

["The profession of acting in America was forever changed with the arrival of the Moscow Art Theatre's productions of Chekhov in the 1920s. What for Stanislavsky and his company was an opportunity to weather the economic storms of Soviet Russia, Chekhov's plays inspired American actors who found themselves in awe of "The Method." While teachers like Lee Strasburg and Stella Adler launched schools from their understanding of Stanislavsky, it also had the side effect of creating a school of thought of what "Acting Chekhov" was supposed to be like, which often meant serious, formal productions, draining the plays of their original humor. One of the major companies that revitalized and reinterpreted Chekhovian acting was the Williamstown Theatre Festival under the direction of Nikos Psacharopoulos. In this essay, actor and director Austin Pendleton, who was a Williamstown company member, and recent Obie-award winner for his production of TheThree Sisters in 2011, attempts to explain that elusive question that many actors struggle with---how to interpret Chekhov's characters." — Heather Helinsky]



“Ten Thousand Emotional Leagues Under The Sea”

[Veteran Actor/Director Austin Pendleton discusses Chekhov]

Here are the facts of my experience with Chekhov, as an actor and a director: I've acted in all four of the major plays (all of them at least twice) as well as in Ivanov. And I've directed all four of the major ones, all of them at least twice. I was very lucky to have been prepared for this life immersion by being part of the Williamstown Theatre Festival when Nikos Psacharopoulos was its Artistic Director. Nikos began directing Chekhov there in 1962, when the very idea of a summer theatre producing Chekhov made people gasp with worry and surprise. He immediately, though, confounded their worries by the dynamism of his productions, most of them rehearsed, and very deeply, in two weeks. Nikos was Greek, which is a temperament not exactly like the Russian temperament, but tantalizing in the ways in which they are similar and in which they are different. All the actions everybody played seemed almost helplessly mercurial, as if the need for those actions arose from the specific elements of the moment preceding them, colliding together and able to be dealt with only in an instinctive, spontaneous way. They were some of the best productions of anything I've seen.

*The first time I ever played a leading role in a Chekhov play was at ACT, during its first season in San Francisco, in 1967. The play was *The Seagull*, and I played Konstantin Treplev, a role known in certain circles of actors as the "actor's graveyard", particularly to be avoided since it beckons an actor so temptingly. Like so often happens when our dreams come true, the whole experience quickly turned into a nightmare, despite the ministrations of a wonderful director (Edward Payson Call) and the wonderful actors I was excited to be playing opposite. The nightmare consisted of a feeling of being lost, which is, I suppose, the actor's nightmare in its purest, most virulent form. I had no idea what I was doing. I was simply trying to work up painful emotion, which is of course as unreal as you can get in acting, because nobody in life ever tries to work up painful emotion, unless they derive pleasure from painful emotion, in which case of course it's no longer pain. I did not figure this out. I felt that I was bad, despite very professional and caring efforts to help me, and the critics, to my horror, agreed with me. I had never really gotten bad reviews before, so I of course had counted on them to console me and tell me that, no, I was wrong, I was actually brilliant and too modest to know that I was. This is not what they said. Like an idiot, I searched for every review I could find that would state a different opinion, but my search was overwhelmingly unsuccessful. I went slowly into despair. I became more and more aware of being hopelessly lost, and, as we were playing in rep, this experience lasted several months. Then I began to notice something. The more the weeks and months went by, the more people seemed to be responding to*

what I was doing. It wasn't until years later that I began to understand what possibly could have been happening.

*One of Chekhov's great perceptions is that many of the most talented artists, go through every day, whether they've worked that day or not, with the feeling of being badly re-viewed. By the world. By God. By their GENES. By everything. And the more this sensation found its way into my bones, the more inevitable it became that I might begin to exhibit, occasionally, truthful behavior in the role. Virtually against my will. The crux of the matter is that performing Chekhov needs to be essentially involuntary. I know that makes no sense, but that's what I began to feel. And to do work that feels, and looks, involuntary requires a great deal of digging. Not the digging that we actors often do — to find the set of actions that constitute the character's behavior — but to stay so open to all the circumstances that Chekhov has provided that we can't help but produce actions that are utterly specific in their attempts to cope with them. This might be finally true of all acting in any material -- and I've come to think maybe it is — but in Chekhov I think this process is indispensable. You're SUPPOSED to be lost in Chekhov. And when you're lost you just instinctively, graspingly, try to find your way. All of the carefully crafted plans you can legitimately find in playing the work of most great writers are of no use to you at all in Chekhov. And thanks to the length of our run in *The Seagull*, and the thoughtful savagery of most of the critics, I was ultimately not allowed to resist the submersion that Chekhov just sweetly asks for. I was no longer allowed to resist the sensation of being a cork bobbing on a turbulent ocean. And being a cork bobbing on an ocean is not a passive thing. I mean, a cork BOBS. That takes energy. That takes concentration. And it leaves no room for finding what you think are brilliant solutions in the role you're playing.*

*This fall, at Classic Stage Company, in New York, I will be directing *Ivanov*, with Ethan Hawke, one of my favorite actors, in the title role. Talk about corks bobbing in the ocean, undertaking *Ivanov* is like stepping into an ocean in the middle of a big storm, riding only a cork. *Ivanov* himself has no idea what his feelings are. He spends whole speeches, whole scenes, trying to put words around his feelings, trying to pin them down, and never seems to feel that he's gotten it right. And so he tries again, he repeats himself constantly, thinking, maybe, that if he could just define what these feelings are he could tame them somehow. But the very effort to tame them makes them more turbulent. William Styron, in his great small book about depression, called *Darkness Visible*, calls depression "a howling of the brain." *Ivanov* seems to be trying to confront, and match, and subdue a howling animal, which is very hard to do when the animal is actually inside you. So *Ivanov* tries to do what I guess we all do when an animal of depression or anxiety is howling inside us: he deals with whoever he's talking to as if they were that*

animal. This leads to terrifyingly, sometimes even comically, unproductive conversations. I mean, try it sometime. But then of course, if you're human, you already have. And by the way, this is only speculation. You can, and you must, speculate about what's going on in Chekhov, but when the time comes to rehearse it, all your speculations about what Chekhov is going to show you bear the same relationship that a sandcastle bears to the next big wave in the ocean. Why does the ocean keep coming into talking about Chekhov?

Why? Chekhov lives. But then of course he always will.

—Austin Pendleton