Adapting Chekhov in the 21st Century: Seven Contemporary Plays

Introduction

At a scholarly symposium in Ottawa in 1994, assessing Chekhov's reception in world culture, noted Chekhov expert Laurence Senelick told the assembled audience that, in his view, the author's plays in production were generally more illuminating than most academic studies. Even with an inferior staging, he suggested, the 'pressures of the rehearsal room, the actual configuration of bodies in space, the adventitious discoveries of a performer's imagination can force insights unavailable in the closest reading.'[1] To grasp a play's complexity of meanings, he added, the only comparable experience was to translate it. This volume proposes a third route towards such understanding and one which combines elements of both. In common with translation, the process of adaptation for the theatre involves living closely with a source text, finding its rhythms, negotiating the gap between what has become alien and what registers powerfully with reader or listener now; in common with production, adaptation assesses a text's thematic potency while establishing what is 'playable', meeting this content with current concerns and contemporary performance vocabularies. Admittedly, the task of translation, whether the result is close or bold, recognises the obligation to adhere to its material with particular attentiveness. Adaptation, by contrast, inherently demands change; yet if a source is to serves as more than a mere springboard, adaptation simultaneously upholds the dynamics and discourses it opts to retain.

Chekhov's works have proved immensely attractive for adaptation, more so than can be said of any other modern playwright. It might seem surprising that a relatively small body of plays, depicting Russian society of the time through a reflective realism that implicitly binds the work still more tightly to its era, should have proved so widely and lastingly generative. Chekhov's continuing relevance in a contemporary context can be explained by several factors. First, the themes of his plays transcend the contexts in which they were presented: the conflict between older and emergent generations (*The Seagull*), the disappointment of a wasted life (*Uncle Vanya*), displacement and suffering (*Three Sisters*), change and the loss of home (*The Cherry Orchard*), are all experiences that are universally recognisable. Second is the ambivalence of authorial position: for while the plays reveal human suffering through a lens that highlights shifting structures of class, wealth and power, Chekhov's own perspective is not readily aligned with any character; in this way, both the dramatic discourse and its creator resist simplistic ideological appropriation. But perhaps more than either of

[1] Laurence Senelick, 'Chekhov and the bubble reputation', *Chekhov Then and Now: The Reception of Chekhov in World Culture*, ed. J. Douglas Clayton, New York: Peter Lang, 1997, pp.5-18 (pp.5-6).

these, and as J. Douglas Clayton and Yana Meerzon have argued, the key to Chekhov's survival in production and adaptation lies in his 'liminal position between realism and modernism'.[2] For while his plays will always be associated with the 'truthfulness' in art that was the objective of the Stanislavskian method, for Chekhov life could be authentically represented only by acknowledging the farcical alongside the serious, the symbolic in the everyday, the poetic flights and the repetitious banalities of language. This embrace of complex sensibilities, discordant aesthetics and an unsettling plurality of subject positions indicates the ways in which Chekhov's drama speaks meaningfully, transhistorically and cross-culturally, to contemporary consciousness. The adaptations gathered in this volume enact that relationship with diverse ambitions and creativities, in all cases treating their sources seriously whilst exhibiting a healthy disobedience.

Chekhov's drama in international context

The extraordinary fame of Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860-1904) expanded exponentially and internationally in the twentieth century and shows no sign of abating. Such posthumous impact could hardly have been anticipated in his lifetime. Chekhov's early writing took the form of satirical sketches and journalism addressing aspects of Russian life, paid work that funded his medical training and supported his family following his father's bankruptcy. He continued to write alongside his lifelong practice as a physician, attracting a following especially for his witty short stories. Aside from an untitled and overstuffed stage play drafted as a student and later abandoned – estimated to contain over seven hours of material, and a work I return to later – his earliest forays into drama were brief skits frequently written for specific actors, as with absurd pseudo-lecture *The Evils of Tobacco* (1886) performed by talented but alocoholic comedian Gradov-Sokolov. He also adapted his own stories for the stage, as with one-act play *Swan Song* (1887), a two-hander where an old actor and his prompter reminisce about lost loves in a theatre after the lights go out. From an extensive body of shorter works, these two examples reveal characteristic motifs that resurface in the famous plays he went on to write: themes of yearning, desire and missed opportunities; a sense of the ridiculous in human behaviour; a combination of the absurd with the melancholy or romantic. His first full-length play to be produced was *Ivanov* (1887), written in a fortnight and almost as hastily staged: this uneven work features a self-absorbed protagonist considered by some a 'Russian Hamlet', although the author had intended this portrayal as parodic[3]; infrequently performed, it was adapted by British playwright David Hare for the National Theatre's 2015 Young Chekhov season, with Hare insisting that *Ivanov* is

[2] J. Douglas Clayton & Yana Meerzon eds., *Adapting Chekhov: The Text and its Mutations*, New York & London: Routledge, 2013, p.3.
[3] Laurence Senelick, *The Chekhov Theatre*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.17.

not ‘a lesser play, but simply different from’ the drama that followed.[4] Chekhov’s major plays are *The Seagull* (1896), *Uncle Vanya* (1897), *Three Sisters* (1901) and finally *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), the last staged a few months before he died. These works cemented his reputation, powerfully shaped by Konstantin Stanislavski’s direction of them at the Moscow Arts Theatre, a company with whom the author’s work became so profoundly associated that for a long time the two became virtually synonymous.

Founded in 1898 by Stanislavski with playwright and director Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, the MAT aimed to produce nuanced, lifelike performance in contrast to the melodrama which then dominated the Russian stage. For Stanislavski, Chekhov’s plays became the vehicle *par excellence* for that purpose: what attracted him was not simply the absence of rhetoric, but the ways in which everyday interaction, in all its banalities, nevertheless conveyed deep emotions beneath the surface. Stanislavski’s productions emphasised precisely those subtextual qualities, eliciting sensitively attuned performances from his actors and heightening atmosphere through scenography, light and sound. While Chekhov appreciated the MAT’s rejection of flamboyance, he was often frustrated by a style of direction which made heavy use of pauses that interrupted the dialogue to convey feeling or build atmosphere - a daring approach at the time that left some critics baffled - or overloaded the action with excessive naturalism in the form of visual detail, sound effects and sometimes even the addition of silent ‘extras’ representing characters mentioned in the plays but never seen.[5] Stanislavski’s interpretation downplayed or failed to recognise the comic element in Chekhov’s drama but his productions established a boldly new aesthetic, cultivating a devoted audience who received them with a religious reverence.[6]

In the decades after his death, Chekhov’s work fell in and out of favour in his home country. Judged politically non-committal, lacking the necessary optimism and insufficiently rooted in action, his plays did not match the revolutionary fervour that marked the beginning of the century. Vsevelod Meyerhold, thirty years after he took the role of Treplev in the 1902 MAT production of *The Seagull,* declared that ‘Chekhov, with his *The Cherry Orchard* or *Three Sisters*, is remote from us today.’[7] He

[4] *Young Chekhov: Platonov, Ivanov, The Seagull* adapted by David Hare, London: Faber & Faber, 2015. p.xiii.
[5] David Allen, *Performing Chekhov*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp.18-20. Sharon Carnicke, ‘Stanislavsky’s production of The Cherry Orchard in the US’, *Chekhov Then and Now: The Reception of Chekhov in World Culture*, ed. J. Douglas Clayton, New York: Peter Lang, 1997, pp.19-30 p.22).
[6] Describing the MAT, Osip Mandelshtam recalled in 1923: ‘For the intelligentsia to go to the Moscow Art Theatre was almost equal to taking communion or going to church.’ Cited in Laurence Senelick, ‘Chekhov and the bubble reputation’, *Chekhov Then and Now: The Reception of Chekhov in World Culture*, ed. J. Douglas Clayton, New York: Peter Lang, 1997, pp.5-18 (p.10).
[7] Meyerhold cited in Tatiana Shakh-Azizova, ‘Chekhov on the Russian Stage’, *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, eds. Vera Gottlieb & Paul Allain, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp.162-175 (p.166).

spoke too soon: a new production by the MAT of *Three Sisters* in 1940 seemed to herald the playwright's rehabilitation. In the post-war period and through the 1950s and 1960s, Chekhov's plays were regularly mounted in Central and Eastern Europe, in productions that characteristically emphasised anger and futility in the face of a harsh world: instead of a muted naturalism, in these stagings 'manor-houses were made to look like skeletal prisons and the branches of the cherry orchard became sterile and gnarled'.[8] Meanwhile, Chekhov's work became increasingly known in Europe and America in the first half of the century, promoted through the work of Russian émigré artists, like Theodore Komisarjevsky in England and Georges Pitoëff in France[9], as well as by the MAT's influential tours to the US in the 1920s. A 1953 journal article attests that while American views of Chekhov were initially hostile (the Washington Players' 1915 staging of *The Seagull* was criticised for 'neurasthenic maunderings […] in the guise of dramatic complications'[10]), the MAT's productions were much more positively received: by the mid-century the plays were judged fluid and complex, rather than vacillating; the ensemble style the work demanded met with acclaim, contrasting notably with the 'star' system that had dominated for some time.

Komisarjevsky's productions of Chekhov in London were widely received as authoritative, closely resembling the stagings of the MAT (notwithstanding that in Russia the director had positioned himself in opposition to Stanislavski). It was largely through Komisarjevsky that the Stanislavskian 'system', closely connected with models of naturalism, was introduced to the British theatre: renowned actor John Gielgud remarked that he himself 'was always showing off, either in a romantic or hysterical vein', but through working with Komisarjevsky he understood 'how a part should be lived from within'.[11] But while Komisarjevsky's productions made Chekhov palatable to a British audience where earlier attempts had failed, this was achieved in part by simplifying and sentimentalising the plays by means of judicious text cuts, picturesque staging and romanticised interpretation of roles.[12] The association of Chekhov with a wistful, middle-class drama that, paradoxically given its Russian origin, appeared to reflect a nostalgic idea of Englishness, was a perception that held sway in Britain for much of the century. Nick Worrall describes the shocked reaction to a boldly postmodern, frenzied interpretation of *Three Sisters* in London in 1990 by

[8] Laurence Senelick, 'Chekhov and the bubble reputation', *Chekhov Then and Now: The Reception of Chekhov in World Culture*, ed. J. Douglas Clayton, New York: Peter Lang, 1997, pp.5-18 (p.12).
[9] For an analysis of Pitoëff's approach in France, see Daniel Gerould, 'The Pitoëffs' Chekhov', *Chekhov Then and Now: The Reception of Chekhov in World Culture*, ed. J. Douglas Clayton, New York: Peter Lang, 1997, pp.31-40.
[10] Charles W. Meister, 'Chekhov's reception in England and America', *American Slavic and East European Review* 12:1, 1953, pp.109-121 (p.116).
[11] Gielgud cited in David Allen, *Performing Chekhov*, London: Routledge, 2000, p.165.
[12] Robert Tracy, 'Komisarjevsky's 1926 *Three Sisters*', *Chekhov on the British Stage*, ed. Patrick Miles, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp.65-77.

Georgian director Robert Sturua, condemned by some as an act of cultural vandalism.[13] By contrast, others received it as a welcome breath of air, 'refreshingly un-English and living proof that there are many ways to play Chekhov'.[14]

Adapting Chekhov

The diverse and evolving directorial approaches to Chekhov's plays constitute adaptation of a sort, making the familiar fresh and strange in each new iteration. Focused rewritings or remakings of his drama is a more recent phenomenon, proliferating since the later twentieth century. *The Seagull,* described by David Hare as the most 'insistently modern' of all nineteenth-century plays[15], was freely adapted by Tennessee Williams and relocated in the deep south, although retaining Russian names; *The Notebook of Trigorin* (1981) is a memory play, seen through the eyes of Trigorin who in Williams' version is bisexual, joined with Arkadina for respectability, casually destroying the besotted Nina, and simultaneously pursuing boys employed on the estate. Later transformations have seen *The Seagull* relocated off the coast of South Carolina in Regina Taylor's African American adaptation *Drowning Crow* (2004), more recently to the Isle of Man, in Anya Reiss's heavily technologised adaptation staged in London (2022) where the isolation and frustration of characters is underlined by their remoteness from the mainland. The conflict between artistic tradition and the avant-garde which Chekhov's play addresses have prompted many adaptations to engage with aesthetic and textual complexities directly. In Russia, Konstantin Kostenko's *The Seagull by A.P.Chekhov: a remix* (2004) exemplifies a trend in postmodern deconstructions of classics, transforming the play into a 'machine' that processes and produces distorted characters, images and text fragments; Kostenko thereby challenges ideas of artistic authenticity, taking Chekhov's work and 'submitting it to the industrial process of serial production'.[16] Less extreme in mode but no less controversial in reception, British playwright Martin Crimp's stripped back text under Katie Mitchell's direction (2006) highlighted frictions between dialogue and clashing stage action; American writer-director Libby Appel established layered language of a different kind in her 2011 *The Seagull* in California, a new version that included previously censored passages from Chekhov's manuscripts, made available after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

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[13] Nick Worrall, 'Robert Sturua's interpretation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*: An experiment in post-modern theatre', *Chekhov Then and Now: The Reception of Chekhov in World Culture,* ed. J. Douglas Clayton, New York: Peter Lang, 1997, pp.77-92 (p.78).
[14] Ian Dodd, 'Instinctive intimacy.' Review of *Three Sisters* dir. Robert Sturua, Queens Theatre, London. *Tribune* 1990, Vol 54 (51/52), p.9.
[15] *Young Chekhov: Platonov, Ivanov, The Seagull* adapted by David Hare, London: Faber & Faber, 2015. p.xv.
[16] Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu, 'Rewriting Chekhov in Russia Today', J. Douglas Clayton & Yana Meerzon eds., *Adapting Chekhov: The Text and its Mutations*, New York & London: Routledge, 2013, pp.32-56 (p.43).

Uncle Vanya, a play in part about recognising the truth only when too late, had a resurgence of popularity in 1990s Russia in context of perestroika, a radical reassessment of past values with uncertainty about the way forward.[17] Adaptations as opposed to productions of the play were more prominent elsewhere, however, as with David Mamet's *Uncle Vanya* (1988), which modernised the work for American audiences and inspired Louis Malle's *Vanya on 42nd Street* (1994). The film was shot inside an abandoned Broadway theatre, where a company of actors rehearse Chekhov's play (as they had been doing in reality for some years, under the direction of André Gregory): the bare stage and absence of costume or makeup signals that facades are stripped away, an 'unfinished' aesthetic that significantly influenced Simon Stephens' *Vanya*, included in this volume.[18] The play also features in a more recent film, Ryusuke Hamaguchi's *Drive My Car* (2021), which interweaves Chekhov with stories by Haruki Murakami: here, a theatre director rehearses a multilingual *Uncle Vanya* while struggling with a recent bereavement, these texts together conveying themes of loss and the hope of eventual recovery.

Of all Chekhov's work, *Three Sisters* has perhaps been most regularly and widely adapted. Arguably, it is the sisters themselves who inspire this: Olga, Masha and Irina effectively represent alternate routes from the same starting point, a structure that opens outwards invitingly and proves hard for writers or directors to resist. In Russia, the romantically titled *Three Girls in Blue* (1980), by dissident author Lyudmilla Petrushevskaya, starkly depicts Soviet life in this period: in this harsh comedy the 'girls' are not sisters but cousins, single mothers struggling to survive in a crumbling dacha with no toilet and a leaking roof; audiences were made deeply uncomfortable by Petrushevskaya's 'frank presentation of a reality that borders on a nightmare'.[19] Less overtly rewritten, Brian Friel's version (1981) for the Irish Field Day theatre company hovers between translation and adaptation but is quietly political in its rejection of standard English, the language of the ex-coloniser. Others have transplanted Chekhov's play to Liverpool's Jewish community following World War 2 (Diane Samuels and Tracy Ann Oberman's Three Sisters on Hope Street, 2008), 1941 colonial Trinidad (Mustapha Matura, 2006) and mid-century Scotland (John Byrne, 2014). The American Wooster Group's postmodern *Brace Up!* (1999) was a startling collage-like version, determinedly rejecting cliches of Chekhov production and substituting fragmented text and TV monitors, with actors downing vodka shots each time a chosen word was spoken ('Moscow'!).[20] Also in the US, a similarly

[17] Tatiana Shakh-Azizova, 'Chekhov on the Russian Stage', *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, eds. Vera Gottlieb & Paul Allain, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp.162-175 (p.173).
[18] Simon Stephens interviewed by Yulia Savikovskaya, http://londoncult.co.uk 12.02.2024.
[19] Béatrice Picon-Vallin, 'Songs of the twentieth century: The plays of Ludmila Petrushevskaya', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 2:3, 2008, pp.77-87 (p.85).
[20] Susie Mee, 'Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and the Wooster Group's *Brace Up!*', *TDR* 36:4, 1992, pp.143-153 (p.149).

audacious but more farcical approach is taken by Halley Feiffer's *Moscow Moscow Moscow Moscow Moscow Moscow* (2017), which parallels/clashes the preoccupations of Chekhov's fin-de-siecle Russians with (equally privileged) inhibitions and anxieties of the present day.

The Cherry Orchard has been almost as frequently adapted as *Three Sisters*, likewise moved into unexpected contexts in which themes of tradition and change acquire new significance. An early example is Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay's (1964) *Manjari Amer Manjari*, adapted for his theatre group Nandikar who specialised in adaptations of Western texts made locally political. Bishnupriya Dutt argues that while *Manjari Amer Manjari* might initially resemble a translation with names changed, multiple interventions are made in the text to bring Chekhov to address – with difficulty – an Indian context. *The Cherry Orchard* had proved popular in the Soviet Union and appealed to theatre-makers aligned with leftist democratic movements. For Dutt, Nandikar's version – revolving around the fate of a mango orchard – effectively addressed the turbulence of post-independence India, simultaneously questioning old categories of class and caste, but was limited in its progressive potential by the play's equivocal voicing of resistance and the privileged space of middle-class theatre itself.[21] Nikolay Kolyada's carnivalesque *Oginski's Polonaise* (1993) revisits the play in context of post-Soviet Russia; from the same period, Romanian author Horia Gârbea's *The Seagull from the Cherry Orchard* (1992) interweaves Chekhov with *Hamlet*, expressing an uneasy encounter with Western cultural traditions; *Leaving* (2008) by Vaclav Havel, former president of what was then Czechoslovakia, reflects on endings of different kinds, acknowledging the indignities of losing power. Similarly personal, Sarena Parmar's *The Orchard (After Chekhov)* (2018) draws on her childhood in a Punjabi-Sikh farming family in 1960s Canada, examining loss of land through the lens of race and class. Through these and other adaptations the play has been subject to adaptations not just of time and place, but theatrical form: a further strikingly contemporary example of this is British dreamthinkspeak's walk-through production *Before I Sleep*, which (recalling *Vanya on 42nd Street*) was staged in a derelict department store, in Brighton: the ghostly space, through which spectators were led by an ancient Firs, positioned Chekhov's characters as forlorn exhibits of a more prosperous time.

Seven Contemporary Plays

The plays in this collection are organised chronologically by date of first production, beginning in 2014 with Dublin-based Pan-Pan Theatre's dreamlike *The Seagull and Other Birds* and concluding in

[21] Bishnupriya Dutt, 'Theatre and Subaltern Histories: Chekhov Adaptation in Post-Colonial India', J. Douglas Clayton & Yana Meerzon eds., *Adapting Chekhov: The Text and its Mutations*, New York & London: Routledge, 2013, pp.145-160.

2023 with British-Irish playwright Simon Stephens' one-man *Vanya*, a tour de force performance by Andrew Scott. Thus structured, the book presents an unfolding, inevitably selective, view of Chekhov adaptation in the UK and Republic of Ireland over the last decade. Yet the seemingly blameless logic of this arrangement is complicated by alternatives that could as easily be justified. The collection of adaptations could instead have mirrored the chronology of the plays that inspired them. Organised this way, the reader starts with *Chekhov's First Play* (2016), Dublin/London-based Dead Centre's playful reimagining of *Platonov* or *Untitled Play* (1881), never staged in Chekhov's lifetime. Next would be Pan-Pan's take on *The Seagull* (1896) followed by Stephens' distillation of *Uncle Vanya* (1897), before two markedly unlike versions of *Three Sisters* (1901), the first a 'feminist punk' adaptation from 2018 by all-female British company RashDash, the second from 2019 by Nigerian-British writer Inua Ellams, who resituates Chekhov's play in Nigeria between 1967 and 1970, spanning the Biafran War. The collection would conclude with contrasting adaptations of the author's last play, *The Cherry Orchard* (1904): first, American-British playwright Bonnie Greer's *The Hotel Cerise* (2016), set in contemporary Michigan on the eve of the US presidential election; and finally, *The Cherry Orchard* (2022) by British-Indian playwright and screenwriter Vinay Patel, which propels Chekhov into the future and onto a dilapidated starship, a context that brings new meaning to a themes of dislocation from and longing for one's home.

An equally persuasive organisational principle for this volume could be to cluster these new plays stylistically, highlighting their divergent aesthetics and positioning them alongside or in tension with Chekhov's originals. On this basis, a loosely 'realist' grouping includes adaptations by playwrights Greer, Ellams and even - despite the futuristic setting – Patel, contrasted with the formally deconstructive vocabularies employed by ensemble companies Dead Centre, Pan-Pan and RashDash. Stephens' *Vanya* arguably has a foot in each camp, blurring the distinction between them: while the play's lifelike dramatic fiction remains intact, the strategy of multi-role performance inherently undermines assumptions about the inner drives or psychological consistency of individual characters. Alternatively, yet another suggestive model for the book could be to position each adaptation on a spectrum in terms of proximity to or departure from the source. However, this quickly becomes thorny: closeness or distance from what, exactly? From the dramatic plotting and characters? From the language, which will in any case already be subject to translation? From the author's specified settings, the period context, the theatrical aesthetics? Any one such principle could serve as a touchstone for proximity/departure but its authority as readily disputed. Projecting Chekhov into outer space sounds radically destabilising, yet Patel's *Cherry Orchard* plays out lyrically, remaining surprisingly 'faithful' to the original - bar the odd robot. Dead Centre's metatheatrical, participatory

and generally explosive treatment was termed by one reviewer 'a wrecking ball'[22], while another commentator agreed this was 'Chekhov like you have never seen it' but judged the result 'totally true to its sources, totally authentic in its execution'.[23] With this slipperiness in mind, the volume lays the plays out in the order first staged and invites the reader to draw their own conclusions.

The Seagull and Other Birds (2014) was first presented at Dublin Theatre Festival, before touring internationally over the next two years. Pan-Pan was founded in 1993 by co-directors Aedín Cosgrove and Gavin Quinn and have built a strong reputation for radical adaptations whose sources include Shakespeare, Wilde, Ibsen, Brecht and Beckett. Reviewer Ben Brantley observes that 'all boundaries are porous in the world according to Pan-Pan'[24]: their postdramatic reimagining upholds this in blurring not just texts but high and low culture, serious and silly, actor and character, performer and audience. The adaptation encompasses multiple plays-within-a-play, structured something like a Russian doll: Konstantin's avant-garde seagull jostles against an array of 'other birds' – extracts from Lena Dunham's *Girls*, Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Nicki Minaj and PTAF's hip-hop 'Boss Ass Bitch' – staged by the tutu-clad cast in deliberately amateurish set pieces. This dizzying onslaught becomes still more bewildering for the audience when Masha calls for ten male volunteers, auditioning each to be her husband: the chosen man is nudged by the others through the final act, his 'lines' spoken by Masha on his behalf. Absurd on the surface, Pan-Pan's dramaturgical vocabulary nevertheless engages seriously with authorship and authenticity, explodes tenets of psychological realism on which the original depends, and energetically champions new creativity and the shocking forms this sometimes takes.

Pan-Pan has influenced the work of a younger company also based in Ireland. Bush Moukarzel worked as an actor with Pan-Pan before setting up Dead Centre with Ben Kidd. Dead Centre's work is similarly avant-garde and interested in combative theatrical recycling: their debut show *Souvenir* (2012) mixed Proust with Shakespeare, Beyoncé, Bruce Springsteen and Don DeLillo, among others; recent work includes an adaptation of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2020), and *Katharsis* (2023) based on Olga Tokarczuk's novel *Flights*. *Chekhov's First Play* (2015), presented first at the Dublin Theatre Festival, takes up the abandoned manuscript normally known as *Platonov*. *Platonov* was previously adapted by Michael Frayn with the title *Wild Honey* (1984), mounted at London's Lyttelton theatre; in his preface, Frayn explained he had decided 'to regard the play […] as fatherless, and to adopt it – to treat it as if it were the rough draft of one of my own plays, and to do the best I

[22] Miriam Gillinson, review of *Chekhov's First Play* in its 2018 revival at Battersea Arts Centre. *Guardian*, 02.11.2018.
[23] Duška Radosavljević, 'Dead Centre's *Chekhov's First Play*.' *The Theatre Times*, 11.11.2018.
[24] Ben Brantley, review of *The Seagull and Other Birds*, *New York Times*, 27.03.2016.

could with it, whatever that involved'.[25] Rather than smooth out the material's rough edges, as Frayn sought to do to an extent, Dead Centre preserve the original's unwieldy quality and loose ends. This is achieved through a first half which presents a more or less naturalistic surface, albeit that this is undercut by the Director whose commentary on the performance – enthusiastic, critical, later frustrated, ultimately appalled – is communicated to spectators via headphones. The Director mutteringly corrects pronunciation ('Pla-*ton*-ov'), rubbishes the acting, talks over a monologue deemed pointlessly longwinded to get the audience up to speed with the plot. Platonov himself, the somewhat Hamlet-like object of desire for several other characters, seems to be absent altogether; this changes when a literal demolition ball crashes through the wall of the house at the end of the first half, leading to a radically altered scene and role *coup-de-téâtre* in Part Two. Discussing the production, Kidd and Moukarzel emphasise that their approach does not seek to make fun of Chekhov but rather, by appreciating the internal contradictions in the original, to allow for 'a polyphony of readings, and a polyphony of interpretation'.[26]

Bonnie Greer's adaptation of *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Hotel Cerise* (2016), was first staged at the Theatre Royal, in London's Stratford East. Set in present-day Michigan on the eve of the US presidential election, the family home and cherished orchard is reimagined estate inherited from a white slavemaster generations earlier, which served as a resort hotel popular with Black elite guests who could thus avoid the humiliations of segregration. Greer has commented that the privileged circle Chekhov depicts, shrinking from the inevitability of change, matched her interest in exploring a sector of African-American society rarely written about: the upper class, wealthy and so-called 'Talented Tenth', many of whom were sheltered from the worst of racist violence within their curiously sealed-off world. In Greer's play, the at times claustrophobic atmosphere of the family circle – its insularity and self-indulgence symbolically underscored in the original design which presented a colonial-style home cluttered with nursery toys and memorabilia – is pierced not by the faint sound of a breaking string from Chekhov's original but a literal earth tremor in Act 2. Its impact seems to open up a rip in the otherwise realistic fabric of the play, where a female passer-by enters and speaks audibly, it seems, only to Anita (Ranevskaya). The woman accuses Anita of discrimination, demanding 'Let some real people in here sometimes'; her voice represents the warning of Black Lives Matter and the reality of Trump poised like the axe that will fell the cherry trees. Greer has said: 'You can't make a "black version" or a "Muslim version" of something', but transpositions of this kind perhaps inevitably prompt assessments of a work's strength or limitations in that light; critics were somewhat divided on how successfully the play's arrows met their intended targets, whilst endorsing in Greer's

[25] Michael Frayn, *Plays: 2*, London: Methuen, 2004, p.165.
[26] Radosavljević, Duška et. al., 'Poets of the Digital Age: An Interview with Dead Centre', *Auralia.Space*, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, 2021, https://www.auralia.space/gallery2-deadcentre/

words the chance to 'inhabit, interrogate and prod a great work to see what other gems, what other magic and life lessons, what other beauty lies within.'[27]

British feminist ensemble RashDash (2009-2022) was founded by Abbi Greenland and Helen Goalen, the core team later joined by Becky Wilkie. Their work somewhat resembles the aesthetic of Pan-Pan and Dead Centre, combining spoken text, physicality and music with an overarching 'risk and rawness, and a kind of attack'.[28] *Three Sisters* (2018) premiered at Manchester Royal Exchange, performed by Greenland, Goalen and Wilkie together with Yoon-Ji Kim and Chloe Rianna providing raucous live music. *The Cherry Orchard* was simultaneously playing in the Exchange's main house, under Michael Boyd's direction, with a multinational cast and modernised setting; this was nevertheless not quite so bold a take as RashDash's, which places a white bust of Chekhov centre stage in an impression of homage instantly shattered by songs like 'Men Make Speeches':

> Why are we always telling your stories?
> What are we always praying to you?
> Why are we always tossing you off?
> Why are we always giving you milk?

Angrily resisting the imposition of ideological narratives, Olga, Masha and Irena still struggle with the same kind of questions asked in Chekhov's plays about the value of work, what constitutes happiness, how life becomes meaningful. The unhappiness of these three sisters takes distinctly contemporary forms – negotiating Facebook, premenstrual tension, binge drinking – but echoes the privileged anxieties of their originals. Lyn Gardner in the Guardian describes RashDash's adaptation as 'a form of creative vandalism' but not in the dismissive spirit of the reaction, cited previously, to Sturua's *Three Sisters* some decades earlier: rather, for Gardner the company's fierce re-examination 'understands that each generation must take what they need from a play and that it must speak not to the past but to the millions of Olgas, Irinas and Mashas of today. Otherwise', she adds, 'why bother?'[29]

Inua Ellams' *Three Sisters* (2019), which opened at the Lyttelton, shares little with RashDash, more perhaps with Greer. Ellams had achieved significant success with *Barber Shop Chronicles* (2017), a probing, witty and uplifting play set in barber shops across two continents and five African cities. If

[27] 'How Bonnie Greer reimagined Chekhov into a story of the American Black elite'. 24.10.2016 https://inews.co.uk/essentials/bonnie-greer-new-play-hotel-cerise-cant-make-black-version-chekhov-27031
[28] Greenland cited in Maddy Costa, 'RashDash: Punking Feminist Theatre', *Guardian* 22.01.2014.
[29] Gardner, review of RashDash *Three Sisters*, *Guardian*, 11.05.2018.

this work explored diverse masculinities, his *Three Sisters* puts female figures at the centre of an study of the precarity of 'peacetime' before, during and after the Biafran War. The adaptation was inspired by his familial experience of immigration and his own three sisters, the oldest of whom, like Lolo (Olga) in the play, was expected to take significant responsibility for her younger siblings; in addition, the playwright perceived Biafra as effectively untaught history, silenced in part because 'the wounds are still so open'.[30] In Ellams' version, Lolo, Udo and Nne Chukwu are living in exile, driven from their former home by the murderous anti-Igbo pogrom of 1966. This altered context makes new sense of aspects that can puzzle in the original: here, the sisters' dislike and mockery of manipulative sister-in-law Abosede (Natasha) is not simple snobbery but distrust of her Yoruba tribe; their longing to return to Lagos yet inability to do so becomes fully explicable given the air of violence that hovers over the elegant house. Although focused on Biafra, the play also emphasises the role of the British in this conflict, as Lolo insists: 'After colonisation, neo-colonisation. To always control. They designed Nigeria, down to our syllabus, to serve them, to fail us.' For Ellams, the adaptation stands as a practice of decolonisation, not just of the British but seeking to 'poke a stick at Russian imperialism' too, thereby demanding that the source is critically re-framed.[31]

Vinay Patel's reimagining of *The Cherry Orchard* (2022) premiered at London's Yard Theatre as a co-production with Manchester HOME. Patel is a writer known for television as much as theatre, with contributions to long-running sci-fi series *Doctor Who*. Patel's radically relocated adaptation was driven by an appreciation of Chekhov's empathetic depictions of the whole strata of society, coupled with his own passion for science fiction as a genre that opens limitless space to think about possibilities, alternatives and potential. Setting Chekhov's play on a spaceship could seem in itself an overreaching undertaking, implicitly inviting the reviewers' puns. Yet, the extraordinary setting is quickly made natural and the ship's situation in orbit captures something of the original's stultifying stasis. The all-Asian cast is not 'used' to make an explicit argument about race or otherness, although it subtly suggests the immigrant journey for which the descendants of those travelling, if not the travellers themselves, may finally reach the desired destination; that idea is reinforced by the failed card trick of Varsha (Varya), who admits that she knows how it begins and ends, the problem being with 'the middle bit'. Such thematics aside, Patel's adaptation strategy is effective simply in making whiteness no longer the default, as well as in joyfully claiming the sci-fi genre for a normally excluded cast.

[30] Cited in Angelique Golding, 'Another Way of Looking: Talking to Inua Ellams', *Wasafiri* 37:4, 2022, pp.22-26 (p.24).
[31] Cited in Angelique Golding, 'Another Way of Looking: Talking to Inua Ellams', *Wasafiri* 37:4, 2022, pp.22-26 (p.25).

The final adaptation in this volume, Simon Stephens' *Vanya* (2023), has one actor take on eight roles. This was not something Stephens had intended: an originally ambitious plan to interweave the drama's offstage world fell away when he and director Sam Yates sat down with Andrew Scott and heard him read different speeches from the play. The effect this made – a fascination with Scott's ability to come intimately close to characters, yet simultaneously, by playing *all* of them, holding each at a distance – sparked the radically simple result; the solo performance also mirrored the economy and precision Stephens particularly admires in Chekhov's drama.[32] *Vanya* opened at London's Richmond Theatre, before transferring to the Duke of York. The makeshift set and unadorned flats emphasised the rehearsal room aesthetic, in the manner of Malle's film; the same quality was communicated in Scott's understated first appearance on the stage, testing a light switch, pulling back a curtain – looking towards the audience as if to say: shall we do this? Gradually, Chekhov's play unfolds through the actor's shifts between characters, their distinction assisted by key props or gestures but equally by Scott's occupation of the space. As Helena, s/he pushes herself boredly on a swing, then as Ivan (Vanya) addresses the place where the seat is still energetically moving. *Vanya* does not significantly alter the plot but, by requiring one actor to play all roles, destabilises the text, making the impulses and hesitations of characters an expression of inner as well as societal complexity. Scott was rightly acclaimed for his performance and it may be difficult to disassociate the text from the actor. However, it is noteworthy that his understudy was a woman, Victoria Blunt, who played *Vanya* only once but whose casting indicates the adaptation's flexible potential. The performances of Scott and Blunt suggest creative opportunities for lone actors beyond the extracted monologue and represent an implicit invitation to receive Chekhov's plays – any plays – not as fixed visions, but as fluid and open.

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[32] Simon Stephens, *A Working Diary*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016, p.240.