

# **An Extraordinary Ordinarity: Anton Chekhov and the Creation of Modern Realist Theater (Russ 551)**

**TR 15:30-16:45**

INSTRUCTOR: Andrew D. Kaufman  
[akaufman@virginia.edu](mailto:akaufman@virginia.edu)

Office Hours:

The world of Chekhov's plays is inhabited by ordinary, yet charming, people doing ordinary things and suffering in ordinary, yet deeply real and touching ways. In presenting such a world to his late nineteenth-century Russian audience, Chekhov challenged many of the assumptions upon which most previous theater, Russian and otherwise, had been based: the idea that a good play must contain riveting events; the idea that a plot must have a clear linear progression; the idea that solid theatrical performance must be made up of "stars" and "supporting actors"; the idea the comedy must always be funny and tragedy always sad; and the idea that a good plays contains a clear moral message. None of this applies in Chekhov's case. He worked out an entirely new form of dramatic writing, because his particular vision of life required him to do so.

This seminar is intended to introduce students to the unique technique, poetics, and deeply humane worldview of Chekhov's theater. We will carefully read and enjoy Chekhov's major plays, as well as his earlier farces and one-acts, with a particular focus on how text, subtext, imagery, acting choices, directorial vision, and physical environment contribute to the overall theatrical experience. Students will be challenged to use their creative imagination, as well as their analytical skills, in order to penetrate the rich, delicate artistic fabric of Chekhov's theater. As part of this course, students will be asked to make short in-class presentations, including optional scene and monologue performances.

Some questions to think about during this course: What are the theatrical techniques Chekhov uses in his plays to create a vision of human life as something extraordinary in its very ordinariness? How can Chekhov's plays help us to understand the problems of our own contemporary world? To what extent does our perception of Chekhov's drama change once we approach Chekhov's texts from the point of view of performers and directors?

## Anton Chekhov and the Creation of Modern Realist Theater

### Course Objectives

By the end of the course you should:

1. Have a deepened appreciation of the dramatic art of Chekhov.
2. Recognize some of the salient themes, motifs, and dramatic techniques employed by Chekhov in his plays.
3. Have a greater appreciation of the way in which theater can be a uniquely powerful medium through which to explore contemporary and universal human problems.
4. Begin to define your own areas of scholarly interest in Chekhov's theater and to develop a scholarly program

### Instructional Method

The course will take place in a lecture/seminar format, combined with student presentations. The instructor will sometimes begin a class with several minutes of lecture, followed by an open-ended question designed to stimulate lively discussion and debate. Because much of the learning in this course will take place during the classroom discussions, it is imperative that students come to class well prepared. As part of class, students will have the opportunity to approach Chekhov from the point of view of actors and directors. No background or experience in the performing arts is expected, but a willingness to take intellectual and creative risks is encouraged.

### Readings

Since this is intended to be a graduate seminar, all of the readings from Chekhov's plays will be in Russian. However students are encouraged, when necessary, to double-check their readings against English translations. This is also a useful exercise in itself, as it gives you the opportunity to compare the effectiveness of various translations. Three of the best recent translations of Chekhov's plays are:

Paul Schmidt, trans.. *The Plays of Anton Chekhov* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998) (At bookstore)

Eugene Bristow, ed.. *Anton Chekhov's Plays* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1977) (There is also a wealth of useful critical and background materials in this edition.) (At bookstore)

Vera Gottlieb, *Chekhov: The 'Vaudevilles' and Other Short Works* (Smith and Kraus, 1998). (At bookstore)

## **Anton Chekhov and the Creation of Modern Realist Theater**

\*Another extremely useful and frequently quoted primary source:

Simon Karlinsky, trans. and ed., and Michael Henry Heim, trans.. *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought: Selected Letters and Commentary* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1973). (At bookstore)

Two useful books, which give a good, concise overview of the Stanislavsky system:

Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski and the Actor* (Methuen, 1998). (On Reserve)

Sonia Moore, *The Stanislavski System: The Professional Training of an Actor* (Penguin Books, 1984). (On Reserve)

All of the other required readings mentioned in the syllabus are available for purchase at the bookstore. They are also on reserve at Clemons.

### **Videos**

Since this class is intended to give you an appreciation of the full theatrical experience of Chekhov's plays, we will be watching several filmed versions of Chekhov's plays. All of the videos mentioned in the syllabus are on reserve at Clemons. I'll try to set up screenings prior to class, but you should also feel free to view the films ahead of time at your own convenience. I've also put some additional videos on reserve at Clemons, which you may want to watch, especially if you think you might be interested in writing a term paper about different directors' interpretations of Chekhov's plays.

All of the videos are on reserve at Clemons.

### **Course Requirements**

1. Attendance at all lectures and discussions
2. Oral presentation on an aspect of Chekhov and his theater (see syllabus for details).
3. Book Review (3 pp.) of any work of Chekhov theater criticism (to be written and also summarized orally for the rest of the class.)
4. Final Project(\*\*). Due Friday May 13. Please be sure to consult the instructor and have a proposal to me for review no later than April 12. For this project you may choose one of the two options:

### **Grading**

Class Participation: 40%

Oral presentation: 10%

Book Review: 10%

Final Project: 40%

**\*\*FINAL PROJECT**

(Proposal due no later than April 12)

**Option One. TRADITIONAL RESEARCH PAPER**

A traditional research paper (15 pp.) on any aspect of Chekhov's theater. This may be a close reading and interpretation of one or more plays, an analysis of a specific theme, motif, or technique that appears in multiple plays, a historical or theoretic (re)contextualization of Chekhov's plays, or an analysis of some aspect in the history of Chekhov criticism. You may also wish to analyze various theatrical and cinematic performances of Chekhov's plays, some of which we will be viewing in this class.

**Option Two. CREATING THE SCORE OF A ROLE FOR A SPECIFIC SCENE**

Imagine that you have just been HIRED AS AN ACTOR by Konstantin Stanislavsky, Artistic Director of the Moscow Art Theater, sometime in the late 1890's, and your job is to bring to life a Chekhovian character before an audience. Choose a character that you can relate to and a prominent scene in which that character appears. Applying everything you know about Chekhov, his artistic intentions, and Stanislavsky's system, create the score of the role for that character for that particular scene. Include an analysis of the given external circumstances of the scene (Where? When? Who? What? Why?) and a description of the circumstances in your character's life leading up to this scene, going all the way back to childhood. For this you will have to use both textual details from the play, knowledge of the socio-historical context, and also your own imagination to fill in the blanks. Describe your character's objective(s) in this scene and the inner impulses and inner actions that you, the actor, will need to create in order to make the character real to you. For this project you are encouraged to follow the creative process outlined by Stanislavsky in *Creating a Role*. While not a traditional scholarly paper, this paper will require you to use many of the analytical skills expected of a good literary scholar. For example, in order to do this project correctly, you will have to do a close, sensitive, and thorough reading of your chosen scene within the context of the whole play. And you will also have to understand the emotional and psychological nuances of your chosen character.

For this exercise don't be afraid to experiment on your feet just as Stanislavsky describes, for instance, on pp.56-62 of *Creating a Role*. You might even want to video-tape yourself working through this scene, trying different approaches. And you are welcome to turn in that video tape with your final written assignment.

The final written assignment should be a clear 15-page paper detailing your entire process of creating the role for the scene.

**Option Three. CREATING A DIRECTOR'S SCORE FOR A SPECIFIC SCENE**

Imagine that you have been HIRED AS A DIRECTOR by the Moscow Art Theater sometime in the late 1890's, and your job is to bring to life one scene from one of Chekhov's major before an audience. Create a director's score (a la Stanislavsky's *Rezhisserskie ekzempliary*, which we will be studying) for that scene. Here you will need to use all of your knowledge of Chekhov to make detailed interpretive choices about actors' actions, subtext (objectives/emotional states), movements, relationship to one another on stage and to their physical surroundings. You will also want to pay some attention to what kinds of furniture and props should be on stage, and how they will contribute to the overall theatrical effect. In short, you are the director of this scene, and it is your job to arrange everything in your imagination so that, when executed, the scene will come to life in accordance with your—and Chekhov's—intended vision. For this project, you will need to do a very close, sensitive analysis of the scenes you have chosen, and pay close attention to all of the available textual clues about character, motivation, setting, mood, and the role of the scene within the larger act and within the play as a whole. Your score will need to be imaginative and textually justified.

**Anton Chekhov and the Creation of Modern Realist Theater**

**COURSE SYLLABUS**

<b>DATE</b>	<b>TOPICS</b>	<b>READINGS/VIEWINGS</b>
Thursday, Jan. 20	Introduction. Chekhov and the Creation of Modern Realist Theater	Chekhov's remarks on the need for a new kind of drama, stage reality, on the role of the artist in society
	<b>Chekhov's Early Theatrical Experiments</b>	
Tuesday, Jan. 25		"Predlozhenie" "Svad'ba," "Med'ved'"
Thursday, Jan. 27		"Na bol'shoi doroge" "Tatiana repina" "Iubilei
Tuesday, Feb. 1		"Noch' pered sudom" "O vrede tabaka,""
Thursday, Feb. 3	<b>Student Presentation</b> on Chekhov and Vaudeville Tradition	"Lebedinaia piesnia" "V Moskve "Tragik ponevole"
Tuesday, Feb. 8		<i>Ivanov</i>
Wednesday, Feb. 9	<b>Film Viewing in Clemons:</b> <i>Neokonchennaia p'esa dlia mekhanicheskogo pianino</i>	9 Feb 2005/ Wed/2030-2400hrs Room 322A
Thursday, Feb. 10	<b>Student Presentation</b> on the movie, <i>Neokonchennaia p'esa dlia mekhanicheskogo pianino</i>	Discuss Film: <i>Neokonchennaia p'esa dlia mekhanicheskogo pianino</i> (based on play, <i>Platonov</i> )
	<b>The Moscow Art Theater, Psychological Realism, and Stanislavsky's "System"</b>	
Tuesday, Feb. 15	In class video: Mosfilm, Films for the Humanities, "Stanislavsky, Maker of Modern Theater" --The difference between stylized acting and truthful acting	Konstantin Stanislavsky. <i>My Life in Art</i> , J.J. Robbins, trans. (New York: Routledge, 1948), pp. 3-11, 58-108, 148-168, 288-375, 458-492, 563-572  Vsevolod Meyerhold. "The Naturalistic Theater and the Theater of Mood" in Eduard Brown, ed. And trans. Meyerhold on the Theater (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), pp. 23-34. (On Reserve and also in-class handout)  <u>Recommended:</u> David Allen, "Chekhov and Stanislavski" in David Allen, <i>Performing Chekhov</i> (Rutledge, 2000), pp. 9-64. (On Reserve)  <u>Optional:</u> Konstantin Stanislavsky. <i>On the Art of the Stage</i> , David Magarshack, trans. (London: Faber and Faber, 1950), "The System and Methods of Creative Art," pp.

**Anton Chekhov and the Creation of Modern Realist Theater**

		89-127.
Thursday, Feb. 17		Konstantin Stanislavsky, <i>An Actor Prepares</i> pp. 1-138.
Tuesday, Feb. 25		Konstantin Stanislavsky, <i>An Actor Prepares</i> pp. 139-336.
Thursday, Feb. 27		Konstantin Stanislavsky, <i>Creating a Role</i> , pp. 3-84, pp. 151-193
	<b>Chekhov's Major Plays: Poetics, Thematics in Action</b>	
Tuesday, March 1	<i>The Seagull</i>	<i>Chaika</i> Act I,II
Tuesday, March 3	<i>The Seagull</i>	<i>Chaika</i> Act III, IV
Tuesday, March 8	SPRING BREAK	
Thursday, March 10	SPRING BREAK	
Tuesday, March 15	<i>The Seagull: The Actor's Perspective</i>	Jean Hackett, <i>The Actor's Chekhov: Nikos Psacharopoulos and the Company of the Williamstown Theater Festival, on the plays of Anton Chekhov</i> (Smith and Kraus, 1992), pp.1-55, 70-80, 106-115, 214-228, 233-236, 287-93
Thursday, March 17	<i>The Seagull: The Director's Perspective</i>	<u>Stanislavski's Director's Copy</u> <i>Rezhisserskie ekzemplary K.S. Stanislavskogo v shesti tomakh, 1898-1939</i> (Moscow: <i>Iskusstvo</i> , 1981), vol. 2, pp. 52-105
Tuesday, March 22	<i>The Seagull: The Director's Perspective</i>	<u>Stanislavski's Director's Copy</u> <i>Rezhisserskie ekzemplary K.S. Stanislavskogo v shesti tomakh, 1898-1939</i> (Moscow: <i>Iskusstvo</i> , 1981), vol. 2, pp. 106-166
Wednesday, March 23	<b>Film Viewing in Clemons</b> <i>Chaika</i> (Mosfilm, 1971) <i>The Seagull</i> (Broadway Theater Archive, 2002)	23 March 2005/Wed/1900-2230hrs Room 322A
Thursday, March 24	<i>The Seagull</i> in performance <b>(Guest Lecturer,</b> Professor/Actor Richard Warner, Dept. of Drama, UVA)	Discuss Film: <i>Chaika</i> (Mosfilm, 1971) Discuss Film: <i>The Seagull</i> (Broadway Theater Archive, 2002)
Tuesday, March 29	<b>Student Presentation:</b> Comparison of different versions of <i>The Seagull</i> from point of view of acting, directing	<i>Diadia vania</i> , Act I, II
Thursday, March 31	<i>Uncle Vanya</i>	<i>Diadia vania</i> , Act III, IV
Monday, April 4	<b>Film Viewing in Clemons</b> "Vanya on 42 <sup>nd</sup> Street"	4 April 2005/Mon/1900-2230hr Room 322A
Tuesday, April 5	<i>Uncle Vanya: A post-</i>	Discuss Film: "Vanya on

**Anton Chekhov and the Creation of Modern Realist Theater**

	modernist American interpretation <b>Student Presentation:</b> Analysis of Mamet's interpretation of original play	42 <sup>nd</sup> Street"
Thursday, April 7	<i>The Three Sisters</i>	<i>Tri sestry</i> , Act I, II
Tuesday, April 12	<i>The Three Sisters</i> <b>Student final project proposals due</b>	<i>Tri sestry</i> , Act III, IV
Wednesday, April 13	<b>Film Viewing in Clemons</b> <i>The Three Sisters</i> , dir. Lawrence Olivier, The National Theater Company of England	13 April 2005/Wed/1900- 2230hrs Room 407
Thursday, April 14	<i>The Three Sisters</i> on the British Stage	Discuss Film: <i>The Three Sisters</i> , dir. Lawrence Olivier, The National Theater Company of England  <u>Optional (Stanislavski's Director's Copy):</u> <i>Konstantin Stanislavskii, Rezhisserskie ekzempliary K.S. Stanislavskogo v shesti tomakh, 1898-1939</i> (Moscow: <i>Iskusstvo</i> , 1981), vol. 3, pp. 87-289.
Tuesday, April 19	<i>The Cherry Orchard</i>	<i>Vishnievyi sad</i> , Act I, II
Thursday, April 21	<i>The Cherry Orchard</i>	<i>Vishnievyi sad</i> , Act III, IV
Monday, April 25	<b>Film Viewing in Clemons</b> <i>The Cherry Orchard</i> , dir. Michael Cacoyannas, 2002. Also watch interview with director.	25 April 2005/Wed/1900- 2230hrs Room 322A
Tuesday, April 26	<i>The Cherry Orchard</i> on the big screen. <b>Student Presentation:</b> Analysis of film version of play from point of view of acting, directing, interpretation	Discuss Film: <i>The Cherry Orchard</i> , dir. Michael Cacoyannas, 2002 and interview with director.  <u>Optional (Stanislavski's Director's Copy):</u> <i>Konstantin Stanislavskii, Rezhisserskie ekzempliary K.S. Stanislavskogo v shesti tomakh, 1898-1939</i> (Moscow: <i>Iskusstvo</i> , 1981), vol. 3, pp. 291-462.
Thursday, April 28	Discuss Student Projects	
Tuesday, May 3	Discuss Student Projects and Wrap-Up	
Friday, May 13	<b>FINAL PROJECT DUE</b>	