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## INTRODUCTION

*The Cherry Orchard* is one of the landmark plays of the modern theatre, not only for its compelling subject matter and psychologically nuanced characters, but for its rich and revealing production history. In the century since its first performance, it has seen a wide range of conflicting interpretations: tragic and comic, naturalistic and symbolic, reactionary and radical. It has been performed as a lament for the dispossessed Russian gentry and as a call to revolution, as a vehicle for detailed psychological acting and as an abstract theatre-poem, as a somber family drama and as a cartoonish vaudeville. The seeds of these interpretive conflicts were present in the original production at the Moscow Art Theatre, where the playwright, Anton Chekhov, found himself repeatedly at odds with the theatre's co-founder and director, Constantin Stanislavsky. Indeed, these conflicts are woven into the structure of the play itself, which combines farcical and serious elements, clinical naturalism and visionary symbolism, a longing look to the past and a hopeful dream of the future.

*The Cherry Orchard* tells the story of a family losing its home. Lyubov Andreyevna Ranevskaya, together with her daughter Anya, her foster daughter Varya, and her brother Leonid Andreyevich Gayev, are forced by debt to give up their estate and its historic cherry orchard. From the beginning of the play, a family friend, a serf-turned-businessman named Yermolay Alexeyevich Lopakhin, has warned them of the impending catastrophe, and urged them to cut down the cherry orchard, subdivide the land, and lease it for summer cottages to achieve financial solvency. They refuse to entertain this idea, and prove incapable of coming up with a viable plan to save the estate. When the estate goes up for auction, Lopakhin buys it, and proceeds

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Excerpt  
[More information](#)

## 2 Chekhov: *The Cherry Orchard*

with his plan to cut down the trees and build summer houses. The lives of all the characters are changed: Ranevskaya will return to Paris, to her wayward lover; Anya will start a new future with her suitor Petya Trofimov, a revolutionary student; Varya, whose possible marriage to Lopakhin falls through, will become a housekeeper; and Gayev will work in a bank. The servants – the eccentric governess Charlotta, the chambermaid Dunyasha, the valet Yasha, and the clerk Yepikhodov – adapt themselves to the changed fortunes of their employers. The old butler Firs, who has lived his whole life on the estate, is left behind, forgotten, locked in the house as Lopakhin's men begin to cut down the cherry trees.

*The Cherry Orchard* was written in the midst of a transformation of the European theatre, and just before a cataclysmic change in Russian history. Its basic story, of the pressures of change on a single family, resonates widely with the events of its time, both cultural and political. The characters easily take on symbolic dimensions – Gayev, the enervated aristocrat; Lopakhin, the millionaire peasant; Trofimov, the student radical; Firs, the ancient retainer. While the story emerges from a specific social milieu, one Chekhov knew well (he himself owned an estate with a cherry orchard at Melikhovo), it also has universal applications. These facts have combined to give it a full and complex afterlife in production, as over a hundred years of history have cast Chekhov's play and his characters in different interpretive lights.

When *The Cherry Orchard* first appeared on the stage, in the 1904 Moscow Art Theatre production directed by Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, it served as an obituary for the nineteenth century and a harbinger of the twentieth. The loss of the Ranevsky orchard was a powerful metaphor for the decline of the Russian gentry in the face of inexorable historical pressures. At the same time, the MAT *Cherry Orchard* represented the culmination of a theatrical tradition that had finally reached its limits. The eerie sound effect of a breaking string that concludes the play represents not only a social and political rupture, but an aesthetic one. The naturalism

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pioneered in the nineteenth century by such figures as Henrik Ibsen, André Antoine, and the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, and brought to its highest achievement by the Moscow Art Theatre, was giving way to the explosive theatrical experimentation of the early twentieth century. The subsequent performance history of the play has drawn on the tensions between past and future built into the structure of the play itself. A century of productions have explored its mixture of tradition and innovation, nostalgic longing and revolutionary change. One hundred years after its first performance, in another new century of instability and upheaval, *The Cherry Orchard* remains a poignant, potent myth of wasted opportunities, frustrated dreams, and fragile hopes.

The Moscow Art Theatre production established the basic interpretive questions about the play, setting up three main lines of conflict that have persisted throughout its performance history. The first is the question of genre: Stanislavsky called it a tragedy, Chekhov a comedy. The second is a question of style: the Moscow Art Theatre production was the epitome of nineteenth-century naturalism, whereas innovative directors like Meyerhold saw the play as a symbolist work belonging to a new theatre of experimentation and abstraction. The final question is one of politics: Stanislavsky's gravely sympathetic treatment of the Ranevskys made the play an elegy for twilight Russia, whereas more radical directors have seen it as a hopeful call for the "new life" sought by Anya and Trofimov.

The question of genre is probably the one that has most vexed directors, audiences, reviewers, and scholars over the first century of the play's existence. Every new production must take some kind of position with regard to the original Chekhov/Staniavsky argument. It is clear that from the play's inception, Chekhov conceived of it as a comedy. As early as 1901, when *Three Sisters* had just opened, Chekhov wrote to his wife, Olga Knipper, "The next play I write will definitely be funny, very funny – at least in intention."<sup>1</sup> He later wrote, "There are moments when an overwhelming desire comes over me to write a four-act farce [*vodevil*] or comedy for the Art Theatre."<sup>2</sup>

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Excerpt  
[More information](#)

4 Chekhov: *The Cherry Orchard*

When he had almost finished the play, he wrote to Stanislavsky's wife, Mariya Petrovna Lilina, "It hasn't turned out a drama, but as a comedy, in places even a farce."<sup>3</sup>

When Stanislavsky read it, he had a different reaction. He considered it Chekhov's best work, and wept during the reading. He wrote a long letter to Chekhov expressing his love for the play and making very clear his understanding of it:

This is not a comedy, nor a farce as you have written, this is a tragedy, whatever escape toward a better life you open up in the last act . . . I wept like a woman, I wanted to control myself but I couldn't. I hear what you say: "Look you must realize this is a farce" . . . no, for simple men this is a tragedy. I feel a special tenderness and love for this play.<sup>4</sup>

The two men would never come into accord on the matter. After *The Cherry Orchard* opened, Chekhov wrote angrily, "Stanislavsky has ruined my play," and complained that it was being universally misunderstood: "Why do they so obstinately call my play a 'drama' in play-bills and newspaper advertisements? What Nemirovich and Stanislavsky see in my play definitely isn't what I wrote and I'm ready to swear by anything you like that neither of them has read through my play carefully even once. I'm sorry to say so, but I assure you I'm right."<sup>5</sup>

The question of style is a more complicated one. The Naturalistic movement in the European Theatre had dominated the last decades of the nineteenth century, spurred by the manifestos of Emile Zola, the experiments of Antoine and the *Théâtre Libre*, the social dramas of Ibsen, and the performances of the Meiningen troupe on their tours around Europe. Naturalism aimed at a detailed recreation of life on the stage, life in all its social complexity and material density. Stanislavsky's early work at the Moscow Art Theatre was very much in this vein. For his Chekhov productions, he and his designer, Victor Simov, crowded the stage with real birch trees, worn furniture, working samovars, and the like. He also employed a wealth of atmospheric sound effects and prepared detailed production scores filled with incidental business to

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ground the characters in a convincing mundane reality. Stanislavsky admitted years later that his naturalistic techniques weighed down the poetic impressionism of *The Cherry Orchard*:

The play is delicate, it has all the tenderness of a flower. Break its stem and the flower dries, its odor vanishes . . . In my great desire to help the actors I tried to create a mood around them, in the hope that it would grip them and call forth their creative vision . . . I took all the by-paths I could think of. I invented all sorts of *mises en scène*, the singing of birds, the barking of dogs, and in this enthusiasm for sounds on the stage I went so far that I caused a protest on the part of Chekhov.<sup>6</sup>

V. S. Meyerhold, a former member of the MAT company who would become a leading experimental director in the Soviet era before falling victim to Stalin's purges, wrote to Chekhov after the opening that Stanislavsky had destroyed the artistic effect of *The Cherry Orchard* through excessive naturalism. "Your play is abstract, like a Tchaikovsky symphony," he wrote, and subsequently published a polemical article on "Naturalistic Theatre and Theatre of Mood" in which he lambasted the Art Theatre for its inability to convey the artistic vision of Chekhov's play.<sup>7</sup> "To Chekhov the characters of *The Cherry Orchard* were a means to an end and not a reality," Meyerhold wrote. "But in the Moscow Art Theatre the characters became real and the lyrical-mystic aspect of *The Cherry Orchard* was lost."<sup>8</sup> The subsequent production history of *The Cherry Orchard* oscillates between abstract, symbolic productions of the play and regular returns to Stanislavskian naturalism.

As for the play's political meaning, it is almost impossible now not to read it as a precursor of the Russian Revolution of 1917. What Chekhov's attitude was to the "old life" of the Russian gentry and the "new life" represented by Trofimov and Lopakhin remains in dispute. Chekhov knew the play had subversive potential; he worried over the censors' responses to the revolutionary student Trofimov, and indeed was forced to alter two of his more inflammatory speeches. He also felt that the most important character in the play was the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)6 Chekhov: *The Cherry Orchard*

risen serf, Lopakhin, the man who ends up buying the orchard, and accordingly he wrote the part for Stanislavsky, the MAT's leading actor. When Stanislavsky instead played the aristocrat Gayev, and cast Olga Knipper, the theatre's leading actress, as a charming and glamorous Madame Ranevskaya, he may have tipped the balance of the play toward sympathy for the gentry and nostalgia for the past. The Marxist writer Maxim Gorky, who later replaced Chekhov as the MAT's house dramatist, certainly thought so. He expressed impatient disgust with the play's "egotistical," "flaccid" "parasites," reserving his sympathy for the foster-daughter Varya, "who works unstintingly for the benefit of these idlers" – and who, perhaps not incidentally, was played by the woman who would become Gorky's second wife. After the Revolution, both Soviet and Western productions often made the political dimensions of the play paramount, whether the interpretation was optimistic or pessimistic. The Revolution itself sometimes became a presence in the play; and contemporary productions have begun appending the play's politics to other, more recent historical upheavals.

In my account of the performance history of *The Cherry Orchard*, I will continually revisit the three main interpretive questions set out by the original production. In the opening chapter I examine the text of the play itself, and the many directorial and acting choices it presents, moment by moment, as it unfolds upon the stage. The next chapter considers the MAT production, still the touchstone for subsequent performances and the crucible for the play's conflicts. In each of the following chapters I focus on a few major productions that seem to me to embody a vital phase in the play's ongoing life. Sometimes these are within a particular national tradition; more often they are groups of linked productions from different countries, coinciding at key moments of cultural and theatrical history.

Chapter 3 considers Russian productions after the MAT opening, both within Russia and the USSR and on tours to the West. Of Chekhov's major plays, only *The Cherry Orchard* was regularly produced by the Soviets, who focused on its invocation of the "new

life.” This chapter also follows the history of the play at the Moscow Art Theatre, and considers how its tours influenced the perception of Chekhov’s work in Germany, France, and the USA. Chapter 4 covers early English-language productions of the play in Britain and America. Although the initial London production failed in 1911, Chekhov eventually became so popular in England that a distinctive British style of Chekhov playing emerged, and *The Cherry Orchard* became a staple of the dramatic repertoire. Chapter 5 deals with a range of productions from mid-century. As the impact of the original MAT production began to recede, several prominent directors developed authoritative new productions in Europe and America. These productions heightened the director’s role as interpreter while filtering Chekhov through different theatrical traditions. Jean-Louis Barrault in France, Michel Saint-Denis in England, and Giorgio Strehler in Italy all developed new productions removing the play from its specifically Russian context and reflecting the influence of modern playwrights like Pirandello, Brecht, and Beckett.

Chapter 6 considers a group of strikingly revisionist productions of the play that emerged from the theatrical radicalism of the 1960s and 70s. In Moscow in 1975, Anatoly Efros made his Taganka Theatre production a mixture of the farcical and the grotesque, with acting styles ranging from detached to hysterical. The Czech director Otomar Krejca deconstructed the play at Düsseldorf in 1976, while the Romanian Andrei Serban presented a visually striking and iconoclastic version of the play in New York a year later. In Nottingham in 1977, Richard Eyre presented a Marxist reworking by radical playwright Trevor Griffiths. In this version Trofimov was the hero, and the emphasis was not on the pain of the Ranevskys’ dispossession but its “objective necessity.”<sup>9</sup>

Chapter 7 examines the two most widely seen and influential productions of recent decades. Both undertook fresh and vivid explorations of the play’s character relationships, eschewing a single interpretive focus in favor of complex, open-ended readings. Peter Brook’s production, staged in Paris in 1981 and New York in 1988, used

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[More information](#)

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8 Chekhov: *The Cherry Orchard*

an international cast and a simple, elegant staging for a spare but humane production. Peter Stein's 1992 Berlin production, also seen in Moscow, Salzburg, and Edinburgh, was, by contrast, meticulously detailed in its setting and glacial in pace, but achieved comparable dramatic power.

The final chapter considers the present status of the play, and what new directions it is taking in the twenty-first century. One important trend has been to use the play to comment, directly or obliquely, on cultural crises far removed from Tsarist Russia. Race and ethnicity often play into reimaginations of *The Cherry Orchard*, as in Emily Mann's production at the McCarter Theatre in the USA, or Janet Suzman's South African version, *The Free State*. The play may be adapted to aesthetic and cultural modes far from any Chekhov could have imagined, as in the work of the Japanese director Suzuki Tadashi. I conclude with an account of productions in the former Soviet Union, including Adolph Shapiro's centenary production of the play at the Moscow Art Theatre in 2004. One hundred years after its initial production, *The Cherry Orchard* continues to inspire many new experiments, as directors, actors, and audiences confront Chekhov's themes of decay and upheaval in a changing cultural landscape.



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## CHAPTER I

*THE CHERRY ORCHARD: TEXT AND  
PERFORMANCE*

*The Cherry Orchard* is representative of Chekhov's dramatic method at its most fully realized. Like the other major plays, *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard* occupies four undivided acts, centered on a provincial household, following the fortunes of a large and varied group of characters over an extended period. The passing of time, the rhythms of arrival and departure, the dwelling on the past and philosophizing about the future: all are familiar devices from the other plays. In contrast to the well-crafted, plot-driven plays of Ibsen, Chekhov's dramas progress through apparently inconsequential dialogues, *non sequiturs*, and the trivialities of daily life. "People can be having dinner, just having dinner," Chekhov wrote in his most oft-quoted comment on his own work, "and at the same time, their happiness is being secured, or their lives are being destroyed."<sup>1</sup>

The rich texture of Chekhov's plays, their mixture of quotidian detail on the surface and powerful feeling underneath, allows wide scope for theatrical interpretation. Actors, directors, and designers are challenged to embody the overheard snatches of conversation, the quirky acts and habitual gestures, as poetic images or moments of human truth. To realize Chekhov's detailed stage actions requires hundreds of individual interpretive choices, each of which colors the meaning of the play as it unfolds. As J. L. Styan has pointed out, while Chekhov's plays seem narrow in scope in comparison to Shakespeare's, they offer the same kind of interpretive range, make the same kind of moment-to-moment demands, and refuse, in the same way, to yield definitive answers to the largest problems they pose.<sup>2</sup> And while

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 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

10 Chekhov: *The Cherry Orchard*

Chekhov certainly took issue with productions (including those of the Moscow Art Theatre) that he felt misrepresented his work, he built into that work a need for interpretation. His texts are deliberately left open, to be completed by reader, actor, director, and audience. He raised questions, but declined to give answers:

You are right to demand that an author take conscious stock of what he is doing, but you are confusing two concepts: answering the questions and formulating them correctly. Only the latter is required of an author . . . It is the duty of the court to formulate the questions correctly, but it is up to each member of the jury to answer them according to his own preference.<sup>3</sup>

The discussion that follows tries to elucidate the performative decisions Chekhov makes himself, in his stage directions and in the implied action of his dialogue, as well as the points of interpretation that are left open to actors, designers, and directors. It also takes into account the development of Chekhov's text and the changes that were made in the course of its initial performance and publication. Finally, it tries to convey something of the way *The Cherry Orchard* functions in performance, as its action and its meaning unfold in real time on the stage.

ACT I

Chekhov's opening stage directions for *The Cherry Orchard* are detailed and evocative:

A room which is still known as the nursery. One of the doors leads to Anya's room. Half-light, shortly before sunrise. It is May already, and the cherry trees are in blossom, but outside in the orchard it is cold, with a morning frost. The windows are closed.<sup>4</sup>

These directions immediately raise questions, both of practical stagecraft and of interpretation. Why "still known"? Is this a way of