

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

A Director's Analysis of Uncle Vanya

by

G. James Dobbin

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF DRAMA

CALGARY, ALBERTA

MAY, 1993

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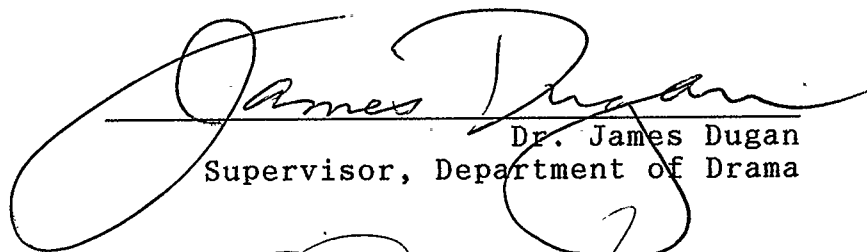
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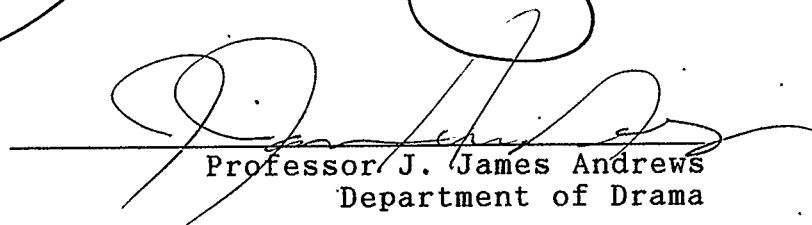


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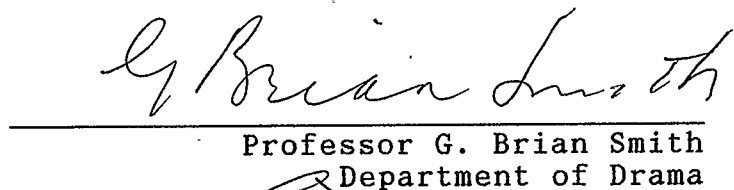
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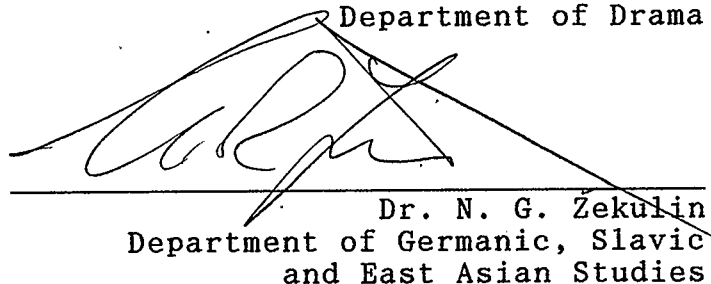
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May, 1993

Abstract

This Thesis records the directorial process involved in the development of the production of Anton Chekhov's Uncle Vanya presented by the Department of Drama at the University of Calgary from October 21 to October 31, 1992. Chapter One serves as a background to the text, discussing problems of translation, critical reactions to the play, and a comparison with The Wood Demon. It also attempts to place the play in an historical context, discussing how the play reflects and was affected by the political and social climate in which it was written. Chapter Two is an interpretation of the play's structure, style and themes. An analysis of the characters is presented in Chapter Three. Chapter Four explains the rationale of the elements of the design and the process of arriving at the design. Chapter Five is a documentation of the rehearsal process from the auditions to the final dress rehearsal. A brief retrospective of the production constitutes the sixth chapter.

Acknowledgements

This production would not have been possible without the hard work and dedication of the many people involved. Thank you to:

The cast, crew and stage management team; J. James Andrews for his set and lighting design and for his suggestions and willing assistance throughout the process; Lisa Roberts, costume designer; John Van Hemert, sound designer; Shari Wattling, dramaturge; Dr. James Dugan for his supervision and guidance; Don Monty and the technical staff for their assistance and indulgence; Dr. N. G. Zekulin; Brian Smith; Grant Paterson; Laura J. Gow; University Research Services for a research travel grant.

For Sally and Seamus

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Chapter One: Background to the Play

Uncle Vanya is considered one of Chekhov's greatest plays. Since it was written in 1896, it has enjoyed an extensive and illustrious history, both in Russia and in the West. In preparing to direct this production of the play it was necessary not only to be thoroughly familiar with Chekhov's text, but also to have some knowledge of the background of the play. This chapter outlines some of the issues that had to be researched and addressed before the work with the designers and actors began.

Selecting a Translation

My first task as director was to find a translation of the text to be used for this production. Although some of the selection process was highly subjective, there were some general criteria that guided my search and influenced the final choice. This is a very verbal play that relies heavily on language for the expression of mood and the nuances of feeling that underlie the text. A good translation should capture the delicate balance between the highly comic moments and the more poignant and painful nature of the play and be able to capture this juxtaposition often in the same scene. I was also looking for a translation that would be easily comprehensible and sound like "natural" speech to a contemporary Canadian audience while maintaining a highly poetic and lyrical quality. At the same time, I was anxious to avoid a text that was too colloquial and

one that set the action too obviously in modern-day Canada, America or Britain. Finally, I wanted a text that was not too literary sounding but contained language that could easily be spoken by the actors.

The more than fifteen translations that I considered fall roughly into three categories. The first consists of the older and often more literary versions which were published early in the century and up until around 1960. The second consists of adaptations of the play by contemporary playwrights and the third, translations by contemporary playwrights. Of the first category, the translations by Marian Fell (1916), Constance Garnett (1929), Stark Young (1939) and Elisaveta Fen (1951) were considered in some detail. All of these are quite good and have their own virtues but on the whole the language is a little antiquated and would not be suitable for a contemporary production. They are also rather literary sounding and seem to pay more attention to "accuracy" of translation than to the overall rhythm and sound of the speeches. This is especially true of the Fen translation which is used in the Penguin edition of the play. Because of the accuracy of the translations, however, I felt confident in using them as a way of measuring the trustworthiness of other translations.

Of the contemporary adaptations of the play I considered most seriously the one by Pam Gems. This

text does not differ radically from other translations and is clearly written, natural and poetic. However it is very British and contains a number of British expressions that would be inappropriate. An adaptation by David Mamet is interesting to read but in the final analysis it places the play unmistakably in contemporary America. Its very quick pace, the broken phrases, staccato rhythm and half-finished thoughts transform the play into more of a Mamet piece than a Chekhov. The Canadian playwright, John Murrell, prepared a version of the play which is titled "a new translation" but which is more properly an adaptation of the play. In any case, the text is very flat and unpoetic and, although probably accurate, the language is quite stilted.

Of the other contemporary translations, some were easily eliminated. For example the Ronald Hingley and David Magarshack translations are too British and sound rather stodgy. While Robert Corrigan's translation flows better, it is a little overcomplicated and not as easily understandable as it should be. A translation by Eugene Bristow, however, is very good and is perhaps most successful in achieving what Bristow himself calls the "exact balance of sound, sense, and feeling" in the play.¹ Once again, though, the language is not quite as natural or conversational as the Frayn translation and therefore would not sound as good on the stage. Meanwhile a translation by Tyrone Guthrie and Leonid

Kippins is quite natural and seems very suitable for performance. Although it is not obviously colloquial, however, it nonetheless is contemporary and North American, containing short sentences and informal speech.

The Michael Frayn translation is the most clear, direct and natural sounding while still maintaining the poetry. While this text has a slightly British flavour, it does not obscure the meaning or suggest that the action is taking place in Britain. The rather formal construction of some of the dialogue and speeches does not take away from the conversational quality or make the language sound stilted but serves to remind us that the action occurs in another time and place. Thus we are given a sense of distance and period without the text sounding outdated or obscure. Overall it is successful in capturing both the comedy and pain in the play and in finding the balance between its natural and poetic qualities. After my first reading of the script I felt that there was nothing in this translation that was out of place or sounded "odd" and I felt that it was a text that could be spoken and understood easily by the actors. This was proven in rehearsals as the actors expressed no difficulty with any of the dialogue or speeches and there was no need to modify the script in any way. Evidently, Frayn's knowledge of Russian, his familiarity with all of Chekhov's work in conjunction

with his own playwriting ability combined to make this a very workable translation of Uncle Vanya for a contemporary production.

Critical Reactions to Uncle Vanya

Chekhov was very secretive about the writing of Uncle Vanya so it is not known when he began working on it or how long it took from the appearance of The Wood Demon. But it seems certain that the new play was finished by the end of 1896 and it was published early the following year.² The play first appeared in an anthology and was first performed in provincial theatres with great success before its Moscow Premiere.³ After the success of the second production of The Seagull in Moscow many directors approached Chekhov for permission to do Uncle Vanya. But Chekhov had promised the play to the Maly Theatre whose committee liked the play but demanded that Chekhov make changes to the third act before they accepted it. Stanislavsky claims that Chekhov, vexed and amused by their objections, told him verbatim what perturbed the committee most of all: "It is impossible to think that an enlightened, cultured man like Uncle Vanya could shoot at a person with a diploma, that is professor Serebrekov." Chekhov used their rejection as an opportunity to give the play to Stanislavsky.⁴ As a result the play was staged for the first time in Moscow at The Moscow Art Theatre on

October 26, 1899.

Incidentally there is not much evidence of a great deal of conflict between Chekhov and Stanislavsky in the preparation of this production. Stanislavsky claims that Chekhov attended many of the rehearsals and was in good spirits, joking and laughing with Stanislavsky and the cast and for the most part was rather reticent to talk about his play.⁵ Other sources indicate that Chekhov did have some disagreements and was more forceful in his opinions. Meister states that he was frank with the actors and particularly critical of the female actors and that he earned the nickname among them as "the actress inspector".⁶ Also, in a letter to Olga Knipper during the rehearsal period, Chekhov makes it quite clear that he disagrees with Stanislavsky's interpretation of a scene in Act Four between Astrov and Yelena: " If Astrov interprets this scene tempestuously, the entire mood of Act Four - a quiet and languid one - will be ruined."⁷

For the most part, this production of the play met with a favourable response from the critics.⁸ The reactions of two of Chekhov's contemporaries are worth noting as they reflect a rather common criticism of the play and of Chekhov's plays in general. Gorky said that the play affected him deeply and that he "wept like a peasant woman." But he was perplexed about the point of the play: "What nail do you hope to drive with such

blows? In this play you treat mankind with fiendish coldness." Tolstoy, likewise, saw much that was good about the play and admired Chekhov's ability to handle subtle psychology and to portray the illusion of reality on stage. But ultimately he condemned the play as immoral and pointless: "Where is the Drama? It doesn't go anywhere."⁹

Other productions of the play in Russia met with mixed reviews. Critics were hostile to a 1901 St. Petersburg production and claimed that the play, as well as the Moscow Art Theatre's treatment of it, was revolutionary and dangerous. In 1907 Merezhkovsky was horrified at the "vulgarity" of the work and saw the play as a materialistic rejection of Christian values.¹⁰ But Chekhov himself seemed pleased with the play and with The Moscow Art Theatre's productions. When Stanislavsky and his troupe went to the Crimea to do a performance for the ailing Chekhov, it met with great success and a pleased response from the author.¹¹

The first English production took place in London with the London Stage Society's 1914 production. The reaction from the critics was mixed. Some reviewers were baffled by the lack of conflict in the play and by its apathetic characters. Others saw the play as realistic and the characters as "a genuine blend of good and bad, weakness and strength - that we all are." Desmond McCarthy had the greatest praise calling it "an

unforgettably good play with the flatness and poignancy of life itself." Of a 1921 production the same critic praised the play again and claimed that he found the portrayal of everyday life "indescribably moving" and that Chekhov had achieved what no other playwright had: he showed on stage what happens between the acts. By this time other critics were calling the play a masterpiece and thought the characters were drawn "in greater depth than any playwright since Shakespeare." Others preferred Chekhov's humour to that of Shaw. In his introduction to Heartbreak House Shaw himself heaped praise upon Chekhov and praises his ability to "capture the idealist's feeling of disillusion as he faces a real world of war and crass materialism." So impressed was he that he claimed when he read Chekhov's plays he felt like tearing up his own.¹²

Later productions of the play in England met with nearly universal praise. In 1923 W.J. Turner was so moved by a performance that when it was over he could "only grope blindly for his hat" and claimed that "if anyone had spoken to him he would have burst into tears."¹³ By 1926 one London Critic asserted that Chekhov had become more acclimatized to Britain than was Ibsen.¹⁴ The play became so well regarded in England that in a 1945 production in which Ralph Richardson and Laurence Olivier appeared the acting was considered good but not quite good enough to carry the play's meaning.¹⁵

Early American reactions to the play were also mixed. The 1912 translation by Marian Fell met with some harsh criticism with one reviewer claiming that Chekhov was "attracting a new cult on their way to nowhere, the cult of the ignoble." Another called the play "drama of the crudest order . . . packed with petty or morbid detail," and "not any more artistic or instructive than it is entertaining." There seemed to be a consensus that the play contains dull and selfish characters and a conventional and uninteresting plot.¹⁶

By the 1920's attitudes toward the play had changed radically. A 1924 production met with an enthusiastic response and in 1929 Alison Smith saw in the play a good "blend of irony and compassion" and admired Chekhov's detached technique which "allows one to see life clearly."¹⁷ A Jed Harris production in 1930 met with even more praise and the play was hailed as a masterpiece and as Chekhov's best. Meanwhile George Nathan claimed that Harris' treatment of the play made it the "most intelligent English speaking production" to date.¹⁸ The Old Vic Tour of 1945 was condemned even more forcefully than it had been in Britain. The reviewers held the script in such high regard that they condemned the acting for not achieving the desired ensemble effect and for making "a parody of all Russian Drama."¹⁹

Critical opinion of the play from the 1940's to the

present generally agrees that the play is a masterpiece and is one of Chekhov's greatest works. Disagreements among contemporary critics focus on matters of interpretation and explanations of why it is such an important play.

The Wood Demon

Chekhov vehemently denied that Uncle Vanya was an adaptation of the earlier play, The Wood Demon.²⁰ In most important respects this is quite true as the later play differs radically in style, import and sophistication from the earlier one. Nevertheless whole passages from The Wood Demon found their way into Uncle Vanya, but in a wholly different context.

Chekhov began working on The Wood Demon as early as October 1888 and the play underwent several revisions before it was completed. In a letter to his publisher, Suvorin, on October 18, 1888, he outlined some of the characters and tried to persuade Suvorin to collaborate on the work with him.²¹ Suvorin refused the offer and Chekhov continued working on the play and supplying Suvorin with details of his progress. Although he had promised the play to actors at the Maly Theatre, by September 1889 he had scrapped the first two acts which he had completed and began the writing again.²² The first version was complete by October, 1889 but was rejected by the literary-theatrical committee as being

unsuitable for the stage as it was more like a short story than a play. Nemirovich-Danchenko agreed with this assessment and claimed that Chekhov had not yet mastered the art of dramatic writing.²³ During the following month Chekhov reworked the play and sold it to the Abramov Theatre in Moscow where it was staged for the first time on December 27, 1889. The play was roundly condemned by the critics and Chekhov himself soon came to despise it and pleaded with his publisher that it never be published.²⁴

The problems in The Wood Demon are obvious, especially when compared with the more mature writing of Uncle Vanya. The plot is rather contrived, depending upon unbelievable coincidences of lost letters and the like and there are too many characters in the play.²⁵ As Magarshack points out, it is something of a morality play in which "virtue doesn't triumph over vice but vice is converted into virtue."²⁶ Furthermore the suicide of Uncle George in Act Three leaves the fourth act as a kind of postscript to the play. Also, the title of the play suggests that the wood demon is the central character but in the play he functions as something of a secondary character.

Although Acts Two and Three of Uncle Vanya are very similar to those in The Wood Demon, Chekhov uses the old material in an entirely new way. First of all, all superfluous characters are removed and others combined

to create new and more complex characters. The later play is framed within an arrival and departure scheme, thereby focusing the action much more clearly. Furthermore the focus of the play is upon the struggle between Vanya and Serebrekov, rather than the wood demon, a change which is reflected in the new title. Chekhov solves the problem of the shooting in Act Three by having Vanya not shoot himself but to shoot at and miss the professor. Within the new framework, this change provides the *perepitia* element that was missing in the earlier play and of course changes the fourth act entirely.²⁷ This solution is far more dramatically effective. As Magarshack points out, by having Vanya rush off-stage as if he were going to kill himself and then return to shoot at the professor and miss, Chekhov "piles surprise on suspense and achieves a dramatic climax that is infinitely more effective than the curtain of the third act of the second version of The Wood Demon."²⁸

The overall effect of the changes is a more realistic, less melodramatic and far more sophisticated play. Astrov, for example, is a combination of the wood demon and the more coarse Fyodor of the earlier play. Consequently, Astrov retains the idealism and good qualities of the wood demon but these good qualities are balanced with a more coarse and drunken side to his personality. His speeches, which always threaten to

turn into sermons, are constantly interrupted or comically commented upon by other characters. In this new play there are no clearly good and evil characters just as there are no easy solutions to the problems presented. As Ronald Hingley puts it: "Everything that was too clear-cut in the earlier play becomes enchantingly indefinite" in Uncle Vanya.²⁹

Historical Context of the Play

In preparing any production it is always advisable to have an understanding of the social and political climate in which the play was written. Although I believe that this play does not have a strong and overt political element, it is clear that Chekhov was affected by and commented on the climate of the times, and that his work is informed by the period in which he lived. Aside from answers to precise, detailed questions which had to be researched, most of the social and political background to the play are suggested in the play itself. Therefore I will not give a detailed account of nineteenth century Russia but will restrict these comments to the important events and tenor of the times that directly impact upon the play.

Since we planned to do a period production, a part of the process with the designers involved the researching of architectural style, fashions and the kind of furniture that was used in the houses of the

period. Other specific information such as the prevalence of divorce at the time, average life expectancy and women's place in Russian society was gathered by the dramaturge, Shari Wattling. All of this helped establish the reality of the setting and helped the actors to clarify their characters. I had already some knowledge of the period as well, through reading the works of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Gogol and other novelists and playwrights of the time as well as the short stories and other plays of Chekhov. All of this helped form a background to the play and to place it in an intellectual and literary framework.

Generally it is clear from the play itself and from external evidence that the play takes place in a transitional time in Russian history. The 1860's and 1870's had been a period of reform after the tyrannical reign of Czar Nicholas I. In 1861 the serfs were liberated and it looked as if a period of democracy and freedom was beginning in Russia. But the emancipation of the serfs only served to make conditions worse as the peasants were not given land individually but were forced to live in villages. The result was bitter disappointment on the part of the peasant class since, though technically free, they were unable to support their families. Meanwhile many landowners were forced to sell their land since they could no longer afford to pay workers. Telegin is an example of what happened to

such men and their families; they were reduced to poverty and forced to live on others' charity.

Likewise, Vanya, a highly educated gentleman is forced to work on the estate if he is to avoid a similar fate. As Styran suggests, each of the social classes appear ineffective:

In Uncle Vanya, Chekhov appears to adopt the role of social historian of his times, presenting a general picture of the absentee landowner and his dispossessed counterpart (Serebrykov and Telyegin); he seems to criticize the intelligentsia of late nineteenth century Russia as academic and effete (Astrov, Serebryakov and Mrs. Voynitsky); he refuses to romanticize the household peasantry (Marina the nurse).³⁰

In this ineffective society a sense of inertia and stalemate sets in. There is no evidence yet of a great change in the future and in this period of stagnation the characters are either happy to maintain the status quo or, out of frustration with the present, await some vague change in the future. This mood permeates the entire play as Vanya finds himself in a state of limbo and, like Astrov, has only the hope of working incessantly and blindly with no sign of progress or improvement in his life. In this climate there is no room for heroes or strong characters. The sense of waste, decay and destruction in rural Russia are clearly stated by Astrov himself in the play. Ignorance and disease are rampant with 76 percent of Russians unable to read or write and with only nine universities in all of Russia, a fact that accounts for the high regard with

which Serebrekov is held. Under these conditions, Astrov, who sees the situation clearly, is fighting a losing battle and there seems to be little that can be done except wait for the situation to change. The educated classes are self-indulgent, petty and greedy and in them there is no hope of change. Meanwhile the lower classes are rendered impotent by ignorance and disease. The workers in the play, Astrov, Sonya and Vanya are fighting a tide of indifference and ignorance.

Chekhov, typically, offers no solutions to the problems but seems content to merely state the problem clearly. As such, he presents us with a society in transition, unable to return to its past, deeply dissatisfied with the present and unable to envision a new life in the future.

Chekhov

Since there are many excellent biographies of Chekhov I will not attempt here to duplicate the facts of his life. Nevertheless, a brief portrait of the private man and his world view may help elucidate the intent and method of his work.

Although he was sometimes accused, on the evidence of his work, of being a gloomy pessimist and a cold-hearted misanthrope, all accounts of the private man show Chekhov to be the opposite of that. Lillian Hellman, in her introduction to The Selected Letters of

Anton Chekhov, paints Chekhov as "a pleasant man, witty and wise and tolerant, with nothing wishy-washy in his kindness nor self righteous in his tolerance" and "a man of sense, of common sense . . . he tried to see things as they were and to deal with them as he saw them."³¹ As for the charge of being a pessimist she writes: "Chekhov was often sad but basically he was a gay and cheerful man, calm, pleasant, full of fun. He liked pretty women, he liked wine and a party, he kept open house for his friends, he enjoyed music and fishing and bathing and gardening and money and fame. He took the good with the bad."³²

Almost all biographies and personal reminiscences agree with this assessment of Chekhov's temperament and reveal him to be a simple and modest man. His sense of humour and fun are certainly evident in his early farcical short stories as they are in his more mature work of Uncle Vanya. In this play he is able to mix comedy with pathos to reveal his deep appreciation and sympathy for human suffering.

Chekhov's compassion and sense of duty towards his fellow human beings were in evidence throughout his life. While writing his stories and his plays he continued to work as a doctor, treating for free all who came to him. He helped build several schools at his own expense and helped set up hospitals in the provinces. In 1890, despite suffering already from the tuberculosis

that would eventually kill him, he undertook an arduous journey to Sakhalin Island to prepare a report on one of Russia's worst penal colonies. All in all he was a tireless, uncomplaining worker who spent his energy in ameliorating the appalling conditions he saw around him.

Although Chekhov lived a relatively simple life and went about his business in a straightforward manner, he was a rather complex character. Jackson claims that despite his cheerfulness he was of "a skeptical and perhaps even innately melancholic nature."³³ The genius of both Chekhov the man and the writer was that he was able to keep these contradictions in a rather sane balance. The result is that he is a man not easily pigeon-holed or labelled. As John Gassner states it in his essay "The Duality of Chekhov" he was able to be "complex without some mystique and subtle without obscurity. He was, so to speak, Olympian and yet also thoroughly companionable." In the same way he was able to express polarities in his work so that "there was sympathy in his comedy and comedy in his sympathy"³⁴

Chekhov is almost always described as being very modest by his biographers and those who remember him. There seems to be no falseness associated with his kind of modesty as it was based in an unflinching and uncompromising search for truth and a determination to see reality without bias. As a result he was accused by some of being immoral, or at best amoral, and that his

work served no purpose or contained no "governing idea." But Chekhov, as a doctor and a scientist, saw his duty as an artist not to provide answers to life's problems but rather to state the problems correctly. He disciplined himself to write in a rather detached and factual manner in order to reveal the nature of reality but not to solve it:

In Anna Karenina and Eugene Onegin not a single problem is solved but they satisfy you completely because the problems in them are formulated correctly. It is the duty of the judge to put the questions to the jury correctly, and it is for the members of the jury to make up their own minds each according to his own taste.³⁵

Chekhov's impartial attitude and his wariness of making philosophical pronouncements reflect his modest nature and suggest a world view reminiscent of that of Socrates. "It is time that writers, and particularly those of them who are artists, should admit that it is impossible to make out anything in this world, as indeed Socrates and Voltaire so admitted."³⁶ Like Socrates, Chekhov's awareness that he knew nothing was at the root of his modesty as well as his profound appreciation for the ultimate unknowability of reality.

Gerhardi perhaps sums up Chekhov's world view: "I do not presume to give the whole of Chekhov's outlook in a nutshell. But if pressed to do so, I would rather say that the whole of Chekhov's outlook in a nutshell was that he thoroughly distrusted nutshells."³⁷ As a skeptic and a scientist Chekhov attempted to describe

life as he saw it, but it was life in all of its contradiction, complexity and mystery. In doing so he painted a penetrating and sympathetic portrait of the human condition.

Notes

¹ Eugene K. Bristow, trans., ed., Anton Chekhov's Plays (NY: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1977) xv.

² Ronald Hingley, Chekhov: A Biographical and Critical Study (NY: Barnes and Noble Inc., 1966) 192.

³ Irena Kirk, Anton Chekhov (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1981) 138.

⁴ Constantin Stanislavsky, My Life in Art, trans. J. J. Robbins (Cleveland: The World Publishing Co., 1956) 360-361.

⁵ Stanislavsky 361 - 363.

⁶ Charles W. Meister, Chekhov Criticism: 1880 through 1986 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1988) 230.

⁷ Lillian Hellman, ed., Sidone Lederer, trans., The Selected Letters of Anton Chekhov (NY: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1955) 250 - 251.

⁸ Meister 230.

⁹ Meister 230.

¹⁰ Meister 231.

¹¹ Nina Andronikova Toumanova, Anton Chekhov: The Voice of Twilight Russia (NY: Columbia UP, 1937) 176.

¹² Meister 232.

¹³ Meister 232.

¹⁴ Meister 233.

¹⁵ Meister 236.

¹⁶ Meister 231.

- 17 Meister 232.
- 18 Meister 235.
- 19 Meister 236.
- 20 Vladimir Nemirovitch - Dantchenko, My Life in The Russian Theatre (NY: Theatre Arts Books, 1968) 5.
- 21 David Magarshack, Chekhov the Dramatist (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980) 122.
- 22 Magarshack 128.
- 23 Kirk 131.
- 24 Kirk 132.
- 25 Kirk 131.
- 26 Magarshack 121.
- 27 Magarshack 206.
- 28 Magarshack 215.
- 29 Hingley 194.
- 30 J. L. Styan, Chekhov in Performance: A Commentary on the Major Plays (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1971) 91.
- 31 Hellman 1x - x.
- 32 Hellman, ed., 5 - 6.
- 33 Robert Louis Jackson ed., Chekhov: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1967) 1.
- 34 John Gassner, "The Duality of Chekhov," Chekhov: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Robert Louis Jackson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1967) 183.
- 35 Magarshack 33.

³⁶ Magarshack 33-34.

³⁷ William Gerhardi, Anton Chekhov: A Critical Study (London: Camelot Press Limited, 1923) 44.

Chapter Two: Interpreting the Text
Structure, Style, and Themes

Chekhov's method of writing is infuriatingly difficult to describe in any general or concise manner. The plot (or lack of one), the themes, style and structure of the play are so intricately interwoven that it is almost impossible to write of one element of the play without, at the same time, addressing the others. The attention to detail, the particularity of mood and atmosphere, the individuality of the characters and the uniqueness of all of the little moments that together make up the play make it difficult and ultimately unsatisfying to discuss the play in any general way. Chekhov's use of irony, contradictory viewpoints, diverse styles and deliberate ambiguity attest to the richness and complexity of the text, a richness that defies any easy analysis or neat categorization.

It is difficult, to say the least, to capture the richness of the text in a production of the play. It is even more difficult to do so in writing alone since any account or description of the play appears rather trite and irrelevant, having the quality of being somewhat beside the point. J. L. Styan, in his Chekhov in Performance, claims that "the usual methods of dramatic criticism - describing plot and character and theme - are inadequate to realize the texture and density and the 'experience' of a Chekhov play."¹ To convey the manner in which, as a director, I analyzed

the text of Uncle Vanya in preparation for production, I will follow Styan's method of discussing the play act by act and highlighting the more significant moments and features of the play which guided the production. Before doing that, however, some general points about the overall style, theme and structure of the play will prove useful in describing the play and in informing the closer act-by-act analysis of it.

Chekhov's disdain for attaching labels to his work is clear from his many comments on the subject and is evidenced in this play by his having Vanya speak of terms like realism and naturalism as so much "rubbish." (5) Nevertheless, despite its vagueness, the term realism helps in indicating the general nature of the play and what Chekhov was attempting to say with it. Chekhov himself suggests his approach with this prescription for writing plays: "Let everything on the stage be just as complex and at the same time just as simple as in life."² The task which he sets himself is to depict not merely the surface details of everyday life but the structure of reality itself in all of its apparent formlessness, complexity and ambiguity. Paradoxically he must use the strict form of playwriting, with precise attention to detail, characters and particular moments to achieve this. Gerhardi, in his Anton Chekhov: A Critical Study, defines Chekhov's realism in the following way:

Realism, that much abused term, means, or should mean if it is to mean anything at all, the extracting from life its characteristic features--for life outside the focus of art is like the sea, blurred, formless, and with no design--and the replacing of them in a design calculated to represent, within art's focus, life that is like the sea, blurred, formless and with no design. The realist is he who has succeeded in presenting within the orbit of artistic form (without which there can be no question of art) that which eludes form, is formless.³

Gerhardi goes on to insist that Chekhov succeeds in this seemingly impossible task. Chekhov unites form and content so completely that his plays, like life itself, seem formless, devoid of action and rather meaningless. The structure and form of the play is almost invisible; it is revealed only in relation to the content and context of the other elements of the play.

Chekhov's genius resides in his ability to observe life deeply and precisely and then to be able to portray that vision in his plays. His refusal to judge life or to write from any preconceived notion makes the work seem at one and the same time so true to life and yet so pointless. Tolstoy, among others, while admiring the vitality and even truthfulness of Chekhov's work, nevertheless condemned it because "it is all only mosaic without any genuinely governing idea."⁴ Indeed Chekhov deeply distrusted any didactic or philosophical approach to either art or life. In answer to the charge that he made no distinctions between moral and immoral characters, Chekhov responded by insisting that his job was not to judge but simply to show the characters "as

they are."⁵ Similarly it is not his task to make pronouncements on life but to show it as it really is.

Chekhov's insistence on portraying life as it really is results in the creation of characters who are neither absolutely good nor evil; there are no clear villains and victims and in the end the least admirable of them gain a certain measure of our sympathy and understanding. Likewise in terms of theme there are no final conclusions or morals drawn. His uncompromising objectivity revealed to him the ironies, paradoxes and contradictory nature of life which suggests that there are no conclusions possible. The play, like life, knows no endings, either happy or sad. Chekhov was an agnostic in the deepest sense of the word: he simply did not know what to make of life and had no final answers himself. His often mentioned humility is, like Socrates', simply the result of his knowing that in any meaningful way he knew nothing. In reply to a letter from Olga Knipper in which she asked him what he thought life was about he replies characteristically and simply: "You ask me what life is. You may as well ask what a carrot is: a carrot is a carrot. Life is life and one knows no more about it."⁶

The overall point of Uncle Vanya, then, is simply that there is no point: as in life we get intimations of truths, half-realized insights, suggestions of meaning and possibilities, and more questions than answers.

Chekhov's unflinching and uncompromising look at reality does have the result though of stating the problems and essential nature of life. The result is necessarily complex, multifaceted, varied and ambiguous like life itself.

The play is framed within the overall structure of an arrival and a departure. The arrival of the professor and his wife has the effect, as Vanya suggests in his first comment in the play, of upsetting the rather calm, orderly and routine lives of all of those on the estate. Their departure returns them to a semblance of normality. What happens between those two points is the focus of the play and as Bentley suggests, this structure implies the question: "What effect has the visit on the visited--that is, upon Vanya, Sonya and Astrov?"⁷ The source of the conflict and the motif that drives the action of the play is the struggle and desire for happiness which is frustrated and constantly denied by reality. As Skaftymov states in his essay, "Principles of Structure in Chekhov's Plays": "The development of the plays consists in the recurrence of hopes for happiness, followed by their being exposed as illusions and then shattered."⁸ This is precisely the journey of the characters in the play and is the motif that is inherent in the structure of the play and was, for want of a more apt term, my "governing idea" in this production.

Bordinat suggests that the overall structure of the play is conventional, consisting of exposition, dramatic incident, rising action, a climax and a resolution.⁹ While on the surface there is some truth to this observation, it does little to describe the unique and ironic manner in which Chekhov uses the conventional play structure. First of all in reworking the play from The Wood Demon Chekhov took most of the "drama" out of the play and signalled this by retitling the play as "Scenes from Country Life in Four Acts." His aim in the new play is to reveal the nondramatic nature of real, ordinary, daily life and humdrum existence. He deliberately re-works the play so that it is undramatic. Chekhov works against the traditional structure of play writing: the play portrays the non-dramatic nature of life. He deliberately removes all drama from the play and in the process creates a play of anti-climaxes. The notion of anti-climax permeates the whole play and is inherent in the themes, style and structure of the play.

Physically, emotionally and thematically the play journeys inward. It begins outside in the garden and moves progressively deeper into the house so that by the fourth act we are at the heart of the house and of the play in Vanya's room. Although the play moves through time in a linear fashion the overall movement of the play is circular. Serebryakov's description of the house as a maze reflects the movement of the play and

the characters' journeys: after much struggling and striving they end up in the same place that they started. Furthermore as the play moves more and more inward the sense of oppression mounts until they are in effect trapped in the house.

The above comments serve to indicate the play's general structure and style. In the act-by-act analysis which follows I will attempt to demonstrate how these principles operate in the play and, through close attention to specific moments in the play, elucidate the finer points of Chekhov's method. I will avoid, as much as possible, detailed discussion of character as that is dealt with in the relevant chapter. Likewise I will suggest the recurring thematic concerns which arise out of the specific moments in the play but will reserve a summary of the themes of the play for the end of this chapter.

The stage picture which Chekhov provides us with, even before the action begins, suggests a great deal about the style of the play. The outside setting appears at first glance to be a public, external and open space but is in fact a liminal and ambivalent space. The garden and the verandah function as a kind of threshold to the waiting house looming in the background. On this threshold we are in fact neither wholly outside or inside the house; we are at a transition place that is neither inside or outside and

at the same time is both. The play opens, then, with a kind of contradiction and is loaded with ambivalence and an ambiguity which pervades the entire play.

The rest of the stage picture sets the mood and suggests the major motifs and concerns of the play. The waiting samovar, the table set for tea and the waiting swing which "hangs there like an unfilled promise"¹⁰ all combine to establish the recurring motif of waiting and expectations denied. This is further enhanced by Astrov's restless pacing even before he begins to speak. The sense of expectation helps the play to begin in suspense but as Styan puts it: "It is a suspense without excitement; indeed this opening smacks of anti-climax."¹¹ Again this notion of anti-climax, of hopes raised and denied, of expectant waiting for things that never arrive is sounded again and again throughout the play and is its major theme. As he will throughout the play, Chekhov uses the weather in this first act to set the atmosphere for the act and to reflect the mood of the scene and the characters. The overcast, dull day and the "stifling" and "oppressively hot" weather lend a kind of slow-paced heaviness to the scene, reinforcing the dullness and dreariness of the scene while suggesting the sense of oppression and pressure which permeates it. This atmosphere also affects the characters, making them bored, restless and irritable.

The opening scene between Astrov and Marina

functions as a kind of overture to the play, restating the motifs already mentioned and introducing the central themes of the play. Structurally the play begins in mid-action; the Serbryakovs are on the estate and have called Astrov, the doctor, away from his work. To pass the time while waiting for them to return, Astrov launches into a rather intense self-analysis. In the process we learn some things about his character and are introduced to one of Astrov's chief roles in the play. His speeches, while very personal, serve to sum up all the major themes in the play, themes that he will elucidate and comment upon throughout the play. He speaks of time passing, aging, dulled feelings, work, disillusionment, frustrated hopes, wastefulness, the inability to love and the lack of hope for the future. However, we are not permitted to take his intense and profound rumination too seriously since the person he is confessing to is a dull old woman who barely hears what he is saying. Chekhov makes the scene comical by having Nanna answer Astrov inappropriately with mundane offers of food and drink. Furthermore, Astrov cannot expect, and indeed does not receive, a serious hearing or any satisfactory answers from Nanna. By the end of the scene he gives up hoping for any real response and accepts her easy and apathetic piety. Incidentally this piety will be echoed by Sonya at the end of the play as the only response open to the problems in her life.

Thus the scene ends in anti-climax with nothing being resolved, beginning the motif of denied expectations which continues through the play.

The rest of the act continues the motif of anti-climax and frustration. The way in which Vanya is introduced is typical of Chekhov's ironic style. Contrary to what is expected, the "hero" of the play enters in a rumpled suit and yawning, having just awakened from his nap. He, along with Nanna, grumble about life on the estate since the arrival of the professor and his wife, thereby supplying us with useful exposition while maintaining the everyday tone and the waiting motif of the scene. Our waiting is finally rewarded with the return of the group from their walk. Chekhov uses this very brief, economical scene to indicate the essential features of the characters and to establish the relationships among them as well as the mood of the household.

This scene is worth analyzing in some detail as an example of Chekhov's "glancing style." In just five lines of dialogue and no more than thirty seconds of stage time he is able to supply a wealth of information and suggest complicated relationships. The professor's first line, his manner of dress and his demand that his tea be brought to his study all point to his pretentious nature, sense of superiority, his hypochondria and his insensitivity to the others around him. He does not

even acknowledge Astrov who has been waiting two hours to see him. Nor does he respond to Sonya's questions or Vanya's announcement that tea is ready. Telegin's ready agreement with the professor immediately identifies him as a hanger-on and his chief function in the household in his constant attempts to head off trouble. Sonya's following after Serebryakov reveals her rather servile nature while her comments about the forest identify her with Astrov. Yelena's youth and beauty surprise us as we realize that she is the professor's wife and that they make a rather odd couple. The whole tenor of the scene is one of discordant notes with each person pursuing his or her own agenda. The assortment of individuals make up a rather strange group, far from cohesive, and the potential for conflict is evident. Chekhov supplies us with all of these impressions while at the same time maintaining the naturalism of the scene.

The speeches by Vanya which follow their exit serve to introduce the immediate conflict between Vanya and Serebryakov. His angry, sarcastic and bitter denouncing of the professor is set against Telegin's ridiculous optimism and happiness that "we're all of us living together in peace and harmony." (4) This juxtaposition of viewpoints sets the comedy while at the same time highlighting the seriousness of Vanya's anger at the professor. Telegin's objections to Vanya's

notion of morality and his subsequent telling of the ridiculous story of his life is used as further comic relief. Again, though, Telegin's comical objections serve to highlight the import of Vanya's comments about the kind of morality that stifles life.

Having spent the first half of the act in establishing the mood, style and exposition of the play, Chekhov brings all of the characters together (less Serebryakov) for a closer look. The occasion is what Peace calls a "Chekovian Tea Ceremony" and the tea becomes the unifying motif in the act revealing character by the way in which they all react to the tea.¹² Astrov has already said no to tea but took it anyway, Telegin expresses extreme gratitude for his, Maria takes hers without looking up from her book and Yelena takes her "cup and drinks it sitting on the swing" while Sonya takes over the serving. (6) In this manner the little gestures become highly revealing of character in the play. The tea is also used to suggest and foreshadow Sonya's hopes in regard to Astrov: her tea is cold. This little moment foreshadows her disappointment to come. Meanwhile, Yelena's comment that "we can drink it cold just as well" is indicative of the conflict between her and Sonya and inadvertently sparks a moment of tension with Telegin, whose normal task is to calm roused tempers. (7) The mood of irritability increases with the fight between Vanya and

his mother, an argument which is stopped only by Sonya's intervention. Ironically it is the youngest member of the group that takes on the parental role. Chekhov balances the angry outburst with sly, comic, and contrasting moments which serve to throw the dismal mood among the group into sharper relief. Yelena's mundane comment about the weather sparks Vanya, half sarcastically and half seriously, to mention hanging himself. Telegin's strumming of the guitar and Nanna's chasing the chicken immediately bring us back to the mundane again, suggesting the dullness and dreariness of the world which Vanya lives in that would spark his anger and his desire for escape. Thus, profound concerns are juxtaposed with the mundane and ordinary. In the process both the unhappiness of the characters and the dullness of the everyday world are clearly delineated.

The entrance of the workman further serves to destroy both Sonya and Astrov's hopes for a pleasant evening. Astrov's speech which follows before his leaving is multifaceted and again reveals how Chekhov juxtaposes moments to create complex and ambiguous scenes. On one level the speech is an opportunity for Astrov to release his pent-up passion and suppressed energy. At the same time it is clear that he is using the speech as a way to impress and woo Yelena. In this context the content of the speech is already undercut

somewhat. Nevertheless, through this great environmental speech, Astrov once again touches on some of the major themes in the play and identifies the cause of the waste and destruction that is occurring not only in nature but in the lives of his listeners as well. However, the speech is cut short just as Astrov is at his most eloquent and passionate and he is brought back to the more immediate by the entrance of the workman once again. Thus the moralizing nature of the speech gives way to comedy and Astrov himself dismisses his ideas with: "It's probably all some crackbrained notion, anyway." (11)

The final scene of the act is used to develop the relationship between Vanya and Yelena. Again the scene functions through the juxtaposition of opposites. While Yelena is dreaming about the doctor, her moralizing and philosophizing are denied and rejected by Vanya. Similarly Vanya's pursuit and fascination with Yelena is denied and rejected by her running off into the house. Vanya reveals, even this early in the play, that he knows that his love for Yelena is hopeless and is merely a futile yearning for lost youth and a lost life. Any hopes we may foster in anticipating a great love story is frustrated from the beginning. The "such a torment" that ends the act sums up the feelings of all of the main characters and expresses the lack of hope and sense of oppression that exists in the household. (12) This

final note also sets the stage for the torment to come in Act Two. This is accentuated by the closing moment of the act with Telegin's jarring polka and Maria's note taking. Life will go on as usual and nothing will change despite the longings and yearnings of the other characters. The torment of stagnation and denied hopes will continue and build as the play moves forward.

In contrast to Act One, the second act is set inside the house just after midnight. Although it is some two months later there is the sense that it is a continuation of the previous act. The dining room, which should be one of the more public rooms in the house, a place where the family meets for communal meals has been taken over by the professor and turned into his sick room and study. Ironically, this large and public room will be used for the intimate and private conversations between the characters. The sense of oppression, claustrophobia and imprisonment is enhanced by using this public space to portray the inner torment of the characters. The brewing storm serves to increase the sense of oppression and reflects the strained nerves and emotional tension of those inside the house. The watchman's tapping is a reminder of life as usual outside and the indifference of the external world to the inner torment of the characters. The watchman is also used to heighten the sense of imprisonment in the house and in his securing of the house from intruders he

becomes a kind of jailor.

The act opens with a very intense domestic argument between husband and wife. In contrast to Act One, we get to see the private side of both of the characters. Contrary to his public demeanor, the professor reveals himself to be a petty tyrant, throwing a childish temper tantrum out of his fear of being alone and his fear of dying. Yelena, in contrast to the great beauty depicted in the first act, is now seen as merely a young woman being abused and tormented by her old gout-ridden husband. The tyranny of the professor, which we will be reminded of again at the very end of the act, is firmly established and accounts for one of the causes of unhappiness in the household. Yelena's being trapped with him in this scene reflects the nature of her relationship with him and her central problem: she is inhibited by this marriage and by her own sense of morality that keeps her in it.

We learn more about the characters as the professor continues his tirade with the others who enter the room. The practical and mature Sonya will not tolerate his "playing up." (15) The professor is terrified of being left alone with Vanya which hints at the arguments and tension that has been building between the two. The situation is indeed reaching the point of absurdity as Nanna enters. Ironically, however, she is the only one who can appease the professor and put an end to the

uproar. She is able to do this by giving the professor what he has been asking for all night: some sympathy and attention. In his responding to being treated as a child the tyranny of the professor is put into perspective and comments upon the others' response to the situation. Furthermore, when we least expect it, after such an ugly scene he has made, we feel a measure of sympathy for the professor in his fear and weakness. Chekhov does not permit us to judge any of his characters too simply or readily.

The rest of the act is set up as a series of duologues which, as Styan puts it, allows us "to test the reaction of one character to another and arrange them in pairs of the compatible and incompatible, like so many guests at dinner."¹³ As everyone else leaves with the professor, Vanya and Yelena are left alone to reveal their innermost feelings. Yelena is at her "wits end" and is near the breaking point. Vanya reveals his chief problem in the play: "Reconcile me first with myself". (17) He feels that his life is "lost beyond recall" and he is running to waste. His hopelessness is contrasted with the storm outside which will cause "everything in nature to breathe a sigh of relief. The only thing the storm won't revive is me." (18) Thus we are reminded of the contrast between the external and internal world and Vanya's alienation from nature and his loneliness in the world. The pathos and comedy is

so intermingled in the scene that we at once feel sympathy for both characters even as we laugh. Vanya's complaints can only elicit this response from Yelena: "When you tell me of your love, I feel a kind of dullness settle over me and no words come" (19), a line which is at once comic and at the same time revealing of the loneliness and the difficulty of communication. As Vanya pathetically pursues her around the room (a scene which prefigures Astrov's pursuit of her in Act Three) we sense his desperation and loneliness and the scene ends with his being left alone on stage. Instead of consolation and understanding from Yelena, he has been offered only philosophizing and moralizing. Vanya's monologue continues this theme as he yearns for the past and dreams of what might have been had he taken the opportunities that were available to him in his youth. The longing for the past quickly turns to anger and frustration with Yelena that she is wasting her life and youth in the same way that he has wasted his. We see a much less selfish side to Vanya in this real concern with Yelena and as he contemplates her life with the professor he is quickly reminded of his own stupid wasting of his youth. Alone in the room he once again vents his rage against the professor, but unlike Act One, his anger is more real and personal. The humiliation and anger at himself for having been "duped" leads to a deep despair and hopelessness that nothing

can be changed and that life has played such a dirty trick on him. Vanya's private thoughts in this scene will become fully manifest in his fight with the professor in Act Three, a scene which will be more understandable because we have been able to see Vanya in this intimate moment.

The mood of the scene is abruptly broken by Astrov's boisterous entrance and Astrov's playful mood which contrasts sharply with Vanya's quiet despair. Vanya's desire to be left alone is juxtaposed with Astrov's party mood and again there is to be no consolation for Vanya. Likewise Astrov's drunken self-confidence and the feeling that he "can do anything" are contrasted with Vanya's feelings of hopelessness and his utter humiliation. (20) Astrov's speech also confirms the reason for his drinking as stated by Vanya in the next scene: "where there's no real life people live on illusions." (21) This is applicable to all of the characters in the play.

The party is interrupted by Sonya, and Astrov's expansive mood is quickly dispelled. Left alone with her uncle, the exasperated Sonya chastises her uncle for neglecting his duties and leaving her with all of the responsibilities for the estate and she will not be pacified by his talk of "illusions." (21) The little moment that follows, though, succeeds in convincing us of Vanya's real pain more than all of his complaining

thus far. Sonya sees that he has been sitting here all alone crying. Vanya's pain is stated even more clearly and poignantly by the fact that he is unable to express it even to Sonya and he leaves muttering " It's so hard to bear....well never mind Later... Don't worry ... I'll go away..." (21) The depth of his pain, his unhappiness and frustration can only be suggested and is accentuated by the inability to express or release it. His terrible loneliness and hopelessness are sensed by Sonya and she is called on once again to do something about it. The situation in the household is becoming unbearable and in all of these strained emotions we are prepared for the emotional storm that will break in Act Three. Before that however we are allowed moments of calm and a temporary respite in the following scenes, a respite which in effect only serves to heighten the tension and push the situation further towards a breaking point.

The scene between Sonya and Astrov at the sideboard allows a lull in the play. The storm outside is now over and in the calm that follows it, these two characters are granted a moment of calm. Finally people get to eat in this dining room, but at an inappropriate time of day. Significantly, it is Sonya who is the source of the nourishment for Astrov. He uses the moment of tranquility to analyze the situation in the household and as such, functions as a kind of chorus

which summarizes the play thus far. Once again Astrov, in ruminating about his personal life restates the themes of the play: the wastefulness of life, inability to love, disillusionment and his fascination with beauty. This confirms his opening speech and this time we take him more seriously because we hear him through the ears of Sonya, an attentive, sympathetic and understanding listener. She elicits a promise from Astrov that he put his philosophical notions to practical use in his personal life and stop drinking. Astrov's promise, however, given only half-heartedly in his drunken state, will soon be broken in Act Four, a comment upon the seriousness of his attempt to better his life.

Ironically as Astrov reveals his soul to the attentive Sonya, her hopes are raised in regards to the possibility of her loving him. This occurs in spite of the facts that he tells her matter-of-factly that he cannot love anyone and that he is interested only in the kind of external beauty possessed by Yelena. We, as an audience, have no question of what Astrov means and we will see the explicit manifestation of this in Act Three. This realization makes Sonya's hopes all the more pathetic in their unreasonableness. But, as she herself demonstrates in her monologue, her hope is not entirely unqualified. She is aware that she is plain and suspects that Astrov may not be interested in her

for that reason. Despite this, her hope will be raised to a new level in the scene which follows with Yelena.

The excitement of the scene between Yelena and Sonya is intensified by the contradictory emotions and irony inherent in the scene. They are both at a breaking point and in their loneliness they are both eager to make friends and express their pent-up emotions. Yelena's insistence that Sonya "must trust everyone" leads Sonya to confess her feelings for Astrov to Yelena as she would to an older sister and close friend. (27) Ironically, this is precisely what Yelena wants to talk about as well and she praises Astrov even more than Sonya does. As Sonya has her admiration for Astrov confirmed and Yelena gives her blessing, Sonya can no longer contain her happiness at the possibility of marriage to him. This happens at the same time that Yelena expresses her deep unhappiness with her life. In this contradictory scene both young women's emotions are accentuated and made clear and have reached a fever pitch. To give vent to her unhappiness and frustration Yelena decides to play the piano and "cry and cry like a child." (28)

While she awaits permission from her husband we are reminded of the indifference and monotony of the outside world by the watchman's tapping. Again the motif of the prison is invoked and in the expectation of being able to break free for a moment we are prepared for Sonya's

return with the simple but devastating answer from her father: "No!" (28) Thus there is to be no release of emotion or no resolution of the tension that has been mounting throughout the act. Both Sonya and Yelena are denied their catharsis by the same petty tyrant who began the act.

In the interval between Act Two and Act Three the emotional strain will build even more until it is finally released by the emotional storm in Act Three. Ironically, however, as proof of Vanya's comment in Act Two, the storm will not have the reviving effect that everyone longs for.

The setting and atmosphere of Act Three sharply contrast with the previous acts. After the dark and claustrophobic mood which closed Act Two, we now find ourselves in a bright, sunny and open room in the house. This atmosphere is established in order to reinforce the major action of this act: a clearing of the air. This is the brightest and clearest act in the play and, as events unfold, the desires, hopes and fears of all of the characters will be brought to light. Under the clear light of day their dreams will be examined and will ultimately be shown to be illusions.

Once again the act begins with waiting and Yelena's restless pacing recalls that of Astrov's in Act One. Vanya's announcement that there is to be a meeting at one o'clock and that it is now "a quarter to one"

begins the action and sets a tone of urgency to the events which are to follow. (29) In contrast to the months of inactivity, inertia, and dreamy idleness which has made up the action of the play thus far, the next fifteen minutes will be action-packed and serve to resolve many of the questions that have been lingering. The answers to the many questions and suspense about the relationships come quickly and, as the tension and despair mount, we are prepared for the explosion that will occur. Chekhov uses the intervening fifteen minutes to clear the way for the focus of the play in the showdown between Vanya and the professor.

In order to bring the problems of Act Two to a conclusion and before bringing the characters together for the final explosion, Chekhov continues the use of the duologues and monologues of Act Two. As Vanya leaves to get flowers, Sonya and Yelena are again left alone on stage and their central concern is, once again, Astrov. As Yelena responds to Sonya's desperation about not getting a response from Astrov, it becomes clear that this is also precisely what is troubling Yelena. She is preoccupied with Astrov. Her motivation for suggesting a cross-examination of Astrov is not entirely selfless as we and even Sonya must suspect. Sonya, rather reluctantly, having given up control of the matter to Yelena agrees to the plan and goes to seek Astrov.

This interview between Sonya and Yelena is, of

course, crucial to the plot of the play. At the same time it is laden with irony and comic effect as we witness Yelena's desire for Astrov being expressed as altruistic motives. We are tempted to judge Yelena very harshly for taking advantage of Sonya's trust and innocence but again Chekhov will not permit such easy judgement of his characters. He follows the scene with a monologue which reveals Yelena's intentions and motivations to be much more complex and ambivalent than we might have otherwise been led to believe. First of all, she admits that she knows that Astrov is not in love with Sonya but tries to convince herself that Sonya would still make him a fine wife. She quickly dismisses this, however, as being beside the point. The point which comes out in the remainder of the monologue is the key to Yelena's character. As she realizes, she herself is fascinated by Astrov and would love to take Vanya's advice to "run wild for once in your life" and to follow her impulses. (33) But at the root of her guilty conscience and sense of morality is a fear of life which she cannot overcome. She realizes by now that she is wasting her youth, as Vanya has suggested, but she equally realizes that she is doomed to waste it. She knows this at the very moment of Astrov's entrance. Thus we see the tragic motif of her character: on the one hand a great longing for life and adventure; on the other an overwhelming fear of life and a sense of

overpowering guilt that will not allow her to be free.

With Astrov's interruption of the monologue we are denied any final conclusions about how Yelena will react to him. Astrov's explanation of the maps, the supposed reason for the meeting, serves once again as a summary of the themes of the play. They are also used by Astrov to get to know Yelena and as a chance to woo her, a continuation of the relationship begun and interrupted in Act One. This being the first time we see the two characters on stage alone together, we cannot help but wonder what will happen and Astrov's important ecological speech is once again somewhat undercut as we, along with Yelena, only half listen to what he is saying. Indeed, the speech is abruptly broken off when Astrov realizes that she is not interested. In some irritation and anger he threatens to leave and this pushes Yelena to quickly get to the point of the meeting.

Yelena does not cross-examine Astrov "discretely" as she had promised Sonya she would. She quickly gets to the point and the pace of the scene accelerates as Astrov realizes what is really going on. Astrov, of course, suspects Yelena's true intent and takes it as his cue to pursue her with energy and enthusiasm. The scene which follows is rather crazy and a typical comic device, and echoes that of Vanya's pursuit of her in acts One and Two. However, Astrov pursues her even more

aggressively and with more ground for hope of success. At the same time, Astrov is aware, as he indicated in Act Two, that his attraction to Yelena has nothing to do with love or attachment. Ironically and revealingly, he is able to take direct and swift action when he knows that there is nothing really at stake for him. The entire wooing scene cannot then be taken too seriously and it retains an element of the farcical.

The play threatens to go over into complete farce as Vanya enters just in time to witness the kiss between Astrov and Yelena. However the moment is shot through with pain and embarrassment for all three characters. Vanya can barely speak and is overwhelmed, not only by the betrayal of his friend but also by the reminder of his own humiliation. On one level he can no longer fool himself into believing that Yelena is an attainable ideal for him so in one stroke this dream is revealed as an illusion. Furthermore it serves as a reminder of his lost youth and of the opportunities he has passed up, opportunities that are now lost forever. Astrov leaves the scene covering his embarrassment with small talk about the weather, continuing the pathetic and comic nature of the scene. This usually mature and serious man becomes painfully aware of the fool he has made of himself and the time that he has wasted in chasing a false dream. Yelena is so overcome that she orders Vanya to use "all of the influence you have to see that

my husband and I get away from here today." (38) Any hope she had of toying with freedom is dispelled and she now condemns herself to return to life with her husband. Thus, the love interests and intrigues are resolved in one swift and concise moment. The final question of the love interests is resolved in the next moment when Sonya gets her response from Astrov through Yelena.

Sonya is more devastated, perhaps, than all the others with the revelation. She had allowed herself to continue hoping despite all of the evidence to the contrary. She is so affected by this response that she hardly hears what happens in the following scene and, for a moment at least, allows herself completely to give way to despair.

In this climate, with all of the major characters totally preoccupied with their own pain, the professor begins his meeting. His speech serves as a kind of calm before the storm that is soon to break over their heads. As he rambles on in his pretentious fashion, he is left unchecked until Vanya is finally pulled out of his self-absorption with the announcement that the estate is to be sold. Vanya's reaction is the beginning of his taking control of his life. The loss of the estate would threaten his last vestige of identity and dignity. In his act of defiance then he begins a process of self-affirmation and, in effect, begins to grow up. The very survival of his family, his mother and his sister, is

dependent on the estate. In defying the professor he still plays the role of family provider but this time he does so without the idealism that he has used thus far in his life to justify it.

This stand against the professor reveals Vanya's awakening from the dream life he has been living. The realization that he has been duped has been growing throughout the play and at this moment it becomes startlingly clear. Indeed the audacity of the professor, backed up by Vanya's mother, is so "past all comprehending" that he is, for a moment, at a loss as to what action to take. (41) Only Telegin, finally, dares to make an effort to speak up on Vanya's behalf and this realization sparks Vanya into a deliberate and calculated attack on the professor. In the process all of his pent-up feelings and frustrations are set loose. He is not only concerned with the practical matter of saving the estate but he also begs for the recognition and respect that he feels he deserves. Angrily, pleadingly and with great frustration he begs the professor to understand the nature of the life he has lived on the estate and the reasons for his doing it. The professor, of course, is far from sympathetic and as he finishes Vanya off with the final insult of "an absolute little nobody!" Vanya's realization of his predicament and his lost life is most clearly revealed to him. (44) The sheer horror of facing it almost does

drive him mad:

My life has vanished! I have the talent, I have the nerve ... If I had led a normal life I could have been a Schopenhauer, I could have been a Doestoevesky' ... I don't know what I'm saying! I'm going mad ... (44)

This is perhaps the most poignant moment of the play. What Vanya says here is highly humorous and ridiculous and we are tempted to laugh at him as a deluded buffoon. At the same moment, however, his awareness of his own ridiculousness is painful and we are denied the possibility of laughing at him, especially since we have been allowed access to his very real, private pain in Act Two.

As Vanya rushes out with his ominous warning lingering in the air, Sonya, who finally pulls herself out of her own despair, reprimands her father for being ungrateful and convinces him to go talk to Vanya. While she is left to be consoled by Marina, a gunshot is heard off-stage and soon the professor is running on chased by Vanya. For a moment there is great tension as Vanya shoots at the professor. However the whole scene collapses into farce as Vanya, like a child with a toy gun, shouts "bang", and then realizes that he has missed the professor. (45) The chaotic end to the scene with Vanya rolling on the floor, Yelena and Sonya screaming and the professor in a stunned and shocked state trying to decide what to make of all of this, serves to heighten the comedy.

As Styan suggests, this climatic scene is, on one level, high drama but it is also a parody of itself. The comedy of the moment is arrived at through the contrast of attitudes on the stage: Marina's indifference, the professor's pomposity, Vanya's earnestness, and Sonya's silent suffering. These contradictory attitudes increase the sense of chaos while highlighting the miscommunication in the group.¹⁴

Act Four opens in silence. The atmosphere of what Chekhov called quiet despondency will pervade this act. The contrast of mood and tempo with the third act serves to heighten the silence and make it speak more loudly than all of the noise in the previous act. We have now moved to the inner reaches of the house to Vanya's room and the setting once again suggests the mood. This is the most used room of the house, a space where people work and the site of the workaday world. It is both the office of the estate and also serves as Vanya's bedroom. Therefore, it is a private space and a public room at the same time. We are at the heart of the play and the setting suggests the essence of Vanya: the provider who is tied to home and hearth. Furthermore he is allowed no private space; in his own room he is surrounded by his family.

Everything in the room is of a practical nature except for the starling in a cage and the map of Africa which, as Chekhov states in the stage directions, is "of

no discernable use to anyone here." (47) The starling metaphor is rather obvious: it signifies the predicament of the main characters and particularly of Vanya. It is not an exotic bird, but a commonplace one that is trapped in its cage. The map signifies Vanya's longing to escape to a more exotic life while at the same time it suggests the impossibility of his dreams. Africa, like Moscow in The Three Sisters, is an unattainable ideal.

All of Act Four is anticlimactic beginning with the quiet and mundane scene of Telegin and Marina winding wool and gossiping about the events that have taken place. This scene provides some necessary exposition while setting the dominant mood and theme of the rest of the play: the return to normality and the mundane.

Vanya's entrance, with Astrov chasing after him, temporarily interrupts this mood. If we have been tempted to take Vanya too seriously we are reminded by Nanna of the absurdity of it all with her cackling at Vanya as she exits. As Vanya melodramatically cries and moans throughout the following scene, we are again invited to put things in perspective as Astrov refuses to allow Vanya to see himself as a tragic hero, a murderer or a madman. The scene also helps to put the events of Act Three into another light. What are we to make of what has happened? What does it all mean? Chekhov, with Astrov suggests that it means nothing, it

was merely an event that occurred. Astrov tells Vanya that he is entirely normal, implying that the situation also is entirely normal and if there is tragedy in the play it is the tragedy of normal day to day living. All of Vanya's ranting and philosophizing are, in fact, play acting and a means of avoiding facing up to reality.

Vanya is brought back to reality by Sonya who pleads with him to give back the morphine. Through the action of returning the morphine Vanya begins relinquishing all hope in illusions. The only thing that will see him through the "long long succession of the days" is work and this is the only salvation open to him. With this decision the play is in effect over. It remains only to say good-bye to everyone and then life will go on as usual.

As Vanya and Sonya go to say good-bye to the professor we get to see the finale of the love story between Astrov and Yelena. The tone of this scene is clear and is evident from Chekhov's comments on it. He insisted that Astrov says good-bye to Yelena and kisses her "quite casually, to pass the time."¹⁵ Astrov's attempt to woo her again cannot be taken seriously: he knows that she has made her mind up to leave. He does not pursue the wooing for long and is soon back to playing his role as commentator and as a kind of chorus in the play. Once again, his speech to her summarizes the action of the play and its themes. He accuses

Yelena and the professor of being the cause of the turmoil. Even Astrov, though, is unable to identify the exact cause of their destructive nature and something of a mystery remains in how it all came about. He is able only to say that "there is something curious about your whole way of being." (53) He is aware that the professor and his wife have been a disturbing influence and with their departure the comedy ends and life begins again: "Finita la Commedia!" (53) Astrov is able to offer a diagnosis of the situation but there are no metaphysical explanations offered for this kind of evil.

The good-byes which follow continue the intermingling of comedy and pain. The professor is now ready to write a treatise on how to live one's life. No one is able to express their feelings but the scene is laden with sadness, regret and a longing for what might have been. The summer has passed and life is over in effect. Inadvertently and ironically, the professor expresses a theme of the play, and perhaps Chekhov's only advice on how to meet the situation: "Get down to the practicalities ladies and gentlemen! Get down to the practicalities!" (55)

The lack of discussion and the few words that are exchanged between the other characters point to the sense of pain and regret that are left unspoken but understood by everyone. The repetition of the statement "they've gone" is both highly poetic and

effective in suggesting the depth of emotions. It also has an element of comedy while at the same time underscoring the routine and repetitive life that is beginning again. Only Sonya expresses her emotion directly with "I'm sad they've gone." (56)

The return to normality is signalled by Sonya and Vanya settling down to work. Astrov's leaving is delayed for a long time and the play nearly comes to a complete halt. There is nothing left to be said but in the silence and the clicking of the abacus we see at one glance how life used to be and at the same time we see how radically everything has changed. Astrov's good-bye to them is quiet and everyday but once again serves as a reminder of everything that has occurred. His agreeing to take the vodka establishes the normality of his life again but is also the final severing of any possible romantic connection with Sonya that might have been. Left alone with Vanya and Sonya, this normally eloquent and philosophical character, passes the time by reporting that his horse is lame. Vanya responds with practical advice and in doing so they tacitly agree not to speak directly of what has occurred, as if the events they have all just lived through have already receded into the distant past. This notion is confirmed with Astrov's pointing out the map and the heat in Africa. The events of the play and the hopes they were all pursuing are now as distant as Africa. With this one

moment Chekhov is able to suggest the terrible and confining nature of their world and the finality of their lost hopes.

Sonya's final speech serves as a contrast to Vanya's attitude at the end of the play. Vanya has given up on the dreams and ideals that have made his life meaningful to this point and is now resigned to the fact that he must go on living and working even if there is no hope for the future or no satisfactory explanation for it all is possible. He is beyond being comforted or consoled with idealism or illusions. Sonya's speech, then, is meant more for herself than it is for her uncle. The speech signifies an element of courage in Sonya's character since she will not give way to despair and she refuses to submit to her unhappy fate. She is determined to go on living and if there is no hope or light in the future then she will create it for herself. At the same time, the speech is rich in irony as her pious and childish hopes are hardly any comfort at all and serves to reveal the depth of her desperation. Unlike Vanya, she is unable to meet the reality of the situation squarely but must, like Vanya has done all of his life, create false hopes and illusions to soften the reality and to keep going. Vanya, on the other hand, has made his decision to keep working and living despite the fact that there may be no discernable reason to do so. Of all the characters in the play it is only Vanya

who faces up to himself and returns to his old life with no other hope of salvation but work. He rises to the challenge of going on living when life has lost its meaning and in the process he displays great courage and heroism.

What I deemed to be the major themes and motifs of the play are connected especially to the reaction by Vanya. Styan aptly describes the play as an "appalling intimate study of the chasm that may at any time open up between human hopes and the naked reality."¹⁶ The gap that exists between our human hopes, dreams and illusions on the one hand and the nature of reality on the other, is the source of both the comedy and the pathos in the play. All of the major characters long for a different life than the one they are living. This is particularly true of Vanya who has spent a lifetime avoiding the truth about himself and his life but who, in the end, accepts the reality of himself and his situation. As Kovitz puts it, "The immovable wall of reality, in opening to reveal the abyss, turns into a mirror. By frustrating our desires and forcing us to halt, it plunges us into the hell of our own nature."¹⁷ By the end of the play Vanya faces the abyss and in accepting the hell of his own nature, perhaps begins his redemption and truly begins to live.

The gap between objective and subjective reality is the foremost theme of the play and all of the other

motifs are intimately linked with this idea. Time is a constantly recurring motif in the play. The very precise references to the time of day throughout the play help create the sense of the characters being trapped by forces beyond their control. This notion is reinforced by the characters' obsession with and awareness of the passage of time. They are frightened of aging and dying and bemoan the loss of the time that has already passed. They are trapped in a horrible and absurd present, between the lost past and the inevitable death in the future. Time is the great enemy and the destroyer of youth, beauty, innocence and happiness. It is an objective force, a great machine that keeps on rolling, oblivious of human concerns. What makes this especially painful is the fact that, as humans, we have an intimation of eternity and long to exist outside the constraints of time. Vanya longs for a new life, to begin afresh, Astrov dreams of life in the future while Sonya dreams of eternity and life beyond the grave. This ability to imagine and long for freedom make the servitude to time all the more painful; it is impossible to make these dreams and the reality meet.

Another major motif in the play is that of waste and destruction. Astrov's environmental speeches make it clear that the cause of the destruction of nature is our petty vices: laziness and ignorance. This notion applies to the whole of human life. Yelena tells Vanya

that the end of the world will not be in murder and slaughter but in petty enmity and hatred. Chekhov suggests that it is our everyday vices that are most destructive and that the most serious evil is that of the everyday and the mundane.

The only solution offered in the play is that of work. Just as idleness is destructive, so work is the proper antidote to evil and the only possibility for creating goodness. Work makes the present bearable and keeps hope alive for the future. As each of the characters abandon their work they get caught in idle and impossible dreams and their entire lives and very identity is in peril. Work is a necessary evil without which we stagnate and run to waste. At the same time, of course, it is a curse as Astrov indicates in his opening speeches and Vanya implies by his wasted youth in working. Nevertheless we are condemned to work just as we are condemned to live and condemned to hope.

In the end then, Chekhov offers us no final solutions or metaphysical explanations for the reason of existence. He makes us aware of the nature of the forces and fates that affect our lives but offers no religious deliverance or redemption from them. He simply describes what it is to be human. In such a situation, the only kind of heroism possible is to face the unknowability of existence squarely and refuse to take any sort of escape route. This is what it is to be

truly human and true human heroism. In the absence of God or any knowable objective truths man must take responsibility for himself and create his own raison d'etre.

Notes

¹ J.L. Styan, Chekhov in Performance: A Commentary on the Major Plays (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1971) 1.

² A. Skaftymov, "Principles of Structure in Chekhov's Plays," Chekhov: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Robert Louis Jackson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1967) 73.

³ William Gerhardi, Anton Chekhov: A Critical Study (London: Camelot Press Limited, 1923) 102.

⁴ Styan 2.

⁵ Gerhardi 59.

⁶ Siegfried Melchinger, Anton Chekhov (NY: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1972) 5.

⁷ Eric Bentley, "Craftsmanship in Uncle Vanya," Critical Essays on Anton Chekhov, ed. Thomas A. Eekman (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1989) 172.

⁸ Skaftymov 85

⁹ Philip Bordinat, "Dramatic Structure in Chekhov's Uncle Vanya," Chekhov's Great Plays: A Critical Anthology, ed. Jean Pierre Barricelli (NY: New York UP, 1981) 47.

¹⁰ Styan 99.

¹¹ Styan 99.

¹² Richard Peace, Chekhov: A Study of the Four Major Plays (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983) 52.

¹³ Styan 117.

¹⁴ Styan 130 - 131.

¹⁵ Louis S. Friedland, ed., Letters on the Short Story.

the Drama and Other Literary Topics by Anton Chekhov (NY:
Benjamin Bloom Inc., 1964) 154.

¹⁶ Styan 98.

¹⁷ Kovitz 190.

Chapter Three: Character Analysis

Chekhov refuted accusations of being a cold and even immoral writer by claiming that his job was not to judge whether his characters were good or evil, but rather to "simply show what sort of people they are."¹ This seemingly simple and modest task which Chekhov sets himself results in the creation of extremely complex, subtle and enigmatic characters. His rather detached, objective, and perhaps scientific attitude allowed him to study and describe human beings without bias and without the need to explain or justify them. His characters, then, often appear as individualistic and complex as people are in real life. Paradoxically, it is precisely because we get to know them as individuals that they become recognizable to us and thereby take on universal significance. As is typical of his style in general, Chekhov's simple and honest approach to the creation of individual characters is what allows him to reveal profound, universal truths about human nature.

At the same time the groups of characters in the play are highly structured so that the play resembles an experiment of sorts. The first group, consisting of the professor and his wife, function as a catalyst for the action, an external pressure that is brought to bear on the others. The second group, Astrov, Vanya and Sonya serve as the subjects in the experiment and are the characters on whom the visit has the most effect.

Yelena is also part of this group since she too begins dreaming of a new life. The third group, the old generation, made up of Maria, Marina and Telegin, represent the old order and as such function as the norm or the constant in the experiment. The visit has no substantial effect on them except as it upsets the status quo; by the end of the play, when life returns to normal on the estate, they remain unchanged.

The four characters in the middle group, then, are the focus of our concern and by placing them between the other two, Chekhov highlights their dilemma and in the process shows us who they are. The visit makes them aware of the boredom, tedium and futility of the old ways while arousing in them dreams of a new and more beautiful life. When these dreams are shattered and shown to be illusory, the characters are left naked and revealed to us. As Kovitz suggests: "Chekhov arranges the destruction of each of his character's happiness for the same reason that God gives Job into Satan's power: to find out who he is."²

Vanya

Although there are four central characters in the play, Vanya remains the chief protagonist and his journey is, in the end, what the play is about. The complex and even contradictory nature of his character leads Vanya on an intense questioning of his whole life

until he is brought face to face with the truth about himself. As we follow him through the play we are constantly torn between laughing at him as a "buffoon" on the one hand, and empathizing with him in his agonizing and somewhat strange dilemma on the other.

An analysis of the name which Chekhov chose for his title character indicates the essential nature of Vanya. The English equivalent of "Vanya," as Vitins points out, is "Johnny" or "Jack" with all of the homely and commonplace associations that the name would have for us.³ The attachment of "uncle" to the name further diminishes Vanya's individuality and identifies him with his rather secondary role in the family. Even Yelena and Astrov refer to him in the third person as "Uncle Vanya" implying, as Richard Peace points out in Chekhov: The Four Major Plays, that Vanya is not looked upon as a full-fledged adult but is seen as something of "a grown up chap."⁴ Indeed the central problem of Vanya is that he has not established an independent identity but through his attachment to his family has remained in a passive role, living his life vicariously through others. He attained the role of "uncle" because of his sister and it is this intense attachment to his sister that has, as Vitins states "served to repress his masculinity and prevent him from establishing a family of his own."⁵ Vitins gets at the core of the character in her assertion that the play is "the most potent

example of a man whose attachment to a sister or mother has decisively affected his desire and ability to lead an independent life."⁶ This assessment reflects Vanya's own complaints throughout the play that he has wasted his life and that he has not lived. We can get at the heart of Vanya's dilemma by examining his relationship with his sister and ascertaining what that implies about his character and how it determined the rest of his life.

We learn in Act Three that Vanya began his adult life with an act of great personal sacrifice: he gave up his share of his inheritance so that the estate could be bought as a dowry for his sister in her marriage to Serebryakov. With this one action Vanya displayed great generosity and an extremely idealistic and self-sacrificing nature. On the other hand, his excessive love for his sister and extreme loyalty to family is rather suspect. With this act of martyrdom he renounced his own opportunity to begin an independent life and opted for the passive role of provider for his sister and her family. He was able to avoid responsibility for living his own life by living vicariously through his sister. He used his seemingly noble action, then, as a kind of smokescreen to cover up the fact that he was avoiding establishing and taking responsibility for a life of his own and to cover his desire to remain in a childlike state in relation to his family. The

renouncing of the inheritance allowed him to remain tied to his family and assured him a permanent position within it.

Vanya's ideal view of his sister and his extreme devotion to her indicates a deep and complicated attachment and dependency. It suggests that he saw in her a substitute for their psychologically absent mother and as such she became in his eyes everything that his real mother was not. With this perfect, pure and loving ideal Vanya played the role of the obedient and hardworking son to keep her approval and validation of himself. Serebryakov was then immediately accepted as a father figure and Vanya worshipped him as blindly and unquestioningly as he did his sister. Vanya's naive, innocent and trusting nature did not allow him to suspect the genuineness of Serebryakov and he plunged himself into the twenty-five years of hard work to support this seeming "genius."

Vanya's disillusionment begins about a year before the play starts. Many factors come together to prompt this questioning in Vanya. First of all at forty-seven he is in middle-age, a transition period between youth and old age and a time, psychologists tell us, when men experience a crisis of evaluating their lives and desperately attempt to recapture their lost youth. Secondly, the professor's marriage to Yelena finally severs his ties with Vanya's dead sister since he is in

fact no longer Vanya's brother-in-law and therefore Vanya has no further familial obligation to him. In this new relationship with Serebryakov Vanya is finally able to look at him more objectively, and without the emotional and familial ties clouding his vision, he is able to see the professor for what he is. Vanya, sensing his own approaching old age, sees this old man with a beautiful young wife, a woman that he has been attracted to. He is not only jealous of Yelena but is jealous of the professor's whole life. As he informs Astrov in Act One, Serebryakov is a man who has led a charmed life and enjoyed success in every field but he has been completely undeserving of it. For his whole life he has been a "usurping another's rightful place." (5) Vanya's sense of humiliation and sense of his own wasted life increases as he realizes that he has forfeited his own life by living vicariously through Serebryakov. The life the professor led was rightfully Vanya's but he allowed himself to be "duped" out of it. As the realization dawns on Vanya that the professor has in fact taken advantage of him for twenty-five years he is unable to contain his anger towards him. As he begins attacking and doubting the validity of his former idol the illusory nature of his whole life begins to unravel and he awakens to the reality of his own situation.

Vanya is in effect left stranded and orphaned.

Having lost his sister and being unable to rely on Serebryakov as a father figure he is forced finally to take responsibility for his own life. He resists this bitter truth through much of the play as he blames and attacks the professor for having "blighted his life," culminating in the shooting in Act Three. He pursues Yelena partly in revenge against the professor and partly as a desperate attempt to get back the youth he has lost and to regain the relationship he had with his sister. There is also a selfless concern reflected in his relationship with Yelena: he wants her to avoid stifling her "own hapless youth and living feeling" (5) as he has done for the professor. He ceases to work on the estate and spends the summer drinking and mourning for his lost life. In his despair and frustration he is unable to continue living his old life and a new way of living now seems impossible: he is stuck.

When Vanya witnesses Yelena and Astrov in each others arms, the sense of his own impotence and ridiculousness is overpowering. But the professor's proposal to sell the estate finally rouses Vanya to action. He finds it "past all comprehending" that the professor would go as far as to dupe him and his family out of the estate. (41) Having no allies, aside from Telegin, to take his side Vanya fights to defend his home and his family. He argues the legal and moral correctness of his claim and the professor is forced to

concede. In the argument that ensues much of Vanya's deeply held concerns are revealed. Like a son appealing to his father he wants at least some thanks from the professor and a recognition and validation of his life. When this is not forthcoming the final ties to his former life are severed and he is left with the naked truth: "My life has vanished!" (43) The fact that he has foolishly sacrificed his own life and has refrained from living becomes startlingly clear to him.

Vanya's shooting at the professor has the effect of driving Serebryakov off the estate. In the process he irrevocably severs any possibility of "good relations" with the professor and Vanya thereby rids himself, finally, of his illusions. But left on his own now Vanya can no longer see any reason for going on. He desperately reaches out for new reasons to explain his actions and his life. He would prefer to see himself as a madman, a murderer or a great tragic hero--anything but normal. When Astrov refuses to accept his melodramatic vision of his life or to offer any solutions, Vanya clings to the morphine as one last, desperate hope for a solution. Finally it is his selflessness and concern for his family and particularly Sonya that convinces him to give up the morphine and to get on with living.

In giving up the morphine Vanya decides to continue with his old life: he will remain on the estate and

continue sending money to the professor and "everything will be as it was." (54) Externally Vanya's life has gone full circle and his situation is the same now as it was a year ago. The difference now though is that Vanya accepts who he is and the life he has to lead without the benefit of illusions or ideals. He does this for Sonya's benefit and because there is no other option open to him. But he is now self-aware and his final acceptance of himself, of reality and his fate is his first courageous act. As Sonya attempts to justify their working and enduring, Vanya lets go of any hope in dreams and illusions and simply continues working. In the end there are no explanations or reasons--just the bare fact of a life that has to be lived.

Astrov

Despite the fact that he is a man who loves to talk and make speeches, Astrov reveals little about himself and he remains the most elusive and enigmatic character in the play. According to Valency this was one of Chekhov's favourite characters and Astrov has many qualities in common with the playwright. But as Valency goes on to point out Chekhov has by no means flattered himself, since Astrov is often "reckless; contemptuous and bitter - even cruel"⁷, and is far less an ideal than was his prototype in The Wood Demon.

The name of the character signifies all of his

major characteristics. It is derived from the Latin word aster which means "star" and upon analysis proves to be a very precise appellation. Astrov exists in loneliness and isolation and is often removed from the daily concerns of earth-bound humans. For the most part he lives outside the human society of friends and family. In contrast to Vanya who is tied to home and hearth and who has been concerned with these quotidian concerns, Astrov from his lofty, objective viewpoint observes and analyses life and human affairs in general. This allows him to have a grand sweeping vision and to see the "whole picture." This ability makes him very attractive to the two young women in the play and especially Yelena who sees in him a "free spirit" having "boldness and wide horizons." (27) Ironically, Astrov is capable of this only through keeping himself at a distance from life and, like the doctor that he is, by maintaining an objective and cold attitude to things. The price he pays for this position is what he complains about through the play.

Astrov states his concerns very clearly in the first scene of the play; what we learn about him through the play serves only to confirm and clarify his own analysis. He feels himself aging, he works too hard and he is bored and frustrated with the provincial life he is living. His feelings are drying up and he is unable to love anyone or desire anything for himself. In other

words he is aware of the poverty of his personal life and feels detached from life, those around him and his own feelings. He is baffled and disgusted by these problems and rather than confronting them seriously handles the situation as he does throughout the entire play: he escapes into his idealism and removes himself from the present, hard realities by looking into the future.

Astrov's great idealistic concern about the environment and the future of humanity is double-edged. His environmental speeches reveal a highly sensitive, intelligent man whose thinking is far ahead of his time. He is repelled by ugliness and destruction and as he states in Act Two, he is attracted to beauty and just cannot be "indifferent to it". (24) Furthermore he is not simply a speech-maker but is actively working to halt the destruction occurring around him and seeking to create something in its place. Yet these very qualities which make Astrov such an admirable and fascinating character are the root causes of the personal problems of which he complains. His objective attitude is what allows him to be a visionary and to be able to see and chronicle the destruction around him. But it is this very perspective that also keeps him detached from his own emotions and from the particular individuals around him. His attitude is summed up in his conversation with Sonya in Act Two when he states: "Life in general I

love, but our life, our narrow Russian provincial life, I cannot endure." (23) His ability to love life in a general, abstract way and life as it "ought to be" satisfies the idealist in him but it prevents him from living a personal and concrete life.

Astrov's idealism, though genuine and heartfelt, is nonetheless suspect--he is not above using it for less noble purposes. He no doubt believes his own speech about the forests in Act One but at the same time he is not unaware of Yelena observing him and uses her interest in the forests to invite her to come visit him. In Act Three he again uses his maps and ideas of the forest to get close to Yelena and begin his wooing of her and we learn that by this point he has "quite given up his trees and his practice." (30) Throughout the play he has been able to throw his idealism aside to pursue more personal goals, suggesting that these great ideas do not have as strong a hold on him as one might suspect from his passionate speeches.

A more personal and negative motive suggests itself for Astrov's obsession with the forests. His idealism, like his drinking, is a way of escaping reality and allows him to ignore any ugliness around him or in himself. His idealism has the intoxicating effect that vodka does and allows him to keep a safe distance from the problems in his life. Under the influence of his ideas, like the vodka that he talks about in Act Two, he

believes he is "able to do anything" and can convince himself that he is "doing mankind some colossal service" while everyone else around him are "just insect life as far as I'm concerned ... just microbes." (20) His great ideas about the future, the betterment of mankind through his medical practice and his work with the forests help him strengthen the illusion for himself that he is a great man living a god-like life and that rather than being "odd" he is a genius.

Astrov repeats this pattern throughout the play. He tells Nanna in Act One that when one of his patients died, "I sat down and I closed my eyes and I thought, a hundred, two hundred years from now . . . " (2) This is a characteristic technique he uses to protect himself from harsh realities. In Act Four he is only able to offer Vanya a bleak hope by referring him to life as it will be a hundred or two hundred years hence. Unlike Vanya, who does struggle with the problems he is faced with, Astrov simply avoids them. His thoughts of the future are as much a sedative and way of avoiding problems in the present as Nanna's prayers are to her.

All of Astrov's great ideas about stopping destruction and waste are useless to him personally. As Sonya tells him in Act Two, he speaks nobly and intelligently but is at the same time destroying himself with drinking. Again he is able to see solutions in theory and apply them in a general way but is unable to

apply them to his own particular life. This is his tragedy and the cause of his being something of a lost soul.

Given his complaints in Act One it is clear that Astrov believes that a love affair with Yelena might cure him of his inability to love. But this is only a vain hope as he recognizes in his discussion with Sonya that his attraction to Yelena's beauty has "nothing to do with love, nothing to do with attachment." (24) The wooing scene which follows in Act Three confirms that he is merely infatuated with her beauty, that in fact her utter indifference to his talk about the forests proved the unsuitability of a serious love match. Besides, he is aware that she is married and very unlikely to leave her husband to spend her life in the forest with him. His supposed love for Yelena then is nothing more than another dream, another drug that he uses to escape his dreary life. Had he seriously wanted to attach himself to someone then Sonya would be the obvious choice but he deliberately ignores any hint of her love for him. Clearly then, Astrov does not really want what he has suggested he wanted at the beginning of the play.

Being a self-aware character Astrov realizes all of this at the end of the play. He is very fatalistic and matter of fact with Vanya that for them there is no hope of change. Although he asks Yelena again to stay and meet him in the forest he cannot be at all serious this

time since she is all packed and ready to leave. He is content to philosophize about what occurred between them and in his objective, analytical fashion to send her off with a friendly kiss on the cheek and a "Finita la commedia!" (53)

In the end then Astrov has not changed at all. The events of the play served simply to confirm who he was to begin with. He is essentially a self-contained bachelor who in his idealism and egotism has what he wants. The problems in his life he has simply avoided and, as he is well aware, will go on avoiding them the way he always has. His choices are made, his life is set and he accepts it all fatalistically and uncomplainingly. In this sense he is less courageous than Vanya and much less of an aspiring nature. His carelessness and passivity about his own personal life reveals a strange laziness of which he is fond of accusing others. The result for him is the same as it is for the forests: decay, waste and ultimately destruction.

Yelena

In Act Two Astrov summarizes his view of Yelena: "She just eats and sleeps and goes for little walks, and captivates us all with her looks - that's all she does....and a life of idleness can't be an innocent one." (22-23) Vanya too refers often to Yelena's beauty and her "indolence." From an analysis of the name of

the character Chekhov also seems to see these as the two essential characteristics. The root of the name in Russian is "len" meaning "laziness."⁸ Other texts translate the name of the character as "Helen," suggesting an allusion to Helen of Troy and by making his Helen a beautiful woman there can be no doubt that Chekhov saw this as a very important feature of the character.⁹ The challenge for an actress or a director, though, is to avoid a too simple interpretation of the role and to discover the complexities of the character that are beneath these external qualities. Styan warns that "any facile judgement on Yelena is inappropriate. She may be as entitled to her self-pity as Vanya is."¹⁰ Chekhov certainly seems to have considered her a major character since she has exactly the same amount of stage time that Vanya does and as Styan suggests, in grouping her with Vanya, Chekhov meant her to be as sympathetic as he is.

Yelena's beauty has an important function in the play and is the impetus for much of the action. Valency, quoting a passage from Chekhov's story "The Beauties," describes the effect that Yelena has in the play:

[Her] excessive loveliness brings to everyone an indefinable sense of loss, a feeling of unworthiness, the intimation of a happiness so far removed from earthly possibility as to beggar its values.¹¹

Yelena's very presence on the estate calls the

three workers away from their daily routine and causes them to daydream and long for a different and more beautiful life. Vanya tells her: "You're my happiness, you're life, you're my youth" even as he realizes that his love will not be reciprocated. (12) Astrov's fascination with her grows to such an extent that by Act Three he is visiting every day and has "quite given up his trees and his practice." (30) While "people have been falling sick and peasants have been pasturing their cattle in my woods and plantations" (53), he has been enthralled with her and pursuing a love affair. Sonya, too, who has loved Astrov in silence for six years, falls under Yelena's spell and believes that her dream is now possible. Like the mermaid that she is identified with, her very presence has the effect of calling people away with the result that their hopes and dreams are dashed and destroyed. As Astrov candidly tells her: "you and your husband sow destruction wherever you go." (53) Her great beauty calls forth the deepest longings and dreams in others but in the end it has the effect of only "illuminating their unhappiness."¹² She passes through their lives like a storm which leaves in its wake devastation, destruction and despair.

Yelena's image of herself is far from the fascinating and destructive creature that others see. She tells Vanya that she is a "dull and tedious person"

(12), and confides to Sonya that she is "a tedious person, though, a minor character" who is "very, very unhappy!" (28) Indeed, as Styan has suggested, she has reason to be unhappy and as much right to self-pity as Vanya. Like Vanya she is wasting her youth and her beauty needlessly in her loyalty to Serebryakov. But this "bird in fine plumage" is caged not only by the autocratic professor but more importantly through her own fear of life and her stifling of "her own hapless youth and living feeling." (5) Why she married the professor and "gave him her youth and beauty, her freedom, her radiance" baffles Vanya. (5) The answer to this puzzle suggests a far weaker and more pitiful character than has been suggested and substantiates her view of herself as a "minor character." (28)

Yelena's marriage to the professor reveals a very passive nature and a tendency, like Vanya, to live vicariously through others. She admits to Sonya that she married the professor not because she was in love with him but because she "was fascinated by him because he was a learned and famous man." (26) Later she admits that she would certainly prefer to be married to a younger man, and in Act Three even toys with the idea of running off and having an adventure with Astrov. In her very revealing monologue just before she meets with Astrov she suggests her reason for not acting on this impulse. She certainly has the desire to "fly off as

free as a bird" but what stops her from doing that and ultimately what stops her from living is her conscience: "But I'm a coward, I'm too timid...I should be tormented by conscience." (33) This passionate, beautiful and educated lady is guilt-ridden, and in the name of morality does "stifle her own hapless youth and living feelings." But her guilt, her morality and her conscience are used to justify her timidity and fear of her youth and passion, and her deep seated fear of living.

It is no accident then that she and Vanya are friends. They both have a great fear of life and in their desire to avoid responsibility are willing to sacrifice their own living for a false and useless ideal. Vanya is now aware of the foolish way in which he has wasted his life and tries repeatedly to warn Yelena against doing the same thing. Having firsthand experience he is fully aware of her powers of self-delusion: "Why can't she understand what I'm trying to tell her? Those rhetorical tricks of hers, the indolent moralizing, her silly indolent thoughts about the end of the world - I find all that deeply repellent." (19) Vanya of course has used similar tricks for the past twenty-five years and is only now waking up from his delusion and sees the wasted life that has resulted from such thinking. Yelena does finally consider Vanya's advice and briefly and half-heartedly toys with freedom

through her relations with Astrov.

Yelena's attraction to Astrov is quite complicated and filled with irony. She spends much of the play hiding it from herself and especially from Sonya, who is only too willing to talk to Yelena about how great the doctor is. We suspect even that it is Sonya's praise of Astrov that makes Yelena take notice of him and desire him. In any event her desire for the doctor becomes so overpowering that she can no longer hide it from herself and under the pretence of helping Sonya suggests the cross-examination. Her idea that Astrov must stop visiting is not of course to protect Sonya but is meant to insulate herself from his influence. This is entirely in keeping with her character: if she can no longer stifle her desire then the object of it must be removed. With the agreement secured from Sonya she can then admit to herself that she is "slightly fascinated" by Astrov. In her soliloquy just prior to her meeting with Astrov she reveals her interest in him: "To fall under the spell of a man like that, to forget oneself ... I think I've become slightly fascinated too." (33) She allows herself to dream for a moment but then quickly stops herself. This is a pattern in her character: a great yearning for life and then a pulling back and stifling of that longing through fear and guilt.

In the scene which follows with Astrov she shows

that she is obviously quite interested in his attention but must deny it. Astrov senses this and does not take her denial seriously. What allows Yelena to go even this far is the fact that she knows she is safe--the doctor has agreed to stop visiting and she still knows that she is a married woman. For a brief moment however she allows her passion to carry her away and submits to Astrov's advances. We can never be sure that she would not have agreed to his plan to meet in the forest if they had not been interrupted by Vanya. However it is highly unlikely, given Yelena's fear and her morality which she would have to overcome. The other more subtle point is that even a love affair with Astrov would hardly set her free. She reveals in her soliloquy that she is fascinated by Astrov in much the same way that she must have been fascinated by the professor. She is really looking for someone else to fall under the spell of and to relieve her of her boredom and tedium of herself.

In any event Yelena returns to the person she was at the beginning of the play. She asks Astrov: "Think better of me. I should like you to have some respect for me." (52) She wants to be seen as a moral and decent woman who, though she has been the cause of others' unhappiness, wants to appear nice. She returns to her tyrannical husband and will no doubt remain obedient to him. As a pathetic and childish act of

defiance she takes Astrov's pencil as a memento and embraces him passionately before leaving. This is one last taste of "what might have been." In reality she will continue to be the obedient and virtuous lady who denies herself a life for the sake of her morality. In the end this "bird in fine plumage" willingly and passively returns to her cage.

Sonya

Sonya is the most simple and straightforward of the major characters. Her name, a derivative of Sophia meaning "wisdom," suggests that although she is the youngest person in the play she is also the wisest and most sensible of the group. Her wisdom, like her character in general, is of a practical and useful nature. Her character is used as a kind of standard by which to judge the others and is brought into sharpest relief when compared with the other young woman in the play, Yelena.

In nearly all respects Sonya functions as a foil to Yelena. Sonya is a tireless worker whose practical and open nature throws Yelena's idleness and self absorption into strong relief. Vanya tells Astrov that Sonya now does all the work on the estate by herself. (3) By Act Two, some two months later, she is still running things herself and in a moment of exasperation complains to Vanya about it. Her practical working nature makes her

appear and consider herself plain in the presence of Yelena's charming indolence.

Despite her youth, Sonya is often the most mature of the group. Her simple and honest nature demands that situations be dealt with openly and that reality be faced squarely and with dignity. She cannot abide uselessness, self-pity or cowardly self-destruction. She is quick to scold her father for "acting up" and his endless complaining, and she constantly stops her uncle from arguing with his mother and the professor. She is deeply pained to see her uncle drunk and depressed in Act Two and even commands Astrov that he not "let uncle drink". Whereas Yelena is content to philosophize about the state of affairs in the household, Sonya keeps struggling to correct the situation.

In Act Two Yelena accuses Sonya of being suspicious of her. Since Sonya does not argue the point there is the suggestion that she suspected Yelena of marrying her father for "his money." Nevertheless Sonya is quick to make up with Yelena and they quickly become "friends." As Yelena suggests, Sonya's "style" is to be open and honest and to want naturally to trust everyone. This perhaps too optimistic and naive outlook causes her trouble. She takes Yelena's oath of friendship as an opportunity, for the first time most likely, to admit her love for Astrov. As Yelena takes on the role of the more worldly woman, Sonya confides in her as she would

to an older sister or a mother. Her penchant to trust Yelena and to hope for a positive response from Astrov points to a weakness in Sonya that ultimately leads to disappointment.

Sonya's interest in Astrov is quite different in quality from Yelena's. Whereas Yelena is fascinated and intrigued by him and sees him as a way of relieving her boredom, Sonya is truly in love with him. She is able to recite his speeches and is in agreement with his views. As she indicates in Act Three she is constantly waiting to see him and can hear his voice and see him when he is not there. All of these are symptoms of one in love. It is clear however that Sonya would make him a "fine wife." (32) She, like Astrov, is hardworking and he is able to confide in her. She is already a friend and Astrov holds her in high regard. Her feeding of him in Act Two is the act of a lover and a wife/nurturer. As Yelena points out, Sonya is intelligent, kind and good and has many things to recommend her as a wife. Her dream of marrying him then is the most realistic one in the play; it is certainly far more possible than Yelena having an affair with Astrov or of Vanya's recapturing his youth through Yelena.

Sonya, though is also guilty of getting caught up in illusions. As the play progresses she is prompted more and more to pursue and expect her love for Astrov to be

responded to in kind. This is in spite of all evidence to the contrary to which she turns a blind eye. Astrov tells her that he is unable to love anyone and in answer to a direct question says that he is not interested in being attached and yet by the end of the act Sonya is laughing in joy because she believes that Astrov may be interested in her. By Act Three she is being tormented to death with wondering what Astrov's feelings are for her though he has given her no cause for hope all summer. Sonya is well aware of why Astrov is coming every day and even tells Yelena that she must have "bewitched" everyone. Yet she continues to hope and agrees to Yelena's cross-examination. This points up a very interesting characteristic of Sonya. Having loved Astrov for six years she has continued to hope though he has given her no cause. What has gotten her through her adult life thus far is the possibility of something happening in the future. She has refused to give up hope and until Yelena's arrival was content to live with the hope alone. With the arrival of Yelena and with Astrov's more frequent visits she becomes aware that the moment of truth may be nearing. When Yelena suggests that it is better not to be kept in suspense Sonya, revealingly, disagrees and responds with "No, better to stay in suspense. At least there's still hope." (33) She is aware that having her dream shattered she will be left without hope for the future and without hope one

cannot live.

Astrov's negative response throws Sonya into such a deep despair and shock that she is out of commission for the meeting. She, in effect, gives up and surrenders to her despair. This does not last long however since she is soon pleading with her father to have mercy on Uncle Vanya. Having been drawn back to her senses through the call to help her uncle Sonya decides to overcome her despair. In order to do so she must replace Astrov with another hope.

Her final speech is, on the one hand, a rather childish one combining Marina's simple piety with Astrov's hope in the future, bleak as that may be. In its simplicity it reads like a child comforting herself in the night. On the other hand it reveals Sonya's determination not to give way to despair. For her to go on living she must have some hope or light in the distance to guide her, dim though it may be. From the tone of the speech it is clear that Sonya is not only comforting herself and her uncle but is fortifying herself to face the future. She sees the bleakness of her future and realizes that in order to carry on she must have hope. Whether Sonya believes what she is saying is beside the point. She realizes the impossibility of attaining the beautiful life she had dreamed of with Astrov but will not let the idea die. It is finally a courageous speech: it displays the

courage of one condemned to despair and in meeting it rises above it. In her practical way she finds a way to go on living.

Serebryakov

Aside from the three minor characters Serebryakov is the least complex character in the play and occupies the least amount of stage time. We learn very quickly and in a few short scenes who he is and what his chief characteristics are. The result borders on caricature, a comical portrayal of a pretentious old professor. Despite his rather simple nature however he plays a very important role in the play. Furthermore, the fact that he appears as somewhat of a caricature does not mean that Chekhov has left him undeveloped. A great part of his character consists in the fact that he is a man playing a role.

Before he even appears on stage we learn that his arrival on the estate has caused distress to the permanent residents. Life is now turned upside down; no work is being done and the well-established routine is disturbed. In his first appearance he strikes a very odd figure indeed, as Vanya points out. On an "oppressively hot day, our great scholar goes out with an umbrella, in his overcoat, gloves and galoshes." (4) He is clearly out of place on the estate and responds inappropriately to his environment. As Styan puts it,

he is a a man who "protects himself from the actualities of life, wrapping himself up in the self-love of the hypochondriac."¹³ The professor protects himself from reality through his work as well. In the first scene he immediately runs off to his study where he claims he still has "one or two things to do." In Act Two, after awaking from a nightmare, he immediately tries to get his mind off his troubles by asking for a "complete Baytushkov." His use of Literature and Art is comically highlighted in Act Four when, having just been shot at, he claims that he could now write "a complete treatise for future generations on how to live one's life." (54)

The professor's condescending nature and his arrogance are the source of much humour in the play but also have the effect of making life hell for the others. In his first scene he ignores the fact that the doctor is there to see him and does not even speak to him; he does not deign to reply to Sonya and most telling of all responds to the tour of the estate as if he were merely a tourist here. Throughout the play in fact he plays the role of the great and renowned professor who is gracing others with his presence and to whom reverence and awe are due. In his first scene in Act Two we see clearly what is beneath this mask. He is in fact an old, sick man who is afraid of dying and who refuses to let go of the life he has lived. He expresses this through self-pitying bickering and, out of spite and

jealousy, insists on making life miserable for everyone else as well. Moreover, he is quite aware of what he is doing and admits to Yelena that he is a "tyrant" and an "egotist." He has no interest in reforming himself but, rather, believes that he has "earned" the right to be like this. Like a child throwing a tantrum he insists on getting "attention from people." Marina, in treating him as a child, is finally the only one who can soothe him.

In contrast to Vanya, the professor is very strong willed and intensely proud. He has climbed his way up the social ladder despite the fact that, according to Vanya, he had neither a noble birth nor great intelligence or talent going for him. Through sheer force of will and a ruthless determination he achieved success as a professor in St. Petersburg and succeeded in being fascinating enough to have "a great success with women all his life." (22) He has in effect achieved a life which Vanya would have liked for himself. This was made possible through his taking advantage of Vanya's weakness and Vanya's natural tendency to generosity and sacrifice.

Vanya's assessment of the professor as a nothing and a "soapbubble" is inspired by jealousy but appears nonetheless to be accurate. Serebryakov's dream in Act Two of having "someone else's left leg" reveals the major motif of his life: he has borrowed and stolen

other people's talent and lives to feed his own life and ego. Paradoxically he is a man with no sense of self and parasitically feeds on the life of others. He is unable even to deal with his gout without validating it by reminding himself that Turgenev suffered from the same complaint. He understands nothing about Art but makes a name for himself by "chewing over other men's thoughts." (5) Like all frauds, there is a great fear at the heart of the character that he is going to be found out. In order to avoid this he has to continue to insist on his "rights" and demand that he continue getting the attention and respect that he needs. When Vanya begins to question him he is truly afraid to be left alone with him and begs Yelena to make him go away. In the argument in Act Three Serebryakov tries every tactic to maintain his dignity and professorial air in front of the others. His great fear is that Vanya is going to unmask him and to avoid this he is even willing to give up his claim on the estate and to antagonize Vanya even further by calling him a "nobody."

In the end though, Serebryakov is able to escape unscathed and is wounded neither by Vanya's bullets nor his verbal denunciation. He has lost neither his wife nor his income and is able to get back to his life in the city. His character is essentially unchanged; he has learned nothing about himself. Of course he has had no desire to face himself but is content to continue in

his pleasant self-delusion and luxury.

Marina, Maria and Telegin

As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, these characters are not of great interest in themselves but they serve an important function in the play. They are used as a kind of chorus to comment upon the action of the play and to throw into relief the nature of the more important characters. Since this has been discussed in greater detail in other chapters of this thesis, I will restrict comments about these characters to a brief description of their more salient characteristics.

Telegin is an impoverished former landowner whose estate was sold to Vanya's family years before the play begins. Since that time Vanya has allowed him to remain with him and his family on the estate because Telegin has had nowhere else to go. Telegin is deeply aware that he is living on the charity of others and that his position in the family is rather tenuous. As a result, he is very careful to tiptoe around everyone and to avoid offending the owners of the estate. He is especially careful to ingratiate himself with the old professor in order that he not lose his position. His greatest fear is that he will be forgotten and if the estate is sold he will be left with nowhere to go.

As a result, Telegin is anxious to keep things the

way they are and is deeply suspicious of any change. Throughout the play he is careful to head off any arguments or dissension in the group. His absurd optimism, as well as his guitar playing, are used to mollify tempers and to prevent trouble. While these tactics are used in the play to comment comically on the action of the scenes, they also reveal Telegin's profound dependence on the goodwill of others.

Telegin's sense of identity is likewise dependent on recognition from others. Consequently, when Yelena gets his name wrong in Act One, he reminds her rather aggressively of who he is and that in fact he does belong on the estate. Likewise he is careful to stay close to the professor, to make sure that he is not forgotten by the professor and to keep the professor favourably disposed towards him. Although he functions as a comical character in the play, Telegin's struggle is a serious attempt to maintain both his physical and psychological existence.

Telegin's character is used to further highlight the arrogance and falsity of Serebrekov. The professor is in essentially the same position as Telegin since he too is, and has been for his entire life, living on the charity of others. The differences in response to the same situation are poles apart: an absurd degree of honesty, humility and servility countered with the professor's falseness, arrogance and self-importance.

It is essentially the difference between goodness and evil.

Marina, the old nurse, represents the old order and the unthinking life of practical work. She retains her role as Nanny and server long after the family has grown up. She is highly suspicious of change of any kind and is a constant in a world where others are lost. In this simple role and in her simple piety she represents domestic tranquillity and order. She does not trouble herself about the bigger issues and as a result is at peace with herself and her world.

Marina's comical displays of irritation at the turmoil which the visit of the Serebrekovs has brought about points to her impatience with any disruption in her carefully ordered life. She attempts to ignore what is happening around her and continues placidly in her work despite any indication that she may have outlived her usefulness. She treats everyone condescendingly, calming and soothing them as if they were still children. In response to their spiritual pain she offers food and drink as well as her simple and unthinking piety.

The character of Vanya's mother, Maria, is perhaps the simplest in the play and she functions as a kind of comic caricature. She is much like Marina in her narrow minded concentration on a single role, but unlike Marina she is absolutely useless to anyone. In her intense

concern with her pamphlets she is blissfully indifferent to everything and everyone around her. Her devotion to the professor is absolute and unquestioning despite any evidence that he may in fact be simply taking advantage of her. When Vanya protests the sale of the estate, an action that could be of enormous consequence to her, she immediately takes the professor's side.

Her indifference to everyone else amounts to cruelty, especially in her inability to comfort or sympathize with her son and granddaughter. Her obsessive and ridiculous concern with her pamphlets is an exaggeration of the professor's own useless intellectuality, and in pushing the matter to this degree Chekhov pokes fun at the pretentiousness and uselessness of the professor's kind of learning. Her pedantic mind is a shadow and reflection of the professor's. Like him, she is determined to avoid reality and in her unquestioning devotion to her intellectual pursuits she sees herself as being not at all ridiculous, but as an intellectual whose work is a valuable contribution to the intellectual and literary world. Unlike her son she is content in this role and is highly indignant at any suggestion that her work is not important or that it would ever be questioned.

All three of these characters then serve as a reminder of the monotonous, absurd and dreary life that Vanya, Astrov and Sonya are trapped in. By the end of

the play we are aware of the futility of the old life to which they are returning and the kind of hopelessness that it signifies.

Notes

¹ William Gerhardi, Anton Chekhov: A Critical Study (London: Camelot Press Limited, 1923) 59.

² Sonia Kovitz, "A Fine Day to Hang Oneself: On Chekhov's Plays," Chekhov's Great Plays: A Critical Anthology, ed. Jean Pierre Barricilli (NY: New York UP, 1981) 198.

³ Ieva Vitins, "Uncle Vanya's Predicament," Chekhov's Great Plays : A Critical Anthology, ed. Jean Pierre Barricelli (NY: New York UP, 1981) 35.

⁴ Richard Peace, Chekhov: A Study of the Four Major Plays (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983) 70 - 71.

⁵ Vitins 35.

⁶ Vitins 44.

⁷ Maurice Valency, The Breaking String: The Plays of Anton Chekhov (NY: Schocken Books, 1983) 182.

⁸ Peace 56.

⁹ Valency 182.

¹⁰ Styan 119.

¹¹ Valency 183.

¹² Valency 183.

¹³ Styan 104.

Chapter Four: Evolution of the Design

The design process for this production began immediately after it was decided which play I would be directing for my thesis project. When we learned that the rights for the original selection, A Streetcar Named Desire, were not available it was necessary to decide quickly on another play that would be appropriate. By late May it was agreed that I would direct Uncle Vanya as the first production of the season. Ideally I would have preferred at least two months of preparation before meeting with designers but with design deadlines set for July it was necessary to begin my work on the script immediately and within a matter of days be ready to discuss the play with the designers. Given those time constraints, as well as the usual budget constraints, the designers were also forced to work more quickly than usual. With this unusual time pressure we all set to work immediately.

We decided first of all that it would be more beneficial and more efficient if the early meetings in particular were attended by both designers. This would allow each designer to be fully aware of the other's plans and would facilitate coordinating the overall design of the show. It also saved time since both designers would hear my views on the script at the same time. Consequently, these meetings involved complex discussions of all elements of the production since we

considered my interpretations of the script as well as the implications for the various elements of the design. These early meetings were rather unstructured and informal as we explored all the major aspects and concerns of the script and bandied about ideas and observations about the play. However they proved very productive in defining a common approach to the style of the production and as preparation for the more formal meetings with the individual designers. In the interest of convenience and simplicity I will outline the evolution of the set, costume, and lighting design separately and will summarize the process by which the major decisions were made.

Set Design

Since Jim Andrews, the set and lighting designer, was involved in the process which led to the selection of Uncle Vanya, I had had many informal conversations with him about the play and about some of the practical concerns in staging it before the play was even chosen. I had assured him during these chats that even if the budget allowed it I was not interested in having a realistic set complete with doors, walls and windows. We had both agreed, then, on the overall parameters of the design before we began discussing possible designs in greater detail. We were already moving towards a style which I would call "Poetic Realism," a design that

was selective in its realistic aspects and left plenty of room for expression of mood, atmosphere and thematic motifs, as opposed to straightforward naturalism. This general understanding prepared us for our first, more formal meetings.

Lisa Roberts, the costume designer, attended the first meeting on June 10. This was a rather short and informal meeting in which we all simply exchanged our impressions of the play and decided on the next step to be taken. Since I had not had much time to work on the script I was not prepared to be specific about my views of the play. We agreed that I would continue working on the script and meet again on Tuesday, June 14, with more concrete ideas on the style, structure, thematic concerns and characters of the play. By Monday, however, I felt that I was not adequately prepared and asked to have the meeting moved to Friday. In the interim I continued my analysis of the script. On the Thursday afternoon before the scheduled meeting I happened to begin chatting with Lisa about the play in general and the characters in particular, a chat which extended into a three-hour conversation.

The Friday morning meeting with Jim consisted of Lisa's and my reiterating our discussion of the previous day. This discussion was beneficial for all of us. Jim insisted that he was more interested in hearing our ideas on the characters at this stage than in discussing

the set design as it would give him a clearer idea of my views on the play and would help him understand the characters who inhabit the world which he was to create on the stage. For Lisa and me it was an opportunity to further clarify and formalize the points made in the previous discussion. As we talked through the play character by character and discussed the groupings and relationships it was clear that Lisa and I were in agreement on many points and ready to discuss details of the costume design. (This is described in more detail in the following section.) It also allowed Jim to hear, for the first time, a detailed analysis of the characters as well as what I saw as the chief stylistic and thematic motifs in the play. At the end of this meeting Jim and I agreed to meet again on Monday morning to discuss these points further so that he could begin working towards a design proposal.

This meeting of June 22 proved to be the turning point in arriving at the design. For nearly three hours I attempted to consolidate and clarify all of the points of interpretation and analysis which I had been discussing with Jim in more of a piecemeal fashion up to this point. It was essential that we come to a consensus on an approach to the script before Jim began planning the design. We focussed the discussion, then, on three areas that would be of major concern to Jim as set and lighting designer: the structure and movement of

the play, atmosphere and mood, and the major themes and motifs of the play. Each of these is explained in greater detail in the relevant chapters of this thesis so I will merely highlight what was discussed and how it affected the design.

In terms of structure we agreed that the play obviously moves from the outside to the inside, so that by Act Four we are at the heart of the play as well as the house. In a very general way the space moves from more to less public areas. But there are many qualifications and indeed contradictions to be attached to this rather simple notion. Act One, set outdoors, is a public space but the proximity to the house, the oppressive weather and the family gathering lend an air of intimacy and privacy to the whole act. Act Two, set in the middle of the night with a storm raging outside, is certainly less public and the intimate scenes which occur in this act strengthen this sense. At the same time, ironically, we are in a large dining room which is usually a public meeting place for the family meals. In the play, though, the dining room is not used for family gatherings but for a succession of intimate scenes between two characters. By Act Three we have moved deeper into the house but the setting is a cold, formal, and rarely used drawing room. However, in this more public space all of the most intimate and private concerns of the characters are aired. Act Four, by

contrast, is a rather cosy, crowded and intimate space. It is Vanya's private space, but one which he has to share with all the other occupants of the house. All of the acts then call for spaces which are at one and the same time both public and private, and sometimes the space is to be used for the exact opposite of what it was intended for.

We agreed that this motif would be essential in the planning of the space on stage and we discussed the space in Act Two in some detail. The atmosphere of imprisonment and claustrophobia which permeates the act would be established essentially by the night setting and the raging storm outside. Meanwhile, the space would be much larger than it need be so that the characters would be trapped together in an immense space which would not permit privacy and, at the same time, would accentuate their loneliness as well as their inability to escape each other. Furthermore, the large dining room table and the piano would serve to highlight the motifs of wastefulness, disorder and uselessness since they would never get used on stage or would not be used for their intended purpose. Like the characters, the space and the objects in the room are running to waste. Within this wasteland, the characters must seek out private and intimate corners for their *tete-a-tetes*. These ideas suggested many blocking patterns for this act in particular.

The notion of a juxtaposition of opposites then carried over into a discussion of the dominant motifs and themes of the play. I explained that in the play I saw a repeating dichotomy between the ideal world of which the characters dream and the hard, cold reality in which they actually live. This notion is expressed in various ways: a rift between a fantasy world and the real, between a romantic and practical view of life, and between the poetic and the prosaic. Both the tragedy and the comedy arise from the characters' yearning for something beyond the mundane, everyday existence: a more beautiful and idealistic life which in the end is illusory and unattainable and defies realization. Jim was immediately excited by this idea and was led to various possibilities of embodying it on stage. Within a matter of minutes he drew a sketch which, in its essentials, was to form the basis of the design which we eventually settled upon.

He suggested a backdrop of plastic strings, forming a screen onto which light and possibly images could be projected in order to create the illusory, dream-like mood of the ephemeral and insubstantial world that the characters yearn for. Meanwhile the foreground would be very realistic with real furniture and props, representing the world to which the characters are continually drawn back and a world in which they will ultimately be confined and trapped. I was immediately

attracted by the simpleness of the design, how it represented my feelings about the play and by the fact that it was very flexible; a large part of the design would be dependent on lighting. Since Jim was the lighting designer and decisions about the lights would not need to be made until much later, it allowed us some breathing space in fleshing out the design.

Before concluding the meeting we briefly discussed the practical problems inherent in the design. I once again impressed upon Jim that I would prefer to have the four separate scenes as called for in the script. He agreed that this would be best and might be achieved with a kind of turntable. In any case this was going to be the major practical concern of the design and we would have to begin right away to find a solution. My biggest concern at this point was not to have long and obtrusive set changes. I had to begin considering the set changes as an important element in the production and to begin seeking ways to integrate it into the rhythm and action of the play.

By Thursday, June 25, Jim had a preliminary set of drawings to show me. After discussing the details of the plan and moving things around, we tentatively agreed that we would proceed with this design. All the points we had discussed previously were present. I also got a sense of the size of the space and was therefore able to consider blocking patterns and to discuss the

possibilities with Jim. Very clear exits and entrances were indicated by the use of archways which would be attached to the platforms. This addition served to clearly define the space and suggest the inside of the house. I was intrigued with the idea that the actors would have to walk through the screens to get on and off stage.

I was also interested in the fact that each of the sets was at an angle and somewhat skewed with the exception of the Act Three set which was more square to the audience, giving it a very formal and spacious feeling. I thought this was quite appropriate, and with the big archway upstage centre I could already envision some possible blocking. I had some reservations about the Act Four set as I thought it too should be facing the audience more squarely and perhaps pulled downstage farther. Jim disagreed but assured me that the angle could easily be changed if need be so I decided to wait until I saw it in the theatre. As it turned out, Jim was correct and when I saw the set in the theatre I was very pleased with it. The angle was interesting to look at and enhanced the crowded feeling that we were trying to achieve. Furthermore, Vanya's desk, set upstage, made him appear to be trapped in the corner and between the two doors leading out of the room.

At this time Jim assured me that the set changes could be done reasonably quickly by using a large crew

of stagehands. I was still rather skeptical and nervous about the prospect of long set changes but agreed that it was an idea worth pursuing and proposing to Don Monty and Brian Kerby. As I took the drawings away to peruse more closely we agreed that tentatively we would go with this proposal. Within a week we formally settled on this plan and proposed it to Don Monty, the technical director, for his consideration and for costing.

From this point on no major changes were made to the design. As we got into rehearsals we did move some furniture around and removed any unnecessary elements. (These are indicated in the section on the rehearsal process.) As the technical elements of the design were being worked out the main point to be resolved, from my standpoint, was exactly how the scene changes were to occur. In discussing this with Jim we agreed that the changes should somehow be integrated into the show rather than having blackouts or dimming the lights and having stagehands sneak around on stage. Besides, since the platforms were rather complicated to break down and reassemble it was necessary to have plenty of light on stage for the stagehands to work. After several discussions with Jim and Lisa I decided that the changes would be done in full view of the audience with the stagehands dressed in peasant costumes and with some lively music played throughout the changes. This would ensure that the rhythm of the play would not be broken

too much and that the audience, rather than sitting and waiting for the changes to be done, would be entertained and kept in the spirit of the play. The details of exactly how this was to be accomplished would be worked out in rehearsal and with a great deal of help from Don Monty and Brian Kerby.

Costume Design

The early meetings with Lisa Roberts, the costume designer, involved general discussions about our ideas and feelings about the play and then eventually coming to a consensus on who the characters are and the nature of their relationships. Aside from several informal chats these discussions began on June 10. At this meeting, which Jim Andrews attended, I was able only to give some vague ideas about what I was thinking about the play. We were, however, able to agree immediately that the costumes would be in period but that there was no need to be overly strict about either historical or geographical accuracy. We were looking for costumes that suggested Russia at the turn of the century and nothing that would obviously stand out as not being in the period. Within these parameters Lisa was free to create whatever was needed to express the ideas that we would evolve in our discussions. As Jim left the meeting, Lisa and I remained to chat informally about the play. I was very pleased to see that she truly

enjoyed the script and was excited about working on the production and was reassured by her reflections that the play was much like life in its complexity and that we want to both laugh and cry at the characters. We discussed some of the characters briefly and even toyed with some of the possible motifs that would guide the costume design. Having established a rather solid foundation we agreed to meet the following week to discuss the characters in detail.

As indicated earlier, Lisa, Jim and I were to meet again on Friday, June 17. However, Lisa and I happened to meet on Thursday afternoon and the impromptu meeting ensued. I had, in the interim, done a great deal of work on character analysis, and throughout the discussion I shared those ideas with Lisa. We discussed each of the characters in some detail and in the process also explored the various relationships that are important in the play. The conversation was very animated and free-flowing but I left the meeting believing that we were in agreement on all of the essential points concerning the characters and the style and meaning of the play.

The next day's meeting, in which we summarized for Jim Andrews the substance of the previous day's discussion, provided the basis for all of the developments in the design which were to follow. An outline of what was discussed and decided upon will

serve to point up the rationale and ideas behind the final costume design. Lisa and I discussed our views on each of the characters and their relationships and towards the end of the meeting she even suggested possible costumes for some of the characters. A guiding motif in our discussions was what we referred to as the difference between the "airy" characters and the "earthy" ones. Of the major characters Yelena was identified with the former; the image used to describe her was that of a bird. Vanya and Sonya belong to the latter category, representing the more practical and mundane life. Astrov was identified as being somewhere in the middle, belonging to the practical camp but also a dreamer and idealist. We identified him with the sky, an image that suggested colours and fabrics to Lisa. At this point it was clear to me that as the play progresses, Astrov's character "lightens" up as he pursues Yelena and ignores his practical work. Vanya's character develops in an opposite fashion and as the play progresses he is brought closer and closer to reality and his character becomes more real and "heavy." Sonya would begin as very practical and sensible but by Act Three, as she falls under Yelena's influence would become less practical and attempt to dress more like her. Yelena's journey was not yet clear to me but she would obviously demand more elaborate costumes and more costume changes. The rest of the characters were fairly

straightforward and their costumes would be pulled from stock, the details of which would largely be dependent on the costume plot arrived at for the others.

Throughout most of July Lisa was out of town. When she returned in August we began looking at pictures and material and discussing the details of the design. By August 13 Lisa had a costume plot completed and aside from some inevitable minor changes this formed the design for the show. Yelena would be dressed in an ivory white, lacy dress for the first act complete with ruffles, hat, gloves and parasol. This St. Petersburg, fashionable dress would have to be built since it was essential that she be very striking in this first act. In Act Two she appears in a rather simple but fashionable nightgown. We decided that her Act Three dress would represent another big change and would require another build. For this we decided on a dark dress which would shimmer and move under the lights, a dress that was at once beautiful and dangerous, giving expression to the mermaid motif in the script. The Act Four costume would simply involve an addition of an overcoat in preparation for travel.

Sonya's costume was rather simple. We had originally imagined a skirt and blouse for Act One with no change in Act Two. In Act Three she would wear a dress that was a pale imitation of Yelena's and by Act Four she would simply roll up the sleeves and get to

work. This changed somewhat as we later realized that there was money and time enough to build a dress for her. We then decided to build a lighter, summer dress for Act One which would give a more youthful, but still simple and practical appearance to her character. The dress originally planned to be used in Act One, was then used in Act Three. This was a greyish brown, fitted dress which reflected the more formal style of Yelena's costume, and added a more sombre note to Sonya's Act Three character. This decision reflected a reversal of what we had originally seen as Sonya's development through the play.

Vanya's Act One costume consisted of an off-white linen suit which would be made of the same material as Astrov's, thereby tying the two characters together. In Act Two he would appear in darker, brown pants and a dark smoking jacket with shades of burgundy. The Act Three costume, formal black pants with a charcoal grey morning coat, would point to the solemnity and importance of the occasion for Vanya as well as a reflection of his dark and brooding mood which develops through the play. The formality of the costume is ironic as well since Vanya is "all dressed up with nowhere to go." For Act Four, later the same afternoon, he needed simply to remove the jacket and later to roll up his shirt sleeves as he decided to get down to work.

Astrov's Act One costume would reflect the sky

motif discussed earlier. It would consist of a slate-grey, finely-cut suit which identifies him with Yelena, but dark vest and more practical and worn look to the suit would also tie him to Sonya and Vanya. By Act Two he has become more dishevelled and removed the tie and jacket. In Act Three his off-white suit would recall Yelena's dress in the first act while making a nice contrast with her in the third. His return to the Act One costume in the final act reflects his circular journey in the play.

Lighting Design

Since Jim Andrews was involved with the production from the beginning and designed the set with the lighting in mind, the lights for the production evolved smoothly and in a straightforward fashion. During our many consultations throughout the summer we had agreed on the principles that would govern the design; by the time we began rehearsals we had merely to decide on the details. Generally the lighting design would parallel that of the set. In the playing space the lighting would be "real," governed by the time of day that the action takes place, coupled of course with the mood that we were trying to create in the scene. In this play, however, the two are often one since Chekhov uses the external environment to comment upon the action in the play. The background lighting was to be more surreal or

impressionistic. We decided that in Act One a picture of birch trees would be projected on the plastic screens. This need not appear at all realistic; rather we were aiming for a more impressionistic look. This would be continued in the other acts with projections of the storm outside in Act Two, overlapping projections of architectural designs in Act Three which suggested the motif of the play as a maze, lights and projections in Act Four that would suggest the setting sun and the darkening mood which ends the play. We were both very nervous about how these effects were to be accomplished as there was no way to tell how it would look until we got in the theatre. I decided that I would trust Jim's judgement and Don Monty's technical expertise to ensure that it could be done.

By the end of the first week of rehearsals Jim had seen a run of each act as well as the first runthrough of the entire play. Since the blocking was more or less fixed and the placement of the furniture decided, we were now ready to talk through the cues in each act in more detail. The overall plan was clear: Act One called for an overcast afternoon, Act Two would be late night and early morning, Act Three would be a sunny, bright, early afternoon and Act Four would move from late afternoon to early evening. Acts One and Three were fairly straightforward and would involve only a few cues. Act Two would involve the most cues so at this

point we decided such things as where the cues would occur, how many candles would be on stage as well as how the onstage lamps would be used. We knew that in Act Four we wanted a slow, fading light and the direction the light would be coming from. The only question that remained was whether we would use a lamp in this scene. Since this was not crucial to the design we decided to look at it again when we got to the technical rehearsals.

Other than a few informal chats about the lights I did not discuss the matter with Jim again until the cue setting on October 11. This session went very well and was my first opportunity to see the effect of the lights on the screen. I was very pleased and thought the effect was as magical as we had hoped. As we looked at each cue we talked through what changes would be needed and many of them were done in this session. Generally the cues were set by the end of the day. As we worked through the technical runs Jim continued to adjust levels and to work on the finer points. The timing of the lights for the set changes were decided and honed after the crew began getting familiar with the changes and we had a better idea of how long the changes would take. Up until preview I continued to take notes on levels and the timing of the lights and discuss them with Jim and the lighting operator. It was a relief to discover that Jim and I usually agreed on the changes

that were needed and he had often already spotted the problems and was working towards solutions.

Sound and Music Design

Although there were not a lot of sound cues the sound was an important element of the production. In my first meeting with John Van Hemert, the sound designer, a list was made of all the cues that would be needed and the quality of sound that we were after. This was a relatively simple affair as I saw no need to add much to the cues that were indicated in the script. In following the general principle of the other elements of the production we decided that we did not need a lot of realistic sound and that any sound during the play should serve only to enhance the atmosphere of the scenes.

The cues, then, were easy to decide on. In Act One we needed a faint hint of external sounds to set the mood for the afternoon scene at the beginning of the play. Storm noises were needed in Act Two to establish the reality of the storm outside to which the characters constantly refer. In Act Four we decided that the sound of harness bells indicated in the script were needed to establish and enhance the mood of departure for the act. Other sounds throughout the play were done by the actors. The watchman's tapping in Act Two and Act Four was important as a repeated motif, indicating the normal

progression of events in the outside world as well as establishing a sense of imprisonment within the house. The gun sounds in Act Three were easily worked out with Don Monty by having real guns that shot blanks. Telegin's guitar playing throughout the play was used to comment, often ironically, on the action and mood of the scenes. The selection of the music was worked out in consultation with John and was an echo of the music used for the scene changes.

John approached me with the offer to do the music for the show long before rehearsals began and I was very excited about the prospect of having original music. I was confident in his abilities as he had done a very fine score for the Richard The Third production in the previous season. In our original meeting I was very clear about the quality of music I would like and I described this to John and let him go away and work on it. From then on he would play pieces for me and we would discuss it and make changes as were necessary.

In the musical score we wanted the general flavour of the period and music that was neither too lively nor too somber, but a kind of half-tone quality fitting the style of the play. The pre-show music and the music between the acts was used to either set the tone for the scene or to comment on the action of the previous scene. The music between Acts One and Two and between Acts Three and Four moved from relatively lively, loud and

upbeat, to more quiet, meditative and melancholy. This seemed to fit the moods of the scenes and also served the practical purpose of covering the rather lengthy set changes and providing a little entertainment during the changes.

As is usually the case, the sound caused the most difficulties during technical week. A lot of time was spent on setting and resetting levels and then changing them again as we heard them in the runs of the play. We decided to cut some of the more problematic but unessential cues, such as dogs barking, as it was far too difficult to get the right quality of sound and these cues were not worth the time to fix. More time was spent on getting the correct timing and levels for the storm cues and the sound of harness bells. In theory these sound like relatively simple matters but it always proves difficult to set levels and time the cues exactly without hearing them several times during runs of the show. However, with a great deal of assistance again from Don Monty, plenty of notetaking during runs and modifying and rebuilding of cues by John, the problems were all ironed out for opening night and the effect was very satisfactory.

Chapter Five: The Rehearsal Process

Auditions and Casting

The auditions were held during the first week of classes on September 9 and 10 with callbacks on September 11. Eighty-five people came out for the two nights, a turnout that I was delighted with but which made the selection process all the more difficult. With three hours appointed each night for auditions, it was very important that they move quickly and efficiently to ensure that we got to see everyone. Since I wanted to see everyone individually for the first time, no more than five minutes could be spent with each auditionee. Therefore callbacks were essential in order to take a closer look at the actors and to see them in different combinations.

I was looking for several key qualities in a cast. First of all, since the play is so verbal it was essential that the actor be able to handle text and have an interesting and strong voice. I was also looking for actors who could manage emotionally, physically and intellectually, the subtleties and transitions inherent in the script. In order to build a strong ensemble I was looking for a group of actors that would work well together and with whom I could build a good rapport. The age of the actors also had to be taken into account so that the relative ages of the characters would be balanced.

Some of these qualities could be determined in the

first two nights when each actor was given a selection of the text to read. I also spent a minute or so chatting with each actor to try and gauge his or her attitude to the play and simply to get to know each actor a little. This was often not a problem since I had worked with some of them before, seen them in other shows or knew them on a casual basis.

The deciding night was the callbacks on Friday. Having reduced the list to twenty candidates, I spent more than three hours seeing actors in different roles and combinations. I actually had enough time to work closely with the actors, asking that scenes be played in various ways. I had more or less made up my mind on all of the male roles by the end of the evening. The list of possible females was considerably shortened but I was still debating the roles they would play. I spent the weekend considering the possible combinations and in having one actress read for me again before finalizing my decision.

The final decision was a result of different factors. Some were chosen through a process of elimination when I felt that this was the best or only possible actor for a particular role. Others were chosen in order to have different ages in the cast. Still others were cast despite their inexperience since the actor had qualities that were essential to the role. On Monday morning the cast list was posted and the

actors called for rehearsal that night.

All in all I was confident that I had succeeded in creating a strong cast who would work well together. The strong "leads" in the play would be balanced and supported by strong actors in the more minor roles, the cast was well balanced in terms of age and maturity, and they appeared to be a group that was very compatible with each other and a group with whom I would be able to work well.

Rehearsals

Rehearsals began on September 14 and extended over a period of little more than five weeks. Since this was much shorter than the usual six week rehearsal period I decided that we would need four-hour rehearsals, six times a week and that we would have to work quickly to get the show ready. The rehearsal period was very strictly planned; there was little time for experimentation or loosely structured exploration of the text. The following is an account of the phases of the rehearsal period, my assessment of the process and a report of the major developments.

Rehearsals began on September 14, the same day that the cast list was announced. I began with an introduction of the cast and the designers and spent a few minutes outlining the approach to the play and the kind of work and commitment that was needed from the

actors. Jim Andrews then explained the set design and as we answered questions and clarified some points, the production style and the overall approach to the production became clearer. Lisa followed this with an outline of the costume design, showing some drawings, pictures and indicating the features of the costumes that the actors should be aware of right away. She informed the women that they would be wearing corsets and dresses and needed to pay attention to their posture and poise from the beginning. The men were shown pictures of the costumes and the kind of poses that were implied by the style. The actors were assured that rehearsal costumes would be provided later in the week.

This introduction was followed by an uninterrupted reading of the entire play. Before we began I asked the actors simply to read for sense and to familiarize themselves with the language and rhythm of the script. The point was to get a sense of the complete play before we began breaking it down into working units. I stopped this first reading only to remind them of this and to take any pressure off those who felt the need to begin acting right away.

I was more pleased with this first readthrough than I had expected to be. I was happy that I had not mentioned that I considered the play a comedy as the actors were genuinely surprised and delighted by the discovery that the play is very funny when read aloud.

Obviously, the general attitude was that a Chekhovian play is slow moving, ponderous, serious and rather tedious and monotonous. The realization of the comedy produced a fast-paced and lively reading of the play. I made a point of stressing that these were the qualities required for performance and that although we would take the play apart and find the reality and seriousness in the scenes throughout the next few weeks we would eventually have to recapture the comic and ironic tone of the play in the process of putting it back together. I made a mental note to myself that I would have to be careful not to get in the actors' way and to allow their characters and the play to develop organically.

The second night began with a discussion of the geographical location and time period of the play. Shari Wattling, the dramaturge, answered any questions that were raised and informed the actors that she had some material that would be useful for them to look through in order to get a feeling for the period and even some specific information that would be of use to them in developing their characters. Shari was also at rehearsals for the next couple of weeks to answer any questions. We then proceeded to read the script again, this time pausing at the end of each act to discuss what had been read. These discussions were rather free-flowing and were meant to address any question that the actors may have had about the script and to exchange

observations on the play. At the end of this reading I took some time to outline more specifically my approach to and views on the play, emphasizing that it is a very complex play that demands very detailed and hard work to achieve the proper tone.

The next four rehearsals were devoted to rough blocking of the entire play as well as beginning to focus on general interpretation of particular characters and scenes. I asked the entire cast to attend these rehearsals whether they were in the scenes being rehearsed or not. I had several reasons for this request. First of all it saved us all time if the details of the set were understood by everyone from the beginning and it gave all of the actors an opportunity to become familiar with the play in its entirety. It was also an excellent time for the actors to look through the research material that was provided by the dramaturge. Furthermore, by keeping the group together for the remainder of the week the members of the cast were able to get to know each other and begin the process of developing an ensemble. It also helped impress on the actors who had not as much stage time that they were an integral part of the play.

The rough blocking was accomplished quickly, covering one act a night. This time was spent pointing out the salient features of the design, establishing exits and entrances, and in indicating the areas of the

stage that were to be used for each scene. This was not a difficult or time-consuming process as I had planned the blocking in advance of the rehearsals. I used the rationale of the blocking to begin the interpretive work on characters and scenes and to help actors to explore the possibilities in approaching the scenes. Again I encouraged them not to worry about making decisions early but to use the time to explore the text, the general nature of each scene, and to begin thinking about character relationships. Any experimenting with the blocking was restricted to varying the distance between the actors to get a feel for the possible ways in which a scene might be played. Over the next few weeks, as we worked the scenes in more detail, the blocking would be modified and the finer details set in conjunction with the actors. During this time, also, I found that some of the blocking I had planned was not working due to problems in the set. These problems were easily corrected when Jim and I made some modifications to the set during the day. For example, the dining room table in Act Two was moved about the stage several times before we finalized its position. The entrance to Act Three was moved left of the centre line rather than right of it in order to balance the stage and to create a playing area upstage right. These changes were easily adapted to by the actors and by Monday September 21 we were ready for the first runthrough of the entire play.

At the end of this runthrough I was satisfied that the blocking was in very good shape. Jim agreed that we would not need to make any more significant changes to the set or the placement of the furniture, and that the blocking he had seen was clear and finalized enough for him to begin working on the light plot. At this point, as is indicated earlier, we talked through the details of the lighting. At the end of this first week of rehearsals I was confident that the play was progressing as it should and was anxious to begin the next stage of the work.

For the next phase of rehearsals, covering a period of a little over two weeks, the play was divided into french scenes with precise blocks of time set out for each scene. The actors were supplied with the schedule and were called only when they were needed. Surprisingly we rarely got behind schedule and when we did we were usually back on course by the next night. This was a relief as it was the only time in the schedule that could be allotted for slow, detailed work on small portions of the play and for close work with individual actors. With not much time set out for this, it proved to be a very intense and hard-working time for the actors.

Many facets of acting were worked on during this period but the prime focus of the work was on reaching a consensus with the actors on interpretation of scenes

and character. This involved close attention to the text to determine motivation, relationships between characters, and the movement and transitions within a scene and from one scene to the next. The subtext of the play was explored by having the scene played in various ways and sometimes by radically altering the blocking in order to reveal a new dimension to scenes. Arriving at the correct acting style and tone of the play was very tricky but it was necessary to begin working on this right away. For example, Vanya is often dead serious, bitter and morose at the same time that he is playacting and appearing facetious. Although there was very little time for improvisations and games, it was sometimes useful to get actors to play a scene with various, and often contradictory, motivations and attitudes. This helped to clarify the complexity of the play and to make clear to the actor the goal of putting all of this together. This was sometimes a confusing time for the actors as they were asked to work on many things at once. To help alleviate some of the panic that resulted I tried to find time in the rehearsal to speak with some of the actors individually in order to review what we had done and to suggest what they should be focussing on in their own work with the script. In some cases I met with actors outside of rehearsal to talk through the scenes and the development of their characters. In conjunction with the script and

character work we also worked towards tightening up the blocking and exploring different qualities of movement. Thus, the work on the meaning, style and focus of scenes was being translated into physical movement on stage. The actors began introducing some bits of business and the smaller blocking such as whether it was better to sit or stand for a scene were being finalized. I also began emphasizing the need to pay attention to how they were moving on stage and to allow the movement to enhance and support their reading. For example, the actors had a tendency, when asked to pace during a scene, to do so at a constant and monotonous rhythm. I was particularly strict about shuffling and adding moves, crosses and gestures that were unnecessary. This aspect of the acting became more of an urgent concern in the later weeks of rehearsal.

My greatest fear during this period was that I was trying to get too much accomplished too quickly and that the actors would become discouraged and frustrated. This danger was avoided for the most part, however, because of the way in which the rehearsals were scheduled. Each rehearsal was given to working several french scenes and then running the scenes that we had worked at the end of the night. This provided an opportunity to review what had been done and for me to give very specific notes on the scenes. After completing each act in this way we would then take at

least two hours to run the act and to discuss and work any problems. I constantly reminded the actors that this was the period of rehearsal where we could take our time and work out all of the details. As we progressed through the play in this way we took time to run some of the acts several times before we had to worry about a complete runthrough of the play. Consequently, some props and costumes could be added gradually without too much distraction for the actors. Additionally, the actors were surprised when I stressed that I would prefer that they not worry about getting off book early and that at this point they should be paying close attention to the script. As a result, the actors had no problem with getting off book when I finally announced an off-book date for the end of the third week. This was a great encouragement to me as it signalled an understanding of what they were doing and no undue focus on getting the lines right.

Midway through the fourth week on Wednesday October 7, we had the first off-book run of the entire play. I felt that overall the run went well and that the play was in good shape. As always happens with these runs the actors were preoccupied with remembering the lines and the blocking. They were remarkably good at this and needed to call for lines only a few times but as a result much of the finer work we had done over the past two weeks was no longer evident. I reminded myself not

to panic over this and made notes only of what I saw to be the major problems to be worked out. I gave general notes to the actors which consisted mainly in reminding them of what we had worked on which needed to resurface. Act One was generally too boring and the actors were getting trapped into portraying boredom on stage by appearing bored themselves. Therefore it lacked the energy and drive needed. This was also true of Act Two since the scenes were being played quietly, placidly and without the needed intensity. Act Three was in better shape, perhaps because we had worked on it more recently, but the biggest problem at this point was that the argument between Vanya and the professor was not building to a climax and Vanya was lacking the rage and energy necessary for the scene. Act Four was the most effective and I was confident that it would improve even more as the problems in Act Three were resolved.

Since the cue-to-cue and the final technical rehearsals were now only a week away, the focus of the next rehearsals was on getting the play ready for performance. It was now necessary for the actors to begin working more independently as there was little time for any detailed or individual work with actors. For the next week we would do runs of at least two acts each night with several complete runs of the play scheduled. We began this process on Thursday night by running Acts One and Two and having Grant Paterson

attend in order to comment and offer suggestions on any vocal concerns. This proved to be very useful as Grant and I met after the run and talked about our reactions to it. Aside from some inarticulation problems with one actor whom Grant agreed to work with separately, he saw no technical problems with the voices. His concerns with vocal quality were all connected with acting problems that I had also been giving notes about. We agreed on the nature of these problems and I decided that we should give notes to the actors together so that we could reinforce each other's observations.

The main problems were those noted from the previous evening. There was a general lack of energy and a kind of reticence on the part of the actors. Generally they were not connecting emotionally to the lines and appeared rather uninterested in what they were saying on stage and a sense of boredom, monotony and tedium had entered the show. I connected this also with the actors' carelessness about movement and general lack of physical awareness. Both Astrov and Vanya, in particular, when pacing during long speeches tended to do so far too consistently, neither varying the speed nor the reason for the pacing. The result was a rather monotonous and low-key reading. I explained this to the actors and took part of this rehearsal and the next few rehearsals to pay particular attention to the problem. The actors were encouraged by Grant's comments since

there were few technical problems with the voices. I used the occasion to reinforce to the actors that they now needed to begin thinking about performance, that the play was now in their hands, and they needed to begin claiming it.

To reinforce this I spent the rest of the evening working with Vanya and Astrov on physicalizing their lines. In the process we tightened up the blocking by eliminating any unnecessary movement and found variety and interest in the movement and how the body was being used. Through this work I realized that the actors had spent so much time thinking about what they were doing that it was actually slowing them down. I once again reinforced that we were now at the stage of rehearsal when they must trust that the work is done and from then on we would become more and more concerned with pacing and timing.

Friday's rehearsal began with a speech and pep talk with the cast to this effect. This rehearsal was spent in working trouble scenes in Acts Three and Four, focussing on pace and getting transitions clear. As we ran and reran scenes I kept stressing the physical quality again and getting the scenes up to speed; there was no time to think. After working in this manner for three hours we ran both acts and the results were astounding. The actors were energized and the scenes in Act Three moved swiftly and were far more animated.

Consequently Act Four had the right amount of energy and could be played at the slower speed it needed. We were all quite excited after this run and it was a good way to end the week.

On Sunday, October 11 we did another complete run of the play. The set was now complete, the crew was available for the first time to change the sets and as we had had a cue setting that morning, Jim began introducing lights into this run. The acting had improved since the last time that we had run the entire play. The actors were becoming more natural and relaxed in the roles and the timing was improving, but I felt that it was still far from where it needed to be in terms of energy and drive. At this rehearsal Jim and I decided to remove a large part of the set in Act Three. A sideboard and bookcase upstage were removed since I really had no use for them and they took away from the presence of the big archway upstage centre. This was a great improvement as it was a distraction and did not affect the actors at all.

Monday night's rehearsal consisted of work on Acts One and Two and a run of both acts. These runs were now necessary in order to give the crew practise in changing the sets and reducing the time needed for the changes. The run at the end of the evening was disheartening as I saw very little improvement in the pace or energy level of the actors. I began to be very afraid that the

actors had been worked too hard and that boredom and exhaustion had set in permanently. It was now difficult to give the actors a night off as the crew and the technical people were becoming more involved and needed the runs in order to iron out problems. Obviously some new energy needed to be infused into the group to get them through the technical week and ready for performance.

I turned my frustration and fear into an energetic pep talk at the beginning of Tuesday night's rehearsal using a combination of scare tactics and encouragement. Essentially I told them that every scene needed more energy, focus and clarity and that I was confident that they could do this. They should remember to trust the work they had done up to this point and begin having fun with the show. I reinforced this spirit with some exercises before we ran Acts Three and Four. To reinforce the notion of physicalization we ran some scenes as a silent movie which was fun and got my point across much better than anything else had. There was a remarkable difference in the level of energy and the pace and even the volume of the show. Since I thought part of the problem was that the actors were unsure of their lines we did an Italian run at the end of the night. This was to boost the actors' confidence in their lines and to indicate that some of those scenes could be played much faster and they did not need the

time to think before acting. The actors had a lot of fun with this and I felt it had the desired effect.

Wednesday's cue-to-cue went very smoothly with few problems. We finished the rehearsal early with all of the cues worked through thoroughly. Part of the reason for this was that Jim had introduced the lights early and we had sorted out most of the problems in the previous couple of rehearsals. Also the crew had begun practicing the set changes earlier than we had originally scheduled. All of the major problems were now identified and Brian Kerby could meet and work with them separately. There were some problems with sound cues which continued throughout the week, as some of the levels were difficult to fix and some cues had to be rebuilt. We also used this rehearsal to integrate the actors, for the first time, into the scene changes between acts. All in all, for the actors, this night was a bit of a break since they were not required to act and could simply hang out and rest up a little.

On Thursday and Friday the costumes, props and makeup were added. These additions were not terribly distracting to the actors as we had been using most of the props and costumes throughout the week. The makeup was more of a problem, as from then to opening night we had continually to ensure that the makeup for the old characters would appear realistic. Although this improved, the result was never wholly satisfactory.

There were continuing problems with sound as the levels were different each night. They had to be reset, some technical repairs made, and speakers reassigned in order to get the desired quality.

The cast was now getting very excited about the show and with nearly all of the design elements completed they were looking more and more towards performance. The runs were generally very good though I was still troubled by a lack of energy, and a desire on the part of one of the actors to play the scenes down and so subtly that nothing was reading and the effect was in fact boring. I didn't know if this was a result of confusion about the role, or just a lack of confidence about his work. In any case I had very little time during these two nights to address the problem since most of my time was taken up in technical concerns, timing of light cues, sound levels, set changes, make up and costumes. As a result I had little time to give the cast notes or to do any work with them. I worked at correcting this problem before Sunday's run. Scenes were reworked quickly to establish where more energy was needed and to remind the actors about pacing, clarifying movement and infuse life into the scenes. By Sunday I did not need to concern myself as much with technical matters so for the last time was able to give some detailed and specific notes to the cast. Though they were not plentiful they were helpful in clearing up

some misunderstandings and in reassuring the cast that they were ready for performance. The final dress rehearsal on Monday made it clear that what was needed more than anything at this point was an audience. The show was very solid, technical difficulties were solved and the next major leap for the actors would be to get an infusion of energy from an audience.

Chapter Six: Retrospective

Throughout the run of Uncle Vanya I was able to view the production from more of an audience member's standpoint. I attended seven of the eight performances of the show and during that time was able to assess the work a little more critically and objectively. Since that time I have become more aware of some of the flaws in the production and have had the opportunity to reconsider some of the points. This retrospective is not meant to be an exhaustive critique of the production but rather an indication of what I consider to be some of its major flaws and, in hindsight, how they might have been avoided and corrected. However, I must first qualify these remarks by stating that I was very pleased and impressed by the quality of work, commitment, and assistance from everyone throughout the entire process. I was likewise extremely pleased with the outcome of the work and believe that the entire production was very successful in achieving what we had set out to do.

The set design for the show expressed well what I considered the play to be about and I was especially happy that we were able to realize our plans and concept for the design, given the time and budgetary restraints. I feel now, however, that we made a mistake in the decision to leave the stage floor black. Jim and I had only briefly discussed, early in the process, whether the floor should be painted a different colour and

whether rugs should be used in some scenes. We decided to leave it a rather neutral black and would later try some rugs on the floor, especially for the Act Three scenes. I now believe that the black floor took away from the overall design, as it left the set rather ungrounded and the furniture looked like it was floating in space. Besides, as the run progressed, the paint on the floor began to strip away and it ended up looking rather shoddy. Also, we never did get around to considering using rugs on the floor. Admittedly, the introduction of rugs would have complicated the scene changes even more but it was certainly worth a try. I believe the floor either needed painting or needed rugs on it to tie the set together. In hindsight, I am not aware of how this came about, except that it escaped my notice until it was too late.

I thought the costume design was also excellent and was delighted with Lisa's creations. Two rather minor points however continued to be overlooked and I regret not solving them during the dress rehearsals. I thought it important that Vanya's clothes be quite rumpled and dishevelled in Act One, both as a character note and to remind us that he had just been taking a nap. Astrov's Act One costume should have had a more worn look; he always appeared far too crisp and clean considering that he was a working doctor and was travelling great distances. A more worn look in Act One would also have

helped establish the tiredness of the character and the workaday drudgery of his life. These points were discussed with Lisa in our meetings and she agreed with them. Somehow these ideas got lost in the execution of the design. I regret not having spotted the problem earlier or pushing to have it corrected, especially as they were easy to fix.

Once again, I believe the actors' work was of a very high calibre and they did a commendable job with a difficult and subtle script. In the end a director is never wholly satisfied with the degree of complexity and intensity that is achieved in the acting, but I was certainly satisfied that we were successful in presenting a strong ensemble of acting and some very fine and strong performances. Vanya's performance was quite strong and he was successful in carrying much of the play. I would have liked, however, to have seen more of his vulnerability come through and have seen a more complex and layered character. Since I had worked closely and intensely with the actor, it is difficult to identify what I would do differently to achieve this. Perhaps, as a director, I did not give the actor the time and space to discover the complexities of the role for himself but was too ready with suggestions and explanations.

The role of Astrof is perhaps even more subtle and complex and much of this was lost in the production. At

times, Astrov was portrayed as a buffoon and a rather comical character. This resulted, I think, from a tendency to lead the actor away from too heavy and a morose interpretation of the character. There are contradictions inherent in the character and as the many facets of his character were explored in rehearsal, we never quite succeeded in integrating them into a single personality. Late in the rehearsal process I was alarmed by the actor's tendency to play the boredom and world weariness of the character far too strongly so that he became uninteresting, morose and dispassionate. To correct this problem we tried emphasizing the humour of the character and his more basic motivations. As a result, Astrov appeared far more simple and less mysterious than he was intended to be. Perhaps we did not begin integrating the character early enough in the rehearsal process. In any case, it is perhaps the most difficult character in the play for an actor to get a handle on since he reveals so little of his real feelings. We got trapped into making the character too clear and thereby losing the complexity and the mystery.

Nevertheless, none of these problems affected the production drastically and I was pleased with the outcome. All in all, I thought that the production worked well and came close to realizing what I consider to be Chekhov's intentions.

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