



THE GOOD DOCTOR'S LAST PATIENT

by Dr. Jay Malarcher

“If they prescribe a large number of cures for a particular disease, it means the disease is incurable.”

—Gaev, ACT I, *The Cherry Orchard*

Anton Chekhov, trained as a doctor, called medicine his wife, and writing his mistress. He was committed to both of these career relationships, and one informed the other in palpable ways, even though he always kept his doctor's office and his writing room separate in any house he owned. Ironically, he wasn't as committed to relationships of the personal kind (usually preferring to have the unfettered freedom of a whorehouse) until he married an actress for the Moscow Art Theatre a few years before he died.

As a physician, Chekhov would have been trained in observation when examining patients, and his attention to the details and oddities of human behavior emerge clearly in his short stories and plays. He practiced medicine in a time when x-rays were beyond the reach of a country doctor yet house calls were a regular part of treatment. One can imagine him telling a family to “open a window” on his way out of a house call, after committing every detail of that home and its characters to his memory and his notebook.

It is not surprising that doctors and writers appear as characters in many of his plays. In *The Seagull*, his first major success on the stage, three characters occupy the scene: a doctor, a successful writer of magazine literature, and a radical playwright. Chekhov was all three of these things, and one needn't delve too deeply into psychoanalysis to understand the moment that Dr. Dorn crosses to the young playwright Treplev and tells him that his play had something.

Chekhov died young, and as a physician he knew exactly what was going to kill him: tuberculosis. He moved to the warmer and more hospitable south near Yalta to spend his last year. The Moscow Art Theatre traveled to rehearse and preview *The Cherry Orchard* for the dying doctor-playwright, and the celebrated feud with Stanislavsky's unfunny and tragic renderings of his plays worsened Chekhov's mood if not his health.

The Cherry Orchard premiered on the playwright's birthday, 17 January 1904, just months before Chekhov passed away at a German spa. The cast includes a cross section of Russian types, as one would expect from a doctor who ministered to the low- and the high-born. It even included a young revolutionary, whose life (one can assume) changed dramatically a year after the play premiered and Chekhov died, during the Revolution of 1905, a real crack in the fortress of the Tsarist government in Russia. Again, Chekhov the doctor seemed to have his fingers on the pulse of his society.

In Germany, at the end, Chekhov sipped some champagne and slipped away in a breathless sleep with his wife by his side. The family and friends of the deceased in that time usually were present for the dying relative's last moments, as ACT IV of *The Cherry Orchard* shows in symbolic terms. The whole family convenes to pay their last respects to the family's pride and joy, while the orchard succumbs to the axe strokes of the fatal decisions that marked its demise.

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