

## *Chekhov's The Seagull – Social Satire or Mancunian Monotony?*

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The copy that adorns the back of 'popular' paperback editions of the classics gives a reasonably accurate account of the general opinion a given author enjoys amongst a 'reasonably' well-versed readership. The very fact that one is rummaging amongst the classics sections of bookshops indicates either familiarity or obligation. Most 'classics' find themselves on set reading lists to be reread by successive generations in order to provide a literary continuity and progression with the past. Chekhov, and his significance, lies firmly here.

Chekhov, despite the numerical superiority of his short stories, is chiefly known outside of Russia and academic circles, for his plays. So much so that he has been honoured with an adjective: Chekhovian. This is no light accolade. Only the greatest are ascribed attributive functions: Bertolt Brecht – Brechtian, Charles Dickens – Dickensian, Nikolai Gogol – Gogolian. Yet even the Nobel Prize for Literature is no guarantee of adjective status for we have no Becketian, Pasternakian, or Hemingwayian. Which leads one to ponder what it is that is so specific and yet so universally true to allow some the right to adjectives. Dictionaries are here of little use for they provide, with the exception of Dickensian, no more than the annotation that the adjective exists, with no pointers to usage or collocation. The New Penguin English Dictionary helps little giving *Chekhovian* as merely 'characteristic of the style or works of Anton Chekhov' (2000: 236) while the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* simply provides the adjective and lets us get on with it.

If we want to understand *Chekhovian* then we need to see how it is used on the dust sleeves of his works or in the writings of academic critics. We find however a degree of ambivalence not usually associated with a writer so widely rehear-

sed, performed and read: '...the depth and subtlety of his art has generated a wealth of interpretation.' (Cover copy for Elisaveta Fen's *Anton Chekhov – Plays*, Penguin 1986) 'Some productions of Chekhov exude an atmosphere of unrelieved gloom; others turn into a boisterous romp round the samovar. Are they tragedies of loss and dispossession, or light-hearted send-ups of society's misfits?' (Cover copy for Hingley's *Anton Chekhov – Five Plays*, Oxford 1998). So what are the things *characteristic of the style or works* of Chekhov? Russia? Country estates? Samovars? Unhappy young women (aristocratic of course)? Boredom? Pointlessness? The political and economic backcloth of the Great Reforms and their spin-offs? Some have even taken the gloom and despair along with its possible socio-political origins to the West of Ireland. Thomas Kilroy's version of *The Seagull* transports it lock, stock and barrel to the era of the Land League and the decline of the Anglo-Irish estates. Here there are no Ninas but Lilys, no Evgenii Sergeevich Dorns but homely Dr Hickeys, no mention of urban diversion to relieve rural ennui but in its place straightforward references to Dublin and the bright lights of London. There is also little to laugh over.

The point in writing this paper is to try to explain a seeming disparity between the common notion of Chekhovian with its tragic characters longing for a brighter tomorrow while holed up in the back of beyond aimlessly engaged in futile chatter – in a word the tragedy associated with Chekhov's plays, and the reaction in Moscow to the second ever production of *The Seagull* whereby "like the bursting of a dam, like an exploding bomb a sudden deafening eruption of applause broke out". Members of the audience rushed the stage amid tears of joy and kissing so general as to recall the Orthodox custom of ritual osculation at Easter. People were "rolling round in hysterics", says Stanislavsky, who himself celebrated by dancing a jig.' (Hingley 1998: xviii). Hardly the morbid social philosophizing associated with Chekhov's drawing room discussions.

Of Chekhov's five major plays: *Ivanov*, *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*, the first is 'a play', the second 'a comedy', the third 'scenes from country life', the fourth 'a drama', and the last another 'comedy'. One must assume that each of these subtitles was chosen very carefully. Gilman points out that 'All these terms or descriptive phrases are to one degree or another tactical alerts to audiences and readers. In effect they tell us not to bring to these works preconceptions about types of drama, they ask us to be supple in the way we wield artistic categories and to be open in our anticipation.' (Gilman 1995: 72) That 'comedy has a wider and deeper action, as formal comedies like Shakespeare's have always made evident: to restore, to heal to embolden.' (Gilman 1995: 73). Others feel that we are misunderstanding the term co-

medy for 'what he [Chekhov] was really appealing for was a lightness of touch, a throwaway casual style, an abandonment of the traditional over-theatricality of the Russian (and not only Russian) theatre' (Hingley 1998: xxi).

The reading of plays is at times a tiresome business. On the whole the 'general' public does not go in for play reading. Plays are most often read as set books for university seminars. One tends to get sidetracked, the names seem to interchange, one has to return to the initial page to recall whom is supposed to be whom. We watch plays, either on television or the stage and of late in Hollywood productions of the classics. Most major playwrights have film adaptations to their credit. And here is the difficulty with drama it requires a different sort of reading; a reading which expects a lot of the associations to be supplied by the reader himself. For here the reader is like the potential director – he is busy looking for pointers as to possible interpretation, all the more so when the playwright himself has failed to 'elaborate' either in the form of extensive stage directions or additional comments on the play – such is the case with Chekhov who provided scant pointers indeed as to the way his plays were to be performed let alone interpreted. There is a difference in the scope allowed the author when writing a novel, a play or a short story. Short stories and plays demand a brevity in the actual words chosen which novels do not. One could even go as far as to say that 'mistakes' are even permissible in novels, the sheer length of the work means that the reader has time to either forgive or forget an 'awkward' wording, a failed description, a flat speech. A short story offers none of that luxury a misplaced word rings strong, the same with drama. Nobody understood this better than Chekhov who according to Bunin was to have said in 1895 (the year of *The Seagull*):

По-моему, написав рассказ следует вычеркивать его начало и конец. Тут мы, беллетристы, больше всего врем. И короче, как можно короче надо говорить.

(Чехов в воспоминаниях современников: 473)

That he adhered to his own rigorous demands is seen in the 'drastic' process of rationalization experienced in the writing of his five 'famous' plays as opposed to his first full scale dramatic attempt *Platonov* which with its 175 pages is in total almost the sum of *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya* and the *Three Sisters*. With the exception of *A Hunting Incident* (1884) *Platonov* was to be the most weighty piece Chekhov was to write. The rest of his literary output is characterised by economy, brevity and a craftsman's precision in making sure the right word fits.

Chekhov's interest in humour can be seen from his modest literary beginnings as contributor of humorous sketches to various periodicals. These initial pieces as his later short stories lend themselves beautifully to the stage with the

need for little in the way of adaptation or rewriting. It is therefore of no surprise that Chekhov was to move on to the theatre, what is surprising is that given the momentous quantity of his literary output (one must remember that he was dead by the age of 44) such a small amount is in the form of plays only three volumes of the 18 devoted to his short stories, travelogues, plays and notes. Yet it is as a playwright that he is remembered, and as a playwright that the term Chekhovian is applied.

Plays require directors, producers, sets, settings, stage directions, prompters, orchestras, costumes, make up, actors, audiences and atmosphere. The theatre is all about atmosphere, about 'going out', about making an effort, about expectation. The regular theatregoer is performing a ritual which requires a certain degree of decorum, and unlike a sports fan he or she is not going to observe the unknown, there is no result to be obtained, no title to be defended. In fact the result is already known, the play already read. Obviously there are plays that have to be seen for the first time but it is no overstatement to wager that a sizeable part of the audience for a production of *Hamlet*, *The Seagull*, *The Wild Duck*, *Waiting for Godot* (school parties excluded) have been before or have at least read the play (or possibly seen the film!) This results in the idea of creating a part. We have critics who tell us that the best 'Richard the III' was so-and-so, that nobody can excel Kenneth Branagh or Laurence Olivier as X, Y and Z.

This association of 'horses with courses' finds an apt parallel in the first staging of *The Seagull* where a certain Elizabeth Levkeyev had chosen the play for her benefit night – the night to commemorate twenty-five years on the stage. Ronald Hingley has described her as 'one of those "fine old character actresses" who has only to emerge from the wings to provoke eruptions of mirth.' (Hingley 1998: xvi) Not really somebody one would initially associate as being a *Chekhovian* actress – certainly no lightness of touch. Rather an individual reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell from *The Importance of Being Earnest*. And here we have another interesting association, and not one merely contained in the fact that the works were both completed in 1895. Oscar Wilde's work is understood to be a comedy whether labelled as a 'witty drama' or not. The audience is awaiting the lines, and testing them against the benchmark of previous performances. How well will she 'boom' the immortal 'A handbag??' How slickly will the repartee come across? Wilde's play in effect being a classic example for the theatre of the Christmas 'favourites' on television – those films, whatever their genre, that have been viewed so many times that their script is almost known by heart yet 'have to be' reseen. Audiences for Chekhov, possibly because of the wealth of translations, queue up to see something they think they know

yet with the realization that Chekhov is game for anyone and what the latest 'interpretation' is to be is anyone's guess. As an example I would like to cite two reviews: one from the American Repertory Theatre production of the 19<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> March 1992 and the other from the Stellenbosch HB Thom Theatre (South Africa) production of the 25<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> November 1996. With regards to the former we read that 'The ART production takes Chekhov's 1895 play and sets it in the modern day. Several of the characters smoke, including two of the women. Konstantin and Masha have the appearance of East Village beatnik intellectuals. Akadina dresses in the latest Fifth Avenue fashion and drapes her three-quarter length mink after her from scene to scene. In this way, Ron Daniels manages to challenge modern day stereotypes with Chekhov's timeless play.' While the latter presents *The Seagull* as 'Chekhov's rather difficult tragi-comedy' going on to ponder 'The question is how one maintains a certain level of performance when the narrative loses all of its comic elements and merely becomes tragic in very understated terms when, hitherto, all the action has been lively in spite of its subtlety.' Two 'Anglophone' countries, two different cultural backdrops and yet Chekhov finds his niche. Wilde is not as widespread.

In the examination of the 'potential' comic core to *The Seagull* I would like to examine the theme of smoking, something close to Chekhov's heart with him even writing a one act, monologue *Smoking is Bad for You* (1886).

I would like to examine the famous 'smoking' reference in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, five 'reworkings' of Sorin's hankerings on smoking and drinking, and finally what I see to be Chekhov of the 1990s i.e. *The Royle Family* a recent innovation in British comedy that was described in the *Sunday Independent* of the 20<sup>th</sup> of September 1998 by Nicholas Barber as 'a comedy drama. You can only feel sorry for anyone who regards it as dramatic. [...] It is possibly the least dramatic programme ever made. A working class Mancunian family chain-smoke in front of the television, the neighbours pop in, and that's it. There are no scene changes. Half an hour of screen time is half an hour in the life of the Royles. *Seinfeld* misleadingly labelled itself 'a show about nothing', when each episode was actually a Bayeux Tapestry of plot strands, *The Royle Family* is the real thing.' My point being that given the mass of translations of Chekhov's *The Seagull* (let's just mention the 13 'best' known by: Marian Fell, New York, 1912; F.A. Saphro, Boston, 1922; Constance Garnett, London, 1923; Jennie Coven, New York, 1922; Rose Caylor, New York, 1930; Julius West and Marian Fell, London, 1939; Stark Young, New York, 1956; Elisaveta Fen, Harmondsworth, 1959; David Magarshack, London, 1960; Ann Dunnigan, New York, 1964; Ronald Hingley, London, 1967; E.K. Bristow, New York, 1977; Pam

Gems, London, 1979.) maybe the answer to the comedy lies not so much in rewriting but in the essence of the play itself – a throwing off of convention with regards to the theatre and comedy and an uncovering of Hingley's term in relation to 'a lightness of touch'. Nothing happens, except off stage, in *The Seagull*, nothing happens except in the audience's preconceptions in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and nothing happens except for the fact that 'virtually every word has comic potential' (*The Daily Telegraph* 14<sup>th</sup> September 1998) in *The Royle Family*. It is the search for 'comic potential' that is of interest here. All three could be nicely summed up by the backcover copy for *The Royle Family*. *The Scripts: Series I* 'Certainly it is not the action that makes it such a superb and hilarious drama.'

That smoking, that most lethal of pastimes, has 'comic potential' can be illustrated by the famous extract from *The Importance of Being Earnest*

**Lady Bracknell** (*pencil and note-book in hand*): I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has. We work together, in fact. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke?

**Jack**: Well, yes. I must admit I smoke.

**Lady Bracknell**: I am glad to hear it. A man should have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is. How old are you? (Wilde 1991: 499)

**Sorin** [laughing] Its all very well for you to talk... You've had a good life, but what about me? I've served in the Department of Justice for twenty-eight years, but I haven't really lived, I haven't really experienced anything yet – so obviously I feel very much like going on living. You're satisfied and you don't care any more, so you're inclined to be philosophical – but I want to live. That's why I drink sherry at dinner and smoke cigars, and all that... And there it is.... (Fen 1986: 141)

**Sorin** [laughs]. It's all right for you to talk, you've enjoyed yourself. But what about me? Twenty-eight years I've worked for the Department of Justice, but I haven't lived yet, haven't experienced anything – that's what it comes to. So I want a bit of fun, it stands to reason. You've always had your own way and you don't care, which is why you're so given to idle chatter. But I want a bit of life, so I drink sherry at dinner and smoke cigars and so on. That's all there is to it. (Hingley 1998: 84)

**Sorin**. It is easy for you to condemn smoking and drinking; you have known what life is, but what about me? I have served in the Department of Justice for twenty-eight years, but I have never lived, I have never had any experiences. You are satiated with life, and that is why you have an inclination for philosophy, but I want to live, and that is why I drink my wine for dinner and smoke cigars, and all. (The Project Gutenberg Etext of the Sea-Gull 1999)

**Sorin** (laughs). It's easy for you to reason. You've lived your life, and I? I served in the Department of Justice for twenty-eight years, but I haven't lived yet, haven't experienced anything after all, and quite naturally, I want very much to live. You had your fill and are indifferent, and that's why you are inclined toward philosophy, but I do want to live and that's why I drink sherry at dinner and smoke a cigar and all that. That's all (Sznycer 1974: 67-68)

**Peter:** Ho-ho-ho. That's capital, I must say. Our doctor may talk. He has lived life to the full, don't you know. He is still in his prime while I'm – Well, I don't wish to die. Not yet. I cannot sit about being clever about life and so on and so forth. I simply enjoy a good claret and a cigar. Nothing very remarkable, really, about that, I just simply need to know that I'm alive, you see – (Kilroy 1981: 19)

**Mam:** They're dead strict about no smoking in the baker's. No way can you light up. It's health and safety. We have to keep taking it in turns to nip to the toilet.

**Dad:** You can't do owt these days. Them health and safety won't let you wipe your arse.

**Mam:** Some places are only taking on non-smokers.

**Denise:** Well, you just don't smoke in the interview do you.

**Dad:** What places?

**Mam:** Well flat-nosed Alan went for a job at the petrol station on the roundabout.

(The Royle Family Scripts I 1999: 46)

So what can we find funny in the above? Well we have the absurdity of a man who wants to live doing something contrary to his doctor's advice: 'But I want a bit of life, so I drink sherry at dinner and smoke cigars...' (Hingley) 'but I want to live, and that is why I drink my wine for dinner and smoke cigars' (Gutenberg), 'I do want to live and that's why I drink sherry at dinner...' (Sznycer) 'Well, I don't want to die. [...] I simply enjoy a good claret and a cigar. [...] I just simply need to know that I'm alive...' (Kilroy). We have the obvious contrast, with its humorous potential between the 28 years in the Department of Justice and the doctor having enjoyed himself. The stage direction makes it clear that Sorin is in jovial mood when speaking, and one could indeed imagine the lines being said in a light-hearted if not riotous manner. But this is hardly the stuff to have people 'rolling around in hysterics'. Maybe something has been lost with time?

**Peter Cook:** Have you seen that bloody Leonardo Da Vinci cartoon? I couldn't see the bloody joke. Went down there. Nothing!

**Dudley Moore:** Well, of course you know Pete the sense of humour must have changed over the years, you know.

**PC:** Of course it has, that's why it's not funny.

**DM:** No, I bet when that Da Vinci cartoon first come out, I bet people were killing themselves. I bet, I bet old Da Vinci had an accident when he done it.

**PC:** Yes, but it's difficult to see the joke just that lady sitting there with the children round her. It's not much of a joke as far as I'm concerned, Dud!

**DM:** No, well, part from that Pete it's a different culture.

**PC:** Yes.

**DM:** It's Italian, you see.

**PC:** Italianate in any case.

**DM:** We don't understand it, I mean, for instance, the Mousetrap did terribly in Pakistan.

(Peter Cooke – Anthology)

But even if we assume that something is likely to lose its initial crispness with the course of time it should still maintain an overall sense of being funny. And yet here we have the interesting point if we are to examine the two remaining extracts, from *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Royle Family* we are not initially struck by the 'funniness' of the pieces, especially with the latter. Lady Bracknell's question about smoking only takes on a sense of comedy in her unexpected approval of the habit. Could the exchange be taken seriously? Could one 'misunderstand' that there's a laugh in there somewhere? This certainly appears possible with *The Royle Family*. With the exception of the absurdity of Mam's last remark about a smoker being put out over not being able to smoke at a petrol service station, the rest could as easily have been taken from a 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary. And here is the problem with text. Text is totally flat. It requires somebody to pump it up, to mark the stress, underline where the emphasis is to be placed and so on. Perhaps we should sideline the idea of translation when it comes to humour and start to speak rather of 'inspiration'. That a given work has given us a set idea. The way in which directors are inspired to make the film of the book. With this idea of reworking we can home in on the essence of Chekhov and approach an understanding of Chekhovian. For Chekhov most men led lives of 'quiet desperation' by which we can understand boredom and isolation. As Hingley points out:

Far from implying any view of life grandiose in the tragic manner, or ultimately harmonious in the spirit of comedy, Chekhov continually suggests the opposite: human existence is more pointless, more frustrating less heroic, less satisfying than members of his audience may privately conceive. But this too may have its advantage. Harassed less by pestilence, famine, and foreign invaders than by the horrors of commuting, of parking his car, of filling in tax and other returns, of pacifying computers and bureaucrats – even harassed, perhaps, by the appalling misfortune of actually being a bureaucrat – a modern man may well find it more cathartic to be purged of Chekhovian boredom, despair, and *taedium vitae* than of the traditional Aristotelian pity and terror. Thus Chekhov admirably complements his great predecessors by catering to a different area of human need.

(Hingley 1998: xxix)

We have always reworked texts whether they be the Greek myths, Roman legends or Celtic folklore. All of it constitutes the background by way of which it becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible to talk of 'a new plot' or even idea, rather we need to talk about the reworking of the same. The complexities of human feelings and interest have long ago been played out upon the stages of the ancient world. All that it is left for us to do is change the form.

**Treplev:** What we need's a new kind of theatre. New forms are what we need, and if we haven't got them we'd be a sight better off with nothing at all. (Hingley 1998: *The Seagull* p. 70).



Chekhov speaking through a character, yet we could easily change theatre for comedy. Comedy has moved on from the telling of jokes, the canned laughter and the double entendre. Like Chekhov's theatre the public have grown to be able to deal with 'new forms' in comedy. If *The Seagull* doesn't have us in stitches despite the mass of translations then maybe its because we have failed to understand Chekhov's 'play within a play'.

**Irina:** But he told us his play was a joke, and that's just how I treated it (Hingley 1998: *The Seagull* p. 76)

The joke actually being that except for the subtitle 'a comedy in four acts' Chekhov told us next to nothing about what it should be. So given the liberty that the theatre allows by way of interpretation, and the endless debate over the 'significance' of Chekhov's plays maybe for the year 2001 as good a evocation of atmosphere are the flying ducks on the wall of a cramped Manchester living room than the lake, the seagull and the setting of a country house which appears to detract the reader/viewer from the word 'comedy' and reiterate the long held view that Chekhov is primarily social satire.

Comedy doesn't get less regal or more real-life than this series about a Manchester working-class family – 'typical' only in that its assemblage of warts-and-all comic characters draws on every Mancunian cliché in the book. [...] Sitting around a television, talking and bickering about who had what for tea, who has the best feet in the family, or who made a costly phone call to Aberdeen may not sound like a recipe for hilarity but [...] virtually every word has comic potential.' (*The Telegraph* 14<sup>th</sup> September 1998)

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*"Mewa" Czechowa – satyra społeczna czy monotonia manchesterska*

Artykuł jest próbę wyjaśnienia podtytułu *Mewy* A. Czechowa – *Komedia w czterech aktach*. Według autora odnosi się on nie tyle do zawartego w *Mewie* potencjału komicznego, ile do inspiracji twórczej, która bezpośrednio doprowadziła do powstania *Rodziny królewskiej*.