



"The whole tragedy of futility is that it never succeeds in achieving tragedy. In its blackest moments it is inevitably doomed to the comic gesture." – Dorothy Sayers



Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was born in the small seaport of Taganrog, Ukraine on January 29th in the year 1860. Today he is remembered as a playwright and one of the masters of the modern short story. He was the son of a grocer and the grandson of a serf. Chekhov spent his early years under the shadow of his

father's religious fanaticism while working long hours in his store.

Chekhov attended a school for Greek boys in his hometown and later he attended the local grammar school after his father went bankrupt and moved the family to Moscow. Chekhov, only 16 at the time, decided to remain in his hometown and supported himself by tutoring as he continued his schooling for 3 more years. After he finished grammar school Chekhov enrolled in the Moscow University Medical School, where he would eventually become a doctor. Chekhov's medical and science experience is evident in much of his work as evidenced by the apathy many of his characters show towards tragic events.

Chekhov died on July 15, 1904, in Badenweiler, Germany. He is buried in the cemetery of the Novodeviche Monastery in Moscow. He was a celebrated figure among the Russian literary public at the time of his death, although he remained relatively unknown internationally until the years after World War I, when his works were translated into English. His early plays, however, were failures and it wasn't until *The Seagull* was revised in 1898 by Stanislavsky at the Moscow Art Theatre that he gained popularity as a playwright.

[adapted from *The Literature Network* on line]

History of the play

The Cherry Orchard is the last play written by Chekov. It premiered in the Moscow Art Theater on January 17, 1904, directed by Constantin Stanislavski. Although it was called a comedy by Chekhov, Stanislavski directed it as a tragedy. Ever since its original production, directors have had to contend and deal with the dual nature of the play, forcing, but also allowing directors to implement tragic and comedic elements into their production. The final product created a divide between director and playwright, with Chekov claiming that Stanislavski “ruined” his play. The play deals with the rapidly changing social structure of Russia at the time and the quickly faltering place of the Russian aristocracy, in tandem with the rising middle class. The Emancipation of the Serfs, a law put in place by Emperor Alexander II, liberated the serfs, the working peasant/slave class of Russia. This law gave the Russian commoners a new found sense of freedom and identity, while also taking away generations of identity and power that the Russian nobility had. This is in the background of Chekov’s production, as we watch the family struggle to find solace in losing their old estate, and desperately try to find a place for themselves in the modern Russia.

The Moscow Art Theatre was founded in 1898, and began as a largely amateur theatre in a barn. It has been nicknamed “The Sea-Gull Theatre” as Chekhov’s *The Seagull* was debuted in the theatre and is dubbed "one of the greatest events in the history of Russian theatre and one of the greatest new developments in the history of world drama."

More than just a traditional theatre, The Moscow Art Theatre is an art institution, or a craftsmen's cooperative society. It is considered Russia’s most globally famous theatre.

[adapted from wikipedia]



The critics over the years

Although critics at the time were divided in their response to the play, the debut of *The Cherry Orchard* by the Moscow Art Theater on January 17, 1904 (Chekhov's birthday) was a resounding theatrical success and the play was almost immediately presented in many of the important provincial cities. This success was not confined only to Russia, as the play was soon seen abroad with great acclaim as well. Stanislavsky’s treatment of the play as a tragedy received unanimous praise and has thus become the predominant interpretation. Most critics agree that the subtlety of *The Cherry Orchard*, which has neither a dominant protagonist nor a traditional plot development, is a tribute to Chekhov's skill as a dramatist. [drawn from *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*]

“Others build upon a solid foundation. They are architectural and they attain solidity by stone upon stone; but he merely throws out one thread after another. Each is so fragile that a wind would blow it away, but we are soon enmeshed in thousands of them. Out of delicacy laid ceaselessly upon delicacy comes strength.” – Joseph Wood Krutch

**This document was researched by the
The Cherry Orchard Task Force:
Justin Connors, Michael Johnston, and Brianna
O’Donnell**

**and edited and assembled by
Sarah Vicaire, Travis Barr, Matthew Chiasson, Jiale
Lin, and Russ Hunt**

English 2223: The Page and the Stage

St. Thomas University

visit our Web site, at

<http://people.stu.ca/~hunt/22231213>