

A Blind Spot: Chekhov's Deepest Horizons

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Chekhov's drama has traditionally been associated with detailed, even cluttered, naturalistic settings.¹ Occasionally, as in the final act of *Uncle Vanya*, set in Vanya's room, the description of the stage is indeed elaborate. Generally, however, Chekhov's directions are "laconic,"² certainly compared with those of Ibsen and Strindberg. The scenic elements are carefully, scrupulously selected and are often emblematic: according to Meyerhold, Chekhov insisted that "the stage reflects the quintessence of life and there is no need to introduce anything superfluous on to it."³

Chekhov's description of the setting for Act Two of *The Cherry Orchard* is invested with particular symbolic weight.⁴ Therefore, as Beverly Hahn insists, it "demands the most absolute precision for its effect".⁵

Open fields. An old chapel—long abandoned and dilapidated. Near it a well, large stones which were evidently once tombstones, and an old bench. A road can be seen leading to the Gayev estate. On one side loom dark poplars, and there the cherry orchard begins. In the distance is a row of telegraph poles, and far, far away, on the horizon, can be dimly made out a large town, which is visible only in very fine, clear weather. The sun will soon set.⁶

This setting contains a particularly curious detail, a detail more intriguing perhaps than the celebrated, enigmatic "breaking string" that sounds for the first time in this act: "far, far away, on the horizon, can be dimly made out a large town, which is visible only in very fine, clear weather." The description is, of course, especially challenging for the designer: how to convey that impression of just-visibility and that exceptional distance? Perhaps it is more pertinent to ask: have you ever beheld that town and that horizon? I have seen perhaps ten *Cherry Orchards*, and I have yet to espy either town or horizon.

As with so much else in Chekhovian theatrical tradition, the failure to show that expansive landscape and horizon can be traced back to Stanislavsky, who was schooled in the late nineteenth-century aesthetic of illusionism as exemplified by the productions of the Saxe-Meinengen company and André Antoine. Consequently, the

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Russian director and his designer Viktor Simov routinely elaborated in excessive detail the essential scenographic elements specified by Chekhov, “encasing the plays in a highly detailed, representational, physical world” (see Figure 1).⁷ As Edward Braun notes, the precision and specificity of Chekhov’s directions for the second act of *The Cherry Orchard* were lost on Stanislavsky.⁸ The tension between encroaching modernity and provincial stasis was largely absent from the Moscow Art Theatre set, which, as Nick Worrall remarks, represented a more emphatically pastoral landscape, in the manner of the painter Levitan.⁹ Missing was the row of telegraph poles in the distance, while introduced were haystacks, a silver birch and two fir trees; and the tumble-down chapel that Chekhov describes became a much grander, more prominent presence, centre stage left. Moreover, Stanislavsky accompanied all this with one of his usual soundscapes: rustling leaves, crackling branches, croaking frogs, and corncrakes. To Chekhov’s annoyance Stanislavsky also toyed with the idea of having a train cross upstage during the act; at least this would have conveyed the aspect of technological advance signified by the telegraph poles. As for that horizon, a ridge rising in the background actually served to foreshorten the distance and confine the landscape, and Stanislavsky’s prompt copy states, “The town is not yet visible in the heat haze.”¹⁰ Moreover, an evening mist rises from the ravine—an image that, with unintended irony, nicely encapsulates Stanislavsky’s obfuscating of Chekhov’s dramaturgy.



Figure 1. The set for Act Two of *The Cherry Orchard*, Moscow Art Theatre, 1904.

Stanislavsky is not the only one guilty of negligence or misunderstanding here. Sometimes the possibility of our seeing that horizon is precluded by the translator. Among translations into English, David Mamet’s and, surprisingly, Trevor Griffiths’s versions of the play acknowledge neither the town nor the horizon.¹¹ Pam Gems notes the “outline of a town,” but it is merely in “the distance,” not

“far, far away” (there is no mention that the town is visible only in very fine, clear weather); and she does not refer to the horizon.¹²

Yet Chekhov was particularly adamant about the setting and the horizon that he envisaged. Presumably ever mindful of Stanislavsky’s proclivities, while revising the play he wrote to Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko that he had “reduced the décor . . . to a minimum” and he asked that in Act Two “you give me genuine green fields and a road and *a sense of distance unusual for the stage*.”¹³ This insistence on the horizon and the view to it acquires greater significance when set alongside an important speech of Lopakhin’s later in the act: in something of a *profession de foi*, Lopakhin speaks of God’s having given us the “deepest horizons.”¹⁴ This subtle but resonant echo points to the way in which, in Chekhov’s plays, scenography operates in an extremely “intricate and complicated” relationship with character, stage business and props;¹⁵ dramatic action and dialogue are deliberately, often ironically, juxtaposed with visual images.¹⁶

The nature of this relationship is perhaps disguised because of the extent to which Chekhov moves from the “fixed,” “closed” spaces of Ibsen’s realistic drama and Strindberg’s early, naturalistic plays,¹⁷ with their single-point perspective, to spaces that are more fluid, open and “multidimensional.”¹⁸ Described in meticulous detail, the single settings of plays such as *Hedda Gabler*, *Ghosts* and *Dance of Death (Part One)* feature carefully constructed locations which serve to emphasize and signify aspects of the central characters’ plight.¹⁹ On the other hand, although settings like the nursery in *The Cherry Orchard* certainly have powerful resonance for the characters, and although details such as the third-act fire in *Three Sisters* heighten the drama, their significance is not firmly fixed by an authorial voice. Rather, as is appropriate for plays which elevate the ensemble above a central role or roles, meaning is left more open to interpretation by both characters and spectators,²⁰ and that sense of a shifting perspective is facilitated in all Chekhov’s major plays because we see those characters in a series of different locations.

Arnold Aronson credits “modern and postmodern” productions, which have broken emphatically with Stanislavskian naturalism in favor of syncretic, poetic designs, with enabling the “Chekhovian landscape” to “thrive” by capturing the fundamental qualities of the plays’ scenography: the “implied transparency of walls, fluidity of space, juxtaposition of near and far and symbolic use of familiar items.”²¹ According to Aronson, Chekhov is a Symbolist playwright for whom “the concrete elements of the external world were manifestations of emotional states of being,” “not a documentary recording of domestic décor”; Chekhov’s “settings are virtual roadmaps to the psyche.”²² However, although Chekhov may have insisted that “the stage is art” and that it “demands a degree of artifice,”²³ and although his dramaturgy moves beyond naturalism and allows a fluid, shifting perspective, it does not necessarily follow that he is more interested in “the evocation of a state of mind” or “emotional states of being” than in “the details of real life.”²⁴ Nor

does it follow that he seeks to create a space that is primarily existential, even ahistorical or apolitical. As Peter Holland argues, a disdain for “naturalism in its fullest sense . . . does not contradict a Chekhov whose aim is . . . to analyze society directly.”²⁵ Indeed, the significance of the “concrete elements of the external world” in Chekhov’s plays is not merely subjective but derives from a “specific historicity and precise sociological imagination” that require some substantiation.²⁶

Designs which distill the plays’ “poetic essences”—perhaps synthesizing the various locations in a single set—might recognize the extent to which Chekhov has moved from the static Ibsenian drawing-room to something more fluid and polyphonic, and they may capture the dichotomy and counterpoint between public and private spheres. They may also express a “Bergsonian awareness that reality stands outside time” or show the plays to open, as Andrey Bely suggests, “an aperture into Eternity.”²⁷ However, such designs, like most conventional, naturalistic stagings, have generally continued to emphasize unduly emotional resonance and *nastroyeniye* (mood), and therefore have overlooked the precise way in which Chekhov envisages the scenography to function. Consequently, some of these distillations ignore or override Chekhov’s own selection of the crucial scenic elements. It is not unusual, for instance, for the lake to disappear altogether from view in *The Seagull*, often to be located hypothetically somewhere in the direction of the audience. On the other hand, as in Giorgio Strehler’s, Anatoly Efros’s and Andrei Serban’s *Cherry Orchards*,²⁸ often cherry trees—or their blossom—have assumed an especial prominence beyond the discreet presence indicated in Chekhov’s descriptions of each act’s settings.

To examine the intricate and complicated role that scenography plays in Chekhov, let us return to that elusive horizon. Of course, the notion of Chekhov’s distant horizons seems like an oxymoron. If we think of Chekhov in terms of horizons at all, they tend to be very narrow ones: his plays are usually seen as claustrophobic. Therefore, because “Chekhov’s characters are often trapped in a life or philosophy that is represented by the concrete elements of a house,”²⁹ they are all too easily hermetically sealed in the fourth-wall, naturalistic world that the Moscow Art Theatre and its adherents have fashioned for them.³⁰ Certainly the characters are frequently self-absorbed and inward looking. Even when they look outwards, as Vershinin and Trofimov do most obviously, they are generally dismissed as dreamers rather than identified as visionaries; they apparently take refuge in fantasy and illusions to compensate for personal inadequacy and unhappiness. Yet, although the characters themselves are often oblivious, Chekhov’s focus extends considerably beyond their narrow circles.

The conceit of the stage encapsulating the world in miniature is, of course, older than Shakespeare’s Globe, but this is often disguised in realistic and naturalistic theatre, which, especially when it confines action to a “fixed” room, seems to value the particular over the emblematic. Therefore, we are often encouraged to

celebrate Chekhov's characters for their special, quirky individuality rather than their representativeness. However, just as *Hedda Gabler* is emblematic of a wider bourgeois world, so *The Cherry Orchard* can be seen as capturing in microcosm a whole society on the brink of "convulsive change."³¹ (Indeed for Richard Eyre this is what makes the play the greatest of the twentieth century.³²) Trofimov makes the point explicitly at the end of the act, when he tells Anya, "All Russia is our orchard."³³

Although reference to the horizon is most explicit in *The Cherry Orchard*, allusion to a much wider world beyond the immediate context of the drama is there in the other plays too, even in the most insular, *Uncle Vanya*. In the final act of *Three Sisters* the play suddenly opens out to the Prozorovs' garden, with a long avenue of firs affording a view of a river and a wood beyond. The canvas implicitly extends even further with the passage of soldiers through the garden reminding us of the imminent departure of the brigade for Poland.³⁴ Of course, that extended world is evoked not only by elements of setting and stage action, but by the references in the plays' dialogue to other people and places: in *The Cherry Orchard* to Ranevskaya's aunt in Yaroslavl, her lover in Paris, and Lopakhin's business in Kharkov; in *Three Sisters* to Balzac's marriage in Berdichev, and a smallpox epidemic in Tsitsikar; and in *The Seagull* to Dorn's visit to Genoa, and Arkadina's and Nina's performances in Kharkov and Moscow. A more distant backdrop still is signaled by a visual detail in the final act of *Uncle Vanya*, seemingly the most "chamber" of the plays. Hanging on the wall of Vanya's room is a map of Africa, which, the stage description notes, "is obviously out of place here."³⁵ (Another interesting challenge for a designer: to suggest the out-of-placeness of the map!) Eventually, towards the end of the act, when Astrov reluctantly takes his leave, he acknowledges the map: he goes up to it, looks at it, and says, "It must be scorching in Africa now."³⁶

Where these wider prospects are registered at all, they tend to be understood as metaphors for the characters' personal plight, or as highlighting the characters' existential predicament or their suffering, even conferring a tragic dimension on that suffering. So, J. L. Styan somewhat lamely posits that the "useless and incongruous" map of Africa in *Uncle Vanya* is "suggestive of the vague and muddled horizons of Vanya's thinking."³⁷ For Rokem, Chekhov's "open" doors, pointing to other worlds and possibilities, simply emphasize that his "heroes are caught somewhere between paralysis and despair."³⁸ In a similar vein Aronson concludes that "what is clearly most significant for Chekhov" in the setting for the last act of *Three Sisters* is "the vista stretching into the distance with its implication of continuity and the promised land that the sisters can never reach"; "The freshness or freedom of the outside world is tantalizingly visible yet inaccessible."³⁹

Aronson's understanding is symptomatic of a more general inclination to read the entire scenography of *Three Sisters*—its sequence of changing settings—somewhat in the Ibsenian manner as a direct, physical correlation of the sisters'

story. Hence Hahn reasons that the sisters' "gradual loss of power in their own house is externalized in the visual details" of these settings:⁴⁰ in the darkening, more ominous mood as the action shifts from the sunny daylight of Act One, first to the winter evening of Act Two and then the deepest night of Act Three, and from the grand, spacious interior of the first two acts—the drawing-room and adjoining ballroom—to the rather claustrophobic bedroom shared by Olga and Irina. The sense of increasing despair is also apparently emphasized by the fire raging in the town, visually represented by the red glow at a window visible through a doorway. Accordingly the outdoor setting of Act Four, with only the terrace of the house visible on the right, is commonly interpreted as making literal the sisters' effective expulsion from the house. Consequently, for Hahn, the "receding perspectives of the long avenue of firs, the river and the forest" express the profound sadness that characterizes the play: they "give more the feeling of a crisis being over than of anything being solved."⁴¹

Such reasoning, like the failure to register or represent adequately the wider frames of reference and horizons, derives from the readiness of performers and audiences alike to take their cue from the characters' own accounts of themselves and to indulge the navel-gazing. (That is why those miseries can easily assume tragic proportions.) Because the irony operating in the plays is often muted in productions, we fail to perceive the bathos of such lines as Irina Prozorova's "my soul is like an expensive piano that is locked and the key lost."⁴² However, Chekhov's dramaturgy should work to prompt us to apply the corrective perspective that the characters are unable to bring to their predicament and problems. This is evident in the use of counterpoint in the construction of scenes: for example, at the beginning of *Three Sisters*, the upstage laughter and ridicule of Solyony by Chebutykin and Tuzenbakh comments ironically on Olga's and Irina's fanciful talk of going to Moscow.

More than is generally appreciated, setting is another device Chekhov uses, especially in his last two plays, to comment ironically on the characters and their propensity to look inwards. It is just possible that the wider view to the horizon upstage actually places the downstage drama and apparent misery in a different perspective, indeed in perspective *per se*, ensuring that the struggles and suffering of the characters are not permitted to loom disproportionately large.⁴³ In other words, looking outwards can alter our looking inwards.

Therefore, the setting for Act Four of *Three Sisters*, for example, can be understood rather differently from the way in which Hahn and Aronson read it. The fire of Act Three provides a clue to this. The turmoil created by the fire generates hysteria and fatigue which precipitate the series of emotional outbursts and crises involving the sisters and then Andrey. Olga complains that she has aged ten years in this single night. However, although she and her siblings are distressed, there are many others in the town who are patently much worse off, as Olga herself has actually told us: Kirsanovsky St has evidently burnt to the ground and its inhabitants

are presumably destitute, and the Kotilins and Vershinins have had to flee their homes. Meanwhile, all Fedotik's belongings have been destroyed, but, in marked contrast to Irina's self-pitying anguish that her life is running out, the junior officer laughs and dances at his misfortune! It is surely significant, too, that, from early in the act, we can see the dawn progressively breaking.⁴⁴

The setting for Act Four of *Three Sisters*, with its path through the Prozorovs' garden to the river and beyond, not only points towards more distant places—Poland, where the brigade is being posted, and of course Moscow—but it allows the world beyond the sisters' circle to enter the scenic space of the play. Although financial constraints doubtless often prevent productions from realizing this, Chekhov envisages that, during the act, miscellaneous townspeople and five or six soldiers walk through the garden en route to the river. The passers-by, who create a “vivid and active” world around the sisters,⁴⁵ include, in particular, two street musicians. Those two itinerants may intrude less brusquely and dramatically than the passer-by in Act Two of *The Cherry Orchard*; however, lest we romanticize them as part of the picturesque scenery, Anfisa remarks, “Poor wretches. They're not playing because their stomachs are full.”⁴⁶ The musicians' destitution *may* be an analogue for the dispossession of the three sisters' house by Natasha, but of course, like the victims of the fire, their privation is actually much greater. It is noteworthy, too, that it is Anfisa who makes these remarks about the musicians. She has been evicted by Natasha from the house and is living with Olga at the school, yet she declares that there is “no-one happier than I.”⁴⁷ Therefore, Anfisa's cheerful resilience and the street musicians' plight not only put the miseries of the sisters and Andrey into perspective but they may become an implicit rebuke of the Prozorovs' self-centeredness.

Similarly, like Trofimov in *The Cherry Orchard*, but more concretely, Astrov in *Uncle Vanya* reminds us of the world beyond the perimeter of the Serebryakov estate and so offers a wider perspective, and tacit judgement, on the troubles of the self-absorbed members of the household. At the very beginning of the play we learn of the typhus epidemic, poverty and squalor at Malitskoye, and later in Act One we are told of the damage to an entire ecosystem: the destruction of forests, rivers, the habitats of animals, and the climate. At this point Astrov is called away to attend to a worker in a nearby factory who has been injured.⁴⁸

The society-in-microcosm in *The Cherry Orchard* is on the threshold of profound change—albeit a transformation that proved more profound in retrospect—and in the play Chekhov juxtaposes three principal ideological standpoints: that of the gentry landowners faced with the imminent loss of their estate and way of life; the radical, revolutionary—implicitly Marxist—position espoused by Trofimov; and the new capitalist class personified by the son-of-a-serf-turned-businessman, Lopakhin. The political and philosophical debate between these three positions is not presented polemically. That is not Chekhov's style. Even if it were, considerations

of censorship made it difficult to be more direct,⁴⁹ and this was presumably unnecessary for the play's original Russian audience. The debate becomes most explicit in Act Two.

It is significant that, for this act, the action moves from the nostalgia-ridden nursery of Act One to the open country beyond Ranevskaya's estate. The symbolic resonances of the outdoor setting are clear. As Braun observes, the telegraph poles, the road and the town on the horizon are a synecdoche for the recent industrial and technological progress now encroaching on Ranevskaya and Gayev's world,⁵⁰ which is evoked, in the foreground, by the dilapidated chapel, a well, and large stones which look like tombstones. For Hahn the backdrop gives "an urban perspective to the pastoral image, foreshadowing the end of a country idyll."⁵¹

In this act, Francis Fergusson remarks, Chekhov actually shows us an important "moment of change in society" and here we see most starkly the characters' attitudes and responses to that change.⁵² Therefore, the expansive landscape of *The Cherry Orchard's* second act could be seen as endorsing Gayev's perception that Nature is indifferent to human fate.⁵³ On the other hand, the landscape speaks positively of the possibility of progress, a literal representation of the transformation of the countryside that Lopakhin and Trofimov advocate. Although the telegraph poles bring the unwelcome reminders of Ranevskaya's lover in Paris, even Gayev appreciates the benefits of technological advances: in his very first speech in Act Two, he remarks on the convenience of the new railway. In the light of Chekhov's insistence on an exceptional sense of distance for this scene, it is surely significant that, when the three ideological positions are presented and contrasted most sharply towards the end of the act, Lopakhin actually utters the word "horizon." He does so after Trofimov's long, impassioned speech condemning the intelligentsia for its ignorance, empty philosophizing, and failure to build crèches and libraries. Somewhat undercutting Trofimov's rhetoric, Lopakhin then very briefly and matter-of-factly reports his own real work in the present—he's up at five every morning—and proffers his own vision: "Lord, you have given us huge forests, boundless fields, the deepest horizons, so, living here, we ought really to be giants."⁵⁴

The sun is now setting, if indeed it has not set already; so, perhaps the view to that town on the horizon has dimmed? Nevertheless, the backdrop gestures both at the wider world to which Trofimov refers in his indictment of the Russian intelligentsia and at the expanse and vast horizons that Lopakhin invokes. Therefore, the sale of the cherry orchard, which is presented as an unthinkable catastrophe by Ranevskaya and Gayev and often as a tragedy by productions and commentators from Stanislavsky onwards, is placed in a different perspective when considered in terms of Russian society as a whole and the changes occurring in it. Surely the audience's response to the ideological debate and to the issue of the fate of the cherry orchard is critically affected by the setting?

This argument may seem to privilege unduly Lopakhin's point of view, but Chekhov regarded him as the "central" figure in the play,⁵⁵ intended Stanislavsky to play the role and was disappointed that he did not,⁵⁶ and amended the text to make the businessman more sensitive and sympathetic.⁵⁷ Lopakhin was not to be a vulgar kulak, but, according to the actor Leonid Leonidov, Chekhov saw him as a cross between a merchant and "a professor of medicine at Moscow University."⁵⁸ Moreover, as John Tulloch points out, Lopakhin's lines and his proposal for transforming the orchard echo the sentiments and arguments of the contemporary scientist Il'ya Menchikov, whom Chekhov greatly admired.⁵⁹ Stephen Baehr also notes Chekhov's own belief in progress, as expressed in a letter to his publisher:⁶⁰ "I have believed in progress since childhood, and can't not do so."⁶¹

Lopakhin's "horizons" speech is placed just before two brief but highly significant incidents which show the wider world intruding more emphatically and disturbingly into the foreground: the first vibration of the famous breaking string and the sudden appearance of the mysterious passer-by. The far-off sound of a breaking string, seemingly coming from the sky, is described by Hahn as the "sound of social transition."⁶² Notwithstanding its mysterious, ethereal quality, the effect is to give that expansive landscape-in-transition a greater material and historical reality: Lopakhin explains the sound as a cable snapping in the mines, while Firs interprets it as a portent of doom, recalling the momentous emancipation of the serfs. According to Vladimir Kataev, the breaking string "conjures up [Russia's] vastness and a sense of time sweeping past."⁶³ The episode of the breaking string prompts Ranevskaya, who has found Lopakhin's talk of giants rather alarming, to suggest that they go inside, but, before they are able to retreat to the house, they are interrupted by the equally mysterious and troubling passer-by, whose dress and quotations of Nekrasov and Nadson identify him as a radical escaping from prison or exile. Both the sound of the breaking string and the stranger in effect emerge from that vast background landscape; Chekhov wrote to Knipper that the sound "must . . . be felt as coming from a very great distance."⁶⁴

The way in which the scenography of the first two acts of *The Cherry Orchard* juxtaposes an enclosed social order with a more complex, changing, technological world serves to endorse Georg Lukács's argument—taken up by Braun—that Chekhov's plays present a conflict between subjective intentions and feelings, and objective reality.⁶⁵ In the same vein, Griffiths argues that *The Cherry Orchard* deals "not only with the subjective pain of property-loss but also and more importantly with its objective *necessity*."⁶⁶ Although, ironically, Griffiths's translation fails to report Chekhov's setting satisfactorily, the landscape of Act Two, with its unusually wide horizon, helps to establish that objective reality.

Just as the deeper structures of Chekhov's realism are not conveyed by excessive naturalistic detail, neither (as has been argued above) are they necessarily signaled by more abstract, synthesizing or reductive designs. Peter Brook's *Cherry*

Orchard, for example, with its assortment of carpets, offered no horizon beyond that of the theatre itself.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, productions such as Adrian Noble's for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1995-96, which cast Ranevskaya's house as the central character in the drama,⁶⁸ offer a purely subjective perspective that not only obscures the "specific historicity" of Chekhov's world, but also disguises the contrapuntal relationship between setting, action, and character. Serban's 1977 and 1992 *Cherry Orchards* certainly opened up the stage,⁶⁹ using a cyclorama to suggest a larger panorama;⁷⁰ however, the abstraction of the productions' designs implied an existential void rather than a physical, material expanse.

One non-naturalistic production which did present the landscape of *The Cherry Orchard's* second act particularly interestingly was that directed by Manfred Karge and Matthias Langhoff at Bochum's Schauspielhaus in West Germany in 1981 (see Figure 2). The production bore the heavy imprint of the directors' East German politics: the play was updated to the 1920s and Chekhov's landowners and their entourage, equated with the self-seeking profiteers of the Soviet New Economic Period, were viewed through the lens of Erdmanesque/Mayakovskian satire.⁷¹ The scenography naturally reinforced this unsympathetic conception of the characters, and consequently the set for Act Two lacked some of the poetic indeterminacy that Senelick identifies in the outdoor location.⁷² However, that set represented a playful, witty, and imaginative response to the challenge posed by Chekhov's stage directions. It featured a white wall extending across the width of the stage. Four large-ish doorways in the wall afforded views of an expansive, receding landscape on a photographic backcloth far upstage. The four apertures worked cunningly to draw attention to and create a degree of intrigue about the background, and they potentially exaggerated the sense of distant vastness, especially because the wall was positioned well downstage. (The angle and focus of the photograph in Figure 2 make it difficult to discern but in fact there was a town in the distance.) Of course, whereas Chekhov's description of the landscape suggests a subtler transition, the wall signified an emphatic division between the Gayev estate and the wider world beyond. That demarcation was underlined by the prominence of a railway track, which Chekhov does not specify but which features conspicuously in the play's dialogue, especially in Lopakhin's speeches. Coming to an abrupt halt in the foreground of the backcloth, the railway suggested the imminence of the onslaught of industrialization and, with it, economic and social change. Meanwhile, by confining most of the action to a relatively shallow strip downstage, the scenography seems to have emphasized the tenuousness of the characters' situation and the hopelessness of any resistance to larger historical forces. The passer-by made a most startling, and Brechtian, entrance into this space. In this instance he did actually emerge from that vast landscape: played by Karge, he came from behind the backcloth, lifting it high as he did so.⁷³ Although, in line with the *mise en scène* as a whole, the second-act set may have been rather reductive in its

interpretation of the text,⁷⁴ nevertheless it captured very effectively something of the Chekhovian interplay between foreground and background, thereby potentially pointing to the way in which Chekhov's drama "confront[s] and communicate[s] the dialectical relationship between . . . the private and the public" that Rokem identifies as a vital function of theatre.⁷⁵



Figure 2. Act II of *The Cherry Orchard*, Bochum Schauspielhaus, 1981 (reproduced courtesy of Theater Heute).

If there is any doubt that Chekhov intends his theatre to enable us to see beyond the immediate preoccupations of the foreground to the wider horizon, it is spelt out for us in *The Seagull*. At the beginning of the play, the curtain rises to reveal a rough stage, presumably centre stage or upstage centre. That stage stands astride a wide path leading to the lake in the background, and its curtain actually hides the lake from view. Commentary on the metatheatrical and metadramatic aspects of *The Seagull* focuses on the device of the play-within-the-play and the allusions to *Hamlet*, but overlooks how that stage-within-the-stage functions physically. Too often, as with *The Cherry Orchard*, productions miss the significance of Chekhov's description of the set, which is important not simply for the self-reflexive image of the curtain within the curtain: the rough, makeshift stage rudely disrupts the romantic illusion of the receding, bucolic vista so carefully engineered within the proscenium arch theatre.⁷⁶

Treplev, whose play is about to be performed on this stage, famously advocates that "new [theatrical] forms are needed."⁷⁷ Whether or not Chekhov satirizes Treplev's particular attempt to create those new forms in a pseudo-Symbolist (or Decadent) mode, it seems reasonable to assume his endorsement of the ambition, which, after all, he sought to achieve with his own plays. Treplev tells his uncle that, in the hidebound, contemporary theatre, when the curtain goes up you see a room with three walls, within which the actors try to drag out of trite lines and scenes some moral platitude that might come in useful about the house. On the other hand, when the curtain rises on his stage, it "will open directly on a view of

the lake and the *horizon*,⁷⁷⁸ as indeed it does for Nina's performance of the play-within-the-play.

In the course of *The Seagull* the action retreats to rooms with three walls and the lake disappears from literal view. That scenic progression seems to parallel Treplev's loss of his sense of vocation and faith in himself, his losing sight of the horizon he speaks about with such optimism at the beginning of the play. Although Chekhov's characters may lose sight of, or fail to perceive at all, that far-off horizon, we, the audience, should not, because it allows us to see those characters' situations—and perhaps our own—in perspective. By seeing the background in productive interplay with the foreground, we may see beyond ourselves and may re-imagine our life and our world. Treplev, the theatrical-literary visionary, may have lost his way, but his rough stage nevertheless endures as a powerful image of the way in which the theatre can both rudely challenge our preconceptions and open up for us a more expansive perspective. If only productions allow them, Chekhov's plays demonstrate what the theatre can do so well: set subjective desire against objective necessity and so enable us to look both inwards and outwards, to see the deepest horizons that Lopakhin envisions.

Notes

1. Arnold Aronson, "The Scenography of Chekhov," *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, ed. Vera Gottlieb and Paul Allain (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 135.
2. Freddie Rokem, *Theatrical Space in Ibsen, Chekhov and Strindberg: Public Forms of Privacy* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1986) 29.
3. *Meyerhold on Theatre*, trans. and ed. Edward Braun (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969) 30.
4. Edward Braun remarks that the settings in *The Cherry Orchard* are "more significant in their detail and more clearly synecdochic than in any of the earlier plays." Edward Braun, "The Cherry Orchard," *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov* 114.
5. Beverly Hahn, *Chekhov: A Study of the Major Stories and Plays* (London: Cambridge UP, 1977) 25.
6. Anton Chekhov, *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy i pisem* [Complete collection of works and letters], 30 vols., *soch.* [hereafter *Works*] 13 (Moscow: Nauka, 1986) 215. This and all subsequent quotations from this edition of the plays are my translations, as are quotations from Chekhov's letters.
7. Aronson 137.
8. Braun 114.
9. Nick Worrall, "Stanislavsky's Production Score for Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1904): A Synoptic Overview," *Modern Drama* 42 (1999): 525.
10. I. N. Solov'eva, ed., *Rezhissërskiye ekzemplari K. S. Stanislavskogo*, vol. 3, 1901-1904 (Moscow, 1983) 339.
11. Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*, trans. David Mamet (New York: Samuel French, 1986) 26; Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*, trans. Trevor Griffiths (London: Pluto Press, 1981) 18.
12. Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*, trans. Pam Gems (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 37.
13. Chekhov, *Pol. sob. soch., pis'ma* [hereafter *Letters*] 11 (1982) 243. Letter of 22 August 1903. My italics.
14. Chekhov, *Works* 13:224.
15. Rokem 32.
16. See Hahn ix.
17. Stanley Vincent Longman, "Fixed, Floating and Fluid Stages," *The Theatrical Space, Themes in Drama* 9, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977) 152.

18. Rokem 35.
19. For example, Ibsen specifies that the drawing-room in *Hedda Gabler* has doors opening, on one side, into a hall and, on the other, onto a veranda and the garden, while upstage center there is a smaller room, Hedda's private space. At times during the play's four acts, in close correspondence to the heroine's predicament, curtains screen off both the view through the French windows and Hedda's upstage cabinet. Together with changes in lighting and properties, the constriction of the scenic space and the loss of the sense of access to the outside world provide a visual metaphor for Hedda's plight: "The theatrical space within . . . becomes the symbol of the powerful repression that the heroine suffers." (Hanna Scolnicov, "Theatre space, theatrical space, and the theatrical space without," *The Theatrical Space* 18.) Similarly, the set for *Dance of Death (Part One)* makes literal the prison in which Alice and the Captain find themselves trapped in their relationship: their drawing-room is the interior of a circular fortress tower, beyond which can be seen, through two doors upstage, the seashore and military batteries, where a sentry is permanently on duty.
20. Rokem 32.
21. Aronson 146-147.
22. 134-135.
23. Quoted by Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre* 30.
24. Aronson 134.
25. Peter Holland, "Chekhov and the resistant symbol," *The Theatrical Space* 237.
26. Trevor Griffiths, preface, *The Cherry Orchard*, trans. Griffiths, v.
27. Laurence Senelick, *The Complete Plays*, by Anton Chekhov, trans., ed. and annotated by Senelick (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2006) 975; Andrey Bely, "The Cherry Orchard," *Russian Dramatic Theory from Pushkin to the Symbolists: An Anthology*, trans. and ed. Laurence Senelick (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 92.
28. Strehler directed *The Cherry Orchard* at the Piccolo Teatro, Milan, in 1974; Efron directed the play at the Taganka, Moscow, in 1975; and Serban directed it at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre in New York in 1977, and for the Romanian National Theatre, in Bucharest and Moscow, in 1992.
29. Aronson 145.
30. For *Three Sisters*, for example, Stanislavsky "sought to concentrate heavily around Chekhov's heroes such a crushing and stifling atmosphere—expressing itself everywhere, even in the tiniest details." M. N. Stroeveva, "The Three Sisters in the Production of the Moscow Art Theatre," *Chekhov: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Louis Jackson (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1967) 133.
31. Richard Eyre, *Directors' Theatre: Sixteen Leading Directors on the State of Theatre in Britain Today*, by Judith Cook (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989) 33.
32. Eyre, *Directors' Theatre* 33 and personal interview, 6 June 1985.
33. Chekhov, *Works* 13:269.
34. This expansive view was conveyed very clearly in Karl Ernst Herrmann's set for Peter Stein's production for the Schaubühne, Berlin, in 1984. See Laurence Senelick, *The Chekhov Theatre: A Century of the Plays in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 259-260.
35. Chekhov, *Works* 13:105.
36. 114.
37. J. L. Styan, *Chekhov in Performance: A Commentary on the Major Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1971) 132.
38. Rokem 51.
39. Aronson 137, 145.
40. Hahn 303.
41. 305.
42. Chekhov, *Works* 13:180.
43. Styan 274.
44. Chekhov, *Works* 13:161.
45. Styan 213.
46. Chekhov, *Works* 13:183.
47. 183.
48. Of course, a further indictment on the Serebryakov circle is that their melodramatic antics result in the neglect of the estate and of the doctor's duties and projects.
49. On 19 October 1903, Chekhov wrote to Olga Knipper about the difficulty of "depicting" Trofimov's problems with the authorities. Chekhov, *Letters* 11:279.
50. Braun 114-115.
51. Hahn 25.
52. Francis Fergusson, "The Cherry Orchard: A Theater-Poem of the Suffering of Change," *Chekhov: A Collection of Critical Essays* 155, 152.

53. "Oh glorious Nature, you shine with eternal radiance, so beautiful, so indifferent . . .," remarks Gayev in the wake of Lopakhin's speech about the horizons. Chekhov, *Works* 13:224.
54. 224.
55. Chekhov, letters to Knipper and Konstantin Stanislavsky, 30 October 1903, Chekhov, *Letters* 11:290, 291.
56. Chekhov, letters to Stanislavsky, 30 October 1903, and to Nemirovich-Danchenko, 2 November 1903, 291, 293.
57. Braun 116.
58. Chekhov, quoted by the actor L. M. Leonidov, *Chekhov i teatr: Pis'ma, fel'etoni, sovremenniki o Chekhove-dramatuzhge* [Chekhov and the theatre: letters, articles and comments by contemporaries on Chekhov the playwright], by E. D. Surkov (Moscow, 1961) 351.
59. John Tulloch, "'Going to Chekhov': Cultural Studies and Theatre Studies," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 13.2 (1999):27.
60. Stephen L. Baehr, "The Machine in Chekhov's Garden: Progress and Pastoral in *The Cherry Orchard*," *Slavonic and East European Review* 43 (1999):99.
61. Chekhov, letter to Alexey Suvorin, 27 March 1894, Chekhov, *Letters* 5 (1977):283.
62. Hahn 17.
63. Vladimir Kataev, *If Only We Could Know: An Interpretation of Chekhov*, trans. and ed. Harvey Pitcher (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002) 288.
64. Chekhov, letter to Knipper, 18 March 1904, Chekhov, *Letters* 12 (1986):65.
65. Braun 111.
66. Griffiths vi.
67. Brook directed the play at the Bouffes du Nord, Paris, in 1981, revived it there in 1983, and recreated the production at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, in 1988.
68. Tulloch 41.
69. Arthur Bartow, *The Director's Voice: Twenty-one Interviews* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988) 288.
70. See Senelick, *The Chekhov Theatre* 297. Santo Loquasto's design for the New York production was replicated by Mihai Maescu for the Romanian National Theatre (344).
71. See Henning Rischbieter, "Kommt Uns Nur Noch Die Farce Bei?: Karge/Langhoff Inszenieren Tschechows 'Kirschgarten' in Bochum," *Theater Heute* 22 (1981) 31.
72. Senelick, *The Complete Plays*, by Chekhov 975-976.
73. Rischbieter 31.
74. Senelick describes the production as "an aggressive reduction of the GDR's ideological attitude to the West." *The Chekhov Theatre* 256.
75. Rokem 75.
76. Styan 21.
77. Chekhov, *Works* 13:8.
78. 7. My italics.