

TICKLING THE FUNNY BONE,

by Heather Helinsky

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(Heather Helinsky)

Anton Chekhov: the writer's writer and the doctor's doctor. The man who, when asked how he wrote his stories, grabbed the first object that caught his eye and declared, "Tomorrow, if you like, I'll have a story entitled 'The Ashtray.'" The doctor who, in need of a medical dissertation, travelled to the far Russian outpost of Sakhalin Island to study the health of political prisoners. His writing life, which originally started as a means to pay his way through Moscow University's medical school, became a passion that prompted him to declare, "Medicine is my lawful wife and literature was my mistress". However, as a playwright, in his efforts to create "new forms" of drama, Chekhov's dual passions merged into one creative force to birth the masterwork, *Three Sisters*.

Unlike the premiere of Chekhov's *Ivanov*, where he was hindered by an old theatrical system that had to survive the Tsar's censorship, celebrity actors who barely rehearsed and improvised lines, and audiences who expected French-style vaudevilles, *Three Sisters* had the benefit of the newly formed Moscow Art Theatre company. Led by director Stanislavsky, who took the work of rehearsals seriously, and literary director Nemirovich-Danchenko, who recognized Chekhov's groundbreaking writing, Chekhov had the ways and means in 1901 to introduce to Russian audiences a new type of play.

Except---he was dying. Unable to ignore the violent symptoms of tuberculosis that first appeared in his early twenties, Chekhov had to leave Moscow for the warmer climates of France and Yalta. This doctor could not save himself, but as a writer, could he save his art? Chekhov's "Moscow Period" had been highly prolific, premiering *Ivanov* in 1887, *Swan Song* and *The Bear*, *The Proposal* and *The Wood Demon* in 1889, and soon after, the first of his two major plays, *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya*. Ironically, with Stanislavsky focused on creating new methods for rehearsing and building the reputation of the fledgling Moscow Art Theatre, Chekhov had to sit in Yalta, over seven hundred miles from Moscow, waiting for the news of his *Three Sisters*. "I WANT TO GO TO MOSCOW! MOSCOW! MOSCOW!" the youngest sister Irina asserts at the end of Act Two.

Irina spends most of the play counting down the days until they plan to move. The Russian poet Osip Mandelstam quipped, "Give the sisters a railway ticket to Moscow at the end of Act I and the play will be over!" This misses the point (and legally, women at this time could not travel without an escort). Chekhov relied on both of his instincts as a writer and a doctor to create a new play that defies classification. Director Stanislavsky himself wondered if this play was realism, naturalism, or impressionism.

From the standpoint of veracity to life, Chekhov certainly photographed the characters trapped in a small town. The Tsar's military, heavily funded, became a status symbol for advancement. Young men, often from the noble classes, serving in the Tsar's artillery divisions deployed to small towns like Perm, the city Chekhov suggested inspired the setting for *Three Sisters*. In Perm, as in many small towns of the 1890s, industry was booming, feeding the coffers of the local County Council and stimulating the creation of

the Trans-Siberian railway. Oddly, however, the railroad would completely bypass certain towns. As Chekhov's main character observes in his short story, "My Life":

"A station was being built four miles from the town. It was said that the engineers asked for a bribe of fifty thousand and the county council would only consent to give forty thousand; they could not come to an agreement over the difference, and now the townspeople regretted it, as they had to make a road to the station and that, it was reckoned, would cost more...and further progress was only delayed... Dubetchnya, as our first station was called, was a little under twelve miles from the town. I walked."

The detailed observations of the ethics and behavior in small towns like the one in *Three Sisters*, of course, were thoroughly noted and examined by Doctor Chekhov. The same doctor who dissected and analyzed corpses in the university continued

throughout his life to analyze the actions, sometimes foolish, often bureaucratic, occasionally heroic, of his fellow Russians.

Yet it is one thing for a doctor who widely travelled remote Russia to create characters based on his powers of observation. A naturalistic painting of a fruit bowl is simply a photographic record of a fruit bowl---it doesn't create dramatic conflict. Unfortunately, Chekhov's plays have sometimes been incorrectly diagnosed as life-like situations where "nothing happens".

To create a new form of theatre, Chekhov did more than just paint the lives of characters he observed. His talent, both in medicine and in writing, was in diagnosis and forensics. Chekhov demands that we train our eye to see what he saw---and that takes effort on our part as a member of the audience. As each new character enters the stage, Chekhov gives us enough information to diagnose and investigate what is happening. Combined with Chekhov's sneaky sense of humor, he draws us into a plot where we recognize all the maneuverings, passions, avoidances, and hungers that we witness in our family, friends, and ourselves. Cutting like a surgeon, Chekhov then asks that razor-sharp, essential question: "Does it matter?"

Konstantin Stanislavsky, who directed the first production of *Three Sisters* for the Moscow Art Theatre, observed, "it was impossible to understand what made Chekhov laugh." In a letter, Chekhov explained his struggle to create "new forms" that could express "the sad comicality of everyday life...everything mixed up together: the important and the paltry, the great and the base, the tragic and the ridiculous."

Chekhov died three years after the Moscow Art Theatre's premiere of *Three Sisters* having also completed his final play *The Cherry Orchard*. While today his plays don't appear on the surface to be radical innovations, Chekhov knew perhaps more than any other playwright that his plays, like life, had to create a new kind of plot to be both hilarious and devastating. Perhaps the best answer comes from what Chekhov told his teachers at his final medical examination: "First of all, I'd get my patients into a laughing mood, and only then would I begin to treat them."

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