

# A RESPECT FOR COMEDY: CHEKHOV'S VAUDEVILLES AND HIS RELATIONSHIP TO THAT THING CALLED "PLOT."

By Constance Congdon, playwright



Chekhov's family was one generation up from slavery and lived through terrible hardship, sneaking out of town with their belongings because they couldn't afford to live in their house, the house in which Chekhov had been born. (He stayed behind to finish high school, sleeping on a pallet in the dining room of that house, after the current residents had gone to bed). This is also the family that played elaborate jokes on one another and did family theatrics, after their orthodox, physically abusive, God-obsessed, scary father had gone to sleep.

Humor is a way of dealing with pain. And irony, Chekhov's first language, is the skylight entrance to perspective, the view from above that allows any of us to look down on our lives as we live them. In this way, irony is an out-of-body experience and one of the only "mystical" events Dr. Anton Chekhov could believe in. The other mystical experiences were in what the natural world gave him, as in the "power of birds" that used to fly and not know why they fly, the forests, the "magic lake" of *The Seagull*. (I want to add to this list, the strangeness of the ordinary, as in the far-off sound of a cable breaking in *The Cherry Orchard* or the unearthly singing of a top spinning in *Three Sisters*).

So why is Chekhov's work frequently considered sad and heavy and morose and "ohmygod do we have to go to this play?" I will paraphrase what Chekhov said: "It is Konstantine Stanislavsky who has made my characters into crybabies." As a playwright, I will add my irritation with the misinterpretation of the Chehovian phrase, "laughter through tears" as represented so often as "laughter through TEARS," and lots and lots of tears.

So, this is how Chekhov should work and does work when it's done well. You applaud, leave the theater, get into the cab, and as soon as you finally come to yourself and are alone, you find yourself crying, with a sort of deep grief and compassion for humankind, including yourself. Those are the tears that aren't "crybaby" tears and they are experienced in private.

One would hope that any group of "theater-makers" would know this axiom: Just as a performer laughing usually kills laughter in the audience, so does crying. However, I admit that I may have a particular sensitivity (or lack of it) for this penchant for tears on stage. People crying brings out the beast in me. I want to slap them. I, too, have a family story of hardship and would complain, except my father had a worse one, and his mother who escaped from a whorehouse where she had been sold with her sisters by their drunken father trumps all of the stories since. Raised with the following credos of most hardscrabble Scots-Irish, Welsh, and, well, just a lot of people, about crying:

1. We don't have time for tears.
2. If you cry, you'll make me cry. {See #1}
3. Whatever you're crying about isn't as bad as all the things the rest of us have NOT cried about over the years, decades, centuries, millennia, etc.
4. If you keep crying, I'll give you something to cry about. (Number 4 pretty much trumps all the others and works well).

So I feel I understand something of Anton Chekhov's respect for, indeed, need for humor and am amazed when his humor isn't allowed to live in his performed work.

*Swan Song, The Tragedian in Spite of Himself, The Proposal, The Wedding, The Celebration, The Evils of Tobacco, and The Bear* are all “one-acts” and used too, too often for festivals and student work and, consequently, rarely done well. Why? Because of the tendency to work on the “farce” instead of the reality of the situations and then not trusting their own sense of what is funny, and, instead, laying on fake ideas of what should be “funny” in a classic work. I’ve seen two productions of the vaudevilles done extremely well. The first was *The Evils of Tobacco* in London’s West End, starring Rowan Atkinson who was very funny, indeed, as one would expect him to be. Another stunning production was of *The Bear*, a student production done with direct address, an almost omniscient and creepy servant, and a kind of stand-up-comic-Louis C K-drive that gave it the heightened performance style that worked so well for the piece.

Chekhov began as a writer of comedy, writing under the nom de plume, “Antoshe Chekhonte,” given to him by a teacher, one Father Pokrovsky, when Chekhov was still in high school. Chekhov wrote as “Antonsha Chekhonte” for a comic journal *The Stutterer*, largely to amuse his brothers, but to the delight of a larger readership. Chekhov had tremendous respect for comedy and his sense of humor continued to be undaunted by the challenging events of his life. Visitors write of how it was impossible to spend time with Chekhov without bursting out in laughter and how ebullient he was, in spite of his, at times, enormous health problems.

After moving to Moscow to pursue an education in medicine, Chekhov continued to write, now for money, for comic journals, such as *The Alarm Clock* and *The Dragon-fly* and published his first collection of stories, *Fairy Tales of Melpomeme*, as Antonsha Chekhonte, in 1884. The year that Chekhov’s tuberculosis was first diagnosed was the year that “Chekhonte” ended his career with the publication of a second collection of short stories, *Motley Tales*, and “Anton Chekhov” published the first version of his comic monologue *The Evils of Tobacco*. The one-act comedies, “vaudevilles”, come in the following years, one written specifically for an actor who inspired the character with his blustery, good-natured brutishness. When Chekhov wrote the farce for the Korsh Theater, Moscow Art Theater actor Nikolai Solovstov played the main male character, Smirnov.

Other ideas for short comic plays came to Chekhov, “gushing up in me like oil in the wells of Baku.” In the self-deprecating tone common in Russian writers, Chekhov seems almost apologetic about these vaudevilles, calling them “airy trifles for the stage” and he claimed to be afraid that he will be “excommunicated,” if the other writers at *The Northern Herald* find out how much he enjoyed this seemingly empty genre. In a letter to his friend Polonsky, he expresses these fears, “What am I to do, if my hands get to itching and want to commit something ooh-la-la? All my efforts to be serious come to nothing and my earnestness invariably alternates with vulgarity. I suppose it is in my horoscope.” Chekhov even confessed to his father-figure, Suvorin that he will write vaudevilles and “live off them. . .when I’m all written out.”

Of course, these comments are public ones and express what writers sometime feel, that comedy is a lesser genre. However, Chekhov is talking more about the emptiness of a certain kind of plot, rather than tone. Comedy as a tone is his first love, his “default button.”

It may seem ironic that Chekhov felt that he had so many plots of vaudevilles at his fingertips when he seemed to have so little interest in “plot” *per se* in his later plays. However, Chekhov first began as a writer of fiction. And as a fiction writer, Chekhov’s relationship to “plot,” the way that term is understood in traditional dramatic works, as a mechanism that drives the story, is as varied as his stories. There are so many terms for Chekhov’s dramatic structure, plot rarely being one of them. : internal action, reflective action, the “layering of circumstance,” (this latter phrase coined by one of my students, Leslie Roth).

I think that the difference between plot in drama and in fiction has mostly to do with the audience. A reader of a piece of fiction can get up, have a cup of tea, return hours later and resume reading. A theatre audience member can’t do this. They will miss the rest of the play and disturb the other audience members. For this reason, plot is necessary in the theater because it keeps people in their seats. This is why suspense is such a good plot device. An audience member can be afraid to look away for fear of missing something. However, a reader, the way fiction reaches its audience, can re-read if they miss something. Events in plays need to be

“dramatic” and what is dramatic tends to be something bad happening. This leads to so many dramatic works (films, also) about just that—something bad happening. This has resulted in an entire literary culture built on the creation of experiences of bad things happening, because good things happening isn’t substantive. Good things can happen in stories but only after a lot of bad things happen first. The happy ending needs to be “earned.” We are immersed in recreational fictional experience based on bad things happening!

What Chekhov offers is a different idea of what is ‘something bad happening’. Although in his four plays contain suicides and a death by duel, those events do not have nearly the same weight as the heartbreak of someone in love with a person who cannot return their love. These bad happenings are the result of individual ordinary human folly, and, even then, the events of his plays are cumulative and engulf the audience like a river flowing inexorably to the sea.

What Chekhov gives us is what comedy gives us—perspective. His viewpoint is comic, in that it is detached. By layering ordinary speech with its trivial subject matter with philosophizing with heartbreak, Chekhov caresses us with familiarity while he endows us with omniscience since we are the only ones who know the whole story the story of all the characters. We *learn* the full extent of the pain of Sonia and Vanya in *Uncle Vanya* because we’ve been privy to all the scenes leading up to the end. This cumulative knowledge is much more like the experience of reading fiction than the experiencing of a standard plot of a play, a plot usually based on external events.

If I may jump ahead to a play he called “a comedy,” much to the bewilderment of generations to come, *The Cherry Orchard* is the clearest example of Chekhov using a plot device as a machine that runs underneath the play. It’s an old story and a compelling one, centering on whether a beloved piece of property will be sold and what will the people involved do once it is sold? Here, I believe, Chekhov came upon his most efficient plot device. The selling of the cherry orchard is like a machine that requires very little stage time for maintenance, thereby allowing Chekhov to write the way he wanted to write, exploring character and moments, those little eddies in the waters of experience that he could and did juxtapose. He was

aware of his natural inclinations towards the comic, again, in his letter to Polansky: “In spite of all my attempts at being serious the result is nothing; with me the serious alternates with the trivial!”

This landmark alternating of the serious with the trivial is an expression of Chekhov’s often-quoted aesthetic: “*Let the things that happen on stage be just as complex and yet as simple as they are in real life. For instance, people are having a meal at a table, just having a meal, but at the same time their happiness is being created or their lives are being smashed up.*”

But back to the comic gems known as the vaudevilles. . . In *A Tragedian In Spite Of Himself*, a character asking to borrow a revolver from his friend to kill himself, gets some sympathy followed by a request to deliver a sewing machine and a caged canary to a mutual acquaintance. The suicidal “tragedian” then snaps and begins chasing his friend around the room, screaming that he wants blood. It is maniacal and absurd as a *Saturday Night Live* sketch.

In *Swan Song*, the mixture of the poignant and the farcical is evident and the idea of someone being left, unknowingly, in a theater is even more powerfully (personally, historically, politically, thematically) used at the end of *The Cherry Orchard* with the old butler, Firs, being left in the house after it is shut up after everyone has gone, moved out with all their belongings, never to return again. However, the ending of *Swan Song* is still very moving, and not to be seen as a laboratory for the later, great masterpiece *The Cherry Orchard*.

*The Proposal* which Chekhov called “a scabby little vaudeville which I’ve scratched out for the provinces.” Along with *The Wedding* and *The Celebration*, these plays all start ironically in that none of the actual events in the title actually occur before the curtain goes down. In the meantime, ignoble characters enact their lives and the use of pretentious misquoting of foreign terms, misheard or misdirected conversation, and petty obsessions, all characteristics perfected in his later plays. Although these short plays had lives, it is *The Bear* that will give back the most to Chekhov, in terms of money in royalties, “I live on the charity of my *Bear*,” Chekhov told his friend Pleshcheyev in 1889. Chekhov was amazed to find it being performed in several little Siberian towns he traveled through-*The Bear* also

netted a rare compliment from his father. On returning after seeing a production of this little farce, Pavel Yegorovich Chekhov said, "What a wonderful thing you've written, Anton!"

In spite of Chekhov making disparaging remarks about his vaudevilles, in general, he thought of himself as a writer of comedy. He knew comedy as a survival mechanism, a way to comment on life, as way to inspire change. The fact that he called his last, and greatest play, *The Cherry Orchard* "a comedy" speaks to the truth of that. And what of the pure comedy in the servant Carlotta's entrance in that play, with this line, "My dog eats nuts." *There* is a line by Antoshe Chekhonte, with that irrepressible need to thumb his nose, to make his brothers laugh...from our impish, brave, objective and objectionable dissector of human cadavers...Doctor Anton Chekhov. Thank you.

[**Constance Congdon** has been called "one of the best playwrights our country and our language has ever produced" by playwright Tony Kushner. Her plays include "Tales of the Last Formicans," "Dog Opera," and "Casanova" among many others. She is also known as an adaptor of classic plays. Congdon has taught playwriting at the Yale School of Drama and is a playwright-in-residence at Amherst College where she's been teaching for a couple of decades.]