studio, William Smithers, for his Treplev. Regina Wojak, a young lady who participated as stage manager in many of the productions, describes the director's methods of auditioning actors.

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[17]N.n. "Casting 'The Sea Gull,'" Villager, August 8, 1956, p. 3.

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> There was open casting mostly for minor parts. He had a certain type in mind, a certain feeling for a character. He would try to cast the larger parts with people he knew or saw someplace. For auditions, he would have the actors read alone on stage while he threw them lines from his seat in the auditorium. Many actors didn't know how to take him because he would behave in a coarse, vulgar, and even insulting manner. I don't know whether he did it on purpose or not in order to get reactions. He upset a lot of potential Ninas at the time.[18]

Frances Cheney, a more mature and experienced actress, seemed to take Ross's auditioning methods in her stride when, after a short conversation, she was asked to read the new Stark Young translation of The Three Sisters and to return to audition for the part of Natasha even though she had applied for the role of Masha.

> I came to read and began speaking very simply, not particularly interested in the part. David shouted from the back of the house to let myself go. This was the Olga-Natasha fight scene in the third act. So I let it out and he asked me how much I wanted to play the part. We finally agreed on a sum which was very little for off-Broadway at that time. His casting in almost every instance with one or two exceptions was quite remarkable. David cast on instinct I think and that was the best thing that David contributed.[19]

George Voskovec, also forced to the same conclusion, said, "I never understood completely how he managed to do many rather good productions of Chekhov on the whole. Perhaps it's because he had a fantastic facility for casting and he seemed to have good instincts for putting the right people together."[20]

An actor who was retained for three of Ross's Chekhov productions is George Ebeling, who remembers the director with some affection. "We

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[18]Regina Wojak, New York, interview, September 8, 1970.

[19]Cheney interview. [20]Voskovec interview.

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had a wonderful association in the cast of The Three Sisters. David could foster it and he could split it apart but I think he chose people with such a strong inclination to foster it that it thrived. I think he is to be credited for that."[21] It seems that Ross found the young actors quite expendable, for when their work during the first week of readings displeased him, he would fire them and seek replacements. Perhaps because of this tendency for summary dismissals, when he was years later to build a new theatre and embark on his last venture with Chekhov, casting was to become a prime difficulty of the production. Thus, even his one great ability--for apt casting--was to come into question.

Formulating an exposition of David Ross's directing methods is difficult since he had directed only one production before deciding on The Three Sisters and, with a cast of knowledgeable and experienced actors, his contributions were bound to be limited. It was this reality that Ross had to live with, often rebelled against, but also adapted to in order to preserve the integrity of the production.

Since Ross was under the guiding hand of Lee Strasberg and most of his actors were from "method" acting schools, it was only natural that the rehearsals would begin with a lengthy reading period. All respondents agree that early rehearsals consisted of reading around a table for at least a week and sometimes longer. What immediately came to the surface was the director's inability to articulate his thoughts to the cast. Frances

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[21]George Ebeling, Houston, Texas, interview, January 20, 1971.

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Cheney was almost noncommittal when she said: "The first week we just sat around the table and read the play with very little discussion. David listened and didn't really bother us."[22] Roger DeKoven was less kind.

> My recollection is that we sat around for about a week before we got on our feet. At this point, David Ross was pretty much in the background and Jimmie Light was doing most of the work. There was a point at which he [Ross] took over but the cast hadn't much respect for him. He was rather inarticulate. If he had ideas, they weren't expressed so that the actors could grasp them.[23]

Regina Wojak recalls that Ross, at the beginning of rehearsals, would try to tell the actors what he wanted but he expressed himself in a vague and general way; after that he would let the actors go their own way. Ross may have developed more confidence by the third Chekhov production (Uncle Vanya) for George Voskovec remembers him participating to a greater extent in the early discussions. A week to ten days before official rehear-

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[22]Cheney interview.

[23]DeKoven interview. Since the name of James Light will come up from time to time it may be useful to identify him. On the Fourth Street Theatre programs, he was listed either as Artistic Adviser or Production Adviser. His theatrical career began at the Provincetown Theatre at the same period (1918-1920) that Stark Young was associated with it. There, he directed several one-act plays and the original production of The Emperor Jones (1920). He went on to direct the Broadway productions of Beyond the Horizon (1919), The Emperor Jones (1924), The Hairy Ape (1922), All God's Chillun Got Wings (1924), and The Great God Brown (1926). Besides these plays by Eugene O'Neill, he also directed the original productions of e. e. cumming's him (1928), Paul Green's In Abraham's Bosom (1926) and several plays for Jed Harris during the 1930s. In 1942, he directed the New School's Studio Theatre productions of Circle of Chalk (1941) and Lessing's Nathan the Wise (1942). Later he acted as Associate Director to Erwin Piscator at the same theatre for the productions of King Lear (1940), in which Roger DeKoven played an important role, and War and Peace (1942). In 1950, he taught at the Yale Drama School, after which he seems to have been inactive until David Ross's production of The Three Sisters.

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sals of Vanya began, the four principal players, Franchot Tone, Felicia Montealegre,[24] Peggy McCay and Voskovec met with the director at the home of Miss Montealegre to read the major scenes and explore the play and characters. Voskovec described these readings as a helpful period for the actors.

> During that time, it was also a sort of open discussion of the play and characters. David was active in these discussions and spoke of the development of the relationships of the characters. Perhaps he talked a little too much and was not too clear or articulate but something came through and his ideas were stimulating. It was a good, pleasant, interesting atmosphere. Then we started reading with the full company either on stage or in the big lobby, I can't remember. Again, there was a lot of discussion of specific characters and relationships. . . . Stark Young came around very often and did some little rewriting, some revisions of the text during that period.[25]

Perhaps Ross's most trying moments were on the first day of rehearsals, when the company would face the director expecting either an analysis of the play, a concept of the production, or some words of comfort and wisdom. At the beginning of one rehearsal period, George Ebeling believes he discovered Ross's prime reason for doing Chekhov. Without malicious intent, he imitated the director's struggle at such a moment.

> There we were sitting around the table and David's first words to the cast ran somewhat like this: "Uh . . . uh . . . uh, I, uh . . . want to tell you . . . uh, why, uh . . . I want to share with you . . . uh . . . why . . . uh, my reasons for . . . uh, doing Chekhov. Uh . . . it . . . the major problem . . . in the world today is . . . uh . . . uh . . . communi-

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[24]Miss Montealegre was dismissed when official rehearsals began and Signe Hasso was signed to play the role of Yelena.

[25]Voskovec interview.

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> cation and . . . uh . . . it's very hard for people to make themselves clear to other people and uh . . . that's . . . the problem. These people in the play have . . . that's why . . . uh . . . I want to do . . . Chekhov." This was the level of the problem that David had.[26]

Ross's attempts at communicating with actors in acting terms presented a still more formidable challenge and ultimately a more frustrating defeat.

The producer-director's relationship to the actors was at best a truce that was broken at volatile moments. The rehearsals form a compiled history of resistance by the actors whenever the director tried to include his ideas in the staging. At times he won a point but most often his contributions were dismissed and he was left to retreat, nurse his wounds and accept what the company felt was best to offer him. Ross seemed to relate better to the young technical staff who were more generous in ascribing to him a larger share in the final results. Carol Hoover witnessed many of the rehearsals as she worked on the lighting arrangements and recalls that most of the actors worked by themselves either on or off stage using exercises and improvisations while Ross would mold the scenes as they went along. She does not remember any specific directions that Ross gave to the cast saying, "it was a kind of mutual affair and the whole production sort of evolved as it went along."[27] She was fully aware of the director's problem in trying to impose his will on actors with such impressive theatre backgrounds. "He was more of a traffic manager," she conceded. She was also forced to admit that David Ross lacked an organized method of directing. "He was basically an instinctive

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[26]Ebeling interview. [27]Hoover interview.

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director. In fact, I would say he was all instinct. Whenever he watched the rehearsal of a scene, although he couldn't say why, he would feel that it wasn't right."[28] This problem was enhanced by the fact that he was dealing with established actors who were there not out of necessity but for the opportunity to do Chekhov in an experimental workshop situation.

> David was not that inspirational a director and he wasn't the kind of person who could come in and take over and they were going to learn from him. They were, more or less, going to develop their own craft as actors and this was also true for the younger ones who were going to learn from these old pros.[29]

Because of his financial resources, Ross remained the nucleus of the entire venture, being accountable for the production and house expenses, while the actors "helped pull the production together and be a stabilizing influence"[30] where the artistic efforts were concerned.

Regina Wojak, who was "on book" for many of the rehearsals, saw even less discipline in Ross's directing attempts.

> He just developed the production as it went along. In fact, I felt he would at that time listen to too many people. In each production, he would have a favorite to whom he would listen. Nothing was worked out, nothing set, no blocking, movements. He picked up ideas as he went along. Many of the experienced actors felt: Who is this man with little experience to tell us how to act? They were not willing to accept direction from him at all.[31]

She too recalls the experienced actors working together on scenes and bringing them into rehearsals, although Ross at times would argue with them, refusing to accept everything they offered. There were occasions when Ross was trapped by his inexperience as specific demands were made on him.

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[28] _Ibid._ [29] _Ibid._ [30] _Ibid._ [31] Wojak interview.

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> At times he would have flare-ups with actors. I know that Franchot Tone often gave him a hard time because he wanted more direction and David couldn't give it to him, only a general and vague idea of what he wanted but couldn't translate it into an acting technique for Franchot. The more experienced actors were never kept on for the other productions because of a bitterness. They felt that David hadn't directed the play, that if it weren't for them, the production wouldn't have been the success it was. After that, David, I think, wanted to show them by not having them around. But he still wasn't very strong to be able to stand on his own because he still listened to others for advice.[32]

The comment on the bitterness of the actors is borne out for the most part by other respondents. Roger DeKoven did not consider David Ross a director by an definition of the word, only a boy with money who wanted to direct. "His direction, at best, was a job of stage managing. We worked out our problems pretty much on our own."[33] He credited James Light as well as Morris Carnovsky and Philip Loeb for the success of The Three Sisters. As for Ross's infrequent attempts at directing, DeKoven dismissed them with the following:

> He was rather inarticulate. If he had ideas, they weren't expressed so that the actors could grasp them. He was very young and was relying on whatever instincts he had as to casting and as to whether a scene was going in the right direction. How much of the production he actually was responsible for is difficult to say. . . . To my knowledge, I don't recall him working or helping any of the actors... At times David did express dissatisfaction and sometimes satisfaction. How much of this you can call direction, I don't know.[34]

Another aspect of the actor-director relationship often came to light from actors who expressed a personal dislike for David Ross. DeKoven found the producer-director arrogant and offensive at times. "His inarticulateness and crudeness was such that many actors could not take it,"[35] he said without any reluctance.

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[32] Ibid. [33] DeKoven interview. [34] Ibid. [35] Ibid.

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Frances Cheney recalled the rehearsal sessions with greater detachment and amusement. At first, she emphasized the point that "David had absolute control of the production. He was the producer, he was the director, it was his theatre." Then, as if contradicting what she had just said, added, "But he had absolutely nothing to do with the production as it emerged. His role of the director from my point of view, and, I believe, of all the others, was that he left us alone."[36] She speculated on the frustrations the director must have felt because of the treatment he received at the hands of the cast.

> We did have fights with David whenever he wanted a particular result. I don't remember whether one of us wasn't ready for that result or whether we weren't sure if it should be that result but we were disrespectful to David. We really were which wasn't very nice of us but it was like we knew and we had been around and "shhh! Quiet David! Just shhhh, stay out of it!" After all, he was the director and he didn't want to stay out of it. But he didn't know how to communicate with people nor with the actors as to what he wanted.[37]

On one occasion Lee and Paula Strasberg attended one of the rehearsals and spoke to some of the actors who were studying with them at the time. There was another source to help the actors resorted to. "Jimmie Light was around and we'd pick his brains a little bit. Jimmie, I think, was brought in by Stark Young. David thought a little of Jimmie's culture might rub off on him."[38]

During the rehearsals of Uncle Vanya, there were signs that Ross was making greater efforts to take over the director's role. George Voskovec

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[36]Cheney interview. [37]Ibid. [38]Ibid.

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describes at some length one of these moments that resulted in a blow-up and near rebellion by the principal players.

> David would sometimes be very exasperating. At one point, I remember, the three of us, Franchot, Signe and myself began working on scenes we were involved in and things started happening. It was during a truly creative part of the rehearsal when characters started emerging and relationships began to be outlined. Well, he had that dreadful habit of interrupting at the very moment when something was just beginning to happen. He never missed. "It's a wrong adjustment, George," or "Listen, don't do this or that . . ." We got so exasperated that finally we made a common front and I remember one day all three of us started yelling at him because we couldn't stand it anymore and said, "You get out of this room, get out of the theatre. Go get yourself some ice cream or something, you like sweets but just get the hell out of here and let us finish the scene." And he went, the poor man. He just said, "All right, all right, if you feel that way." And we had a marvelous time and really worked on that scene without his interruptions. We got it rolling. We spoke, discussed, suggested, and it worked. He came back and we were joking with him by then because we felt sorry for him, really, because he was likeable in many ways. He said, "Is it all right for me to come in?" We said, "Come on in, David, come on in. We did some hard work and now we'll show it to you and if you don't like it, all right, you can take over." We did the scene for him and he started to applaud and said, "It's beautiful. I don't understand because that's just what I wanted." He may have known what he wanted but he was always using the word "adjustment" which infuriated me. I don't like that Actor's Studio terminology. I remember I told him once, "David, if I hear the word 'adjustment' once more from your mouth, I'll walk out or I'll really get physical with you. I can't stand it. Will you please remember that? It drives me crazy." And he stopped it. We finally got along with him on a sort of half kidding level and I must say that David had a sense of humor. He didn't take himself so terribly seriously, particularly when he got himself a handful of pretty damn good actors.[39]

On the other hand, Vockovec was one of the few actors who saw some ability in David Ross as a director and acknowledges the help given to him and the production as a whole. He referred to a specific instance.

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[39]Voskovec interview.

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> But at times David might have some ideas. He helped me in places. I remember a soliloquy with the Professor's chair. I was attacking it wrong at one point. I don't know what was wrong about it but he helped me to make it specific, make it concrete by kicking Serebryakov's chair and letting it rock, as if the Professor were still in it. It became very effective. He had good ideas of using certain props on the stage. He picked things out for me because I was being too general in releasing my frustration. It's a hell of a thing, a soliloquy, particularly in a modern play. David said, "Why don't you physicalize it? There are all his medicine bottles and his chair and his books." It helped me. That's a particularly fine directorial contribution. He had talent. He depended mostly on instincts. He could be very disorganized in his thinking. His thinking was sort of messy but it wasn't pointless. It had substance. So he must have given a certain life to the play.[40]

An actor who developed a confidence in David Ross's "deep down gut feelings" was George Ebeling, who recalled that the director would react emotionally when he felt the actor was on the right track by applauding and saying, "That's right, that's right! Good!" But when the actor went off, Ross could only grunt or groan. "He was not able to suggest what was wrong and what could be done to improve it. David did not think as much as he felt."[41] It wasn't long before the actor began listening to the noises out front to discover if he was giving the director what he wanted.

The veteran actor Jacob Ben-Ami, less impressed with the director's instincts, saw little of their contribution to the production itself.

> David Ross didn't direct very much. At the end of the rehearsals, he would try to tie everything together. He didn't know very much. He depended mainly upon the players. . . . If an actor in the cast had a problem, David couldn't help him. . . . Jimmie Light knew more about directing and he was there all the time. He was an intelligent man and knew a great deal about mise en scene even though he lacked an inner means of organizing himself.[42]

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[40]*Ibid*. [41]Ebeling interview. [42]Ben-Ami interview.

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After the first week of reading, as the actors felt the urge, they would rise from their chairs and begin moving about the stage. A mock set was then drawn on the stage floor and the sets which were being built downstairs in the lobby were described in detail to the cast. Because of the physical arrangements of the furniture, much of the blocking allowed for only diagonal or circular movement. This limitation helped solve many of the dangers of having too much of an actor's back facing one part of the audience. Ross would occasionally refine certain movements. With the small stage, the prearranged physical setting, the four corners for entrances and exits and the directions furnished by the author, blocking became a relatively simple affair.

The later rehearsals, however, were usually a trying period at the Fourth Street Theatre because of the insecurities of the actors, who felt they needed direction in order to pull the production together. Frances Cheney's fears were typical of many when she said:

> Towards the end of rehearsals we thought we were in very bad trouble because there was no orchestration, there was no form, it seemed formless to us and we felt the play should be moving in a direction and that he wasn't able to do that. It's very hard for the actors to do it. No matter how we were relating to each other, someone from the outside should be able to see the line of the play and where it's going and what it's really driving towards. We always felt that that hadn't been accomplished.[43]

Some actors suggested that Ross bring in another director but he adamantly refused. At one point, Morris Carnovsky began giving notes to the actors after the run-throughs. When Ross discovered this a violent scene ensued

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[43]Cheney interview.

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and the notes ceased. There was a line of retreat behind which David Ross refused to go. At that point he vehemently asserted his position as producer and founder of the theatre.

As Frances Cheney admitted, the fears of the company proved to be ill-founded. "It did finally fall together. It was Chekhov for one thing. And the people involved. We all helped each other."[44] Carol Hoover, observing the rehearsals from a ladder or the lighting booth, had the same doubts as the actors.

> In the later rehearsals, as you watched them, you wondered if the whole production would jell, come together. You wondered if the scene would ever play or work and somehow it would as all the elements fell into place and it would get more and more exciting dramatically. It just was a whole evolving, growing process.[45]

The stage manager recalled one provocative incident during this critical rehearsal stage. "David would pace back and forth, his eyes closed, listening and once he began snapping his fingers when he wanted a faster tempo. This enraged the 'method' actors."[46]

Each play at the Fourth Street Theatre was given a week of previews during which all aspects of the physical production were adjusted and refined. The intimacy of the house made it easy to observe the faces in the audience and to gauge their response to what was happening on stage. Ross would sit at the rear and make notes for the actors while Carol Hoover, sitting beside him, managed to sense what lighting changes he desired. "David's instructions for lighting were usually based on

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[44]Ibid. [45]Hoover interview. [46]Wojak interview.

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volume or intensity or color or tone but working with him over the years, I was able to tune in to him and know what effects he wanted."[47]

The set design problems, what there were of them, were less complicated, but even here difficulties for the director arose. "Before rehearsals he would sit down and talk to the set designer but often found he didn't get what he wanted but made the most of what he got. I think he had trouble getting his ideas across."[48] The stage manager was made immediately aware of the director's lack of technical knowledge but considered him fortunate in his choice of lighting designer. "He would tell her that he wanted a certain kind of light, something he felt, and somehow she would be able to give it to him."[49]

Once the sets were agreed upon, they were usually built in the lobby during rehearsals, but the props and pieces of furniture were often tested and moved about on the stage. Since the financial situation did not allow for rentals, getting the right items for the period presented a problem. The staff was forced to scour the Third Avenue shops and the Salavation Army for furniture and then covered the pieces with materials bought on Canal Street. As George Voskovec informs us, the visual elements proved highly satisfactory to the actors.

> The scenery was minimal and it didn't seem to matter much. It didn't seem to get in our way. But the furniture gave us a wonderful feeling of reality. It was simple and sensible. I had very much a feeling of three or four different rooms on that tiny stage. I had such a feeling

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[47]Hoover interview. [48]Wojak interview. [49]Ibid.

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> of completely different atmospheres and completely different sets and God knows it was only a few chairs, a swing, a window or a table.[50]

This strong, intimate feeling of place, so important in Chekhov, was also conveyed to the audience assembled in a small room where every sound, gesture, and nuance could be heard, seen and felt in the unfolding of a Chekhov drama. It was the first time that a sizeable American public had been given the opportunity of witnessing these plays in such a suitable environment.

The preceding pages may have conjured up a picture of dissension and frustration that could only provide a poisoned working atmosphere. Unlikely as it may seem, just the reverse was true. Despite David Ross's inarticulateness and difficulties with his actors, many remember that period in their career as an excitingly productive one. Carol Hoover spoke for most when she said:

> It was a kind of home, a workshop that you find in some repertory theatres. We did rehearse for four or five weeks with a week of previews. It wasn't anything like slapping together a brilliant Broadway production. What was so important was the whole pace and atmosphere of the show that evolved over a period of time. No matter who the performers were or what their background was, there was a tremendous amount of friendship, a camaraderie, and we all got to know each other quite well because we were working down there all hours to get the show on, not for money, but for a real interest and love for the play and for the opportunity to work on it.[51]

It was not merely a matter of public relations when Arthur Gelb was given the impression that David Ross's theatre had become a pleasant place for actors to work and a place in which they regarded themselves as one big

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[50]Voskovec interview. [51]Hoover interview.

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family. They had been given an opportunity to practice a craft that had been previously restricted to special acting classes or studios, as Frances Cheney tried to suggest:

> There was such a right feeling for the relationships . . . the relationships. Those three sisters . . . it's not that we really worked for it particularly. It's just that . . . it emerged somehow . . . it evolved. I think David's lack of experience and having gotten good actors and that particular theatre and all of us wanting to work in a particular way . . . truthfully . . . what are we doing and what's really going on . . . and being allowed to do it without anybody pushing you to a result too soon. . . . It was Chekhov that seemed to take over.[52]

Roger DeKoven was also appreciative of the fact that after years of steeping himself in craft he was able to apply it at the Fourth Street Theatre in ways that approached an art form. For George Voskovec, it was his second Chekhov production, and one that produced much happier results. "It was a lovely show, I thought. I think it was about the best thing I did in this country as an actor. I felt very much at home in it even though it was difficult. I find Chekhov is always difficult. You have to work your arse off."[53] Jacob Ben-Ami, alone, expressed a disappointment in what had been achieved. "David Ross's production was not especially good, not nearly as good as that of Le Gallienne's. Frankly, I enjoyed the productions there more when I watched it than when I acted in it."[54]

Carol Hoover remembers the director as being extremely pleased with what had been accomplished and went on to say: "The critics and audience reactions were also quite good. After a while, David attracted

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[52]Cheney interview. [53]Voskovec interview.

[54]Ben-Ami interview.

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so many good people, he had difficulty choosing whom he wanted to work with."[55] Over a period of six years, Ross gained the reputation of being one of the most illustrious off-Broadway directors, a fame won mainly by his presentations of Chekhov's plays. As the years passed, and with more experience behind him, he began assuming a greater control over productions. By 1962, the year of his last Chekhov production in a new off-Broadway house, he was in complete charge of the staging--with results that verged on disaster.

David Ross relinquished his lease on the Fourth Street Theatre in 1960 and, after a directing stint in England, returned to his country to become involved in several business ventures in order to replenish his financial resources. At the same time he began looking for a larger and more modern off-Broadway theatre, finally leasing an abandoned church on 55th Street, west of Ninth Avenue, and remodelling the entire structure. In order to capitalize on his former theatre, he decided to name it Theatre Four and open it with a revival of The Cherry Orchard. Ross had married, and his wife was listed as Associate Producer; she attended all of the rehearsals. The new theatre was a complete break with his former venture since no actor or crew member at Theatre Four had been previously associated with the Fourth Street Theatre. Also, despite Ross's original enthusiasm for Stark Young's translations and an expressed determination in his New York Times' article "Why Chekhov?" in using them throughout

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[55]Hoover interview.

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the cycle, he was to turn to the Constance Garnett version of The Sea Gull because he thought it was more poetic." Jacob Ben-Ami, on the other hand, saw finances as the motive for using the royalty-free version. A third reason may have been a falling out with Stark Young and subsequent abandoning of his version. In his last production of The Cherry Orchard he was to use an uncredited text based on the Constance Garnett translation with revisions made by himself and his wife.

Casting was conducted mainly through agencies and notices in trade papers. Charles Randall, an actor with a wide professional background, who was to play Epihodov, recalls a casual meeting with Ross through friends and, after a phone call, he went to read for the producer-director and his wife at their apartment. John LaGioia was a young actor who had come to New York less than a year before and had been in only one professional production before he was selected to play the important role of Trofimov. He recalls what happened at that time.

> I saw a notice in Backstage and I sent him a picture and resumé. Actually, I was a replacement for somebody else; I don't remember his name. He and his wife had a suite on Central Park West and I went up there to read. I hadn't done any Chekhov up to that time. I was not very familiar with the play. I had no idea what the play was about. I got myself a copy of it real fast before the audition which didn't help. . . . He just gave me the script and I believe I read with his wife who played the girl in that big scene at the end of the second act. I read for about a half hour and when I got the part it took me by surprise.[56]

Casting, however, did not end with the beginning of rehearsals. As Charles Randall informs us, replacements followed on the heels of replacements before the cast was finally set.

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[56]John LaGioia, New York, interview, May 26, 1971.

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> Each day there was a cast replacement. I was one of the few that was left. We started out with Meg Mundy as Madame Ranevsky. She was there for one or two days and then gone. Then there was Jacqueline Brooks who came and went. Signe Hasso flew in from California and she rehearsed for a while and then left.[57] They were fired. There was no nonsense about that, they were fired on the basis of reading the play. There wasn't any acting then, just reading. They finally got Marian Winters who did the part.[58]

This ominous beginning was to set the tone for the remainder of the rehearsal period and would inevitably affect the morale of the company. "Other people were fired too and it gave us a very creepy feeling to arrive every day and never know who was going to be in the cast. This kept happening for the first two weeks."[59] John LaGioia recalls a specific moment during the first rehearsal attended by Signe Hasso. ". . . she was quite adamant and told David, 'You're going to direct me, aren't you, David? You're going to direct me?' I thought she was asking him to be very specific in what he wanted. She seemed to know what she was in for."[60]

The early rehearsals consisted of a week of readings which took place in a television commercial filming studio because of the renovating of the theatre building. It seems David Ross's reputation as an interpreter of Chekhov's plays had preceded him.

> We all sat around the table very nervous because, after all, David Ross came to us with a kind of aura. Most of us had seen his productions and read the articles in The New York Times. You expected

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[57]As far as I can ascertain, Signe Hasso was the only member of a Fourth Street production called to participate in this revival. She had starred in the role of Yelena in Uncle Vanya.

[58]Charles Randall, New York, interview, April 9, 1971.

[59]Ibid. [60]LaGioia interview.

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> something from David. I remember the first day he said to the cast, "Well, I should say something about Chekhov. But what can one say about Chekhov so let's read." That's all he ever said in terms of the author and in terms of the play.[61]

It wasn't long before a decided disillusionment began to set in among the cast.

> There were never any comments during the week of readings. We would read the play. Maybe he would interrupt here and there. But we were just reading and it got very boring and very nerve-racking because we thought we may be fired this afternoon or tomorrow. After a while, we began to treat it as some kind of joke.[62]

When there was no one available to read a particular part, Mrs. Ross would fill in and read until a replacement was found. John LaGioia expressed a similar let-down during the reading period: "Once I realized I was going to be in a David Ross production, I had expected a lot more, honestly, a whole lot more. I remember being disappointed. I derived so little from it."[63]

The history of David Ross's work with the actors becomes so agonizing and bizarre at this point that one can only conclude something was basically wrong--something which affected the behavior of the director. Richard Waring, who was cast as Lopahin, preferred to remain non-commital in describing the rehearsal period: "Many of the experienced actors felt their own way." He added, "but David was rather hard on the less experienced actors. Ross was a very emotional man."[64]

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[61]Randall interview. [62]Ibid. [63]LaGioia interview.

[64]Richard Waring, New York, telephone interview, April 5, 1971.

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Charles Randall, willing to be more specific, related a typical incident among many.

> I remember the actresses who played Varya and Anya and he treated those girls unmercifully during rehearsals and it had nothing to do with the play. He would just scream at them telling them they weren't any good, yelling at them. I remember after a siege they would go into the wings and cry. They would be totally reduced to tears, day after day. It began to affect the whole cast.[65]

He was finally led to believe that Ross's entire approach to directing was to have the actors do it themselves. If an actor asked for help he would invariably become angry, thus discouraging any means of communication. "He would give rather general kinds of suggestions and it usually wound up with name calling. It stopped any kind of questioning and everybody was fairly confused."[66] Throughout the rehearsals, the actor remembers a great deal of shouting, tears and anxiety of being replaced to the extent that a pervading fear prevented the actors from dealing with the play and the character relationships. "We got involved with personalities because you were constantly derided for what you didn't do. It turned out to be a kind of free-for-all,"[67] the actor recalled with regret rather than bitterness.

As one of the young, inexperienced actors, John LaGioia was forced to bear the brunt of many of these outbursts. He described the awkward position he found himself in.

> David Ross wasn't one who was able to express himself too clearly, at least he couldn't express himself too clearly to me. He seemed to take some antipathy to me. I don't know why. I just did not understand what he wanted. I felt he was under a great deal of pressure from somewhere.

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[65]Randall interview. [66]*Ibid*. [67]*Ibid*.

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> I remember he rode me quite badly. He really rode me. In rehearsal, every time I went through that big scene at the end of the second act which I thought I understood quite clearly, I remember him saying he never wanted me to stand up, he always wanted me on my knees. Well, that's a pretty long speech that Trofimov has and he never gave me a reason for it. I would go through the scene and he would say something like, "I don't think that was right. I don't think you understand certain things." Then he would go into something like it must be orchestrated like a concert. You know, nothing specific and I tell you it was very strange because the man never used words that I could understand. It was a little sad. I suppose I did the right thing because I never exploded and I kept my job.[68]

During the same speech, Ross would attempt to accompany him almost as an obligatto with such words as "No," "Yes," "More," as if he were conducting an orchestra, a procedure which only added to the confusion of the young actor. There were other bizarre methods used in handling this actor, that, for him, turned the rehearsals into a nightmare. Especially heartbreaking were the actor's self-doubts and soul-searching during this period.

> Knowing that he had directed some superb productions, I kept saying to myself, "I'm wrong. I must be wrong. I've got to be wrong because the man has proved himself." But all I've come up with since is that something happened, I don't know what. It didn't work, it simply didn't work. He wasn't there at that production.[69]

Because the architectural features of Theatre Four was quite different from those of the Fourth Street Theatre, different staging considerations were mandated. Michael Smith was one of the few critics who found it important enough to dwell upon the physical structure:

> The just completed Theatre Four on West 55th Street has a styleless shiny newness in the lobby and an ugly lack of personality inside.

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[68]LaGioia interview. [69]*Ibid*.

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> It is boxy and all painted brown, the auditorium floor is flat, the sight lines are bad, the stage is raised high and lacks a proscenium arch. The theatre is neither formal nor intimate; there is no sensible division between players and audience (pre-revolutionary Russian and contemporary American) and no meeting. The actors seem plunked down up there on that platform, and they look understandably distressed. But this theatre was designed expressly for Mr. Ross and it must approximate what he wanted. And so one expects him to make some certain use of it, as he managed to turn the limitations of the Fourth Street to such stunning advantage.[70]

Many of the actors were indeed distressed by a feeling of "nakedness" that precluded any sense of intimacy. "I remember feeling as if we were in an amphitheatre because the stage was the width of the whole building."[71] was Charles Randall's recollection while, on the other hand, Richard Waring considered the theatre's acoustics excellent. Another difficulty that may have mitigated against the production was the continual renovation that went on during rehearsals. Carpenters, plasterers and painters seemed forever underfoot and plaster dust was everywhere. During the previews and even thereafter the alleyway leading to the dressing rooms, and the dressing rooms themselves, were not yet roofed. The actors were forced to change costumes under the open sky during a winter's cold wave. Randall believes that the heavy financial investment and the pressure of getting the building ready for the opening may have preyed heavily on David Ross's mind.

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[70]Michael Smith, "Theatre: 'The Cherry Orchard,'" Village Voice Voice, November 22, 1962, *T-NBL+, 1962-63, A-C.

[71]Randall interview.

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During his tenure at the downtown theatre, and because of the small size of the stage, Ross had accepted the open and fluid approach of staging whereby the actors blocked their own movements. As Richard Waring suggests, he undoubtedly expected the same results on the new and much larger stage. "Blocking was loose and he let the actors do most of it. Bramwell Fletcher gave many suggestions on the grouping."[72] But Ross was now working with a different type of actor as well as a new environment.

> The important thing is that David did not use the stage effectively. He could barely stage a play, which was amazing because it was a good size stage. There was no problem of space. I remember him saying things like, "come on, you should know where to move." He was frustrated out there and after hearing him say this five or six times, I realized he didn't know what to do. So he had wanted us to stage the play.[73]

John LaGioia remembers Richard Waring, Marian Winters and Bramwell Fletcher doing most of the blocking, but they never assumed an authority beyond that point. To this day he regrets it.

> In situations like this when you have a weak director, what often happens is that somebody takes control, if one of the actors would be a leader. Nobody took control. Bramwell didn't, Richard Waring couldn't, Marian Winters wouldn't, and these were people who could do it; they were the older, more experienced actors. I don't think he would have minded if someone did take control.[74]

Randall may have revealed a glimpse of David Ross's forlorn hopes when he remarked, "I got the feeling that he expected the whole thing to just--evolve."[75]

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[72]Waring interview. [73]Randall interview.

[74]LaGioia interview. [75]Randall interview.

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The dimensions of the stage called for more elaborate scenery than Ross had previously worked with and here, too, he is accused of a lack of interpretive imagination.

> He has had David Ballou design him a semi-architectural setting that is uncomfortably between stylization and realism. There are either too many or too few entranceways, the characters come in out of limbo or from the wrong person's bedroom. The squared-off stage area allows no interest in the movement forcing the furniture and actors into random positions and rambles. And then everybody is done up in elaborately period costumes which must have cost all kinds of money and are absolutely at odds with the backgrounds.[76]

LaGioia felt as if "the set was off on a cloud somewhere. It was like playing in Carousel, it was so big."[77] Although the furniture was held to a minimum, he regarded the pieces as incorrectly set. "No set design book, the most basic book in the world would ever allow you to put a sofa in front of a door opening up center so that when actors come in the audience only sees the upper half of them."[78] The cast as a whole felt that the set did little to help the actor. "No concept of the environment," was Randall's judgment.

When participants in the production were asked to evaluate David Ross as a director, the subject of casting inevitably came up since the profession had regarded him as a man who had the innate ability of finding the right actor for the right part. Although Charles Randall himself had been cast and kept by the director, he was almost violent in his reaction.

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[76]Michael Smith, "Theatre: 'The Cherry Orchard,'" Village Voice, November 22, 1962, *T-NBL+, 1962-63, A-C.

[77]LaGioia interview. [78]Ibid.

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"Based on this play, I think that is just nonsense, absolute nonsense. There were people in the play who were just not right, not right in terms of the play and in terms of experience."[79] To underline his point, he referred to the many replacements. John LaGioia thought the company was cast extremely well according to physical types.

> Visually, everybody fitted in, but once it was put on the stage, it was as if everybody was off in his own corner. It didn't meld together in this company. You have Bramwell Fletcher and Dick Waring who come from one school of acting. Everybody was different in personality as well as in acting styles. It never came together as a piece.[80]

For these actors, the image of David Ross, the successful Chekhovian director, had been crushed by the cold, relentless weight of reality. In summarizing his appraisal, Charles Randall reflected with some caution.

> The interesting thing about David, I suppose, was his total inability to communicate with actors. That's number one. I mean other than being destructive and screaming at them and the torturing and all the rest of it. Another is, I don't know that he had anything to communicate. The third thing is, I have a feeling that David was a victim of his own success. I have the very strong feeling that he did these plays at a time when they needed to be done and some of them came off rather well and he had received all the accolades and I have a feeling that David had no idea how he got there. He hadn't the vaguest notion. After all, he was David Ross. He said this at a rehearsal. He was the authority.[81]

Nine years of acting experience has given John LaGioia a greater perspective and tolerance in reliving the episode. It does not erase the pain, as his final statement shows:

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[79]Randall interview. [80]LaGioia interview. [81]Randall interview.

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> I think David tried very hard, at least in spirit, to do the thing slowly, to get into it. I don't quite know where it went wrong. I had very few things to compare it with. I'd been in New York for only a year and had only one job . . . I thought he was ill. A normal person just wouldn't behave that way. He suffered from gout, you know. People laughed at it but was painful. It was sad. But it was also sad what we were going through.[82]

David Ross's treatment at the hands of the critics had been a warm and gratifying one but it perceptibly cooled as the years passed. The first of the productions exploded upon the scene with a critical reception never before given an off-Broadway presentation. Maurice Zolotow, reviewing in Theatre Arts, wrote of The Three Sisters:

> On the whole, I think this was the best ensemble performance of Chekhov in my experience, which only goes back as far as those fragile versions of The Sea Gull and The Cherry Orchard that Eva Le Gallienne used to produce at the Civic Repertory twenty-five years ago. It was directed by David Ross with a sense of the grotesquerie that is the essence of Chekhov's comedy.[83]

George Freedley was equally enthusiastic when he saw the play a month following the opening. "Ross has done a splendid job of directing the Chekhov classic and New York can be proud of him in restoring to the stage the great drama in so effective a revival."[84] This critic was the only one who acknowledged the possible contribution of a member of the production staff when he concluded: "The fact that James Light, once of the original Provincetown Playhouse, is listed as Artistic Adviser could

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[82] LaGioia interview.

[83] Maurice Zolotow, "'The Three Sisters,'" Theatre Arts, XXXVIII, No 5 (1955), 87-88.

[84] George Freedley, "Off Stage--And on," Morning Telegraph, March 30, 1955, *T-NBL+, 1954-55, SAINT-WITNESS.

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have something to do with the success of the whole production."[85] Even Judith Crist's reservations on the play were overcome by the company's performance.

> The revival that opened at the Fourth Street Theatre last night, however, features so uniformly excellent a cast that even those who prefer frustration in smaller doeses can have a delightful evening. . . . Such performances last night by the entire cast made it not only bearable but brought many moments of genuine tragic intensity and intended moments of comedy to the evening.[86]

For the second production, the first string critics decided to attend the opening night's performance and some responded with great approbation. Brooks Atkinson was among those who made the trek down to the Lower East Side to see The Cherry Orchard. "Mr. Ross [sic] command of the style is even more certain than it was last year. And most of the acting is extraordinarily perceptive."[87] He had previously thought the structure no more than "a very awkward theatre physically," but with this production, he began having second thoughts. "In the design of the production, Mr. Ross has triumphed over the inadequacies of stage and theatre. He has triumphed so thoroughly that his platform stage almost seems ideal for Chekhov."[88] The critic went on to credit David Ross with an expertise his name bears to this very day. "Having

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[85] Ibid.

[86] Judith Crist, "Chekhov's 'Three Sister,' Revived at 4th Street Theatre," New York Herald Tribune, February 28, 1955, loc. cit.

[87] Brooks Atkinson, "Theatre: Chekhov's 'Cherry Orchard,'" New York Times, October 19, 1955, *T-NBL+, 1955-56, A-K.

[88] Ibid.

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produced The Three Sisters and The Cherry Orchard, Mr. Ross proposes to go on to The Sea Gull and Uncle Vanya. Nobody is better qualified to free them from cant and communicate the inner truth of Chekhov."[89]

With Uncle Vanya and a cast of illustrious names, opening night became a gala occasion. The reviewer in Variety saw a profitable season ahead when he wrote: "Unanimous critical praise by the daily reviewers and the name lure of co-stars Franchot Tone and Signe Hasso should guarantee a hefty turnout at the small off-Broadway hide-away."[90] Whitney Bolton of The Morning Telegraph said that this Uncle Vanya was the first one that had ever succeeded for him.

> David Ross' [sic] fervid love affair with Chekhov is in its third stage at the 4th Street Theatre and it is a pleasure to be able to report that most of the sighs and breast-beating have been chiseled out of Uncle Vanya. This work which never was believed to have much sparkle has, in the hands of Mr. Ross, a translation by Stark Young and enthusiasm by a splendid company, a great deal of it.[91]

Walter Kerr, who has made no attempts to hide his distaste for the limitations of modern drama in his book, How Not To Write A Play, was willing to make a major concession in his review for The Herald Tribune.

> But it's a real trick to catch hold of the essential comedy of Chekhov, that wild strain of fatuous anguish and comic despair that infects, lightens and gives glorious contrast to a decaying, gloom-ridden background. In the third act of Uncle Vanya, now being revived at the

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[89]Ibid.

[90](Jess.), "Uncle Vanya," Variety, February 8, 1956, *T-NBL+, 1955-56, S-Y.

[91]Whitney Bolton, "A Bright Version of Chekhov," Morning Telegraph, February 2, 1956, loc. cit.

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> Fourth Street Theatre, a group of distinguished and suddenly very shrewd actors do catch hold of it. Indeed they shake it in their fists with a kind of triumph over the dullards who have hitherto made murky and lugubrious nonsense of the play's climatic scene.[92]

True, he still felt that the first and second acts over-stressed Chekhov's chronic complainers and lacked a full dimension. But he went on to comment that: "There are those two final, full-bodied acts coming up, and once David Ross' [sic] company has found the key to the wine cellar in which those bitter but bracing high spirits are stored, it's anybody's party."[93]

As we have seen, David Ross was beginning to show signs of exerting greater control over the production with this Uncle Vanya but, because of a cast of strong actors, these attempts were mainly thwarted. He was more successful in his control of the succeeding production--which may account for the only poor notices of the cycle. Walter Kerr, who had become a staunch supporter of the producer-director, could find only one effective moment in the staging and added: "Unhappily, the production flares and flickers as fitfully as the candles on the table."[94] The deepest regrets were expressed by Brooks Atkinson who had been looking forward to a successful completion of the series.

> Since the Chekhov festival at the Fourth Street Theatre has been enriching the town, it is disappointing to report that The Sea Gull is not up

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[92]Walter Kerr, "'Uncle Vanya' is Revived at the 4th Street Theater," New York Herald Tribune, February 1, 1956, loc. cit.

[93]Ibid.

[94]Walter Kerr, "Chekhov's 'The Sea Gull' at 4th Street Theater," New York Herald Tribune, October 23, 1956, *T-NBL+, 1956-57, PIC-VISIT.

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> to standard. Although the production that opened last evening is beautifully set, costumed and lighted, the performance is listless and superficial.
>
> This is a little surprising. In the three earlier productions David Ross, the director, disclosed increasing mastery of Chekhov, and his Uncle Vanya was brilliant work. There was only one more play in the Chekhov canon to make the record perfect.[95]

The director was especially faulted for the casting of the principal players and the use of the pedantic translation of Constance Garnett. Although there were a few bright spots in the production, the critic was forced to conclude that "the current performance does not catch much of the inner spirit of an inspired man of letters."[96] After a number of cycles of plays of other dramatists which were relatively unsuccessful, Ross decided to revive The Three Sisters in the Fall of 1958 with a completely different cast. Despite the fair notices, it was unfavorably compared with the earlier production.

The reception of Ross's final Chekhov production is of particular interest because of the contrasting viewpoints. Most of the actors in the company were surprised to learn that a few of the reviewers were pleased with what they saw. Leonard Harris, then reviewing for The New York World-Telegram and Sun was one of them. "David Ross' [sic] new Theatre Four, once a church, was last night blessed with a splendid and touching production of Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard."[97] After singling out several

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[95]Brooks Atkinson, "Chekhov's 'The Sea Gull,'" New York Times, October 23, 1956, loc. cit.

[96]Ibid.

[97]Leonard Harris, "Comedy Rules 'The Orchard,'" New York World-Telegram and Sun, November 15, 1962, *T-NBL+, 1962-63, A-C.

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of the actors for their excellent portrayals, he concluded: "And, of course, a major share of the credit for this flowering Cherry Orchard goes to David Ross, who not only produced and directed it, but gave it a charming new theater."[98] The New York Times and The New York Post critics expressed some reserved pleasure with the performance but emphasized the beauty and eloquence of the play.

A constant source of bewilderment in the field of drama reviewing lies in the possibility that observers who witness the same production yet differ so widely in their reactions. Those reviewers who were disappointed with the results treated the production unmercifully. Walter Kerr opened his notice with the following question: "In Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard, a world comes apart at the seams. But should the production?"[99] Having credited the director with good Chekhov productions in the past, the critic attempted to explain the present failure in terms of an attitude that had become the nemesis of many a Chekhovian interpreter. "Perhaps the play is so well known, and Chekhov so deeply revered, that actors and director alike tend to assume that the inflections will take care of themselves instead of setting out to discover them freshly, and firmly. The present production is soft, vague, eventually unsettling."[100] Michael Smith, whom we have seen to be an admirer of the Fourth Street Theatre productions,

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[98] Ibid.

[99] Walter Kerr, "'The Cherry Orchard,'" New York Herald Tribune, November 15, 1962, loc. cit.

[100] Ibid.

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was this time appalled at every facet of the production. "As presented by David Ross at his new theatre uptown, The Cherry Orchard is not a great play. So many things are wrong and inadequate and inexplicable that it's hard to locate an overriding fault."[101] After taking care of the theatre and the scenery, Smith finally began to enumerate the faults in their particulars. "Clumsy physical production, lifeless direction, and some very bad acting have combined--with a translation that makes the play seem much more dated than necessary--to deprive us of Chekhov."[102] The critic continued to deal with the production's inadequacies in detail and concluded with: "So the production leaves nothing of consequence in the play."[103]

More than eight years had elapsed since David Ross had stumbled upon a little theatre in the Lower East Side and began what may have been one of the most vigorous revivals of the modern classics. He had provided a home and workshop for the serious theatre artist and was determined to master a craft he had not originally set out to learn. It is one of the inexplicable ironies of the theatre world that a few months later he had become the foremost authority for staging the Russian dramatist. Whether he had been trapped by this swift and unexpected success, as the actor Charles Randall had suggested, thus preventing a healthier and more vital growth, will never be known. Two years after his last Chekhov production, he was dead.

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[101]Michael Smith, "Theatre: 'The Cherry Orchard,'" Village Voice, November 22, 1962, loc. cit.

[102]Ibid. [103]Ibid.

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CHAPTER VIII

ALAN SCHNEIDER

For Alan Schneider, the continual adventure of the "rediscovery" of Chekhov's plays began in his childhood. Born in Russia during the Civil War, he was brought to the United States in his infancy, and, since his family maintained the old world customs, he grew up speaking and reading the language of his birthplace. To date, he has directed two professional productions of Chekhov's plays in this country, The Cherry Orchard and Uncle Vanya, both performed at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., and a production of The Cherry Orchard for the Cameri Theatre in Israel.

In attempting to explain what he meant by "rediscovery," the director said:

> I'm interested in trying to find that answer and I keep looking for it and I'm not sure I'm going to find it. . . . Life is continually made up of loss. It is an endless process of disappointment and discovery. Chekhov tries to make you accept the limitations of life and find a way of dealing with it by seeking its beauty, its truth, its satisfaction or love, anything within that constant flow of endlessness. I don't think he's a positive or negative playwright anymore than Beckett is.... Chekhov doesn't depress me because ultimately, he tells me more about what life really is than anybody.[1]

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[1]Alan Schneider, New York, interviews, November 3 and November 27, 1970.

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Particularly intriguing for him were the plays' human relationships, whose subtexts provided nuances that seemed inexhaustible. The director found "more ground to till and more layers to uncover" in Chekhov than in any other modern playwright with the exception of Beckett.

> I always say to the actors that when you act Chekhov you have to act five different layers. What you say, what you don't say, what you think, what you don't know that you're thinking, and what you're doing in terms of behavior, while all this is going on. I find that's the fun and joy of digging around to find these five layers.[2]

Schneider was reminded of the poet James Bridie who had once said that a great play first was a poem, second told a story, and third was a metaphysical demonstration. "For a play to be great, it had to work on all three levels. I agree entirely and to me Chekhov's plays have all three."[3]

Schneider confesses to never having made a formal analysis of the plays before production and even then finds the forms somewhat mystifying. "I don't have an analytical mind," he said, adding:

> I'm not aware of the structural problems or forms until I work with them. In other words, I don't really know a Chekhov play until I direct it once and then I begin to be aware of the form. I'm aware of the enormously complex structure, a kind of steel structure made of butterfly wings, if you'll excuse the mixed metaphor. It is exceedingly strong yet seemingly delicate at the same time. . . .[4]

Adding another metaphor to the mixture, he continued: "There's not a line in Chekhov that can be cut. If you pull out one thread, the whole garment disappears, so to speak. So, obviously, there is tensile strength in the structure. What it is, I leave to Mr. Brustein and his colleagues to examine and analyze."[5]

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[2]Ibid. [3]Ibid. [4]Ibid. [5]Ibid.

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Schneider also regarded Chekhov's plays as highly theatrical due to their dramatic action, which he defined not as people running about the stage with guns or meat cleavers but "as any change in the relationship between two people." As an instance, he referred to a scene from The Cherry Orchard when, "a man comes into a scene in order to propose to a girl and somehow he doesn't propose as in the Lopahin-Varya scene, which to me is one of the greatest scenes in all dramatic literature. To me it is dramatic although 'nothing happens.'"[6] For the seeming inertia and morbidity of Chekhov's plays, Schneider blames the traditional manner in which they are staged. He pointed out the second act of The Cherry Orchard, his favorite, as a typical trap a director can fall into because of the ambience and mystical quality of the scenes. "It's too easy to get 'Chekhovian' with it," he said, calling the term a derisive one that signifies nostalgia, somnambulance and sentimentality. His technique was to play against the mood and stress the humor. "I think the really successful Chekhov production," he emphasized, "is when one can laugh and cry simultaneously. It's very hard and I really don't know how to do it. I have no formula for it. It doesn't happen at every moment but the more it happens, the more moved you are and the more amused you are."[7] His two Chekhovian productions were to illustrate the uncertainties for success and failure of this particular principle.

Alan Schneider filled the role of Artistic Director for the Washington Arena Stage during the late fifties and early sixties and thereafter functioned

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[6] Ibid. [7] Ibid.

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as a guest director. The Cherry Orchard, produced in 1960, was performed in a building reconstructed from a defunct brewery and called the "Old Vat." After a heavy fund-raising campaign, its producer, Zelda Fichandler commissioned the construction of a new and larger building, opening its doors in the Fall of 1961. Uncle Vanya was included in the program for the opening season.

The Stark Young translations were used for both productions although Schneider seemed unconcerned as to the choice since he usually carried the Russian text with him to make sure the version was accurate. The translations, he believes, are getting better and better; on the other hand he regards them as remarkably alike. "How many different ways can you say, 'What time does the train get in?"[8] he asked. Fred Hoskins, his stage manager for both productions, recalls very few script revisions. "He might have rephrased lines here and there if they sounded a little awkward. He would come up with a line or two and say, 'let's try it this way instead of that way.'"[9] One example of a dialogue change occurs in the opening line of the fourth act. Yasha's line "The simple folk have come to say good-bye" was slightly altered so that the words "simple folk" became the one word, "people." Elsewhere in the same act, Lopahin offers Trofimov a glass of champagne and the latter's, "I shan't," was changed to "No, thank you." On occasion, Schneider insisted on reversing a line of dialogue; Yasha's

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[8]Ibid.

[9]Fred Hoskins, Hartford, Conn., interview, May 27, 1971.

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response to Anya's queries about Fiers being taken to the hospital, "This morning, I told Egor. Why ask ten times over!" became "Why ask ten times over! This morning, I told Egor." Again, Pishtchik's "Wait--I'm hot--Most extraordinary event" was reversed: "Most extraordinary event--Wait--I'm hot."[10] The only words deleted were infrequent forms of address which were awkward for the actor, like Lopahin calling Trofimov "brother," or Madame Ranevsky addressing the house as "old Grandfather." On the whole, the director preferred to remain faithful to Stark Young's published text.

Despite his long acquaintanceship with the plays, for The Cherry Orchard, Schneider began a structural analysis during the pre-rehearsal period. This analysis included annotating the text for "beats." He elaborated further by saying, "I break up the play into sections in terms of what the character wants or is doing and then I try to establish the actions of the characters generally and specifically."[11] He did not feel a need for a formal and comprehensive directing book and preferred to develop his ideas with the actors at rehearsals. His personal script merely shows lines drawn across the pages to separate the "beats," which closely resemble the French scene.[12]

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[10]Anton Chekhov, The Cherry Orchard, trans. by Stark Young (New York: Samuel French, 1954), personal directing book of Alan Schneider, Wisconsin Center for Theatre Research, Wisconsin University, Alan Schneider Collection, series 2, box 14, folder 6.

[11]Schneider interview. [12]See Figure 6, p. 238.

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80 THE CHERRY ORCHARD [ACT IV

ANYA. [*To* EPIHODOFF, *who is passing through the room.*] Semyon Panteleyevitch, please inquire whether or not they have taken Fiers to the hospital.

YASHA. [*Offended.*] This morning, I told Egor. Why ask ten times over!

EPIHODOFF. The venerable Fiers, according to my conclusive opinion, is not worth mending; he ought to join his forefathers. And I can only envy him. [*Putting a suitcase on a hat-box and crushing it.*] Well, there you are, of course. I knew it. [*Goes out.*]

YASHA. [*Mockingly.*] Twenty-two misfortunes—

VARYA. [*On the other side of the door.*] Have they taken Fiers to the hospital?

ANYA. They have.

VARYA. Then why didn't they take the letter to the doctor?

ANYA. We must send it on after them— [*Goes out.*]

VARYA. [*From the next room.*] Where is Yasha? Tell him his mother has come, she wants to say good-bye to him.

YASHA. [*Waving his hand.*] They merely try my patience.

[DUNYASHA *has been busying herself with the luggage; now when* YASHA *is left alone, she goes up to him.*]

DUNYASHA. If you'd only look at me once, Yasha. You are going away—leaving me— [*Crying and throwing herself on his neck.*]

YASHA. Why are you crying? [*Drinking champagne.*] In

Figure 6

A Page From Alan Schneider's Directing Book Used in His Production of The Cherry Orchard at the Washington Arena Stage. Alan Schneider Collection, Wisconsin Theatre Center.

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However, the members of the cast and crew were left with little doubt as to the work Schneider had put into preparing for the rehearsals. Harry Bergman, who spent several seasons at the Washington Arena Stage and who was cast as the old servant, Fiers, recalls that:

> He knew more of what he wanted to do with Chekhov than with the other plays. He knew the way he wanted it to go and he directed it that way. He was very prepared. He had the blocking mapped out although I don't remember seeing a directing book. It may have been there. He pulled the people along the way he wanted it to go. He was very successful with many of the actors who were pliable.[13]

Schneider left it to the stage manager to record his blocking and reblocking in order to concentrate on other production problems. "Most of the time Alan just had it evolve," he said, "according to the situations with the actors. He did his homework because there was nothing you could ask him about the play or a character that he wasn't ready with an answer for, or the relationships between characters."[14] Hoskins then added one detail. "I don't think Alan knew as specifically what he wanted with Uncle Vanya as he did with The Cherry Orchard. But he was prepared."[15]

Schneider has worked on Broadway and off-Broadway where the opportunity for casting is relatively unlimited. Yet with Chekhov he prefers to work with a permanent company. He firmly believes that with a well-balanced and talented group of actors, a director can cast any play, especially for a Chekhovian production where company spirit and ensemble

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[13]Harry Bergman, New York, interview, March 21, 1971.

[14]Hoskins interview. [15]Ibid.

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work play so important a part. "I think casting is really the most important work the director does," he said with emphasis. "I don't care what your concepts are, what your pre-production work is, what your talent is. If you don't cast it correctly, you're in trouble."[16]

The two Chekhov productions were produced under regional theatre conditions which meant a relatively small budget and four weeks of rehearsals. Since performances were held in the evenings, rehearsals were limited to five hours a day, two hours on matinee days and eight hours on Mondays when the house was dark. According to Hoskins, the previous show closed on Sunday night, the dress rehearsal was scheduled for Monday and the play opened the following night. Time was therefore to become an important factor in Schneider's rehearsal methods. One actor remarked: "He was very jealous about the time and always insisted on finishing a scene before the rehearsal ended."[17]

Since Alan Schneider feels the early sessions are the most critical of the rehearsal period, it may be helpful to quote him at some length on this subject.

> I have my actors read for a time, more so in Chekhov than normally because it's very difficult to know what's happening. I also insist that everybody stay there and listen. I not only have them read but I have them listen. To me, the essential thing in Chekhov (of course, it's important in any play but especially in Chekhov) is to listen and to understand why what is being said, is said at the particular moment it is being said. Whatever that inner monologue is that Mr. Stanislavsky talks about, it's very essential in Chekhov. Particularly when I have

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[16]Schneider interview. [17]Bergman interview.

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> younger people who are willing to do it. I go to great lengths about the inner monologue, about the past life, about the circumstances.[18]

He went on to describe a production of Uncle Vanya he directed at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, in which he had the students write long biographies of the characters they were playing. Pressed to define some of his terms, Schneider explained:

> By inner monlogue, I mean what is happening to you, what are you thinking about, what is your reaction and relationship to everything that is happening to the flow. Chekhov is a constantly flowing river but into which one doesn't put one's foot twice as Brecht once put it.[19] I always want to know where the people are in that river even though they may not have any particular line at that moment. I'm not one for great discussions all the time. I think actors like to discuss things partly because it prevents them from working and they don't have to show anything. At the end of the discussion one comes out very often with the same thing had there been no discussion. On the other hand, I like discussion when there's time. I usually have the cast read the play two or three times before I start staging it. With Chekhov, I've gone as far as a week. There are so many subtle things that I want to make sure everyone understands every line, why it comes, how it comes, the rhythm of the line, the nuance of the line, the shape of the line, its relationship to another line. There has to be some discussion on this. It's all very critical before you do the staging.[20]

David Hurst, cast in the role of Vanya, recalls the director bringing in records of the Moscow Art Theatre to help the cast absorb the rhythm and feel of the play. "He did discuss things about the atmosphere, the heat, the cold, drinking tea served with jam and so forth."[21] Harry Bergman was more explicit in describing the first rehearsals of The Cherry Orchard.

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[18]Schneider interview.

[19]Actually this axiom originated with the ancient Greek, Heraclitus, whose philosophy of conflict and change probably made him the first dialectician of the western world. The full quotation is: "You cannot step twice into the same river; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you."

[20]Schneider interview.

[21]David Hurst, Westport, Conn., interview, April 16, 1971.

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> He discussed the play and told us how he felt about Chekhov and what he was trying to say and he also discussed the various levels of the Chekhovian experience. Those elements that are not in the lines but underneath and also in the pauses. He also said that the levels intertwined and were always there. This is what the actors were asked to work for. . . . He always stressed contact; he always stressed talking and listening; he always stressed actions; he always stressed trying to play something, trying to do something, trying to accomplish something. . . . He discussed the background of the play, the reality, the period in Russia. He had done his research, absolutely, and he insisted on the customs, the mores, the manners, the physical manners and tried to get those from the actors. . . . He laid great stress on listening, especially in the first readings, even when they weren't in the scene. His readings were very disciplined. He would never allow any chitchat. If actors weren't in the scene, he wouldn't allow them to talk.[22]

This sense of discipline, which has led some actors to regard Schneider as a martinet, has caused long-lasting resentments. There were no explosions or violent conflicts during the rehearsals of the two productions under study. A few actors nevertheless reacted negatively to the director's strong and imposing will, a will not made manifest until the later rehearsals.

Fred Hoskins recalls that Schneider always tried to approach a Chekhov play as if it were a new play. "He didn't want anybody to feel, 'Oh God, it's a Chekhov play, you know. A beautiful play by a great playwright.'"[23] His reverence for the material may have defeated those intentions as the stage manager suggests:

> We did a lot of reading and he had background material. He brought in books and pictures and things about Chekhov. He let us take them home and read them. He was in no great hurry to get people on their feet to start wandering around. He tried to get them very familiar with the material and what it was all about. We pretty much settled on relationships between actors at that stage. There were questions about family background and why they were in that particular circumstance and what had happened to cause their downfall.[24]

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[22]Bergman interview. [23]Hoskins interview. [24]*Ibid*.

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Referring to the early rehearsals of Uncle Vanya, he agreed with David Hurst's recollection that the reading period was shorter than for The Cherry Orchard.

Alan Schneider's method of working with the actor may be called eclectic, and whenever necessary, he can be flexible. He can work equally well with "method" actors and those considered "external" or "theatrical." He ignores these differences by dealing directly with the text and the emotional material the actor brings to the rehearsal, as he informs us:

> I work very strongly from the actors' impulses, from the actors' behavior, not so much from the talking as from the doing. If he's not doing something I think he should be doing, I'll question him but I don't get rigid about motivations. Motivations is a word I rarely use. I'll say, "What are you coming into the room for?" which is the same thing, or "What happens in the scene?" That, to me, is the crux of my work with actors. I have to know what happens to the character in the scene and by the scene I mean the French scene, the moment the character enters and when he exits. Some times it's obvious, some times it's questionable and some times they're just talking. Now, if they're just talking, I then try to find something to impose upon the scene.[25]

The director pointed to two examples in the second act of The Cherry Orchard when he had the actor playing Lopahin consciously stalk Madame Ranevsky and make her face the imminent loss of the orchard while the actress was asked to concentrate on avoiding him. Later, Lopahin realizes that he can no longer convince Madame Ranevsky and so must "give up," which decision Schneider regarded as a "happening" even though the text is not so explicit. The director rarely strays from the text to work with improvisation, "...partly

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[25]Schneider interview.

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because I'm not really sure of it, partly because I think it demands great security and partly because there is never enough time."[26]

One stringent demand the director makes upon his actors is to speak the Russian names accurately and consistently. He expressed an absolute intolerance of Chekhovian productions that overlooked the proper pronunciations. Summarizing his work with actors, Schneider considered his strengths and weaknesses as a director.

> Basically, I'm good with characters. I'm not a particularly great choreographer or what is generally known as a colored lights director for special effects. I like to deal with human relationships and Chekhov gives them to me par excellence. There are no flourishes, no great, big poetic passages in the formal sense.[27]

Philip Bosco is an actor who feels more comfortable working with large and colorful canvasses. Cast as Lopahin in The Cherry Orchard, he immediately, as the actor himself acknowledges, presented a problem to the director. "There were some style differences in the cast but Alan managed to overcome them. For example, Michael Lipton, who played Trofimov, and I are the more flamboyant, theatrical and less introspective actor and Alan got us to tone down, to be more real and less showy, which this kind of play demands."[28] This result was mainly accomplished, according to the actor, by going over the play line by line, delving into the sub-text, studying the pauses and learning to be affected by them. Bosco had never worked on a Chekhovian play before and in this production a wealth of material as well as a new means of attacking a role was opened for him. The influence upon him as an actor is apparent.

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[26]Ibid. [27]Ibid.

[28]Philip Bosco, New York, interview, November 27, 1970.

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> Alan is given to a kind of honest approach to acting. That is to say, he's not interested in histrionics or technique as such. He tends to accent the inner life, the reality, the honesty, the simplicity of the character. If there is a disagreement with interpretation, Alan's method of solving it is one of intimacy. He tends to draw the actor aside and try to understand what the problem is and work it out. It's a rather personal approach I wasn't used to.[29]

The stage manager confirmed these moments almost with a weariness when he recalled that "there were times when he would spend fifteen minutes with an actor and all you could see were the hands going and the actor agreeing or disagreeing."[30] At other times he would insist on the cast listening to him solve a particular problem with an actor, including those not in the scene.

Some acting problems proved too formidable for this approach and the director would bear down strenuously on the actor. One actor in particular felt victimized by a character concept he believed was inappropriate for him. He explained his dilemma in some detail.

> He cast me for Fiers but don't ask me why. It didn't work. This was a case where Alan imposed a character on me as an actor. He told me specifically what he wanted and beat me until I tried to get exactly what he wanted and it didn't work. He wanted me stooped over completely at right angles. He wanted a thin, high piping voice. He wanted a cadaverous old man. He wanted a lot of external characteristics and he left it for me to fill in the rest of the character and I just couldn't do it. He'd say I want it this way; I want the voice more reedy and so on. I suppose, in a perverse sort of way, it was a compliment to me because at that time he felt that I could do this sort of thing.[31]

Casting from a limited company may have been at the root of the problem. The actor then in his late twenties or early thirties, was asked to play an

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[29] _Ibid_. [30] Hoskins interview. [31] Bergman interview.

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eighty-seven-year-old man. With more amusement than rancor he went on to describe the various means the director employed to achieve a desired result.

> Alan talks openly in rehearsal. Other times he'll take you aside and talk to you. At times, he'll belt something out and he'll even insult you. He'd say, "Come on, what are you doing. What are you up to. Come on." He'll work that way. It depends on what he thinks is necessary at the moment to get what he wants. I'm sure he feels that there are no holds barred when you're directing, that you do anything you can to get what you want.[32]

Having worked with Schneider for several seasons, he had observed that his approach to Chekhov was different than his approach to other playwrights; with Chekhov the director insisted on various levels of involvement. "I've always held Alan in the greatest esteem," Bergman said with sincerity. "I think he's a great director but I always thought he was a difficult one because he wanted what he wanted. Many times people just couldn't do it but he's still a fine director and particularly with Chekhov."[33]

David Hurst, a member of Actor's Studio, and a strong adherent of the "method" also felt inhibited by Schneider's strong hand.

> Alan gives the actors some freedom but they must actually fall into his creative thinking. He worked too fast for actors to be able to grope and work things out for themselves. He would often change things before anything would happen. He seemed rather impatient with actors. He seemed to want more predictable results.[34]

The actor admitted that he was dissatisfied with his work in the production mainly because of personal problems during that time. Hurst was also convinced that regional theatre offered unfavorable conditions for

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[32] Ibid. [33] Ibid. [34] Hurst interview.

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doing Chekhov. He did credit the director, however, with knowing what he wanted and an ability to explain what an actor was doing wrong. But he also sensed the director's lack of contact with the actors on a human level and emphasized this ambivalence towards the man when he said, "Alan definitely assumes the role of director and authority figure and not just a co-worker. He gives others comparatively little freedom to explore although he understands the method and tries to work organically."[35]

Schneider's ability to work with actors with disparate backgrounds was also corroborated by his stage manager.

> He really spent most of his time with David [Vanya] and Melinda Dillon [Sonya]. I think he and David had great difficulties. Here, again, there were many intimate moments of sitting down and talking quietly while everybody sat around waiting. I don't know if they were delving into character or what. I believe Alan used motivations more with these two than with the others. The more "method" an actor was, the more "method" Alan could get because he enjoys that sort of thing.[36]

After years of developing his craft in universities, schools, Broadway, off-Broadway, and in regional theatres, Alan Schneider has learned to accept all possible working conditions and to adapt to their uncertainties. Dealing with limitations and compromises seem to have become a part of his canon. It may also have accounted for his need to control what he felt might otherwise be an unresponsive working situation.

Blocking a Chekhovian play presents less of a problem for Schneider than any other phase of the rehearsals. He likens it to putting the clothes on a body. The successful production is one in which he and the actors are

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[35]<u>Ibid.</u> [36]Hoskins interview.

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unaware of what is happening, since the staging is the inevitable result of the relationships, circumstances and characterizations. "The blocking and business," he said, "should be accomplished gradually through osmosis. That's when it's best. So that in Chekhov I worry less about the staging."[37] He is not particularly concerned whether a scene finishes with actors on their feet or sitting or otherwise as long as it "gradually evolves." He took special care in distinguishing the word "staging" or "blocking" from the word "directing." Since the former is visible to most people, they tend to use the words interchangeably. "In my experience with university theatre," he said, "directing has become synonymous with staging. With me, it's less and less so."[38]

There were critical scenes, however, that required infinite pains for the proper staging. He described two cases in point.

> I always feel that the entrance in the first act of The Cherry Orchard, the coming home, is one of those moments, perhaps because I'm Russian. The coming home, the serving of food, all those domestic events that in Chekhov become ceremonial and almost critical to the meaning of the play. The way they leave the house. I have a thing I always do with The Cherry Orchard and I don't know if it's legitimate or not but since I was a kid, whenever we went on a trip, we would always sit down and say in Russian "sbogom" which means "with God." I don't know whether it's an old Russian custom or a Russian-Jewish custom or a peasant custom but it seems to have been a custom with my family and therefore when I do the fourth act of The Cherry Orchard, I don't have them say "sbogom" because it's not in the text, but there's a moment when they all sit down before they leave. I've never seen it in any other production but to me that's a ceremony that's very important when going on a significant journey. When I find these critical moments, I obviously have to stage them.[39]

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[37]Schneider interview. [38]Ibid. [39]Ibid.

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This moment proved to be one of Philip Bosco's most vivid memories. He described his reaction to it in terms of dramatic technique rather than a means of illuminating the text.

> In the fourth act he had us all sit and pause for a minute before we left. I thought it was a great idea because it changed the pace, it was a marvelous dramatic device after a scene of action and movement to suddenly stop everything, and everyone on stage sit down and pause for no other apparent reason than to take stock of the situation and to reconsider what you're going to do or to look back with fondness on the past.[40]

Given the time, Schneider enjoys experimenting with movement, especially when the element of spontaneity is employed. In the late forties, he directed a student production of The Cherry Orchard at Catholic University. As an exercise, he would come to rehearsals every day with a different floor plan and asked the students to grope their way about the new setting as they continued their rehearsal. "I always fool around with floor plans and change things with professional casts also, but not to that extent."[41] In his role as stage manager, Fred Hoskins recalls those changes, which almost drove him to distraction.

> The prompt book for The Cherry Orchard after the third week was impossible to read because I couldn't erase fast enough to change the movements. With other plays, I have seen him work where almost nothing changes after the basic blocking is done but here we would change scenes any number of times in relationship to where people were on stage and then go right back to where we were at the beginning but Alan had to be sure he was right. Alan knew certain basic movements that had to happen at a particular point but as far as the moving around, that had to evolve. He let the actors feel their way around and if it worked it worked and if it didn't we would try it another way. The flow of the movement, as I remember it, in The Cherry Orchard, was marvelous whereas in the production of Uncle Vanya, it was very still and quiet and very inactive.[42]

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[40] Bosco interview. [41] Schneider interview. [42] Hoskins interview.

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David Hurst, as Vanya, complained of the many changes coming too fast to help the actor orient himself within the set but admitted that: "He tried to establish relationships by movement and he gave actors some freedom of movement when blocking. He expected everyone to know where they were coming from and going to in the arena exits. Actors were expected to do some preparation before entering."[43]

Another staging element that Schneider considered vitally important was the detailed physical behavior of the actors which established them as Russians and gave an authentic atmosphere to the play. "I've noticed Russians hold the glass of tea with the spoon in it to cool it. I therefore try to use these bits of behavior and even look for them,"[44] the director said. Harry Bergman graphically recalls the meticulous care given to this stage of the rehearsals.

> He gave us a great dissertation on the samovar, the making of the tea, the drinking of the tea and there was a lot of talk about that. It almost got to be a form of ceremony. He talked about the fact that the aristocracy was able to have those lovely filligree holders for the glass and they always used jam in their tea instead of sugar. He insisted that the actors learn to put the jam in the glass of tea in the right way and know how to hold the glass and drink their tea. He felt the samovar played a very important part in Chekhov's plays.[45]

Fred Hoskins too affirmed the director's use of ceremonial activity to authenticate Russian behavior but he added an interesting observation. "Alan loves using things and likes business. He doesn't like to have actors on stage doing nothing. I don't know if he does this just on arena stages to keep things flowing."[46]

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[43]Hurst interview. [44]Schneider interview.

[45]Bergman interview. [46]Hoskins interview.

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A few words may be in order at this point concerning the director's method of staging a Chekhovian monlogue. In Uncle Vanya, which I saw in dress rehearsal, whenever an actor had to speak a monologue, he related in some way to another person, animal, or thing. For example, for Sonya's second act monologue, which followed her big scene with Astrov, Schneider had the old nurse enter and clean the table while Sonya spoke to her. The old woman pretended not to listen and then left. In Yelena's third act monologue, a caged bird was added to the set. Here, Yelena recited her monologue directly to the bird, sticking her finger inside the cage and teasing it. When Schneider was reminded of these instances of staging, he expressed surprise and admitted he had not been aware of them. After some thought, he said:

> I don't like monologues on the stage. I distrust monologues and I think my prejudice as a director is to try to justify a monologue. People do talk aloud to themselves and I suspect that Russians talk aloud even more than Americans so that it's not only a dramatic conceit of Chekhov's. There's a kind of self expression that's there but as a technician, I don't like someone talking aloud to himself and wherever I can, I avoid it. Let's say there are periods in my directorial career when I don't like talking aloud and I try to justify it. I do resent that third act monologue of Yelena's and I just don't know what to do with it. I haven't always used the bird. I don't even remember how we found the bird and decided to use it. I've done Othello with a fool on stage, a deaf-mute, so you can see how I feel about monologues.[47]

Alan Schneider did not consider the later stages of rehearsal decisive in affecting the final results. Any wrong choices made during the first few weeks of rehearsals would inevitably become pronounced

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[47]Schneider interview.

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and haunt the director. When he was asked what he did to reinforce the tempo, mood, and ensemble effect at this particular time, he merely smiled and said, "We pray an awful lot." He was convinced that it was too late to alter the basic design except on a very superficial level and added:

> The thing is really determined, I think, by the casting and by the first two or three days of rehearsal. I've rarely seen a play change in character during the last part of rehearsal. You might change the staging or change a character but there's something, and I don't know any better word for it than "texture"--I scrupulously avoid the word "style" not only because I don't like it but because it suggests "stylization" or preciousness of some kind--the style or rather the texture of a production, the feeling of a production is determined very early on and how it's determined or why it's determined, I wish I knew. If I knew, I'd copyright it or bottle it and wouldn't come to talk to you or anybody else. I'd put it into a small box and then dole it out to myself. But the fact that it is indeed determined by every choice one makes rather than by an abstract, conceptual base, by such choices as the costumes or the choices of the props, all of that is done before you get to the final stage. All the final stage does is give the production a flow or rhythm or strength or continuity, etc. The question is, does it work or doesn't it work. In the later stage of some plays we had to do the rehearsals faster or we just ran around a lot or if it wasn't funny we'd try to do it melodramatically. But, of course, you can't do this with Chekhov.[48]

In trying to achieve the final stage qualities mentioned above, the director seems to have worked with greater determination and even frenzy in shaping the production. Harry Bergman remembers the director taking copious notes during the run-throughs and running backstage after the evening performance of the current play to discuss them with the actors.

> He would try to get at the pace organically. He would give you an acting note that would accomplish the need for speeding up or slowing down. He would have you take another adjustment, in other words, do this so that would happen. He would never tell you to do anything faster or slower. He would do it through the process of relating to

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[48]*Ibid.*

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> something. The note sessions became the stormy sessions. That's when it became tough. That's when he really laid it down to the actors.[49]

David Hurst also spoke of the "masses of notes," including motivations and adjustments, which he found more confusing than helpful. "There were so many things to remember and work out,"[50] he recalled wearily. Similarly, Fred Hoskins had noticed that the director rarely interrupted a run-through, ". . . but he did take profuse notes, many, many notes about tiny specifics like what someone does with his hands."[51] Not even minor restaging was attempted at this point, only a pressured insistence for narrowing the subtleties of the production.

Visually, Schneider prefers to create a Chekhovian environment that is open and fluid in terms of space relationships. With proscenium productions, he studiously avoids heavy, realistic details within a box set. "From my first Chekhov production," he said, "I liked the idea of pieces or elements surrounded by space in one way or the other."[52] When he was invited to direct The Cherry Orchard at the Cameri Theatre in Israel, which contains a picture window stage, he commandeered the services of a renowned painter and sculptor to design the physical production.

> It was done without a curtain. I generally try to do Chekhov without a curtain, which implies a certain poetic quality right there by not pretending that you're in a theatre. In all my proscenium productions I use highly selective realism, that is, only the doors or only the

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[49]Bergman interview. [50]Hurst interview.

[51]Hoskins interview. [52]Schneider interview.

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> sindows or only certain sections of the walls or only certain pieces of furniture set in space rather than hemmed in by walls. I don't think it has anything to do with or without a proscenium but how you use the space.[53]

All this is in direct contrast to his demand for absolute authenticity in furniture pieces, costumes and props.

Another directorial device he employed for the physical production in Israel was to change scenes between Acts I and II, and III and IV as part of the presentation in order to avoid three intermissions, which might tend to destroy the continuity. "The actors moved the scenery in a kind of rhythmic, flowing, choreographed way, in an organic manner. In other words, they did it as part of the character always with a musical accompaniment."[54] This practice created some controversy and bitter opposition from conservative theatre people, the director claimed.[55]

At the Washington Arena Stage at the "Old Vat," the setting of The Cherry Orchard consisted of a skeletal representation of the house and orchard for all four acts. As Fred Hoskins put it, "with other plays we sometimes got carried away but with The Cherry Orchard, it was extremely simple with the placing of the furniture at the most advantageous viewpoint for everybody in the house."[56] When the company moved into its new building, a larger budget was provided for the production of Uncle Vanya and several huge, cumbersome sets were the result. The first two acts were staged on a split set in which the first was played on one

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[53] Ibid. [54] Ibid. [55] See Appendix A

[56] Hoskins interview.

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half (the garden) and the second on the other half (the drawing room). Hoskins felt the concept did not help the play and also rebelled against the heavy shifting of the sets, which were built on platforms. He gave other reasons for objecting to the design.

> The split set for the first two scenes was really impossible because the people at the East part of the house couldn't see very much. And in the third act, they wheeled on a grand piano and used the whole area and it was almost like a different play. The sets didn't coincide. And then the fourth act was on a little bitty platform where everybody was hemmed in. For that we could have used the whole stage and cluttered it rather than having such a small area. It was just too congested. . . . The staging didn't evolve as naturally as The Cherry Orchard. I think the set interfered terribly.[57]

In a memorandum sent to the director after the dress rehearsal, Zelda Fichandler, the producer, offered some criticisms that were concerned exclusively with the physical production. She advised getting rid of the grand piano in the third act since it took five men five minutes to move while creating an enormous racket, all this for the purpose of having the actress playing Yelena strike two notes. She suggested the substitution of a small upright piano. Another thought expressed was: "One wonders about the artistic selection involved in a medium that is not equipped to carry heavy sets. . . .[58] Regarding the overall scenic design, she wrote:

> Somehow I got the feeling last night that the scenic conception was wrong at the beginning--but this is hindsight and only good for the future and not for tonight. Couldn't more of the acts have been played

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[57]Ibid.

[58]Zelda Fichandler, memo to Alan Schneider, undated, Wisconsin Center for Theatre Research, Wisconsin University, Alan Schneider Collection, series 2, box 16, folder 8.

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> in the same place? Or is this not possible? Should there have been a platform that has to go off for one act and then back in for another? Are the dust covers really contributory, couldn't that scene have been played in an Act II set that, instead of being half a set, covers the whole stage? These are the thoughts I examine in trying to figure out what is wrong and why it all seems so cumbersome, with three of the acts played in over-confined spaces and yet there being so many arduous shifts. . . . I don't know, it's worth thinking about. There seems to me to have been a lack of conceptual thinking on the part of the designer and, also, a lack of proper selection of detail.[59]

One reviewer was distracted enough to offer a similar criticism. "John Raymond Freimann's settings for the play's early acts seem to take too much advantage of Arena's spacious stage. . . ."[60] For Schneider, space, ideally used, should become a poetic framework for the purpose of highlighting the essence of behavior and human drama contained within. An imbalance of these two elements has tended to destroy the director's overall intentions.

Schneider readily admits that costuming is one of his weaker areas. "I know less about costumes never having studied them enough," he said. I'm very bad in knowing periods and I don't know enough about fabrics so I have to be dependent on the costume designers. But I know what I want. I don't try to make the costumes 'poetic,' just authentic and simple, and I try to harmonize the various colors and textures and styles, etc."[61] With props, however, he insists on supervising their

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[59] Ibid.

[60] Jay Carmody, "The Passing Show: Old Chekhov Perils Turn Up at Arena," Washington Evening Star, April 18, 1962, p. B-10.

[61] Schneider interview.

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selection and use, often driving prop girls to tears and stage managers to distraction. Fred Hoskins recalled that: "Props were very important to Alan. Oh, yes, and he was very specific about his props. He wouldn't settle for just any luggage. We had the greatest 'Chekhovian' luggage at the end of the play that you ever saw in your life."[62] Actors were often forced to work with rehearsal props only because the acceptable ones were not found until very late in the rehearsals. How obsessive the director became with the use of props was shown when his stage manager went on to explain that:

> Alan loves to use props in all his plays mainly for the actors but in Chekhov it gave atmosphere as well. He loves all that Russian clutter. In the last act in Vanya that office was really just cluttered with things on the desk and the right kind of inkwell which no one could see, of course. The accounting books looked so terrible and he'd say, "Put a little dust on them." He insisted on everything being authentic.[63]

How Alan Schneider is able to adapt creatively to various theatre conditions is illustrated by the advantage he took of the architectural structure of the "Old Vat" for the third act of The Cherry Orchard. According to Harry Bergman, Schneider had been impressed with the Moscow Art Theatre's staging of the ball at the rear of the stage as a background for the entire act. (Chekhov had set the ball in the adjoining room.) This was not feasible in an arena setting and the director therefore decided to have the ball take place in the theatre lobby which was connected to the stage by an aisle. There, a buffet table was set up with food and the

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[62]Hoskins interview. [63]Ibid.

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actors were directed to improvise conversation and dance. Bergman had some doubts as to the effectiveness of the device, since he had observed members of the audience wondering what was happening off-stage. Hoskins and Bosco did not see it as an intrusion but as a logical accompaniment to the act itself. ". . . it was very plausible that people would flow into the drawing room,"[64] the stage manager said. Philip Bosco agreed, feeling quite comfortable with the physical arrangement, as he explained it:

> We had the party going on in the foyer as a peripheral action where the table of food and guests were used as the off-stage life, blocking it to make it extremely vivid. On the stage proper were the scenes of the play itself. It worked terribly well. I made my final exit overturning the table and breaking glass as I went up into the foyer.[65]

In his evaluation of the production, Bosco admitted that he was not totally pleased with his performance as Lopahin and expressed a desire to attempt it again because of the discoveries he had made in performing the role. However, he considered the production as a whole "a hell of a show and very well received." Commenting on his work under Alan Schneider's guidance, he added, "It was one of my most enjoyable experiences as an actor, one of those that stand out in my memory. I always like to work with Alan because he is a thorough, terribly good director."[66] Harry Bergman, despite the problems with his role, had to admit the others in the cast did extremely well and the production of The Cherry Orchard was successful due mainly to the director's efforts.

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[64] Ibid. [65] Bosco interview. [66] Ibid.

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David Hurst expressed an extreme dissatisfaction with his work in Uncle Vanya, then went on to say that "Alan douldn't bring different styles together of various actors."[67] He also realized that Schneider had tried to stress the humor in the play but he had not used enough devices to attain it. "The production was not very funny," he admitted. He was convinced that Chekhov could not be adequately done with four weeks of rehearsal.

Fred Hoskins, having worked as a professional stage manager in regional theatre for many years, claimed without hesitation that "this Cherry Orchard was the best Chekhov I've done and I've managed quite a few of them."[68] On the other hand, he regarded the production of Uncle Vanya as "rather 'pokey!' It just never got off its feet somehow. I thought it was one of our weaker shows. Everybody in the company was fine but there were great differences in acting styles." Although he had received dire warnings that he would be forced to live on tranquilizers to survive the season, his respect for Alan Schneider's directing ability grew. The production of The Cherry Orchard became a particularly enlightening experience for him. "I was in awe of Alan directing Chekhov because I respect him as a director anyway and, by God, I realized the whole thing isn't as drab and dreary as people make out. There is really life and excitement in it. And he got humor in it and it came out strongly."[69]

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[67] Hurst interview. [68] Hoskins interview.

[69] Ibid.

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The critics for two newspapers agreed whole-heartedly with the stage manager while they divided in their appraisal of Uncle Vanya. Richard L. Coe, writing in The Washington Post, expressed a confidence in the work of Alan Schneider in his opening remark. "There was every reason to expect a fine production of The Cherry Orchard from Alan Schneider at Arena Stage. And we are not disappointed. It is knowingly conceived, often memorably played and boasts many pulsating moments."[70] The critic admitted to several spots where the director's aim had missed but more than enough virtues remained to establish the production style and intent of the author. He was particularly impressed with the fresh directorial concept and concluded his review with the following:

> But what matters is that most of the play's fuzzy overlay has been knowingly dusted away. We have here a production of the cliché-ridden, morose Russians of 19th century tradition but universally identifiable characters of rueful, rosy charm. The intent is not a scowl but a raised-eyebrows smile.[71]

Jay Carmody, of The Washington Evening Star, considered the production one of the winter's highlights and went on to write:

> The Raneskayas, of course, are universally recognized as among the drama's most fascinating creatures. Director Alan Schneider and his players treat them as they should be treated, tenderly, with amusement, wistfully, and with an appreciation for that mercurial moodiness that suspends the family appropriately between farce and tragedy.[72]

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[70]Richard L. Coe, "Chekhov Pull Felt at Arena," Washington Post, January 14, 1960, p. D8.

[71]Ibid.

[72]Jay Carmody, "The Passing Show: That Chekhov Orchard Blooms at Arena," Washington Evening Star, January 13, 1960, p. C-18.

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Acknowledging the elusiveness and subtlety of Chekhov's vision that often escape performers in productions of The Cherry Orchard, he conceded that the enormous riches within the play might help a clever director conceal what is lacking in the presentation. He went on to write that:

> Mr. Schneider is more than a clever director. Accordingly, he has made an absorbing piece of entertainment of this brilliantly written threnody on the theme of summer's ending. To do so, he has taken artful advantage of the fact that the delicate blur of Chekhov's play lends itself ideally to central staging.[73]

Richard Coe was also favorably disposed to the Uncle Vanya production albeit with some minor reservations, as his opening statement suggests. "Ensemble acting in an ensemble play is on view in Alan Schneider's staging of Uncle Vanya at Arena Stage. This surely must be the most difficult to perform of Chekhov's major four and while it cannot be said that all the major points are made, certain critical ones are fully achieved."[74] After praising the simple translation of Stark Young and the shifting moods the director managed to cast over the tensions of the play, the reviewer whole-heartedly commended the presentation to the theatre-going public. "Uncle Vanya is recognized as a major theatre classic. Here is a chance to see it played as well as you're likely to find it in this country. . . ."[75]

On the other hand, Jay Carmody's response to Uncle Vanya was nothing short of devastating. Calling the play Chekhov's most "elusive

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[73]Ibid.

[74]Richard L. Coe, "'Uncle Vanya'" Neatly Woven," Washington Post, April 19, 1962, p. C-21.

[75]Ibid.

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and treacherous," the reviewer went on to write:

> Both of these aspects are apparent in the production which opened last night for the usual four-weeks run. Indeed they are so evident on occasion that the mind turns back to the late Wolcott Gibbs' estimate of Uncle Vanya as the complete "parody of all Russian plays."
>
> . . . feelings plucked merely from the surface of Uncle Vanya's relatives and neighbors leave them looking more like caricatures than the Russian Chekhov found so pitiable, yet not unamusing. They lacked the substance Director Schneider found in earlier Arena Chekhov.[76]

Calling Schneider an old hand at Chekhov, Carmody recognized the director's awareness of the perils of dealing with bored or dull people and the apparent attempt made at injecting comedy into the production in order to intensify the play's tragic qualities. But the forced nature of the production was spelled out when he concluded: "Ruefully, the effect is too often the actor's frustration added to that of the character."[77]

Alan Schneider states that Chekhovian production will play a great part in his future as a director. Although his attitudes are basically the same, he is aware that he has changed over the years and must therefore see new values in the plays, insights he may not likely experience until he stages them anew. Working with Chekhov for him is, indeed, a renewing adventure, since he is beginning to surmise that the Russian dramatist is trying to tell him that ". . . life is an endless process of disappointment and discovery. The idea of happiness eludes us but the process of living is constant. . . ."[78]

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[76]Jay Carmody, "The Passing Show: Old Chekhov Perils Turn Up at Arena," Washington Evening Star, April 18, 1962, p. B-10.

[77]Ibid. [78]Schneider interview.

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CHAPTER IX

LEE STRASBERG

It may be safely assumed that Lee Strasberg had been preparing himself to direct a Chekhovian play ever since the Moscow Art Theatre's New York visit in 1923 and, in fact, the Group Theatre had been seriously contemplating a production before it disbanded. With the formation of the Actor's Studio Theatre production company in 1963, fifteen years after the founding of the famous actor's workshop, the project seemed feasible, and Chekhov became the European dramatist who was to represent the "classic revival" in the production company's program.[1] Stuart W. Little, in an interview with Strasberg asked him, why he had chosen The Three Sisters above the other Chekhovian full-length plays. Strasberg claimed to have been studying the play for the forty-one years since the Russian company's New York presentation and went on to say:

> It is the warmest of Chekhov's plays. It doesn't have the classical structure, so to say, of The Cherry Orchard. But its very diffuseness, its rambling nature, is its interest for me. We have felt the influence of Hollywood too strongly, where every scene has to lead logically to the next scene, where the structure has to be tight and

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[1]The other plays were American and included June Havoc's Marathon 33, James Costigan's Baby Want A Kiss, Eugene O'Neill's Strange Interlude, James Baldwin's Blues for Mr. Charlie, and Arnold Weinstein and William Bolcom's Dynamite Tonight.

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> rigid. I like plays where there is a certain ambiguity, a certain diffuseness.[2]

The director went on to elaborate on this point in a later article by Henry Hewes in which Strasberg likened the play to an impressionist painting that meant different things to each viewer. Such a variable meaning of a play could only be achieved in production by de-emphasizing "theatrical punctuation and conventional climaxes." In this way the play would appear as a continuum of life itself. Hewes paraphrased the director:

> There is also deliberate disruption of the old-fashioned theatrical idea of focusing on one or two characters for any length of time and a breaking up of mood whenever it starts to accumulate. And to be sure that we see the play as a more total picture of society, there is much use of offstage sounds and intrusions by minstrels and carnival cèlebrants.[3]

In order to achieve this lack of focus, Strasberg claimed in an interview with this writer that Chekhov had to dramatize his observations with a craft and technique unlike other playwrights. "Oddly enough," he said, "his playwriting is closer to the Shakespearean form which is round and doesn't go straight. It seems to go around and wham, around and wham, and many people seem to misunderstand it."[4] For this reason, many regard Chekhov's plays as plotless despite the many love triangles, killings, attempted killings and suicides. He blames this misconception on the

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[2]Stuart W. Little, "Lee Strasberg on Actors Studio Theatre," New York Herald Tribune, June 15, 1964, p. 8.

[3]Henry Hewes, "Russian the Season?," Saturday Review of Literature, July 18, 1964, p. 25.

[4]Lee Strasberg, New York, interview, December 16, 1970.

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popular belief that the characters do "nothing but talk." In a casual analysis of Chekhov's subtle dramaturgy, he went on to say:

> The difference with Chekhov is that at the end of every talk [at this point the director slapped his hands] something is cemented. The play moves forward as a result of what has just been going on. A lot of other playwrights who try to follow the Chekhovian technique put in the aimlessness but they don't put in the forward movement. I remember even Clifford Odets, whose early plays did it, and I didn't know why they never came off. It wasn't until later that I realized that he has those marvelous speeches and his best writing in those plays but at a certain moment when they have to move forward, the people just speak, they speak about America and so forth and so [claps his hands] the curtain comes down. Nothing has actually happened as a result of that talk. There is great confusion about the Chekhovian form.[5]

It is the unfocused quality and "round" form of Chekhov's plays that also permit an awareness of the social problems of Russia as a non-intrusive, accompanying background. But, above all, the form acts as a framework for the revelation of character which is all the more remarkable since the plays' actions are distributed among many individuals. Strasberg believes Chekhov was able to achieve this effect because of his enormous response to people, by avoiding generalizing, and by dealing only with the "real and concrete" of each character. Strasberg was reminded of Chekhov's admirers who visited him in Yalta in order to discuss art and culture. The author would somehow manage to turn the conversation back to the visitor's peculiar interests and wants. When it was pointed out that Chekhov's own characters tended to generalize by philosophizing, the director replied: "It's true that his characters philosophize as all people do, but they must still deal with the tangibles."[6]

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[5] _Ibid._ [6] _Ibid._

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Lee Strasberg proved to be the only director in this study who had witnessed the Moscow Art Theatre productions in 1923 and who willingly admitted the large debt he owed the Russian company. He had been particularly impressed with the "fullness and vividness of life" that had been brought to the stage and went on to add: "Although I had my own ideas of the play, it did serve as a guiding light for my production. . . ."[7] A theme in The Three Sisters he was determined to pursue in the production was the avoidance of defeat at the beginning of the play with the sisters sustaining their hope and dream of going to Moscow until that hope is gradually lost in the later part of the play. He described at some length what he had in mind.

> On the contrary, they dream and they plan constantly to get to Moscow as soon as their brother can take them there and even after he marries they are still influenced by that dream. It's not until the third act, in which the marvelous external fire which Chekhov invented for that act as a symbol of the internal fire, do the sisters give up. It was an effort of mine to find a logic that did not give away the ending. I don't think I've ever seen a clear attempt to carry this line out before. . . . I felt that the sisters were not going towards the end, they were going towards a future. I tried to be very careful in pointing out that it is taken away from them little by little. The first act is very light and very gay, no sadness at all, not in the behavior, the life, the party, and so on. It's true that things have changed since their father was alive but otherwise they're all going towards the future. At the end of the act, we find that the brother, Andrey, on whom their hopes lie will marry Natasha. Fine. He marries her. It's a little bit of a shock, they don't expect it, but things might still go along. In the second act, even though the celebration is destroyed at the end of the act, we still hear, "To Moscow, to Moscow." They're still dreaming and hoping. They're beginning to get the sense that their brother is gambling and putting them in debt but it is still their house and they

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[7] Ibid.

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> might still leave for Moscow with the brother. It's not until the third act that Natasha takes over. It's in that act that all of the sisters give up. If Andrey becomes a professor, they can all go to Moscow. Andrey then becomes the focal point of the play. If you remember the first scene when Andrey enters, they make a fuss over him for he was their hope, their pride, their joy, their leibling. We played that scene very alive and very gay and at the end of the act he decides to marry. We hardly know what's happening. In the second act, we begin to see Natasha take over even though the sisters still think they might go to Moscow. In the third act, it is the first time they give up. Even then they still have hopes but it's not until the argument with Natasha does Olga see that there is no way out. Of course, we have here the symbolism all through the play of the new Russia taking over which Chekhov either deliberately created or did so without knowing it.[8]

The Three Sisters was Lee Strasberg's first directorial assignment on Broadway since the ANTA production of Peer Gynt, starring John Garfield, thirteen years before. After the demise of the Group Theatre, Strasberg directed several plays for independent producers but found the rehearsal conditions unfriendly to his methods. He soon began concentrating his energies on teaching. The Actor's Studio had originally been formed by Elia Kazan as a training ground for actors in order to provide him with an acting pool for his Broadway productions. Actors so trained could save the director countless hours of explanations during the critical rehearsal period. As the Studio grew, Kazan asked his former mentor in the Group Theatre to assist him with the heavy class schedule. When Kazan began turning his directing sights to film, Strasberg gradually took over the major responsibilities of the Studio and became its voice, defender and guiding hand.

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[8]Ibid.

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Despite the resource of talent of the Actor's Studio Theatre and an Equity dispensation permitting five and a half weeks of Broadway rehearsal time with a week of previews, Strasberg still had serious doubts about attempting a Chekhov play. "I don't think it's best to do Chekhov under Broadway conditions," he said. "The best you can hope for is an intelligent production but you cannot bring to it the kind of illumination which I feel it can have."[9] One major obstacle, he believed, sadly inhibiting the imagination of the Broadway director was the money necessary for creating each additional scenic effect. The greatest handicap that Strasberg suffered because of his directorial methods remained the lack of the necessary rehearsal time. Salem Ludwig has been a member of the Studio since its early years and has also been active as an acting teacher and director. A serious student of Strasberg cast in the role of Ferapont, he scrupulously attended every rehearsal and said: "We had five and a half weeks for rehearsal but Lee needed a lot more time than that to get all of his ideas across. At least he does. He works very carefully."[10] Union regulations prohibited earlier work at the Studio which would have included experimentation and a wise use of improvisations, and sense memory and affective memory exercises, which the director reharded as essential in helping bring the play more easily and flexibly to its staging period. "A longer period for exploration and investigation

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Salem Ludwig, New York, interview, January 15, 1971.

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would always be more helpful," he said, "and not only helpful but decisive in achieving what you want."[11] Lee Strasberg is well known as a slow, methodical director but Chekhov's "round" form made the rehearsal time even more critical, as he points out:

> You don't have the opportunity to accomplish much with each of the actors, especially when you're dealing with so many major parts. There is no one major part, no two parts, but many equal parts and they all have major scenes. From that point of view, Chekhov is not a playwright with which you can spend all your time working on just one main character. Everyone has great moments during the progress of the play and you just don't have the time to do all that in just five and a half weeks.[12]

Methodical as he may be, Strasberg never approaches rehearsals with a pre-planned, organized directing book, but allows for as much spontaneity as possible. "I never work with a directing book," he said, Instead, he brings his basic concept of the production to the theatre and works it out moment by moment with the actors. His study of the play informs him as to where the important scenes are to be found and the high points he will try to achieve. "But within them," Strasberg went on to say, "I work flexibly with the actor, trying to make him feel at home in the room, in seeking the motivations and impulses from within him."[13] Salem Ludwig does not recall Strasberg ever looking at a script but he was certain that the director made notes before coming to rehearsals, never referring to them unless he felt he was going off the track. ". . . but he never used them at reharsals," the actor insisted.

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[11]Strasberg interview. [12]Ibid. [13]Ibid.

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The version of the play used by the Actor's Studio Theatre was a new translation by Randall Jarrell, the writer and poet, who did not know Russian, according to Martin Fried, the production stage manager. He describes Jarrell's methods of working on the text.

> Randall Jarrell's translation is the best one I've ever read. Jarrell took a literal translation--a student just literally translated it but literally--and Jarrell took that and made it into poetry. Whoever translated it literally put in parentheses that this probably means this or this or that because of what it meant in that period and so on. Whoever did it did a terrible lot of research on it. From the American point of view, it flowed better than anything I've ever seen. I've seen the two scripts, the literal translation and Jarrell's.[14]

Fried claims that except for one or two lines that involved singing and dancing in the second act, no revisions were made in the script. My own examination of the prompt script reveals approximately one dozen lines cut throughout the play and these were always part of longer speeches. For example, in Olga's first speech, the lines--

> But now a year's gone by and we can remember it calmly. You are already wearing white. Your face is radiant.[15]

--were crossed out. Further on in the same act, in Tusenbach's description of Vershinin's difficulties with his wife, the last two lines--

> If I were Vershinin, I'd have left such a woman long ago but he puts up with her and just complains.[16]

--were also pencilled out.

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[14]Martin Fried, New York, interview, January 27, 1971.

[15]Anton Chekhov, "The Three Sisters," translated by Randall Jarrell (unpublished prompt script, property of Lee Strasberg), I.1.

[16]_Ibid._, I.5.

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Tamara Daykarhanova, who was asked to play Anfisa, had her own opinion of the translation, which she expressed in the following manner: "I asked what translation he would use and that I would play my own translation because I translated the play with Anne Bannigan, the translator. I said you play whatever translation you want but I will play my translation."[17] The prompt script bears this out since Anfisa's lines were pencilled out and other lines were written in on the opposite pages.

The director himself was quite pleased with Jarrell's work because of a simplicity inherent in Chekhov's original Russian, a simplicity considered to be extremely difficult to capture in English. However, the translation was to present some difficulties to the cast and, conseqently, the translator and director.

> He [Randall] had a certain way of phrasing things that was still American, an elliptical way that sometimes people of certain localities speak. It was not local but had very interesting twists and turns to phrases. We would have to give some of them up because the actors muffed them. They made them more colloquial to fit themselves which I didn't agree with because I thought he had done something quite unusual in that translation.[18]

Such liberties may have been the basis for Henry Hewes' remark: "And Randall Jarrell's new translation is, without being anachronistic, so modern that the play could be taking place in some present-day Midwestern town."[19]

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[17]Tamara Daykarhanova, Croton, New York, interview, November 20, 1970.

[18]Strasberg interview.

[19]Hewes, "Russian the Season?," p. 25.

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Over the years, Chekhov's plays had presented a substantial source of material for scene study at the Actor's Studio. Therefore, when plans for The Three Sisters were announced, a flurry of excitement swept the former church structure on West 44th Street. Finally, a notice was tacked on the bulletin board informing the members of auditions to be held. "I had an idea of what actors I wanted to play certain parts," Strasberg said, "but at the same time I invited actors to volunteer to audition if they wished to."[20] Almost the entire Studio came out to read for parts. The director tells us what he had in mind when casting for the three sisters.

> . . . for me, the combination of the people, of the three sisters was essential. I didn't go ahead until I lined up Kim Stanley and Geraldine Page for two parts. There was a problem in finding the third girl, Irina, who had to be young. Unfortunately, most of these plays and parts are played by mature people such as Katherine Cornell, Judith Anderson, etc. Such actors might be a nice combination but in a way foregoes any sense of a future that these people must have. The parts of Masha and Olga should be played by actresses even younger than Kim and Geraldine. Olga is supposed to be twenty-eight and Masha twenty-four; that's where the sensitivity and depth of these should be seen. Kim looked around thirty or so therefore we forewent the age a little. Shirley Knight did give a sense of twenty-one so I feel we had more or less the right kind of combination and the other parts were in that sense open, more or less.[21]

For the character of Natasha, Strasberg originally had Barbara Harris in mind because of a peasant quality and a unique comic talent. Her work with the Second City group, which made its reputation on comic improvisations, became a worrisome element for the director in that it might have presented an obstacle for playing a straight role in a difficult play. "I wanted to use her," he said, "but I felt that I might not be able

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[20]Strasberg interview. [21]Ibid.

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to help her with that basic problem which I feel she has to solve in the theatre."[22] The role was eventually assigned to Barbara Baxley, a long-standing member of the Studio.

The director considered Natasha an important key to the play and agreed with Robert Brustein's observation that The Three Sisters was the only play of Chekhov's that had a villainess. He tried to heighten this element by stressing the character's behavior in taking over and forcing the sisters out of the house. "The actress fought against it," the director recalled, "because every actor likes to be sympathetic. Essentially we accomplished it even though in some instances we wanted a sharper quality to the character."[23]

Casting the role of Vershinin presented a more difficult problem. Ben Gazzara was the director's first choice. "He thought Ben would make a fantastic Vershinin," Martin Fried said, "but someone in the production thought he was too young. Kim was a little too heavy and dowdy for Ben's Vershinin."[24] Strasberg insisted on avoiding the straight leading man and romantic figure as Vershinin seems destined to be played. "He has to be a little bit of an idiot," the director said. "That's a very difficult quality to capture at the same time that you have to get the depth and intensity."[25] At one point, Marlon Brando agreed to play the part but because of film commitments, withdrew before rehearsals began. George C. Scott, who was to play the part later in London, and Jason Robards, Jr. were also under

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[22] Ibid. [23] Ibid. [24] Fried interview. [25] Strasberg interview.

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consideration at the time. Kevin McCarthy took pains to describe a telegram he sent to Strasberg from the west coast as to why he should be cast for the part and weeks later when he returned east he was invited to audition with the others. He was finally, over the strenuous objections of Kim Stanley, given the role. The only members of the cast who were not members of the Studio were a musician who played the guitar and piano and who was given the minor role of Fedotik, and Luther Adler, who was cast as Chebutykin, and who had been associated with the director from Group Theatre days. In assessing the final cast, the stage manager, who has since become a director in his own right, pointed out a contingency that had to be met by the director. "Lee cast people who were very good Chekhovian actors to offset the Kims and the Geraldines, because he knew he would need substantial actors who would take direction and be self-disciplined."[26]

The casting period proved to be extensive and wearying. Copies of the new translation were freely circulated among the actors, many of whom took the trouble to memorize the parts in advance of the audition. Kim Stanley and Geraldine Page were constantly present to read with those trying out. The readings suited another purpose for the director, as Fried reveals. "Lee did most of his talking about the play and characters during the readings so that when they came to rehearsals, they had a pretty good idea what he wanted and what was expected of them. The readings took a long time, about six weeks."[27]

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[26]Fried interview. [27]Ibid.

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Strasberg considers the early rehearsals to be the most crucial of the production. He was particularly careful in explaining why:

> I have a process of rehearsal which gives much more time to the play's values and makes use of them in a different way than is commonly used. Rehearsals around the table or reading rehearsals are usually talk rehearsals, discussion rehearsals and so on. I don't really believe in talk or discussion. I believe in sharing ideas with the people but even those ideas are meaningless until they know what it means, until they themselves begin to have some sense of moving and behaving. The first five days of rehearsals, therefore, which are for me reading rehearsals are really a way in which, seated in a chair, the entire production takes shape. I work by means of improvisations with the individuals and in preparing the individual scenes as we see what the problems are. As they read, I begin to see what the problems are, that is, my problems, the problems I may have with the actors. At times, we may have already discussed some of these problems beforehand, that is, at the time of casting. But work on the problems starts at that time, the first week. Between each of the reading rehearsals that take place, I then do separate work with the various individuals that need it. That work is then brought into the reading rehearsals. So that each reading rehearsal is really a sculpting out, the structuring of the dramatic sequences of the play, and the creation of the actor's reality by means of which he will accomplish it. So that by the end of the fifth day, you actually have a complete production. You know what the play is. The actors are not yet worried about their lines because they are still reading the script. By the fourth or fifth day they may already move around. I don't let them go into the set but if they have the desire to move, that's very good. It means that things are beginning to happen within them that need physical and other activities so that it will be much easier for them when we begin to get them on their feet further into the rehearsals. So the first five days of rehearsal for me are much more important than are commonly conceived or made use of. After that, we pulled the play apart again. You never see the play again until the very end. Most people go scene by scene until at the end they see what they have. I believe the first five days of rehearsals when the actor first comes to the play, when he first reads the lines, you have to watch that the words become natural immediately. If you let him get on the wrong track with the words, he's finished. You'll never get him back. You'll never get what you want from him. Therefore, from the very beginning, I watch that the actor never be permitted to hold on to or to get into any bad habits. It may not yet be right but the process must go in the right direction. He's speaking, he's listening, he's talking, he's responding and so on. At the same time we begin to block out

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> the actions of the play. On those sections, we prepare separately, preparing each of the actors so that they can come into those scenes. All this we did in the first five days of rehearsals. So that by the fifth day of rehearsal, you actually have a full production except that it's not yet staged physically but the actors are acting, they're alive. They don't know their lines, they hold their scripts in their hands, therefore, they're able to make the effort to do all the things that you ask them to do.[28]

It was during this rehearsal period that Strasberg felt most confined by a lack of time. With opportunities for work with improvisations and exercises, the actors might ease more naturally into the blocking stage.

The readings were not conducted in the formal sense of actors sitting around a table. "It was all around the stage at the Martin Beck Theatre," the stage manager recalled. "They used the whole stage and people just sat anywhere and Lee sat in the middle on the stage."[29] The company spent some of the time listening to recordings of the Moscow Art Theatre but not for the purpose of emulation. Tamara Daykarhanova, who played the role of the young maid in the Moscow Art Theatre production and was now playing the old servant, acted as Artistic Adviser to Strasberg, remaining constantly at his side during the first weeks of rehearsal. As the cast listened to the Russian recordings, she informed it as to what was going on and described how it had been staged. She also sang the songs that were to be sung and crooned the nurse's off-stage lullaby in the second act for the production. She was often called upon to instruct the actors on pronouncing the Russian names correctly.

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[28]Strasberg interview. [29]Fried interview.

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Salem Ludwig offered an example of Lee Strasberg's incisive observation and sensitivity to his actors when he recalled the director's request that the cast not undertake professional commitments, especially during the first week of rehearsals. Since Ludwig was in the midst of directing a production at the Neighborhood Playhouse, he did not have sufficient time to prepare for the day's rehearsal. "Finally, he [Strasberg] got impatient," Ludwig went on, "and wanted to know when I was going to start working, when I was going to do some homework on the part of Ferapont. He knew I wasn't working because I wasn't bringing anything in."[30] He gave a detailed picture of the early rehearsals from the actor's point of view.

> We gave our first reading without any interruptions. After that he would interrupt whenever he felt that we were acting. He just wanted it simple and to make connections, to know who the characters were although we all knew each other very well. We all had fourteen years acquaintanceship so it was easy to get geared in with each other. He would stop us to tell us there would be music or describe what the costumes would be like or what the actor might be doing at a certain time. He sort of oriented us as to what would be happening. Tamara was referred to for pronunciation and for validity. She would also sing some songs for us. Lee felt that the characterizations were mostly formed in the first five days and that it was much harder to change after that than it is to set it straight.[31]

One reason why Strasberg's methods seem slow and painstaking is that he works discreetly with his cast, almost to the point of self-effacement. He rarely imposes his will upon his actors and prefers to draw them out by playing on their impulses and engendering an understanding of what they are doing. If it can be said that a director works

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[30] Ludwig interview. [31] Ibid.

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"organically," it is especially true of Lee Strasberg. This writer has often heard him refer to a favorite analogy as he points out the distinctive methods of creating an artificial flower and a real one. The former, he will tell you, is put together in a matter of minutes, even seconds while the latter must begin with a planted seed, and then be nursed with water, sun, time and patience. This approach to staging inspired Fried with admiration for the director. "You seldom saw Lee directing. You actually didn't see the workings of a director. He more or less let things happen."[32]

Salem Ludwig found this directing technique extremely fulfilling as an actor because ". . . there was a building of brick on brick of putting pieces together and a sense of comfort and ease and relaxation and ownership of the stage."[33] If the director found an actor not responding or relating in the scene, according to Ludwig, he never pointed it out overtly.

> Instead, he would say, "What does that word mean to you?" In the open rehearsal, he'd pick on something specific and move from that so that the actor himself would know that he wasn't listening. He would say, "What does that mean to Kuligin?" And then Albert Paulsen, who was playing Kuligin would start a train of thought and arrive at something. He wouldn't even let him answer it. Once he got involved, he didn't have to answer.[34]

From the beginning, there was an emphasis on behavior on all levels and an avoidance of emotionalism or results before the actor was ready for them. The open rehearsals referred to above occurred often during a group scene that bogged down because of an actor's inability to comprehend the immediate situation. For individual help, Ludwig informs us:

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[32]Fried interview. [33]Ludwig interview. [34]Ibid.

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> . . . he discussed the actor's problems and their personalizations or motivations privately. All he said to me was that the fire scene had to have some element of urgency and danger. He left it to me to pick my own personalization. He didn't use the word personalization during rehearsals but he did use it in class at the Studio.[35]

Strasberg, it seems, made some effort to divorce the production from the classroom situation by avoiding familiar terms used in the scene study classes. One term often brought up by the director for a Chekhov scene at the Studio was the word "grain," coined by Vachtangov. Marketa Kimbrell, a member of the Studio but not part of The Three Sisters company, one day brought in the Sonia-Astrov scene in Act II of Uncle Vanya. She explained what the term came to mean to her as an actress.

> The grain in this scene was for Sonia to find out if Astrov could love her. She had to know and so every moment in the room with him is directed towards finding the answer. This is different from an action. Instead of working sequentially from one moment to the next, the whole scene is textured with the "grain."[36]

Also affecting the grain was the preparation of the scene before Sonia calls Astrov into the room, the sensorial imagery of the food she feeds to Astrov together with the darkness of the night and the thunder and lightening of the storm. All, Strasberg emphasized, was to be used in the service of establishing her relationship to the other character and situation.

Sensory images, personalizations and preparations were constantly brought to the rehearsals of The Three Sisters by the director as

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[35]Ibid.

[36]Marketa Kimbrell, New York, interview, November 17, 1970.

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well as by the actors. The stage manager described a personalization given to Robert Loggia who was playing Solyony: that of Clifford Odets who liked to think of himself as Beethoven.

> When Odets walked into a room, he literally didn't understand why all the girls didn't walk over to him. Odets is Solyony. Of course, Lee was just using it as a point for action, since Solyony thought he was Turgenev [sic]. Lee used images about whom he knew and Clifford Odets was hung up on Beethoven and had a fantastic collection of Beethoven records.[37]

Kevin McCarthy referred to a similar kind of help he received from the director, although the image was less concrete in nature.

> I remember the farewell scene between Vershinin, Masha and Olga. He gave me an image about the sea, a great wave washing over us, this great ocean coming at us in waves, the events of life, a tremendous assault on Vershinin's sensibilities, tremendous, great breakers washing over him in order to derive some kind of stature. At a certain point it worked.[38]

Preparations for scenes were, as a rule, left to the actors and it seems that they made the most of their opportunities. Salem Ludwig described some of the efforts expended for this end.

> I know I had to work for cold and had to use sense memory exercises. There was a hell of a lot of activity going on backstage in preparing entrances. Kevin McCarthy would be running up and down ladders to energize himself, I guess. Jimmy Olsen did pushups and then he and Gerry Page would do a country dance round and round. There was a lot of activity back there. I was playing an old person so I didn't have to be as physically energetic as they.[39]

At times, in order to experience a sense of cold for the second act entrances, a tub of ice cubes was ordered backstage. "The actors began rubbing the

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[37] Fried interview.

[38] Kevin McCarthy, New York, interview, January 6, 1971.

[39] Ludwig interview.

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ice cubes all over themselves," Tamara Daykarhanova recalled with amusement. "One actor to feel anger would go on to the fire escape and shake it furiously."[40]

The advantages of having actors and a director who know one another well are obvious. But a relationship over a long period of time may also breed animosities that lead to problems for the director. Martin Fried implied as much when he said, "He always let Kim alone. Kim had an idea about the part and that's what she did."[41] Tamara Daykarhanova was willing to be a little more outspoken. "Lee Strasberg could not tell Kim Stanley anything."[42] Kevin McCarthy seemed to have no reluctance in elaborating on the discipline problems that faced the director.

> Here we had a director who had pretty strong ideas of how he wanted the production to be but he had grown in his own nursery some monster plants that wouldn't behave and insisted on flowering or fading or curling in their own way about the stage and the most outstanding, of course, was Kim Stanley, who wouldn't do anything that Mr. Strasberg asked her to do. She would never perform at rehearsals. She was always "working" at rehearsals.[43]

McCarthy went on to fault the classroom routine at the Studio that helped develop an attitude in the actors unconducive to the strict regimen of Broadway production.

> There are a lot of individualists at the Actor's Studio. They're taught to sort of develop their own, play their own instruments so to speak and one thing they didn't learn at the Studio was to play your instrument in concert with others. They only played solos. That's a problem he found. He's more of a coach at the Actor's Studio and he was trying to be a director on the stage. He brought the people

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[40]Daykarhanova interview. [41]Fried interview.

[42]Daykarhanova interview. [43]McCarthy interview.

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> that he coached to the stage and they were not going to respond to the scenic demands.[44]

McCarthy believed Strasberg was partly responsible, since the Studio classes encouraged the actors not to work for results but to take as much time as they wished in examining themselves and the roles. Salem Ludwig referred to another difficulty the director had to contend with. "Lee did blow up at one point. He did not want the actors directing each other. It stopped after that."[45] Henry Hewes seemed to have sensed the nature of the problem when he wrote: ". . . the performers seem less involved with each other than they do with their personal selfish needs and feelings."[46] The actresses playing the three sisters were especially reprimanded for contributing to a work-conscious medley of "self-generated" solos.

One aspect of the production that presented no problem for the director was the blocking of the play since he regarded it as a natural consequence of the proper procedure in the first week of rehearsals. Strasberg describes the process.

> You start on the physical staging, which means you take the actors into the actual set and you let them ease themselves into the environment. . . . Within it I work flexibly with the actor, trying to make him feel at home in the room, seeking motivations and impulses from him. Many people think it's a great thing for actors not to get in each other's way. Yes, if you stage it mechanically. But if you let them develop their own natural impulses and sensitivities, they're going to behave like human beings. So, it's only a matter of having certain high moments of the play that you feel would be best conveyed

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[44] *Ibid.* [45] Ludwig interview.

[46] Hewes, "Russian the Season?," p. 25.

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> by this particular type of composition or staging and within that you work flexibly. It doesn't take me long to do that because the actors are already prepared. By the third week, in other productions, the actors are still plodding along because they were never permitted by themselves to gain any degree of ease. They are supposed to gain it only after running through it and after that they start playing. Whereas, after the first five days of rehearsals, as I use them and feel they should be used, the actor is already acting, is alive.[47]

By the end of the second week, the play is almost staged and, as scenes are repeated, other elements are gradually incorporated into the growth of the production.

> The process is always taking place in a way that nothing is dissipated or separated, where the actors learn their lines before they know where they're going, or what they're doing, or not establishing a rhythm which doesn't coincide with what is going on and, therefore, creating a great deal of difficulty. You'll notice that many productions by directors developed out of the Group Theatre or Actor's Studio are acted with ease even without tryouts. Their productions don't need tryouts to get working. They ease into them. That's because the actors are prepared and therefore their approach to the mechanical problems make them much simpler, such as movement, business and memorizing.[48]

Tamara Daykarhanova, who viewed the cast as composed of "first class actors," credited them with blocking the play. Because of their excellent training, they had made a careful study of the various situations which determined where they might move and what business to introduce.

> For example, Geraldine Page didn't want to keep correcting notebooks throughout the beginning of the first act. She just didn't want to sit in one place so she began acting the hostess by seeing that everything was prepared for the dinner party. This was good business. All the experienced actors at the beginning thought up their own business on that stage.[49]

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[47]Strasberg interview. [48]*Ibid*.

[49]Daykarhanova interview.

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Salem Ludwig agreed. "The blocking came from the actors. The set was laid out for us and the procedure was very organic and the movement evolved from the actor's motivations."[50] As one who was continually at Strasberg's side, Martin Fried was conscious of the director's guiding hand regardless of how natural the development of the production appeared. "You never saw him direct in a sense because he let scenes happen and then he would fix it and move people so and so. The blocking came more or less naturally."[51] Fried was particularly impressed with the staging of the group scenes, which caught the spirit of the party in the first act and the merrymaking during the festival in the second. Though the movement was carefully thought out by Strasberg, the actors were still permitted the freedom to feel their way about the stage and improvise their own business, which was then either accepted or rejected as the director saw fit.

> It's a party, the night of the festival. That all happened naturally. I mean it wasn't really directed. He would talk about the scene and they would do it. Lee brought the gypsies on the stage which not many people do. . . . The whole atmosphere of the dinner scene in the first act was fantastic. But there was no extra dialogue put in. In the background, the actors did talk to each other, at least they weren't mouthing anything but they couldn't be heard.[52]

Fried was not the only one who responded to the staging of these scenes. Henry Hewes took special pains to point out the elements he admired in the production:

> Mr Strasberg has created some wonderfully vital scenes, such as the one in which Tusenbach and the brother do a spirited Russian dance, or another when the girls are all waltzing around the piano. These

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[50]Ludwig interview. [51]Fried interview. [52]*Ibid.*

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> help create a feeling that provincial life with its constant visits by officers from the local garrison is not so bad.[53]

The later rehearsals presented some difficulties for Strasberg, partly because he had to be careful not to be pressured by the time factor. At the end of the third week, should he find the play not fully staged, he refuses to be concerned, especially if the first few acts are going well. He is convinced the last act will fall into place if the actors are aware of all their relationships. Still, this particular rehearsal period does offer subtle staging problems which the director felt necessary to explain at some length.

> In the way I work, there is a stage in the final week. In working for the intimacy of the actors, in order to make the play alive to them, I usually wind up in the fourth week with a production that is low, not in energy but in volume. If you start projecting immediately, you'll never get the naturalness of real speech. This is especially important with Chekhov. Chekhov is supposed not to have liked the plays of Ibsen. I can only guess that to him they seemed too theatrically oriented. I have a feeling by the way people described Chekhov and by the way he spoke and also by the way he wrote that he tried to achieve, not a tone of naturalism in the sense of casualness but a tone that is easy, that is natural, that's alive. . . . We worked very hard to establish an ease, a naturalness, an intimacy and so forth. Therefore, we arrived at the stage of the run-throughs with a low level of vocal energy. But for a couple of days, it has to be watched. Also some of the scenes have to be watched, scenes in which some of the actors are taking too much time. You might have to find adjustments to help the actor in order to give you the pace or the tempo. I don't actually believe in pace or tempo but nonetheless there is a limit you have to watch for. By pace or tempo, it is commonly assumed that if you make something fast it will be interesting. I don't see how anything that's uninteresting to begin with is going to be interesting if it's said more quickly. If you get over it more quickly it may just seem more interesting but logically it doesn't make sense. As in any temporal element, time is a factor and,

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[53]Hewes, "Russian the Season?," p. 25.

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> therefore, little things may take you a long time to do and the big things are over in a couple of minutes. In staging for the theatre, it's very difficult to maintain a balance between the things that are not so important dramatically speaking yet must be real and moved along easily and naturally, and the few short dramatic explosions that are important--as often happens in life. It's only when the actor starts working for it that the process is slowed up during rehearsals in order to give the actor time to accomplish it. But then it has to be watched, that it doesn't get set and that's a problem for the director. These are the things that we have to deal with in the final stages of rehearsal. You give your actors on the one hand an opportunity to run through which they hadn't had since the early days of rehearsal and which is very necessary for them. They need that sense of continuity. I don't believe in stopping people during the process of run-throughs. The director should be able to make notes and deal with the problems afterwards. During the staging, I don't care about the acting or a performance, we just go through it easily. This way, I think the actor is led to the entire process of performance much better than the more mechanical way which is commonly used.[54]

Martin Fried confirmed Strasberg's lack of concern with the pace of the show even though it ran a half hour too long for Broadway. "That's why in places people thought it was boring but for people who care about the play, it's not."[55] If the director thought a scene was too slow, he would pick out significant moments and discuss them with the actors. "That would always speed things up," Fried continued. "If it still was slow then it was slow for the right reasons rather than not knowing what was happening."[56]

Salem Ludwig was more specific when he described Strasberg's instructions to the actors at this stage of rehearsal.

> Lee never brought to our attention, overtly, the need for tempo or pace. He always worked with motivations such as telling the actor,

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[54]Strasberg interview. [55]Fried interview. [56]*Ibid*.

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"You know as soon as you hear this word what you are going to answer," and the actor would automatically speed up a cue. He never obligated the actor. He never said, "You've got to be faster." He tried to justify everything he wanted from the actor.[57]

Tamara Daykarhanova saw this critical period as a hurdle the production failed to overcome. When the play was expected to become a unified whole, she regrettably saw a lack of cohesion. "You see, at the Actor's Studio," she said, "they only put on scenes and so they are both actors and directors themselves so Lee was not used to putting things together."[58] Similarly, Kevin McCarthy felt that this rehearsal stage failed in certain essentials, and once more blamed Actor's Studio procedures.

I think the production did not have the rhythm that Strasberg would have liked. He asked for certain things they never gave him and most of those things were rhythm and tempo. Those were the things that were put down at Studio sessions because he did not want them to pay attention to them but to think about themselves, development of certain aspects of their character and not have to feel that they have to deliver at a certain time but when you get on the stage you have to. This attitude got in the way of the production.[59]

But for some, especially Martin Fried, a devoted student and disciple of Strasberg, this rehearsal stage proved particularly gratifying.

For the run-throughs, as stage manager, I would say, "Places please." When everybody was in place ready to begin, they would have to wait for three minutes, every actor. It was nice. The run-throughs were always marvelous. They always happened naturally. People always came to see the run-throughs before the tech rehearsals on the open stage with everybody still in their own street clothes. Costumes began to come in slowly. It was just marvelous to watch it develop. The rehearsals were fantastic.[60]

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[57]Ludwig interview. [58]Daykarhanova interview.

[59]McCarthy interview. [60]Fried interview.

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Since Strasberg strives persistently for natural behavior, the environment must play a primary function. The scenery, therefore, became an area for special attention. An interesting scenic concept was to capture the feeling of the entire house of the Prozorovs rather than individual rooms. This, he believed was achieved by a unique scenic method.

> I think we had a rather new device which may be worth mentioning because one of the things which I started with, which we carried out but not to the extent that we might have, and which I think is an interesting idea, is the fact that I wanted to give the sense of the house, that all these rooms were rooms in a house. . . . That's not easy to accomplish but you'll notice the entire production was in one set. It had three separate areas but actually in one set. The house at the end [garden scene] was really the same set as the house at the beginning [drawing room and dining room]. It was simply turned around. The set was on a pin. The third act used the same set as the first two acts but [the furniture] had to be changed during the intermission.[61]

He was particularly proud of the effect achieved for the sisters' bedroom in the third act.

> I had the sense of a very intimate, private kind of room in which the people do not undress before each other, even the girls do not undress before each other. That's why we had the screens which we used within the angles of the room.[62] I think we achieved that effect. In fact, from a certain point of view, that was the most completely accomplished idea of ours.[63]

The director failed to mention a staging device which helped give the audience (at least part of it) an added visual perspective. His stage manager furnished the details. "Lee had a marvelous idea bout using a mirror for Gerry Page. Usually Olga is hidden behind the screen but here

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[61]Strasberg interview.

[62]Screens are called for by the author. [63]Strasberg interview.

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the audience could see what Olga was doing which was getting into a nightgown and taking down her hair."[64]

Light played a particularly important part in Chekhovian production for Strasberg and, here, he relied on his childhood memories of Russia when candles and oil lamps were commonly used. The play's four acts also represented different times of the year as they did in Chekhov's other plays. "And, therefore, the change of seasons and the change of light was for me very important in the production,"[65] the director said. The atmospheric effect of Natashia carrying a candle in the second and third acts were so important for Strasberg that he had Abe Feder, the lighting designer, install thirty small lights or "inkies" along the first pipe to follow the actress about the stage. "I had to give warns for about thirty cues," Fred said, "one right after the other so we got the effect of real candlelight without the candles. . . . The flickering effect was all done by Feder."[66] For the last act, sunlight was projected against the sky cyc on stage left; it slowly moved throughout the act to stage right. "He had one lighting cue that was a 360 second cue. It was a bitch for

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[64]Fried interview. [65]Strasberg interview.

[66]Fried interview. Natasha's symbolic association with the candle has already been investigated. See David Magarshack, Chekhov The Dramatist (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), pp. 248-249. Strasberg developed the theme of Natasha taking over the house at the opening of the second act by having her enter with the lighted candle and cross to Andrey's room, then move to the nursery door, the kitchen door, into the dining room and finally the table. All this was synchronized with the appropriate lighting.

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the electricians."[67] Strasberg described how he tried to achieve a visual sense of wind in the second act with the rustling effect of a fan and "by a certain light on the window curtains that created a shimmering movement."[68]

With the help of Tamara Daykarhanova, all the music was adapted from the Moscow Art Theatre recordings. The costumes were authentic while the sets were kept attractively functional at the same time a naturalistic clutter was scrupulously avoided. Henry Hewes called Theoni V. Aldredge's costumes "bright and appropriate" and Will Steven Armstrong's settings, "attractive and poetic."

Admittedly, Lee Strasberg did not achieve all of the goals he set out to, but he seems to have been pleased with the overall results. He was particularly gratified with the reactions of many theatre-goers who had hitherto regarded the Chekhov play as a solemn "classic." "My God, it's taking place in Westchester," he quoted some as saying, and went on to reflect that "the thing that I tried to achieve was a kind of universality and what I was especially proud of was that the production was moving. . . that this time it had a very moving, powerful quality and not just the quiet dynamics of Chekhov."[69] One of the mild reservations he expressed concerned the performance.

> There are things that are very deep and intense that are spoken very humanly, very simply so that it doesn't seem like "acting." I don't think he [Chekhov] liked anything that seemed like acting. Perhaps we didn't entirely achieve that but I think we achieved a great deal of it compared to other productions.[70]

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[67]Fried interview. [68]Strasberg interview. [69]Ibid. [70]Ibid.

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Martin Fried believed the director did not achieve as much as he had wished although the stage manager was convinced that the production was going in the right direction. "We were received very nicely," he said, "but Lee's ideas were fantastic and he just didn't have the time to put them all in, at least not in the way he worked which is to let the actor do his thing and not push him."[71]

Kevin McCarthy was disappointed in the production not being more successful than it was and pointed to a lack of cooperation from some of the actors as the root of the difficulty. His rehearsal experiences gave him fresh insights and a new appreciation for Chekhov. "The relationships, the atmosphere, the period, the environment, they weren't brought together in The Sea Gull. To me they were all brought together in The Three Sisters to some extent."[72]

Salem Ludwig agreed with others that the director did not get all he wanted but he himself felt that the performance had "a very high level of realistic acting and that it was all in the same style, of one piece."[73] Tamara Daykarhanova's opinion was to the contrary, conceding there were good "individual moments." But the production did not cohere as a complete entity. "I felt that everybody played separate scenes," she said, "and some scenes were very good and some not so good."[74] She seemed particularly concerned with some of the pauses that were too long and some that were dead.

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[71]Fried interview. [72]McCarthy interview.

[73]Ludwig interview. [74]Daykarhanova interview.

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The critical reception to Strasberg's The Three Sisters were mixed, with some of the enthusiasts virtually ecstatic in their praise. The mildest of the approvers was Howard Taubman of The New York Times who acknowledged the company's strength and which played with "an admirable sense of unity in the production." Another source of admiration was Strasberg's unhurried and sensitive approach to the play with its full relish for details of Russian life. He felt, however, that the first act staging tried too hard to capture the counterpoint and diverse strands of action implicit in Chekhov's dramaturgy. It is in the third and fourth acts that the production gains power and conviction and "tightens its grip on the Chekhovian essence."[75]

On the other hand, Judith Crist, conceding "an intermittent vitality and an emotional power. . . ." was finally left with ". . . a diffusion of character, a variety of acting styles and a diversity of mood that vitiates the cumulative impact of the play."[76] Most of her review was given to Kim Stanley's performance, which she viewed as an extraordinary illumination of the role of Masha.

Lee Strasberg received the lion's share of the credit for "the finest ensemble acting by an American company" in Norman Nadel's review. "As a result," he went on to write, "The Three Sisters conveys an abun-

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[75]Howard Taubman, "Theater: A Tender 'Three Sisters'," New York Times, June 23, 1964, *T-NBL+, 1964-65, T-Z.

[76]Judith Crist, "Chekhov on Broadway Illumed by Kim Stanley," New York Herald Tribune, June 23, 1964, loc. cit.

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dance of meaning and feeling beyond anything you might suspect from a reading or from most productions of this classic."[77]

Both the Actor's Studio and Strasberg shared Jerry Tallmer's uninhibited admiration when he raved in the New York Post:

> The Actor's Studio talks a good deal about truth. Last night at the Morosco Theatre it nailed for our lifetime the right to do so and Lee Strasberg proved to a world waiting twenty years that he could direct a play--if it's the right play--with all the creative truth and strength a human being can command.
>
> The Actor's Studio also talks a good deal about inner life. I do not think I have ever seen sixteen or however many actors walking a stage with more valid and interrelated inner lives than those Mr. Strasberg has elicited from his brilliant cast for Chekhov's The Three Sisters at the Morosco.[78]

Instead of "truth" and "inner life," Robert Brustein found limpness and flaccidity predominant in the production and went on to write:

> Actually, Strasberg has left the play largely undirected and permitted his actors their heads, but wherever he has bothered to interpret, he has introduced Chekhovian cliches. This production will confirm the Philistines in their conviction that Chekhov is a deadly bore, for it is as sluggish and torpid as an early Garbo movie--though the play is only sixty pages of printed text, it takes the Actors Studio Theatre three hours and ten minutes to peform it.
>
> The star-studded company is disorganized as an ensemble, but it is even difficult to single out individual performances for praise.[79]

In another conflicting notice, Douglas Watt, who called the production a "stunning achievement," expressed a heart-felt appreciation to

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[77]Norman Nadel, "Actors Studio Superb in Chekhov Finale," New York World Telegram and Sun, June 23, 1964, loc. cit.

[78]Jerry Tallmer, "Truth, Chekhov, Strasberg," New York Post, June 23, 1964, loc. cit.

[79]Robert Brustein, "Memoirs of Mr. Bang," New Republic, July 25, 1964, p. 33.

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the Actor's Studio for lavishing their skills on the public in order to "bring us a miraculous ensemble performance of Chekhov's masterpiece." He too considered Strasberg the "true hero of the occasion," and added that "using his players like an orchestra, he has caught every inflection and meaning of Randall Jarrell's excellent new adaptation. . . ."[80]

Weeks after the opening and in a lengthy review, Henry Hewes gave a careful assessment of what he had seen on the Morosco stage. He could not seem to shake off the gnawing impression that the production had become an extension of the Actor's Studio's working procedures.

> Indeed, if one is able to regard a play as a montage of acting explorations and artistically conceived supplements, this production is an extraordinary event. But for some of us, who rightfully or wrongfully seek more conventional theatrical fulfillment of our conception of Chekhov and The Three Sisters, the presentation fails to harmonize its impressions, or even to leave us with a series of impressions we can mentally synchronize. Partly, this effect may stem from the exigencies of casting, but partly it may also be inherent in the Studio's approach to production.[81]

He sensed in the performance a conscious working for character delineation with varying success and, with ambivalent feelings, concluded that: "As it stands, our appreciation of their work is constantly mixed with our exasperation at what these artists and their director have chosen to do."[82]

However, no doubt remained as to where many in the cast stood with regard to the production when, during the curtain calls on opening night, Luther Adler stepped forward to interrupt a rousing ovation. "If the greatest living playwright, Anton Chekhov, has been here tonight, it is because there is in this theatre, there among you, Lee Strasberg."[83]

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[80]Douglas Watt, "Actors Studio Does Itself Proud with Revival of 'Three Sisters,'" New York Daily News, June 23, 1964, loc. cit.

[81]Hewes, "Russian the Season?," p. 25. [82]Ibid.

[83]Jerry Tallmer, "Truth, Chekhov, Strasberg."

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CHAPTER X

HAROLD CLURMAN

In an introduction to his collection of theatre reviews and essays, Lies Like Truth, Harold Clurman professed that as one of the founders of the Group Theatre he could hardly be considered an opponent of realism. In the years following the thirties, however, he became increasingly convinced that the more intense the search for reality in the theatre, the more one had to reach for the poetic. "The profoundest realism is poetic; genuine poetry is real,"[1] he concluded. In his review of Thornton Wilder's The Matchmaker, **a decade and a half** after the Group Theatre had been assigned to its prominent place in the chronicles of American theatre history, Clurman was to affect the posture that "The theatre at its best is either festival or rite. The upstart realistic theatre is only superficially a challenge to this axiom."[2] A year later, the director-critic elaborated on this aesthetic conversion when he reviewed an off-Broadway production of a Chekhovian play.

> I have often harbored a certain speculative resistance to the idea of Chekhov. I prefer my drama spacious, high and bold--full of sonorous

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[1]Harold Clurman, Lies Like Truth (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1958), p. 20.

[2]Ibid., p. 40.

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> speech, hot action, splendor of color, effect and depth of meaning. In theory, I deplore the smallness of realism and the hushed inwardness and stammerings of that truncated world in which the road to great deeds has been blocked. In vain I tell myself that modern society cannot produce sound plays to the measure of abstract aesthetic demands, since society itself does not produce the environment which might make our favorite kind of drama natural to it. I still hanker for something more than what the depressed middle class can create.
>
> But all this theory thaws like snow in the sun when I sit before a reasonably competent production of a Chekhov play.[3]

Clurman sincerely examines the source of his captivation by Chekhov, since the Russian dramatist lacks the abundant eloquence of a Shakespeare, the structural compactness of a Sophocles, and the colorful grandeur and sweep of the nineteenth century romantics. Almost with a touch of bravado, Clurman attempts to offer an answer that sounds like a confession that has been wrested out of him.

> Chekhov triumphs because the gentleness and goodness of his soul, the wit of his understanding, the acuteness of his observation are so balanced, so loving, so unemphatically honest, probing, discreet, economical and impeccably true in taste and tone that every moment of his plays is transformed into the most penetrating poetry.[4]

Lacking a knowledge of the Russian language, he can still affirm the inherent poetry in Chekhov's realism, not in his employment of language or verse but in the artistry of his dramaturgy, the pertinence of his naturalistic detail, and the significance of behavioral data. All this has been "transfigured in the alembic of a great man's understanding and feeling,"[5] he went on to write. Years later, when Clurman was invited to write a foreword to Robert W. Corrigan's new translation of Chekhov's plays, he was still asking himself the same question, as if his previous answers

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[3] Ibid., pp. 133-34. [4] Ibid., p. 134. [5] Ibid.

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had been unsatisfactory. Repeating once again that a play by Chekhov was for him always a fresh and moving experience, and that provoked a combination of laughter and tears, he added:

> I ask myself the secret of this dramatic miracle. The answer lies, I believe, in Chekhov's wisdom and humanity. He transcends the false opposition of optimism versus pessimism. Man is inadequate to his task, his promise, his ideals. His dignity lies in his never ending aspiration, which is also the source of his vulnerability.[6]

Before becoming an interpreter of Chekhov, Harold Clurman had preferred to remain a reader, an observer, a critic, and an analyst of the plays, although he had made a half-hearted attempt to direct The Three Sisters in 1939. "We couldn't raise the money," Clurman recalled. "It was very difficult to raise money at that time for classic plays and revivals."[7] Joseph Wiseman, the actor and friend of the director, observed that over the years Clurman had deliberately shied away from attempting Chekhov.[8] The director admitted as much when he explained the obstacles he faced in the late thirties. "It was much easier to raise money for a new play such as Thunder Rock by Robert Ardrey," and added:

> However, I am almost glad we didn't because I don't think I was up to it at the time. I had already done three or four productions, perhaps more, but that particular play which requires a great deal of subtlety, I don't think I would have done it the least of justice. At the time, I was insufficiently experienced despite the fact that I had done Awake and Sing! and other plays of Odets which many people

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[6]Anton Chekhov, Six Plays of Chekhov, new English versions and introduction by Robert W. Corrigan, foreword by Harold Clurman (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. x.

[7]Harold Clurman, New York, interview, October 27, 1970.

[8]Joseph Wiseman, New York, interview, October 26, 1970.

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> thought were Chekhovian. After that, my real interest was always in new plays.[9]

Another reason he gave for not reviving a Chekhov play was somewhat more defensive.

> I always had the feeling that everybody gets very wise when they see an old play. They know how it was done here or there and people are always having ideas on how Chekhov should be done. They are not looking at what they're seeing. That's why I've always been shy at reviving plays that so many people have done. These are the two basic reasons for having avoided doing Chekhov.[10]

With a greater willingness to direct revivals today, mainly because he finds so few good contemporary plays available, in 1969 Clurman accepted an invitation to direct a Chekhov revival for the Center Theatre Group at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. The year before, the theatre's producer, Gordon Davidson, had directed Joseph Wiseman in the successful production of _In The Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer_ and had asked the actor to star in another play the following season. Wiseman recalled that he had expressed a desire to act in a Chekhovian play if Harold Clurman would direct. To this, the producer agreed and _Uncle Vanya_ was selected for the 1969 summer venture. Clurman explained why he accepted the assignment.

> Chekhov is a particularly beautiful playwright of particularly beautiful plays and is naturally a challenge because they are realistic and poetic, humorous and sad, really beautiful characterizations and there are so many disputes about what constitutes the Chekhovian manner, so much so that we know the debates between Chekhov and Stanislavsky and later the accusations that Stanislavsky had misin-

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[9]Clurman interview. [10]_Ibid._

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> terpreted Chekhov's intentions. All these things make one feel he'd like to find out the truth about it by doing it. The basic thing is that the plays are beautiful and subtle and not easily categorized.[11]

The circumstances that surrounded professional production in the American theatre was another inhibiting factor in attempting the Russian playwright. "The conditions for doing Chekhov in this country," he said, "are not the most favorable, even off-Broadway and in the regional theatre."[12] He was particularly suspicious of the Los Angeles cultural climate and its ability to embrace Chekhovian drama. Above all, sufficient time was a vital factor that would be lacking for an adequate rehearsal period. "The real way to stage Chekhov," he went on, "is to tell the cast, here are the characters, this is the environment, go ahead and do the play." With a talented cast moving about freely, responding to the emotional subtleties and scenic demands, always under his invisible but guiding hand, he might then mold and shape the production's seemingly chaotic and amorphous form.

> But I realized I didn't have the time for that. If I had six to eight weeks, I could do it. I would take the first two to three weeks to improvise. But with the time we had I had to block everything out and then change things. We only had a few days to read at the beginning of rehearsals. It's my opinion that you need a minimum of eight weeks to do a Chekhov play.[13]

Despite his claims that he had a well-chosen cast for his production of Uncle Vanya, another obstacle that stood in Clurman's way of achieving the desired results was the lack of an ensemble company. "You don't make an ensemble in a few weeks," he said. "I got some ensemble

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[11] Ibid. [12] Ibid. [13] Ibid.

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effects but you really need years."[14] He described the early days of the Group Theatre members who, over a period of time, had lived and fought and worked together, and who knew the playwrights and the environment about which they wrote. In a similar context, Chekhov wrote about a class to which the actors in the Moscow Art Theatre were attuned. "In this way you build up an ensemble."[15]

In his structural analyses, Clurman seems to have approached Chekhov with considerable caution. "Chekhov's plays are consummately constructed," he once wrote, "but their structure is of a special devising--which might be described as 'seamless.' One is not able to recognize the mechanics of workmanship. The plays unfold effortlessly as if what we were seeing was simply the flow of everyday occurrences."[16] He finds little external logic in the characters because of their contradictions and they are often made to express themselves from unconscious impulses. "Without knowing it, all the characters reveal themselves," Clurman went on, "though Chekhov never 'explains' them, never removes the shadow of their mystery."[17] Such a tenuous evaluation of Chekhov's people cannot help but present a peculiar challenge to a director who works with specific and tangible production objectives.

Harold Clurman's basic method in seeking the dramatic thrust of a play is the uncovering of its "spine." Also known as the "superobjec-

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[14] Ibid. [15] Ibid.

[16] Chekhov, Six Plays, Clurman foreword, p. x. [17] Ibid.

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tive," the spine is the play's active problem to which all the characters are related. Always put in terms of a verb, it becomes a "doing" throughout and is presented in terms of specific behavior by the actors. Clurman saw the characters in Uncle Vanya as hard-working, conscientious people who continually talk about idleness because of a dissatisfaction in life, a life that has become insignificant by the lack of desired accomplishments. "The spine of the play," the director concluded, "is to find a way to live successfully, to find a way to a better life. It has an idealistic spine."[18] Each character, too, is activated by a "spine" of his own and, whenever it is as difficult to find the spine of a play, as it is in the plays of Chekhov, the joining of the spines of the various characters will ultimately lead you to that of the play. The behavior and actions of the people must subsequently be manifested in accordance with their spines. Since motivations of characters change from moment to moment and scene to scene, "the spine of a character or play is not the motivation," Clurman claimed. "It is something that can be acted all the time."[19]

In his foreword to Corrigan's translations, written seven years before he directed Uncle Vanya, Clurman regarded all of Chekhov's characters as people who "for the most part, fail in their immediate aims, yet nearly all of them have some 'premonition of happiness.' Even in the

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[18]Clurman interview.

[19]Harold Clurman, lecture in Play Analysis, Hunter College, The City University of New York, Spring, 1969. Quoted in class notes of John Tietsort, graduate student: "(Hereinafter referred to as Clurman lecture)"

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depths of their wretchedness they feel they must go on, they must 'work,' they must aspire."[20] He saw Vanya as an intelligent, sensitive, artistic and self-sacrificing man who had no confidence in his own abilities and was rendered impotent by his self-doubts and recriminations. By pinpointing his desperate outcry, "Help me make peace with myself," Clurman concluded that Vanya's spine was "to find a way to live through the difficulties of life."[21] The director characterized Yelena as a passionate woman, full of potential, but dutiful and repressed by a lack of courage and by a hatred for ugly situations she cannot control. Clurman saw her spine as "to try to obey and justify her obedience."[22] Sonia was seen as a robust, healthy young woman, always hopeful, content when she can express her true feelings, ready to be of help to those around her. The spine given her was "to serve everybody."[23] Clurman had greater difficulty in finding Astrov's spine since this interesting character seemed to possess many negative qualities. "He is hopeless in a way," the director said. "He can't love. He loves no one, not even Yelena." There is very little of life left for him except to pursue his vocation and his hobby of forestry. Thus, "to do the thing he has to do,"[24] became Astrov's spine. "In one way, Vanya is more of the aspiring one," Clurman added. He saw all of Chekhov's characters as life's gentle people who cannot bear pain or

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[20]Chekhov, Six Plays, Clurman foreword, p. x.

[21]Clurman lecture. [22]Ibid. [23]Ibid.

[24]Clurman interview.

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violence, who are eternally idealistic and who, although rich in inner resources, will never achieve their ends. "Silken souls"[25] was the image they conjured up for him.

As has many another director, Clurman viewed Uncle Vanya primarily as a comedy. "This production won't be mournful," he said at the first rehearsal. "People may cry, but it won't be mournful. Russians weep not only out of sorrow but for beauty and happiness."[26] Neither was he inclined to make it comic or "jazz it up." Farce, he was convinced, was not the way to get at the humor. In production one means of reducing the mournfulness was to stress the action. Indeed, Clurman saw nervous activity as an important atmospheric element in the play. "That is why Chekhov put a storm into--it is also a storm inside. . . . The atmosphere of the play is nervous, searching for a better life."[27] A continuity and rhythm, he believed, could best be created by the silence within the pauses as a counterpoint to the play's activity. "Chekhov has a rhythm that is very elusive," Joseph Wiseman, the actor who played Astrov, said in recalling difficulties in rehearsal. "It takes time to nurture and develop."[28]

Chekhov's language was another element that Clurman discovered baffling to American actors. It is not true that the Russian is a talky

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[25]Joanne Rotte, "Rehearsal log of Harold Clurman's production of Uncle Vanya" (externship, Ph.D. Program in Theatre, The City University of New York), "(Hereinafter referred to as Rotte rehearsal log)"

[26]Ibid. [27]Ibid. [28]Wiseman interview.

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playwright, since the plays contain a great deal of inner action. When Russians did talk they did so with great lyricism. "They talk with fullness, they are 'connecting,'" Clurman told his cast, using one of his favorite expressions. "Lines are 'scaffolding' of things that are going on."[29]

A particularly delicate problem for the director was the selection of a production concept that could best relate to the west coast audience. After considering the limitations of regional theatre conditions and the structural features of the building, he arrived at the following formula.

> I wanted my production of Uncle Vanya to be Russian in a supranational sense. I didn't want them to be imitative of the Russians in terms of manners and accents but to be, as Americans, as close in their feelings to what the Russian feelings essentially are. I wanted an American production, not in the sense of being slangy or commonplace or vulgar but as Americans getting the spirit of what is essentially in Chekhov.[30]

Harold Clurman may well be one of the most meticulous and conscientious of American directors in preparing a play for production. Before coming to the first rehearsal, elaborate notes are compiled which are eventually used to make up his directing book. In an article in the Tulane Drama Review, he described this early note-taking phase of his preparation.

> At first the notes are set down haphazardly in no particular order, without too definite a method. After five or six readings of the script--more in the case of a very complex play--I read through each of the individual character's lines, setting down the basic action or motivations, the attitudes, peculiar traits or history of

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[29]Rotte rehearsal log.

[30]Clurman interview.

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> each of them. Only then do I begin to work on the main body of my preparatory work, which is the director's book.[31]

The notes are intended for the director alone in order to clarify all feelings and thoughts of the play and characters. "I find that unless I write them down I am not sure I have thought precisely enough and will be able to make my ideas sufficiently clear and cogent for the actors."[32]

After a series of voluminous notes, the director begins to work on his directing book, which contains minute and considered annotations keyed line-by-line to the author's text. Clurman described it thus:

> My notes precede the making of the director's book in which, on a separate sheet beside almost every line, I set down the action, the adjustment, the physical movement or business (if any) of each scene. This might be called the "score" of the stage play. It is from this that the actors are directed.[33]

Joanne Rotte, a student of Harold Clurman at the City University of New York, who served an externship with the production of Uncle Vanya, recalled examining the director's book, lost unfortunately, somewhere on the New York City Transit System.

> He had in his book a lot of notations relating to the actions of the actors. He had columns pasted opposite each page of dialogue with notes on the needs of the character. He also had some blocking. He had the drawings of the stage and perhaps the ground plans for each act from Peter Wexler [Stage Designer] but he never understood them until he got into the Mark Taper Forum Theatre.[34]

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[31] Harold Clurman, "Director's Notes: Incident at Vichy," Tulane Drama Review, T 28 IX, No. 4 (1965), p. 77.

[32] Ibid. [33] Ibid.

[34] Joanne Rotte, New York, interview, September 27, 1970.

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Clurman took the opportunity for an exhaustive study of the play by assigning it in his Play Analysis course in the Graduate Division of Hunter College six months before he was scheduled to begin rehearsals. This intense analytical preparation helped convince many of his students, including Miss Rotte, that "intellectually, Clurman knew that play as well as Chekhov or Stanislavsky. He was totally aware of what was in it, of what Chekhov was saying. He really had the most complete understanding of a play of anyone I've seen in my life."[35] Equally impressed were many of the actors in the cast. Having worked with the director previously, Joseph Wiseman showed no sign of hesitation in his appraisal. "Harold Clurman, I believe, has the greatest insight into Chekhov of any other director or man in the theatre I've known."[36]

For Clurman, the directing book can only serve as a guide, or "to direct me!"[37] as he put it. Its contents thereafter must be translated into theatrical terms, reduced to specific and concrete images that the actors can understand and incorporate into their stage behavior. "Their essence," the director wrote in referring to his notes, "must be conveyed to the cast more freely, less 'intellectually,' by gesture, demonstration, anecdote, dramatic example, trial and error on the stage."[38] It was the anxiety of conveying this material to the actors under the pressure of time that was to prove a major difficulty in this Los Angeles presentation of Uncle Vanya.

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[35]Ibid. [36]Wiseman interview.

[37]Clurman, "Director's Notes," p. 77. [38]Ibid.

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Of the translations available to him, the director finally selected one he considered the least stilted or idiomatic. "I thought Alex Szogyi's translation the simplest and the most speakable without being too colloquial,"[39] he decided. Professor Szogyi, who is presently Chairman of the Romance Languages Department at Hunter College of the City University of New York, has translated all of Chekhov's plays into English and has adapted an early play, That Worthless Fellow Platonov, into A Country Scandal. The translator seemed quite satisfied with the director's treatment of his work. "There is a no more respectful man in the world when it came to the text. He did cut the reference to the Inspector General, not because the audience didn't understand it but because the actor couldn't use it properly."[40] When Szogyi flew to the coast to witness a preview performance, Clurman requested a rewrite of one line spoken by Astrov. "He would never have changed it unless I agreed to it," Szogyi was convinced.[41]

Casting the leads for the production was limited for the most part to actors the director knew and had previously worked with, while selection of the minor characters was made in Los Angeles under the insistence of the producer. It was a practice Clurman concurred with. "Gordon Davidson, the producer, was institutionally right in not having a New York

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[39]Clurman interview.

[40]Alex Szogyi, New York, interview, December 10, 1970.

[41]Ibid.

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company,"[42] he said. For the role of Sonia, however, he decided to hold open auditions in New York. Joanne Rotte, who attended these sessions, described the procedures.

> He brought in an actor who was a friend who read Vanya to the actresses auditioning for Sonia. They read Sonia's last speech and the Sonia-Yelena scene. They could move and do whatever they liked. Some actresses had the lines memorized, guessing what speech they'd be asked to do. Almost everyone who auditioned had worked with Clurman before or he knew their work except, perhaps, one or two. He was looking for someone with the qualities of inner youth and outer youth and someone who was strong without being hard. Also he wanted a more experienced actress because he was afraid he might have trouble with his picked actors. One actress auditioned with a costume or a rehearsal skirt. Clurman first tried to get the actresses to relax by telling them some jokes or funny stories and had them read.[43]

Lois Smith, a member of Actor's Studio who had worked with the director in the past, was invited to audition and was eventually assigned the important role.

For Yelena, Clurman employed the services of a former student, the young movie actress Pamela Tiffin. He found it necessary to explain why.

> I took a chance on an actress without much experience. There was resistance there, understandably, since she is an actress without much stage experience. But I felt that she looked so right and was basically so sensitive a person that I could get an adequate performance from her. She was obviously not ideally cast but many thought she was one of the most beautiful women they had ever seen. Of course, she had more than that but she is far from a finished and complete actress.[44]

Clurman also decided to defy the traditional portrayal of Vanya as fat and unattractive by casting Richard Basehart in the role. "Because

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[42]Clurman interview. [43]Rotte interview.

[44]Clurman interview.

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we should feel that Vanya could have been something--he is real--but he is a loser,"[45] the director explained at an early rehearsal. Although the man has given up, he still has a rich life within and possesses an intelligence that helps him to avoid an inherent self-pity.

Alex Szogyi believed the production suffered by the hazardous casting of these two parts. He had never seen a more beautiful Yelena but was forced to admit she lacked the necessary technique for the difficult role. Basehart as Vanya presented other problems.

> But you can't take the allure of a star away from Basehart. Basehart walked around as if Vanya had a secret, like a million dollars in the bank. So you had a Vanya who was not defeated. . . . The stage presence of Basehart is so remarkable that every time he was on stage you didn't notice anyone else.[46]

No one seemed to question the choice or the artistry of Joseph Wiseman in the role of Astrov.

The early rehearsal period was held in an annex some distance from the theatre. The first three days were limited to the cast sitting around a table and reading in order to get "an acquaintance with the script and some affection for it."[47] Elsewhere, Joanne Rotte describes the director's working methods.

> One of the most interesting and helpful things he did was relate stories, anecdotes and background material about the Moscow Art Theatre, Russia, Gorki, Tolstoy, tying it all in with the play and giving the cast a feeling of Russia of the period. He helped impart the flavor of the play. He gave verbal notes on characters. Most of the actors wrote down these notes as an aid for study.[48]

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[45]Rotte rehearsal log. [46]Szogyi interview.

[47]Rotte rehearsal log. [48]Rotte interview.

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But soon difficulties arose when the director kept interrupting the readings, often enough, in fact, as to prompt a log note: "Actors beginning to see the density of Chekhov and getting frustrated and nervous."[49] Added pressures increased as Clurman was to confess throughout the rehearsals, "I'm so concerned with the short time and so that we can get some semblance of a show, I push ahead too fast. I'm very unhappy about it but I do it."[50]

Clurman remained constantly on the alert for method actors falling into traps that might destroy their effectiveness in performance. One piece of advice he continually gave the actors was to avoid a hushed reading which denoted a deliberateness and control, thus preventing an instinctual exploration. "Hushed tones are a falsity,"[51] he said. From the beginning he strove for a spontaneity arising from the actors' personal resources.

> Don't study what you're doing, just read it as it comes and forget any preconceived notions you may have of the character. Don't be too deliberate in reading; in other words, don't necessarily read with the right rhythm, but with your own, for yourself. For the character is still a stranger to you.[52]

The actor was thus encouraged to make the dialogue as much his own as possible but always with an attempt at understanding what is being said.

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[49]Rotte rehearsal log.

[50]Joanne Rotte, "Harold Clurman's production of Uncle Vanya," colloquium, January 6, 1970, The City University of New York: "(Hereinafter referred to as Rotte colloquium)"

[51]Rotte rehearsal log. [52]Rotte colloquium.

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This alertness, he hoped, would help counteract a tendency towards inaudibility in the actor as he explained in an interview with Dan Sullivan of the Los Angeles Times:

> I know it's against Stanislavsky and Lee Strasberg and the Holy Ghost to suggest that actors should be audible, but when you mumble I can't understand a word you say. And when you shout I still can't understand! It's not that your diction is bad, it's that you don't have a clear intention, a clear action. An actor has to know what he is saying. That's why in the beginning, the first rehearsal, the second rehearsal, it's good just to make sense of the lines as talk.[53]

Despite admonitions to the cast against preconceptions and constant reminders that "you must not anticipate," Clurman found himself feeding the actors end results. At the first rehearsal, he was already telling the actress playing Sonia to read her final speech positively and convincingly. A directorial image he brought up that could not help but affect the actor's first reading was that the third act shooting scene was to be played as farce. This occasioned the log note: "HC is guilty of that which he condemns."[54] Clurman realized his error days later when he remarked to Eduard Franz, portraying the Professor, "I may have put you off already by telling you about the comedy. But he too has his pain-- He wants to be respected and honored."[55]

Blocking began on the fourth day of rehearsals. Clurman expected little difficulty with this particular phase of production as he himself sug-

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[53]Dan Sullivan, "The Two Sides of Harold Clurman, Critic--Director," Los Angeles Times, August 18, 1969, p. 26.

[54]Rotte rehearsal log. [55]Ibid.

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gested. "Staging and blocking in most cases is the easiest thing in the theatre. The thing that everybody thinks you have to spend a lot of time cogitating over--generally speaking, the size of the stage and positioning of the furniture make it inevitable, even if you don't like it."[56] The Mark Taper Forum, however, consisted of a huge three-quarter thrust stage surrounded by an amphitheatre of 750 seats. According to the director it was an alien and unnerving situation.

> There was more movement than I would put into a proscenium arch production. You had to keep moving them around. This was the first time I worked on a thrust stage and it troubled me a little bit because I felt that I had to move people when I didn't think it was essential or desirable and I might have gotten a greater sense of depth if they felt they didn't have to move quite so much. The sight lines and the acoustics from different parts of the stage had to be taken into account all the time. It was a very wide stage. That type of stage may have certain advantages but it has many disadvantages, especially for a Chekhov play.[57]

With the floor at the annex taped and miscellaneous pieces of furniture used as a mock set, the director's swift and mechanical staging immediately presented problems for the actors. "No motivation for movement was given," Joanne Rotte recalled, "and most of the actors didn't care for the movements which didn't feel or look right. . . . an area downstage right was rarely used until it was pointed out to Clurman."[58] At one point Gordon Davidson suggested that the director move his actors diagonally rather than laterally. By the time the fourth act was reached,

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[56] Sullivan, "Two Sides of Harold Clurman," p. 26.

[57] Clurman interview. [58] Rotte interview.

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an entry in Rotte's log suggests no lessening of the staging difficulties. "Set has all furniture shoved upstage--lots of empty area downstage--R. B. and J. W. are doing their own blocking. Resistance to HC blocking--Took one hour and forty-five minutes to block entire act even with repeats and re-runs."[59] The movements were set in the first few days of blocking although some changes and dimensional adjustments were deemed necessary when they moved into the theatre. It appeared to be another case in which the director worked counter to his own intentions. "Blocking will be very slow. I'm not able to stage a play quickly,"[60] he remarked at an early point in the rehearsals. Joseph Wiseman was forced to admit, "Clurman was not especially strong on blocking."[61]

It soon became apparent that the director preferred to adhere closely to the author's stage directions and made few attempts at inventing incidental business, some of which was contributed by the actors during rehearsals. One piece of business that proved successful was the first act "hat game" which was improvised by Lois Smith and Joseph Wiseman.

> Astrov is leaving and forgets his hat. Here, Telegin picks up the hat to give to Astrov but Sonia grabs it and sits on it impishly. Astrov looks for the hat and Sonia finally gives it to him and everybody laughs. Astrov puts his hat on and pats it down on his head as if to say he would probably forget his head.[62]

Clurman finally admitted that he liked it and jokingly claimed he would take the credit as director.

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[59]Rotte rehearsal log. [60]Rotte colloquium.

[61]Wiseman interview. [62]Rotte interview.

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A disagreement regarding movement arose when Richard Basehart expressed a reluctance to sit in the Professor's chair during the second act. The actor felt that the Professor's presence was made manifest by this piece of furniture to which he could relate during his monologue. The director accepted the actor's argument and permitted him to sit on a stool instead. Another disagreement concerned Sonia's monlogue in the second act.

> When Dr. Astrov had left the scene, Lois Smith had made the chair in which he had been sitting become him and it was not obvious but she caressed it and talked to it as if she wanted to retain this feeling of him still being with her. HC had given her the direction that when Dr. Astrov left, she should accompany him out. This she didn't want to do but preferred to stay at the table where they had sat together in order to retain the rapport they had had earlier in order to lead her into her declaration of love for him.[63]

Such an actor's contribution seems to have affirmed the director's frequently quoted axiom, "The purpose of a director, like parents, is to make himself unnecessary."[64]

The most serious difficulties encountered during the rehearsals, however, were the acting problems of some of the cast. "The one difficulty I had with Pamela [Tiffin] was that she was too inexperienced," the director recalled. "I had to spend more time with her for that reason."[65] Joseph Wiseman revealed an annoyance when he said, "Most of the rehearsal time and the director's attention went to the actress who played Yelena."[66] Although he considered Richard Basehart an excellent Vanya,

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[63]Rotte colloquium. [64]Rotte rehearsal log.

[65]Clurman interview. [66]Wiseman interview.

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the director noted a resistance to the role. "One mistake I made was telling him that Vanya was a loser because I think Basehart feels he is a loser. In other words, I may have struck too close to home."[67] Clurman rarely used the terms "action" or "motivation" but rather encouraged the actors to "discover the characters' wants and needs for themselves."[68] He often gave implicit reasons for acting out a particular moment rather than the result itself. "For example, Pamela had difficulty with volume. HC told her to compliment Astrov and her voice came up. She had a clear intention."[69] Unfortunately, the intention was too soon forgotten and the element of time forced the director to press ahead with the rehearsals.

At one rehearsal, Clurman took time off to explain his interpretation of the Stanislavsky acting system. At another point, the entire cast was shown the Russian film, The Lady With A Dog, based on Chekhov's short story, which proved helpful to the actors in establishing a desired tempo. The director also "had Russian music played at certain times during rehearsals to get actors relaxed. . . . He had some guitar and folk music as well as a woman singing Russian ballads to a piano accompaniment. This seemed to work nicely."[70]

Another instance of the director violating his own principles was in giving the actors line readings throughout the rehearsal period. "Clurman would regret doing it immediately afterwards," Joanne Rotte said, "but he

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[67]Clurman interview. [68]Rotte interview.

[69]Rotte colloquium. [70]Ibid.

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continued to do it because he was so worried by the lack of time."[71] The line reading would always be accompanied by a request to the actor not to imitate him since he was only "conventionalizing." At less frequent times, the director would act out a scene after which he apologized. "I can only indicate. What I do is no good, not acting."[72]

The doctoral student was particularly struck with the classroom atmosphere of the rehearsals. Eduard Franz complained of this in a private conversation.

> Clurman has been a teacher too long--treats us like students. He used to not talk and butt in so much. I'm used to working with directors who just come in after letting the actors work and make suggestions. First, they let us get it--be free, find our way, never say do this or don't do that and never give line readings.[73]

In appraising the cast's acting methods, Joanne Rotte summarized them as "Actors working from different techniques."[74] This spectrum embraced the method, technical, and instinctual approaches to performance. Alex Szogyi observed the disparate acting styles in the production. "Joseh Wiseman playing with Richard Basehart was like an actor from the Habimah playing with John Wayne. In fact, everybody had a different style in the production. You had so many of them that you forgot about it. If you had two only it would have stood out."[75]

Two and a half weeks after the beginning of rehearsals, the company was permitted the use of the stage. The director was immediately

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[71] Rotte interview. [72] Rotte rehearsal log. [73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid. [75] Szogyi interview.

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disconcerted by the new surroundings. "It's like living in a mausoleum,"[76] he commented. The move also presented the need for re-establishing the proper tempo and mood which the director had worked for in the following manner:

> Clurman rarely worked with the concept of pacing or tempo. The rhythm was to be created by dialogue and silences, the latter to be filled by the actor in terms of inner action. The actor must never stop being the character no matter what is happening on the stage. If things seemed dead, he would tell all the actors to work on their inner activity in order to bring the scene back to life. This inner activity plus the interrelationships of the characters also helped to create the mood. For this reason the show was never boring although it was rather slow.[77]

The director had been aware of the actors' low volume and laxness in diction but preferred to ignore them for the time being. In the theatre these difficulties became magnified. It proved a matter of greater anxiety when Alan Schneider dropped in to witness a run-through of the fourth act and claimed he could not hear anything. Thereafter, the stage manager was dispatched to the rear of the house and told to call out whenever he failed to hear a line. The director began writing detailed notes for the actors but, in trying to achieve a richness of inner activity, a low-energy level became a constant threat to the production. On the other hand, attempts at infusing greater spirit into the proceedings only prompted such observations as "Act III played for comedy rather than the attempted murder,"[78] and a quip from Gordon Davidson, "That's a great act you've got there, Mr. Kaufmann."[79]

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[76]Rotte rehearsal log. [77]Rotte interview.

[78]Rotte rehearsal log. [79]*Ibid*.

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Clurman regarded the week of previews as rehearsals with the audiences acting as guinea pigs. During the day, the run-throughs were used mainly to work on the notes of the previous evening's performance. During this period, the director also felt compelled to ignore two more of his own directing principles, that of giving the company line rehearsals and, as Joanne Rotte's log entry notes: "HC talked of timing, pacing and covering lines so there are no breaks in voice and action."[80]

As opening night approached, Clurman noticed a decided improvement in the performances. He was especially gratified by such a response as, "Act III scene, audience howled throughout."[81] The night of the opening, audibility still preyed heavily on the director's mind. He told the cast, "Not having any more rehearsals, my job is over except to watch and say where to be louder. It's now up to the actors."[82] In a parting speech, Clurman advised the cast, "Nature of audiences always change--whatever happens, play the play as directed--don't try to please the audience--don't change for them. Remember relationships with one another on stage--be audible and keep energy up."[83] The director went on to explain the many areas needed for development given the necessary time and professed faith that the company will grow and deepen with each added performance.

With the Los Angeles audience and the stage's architecture in mind, Clurman tried to establish the "supra-national" framework for Uncle

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[80]Rotte rehearsal log. [81]Ibid. [82]Ibid. [83]Ibid.

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Vanya by having the visual elements accommodate his production concept.

He described it thus:

> I didn't want a typically Russian setting in all its details which is practically impossible on the open stage. I wanted the audience to feel that this was a nice environment for nice, educated, well-groomed people and people not so foreign to us with lovely homes, sufficiently suggestive and simple to be accepted as realism and non-realism. I was trying not to strain anything but to be unpretentious, direct, an untricky production. I was translating it into Clurman, an American.[84]

After several conferences with Peter Wexler, a scene designer Clurman deeply admires, the director approved the sketches offered him.

> The sets were very handsome, colorful, beautifully dressed--not realistic in environment though in furniture they were--gorgeous authentic antiques that looked so right for the Sebryakov estate because they were worn but good. The back of the set was very linear, almost a cage-like effect which was a gun metal gray with no period feeling but a symbolic purpose with each act getting progressively more closed in until Act IV when it had a complete back wall enclosed with bookcases and shelves, all real. In other acts, walls were partial and partially shuttered. Also, there were the usual Chekhovian birch trees in the background that were supposed to look progressively more withered done with lighting but that wasn't wholly successful.[85]

The birch trees were highly stylized pieces of wood hung from above. Unfortunately, they had a tendency to sway whenever there was nearby movement. This unplanned movement proved distracting to the actors until they learned to avoid the trees.

Another means of neutralizing the late nineteenth century Russian period was in foregoing the costume colors of blacks and browns worn by the women of the time. Clurman felt the lighter, gayer and brighter colors

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[84]Clurman interview. [85]Rotte colloquium.

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in the beige and white range would be more pleasing to an American audience. The silhouette and design, however, remained authentic to the period. Similarly, the director was not concerned with light sources since the environment was obviously a stage set and suggested an abstract lighting scheme to accommodate the playing areas. A disagreement arose in lighting the play's final moments. The lighting designer preferred a more realistic ambience with a predominance of blue. The director insisted on the more sentimental hues tending toward the pinks. It was an interpretation he had severely criticized in an off-Broadway production more than a decade earlier which enforced a mood of "optimism."[86]

Of his one and only Chekhov production, Harold Clurman expressed a pleasure in what had been achieved under the unfavorable conditions given. He went on to add somewhat defensively:

> It was a very intelligent and sensitive production with a certain lack of depth. When people said it wasn't so good, I told them to listen to the play. Even if we got half the play, a quarter of the play, it was Uncle Vanya and ten times better than most of the good productions you see. I was satisfied.[87]

Joanne Rotte was made aware from the beginning that the director had given himself limited objectives. "Clurman aimed for . . . two levels of Chekhov when there are really seven," she said. "The nuances and subtleties he believes are there, he never achieved, but he knew he couldn't under the circumstances."[88] Despite the favorable audience reactions

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[86]Clurman, Lies Like Truth, p. 135.

[87]Clurman interview. [88]Rotte interview.

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and a booming box office, she noticed dissatisfaction among many of the actors mainly because of the movement and the little time given to it. The actors also felt that the production needed more business throughout as well as a more rapid pace in certain places. Joseph Wiseman expressed a disappointment with the final results. "Clurman was so concerned with his conception of Chekhov that he overlooked the staging. The lack of time was mostly responsible."[89] His admiration for the director had evidently not diminished when he said, "I'd rather be wrong with Harold Clurman than right with any other director."[90]

Alex Szogyi was among those who regarded the production as a success. Having worked with many directors through the thirty to forty productions of his translations in ten years, including four in New York, he was impressed with the fact that Clurman knew exactly what could and could not be accomplished. Admitting that by New York standards the Los Angeles production could not be considered purely Chekhovian, he went on to add:

> Despite all the problems, the production still was a good one. There were marvelous moments in it. It had lovely atmosphere in it. The set was really great and the costuming was very beautifully done. It was really one of the better productions of Chekhov I've seen because it was totally unpretentious.[91]

The critical notices of Harold Clurman's production of Uncle Vanya were mixed with its pace the standard by which it was judged. Dan Sullivan, reviewing for The Lost Angeles Times, likened Chekhov's plays

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[89]Wiseman interview. [90]Ibid. [91]Szogyi interview.

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to works of music, and asked himself at what tempo they are to be performed. Taking note that Clurman's approach was a return to an older and more European tradition, the critic went on to write:

> This is Chekhov played slowly and juicily, with lots of nuance and rubato--a tone poem evoking a society where people had time to savor their private disasters.
>
> To go on record at once, this reviewer finds Clurman's tempo true, probably, to Chekhov's world but dangerously slow for an American audience. The danger is not only boredom but a suspicion on our part that these people are spiritual malingerers, moral mopes.[92]

But the reviewer found more than enough compensation in the director's interpretation by being drawn into Chekhov's thick and miasmic world by the spell the production cast upon the playgoer. "But the greatest virtue of taking one's time with Chekhov," the critic observed, "is how much more one has time to see. Clurman's production is beautifully detailed, full of tiny graces and gaucheries that locate the action, after all, on our planet."[93]

In a later article written for the Sunday supplement of The New York Times, Dan Sullivan seems to have given the performance additional thought.

> At its worst, the inertia that Vanya's characters feel themselves stuck in is not just evoked but duplicated. The unfortunate thing about this isn't that the audience is occasionally bored--many great plays have moments of boredom--but that it is too frequently given an opportunity to feel superior to Chekhov's people, mooning about

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[92]Dan Sullivan, "Slow Tempo for Chekhov's 'Uncle Vanya," Los Angeles Times, August 22, 1969, p. 15.

[93]Ibid.

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> like languid creatures half in love with their despair. I doubt that Chekhov meant us to see them that way; I'm sure that Clurman didn't.[94]

He nevertheless continued to pay homage to the director, "who, incredibly, has never done Chekhov before--for not injecting a spurious dynamism into the show."[95] He was convinced, however, that a brisker tempo would have permitted a more appropriate response from an American audience without losing any of the delicate shadings. He expressed a reserved admiration for the entire cast but concluded with the following comment: "The only objection to the company is that their voices, bred and trained in all sorts of places, don't match as a family's should."[95]

The Los Angeles reviewer for Variety, on the other hand, responded to the director's production concept in no uncertain terms. "Harold Clurman, as the director of the production, has butchered one of the playwright's best works. Aside from the words and story, little on the Mark Taper stage is Chekhov, but more of a Clurman collage."[97] Declaring Peter Wexler's setting to be the star of the show, which even then, were more decorative than functional, the writer claimed to have observed an embarrassment in the actors for being forced "to project the aloofness associated with Victorian attitudes." Such "aloofness" was believed to have played no small part in minimizing the conflicts and comic situations

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[94]Dan Sullivan, "Sipping at Life Through A Straw," New York Times, August 31, 1969, sec. D, p. 4.

[95]Ibid. [96]Ibid.

[97](Edwa.), "Show Out of Town: 'Uncle Vanya,'" Variety, August 27, 1969, p. 76.

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in the staging of the play. The only actor who escaped censure was Eduard Franz, who was credited with an avoidance of "Victorian gestures and emoting." Without doubt the tempo contributed heavily to the critic's negative response. "With Clurman's slow pacing of the show, Vanya runs two hours and thirty-five minutes and is a bore."[98]

A month later Clurman decided to use his theatre reviewing column in The Nation magazine to answer the critics who denigrated the production because of its seemingly heavy and ponderous style. Declaring that the architectural framework is an essential feature for the impact of a production motif, it was to affect his staging of Chekhov's play.

> I began with a production idea, the first item of which was that the play was not to be given a mournful tone, that it was to be physically active. Directing it on a thrust stage necessitated even more movement than I had anticipated.[99]

The visual and aural demands of the audience had to be met by a method of staging that could accommodate the playing areas to the seating arrangements, a relationship different from that originally found at the Moscow Art Theatre. A more energized movement resulted in:

> . . . a certain 'Americanization' of the play. Yet for all its heightened energy, it remained Chekhovian in its brooding inwardness, as well as in its humor. This was not because I dwelled on 'psychology' or 'mood;' I rather avoided such emphasis. Yet a number of people spoke of the pace as slow or too 'Russian!'[100]

Clurman gave two reasons for this reaction. The first was an inherent

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[98] Ibid.

[99] Harold Clurman, "Theatre," The Nation, September 22, 1969, p. 293.

[100] Ibid.

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nervousness or a "lack of repose" in the American audience conditioned by a frenetic pace, with its accompanying technological din and confusion. It thus found a normal and civilized tempo slow. The more important reason, however, was: "There is something at the very heart of Chekhov's world (apart from its locale in sleepy country towns) which makes his plays seem 'slow' no matter how crisply they are acted."[101] This something, Clurman points out, is the surface environment, which constricts the passions and aspirations of Chekhov's characters and hides the inner life and activity which erupt only at significant moments in the plays. "Chekhov's 'slowness,'" Clurman therefore concludes, "is part of his meaning."[102] The many pauses, the pervading dreariness and repetitive irrelevancies are constantly counter-balanced by the "the juices of desire and rich human experience" leading to an ultimate acceptance of life with its accompanying stoical resignation. Recapitulating his justification of the production's pacing, the director finished his article with:

> To my astonishment and satisfaction the thrust stage, I repeat, besides compelling even more movement than I had planned, also served to clarify the sense of each action. It did not alter the nature of Chekhov's truth nor impair the perfection of his craft which make Uncle Vanya, like Chekhov's other major plays, a poetic as well as a dramatic masterpiece.[103]

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[101] Ibid. [102] Ibid., p. 294. [103] Ibid.

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CHAPTER XI

WILLIAM BALL

It was with a Chekhovian play that William Ball made his New York directorial debut. So successful was this 1958 off-Broadway production of Ivanov that he was assigned to direct an important revival of a Pirandello play (which won him the D'Annunzio Award), a major Molière revival for the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center (their first critical success), and was later invited to oversee the newly established but foundering American Conservatory Theatre. Ten years after his encounter with Chekhov's early play, Ball decided to attempt an interpretation of the Russian's more mature and developed work, The Three Sisters. A comparison of the two productions may help provide us with a perspective on the director's working methods at different periods in his career and his growth and development as a theatre artist. The contrast also becomes significant when we are given the conditions under which both plays were produced. Ivanov was an independent production, conceived and executed under the restrictions of time and money that burden the professional, off-Broadway theatre. On the other hand, The Three Sisters was included among a host of productions performed by a permanent repertory company molded and trained by the director. These diverse circumstances may help

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clarify under what conditions the performance of a Chekhovian play may best flourish or, at the very least, what might be the most satisfactory for this particular director.

At this writing, the home of the American Conservatory Theatre (or ACT) seems to be firmly established in San Francisco after near-fatal experiences with previous directors and a dismaying apathy in several large cities of the country. The ACT presently occupies two stages, the Marine's Memorial Theatre and the Geary Theatre, the former housing the less "standard" presentations. What has particularly aroused devotion in the members and their following is an elaborate training program as part of the company's purpose and hence the word "Conservatory" in the name. Indeed, not production, but the training of the actor was proclaimed to be the primary function of the organization. Paul Shenar, an actor who had been with the company for five years, enthusiastically explained its objectives.

> Because it is an actors' company, the production is sort of a by-product, an effort to build great actors according to Bill. It's not a director's company or a playwright's company, it's an actors' company and his main concern in putting on a production is in building actors. He is trying to establish a place where actors want to come back and to learn throughout their lives and experiment.
>
> The company used to hold classes all the time and classes in just about everything. Classes in laughing, classes in whistling, classes in juggling. Every time he found somebody that had an idea of teaching something that would make us more flexible, he would give that person a chance to teach and he would send ten people that he would choose to this class. At least once a month, Bill would give a class, usually an introductory class for the students and all of the old actors would go to it.[1]

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[1]Paul Shenar, New York, interview, January 19, 1971.

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Ball claims that a theatre organization such as ACT is unprecedented in the United States in that it performs a broad range of plays as well as keeping the company in constant training. "I teach as well as direct," he said in an interview for The New York Times and added:

> We have a lot of "exploratories," as we call them. Seminars or discussions leading to development of new craftsmanship in acting or directing. Some courses have strange names. I'm working on Histrionics, Connotations, Amplifications. Theater Games are taught by other directors. I teach Comedy Techniques.[2]

When examining his production of The Three Sisters, we must keep in mind that Ball does not strive for a set or consistent performance. "This season we'll do nine plays in the Geary and eight in the Marine's Memorial," he once said. "And, while we're working we're also training."[3] After emphasizing this point, he brought up his favorite D. H. Lawrence quotation, "A work of art is constantly in a state of becoming." Feeling a further need to underline this principle, Ball added: "We hope a creative audience will give us an opportunity to fail and to show our work as it develops."[4]

Despite a mercurial success as a director at a comparatively early age, Ball seems to have suffered considerable artistic dissatisfaction and frustration before the ACT experiment. "As a director in New York and elsewhere," he once said, "I spent a great deal of rehearsal time teaching basic acting techniques. I thought how wonderful it would

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[2]Judy Stone, "A Chance to Fail--And to Succeed," New York Times, May 7, 1967, sec. D, p. 5.

[3]Ibid. [4]Ibid.

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be to teach a cast once, and then we might go on to something a little more sophisticated. . ."[5] Production, however, remains the foundation upon which the ACT actor is trained. Jack Kroll of Newsweek seems to have captured its working atmosphere in a 1967 article.

> His actors act hard, study hard. Last season the 47 acting members of the 140-man company played 187 roles.[6] Jay Doyle and Paul Shenar each took eight roles . . . This year, the company will study, among other subjects, comic technique, Shakespearean diction, voice projection, non-verbal communication, suspense, rhetoric, scansion, dance, fencing, mime, improvisation, posture, hairdressing and yoga. . . . The reason for Ball's emphasis on the conservatory aspect of his theater is that people don't naturally have the imagination or wit of Hamlet, the passion of Macbeth, the resentment of King Richard. Our range of expression tends to be polite. . . . Despite the high-pressured atmosphere, or perhaps because of it, the actors seem to be thriving on the Ball method. "He keeps the company on the edge of hysteria," says actress DeAnn Mears in admiration, "and he himself works on maximum adrenalin."[7]

Kitty Winn had been with ACT for two and a half years before she was cast in the role of Irina. She recalled the rehearsal conditions of The Three Sisters company.

> I think he wanted a relaxed atmosphere although not a very completely relaxed atmosphere because he's a very hard worker and hard pusher and expects a lot of work out of people but I don't think he wanted us to be so concerned with opening night and success. Three Sisters was a kind of play that took months to evolve. A play like that is dependent upon interrelationships and so many nuances. We rehearsed it for about six weeks but then we played it in repertory for a long time and over the summer we took it to Ravinia in Chicago and then we brought it here in the Fall. So it had a long time to seep in and grow and things to come out and other things to recede in the perform-

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[5] Jack Kroll, "On the Ball," Newsweek, November 20, 1967, p. 121.

[6] ACT has since grown to a company of approximately 250.

[7] Ibid.

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> ances. He kept working on it after we began playing before audiences and, in fact, when we got to New York, he changed a very important scene in the play.[8]

The production of Ivanov, on the other hand, was rehearsed for four weeks and then opened to critical review. Nevertheless, the working atmosphere seems to have been somewhat more relaxed. Jacqueline Brookes, who portrayed the character of Anna Petrovna, implies as much when she described the interpersonal relationships of members of the cast.

> The actors came to the theatre earlier and earlier during rehearsals. We always stayed together. We went out together, there was a real-- [a gesture of interlocking the fingers of both hands]. In New York that very seldom happens. It happens sometimes when you're out of town because you have no place else to go but this group--we would find ourselves getting to the theatre earlier and earlier in a real sort of Chekhovian manner. We hear these stories of Chekhovian plays and this was becoming true of us. We were becoming the characters and developing the traits of the characters. I think this was because of both Chekhov and Bill Ball. . . . Ivanov was a tremendous love affair. We loved him [Ball], we just loved him. We would have done anything for him.[9]

Despite a continual professing that his primary interest is in establishing ACT as a training ground for actors, Ball himself loses sight of his purpose by his interpretive demands and his dominating personality. One example is the liberties he prefers to take with the script at hand. As the dramatic reviewer of Newsweek expressed it, "Actually no play is safe in the ACT, particularly when Ball himself directs. His Tiny Alice is an adaptation from the Edward Albee, and his Twelfth Night, the first production of this season, is 'ball-ed' up Shakespeare, with additional

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[8]Kitty Winn, New York, interview, March 23, 1971.

[9]Jacqueline Brookes, New York, interview, March 23, 1971.

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dialogue by the director."[10] We also find Paul Shenar, one of Ball's favorite actors, admitting that everybody in the company was forced to submit to Ball's directing style. "He is rather overwhelming,"[11] he said. Kroll sensed the dynamic energy of the man when he wrote: "The 36-year-old Ball contributes all over the place--as teacher, theorist, administrator, director and style-setter. Merely in appearance he is a one-man side-show. . . ."[12] Two years later Mel Gussow of The New York Times reinforced this image: ". . . he is a highly imaginative and restlessly energetic director. At least this should not be boring Chekhov. . . . In William Ball's production, there is clearly one driving force: Mr. Ball himself."[13] All aspects of Ball's production of The Three Sisters seem to illustrate these observations.

The text used for the production is a case in point. With previous ACT productions, Ball never failed to credit himself whenever an adaptation was made, but with Chekhov's play no adapter or translator is recorded on the program. As a free version, the The was also dropped from the title. Ball used an unusual method to arrive at a text he considered acceptable. Paul Shenar describes it in detail.

> First of all, he had a student from Stanford University do a literal translation straight from the Russian, word for word, with several choices of words written over each important word. He also used

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[10]Kroll, "On the Ball," p. 121. [11]Shenar interview.

[12]Kroll, "On the Ball," p. 121.

[13]Mel Gussow, "'Three Sisters' Minus Sighs," New York Times, October 13, 1969, *T-NBL+, 1969-70, T-Z.

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> all the extant translations; I believe there were nine altogether. When he was working on it, he had a very long board with all these pages with different versions clipped to it. He was trying to get a consensus of the feeling of Chekhov as seen through many different eyes. He believed that if you read enough of the works of a translator, you get to know his prejudices, his likes and dislikes, how romantic or how factual they were. It becomes then a matter of choices.[14]

Ball did not stop with mere verbal translations. Kitty Winn recalls that after having assorted all the translations, he proceeded to "cut, rearrange and rewrite things." Shenar went on to explain Ball's semantic theories and how the text was eventually shaped and formed in rehearsal.

> Ball considered Russian as a very rapid language, a simple language with a great deal of emotion riding on fewer words than in English. It passes quicker than literal translations in English when trying to capture the nuances. A great deal was understood in the Russian language, so he believed. He felt that most translations take too long, use too many English words to arrive at a sentiment. So what he did was give us alternate choices or rather expounded on ideas so that the actor could get a flying start on a speech and feel how fast it should go and how fast the character must say it in order for him to sustain through the moment or through the speech. And so you just weed out. Tusenbach had a long speech in the second act philosophizing. It went on forever in Bill's original translation and I chose the one I liked best. The choice I had was saying the same thing in three different ways. Bill often would say, "Cut all that out. You've already said it," or "Go on, skip that. You don't need it." Sometimes he felt it didn't matter whether Chekhov's original lines were omitted or not as long as it was possible to nail down an idea that Chekhov has in all of his plays, what is consistent with Chekhov, what he's trying to say.[15]

All of Chekhov's directions, however, were used by Ball who considered them rare treasures for the actor. This practice of culling a text from various sources was hardly new for Ball. He was already applying it ten years before, as Jacqueline Brookes informs us. "He used his own ver-

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[14]Shenar interview. [15]*Ibid.*

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sion of Ivanov, you know. It wasn't just Elizabeth Fen's. He used all the translations by compiling all of the scripts but it was definitely his version."[16]

No one who has worked with Ball ever recalls him working with a directing book, although they were all convinced he had structured the entire production before rehearsals began. "I don't think it was ever written down," Paul Shenar believed. "It seemed to have been in his head."[17] Jacqueline Brookes had equal difficulty in recalling the use of a directing book and added: "Bill's secret was that he knew the play so well. If he had a directing book he never looked at it. But he does a lot of homework, a lot of preparation. He knew that play very solidly and he knew what he wanted to do with it."[18] Another member of the Ivanov cast, Jack Bittner, who played the role of Borkin, and who appeared in Ball's later independent productions, was more certain when he stated that, "I'm sure he had it all planned out but he never works with a book per se."[19] Since the Renata Theatre had a very small stage, the large group of milling wedding guests in the last act must have necessitated a complex choreographic design.[20]

For several years William Ball had been contemplating a production of Three Sisters but he was particularly anxious to have the right

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[16]Brookes intervew. [17]Shenar interview.

[18]Brookes interview.

[19]Jack Bittner, New York, interview, April 24, 1971.

[20]The Renata Theatre is now the Bleeker Street Cinema in Greenwich Village.

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actresses for the roles of the sisters. With the company assembled at the beginning of the season, always with new additions, it wasn't until 1968 that he felt he was ready to proceed with the production. As a rule, plays were cast by the director without readings and auditions. As Kitty Winn explained it, "Most of us had been in the company for some time so he knew what he might ultimately get from each of us."[21]

Paul Shenar saw other motives for what he considered hazardous casting by the director.

> I don't think anybody goes into production with Bill without being specifically challenged about his acting ability. For example, he cast Kuligin and Andrey backwards. He cast me as Tusenbach. I shouldn't play Tusenbach. I should play somebody good-looking but he does that. He does that for the actors to expand. He therefore has you at a disadvantage. It requires that you open and be available if you're going to solve some acting problems. It also gives the production the advantage of it being an incidental piece of work, that is, leading toward something of greater fulfillment which doesn't necessarily have to do with the production.[22]

Ball cast Ivanov, on the other hand, with considerable care by inviting those he knew for important roles. They, in turn, brought in actors who were particularly anxious to do a Chekhov play. In addition, Ball went to his teacher, Michael Howard, a protegé of Strasberg, who recommended well-trained actors for specific roles. Thus, a talented and cooperative cast was slowly assembled for what was to prove an unusual off-Broadway production.

The early rehearsals for Three Sisters consisted mainly of reading and discussing the text for five days, an unusually long time for the com-

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[21]Winn interview. [22]Shenar interview.

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pany, according to Paul Shenar. During that period Ball listened and continued cutting and adding to the text. The actor was given considerable latitude in choosing his own lines. "If you don't like that, you don't have to say it,"[23] he would occasionally tell an actor. Of particular interest is Ball's visual means of establishing the environment among the actors.

> He also gave two hours a day for getting acquainted with the town in Three Sisters by surrounding us with pictures and maps. He found a town that he thought Chekhov was writing about. He had thousands of photographs which he hung up in Studio E which was a basement studio. One wall was lined with mirrors to be used as a dancing studio and which also had curtains to cover them. He hung pictures taken of old Russia or other places akin to what the play was about. They gave you an actual sense of the town geographically and visually, such relationships as the telegraph office to the railroad station or the railroad station to the town. Bill Ball has done research all his life. He has a huge file of pictures and most of the pictures used during rehearsals were from that file. He's very visual in nature and spent most of his college days and afterwards assembling a picture file of periods. The Chekhov file is about a foot and a half thick of magazine photographs.[24]

Kitty Winn recalled the use Ball made of the photographs but also emphasized the participation of the cast. "In fact, we all brought in anything that we had been reading about Russia or photographs that reminded us about that part of the country or anything relating to the area and the kind of life. We had one whole wall covered with photographs. Bill initiated it but we all pitched in."[25]

The visual sense was not the director's only means of stimulating the actors' imagination we are told.

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[23]Ibid. [24]Ibid. [25]Winn interview.

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> . . . at four o'clock in the afternoon, there was great fun after working during the day. We would all gather around a long table and we would have hot tea, cakes and just sit and discuss with each other things like it might have been in Russia one long afternoon. The tea was served in glasses with holders. The background in which we were playing and the atmosphere was very important to Bill. . . . From the very beginning, the girls always worked in rehearsal skirts and I always wore my shoes and laced them up and wore them all the way through the rehearsal period. We also had a samovar there from the very beginning but if we didn't have the real props the prop department would send down something very similar.[26]

Ball used a similar method for his early rehearsal of Ivanov which Jacqueline Brookes also found invigorating for the actor.

> He brought in pictures and maps and we did work with that. We also discussed the play and the characters and a lot about the background. With the pictures and maps we talked a lot about the life of the town and what went on that wasn't on the stage.[27]

Despite a driving energy that inevitably dominated the production, Ball continually took pains to keep the rehearsals as open-ended and spontaneous as time and circumstances would allow. "Bill Ball never had any rule or method in rehearsals," Paul Shenar insisted. "If an actor felt like screaming in the first rehearsal there might be a reason for it and he never dissuades anybody from doing anything by making fast rules. He gives the actors a wide latitude."[28] The director's work with the actor always remained specific and individual because of his knowledge of their work and his knowledge of them as people. Jacqueline Brookes made the same point when she said:

> He dealt with specific problems that I had as an actress and he wouldn't ask anybody else to do the same things. For me, he knew that surprise

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[26] Ibid. [27] Brookes interview. [28] Shenar interview.

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> was essential, the moment was important, that I couldn't get stuck in a rut. Now he didn't use this technique with everybody that I know of. That was for me.[29]

One of Ball's favorite means of stimulating the actor is by provocation and challenge. Paul Shenar describes the manner in which Tusenbach's character was formed.

> He would say, "Tusenbach is a person who trips over furniture, right?" And I would say, "That's a good idea. Tusenbach trips over furniture." And he would say, "All right, now I want you to trip over ten pieces of furniture during that scene. Work on that. We won't use them all but do something clumsier. You stick your finger out at people a lot," Bill would say so that Vershinin can catch me with my finger sticking out, so that people can do things to mock me, to make Tusenbach look pitiful. This conception of Tusenbach was sort of a product of both of our ideas.[30]

Jacqueline Brookes found this directorial approach equally helpful to her.

> Bill also works a lot by antagonism. He could provoke you by goosing you. He's very demanding, Bill is, very demanding. He'll make you do it and do it and do it. He won't just make you repeat it but he'll give you different things to work with, different actions, different adjustment based upon what he knows about you. That's where he was clever. He knew me extremely well, and he knew how to provoke me one way or the other.[31]

Kitty Winn, on the other hand, seemed to express less enthusiasm and more concern in her ability to respond to Ball's methods.

> He'll make you do things that are too much or too outrageous for the situation somehow, at least in your mind you think it is. He makes you go ahead and take that step beyond and then you can pull it back in performance. Somehow, in pulling back a bit, which I guess he allows, and which he knows you're going to do, he'll get about what he wants.[32]

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[29] Brookes interview. [30] Shenar interview.

[31] Brookes interview. [32] Winn interview.

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Ball assumes that any actor who comes to the company already has the "method," which he considers fundamental. ACT, he insists, builds from there. An acting tool he presently expounds is the axiom, "Do the act and the feeling will follow," which he claims is based on a psychological theory first promulgated by William James.[33] "In the Method," Ball said, "the performer is told to get the feeling he wishes to convey by emotional recall and the proper gestures and attitude will follow. I think it's just the reverse. Do the act, make the gesture, and the proper feeling will be attained."[34] In an article for the ACT Backstage Newsletter, the director described in vivid detail how this technique was applied.

> We had laughing classes in Pittsburgh, and after studying the completely technical shape of the laugh, the stoppage and release of breath, etc., the class just became giddy and started to laugh at anything. . . . They might have come in tired or depressed but they left light-hearted, energetic, almost joyful. There was nothing at all amusing in the exploratory; it was a discussion of mechanics. But the actors left filled with mirth, so the mechanics and sounds of the laughter obviously had caused the spirit of mirth.[35]

To help Kitty Winn weep in her emotional scene in the third act, Ball asked

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[33]Shenar interview. Ball was obviously referring to the famous James-Lange theory of emotion. Its essence is captured in the following: ". . . that the bodily manifestations must first be interposed between, and that the more rational statement is that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble." See William James, The Principles of Psychology (2 vols.; New York: Dover Press, 1950), II, 450.

[34]Jeanne Miller, "Lesson in Acting Up," San Francisco Examiner, December 19, 1967, William Ball clipping file, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, Research Library of the Performing Arts, Theatre Collection.

[35]N.n., "Ball's Object is Continuity," ACT Backstage Newsletter, I. No. 3 (April, 1967), 2.

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her to close her mouth and make the highest sound possible in the form of a hum. This was taught in the ACT classes in crying in which the student is told to lift the uvula and yawn. Paul Shenar saw it as "part of the anatomical investigation. That particular thing he gave to Kitty Winn was supposed to help her feel fury, boredom and frustration. She didn't like it at all. It made her very uncomfortable."[36] The actress agreed that the acting tool did not work well for her. "There were many situations in which I personally felt awkward. I never did feel that they worked but he made me do it anyway."[37]

Another important training method around which the ACT is centered is known as the Alexander Technique.[38] Paul Shenar has been practicing this technique for five years and described its application in rehearsal.

> It's a technique of body realignment and physical awareness. It has to do with posture and with the economy of energy that's expended to keep you standing upright, to keep you in symmetry and balance. Bill Ball is the one who brought it to the company. He's been using this from the beginning of ACT and we have a man in residence [Frank Ottiwell] who does nothing but give the Alexander Technique. This technique was used in every rehearsal of Three Sisters. Frank would put his hand on your back to remind you to let go of tensions and assume the physical attitude that's in tune with what you're thinking about. He's usually in the plays and was a soldier in Three Sisters.[39]

Kitty Winn had studied the Alexander Technique with Frank Ottiwell for

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[36] Shenar interview. [37] Winn interview.

[38] For a detailed description of the Alexander Technique, see Appendix B.

[39] Shenar interview.

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three years and explained its use in helping her arrive at a characterization of Irina.

> One thing that was quite interesting at the beginning of rehearsal when we stood up was that Frank would walk around and behind us when we were still concentrating on the lines with the books still in our hands. All of a sudden he would do something to our backs and heads with his hands. It's hard to explain but it was incredible, it felt fantastic. It was marvelous for this play because I think they are people who are very proud, tall, straight and on the fringes of the aristocracy and I think that they must carry themselves beautifully and the men who are officers. I have a tendency to slump forward so that Frank would take his hands and put them against my back and bring them up with the feeling that there was energy flowing upwards through the spine and then he would just take it through the arms and then shake your hands. So you got this feeling that you are a sort of fountain going up and out. This standing straight and yet relaxed, plus the costume really helped me in understanding the relationship Irina really had with her dominant father.[40]

Paul Shenar took particular pride in the fact that members of the company were able to release their inhibitions by risking dependency on each other. By exposing themselves, they had slowly accepted the pain of vulnerability in order to achieve a sense of ensemble. "So we really got to be good friends," he said. "It was a real tight company." The cast was encouraged to explore every avenue of release and self-expression. "We had invited all those encounter people in at one point or another. Frank Ottiwell goes down to Esalen a lot. He teaches down there. And a lot of the actors have gone down there and spent weekends at Esalen."[41]

Jacqueline Brookes had followed the career of her former director but found herself expressing reservations as to the direction his development had taken.

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[40]Winn interview. [41]Shenar interview.

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> When Bill works at his best, he works organically with the play, with what the play is about and he tries to make the play work. Only later he began bringing extraneous things into his directing. When you're dealing with great plays you don't have to deal with external and clever things. The secret of the success of Ivanov was that he found the reality of that play and put the life into it that belonged there. He didn't put anything clever into it. There was no "directorial" stuff in it. Only later he began using directorial gimmickry. With Ivanov, it just evolved. A lot of skill went into it but it looked like it happened at the moment. No one said, "Oh, what a brilliant idea of the director!"[42]

She later went on to say: "Now he uses such things as the Alexander Technique and even though you don't see any of these things in his directing, the acting is very tense."[43]

At times this tension seems to have approached a frenzy during the rehearsals of Three Sisters. Paul Shenar acknowledged the blocking to have been less arbitrary with Chekhov's play than with previous productions. "The blocking and physical movements happened. I mean it just happened." He went on to describe the blocking of the third act which seemed to confirm the actress DeAnn Mears' characterization of the working atmosphere as "the edge of hysteria."

> It was in the basement at night and everybody was in a foul mood. There are times in rehearsal when people sort of pop into character. Someone gets a good running grasp of the character and runs with it. It usually happened sometime between beginning of rehearsals and opening night to every actor, hopefully, at least once, so that he has an idea of what he is doing. That night it happened and I had never seen anything like it. It was the most incredible performance I'll ever see again and I don't think an audience could have stood it. But everybody that night popped into character at one time within the first fifteen minutes of the act. By the end of the act, it was like blood from wall to wall. People were doing things they never even

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[42] Brookes interview. [43] Ibid.

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> dreamed of doing and really tripping or grooving on the idea and accelerating it and really coming in as the character, trying to solve the problem with a life and death commitment. It's a very irritable and difficult act, the way people are rubbing against each other. I think the act got blocked that night and whatever we did he accepted. He began talking to his assistants like that [snaps fingers] who recorded the movements. . . . I said the audience couldn't have stood it because at that time it was all overdone, with hideous overacting. . . . What I meant was that first dive that an actor takes into a character and it might be extreme but we all did it at once. And it was horrendous to watch even in terms of knowing the actors as people and knowing what they were doing to themselves in order to line up and get into character.[44]

Kitty Winn, who recalled that very rehearsal, explained it somewhat differently.

> It was so fluid an experience for me that I didn't feel as if I was being blocked. We always felt a great deal of freedom but yet we also felt that iron will behind us and he was guiding us and I always felt he was there and if he didn't want me over near that window I wasn't going to be near that window by the time we opened and I wasn't near that window. Sometimes without you knowing it, he would have you play an entirely different action or attitude.[45]

Often Ball would seek a logic consistent with the characters and environment in order to facilitate the staging.

> Bill would say to me when playing a scene with Irina, "You're trying to get a word alone with Irina and everybody else is in the dining room. Now where would you go to feel safe and comfortable with her? You would go down to the chaise, down right, wouldn't you?" If Irina didn't want to stay down right, she would ask, "Why would I want to stay here with him, Bill?" And he'd say, "I don't know. Stay there three times and you tell me. If it doesn't work go where you want to go."[46]

Simple business was another means the director had of getting the actor involved in a situation and establishing a focus within a scene.

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[44]Shenar interview. [45]Winn interview.

[46]Shenar interview.

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> Bill did like to use physical things. Once he had me playing with cards while Paul [Tusenbach] was talking and I found myself in the second act getting annoyed with him, not enjoying his philosophizing and having him around all the time. Bill threw the cards down in front of me and said, "Pick them up earlier and bring them down here." I started playing with them and as I did this, I began getting madder and madder and the only way I could show how mad I was was by making noise with the cards. I flipped them down on the table just when Tusenbach thought he was making a brilliant comment. There were touches like this. He had me pick up a stick and trace something in the dust at the end of the play. He would have us physicalize our feelings so that we could orchestrate the scene and even though the script didn't show anything, we all responded to the situation. I wasn't allowed to just sit there listening.[47]

In order to help an actor overcome a non-productive period in the rehearsals, the director would impulsively suggest an arbitrary gesture or physical posture.

> Bill once said to me, "Why don't you lay on the floor and put your feet up and your head all the way back." And I loved it. I did the whole scene that way. It just happened in rehearsal one day . . . like most things. Bill got the idea because I was bored doing the scene over and over again without it breaking or doing anything. I was taking "uppies" one day and "downies" the next day just to try to break it because there are only so many words there and so many ways of doing them.[48]

Although a choreographer [Ed Mock] was listed in the program for <u>Three Sisters</u>, he acted primarily as an instructor in movement. All physical activity, of which there seems to have been an abundance, remained the province of the director. One critic noted: "This is in almost all respects an animated production. The exception is the frequent posed cameos of

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[47]Winn interview.

[48]Shenar interview. This writer did not find a prevalent use of amphetamines or tranquilizers by the company. Rather, in their explorations, the instruments of various cultural movements were resorted to.

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sister leaning on sister. Otherwise, everyone is on the move . . . tumbling on couches, banging floors, clutching stair rails."[49]

Physical movement had also been an important part of Ball's interpretation of Ivanov, as Jack Bittner discloses. "Blocking was all expermentation. He wasn't rigid. He'd either tell you where to move or let you do it. . . . He believes in a lot of movement, in a lot of energy, in a lot of humor. Some times too much movement, perhaps."[50] Jacqueline Brookes, who had the confidence of the director, was given all the freedom she asked and was seldom told where to move. She remembers the staging of the last act in which she did not appear but witnessed from out front.

> The most extraordinary directorial thing in Ivanov was at the end, that is the choreography, which was brilliantly staged and which fascinated me. . . . I'm not a director and it's one of those things that mystifies me as to how a director knows an actor being six inches to the right or to the left is going to make some kind of difference. . . . It was so strange because when it was right you could see it. . . . The way the group moved to build the tension of the scene was extraordinary and why he had this actor cross this way or that way was mysterious to me but it was usually rather instinctive with him.[51]

Once Ball is satisfied with the physical staging, verbal directions cease and the remainder of the rehearsal period is given to note-taking mostly in terms of refining the rhythm and tempo of the production.

> He doesn't interrupt nor does he say anything during the day at all. Some of the notes would say, "Speed it up on that," or "Would you please take this half a line before you come down the stairs, because-- or not because--. If you want an explanation, see me." I suppose

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[49]Mel Gussow, "'Three Sisters' Minus Sighs," New York Times, October 13, 1969, loc. cit.

[50]Bittner interview. [51]Brookes interview.

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> Bill was sort of sculpting it, dealing with his actors with notes. He has an assistant type them up for him who then cuts them up into strips and hands them out to the actors at the end of the day. They were like fortune cookies.[52]

Kitty Winn saw a similar purpose in the use of the director's notes.

> I think that in his head he had it orchestrated and every day we got a huge amount of notes. As far as the pace was concerned, I was never aware that he was speeding me up or slowing me down. A lot of the notes dealt with the spatial relationships, where you're supposed to move on a line preceding a certain part. I guess these were notes on blocking. It seemed to me that whatever you were doing, he would in some way adjust that rather than talk about pacing.[53]

Shenar found the note-taking phase of the rehearsals of Three Sisters one of the most productive due mainly to the element of surprise.

> You then saw all marvelous things happening around you on stage and you never knew why. And then you realized somebody must have gotten a note on that. You then tried to figure out what it was. I don't think you can get away with that in anything but a very tight company. In other companies, actors are always taken off guard and humiliated by the unexpected.[54]

One production element that William Ball considered of vital importance proved particularly disappointing. "Bill lost his set designer that year," Paul Shenar said, "and he threw the sets for Three Sisters together very rapidly." Ball had been a design major at Carnegie Tech and often designed the sets himself, but assigned a competent technician to execute them. Now, he was forced to rely on an apprentice. The basic lighting and execution, however, were his own and they showed an attempt to add a presentational effect as Shenar described it,

> Bill is always experimenting with lighting and so he put those lighting fixtures down in the middle of everything with baby spots, lighting

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[52]Shenar interview. [53]Winn interview. [54]Shenar interview.

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> very specific areas, especially the night scenes. I think the set was a disaster. It worked well but it looked horrible. I think he realized it too.[55]

One critic found the exposed lighting style puzzling in a Chekhovian setting when he wrote, "It seems a bit odd that the Prozorovs have a stage batten dangling across their living room with clusters of spotlights on it, just past fingertip reach. . . ."[56]

The ACT costume designer, Ann Roth, seems to have been more successful in attuning herself to the interpretive desires of the director and actors. Kitty Winn related the effect the first act costume had on her characterization of Irina.

> It was white with little blue and green flowers of the period and then on this dress she put a brown, very military looking sash that came around and tied in a bow and dropped to the floor. I put on the costume and went home that night and began writing some thoughts down in Irina's diary. She was probably her father's little girl and he was probably such a dominant figure in her childhood and her life that all other men became impossible for her.[57]

Ball was considerably more fortunate with the Will Steven Armstrong's design of Ivanov. "Working closely with the designer and having an enormous capacity for work and pains, the production was beautifully designed and beautifully costumed with great care,"[58] said Jacqueline Brookes. "We had very good sets," Jack Bittner recalled. "Will Armstrong gave us more room than we thought could be gotten on that tiny stage."[59]

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[55] Ibid.

[56] Stanley Kaufmann, "American Conservatory Theatre (ANTA)," New Republic, November 1, 1969, p. 33.

[57] Winn interview. [58] Brookes interview. [59] Bittner interview.

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Regardless of the results or reception of the two Chekhovian productions, as a director, William Ball never failed to win the admiration and gratitude of his actors. Members of the Three Sisters company regarded their exposure to Chekhov as fundamentally a learning process, which Ball intended. Kitty Winn had no regrets about what had been accomplished. "There were other things I would have liked to work out but I just loved what we did with it as far as we went."[60]

Paul Shenar evaluated his first experience with Chekhov with greater enthusiasm.

> It was a joy to be in. It was, until then, my greatest work, I think. I believe the company was extremely close when we were doing it, closer than usual because of the nature of Chekhov, because of the idea that there is a great deal of despair, a great deal of unhappiness in the world, the most insidious kind of unhappiness, that is, unhappiness with no reason for it.[61]

In his close association with the director, he had learned that Ball's two favorite plays were King Lear and Three Sisters although in a San Francisco interview, the director seems to have been more carried away. "I think it's [Three Sisters] the greatest play ever written. And that is after considering Lear and Hamlet."[62] Shenar is convinced that the Three Sisters production failed to meet Ball's expectations. "He was probably unsatisfied with it," the actor surmised. "He would have liked a whole new set and more time to do it in, God knows, especially with Chekhov."[63]

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[60]Winn interview. [61]Shenar interview.

[62]Paine Knickerbocker, "Bill Ball to Stage Chekhov Play," San Francisco Chronicle, February 14, 1969, p. 48.

[63]Shenar interview.

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Unlike the ACT company, the actors of Ivanov evaluated it as a finished work. Jack Bittner had left the cast early in the run and returned to view it as a spectator. "I didn't realize how good a show it was," he said, "until I left it and came back some weeks later and saw it from out front." As a director, he found Ball "young, very eager, and fun to work with."[64] For Jacqueline Brookes, Ivanov proved to be one of the highlights of an active and colorful career. She could not resist a comparison of the director's two Chekhovian productions.

> The Ivanov production was infinitely better than Bill's Three Sisters, having been in one production and seen the other. There is no comparison between the work Bill did in his early days and the work he does now. Now he may be going through a period and he may come out more creative still but no doubt there's been a decided change.[65]

The actress also saw a difference in the director-actor relationship as reflected by independent production and a conservatory setting.

> In the beginning he trusted the actors. He loved them. He believed in them. He kept around him people who might not necessarily do what he told them, who might fight him. Robert Blossom [Shabyelsky] fought him every inch of the way but Bill put up with that and he gave a brilliant performance. I don't know if he'd put up with that today.[66]

William Ball's ACT production has provoked a wide controversy as will be seen in the mixed critical reception. The company's host city received it with considerable enthusiasm and a theatre reviewer considered Three Sisters the best Chekhov presented in the Bay Area in fifteen years. The critic went on to report that the director had illuminated the play's poignance and futility, and what Kenneth Tynan had once called its "dynamic

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[64]Bittner interview. [65]Brookes interview. [66]Ibid.

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apathy." The reviewer continued with his praise for Ball, "he has choreographed a strong cast resourcefully, always so that the three sisters remain a unit, surrounded, moved, and exasperated by others, but never shattered by any individual desires."[67]

On Broadway, however, Three Sisters was subjected to either ecstatic praise or virulent disparagement. On the side of the defenders, Richard Watts, Jr. wrote:

> How mistaken it is for a reviewer to waste his kindness on something that is merely good! What, then, has he left to say about a superb production of a masterpiece? And that is exactly what the revival of Three Sisters, which the American Conservatory Theatre presented at the ANTA last night is, a beautiful, wonderfully staged and acted performance of a great play that is surely high among the achievements in contemporary dramatic annals.[68]

Two of the actors interviewed for this study were surely rewarded for their hard work when they read that:

> Every member of the cast deserves individual acclaim, but I will confine myself, perhaps unfairly, to a pair of the players. Kitty Winn is enormously touching, gentle and adorable as the youngest of the sisters, while Paul Shenar, who established himself as an actor as the innocent lay brother in Tiny Alice, demonstrates what a brilliantly versatile player he is by his entirely different but equally striking portrayal of the doomed baron. Three Sisters is a proud triumph for everyone concerned in it.[69]

By contrast, Mel Gussow of The New York Times missed in the production what he referred to as the Chekhovian "sigh" and added:

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[67]Paine Knickerbocker, "Poignant 'Three Sisters,'" San Francisco Chronicle, February 20, 1969, p. 47.

[68]Richard Watts, Jr., "A Masterpiece Brilliantly Done," New York Post, October 13, 1969, p. 77, *T-NBL+, 1969-70, T-Z.

[69]Ibid.

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> What Ball has substituted for the sigh is a cyclone, which rips right through the play, undercutting subtleties, neglecting nuances, caricaturing characters, and scarcely pausing for a Chekhovian pause. The few pauses are sudden and stagey. The adaptation takes refrains and motifs and turns them into running gags.[70]

Acknowledging Ball as the imaginative dynamism behind the San Francisco theatre group, Gussow questioned whether the company's style had served Chekhov. "He apparently wants to make the play move, and it does, but not without damaging its inner mechanism." Having witnessed a plethora of boring Chekhov productions, the critic finally concluded that ". . . if the alternatives are Mr. Ball's Three Sisters or a boring Three Sisters, one might be better off staying home and reading the play again."[71] John Simon came to a similar conclusion when he wrote: "Ball's Three Sisters is crushed under a frantic gimmickiness which at best distracts from, at worst destroys, the play." But he extended his criticism to the director's entire theatre policy: ". . . it is bathed in a steamy, insalubrious, hot-house atmosphere. Hence, no doubt, the name Conservatory Theatre: a place for breeding calla lilies and Venus flytraps."[72]

The factors that Gussow and Simon found ruinous to Ball's Three Sisters were seen by Martin Gottfried of the Women's Wear Daily to be unexpectedly revealing and incisive. An air of astonishment opens his review.

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[70] Mel Gussow, "'Three Sisters' Minus Sighs," New York Times, October 13, 1969, loc. cit.

[71] Ibid.

[72] John Simon, "Three Sisters," New York Magazine, November 3, 1969, p. 64.

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> The difficulty with Chekhov, The Three Sisters especially, is that his plays can so easily be taken on their topmost level--that is, as stories--and that what seems beneath them is only the tip of a vast, subtle and sometimes spooky underground. The curiosity in awaiting William Ball's production of the play, was on a much more practical level. Mr. Ball's theatrical approach stresses the flamboyant, the highly expressive, the externals of acting (what shows) while Chekhov, in partnership with Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre, rebelled against just such theatre in the pursuit of internalized acting, searching for inner psychology and feeling to replace artifice and stylization. What is impressive and sometimes amazing about this production is that in the process of demonstrating his externals approach, Mr. Ball revealed more of what The Three Sisters is about, inside and out, than any other version I've ever seen, the Moscow Art Theatre's included as well as the magnificent one that Lee Strasberg staged for his Actor's Studio Theatre. The American Conservatory Theatre production that entered the repertory last night at the ANTA theatre is simply extraordinary.[73]

Using the metaphor of a finely precisioned watch in describing the play, the critic went on to write:

> Ball has fit together his actors, connected them wound them up and set them ticking to visual as well as verbal choreography. The production is in every way a dance, its words are in every way orchestrated. It is stunning to watch.[74]

Stanley Kaufmann, reviewing for The New Republic, was unimpressed with any of the productions. "The ACT is a quite mediocre company at best," he wrote, and, commenting on the director's inventiveness, claimed that "Ball, an essentially traditional director, simply twists tradition to suit his eogcentricities." He admitted that the Three Sisters production had a few good moments but added:

> This beloved play, which grows more important every year, is easy to make "look" good, like all of Chekhov. The moody lighting, the

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[73] Martin Gottfried, "Three Sisters," Women's Wear Daily, October 10, 1969, loc. cit.

[74] Ibid.

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> snow, the Victorian clutter, the picturesque groupings, all these are accessible even to a modest directing talent. Ball seizes his opportunities.
>
> Ball makes some nice pictures. But not much more. Where were the actors? What is the point of producing this masterwork merely to make pretty Russianoid tableaux? Can the grossly inadequate performance of a great play be justified on the ground that it is part of a repertory effort by a permanent company?[75]

William Ball's earlier Chekhov production enjoyed unanimous acclaim. "Ivanov, beautifully staged at the Renata last evening," Brooks Atkinson wrote, "is a second-best play in comparison with the great four with which he [Chekhov] concluded his career. . ." Under the direction of William Ball, the performance is sensitive and sure."[76] John McClain, reviewing for The New York Journal-American, considered Chekhov's early play "first class" and wrote that: "The new translation by Elizaveta Fen is contemporary yet unostentatious, the performances are uniformly impressive, the direction is expert and the settings are brilliant. This is off-Broadway at its best." He concluded the review with an additional tribute to the director. "William Ball has directed with assurance and good taste. Go see Ivanov--you'll have a good time."[77] The Canadian critic Herbert Whittaker, substituting for Walter Kerr in The New York Herald Tribune expressed an excitement in the fact that ". . . a company under the direc-

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[75]Stanley Kaufmann, "American Conservatory Theater (ANTA)," New Republic, November 1, 1969, p. 33.

[76]Brooks Atkinson, "Theatre: Chekhov's 'Ivanov' Staged," New York Times, October 8, 1958, p. 42, *T-NBL+, 1958-59, GO-L.

[77]John McClain, "Early Chekhov is First Class," New York Journal-American, October 8, 1958, loc. cit.

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tion of William Ball gave the first production in English here at Anton Chekhov's Ivanov. The performance was rousing and intelligent; the play challenging and evocative." After a paean to the skill and insight of "one of the world's finest dramatists," the critic was particularly gratified that "The Renata Theatre's Ivanov does not miss. It has made a bold, first-rate introduction to some unknown and worthy Chekhov."[78]

The Village Voice's critic with the initials J. T. found Chekhov's early play nothing more than "a preliminary and premature sketch." He preferred to reserve his most lavish plaudits for the production and particularly the direction. "Mr. Ball not only picked all these people," he wrote, "but he kept them free and easy, fluid, and yet under perfect control . . ." His opening paragraph, however, leaves his enthusiasm in little doubt.

> Not since this newspaper came into existence in 1955 has there been a more professional and feather-light off-Broadway production than that of Chekhov's Ivanov at the Renata. Not since then and not often before has any play, Broadway included, been so finely cast, both for style and physique, almost through the entire roster. And not often, certainly, on any American stage has the direction of a play by Chekhov been consigned to such sensitizing hands as those of young Mr. William Ball.[79]

William Ball evidently takes seriously D. H. Lawrence's aphorism, "A work of art is constantly in a state of becoming." Before the Broadway opening of Three Sisters, Lewis Funke of The New York Times reminded the director that some observers felt that he had injected a bit too much

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[78]Herbert Whittaker, "Chekhov's 'Ivanov" Revival Staged at Renata Theater," New York Herald Tribune, October 8, 1958, loc. cit.

[79](J. T.), "Theatre: 'Ivanov,'" Village Voice, October 15, 1958, loc. cit.

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energy into the production in an effort to achieve freshness. He was evidently referring to Dan Sullivan who, reviewing the production on the west coast, had characterized the performance as a "nervous allegro."[80] Ball readily admitted that these observations might have some validity. "For New York I'm going to have another look at it,"[81] he said. The director refuses to allow his creations to dawdle or rest and as Kitty Winn has informed us, scenes were rethought and restaged for this untried audience. Ball and the American Conservatory Theatre had continued to experientially incorporate Lawrence's "state of becoming" into Chekhov's immobilized world.

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[80]Dan Sullivan, "Sipping at Life Through A Straw," New York Times, August 31, 1969, sec. D, p. 4.

[81]Lewis Funke, "West Coast 'Tiny Alice' Passes Albee's Scrutiny Here," New York Times, September 29, 1969, William Ball clipping file.

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CHAPTER XII

CONCLUSION

To attempt a comparative study of theatre productions long after the event must by its nature be hazardous. An audience's appraisal of a theatrical experience is conditioned by many known and unknown factors: background, training, temperament and that catch-all mode of sensibility we call taste. Such an appraisal, therefore, may often turn out to be an exercise in subjectivity rather than an aesthetic evaluation of a work of art. A weak claim to objective standards is a univeral complaint in all art criticism but given the ephemeral nature of theatre, the difficulty is magnified. One need only scan the contradictory reviews in the previous chapters to realize the complexity of the problem. Of the twenty-one productions examined, only three received unanimous praise from the critics and contributing artists alike. Not one production was totally rejected by the critics, while three others divided them into two extreme camps. The remainder received mixed reactions. A Chekhovian production seems to invite differences of opinion and, as intimated in the Introduction, one reason for these differences stems from a host of preconceptions on how Chekhov is misinterpreted and how he should be staged. Another reason may be the nature of the material itself. There

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are so many varying factors that are required to maintain the delicate balance of a Chekhovian play that a failure in one area may easily destroy the total theatrical experience.

Another important factor that may present difficulties in finding meaningful comparisons of the productions is the time that has elapsed between Eva Le Gallienne's 1926 production of The Three Sisters and William Ball's production of the same play in 1969. Much has changed in the American theatre over these years. As a pioneer, Le Gallienne presented Chekhov to a relatively untried audience with a cast who had not yet had the advantages of acting techniques that were to become a part of American theatre training. For William Ball, on the other hand, almost two generations of Chekhovian analyses and production fed his imagination. Still, advantages and disadvantages can be argued for each case. In 1926, Chekhov had not yet inspired awe as a major world dramatist and so the performance could be observed with greater objectivity, although comments on it were no doubt subdued by a lack of comparisons with previously successful ones. But the refinement of production techniques has also paralleled the playgoer's critical demands. By 1969, Chekhov had gained a following that often took on the semblance of a cult. Now a performance immediately invites high expectations as well as comparisons with other major productions. An interesting example of the change in the critical esteem of a Chekhov play is seen in Richard Watts, Jr.'s review of Le Gallienne's The Three Sisters in which he considered the play, apart from the production, to have suffered from tedium and lethargy. In his

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1969 review of William Ball's production, he characterized the play as a "masterpiece." One might conclude that the critic himself had gained an appreciation and insight over the intervening years.

Another important point that should be kept in mind before attempting to draw conclusions in this study is the difficulties encountered by the directors in almost every production. The American theatre is notorious for disregarding the needs of its artists--forcing them to work under pressures and inconveniences that their European colleagues often find appalling. These conditions prevail not only in the New York commercial theatre but in the off-Broadway and regional theatres as well. It is therefore a tribute to the American theatre artist that, despite the many obstacles, a sufficient number of imaginative Chekhovian productions has paraded across the American stage to make feasible a reasoned judgment on the best course available for the staging of a Chekhov play.

Before investigating individual components that have made up the productions, the writer has found it profitable to divide the productions into three categories, depending on the receptions they have received. The first category consists of those productions that received universal acclaim from the observers and participants alike and include Jed Harris' Uncle Vanya, David Ross's early productions at the 4th Street Theatre and William Ball's Ivanov. The second category concerns those productions that aroused the greatest controversy, receiving either unusual praise or violently negative responses. These include Guthrie McClintic's The

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Three Sisters, Lee Strasberg's The Three Sisters, and William Ball's Three Sisters. The third category consists of the presentations that were given mixed notices but failed to generate uninhibited enthusiasm. They are Le Gallienne's Chekhovian productions, the Theatre Guild's production of The Sea Gull, Norris Houghton's The Sea Gull, David Ross's last productions, Alan Schneider's Washington Arena productions, and Harold Clurman's Los Angeles production of Uncle Vanya. This classification should not be regarded as a final judgement in itself. Rather, its purpose is two fold. Primarily, it will provide an order to the productions for comparisons in an attempt to find common characteristics within each group as well as clarifying contrasts to other groups. Second, this framework may help to dispel the dogmatism that beclouds so much of Chekhovian production. It is not easy to argue that Chekhov cannot be performed in a certain way or under certain conditions if a performance has been enthusiastically approved by all or even by a certain number of respected authorities. What makes such a classification somewhat precarious is the unique responses of various observers. There are undoubtedly many who still feel that a production in my second or third category is preferable to one in my first. However, the nature of this study impels us to regard a preponderance of experiences and observations unearthed in the research of a production as a decisive yardstick. The writer has tried to avoid such relative but unproductive terms as "a better production" or "a worse production" and has, instead, limited himself, if not to more measureable,

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at least to less dogmatic terms such as "a more acceptable" or "less acceptable" production, or "a more artistically successful" or "less successful" production as the case may be, depending on the artist's intentions, the development of the performance with its accidents and compromises and its final reception. It is of particular importance to stress that the evaluations of the productions should not by any means be construed as a judgment on the talents and abilities of the individual directors. The accidental circumstances of a specific effort or a peculiar lack of affinity for Chekhov is too prejudicial for such a serious verdict.

In our search for the best possible conditions for producing a Chekhov play, it may be best to begin with the theatre organization itself. Eva Le Gallienne has many supporters when she claims: "I don't think Chekhov is good to do on Broadway. I think Chekhov does much better in repertory theatre."[1] Since she has directed Chekhov for three repertory companies and one independent Broadway producer, we can respect her preference as an artist. What may be significant is that Le Gallienne's productions of Chekhov under independent Broadway and under repertory conditions received responses that were equally mixed. William Ball is another director who presented Chekhov with independent off-Broadway and repertory companies, the latter under an extremely heavy production schedule. George Oppenheimer of Newsday, in an article that included an interview with the director, described the pressure under which the

[1]Eva Le Gallienne, Weston, Conn., interview, October 2, 1970.

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Three Sisters company worked. "He spoke of his strenuous activities in San Francisco. With two theaters going at the same time, he has presented in one week, with matinees almost daily, 23 performances of 16 different plays."[2] Ball's preference for the repertory system lay in the following advantage: "Knowing my actors eliminates the necessity of having to give acting lessons in the middle of rehearsals."[3] Despite the convictions of Le Gallienne and Ball, an interesting finding is that the productions universally acclaimed were presented under indpendent auspices, with Harris representing Broadway and Ross and Ball representing off-Broadway in which they worked with companies assembled for single presentations. The productions that created the most heated controversy, such as McClintic's all-star production, Strasberg's Studio production and Ball's ACT production represent independent, workshop and regional repertory theatre organizations respectively. The remaining productions, those that were given a mixed and less controversial reception, were products of the repertory company, the independent producer and the regional theatre. A final judgment concerning the theatre organization that is most conducive to Chekhovian production cannot be given here. The evidence, however, does seem to imply that an independent production unit that offers a director an opportunity of hiring a selected group of actors may have an advantage in the staging of a Chekhovian play.

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[2]George Oppenheimer, "On Stage: The Gentleman From San Francisco," Newsday, October 25, 1969, William Ball, clipping file, The New York Public Library, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Theatre Collection.

[3]Ibid.

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Since Chekhov had written for the proscenium arch stage, it was important to learn if his plays could be made to feel equally at home on other types of stage structures housed within varied theatre architectures. Of the production in the first category, Harris' Uncle Vanya was presented at the Cort Theatre, a moderately intimate Broadway house with a conventional proscenium arch stage while David Ross's 4th Street Theatre had the unique characteristic of a center stage dividing an audience in half with a low ceiling insuring a close proximity between the stage and the house. The Renata Theatre housing William Ball's Ivanov was an intimate off-Broadway house with a small proscenium arch stage. The controversial productions of McClintic, Strasberg and Ball were housed in such Broadway theatres as the Ethel Barrymore, the Morosco and the ANTA theatres, all of which are considered favorable for intimate attractions. Of the third category, the Theatre Guild and the Phoenix Theatre productions of The Sea Gull, presented at the Schubert Theatre and the 12th Street Theatre respectively, had to contend with large houses whose acoustics demanded considerable projection. The problem of audibility arose during Harold Clurman's regional production of Uncle Vanya, presented in a 750-seat house he characterized as a "mausoleum." Although it is the only example of a production on a thrust stage in this study, the director is convinced of the potential in presenting Chekhov in this theatrical environment as may be seen at the end of Chapter X.[4]

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[4]Further evidence for such optimism may be found in the successful productions of Sir Laurence Olivier's Uncle Vanya for The National Theatre at Chichester, England, and Tyrone Guthrie's Three Sisters at Minneapolis. Both plays were performed on thrust stages.

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Another form of stage construction that has been examined here is the theatre-in-the-round or arena stage. Here, again, as directed by Alan Schneider, we find Chekhov adaptable to a physical arrangement he had not anticipated. What may prove significant is the difference in results between the productions performed in the two arena theatres. The Cherry Orchard was performed in a smaller theatre and, as Fred Hoskins, Schneider's stage manager for both productions, has informed us, "That was the nice thing about the 'Old Vat.' It seemed much more intimate than the Arena. . . . I liked the 'Old Vat' better because of the atmosphere. The brewery looked big but there was a greater intimacy than we had in the new Arena. It had a lower ceiling."[5] The acceptability of this type of structure seems to have been confirmed by the Washington critic, Jay Carmody, when he wrote, ". . . Chekhov's play lends itself ideally to central staging."[6] Perhaps it was the desire for intimacy that prompted Schneider and the scenic designer to erect platforms for Uncle Vanya in the new Arena Stage.

An insistence on intimacy appears to have been made by almost all of the directors and actors and the most acclaimed and controversial productions seem to bear out its importance. When Le Gallienne's National Repertory Company was forced to perform The Sea Gull in a 4000-seat house

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[5]Fred Hoskins, Hartford, Conn., interview, May 27, 1971.

[6]Jay Carmody, "The Passing Show: That Chekhov Orchard Blooms at Arena," January 13, 1960, p. C-18.

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in Indianapolis, all she could advise her actors to do was avoid straining their voices or characters and permit them to carry only as far as they could. "Chekhov works best in a small, intimat house,"[7] she said. A similar problem occurred during the tour of McClintic's production of The Three Sisters. Eddie Dimond, the stage manager, recalled a booking in a huge theatre in Pittsburgh when he was forced to approach Katherine Cornell during an intermission to inform her that members of the audience were complaining that they were not able to hear the actors. The actress, upset because of the lack of audience response, answered, "That's all right, Eddie. We can't hear them either."[8] No attempt was made to increase the volume of the actors' voices. The barn-like structure of David Ross's Theatre Four on 54th Street seems also to have played an important part in unsettling the performance. It may be stated with confidence that the type of stage and house architecture seems to play no significant role in the performance of a Chekhov play provided the actor-audience relationship is established on fairly proximate and intimate terms.

Chekhovian production has been closely associated with the directing methods of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Dantchenko, and so it should be particularly important to examine how American directors of diverse backgrounds and training have fared in working with the Russian plays. Such factors as the director's individual style and his personal

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[7]Eva Le Gallienne quoted by Ann Meacham, interview, January 12, 1971.

[8]Eddie Dimond, interview, September 23, 1970.

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relationship to the cast will also be investigated in an effort to learn how decisive they were in the final results.

What is immediately evident is the unexpected, almost bizarre, group of directors who have enjoyed the greatest accolades for the direction of a Chekhovian play. As a Broadway producer-director with no formal theatre training, Jed Harris had been associated with such commercially lucrative products as melodrama and farce and had introduced the work of such playwrights as George Abbott, George S. Kaufmann and Edna Ferber to the New York playgoer. He was also burdened with a reputation as a cruel and destructive agent in his relationships with other theatre people. In his work on Uncle Vanya, however, he seems to have been on his best behavior, managing to inspire respect, admiration and even worship from his experienced and talented cast. The overpowering nature of an "intense will" together with a peculiar insight into people and a capacity to draw them out when it suited him helped to provide an atmosphere of confidence and creativity in the actors who had put themselves in his hands. He had evidently not abused that trust.

David Ross, on the other hand, failed to win the confidence of his actors, who proceeded to ease him out of his role as director and take over the rehearsals themselves. A beginning student of Strasberg, Ross attempted his first Chekhovian play after only one directing effort. Fortunately, he was in a position to attract talented and experienced actors who knew what they wanted and what they were doing. The fact

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that Ross was his own producer and did not have to account to a superior, permitted him to retire gracefully and leave his actors to carry out their work. Another important factor that undoubtedly helped make conditions favorable for working with Chekhov was the informal and intimate nature of the surroundings that gave the rehearsals more of a workshop than a production atmosphere. It is highly unlikely that the cast could have maintained such confidence had they been forced to rehearse on a legitimate stage under Broadway conditions. The controlling hand of a strong and knowledgeable director would, indeed, have been sorely missed. As David Ross assumed a greater role as director, the performances began to suffer until his last production of The Cherry Orchard, which he directed with a dictatorial hand, was least praised of all.

William Ball's production of Ivanov was preceded by university training as a designer, several off-Broadway roles as an actor and several months of study with a protegé of Strasberg. But the dynamic energy of the man, together with a vivid visual sense, seems to have made up for a lack of professional experience. Like Harris, a strong hand seems to have particularly affected the actors in their relationship to him. "He was really capable of inspiring actors," Jacqueline Brookes had remarked. At another point she had said, "We loved him, we just loved him, we would have done anything for him."[9] The tiny stage of the Renata Theatre had

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[9]Jacqueline Brookes, New York, interview, March 23, 1971.

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evidently provided this director a milieu in which he was permitted to guide and control a large and select company to a praiseworthy performance.

The three directors in the controversial category were equally diverse in background, training and directing methods. All had strong production concepts and enjoyed the respect and confidence of their casts. McClintic, as we have seen, stemmed from the Belasco-Ames theatrical tradition and often worked with the same actors who were nurtured on Broadway, the national touring company and the English stage. The externals of behavior had predominated in his work with Chekhov. In contrast, Lee Strasberg, as a student of Richard Boleslavsky, the co-founder of the Group Theatre and Artistic Director of the Actor's Studio, belongs to the Stanislavsky school of directing in which the inner-directed examination of character behavior is paramount. Despite difficulties with a few actors, his position as teacher and coach at the Studio had earned him a loyal following among the cast members, permitting him to put into practice what he had previously been working for in a class situation. Ten years of off-Broadway and regional productions followed William Ball's Ivanov. He had also examined and formulated different acting theories and techniques and applied them in his controversial production of Three Sisters. As Artistic Director of ACT, he wields complete control over all phases of production and, with a strenuously active imagination that keeps the rehearsal atmosphere at high pitch, his domination over his actors appears to have produced interesting albeit unexpected results with Chekhov's play.

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The third category, too, reflects a host of directing methods that have helped to shape the history of American theatre production. Eva Le Gallienne's past straddles both the American and European professional theatre, not excluding the Russian tradition. In her untiring efforts to present Chekhov, she has been forced to play the role of administrator, actress and director in all but her last production. In the Theatre Guild production of The Sea Gull, we find a confusion of authority and the eventual control of the proceedings gravitating to a star with a limited directing background and little acquaintance with Chekhov. Milton himself received his training under Richard Mansfield and developed as a director in the teens and twenties on Broadway productions. The influence of the Moscow Art Theatre on Norris Houghton may be seen in his recorded experiences, Moscow Rehearsals. His one attempt at directing a professional version of a Chekhov play seems to have been doomed from the beginning when he was forced to accept a small nucleus of actors in important roles in The Sea Gull, a situation which caused the production to slip from his grasp. Alan Schneider's eclectic background includes university theatre, regional theatre, Broadway and off-Broadway and a thorough grasp of the Stanislavsky method. His two Chekhovian productions were presented in regional theatre with a seasonal company over which he maintained a firm hand, at times producing resistance in the actor. Harold Clurman, whose background and training is similar to Strasberg's, used the regional theatre for his introduction to Chekhovian production. His remarkable insights into the Russian

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dramatist earned him respect and admiration from his cast but, working in an alien setting under conditions the director felt restrictive, there resulted an insecurity that forced him to limit his initial objectives.

We thus have a profile of directors of which the first category is represented by two strong and inspiring talents and one who permitted a self-directed but talented and experienced cast to resolve their own acting and staging problems. The three directors of the second category had sufficient control over their productions so as to translate their directorial concepts into controversially theatrical terms. Of the third category, such commanding directors as Le Gallienne, Schneider and Clurman have worked with Chekhov under varying restricted conditions and their potential as directors of Chekhov remains uncertain. The Sea Gull productions of Milton and Houghton exhibited conflicts of such proportions that the contributions of the directors are also impossible to ascertain.

What appears to emerge from this summary is the advantage a Chekhovian production has when guided by a director with a vivid theatrical imagination who is permitted to work under less restricted but familiar conditions. This conclusion is hardly surprising, since it applies to many authors. What was not anticipated before this study began is that a Chekhovian play can respond equally to the talents of a director of any background and training. The peculiar characteristics and abilities of the individual director and the conditions under which he works have proven to be more advantageous for a Chekhovian director than the use of a particular directorial method, Stanislavsky or otherwise.

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When we come to the subject of the acting company, a clearer pattern appears, one that may be of primary importance. The overwhelming number of actors who participated in these productions were blessed with talent and sensitivity as well as a decided mastery of their craft. However, it is not the ability of the individual actor that seems to have had a fundamental role in a greater acceptance of a production but the acting company as a whole. When we examine the casts in the first category, we find actors with disparate backgrounds and training. But in none of the three companies is there evidence of diverse acting styles ever becoming a distraction. On the contrary, the uniformity of acting style was often alluded to for the success of the performance. The actors in Jed Harris' Uncle Vanya had been trained and had worked in the American theatre since the previous century. Although Lillian Gish had received her early training and experience in that medium, her many years of film acting undoubtedly presented a stylistic problem for the production. Whether it was the strong supportive cast, the sensitivity and determination of the actress, or the subtle and imaginative handling by the director, the difficulty seems to have been overcome, enough so as to have ellicited such a response as "...a definite, personal style emerges for the play as a whole."[10] In Ross's early productions, the actors had identified themselves with the European theatre tradition in their taste, their heritage, and their training. Frances Cheney, who played Natasha in Ross's first production of The Three Sisters put it succinctly enough when she said:

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[10]John Hutchens, "Brighter Nights," Theatre Arts Monthly, XIV, No. 4 (1930), 460.

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> And I think it was a big help the fact that Morris [Carnovsky], Roger [DeKoven], Phil [Loeb] and I and even George Ebeling, in a curious way, all had a connection with the European or Russian background, something that wasn't American so that the people were unified. It was like we belonged in one milieu, one locale or bloodstream or whatever you want to call it.[11]

The results had led to Brooks Atkinson's expressed admiration for "Mr. Ross' [sic] command of the style. . ."[12] William Ball's Ivanov company was carefully assembled from actors he had known and worked with or who had come highly recommended by his teacher, Michael Howard. Differing somewhat in background from the other two Chekhov companies in this category, they were able to look back on a university training and regional theatre experience as well as Broadway and off-Broadway assignments. His meticulousness in casting and his ability to act as a provocative yet supportive presence brought forth such comments as ". . . the performances are uniformly impressive,"[13] and "Mr. Ball not only picked all these people, but he kept them free and easy, fluid, and yet under perfect control. . . . finely cast both for style and physique."[14]

Although the productions reveal acting companies with backgrounds, experience, training and temperaments, different from one another, one

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[11] Frances Cheney, New York, interview, January 9, 1971.

[12] Brooks Atkinson, "Theatre: Chekhov's 'Cherry Orchard,'" New York Times, October 19, 1955, *T-NBL+, 1955-56, A-K.

[13] John McClain, "Early Chekhov is First Class," New York Journal-American, October 8, 1958, *T-NBL+, 1958-59, GO-L.

[14] (J. T.), "Theatre: 'Ivanov,'" Village Voice, October 15, 1958, loc. cit.

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production element seems to have been common to all. The human and interpersonal relationships were to become important creative factors in their work with the play. So important was this factor that the production was to become greater than the sum of its parts and the individual actor found himself being submerged in a process that satisfied the needs of the play rather than what he achieved in his own performance. Such a working atmosphere was to produce an affection and loyalty in the actors for each other and for the author to the extent that reminiscences of the productions remain vivid and alive to this day.

Pursuant to this point, a cohesive force in Jed Harris' production was the presence of Katie Mayhew and Lillian Gish. As a symbol of a glorious past in the American theatre, Katie Mayhew elicited a respect and adoration from the entire company. At the same time, everyone proceeded to fall hopelessly in love with Lillian Gish, including the women. As Joanna Roos was to remark, "Lillian had both a dignity and child-like quality but she needed support and she got it from all of us." The director, too, was to relieve any sign of tension by instilling in most of the actors a "tremendous feeling of security." Above all, he made no attempt to hide the fact that ". . . he adored the play and he adored the cast and he especially adored Lillian."[15]

The "milieu" in which David Ross's actors found themselves was deemed to have been the creation of a mutually supportive company and

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[15]Joanna Roos, New York, interview, September 13, 1970.

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advanced by the author. "It did finally fall together," Frances Cheney had remarked. "It was Chekhov for one thing. And the people involved. We all helped each other. . . . It was Chekhov that seemed to take over."[16] Carol Hoover, the lighting designer, seemed acutely aware of the production conditions that encouraged a creative working atmosphere among the actors. "It was a kind of home, a workshop," she had recalled, ". . . there was a tremendous amount of friendship, a camaraderie, and we all got to know each other quite well because we were working down there all hours to get the show on, not for money, but for a real interest and love for the play and for the opportunity to work on it."[17] The actors never allowed their impatience with the director to interfere with their work on the play or their relationships with each other.

We have also seen Ball's Ivanov characterized as "a tremendous love affair" among the actors by Jacqueline Brookes. Here, the actors found themselves coming to rehearsals earlier and earlier and behaving ". . . in a real sort of Chekhovian manner. We hear these stories of Chekhovian plays and this was becoming true of us." She was finally to sum up the working attitude of the company. "The play really became a labor of love. God knows, we didn't make any money. There was such a fantastic feeling on the stage between the actors."[18]

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[16]Frances Cheney, New York, interview, January 9, 1971.

[17]Carol V. Hoover, New York, interview, August 1, 1970.

[18]Brookes, interview.

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In the productions of the second category, we have companies of actors equally varied out of a somewhat different nature. Indeed, we find actors who are recognized as possessing greater individual talent or star quality, of more intensive workshop training in acting techniques than those in the first group. Some of these qualities may have contributed to the controversial nature of the productions themselves. Here, again, however, we find enough of a homogeneity of acting styles within each production as to maintain a consistant level of performance. After some searching, Guthrie McClintic managed to assemble an all-star cast of magnetic quality with a technical and objective approach to acting. Lee Strasberg's cast of The Three Sisters consisted of actors selected and trained by the director over a period of years, some of whom had attained stardom. Needless to say, all of these actors worked with the subjective and analytical techniques taught at the Actor's Studio. A consistency of acting style was also seen in William Ball's Three Sisters since most of the actors had been under the vigorous tutelage of the director for several years.

Upon examining each company as a working unit, we find elements which could not help but affect the production values of the play. We have already seen that McClintic's recurring use of actors earned his independent companies the epithet, "McClintic's stock company." He had previously worked with all but two of the actors in The Three Sisters and they gave him their whole-hearted and enthusiastic support, thus

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creating a warm and collaborative atmosphere. Nevertheless, half of the critics complained of distractions by the awesome presence of so many stars which inevitably occasioned applause of the audience on entrances and exits. Such reactions helped to heighten the effect that the long Chekhovian speeches were operatic solos. It appears that the greatest admirers of the production and of the acting company were those who saw Chekhov's play as a suitable "vehicle" for great acting but, nonetheless, a museum piece in content and form. Despite the intentions of the director, the individual performances were to dominate the total production concept rather than giving the actors an opportunity ". . . to explore a great play, to fit themselves in and become a part of it."[19]

The Actor's Studio takes great pride in developing in its actors a mastery of acting techniques, concentrating on those oriented toward psychological implications in human behavior. Much of their workshop discipline has gone into presenting and criticizing scenes from plays not readily available to the working actor. The company that was eventually formed for The Three Sisters was to exhibit the fruits of this intensive training, and prompted such responses as "truth" and "inner life" by several of the observers. What created the heat for controversy in this production were the divided camps that claimed the achievement of a totally unified performance on the one hand and those who felt the perform-

[19]Guthrie McClintic. "Directing Chekhov," Theatre Arts, XXVI, No. 4 (1943), 213.

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ance was marred by the failure of the individual scenes, excellent though they may have been, to cohere into a complete and organic entity. Arguments for both viewpoints were advanced by contributing artists and critics alike. The lack of cooperation by a few actors as well as the habitual working procedures at the Studio were brought up too often in the evaluation of the production to be dismissed. Additional factors that may be subject to questioning are whether the intense Studio competition for parts, the overhanging solemnity in approaching a Chekhov play, and a singular absorption in craft is of help in producing an atmosphere conducive for presenting Chekhov.

As a "conservatory" theatre, William Ball insists that his production of Three Sisters was meant to be fluid, unfinished and experimental. For the purposes of this study, we must still regard the acting company not only in terms of its needs and objectives but also by its achievements, particularly since it was willing to present them before a Broadway audience and at Broadway prices. In looking back at Ball's work with Three Sisters, we can see that his dominant position in relationship to the individual actor is reinforced. It is he who feeds the imagination or suggests various techniques to the members of the cast. It is also he who supervises their class training and assigns projects that he believes essential for the growth of particular actors. The strong presence of the director was also felt by those observing the performance of the play, both defenders and detractors. We thus find such catch-words in their

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comments as "a driving force," "egocentricities," and "a breathless sense of trying to force life" attributed to the performances. Even in such a laudatory notice as Martin Gottfried's, the director's work was seen as foremost. "Ball has fit together his actors, connected them, wound them up and set them ticking to visual as well as verbal choreography."[20] The overall impression given is that the energies of the disciplined and unified actors were directed towards the conceptual values of the director rather than the human values of the characters to each other.

In the second and controversial category, as in the first, we find a homogeneity of acting styles within each company. What distinguishes this group is a sense of virtuosity on the part of the various artists, thus making Chekhov's play more of a vehicle for their specific talents, intended or not. In McClintic's company, the star quality and personal magnetism of the individual actors inevitably dominated the proceedings which, in fact, fit the director's outlook on theatre despite his protestations that the play is always paramount. The virtuosity of the Actor's Studio production was not with the stature of the individual actor, although the presence of Kim Stanley and Geraldine Page gave it a good deal of glamor. Rather, it was an application of a craft the actors had spent years of effort in mastering and the opportunity of working with a play in which they might adequately display the tenets of that craft. The virtuosity of the ACT

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[20]Martin Gottfried, "Three Sisters," Women's Wear Daily, October 10, 1969, *T-NBL+, 1969-70, T-Z.

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production of Three Sisters rested in the hands of William Ball who, as administrator, teacher and director had made use of various theories and techniques in fashioning a company of actors that was able to respond to his unorthodox interpretation of the play. The ingenuity of all these production methods seems to have been considered above an ingredient less theatrical perhaps but more essential for a Chekhovian play, that of maintaining a binding and inter-dependent force that created a company with the characteristics of a socially and psychologically cohesive organism; in short, a society that maintained itself off stage as well as on.

In all of the productions in the third category, we find companies consisting of actors with various backgrounds and acting styles. In most cases, this variety was to affect the rehearsal atmosphere and the working and personal relationships within the casts. A serious theatre artist, Eva Le Gallienne nevertheless had difficulty in attracting the best acting talent to her 14th Street Civic Repertory Theatre. Her casts consisted mainly of young and inexperienced American actors and established European actors who were attracted more to repertory theatre than to the money and glamor of Broadway. Indeed, all of her productions lacked casts with homogeneous acting styles or suffered from such abrasions as a difficult co-director with the National Repertory Company or from an estranged acting clique in her APA-Phoenix production.

The same may be said of the Theatre Guild's company of The Sea Gull, in which Robert Milton had little in common either with the actors

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in terms of craft or of personal relationships. The floundering of some of the young actors, together with the anxiety of Lynn Fontanne, did little to help make the working atmosphere a creative or enjoyable one. The Phoenix production of The Sea Gull suffered even more from factionalism as well as diversity of acting styles while we have seen the Kafkesque atmosphere in which David Ross's last production of The Cherry Orchard had been put together. Despite the limited casting possibilities of regional theatre, Alan Schneider, with a strong hand, managed to coax a heterogeneous acting company into a fairly successful regional production of The Cherry Orchard. Similar conditions proved too formidable at his second attempt at a Chekhovian play. The backgrounds, the acting techniques, and the individual styles of the actors in Harold Clurman's production of Uncle Vanya seemed so perversely varied that the translator was willing to overlook it completely. Other observers were not so generous. More important, however, was an insecurity exhibited by members of the company. The director's complaint of the lack of time, dissatisfaction by some of the actors, concentration by the director on a particular actress and the alien environment of the thrust stage undoubtedly contributed to a rehearsal atmosphere in which it is difficult to see how a constructive working relationship could have been established.

A summary of the productions with regard to the acting companies suggests findings that many devotees of the Russian dramatist will find difficult to accept. The first observation is that Chekhov can be played

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adequately and creatively by a talented actor with any type of training or background. As in the case of the director, the close association of Chekhov with the Moscow Art Theatre has tended to instill in many a belief that the Stanislavsky Method is the only door through which the American actor must enter to enjoy fully the Chekhovian experience.

Significantly related to acting method is the importance of selecting a company in which a consistent acting style is attained. How this homogeneity is accomplished seems relatively inconsequential. Most often it was the result of similar theatrical backgrounds. Where Chekhov is concerned, it is not the acting system but a company's compatibility, of personal quality and mode that is critical in creating his composite world.

An element that may be even more decisive in a company performing Chekhov cannot help but be the most accidental and elusive. It may have occurred to the reader that the popular expressions "ensemble playing" and "ensemble group" have not been used here. Like others of Stanislavsky's acting and production principles, the terms have been overly abused. Of course, ensemble has been a primary goal of every director. Indeed, not one director in this study had thought of presenting a Chekhovian play on any other terms than as a complex-charactered, highly textured, and polyphonically orchestrated theatre work. In this country, ensemble acting has also been associated exclusively with a successful application of the Stanislavsky acting system. Thus, a

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specific craft is still believed to be the best if not the only means of its realization within a company. The evidence in this study suggests that the term, ensemble acting, may require a reexamination as well as a new definition. It is far more probable that an acting system or method is of small significance for developing an ensemble unit as an instrument for a Chekhovian play. Instead, more important variables seem to enter the picture. It is the finding of this writer that the most determining factor for such an acting company is not that of casting in the conventional sense of choosing actors close to the parts with ability and experience but the additional ingredient of a group balanced in temperament and supportive enough to regard the play and company as foremost to its interest. In essence, a working relationship closely attuned to an atmosphere of family warmth has somehow been engendered within the members of the successful company--an atmosphere which they carry out of the theatre. Perhaps we might say that Chekhov has created a world in which they have found a long-sought comfort and congeniality off- as well as on-stage.

Another variable that seems to affect ensemble playing is the relationship between the director and the actors. This situation may involve a director capable of acting as a catalyst for inspiration and guidance and as a supportive agent to the actors whenever such help is needed. On the other hand, a company that is self-directed as well as sensitive to the needs of the play may still maintain its own integrity if

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they can press a director who is a distracting element to retire from the proceedings and permit them to work in critical areas. A strong and insensitive director can destroy a perfectly balanced ensemble group in a matter of hours.

The third major ingredient in helping to establish an ensemble group is the physical rehearsal environment. The structure of the stage or the size of the house can be of critical importance in helping the acting company establish a home base in which the illusory Chekhovian world the members are building for themselves can be contained. Here again the word "intimacy" intrudes itself as a key factor in Chekhovian production and the strain of maintaining the delicate relationships within huge spatial areas can be destructive. Early use of the set and props in rehearsal are also desirable but not critical.

There is no need to belabor the point that the productions in the first category contain all of the ingredients for a well-balanced ensemble company. One need only review the testimony of the actors and technicians to corroborate the unity of the company with or without the help of the director as well as the rehearsal conditions that contributed to the production's success. The acting companies in the second category, however, seem to have prompted conflicting opinions due primarily to McClintic's star system, the workshop methods and competitive ambience in the Actor's Studio production and the conservatory environment with the high-pressured style of the ACT director. The relationships of the three

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companies to the directors seem to have been those of mutual respect and devotion while fairly successful attempts were made to provide the companies with a supportive rehearsal environment. As we have seen in the third category, the mixtures in acting styles, the unevenness in acting ability, the abrasive natures of several of the directors and actors, and the inadequate rehearsal facilities prevented the companies from achieving a form of ensemble playing as it has been defined here. It may well be that there are variables still unknown that are essential for a profoundly meaningful ensemble production of a Chekhovian play. The three elements above are necessary to begin with.

A rehearsal demand that most directors in this study have made and deemed essential is more rehearsal time. Chapter after chapter, we have seen testimony that a Chekhovian play must have six weeks or more to do it justice. There is no denying that more rehearsal time for many plays might prove helpful so long as the play stops short of being over-rehearsed. With Chekhov, however, time has been thought so critical that such directors as Eva Le Gallienne, Guthrie McClintic and Lee Strasberg insisted on more than the normal rehearsal period whenever possible, while Norris Houghton and Harold Clurman limited their objectives. Time has been regarded as even more critical when the need for developing an ensemble group was brought up.

An ironic note struck in this study is that the Chekhovian productions in the first category had a more limited rehearsal period than many

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of the others. Jed Harris' company rehearsed Uncle Vanya for three and a half weeks in a Broadway theatre before opening for a week's stand in New Haven where it received ecstatic reviews and was followed immediately by its Broadway opening. David Ross's companies were given between four and five weeks of rehearsal and a week of public previews before the official openings while William Ball's Ivanov company was permitted four weeks of rehearsal and a week of previews to get acquainted with Chekhov's play. The second category seems to have had the advantage of a little more rehearsal time, as insisted upon by their directors. McClintic found it a worthwhile investment to give his all-star company six weeks of Broadway rehearsal time before opening in Washington, D.C. while Lee Strasberg managed to get Equity to accept a five and a half week rehearsal period for his company. Ball's Three Sisters company was forced to rehearse under a shorter rehearsal day for six weeks since many of the actors were in the evening productions. A six-week engagement in San Francisco followed by a national tour preceded the Broadway engagement. The third category of productions varied in rehearsal time from three and a half weeks on Broadway followed by out-of-town tryouts to six weeks under repertory conditions. Whether more time would have significantly affected any of the productions must remain doubtful. Some directors may indeed need more time than others because of their organic working methods. But the length of the rehearsal period, which includes previews or tryouts, seems to have played a small part in the overall results and diminishes in importance in proportion to other rehearsal demands.

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Of lesser importance for a successful interpretation of Chekhov is the English translation used in production. In not one case was a translation brought up even as a minor cause for an unsuccessful production. Most often the translation was commended by the artists and critics regardless of the reception accorded the production. An interesting note is that, of the texts used in the first category, two were free adaptations. In the second category, the three texts were new and unpublished versions, the last being the ACT's free adaptation of Three Sisters. The last category consisted of more faithful translations by Constance Garnett, Stark Young, Alex Szogyi and one unpublished version for the Phoenix The Sea Gull production. Much has been made of the values and nuances of a "proper" translation of Chekhov. Little of their significance seems to have been attached to the final staging.

A few notes should be made concerning the use of visual elements in the productions. Stylized sets and lighting were inevitable for such structures as the arena stage, the thrust stage and David Ross's two-sided stage. Ross and Schneider preferred to work with the barest suggestion of a real environment while Clurman veered closer to an abstract concept. All, however, insisted on using authentic furniture, costumes and props. The prosenium arch productions adopted selective realism as stage decor with one exception. The suspended ceiling and intermittent paneling gave Norris Houghton's production a stylized effect but economics and an unusually wide stage seem to have forced this decision. Parenthe-

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tically, Schneider's use of a stylized set in his Israeli proscenium production of The Cherry Orchard produced some negative reactions, according to an actress in the company. "Some of the criticism was that the set was not correct for Chekhov. There was no feeling of sorrow in losing it. It was a very aesthetic set but had no real meaning for the play."[21] Proscenium lighting has, on the whole, been conventional and such practices as unmotivated light sources used by McClintic and exposed battens by Ball were seen as distractions rather than poetic effects. No doubt new approaches in stage decor will be tried in the future but Chekhovian production in this country seems to have confirmed Norris Houghton's dictum against stylization, written six years after his staging of The Sea Gull. "But any such attempt, it strikes me, goes against the intent of the author, who wished his audience to feel that it is a slice of life they are beholding."[22]

For almost five decades, American theatre artists have been repeating and nurturing general assumptions concerning Chekhovian production to the point that they have taken on almost mythic proportions. How much they may have accounted for the discouragement of doing Chekhov's plays by many talented directors is, of course, impossible to say, but by briefly considering these assumptions or myths, as expressed by the directors in this study, they may finally be laid to rest. Such negative findings might prove more acceptable to those who still prefer to hold on to their reservations.

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[21]See Appendix A.

[22]Norris Houghton, "Symposium - Directing Chekhov," World Theatre, Chekhov Centenary, IX, No. 2 (1960), 131.

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The first assumption is that only a permanent company developed over a period of time can do justice to a Chekhovian play. This conviction has been expressed by Eva Le Gallienne, Guthrie McClintic, Robert Milton, Norris Houghton, Harold Clurman, and William Ball. McClintic was forced to defend his cast as a floating "stock company," while Clurman saw the need for years of work in order to arrive at ensemble playing. Houghton's belief that the Russians would be appalled at the thought of doing Chekhov by actors who are strangers to each other seems to sum up the feelings of many of the American theatre artists. However, we have seen that ensemble playing can be achieved by assembling a balanced, talented and sensitive cast of actors for a single, independent production. In America, the opportunities for such a company are wide in the commercial theatre because of the availability of many talented actors, all channelling their energies into that one effort.

A second assumption that has permeated the American theatre is the added rehearsal time needed for directing Chekhov, a point we have already examined in some detail. The length and intricacies of the plays undoubtedly require more time than rehearsing a commercial drawing-room comedy. But under the proper conditions, Chekhov can be done more than adequately under Equity rehearsal rulings.

Another recurring theme that has been expressed time and again is that few people recognize the humor in Chekhov. Yet in the writings and interviews with most of the directors in this study, humor had played

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an important part in the directorial concepts. A review of the foregoing chapters will reveal Le Gallienne's assessment of Chekhov's "Comic Sense of Life," his "comic range" as seen by Harris, McClintic's belief that Chekhov "had more humor in his plays than most people thought," as quoted by his stage manager, the determination of Houghton, Ross and Clurman not to make their productions traditionally mournful and pessimistic, and Schneider's avoidance of the "Chekhovian" ambience by stressing the humor in the plays. So defensive were the directors in insisting that Chekhov is comic that it should long since have become axiomatic. Yet for almost every production, humor was mentioned as a means of correcting previous misconceptions. The evidence reveals that if a production failed to achieve humor, it was always in defiance of the director's efforts.

Finally, it has often been expressed that a Chekhovian play should not be exposed to the vagaries and pressures of the Broadway theatre since the economics and success syndrome will not allow the rehearsal conditions to fulfill the play's delicate values. Le Gallienne, Houghton, Strasberg, and Clurman were particularly adamant on this point and it is probably true given a poor production organization, a weak director, and poor physical facilities. But Chekhov has been performed successfully on Broadway and the fact that four of the six productions in the first two categories were presented there attests to its feasibility. With the proper dedication, Chekhov seems to be able to thrive almost anywhere and the need to nurture him under illusory ideal conditions can only inhibit future productions by otherwise willing artists.

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As a final summary, the results of this study suggest a series of production elements that are essential for the successful staging of a Chekhovian play. Although they are interdependent, and a failure in one area may easily influence the others, they are presented in order of their importance.

1) The Company--A group of sensitive and experienced actors, homogeneous in style, and personably attuned to each other make up a creatively warm rehearsal atmosphere and thereby constitute a unit of "ensemble" players.

2) The Director--Must be one who can inspire confidence and security in his actors, having the necessary perception to guide them through the intricacies of the play. Should he lack these qualities and have a group of actors who are experienced and sufficiently trained to work on their own, he should assume more the role of an objective observer and refiner of details without giving up his encouragement and support.

3) Architecture--The structure of the stage and house should be intimate and compact enough to help contain the Chekhovian reality that has been delicately constructed by the actors and director.

Like all things theatrical, these elements cannot of themselves guarantee a successful production of a Chekhovian play. However, no production

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in this country has ever been successfully staged without them. Dramatic criticism is replete with theories on how a play by Chekhov should be staged but the myriad accidents, mistakes and reinterpretations insist on cropping up as a continual mockery of these theories. The contemplation of Chekhov's world encourages creative speculation, the reconstruction of it causes frustration and confusion in its elusiveness. Thus, every new production renews the controversy.

At first glance, it would appear that these principles may apply to any play and surely their presence can only be an advantageous force in production as a whole. The question that remains relevant here, however, is whether their presence is essential for a successful presentation. For example, is the intimate and compact environment found decisive for Chekhov equally so for the dramas and comedies that have derived from the Classical, Elizabethan, Restoration and Romantic periods? The heroic, farcical and artifical nature of these works should claim otherwise. Neither would the delicate, interpersonal relationships of the members of the company seem to be as critical in these plays as they are in Chekhov.

But the point seems well taken if we consider the plays that have been written during Chekhov's own time, or the period of Naturalism and Realism. Can the three principles apply equally to the productions of such playwrights as Ibsen, Strindberg and Shaw? Unfortunately, matters can only be speculative at this point. Much has been written about the seeming formlessness of Chekhov's plays as compared with the well-made and struc-

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tured forms of many of his contemporaries. Lacking heroes and villians, Chekhov's plays consist of group portraits in which the trivial and commonplace act as a masking device for the inherent drama. The objectivity of the journalist or the chemist had become Chekhov's credo in which "life as it is" determined the dramatic form which has been characterized by Harold Clurman as "seamless." This is in contrast to the dualistic actions of other dramatists in which protagonists or antagonists emerge as central to their themes to act as moral precepts. Yet, the fact that these dramatists also dealt with middle class or working class characters who moved in a mundane and intimate environment must still leave in doubt whether the findings in this study might also apply to them. Thus, such a question as: "Is the ensemble company, so essential in constructing the Chekhovian reality, equally necessary for embodying the moral fervor of an Ibsen or a Strindberg?" must be entertained. It is the opinion of this observer that the three production elements entered in the conclusion may be as important for realistic plays fashioned in the decentralized mold in which the group embraces a social theme as may be found in such plays as Shaw's Heartbreak House, the early plays of O'Casey and Odets, and such atypical plays as Lillian Hellman's The Atumn Garden and Eugene O'Neill's Long Days Journey Into Night. But since this study is limited to Chekhov and the American director, a comparison of directing methods for other plays and playwrights can only be held in abeyance. Studies made of the efforts of American directors to realize the dramatic values

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of Chekhov's contemporaries as well as the playwrights he has influenced during this century would therefore help answer the question. It is also hoped that such further explorations may eventually lead to comparative studies of American directors and their work with other world dramatists whose productions have traditionally inspired controversy.

Despite Chekhov's enormous perception, the raw materials he worked with never ceased to remain a mystery. He willingly admitted that he could not fathom the meaning of what he observed. "The time has come for writers," he had written to his publishers, "especially those who are artists, to admit that in this world one cannot make anything out, just as Socrates once admitted it, just as Voltaire admitted it."[23] In a more Chekhovian tone he answered his wife's letter with a suggestion of mild impatience. "You ask what is life? That is just the same as asking what is a carrot? A carrot is a carrot, and nothing more is known about it."[24] It is the uncertainty of trying to suggest what that carrot is that so confounds production and intimidates directors as to defy any one theatrical method or conscious technique. And with all the attempts to fathom the plays' features--such as subtextual materials, multi-layered character studies, chthonic silences, or polyphonic structural forms--the

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[23]Anton Chekhov, The Personal Papers of Anton Chekhov, trans. by S. S. Koteliansky, Leonard Woolf and Constance Garnett (New York: Lear Publishers, Inc., 1948), p. 134.

[24]Anton Chekhov, The Selected Letters of Anton Chekhov, ed. by Lillian Hellman, trans. by S. Lederer (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1955), p. 386.

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director still finds himself facing imponderable choices when he approaches the performing stage.

Since 1926, the American director together with his collaborative colleagues have made use of the most refined and sophisticated skills and materials in reconstructing the Chekhovian world. But its implicative design, with rare exceptions, has remained vague and unfulfilled. In an era that boasts of theatrical experimentation, often for its own sake, Chekhov has been relatively untouched, perhaps more because of deference than a lack of boldness. It remains to be seen whether a young, incautious director may happen to stumble upon a key that will open up a new realm of Chekhovian experience. The fertile ground is there, as many of us sense, since we refuse to cease in our labors to imagine, argue, and attempt that definitive production.

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APPENDIX A

AIAN SCHNEIDER

(Highlights of an interview with Miriam Gabriele who played the role of Charlotta in The Cherry Orchard at the Cameri Theatre of Israel - August 11, 1971)

The Russian culture is very close to Israeli culture so Chekhov is greatly admired. Even so, many of the performances in the Cameri Theatre production were poor. Many of the actors were Russian and were afraid of Chekhov. They thought, "oooh Chekhov" and so there was a great deal of tension during the rehearsals. There was very little humor in the production because of the fear.

* *

We had six to seven weeks of rehearsals. The first five days we sat on chairs and read.

* *

Alan came from another world and his rehearsal methods were foreign to many and so there were clashes. Many of the actors knew the Stanislavsky system but had their own approach to it. The mental atti-

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tudes of the director and actors were also different. The Israeli actor isn't so serious or demanding and they are more casual during rehearsals. Alan would get impatient and feel like tearing his hair out. He once said, "I directed Virginia Woolf in three weeks and I can't do anything here in six." Once during an important rehearsal which required a great deal of concentration, Alan motioned to the prop man to bring a prop but he couldn't make himself understood since he didn't speak Hebrew. The actress suddenly stepped out of character and told the man to bring the prop. Alan was furious at her for breaking the mood. She couldn't understand his attitude.

* *

Alan also liked to concentrate on small details of the production and getting everything right and authentic. This is rarely done in Israel.

* *

The blocking was very flexible and he allowed the actors to move where they liked but they depended on him a great deal. Alan wanted more contributions of ideas from the actors but he didn't get very much. They expected the director to tell them what to do.

* *

The set was designed by Dani Caravan, a well known Israeli sculptor. It was a light set and movable. The environment became the star of the production. Some of the criticism was that the set was not correct for Chekhov. There was no sense of the past in the house or the

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furniture. There was no feeling of sorrow in losing it. It was a very aesthetic set but had no real meaning for the play.

[The theatre holds about 700 seats with no proscenium arch, merely a picture window stage at one end from wall to wall measuring approximately sixty feet, the width of the house, and thrity-five feet deep. Sets are usually built within the stage space and set off by a background of black velours or a cyclorama.]

* *

Alan managed to create a very delicate mood and atmosphere in the production and the company felt it backstage. It even brought the company closer together. The critics' reactions were mixed. The young Israeli audience seemed as a whole indifferent because it lives at a different tempo in a new and growing country. But there were people who were serious theatre-goers and knew Chekhov who loved the production and came back again and again. It was a failure as a Cameri production with only twenty performances but in spite of everything some of us felt it was an artistic success.

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APPENDIX B

THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

(The following is a condensation of an interview with Miss Judith Liebowitz, Director of the American Center for the Alexander Technique. She is on the faculty of Juilliard School and has acted as Alexander Technique Coach for the American Conservatory Theatre, Washington Arena Stage, and Tyrone Guthrie Theatre.)

The Alexander Technique is a form of psycho-physical education and a means of becoming aware of and changing habits of movement. The habits that we work with are those that have developed in the process of growing up and which now interfere with the free and easy use of the body. You are interested primarily in its use for the actor, aren't you? An actor very often has body postures that interfere with roles that he wants to portray. Because of the way he uses himself, the way he moves--his habits, rigidities and tensions in his body--all prevent him from doing what he would like to do. With the Alexander Technique, we try to give him a method of becoming aware of his habits and finding a way of changing

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what he chooses to change, of letting him know into what he is changing. We try to find what is his particular neutral, where he has his center or proper body alignment with which he can do any of the character parts he wishes.

Body alignment is the head-neck-spine relationship. It's the center with which one maintains a good posture but you have to define posture very broadly. It is not a rigid line-up of parts. It is what happens to one part that maintains a balance with another part as the body is in constant motion. Even when a person is still, is not moving, there is still movement going on in the body. It doesn't become a dead entity. There is life there which is a quality of energy, a readiness that is always there.

Regarding the emotions, it should be remembered that you cannot separate your mind from your body. They are a psycho-physico entity and you're working with the two together. The relationship is very close and you don't know where one stops and the other starts. For instance, you look at a person and you know who he is because of the way he handles himself in the sense of being a defensive person or an aggressive person. This is what the actor has to recognize and to be able to carry out in his characterizations. Before he can gain the freedom to do what the character is, he also has to be free enough in his body so that he doesn't have any of those qualities that are part of his own makeup. He must be made aware of the habits of his own mind-body.

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With the Alexander Technique, you may find that people are primarily concerned with physical habits but they are also finding a way of dealing with their emotional problems. Now, this is not a substitute for psychotherapy. I want to make this clear. Nor is psychotherapy a substitute for what we are doing. Many of our postures or habits--I prefer to use the word habits rather than postures--are tied up with emotional problems, and in releasing the tensions in the body we also release some of the psychic tensions that are associated with them. When assuming a particular posture that is associated with a psychic tension, you can reverse it by dealing with a psychic tension that is associated with that particular posture.

The Alexander Technique can be very helpful to actors who are trying to get in touch with themselves and to whittle away many of the impositions that have become a part of them. At first the student must make a conscious decision to leave himself alone, to do nothing, because the body knows only how to move the way it was taught. He is not making any kind of judgment; he is merely coming at it cold. While he is doing nothing, he gives verbal directions to himself which describe what is going on in his body. He doesn't carry anything out. He then allows the teacher to lead him through a variety of everyday movements while he speaks these words to himself but the movements may be different from what he has experienced before. He is given verbal directions that describe what should take place in the body during movement.

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He is conditioning himself to respond to words because the teacher gives him the movement when he hears and repeats the words. He will tend to repeat the experience. What the teacher is doing is guiding his head into a particular poise on his spine and helping him maintain it in movement. If he assumes this poise, there will be a tendency to greater ease and movement, a lessening of physical tension and improved posture because there is a change in the skeletal alignment. That is, the spine begins to let go of the excessive curvatures resulting in a lengthening of it. That doesn't mean it becomes a rigid, straight spine since a spine is very flexible. Rather, in every movement, whether it is a spine extension or spine inflection, a lateral bending or even a spiral movement, we keep that spine long instead of pushing it into itself. Now, the words the student repeats to himself help continue this particular experience. They are designed to guide him into it as the teacher also helps him attain a kinesthetic or sensory appreciation of what is going on. Such words as "Let the neck be free, to let my head go forward and up, to let my torso lengthen and widen," and anything else that the student wishes to add, help him to maintain the full length of the spine.

A student of ours who is also studying acting may be working on a role that demands a certain kind of body situation and he wants to do it without hurting himself. Also, after a role is performed, the actor may want to rid himself of the characterization so that it doesn't become a part of him. Often when a characterization is achieved incorrectly, it

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may add tremendous tension to the body which in turn can affect the voice. It was F. Matthias Alexander who discovered this technique because he had a vocal problem. Now, if an actor is doing Richard III who probably had a serious scoliosus, a curvature of the spine from the description we have of him, well, one can do a very interesting characterization. But one must understand what the problems involved are, what are the physical distortions, where to take those distortions and how to move with them without hurting oneself or creating excessive tensions.

If you are attempting to develop a psychological gesture by means of a physical gesture, very often your body will not permit it. Your body is fixed into a habit pattern. The Alexander Technique loosens you in order to make use of that gesture. It attempts to clear the debris of poor habits, to free the actor so that he can do whatever is necessary.

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