

WHY DO PEOPLE FIND CHEKHOV BORING?

The short answer is that in Chekhov's plays nothing happens. His subject is boredom.

Nobody actually says, as Estragon says at the beginning of *Waiting for Godot*, "Nothing to be done", but that is what Chekhov's characters are thinking. Vladimir agrees with Estragon but adds, "All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle."

Sonya, at the end of *Uncle Vanya*, strikes the same note. "Well, it can't be helped. Life must go on. And our life will go on, Uncle Vanya. We shall live through a long succession of days and endless evenings. We shall bear patiently the trials fate has in store for us. We shall work for others - now and in our old age - never knowing any peace. And when our time comes we shall die without complaining."

Three Sisters ends in the same way. Chebutykin, reading the newspaper, says, "None of it matters. Nothing matters." Olga, imagining a future in which they will find out "what our lives and sufferings are for," says, "If we could only know, oh if we could only know!"

In *The Cherry Orchard*, the family having left without him, Firs, their old servant, finding himself alone, lies down and says, "Life's slipped by just as if I'd never lived at all. I'll lie down a bit. You've got no strength left, got nothing left, nothing at all. You're just a - nincompoop." There the play ends.

None of Chekhov's plays has anything that could be called a plot. The things that happen form a background to what happens to the characters on stage, which is nothing. All that Beckett does is to push Chekhov's plays to their logical conclusion. Life is simply a matter of waiting for something to happen, but nothing ever does.

The humour which some people see in Chekhov is lost on others. This is often because the humour is lost on the actors as well. British actors and directors struggle with Chekhov as they struggle with Beckett. If they think it's supposed to be funny, they play it for laughs. If they think it's supposed to be serious, they take it very slowly. Neither way works.

The humour in Chekhov's plays is the humour of recognition, the humour that Gogol captures when the Mayor in *The Government Inspector* turns on the audience and says, "What are you laughing at? You're laughing at yourselves."

All that the actors in Chekhov's plays have to do is to act naturally. The audience then can identify with the characters, seeing themselves in Sonya and Chebutykin and Olga and Firs. What a character says can be funny and sad at the same time. Playing for pathos, as much as playing for laughs, belongs to the melodrama that Chekhov reacted against with his new, naturalistic style.

Melodrama has returned to the British stage with a stylised form of acting, derived perhaps from film and television. Background music on the screen, and increasingly on the stage too, puts the audience in the right frame of mind for humour or pathos, but not for both at the same time.

Chekhov's characters, in his stories as well as his plays, are alike in their ability to express contradictory ideas without any apparent sense of irony. They can say something with genuine conviction and seconds later say something completely different with equal conviction.

Everyone believes in work, but hardly anyone does any. This is sometimes interpreted as Chekhov's response to the political situation in Russia at the time. It could also be seen as the reflection of a characteristically Russian way of thinking. The political dimension is less important than the human. A generation earlier, Goncharov created a character in *Oblomov* who thought in just that way, deeply in love but lacking the will to do anything about it. There may be something in

Chekhov that Russian audiences are better able to identify with. Perhaps Beckett gave one of his tramps a Russian name out of respect for the Russian playwright in whose footsteps he followed.

"What is all this for?" one of the three sisters asks. "Why all this suffering? The answer will be known one day, and then there will be no more mysteries left, but till then life must go on, we must work and work and think of nothing else. I'll go off alone tomorrow to teach at a school and spend my whole life serving those who may need me. It's autumn now and it will soon be winter, with everything buried in snow, and I shall work, work, work."

Irina abandoned her dream of going to Moscow and settled for marriage instead. When her fiancé is killed in a duel, she invents a new, life-affirming dream in the idea of work. The idea, rather than the thing itself. Just before the duel, when someone says that duelling is immoral, Chebutykin says, "That's only the way you see it. We're not real, neither is anything else in the world. We aren't here at all actually, we only think we are. And who cares anyway?"

In Chekhov's plays there is almost always more than one thing happening on stage. Often there are two or three conversations taking place at the same time. Characters come and go, wander in and out. The set for Act One of *Three Sisters* consists of two rooms, one upstage, one downstage.

The Prozorov's house. A drawing-room with columns beyond which a ballroom can be seen. A table in the ballroom is being laid for lunch.

Actors are constantly in danger of being upstaged. The set for Act Four offers even more scope for distraction.

The old garden belonging to the Prozorovs' house. A long avenue of firs with a view of the river at the end. A wood on the far side of the river. On the right the terrace of the house. On it a table with bottles and glasses - someone has obviously just been drinking champagne. Midday. From time to time people from the street go through the garden to the river. Five or six soldiers march briskly past.

Similar depths and distances are created on stage in *Uncle Vanya* and *The Cherry Orchard*. They are the physical counterparts of the interior landscape of Chekhov's characters. Each of them at one time or another says something like, "Life goes on," a truism that is embodied in every aspect of the plays. As well as hearing it, we see it. Without the benefit of a camera, Chekhov gives us long shots, panoramas and close-ups.

The long answer to why people find Chekhov boring is that the naturalism he invented has given way to the melodrama that he found false and sought to replace. Audiences prefer the absolutes of melodrama to the ambiguities of naturalism. Long silences and frequent distractions are what we find in life, and in Chekhov life goes on.