

PROSCENIUM

Uncle Vanya

By Anton Chekhov

Translated by Michael Frayn

Uncle Vanya

Wednesday 13th January to Saturday 16th January 2010
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

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Cast:

Serebryakov, professor emeritus Colin Hickman
Yelena, his wife Izzie Cartwright
Sonya, his daughter by his first marriage..... Christina You
Maria Vasilyevna, widowed mother of the
 professor's first wife Kathleen Jones
Vanya, her son Mark Sutherland
Astrov, a doctor..... Charles Anthony
Telegin, an impoverished landowner Vincent Eavis
Marina, the old nurse..... Crystal Anthony
Workman..... Paul Davis
Directed by..... Michael Gerrard
Stage Manager Paul Davis
Assisted by..... Linda Hampson
..... Paul Belton
Properties Susi Thornton
Lighting Joe Cohen
Costumes..... Evelyn Moutrie

The action takes place on Professor Serebryakov's estate.

History

Uncle Vanya was first produced in 1897 as the second of Chekhov's four last great plays. But in its origins it goes back to a much earlier period than any of them. It is substantially a reworking of *The Wood Demon*, which was conceived nearly a decade before and began life as a collaboration between Chekhov and his friend, Suvorin. After the production and failure of *The Wood Demon* Chekhov reworked the material, making, in part, straightforward improvements in dramatic technique – concentrating the setting and cutting out superfluous characters – while preserving most of the plot ingredients: the conflict between Serebryakov and Vanya; the latter's infatuation with the professor's young wife; Sonya's troubled love for the environmentalist doctor. However, he made a number of significant changes which deepened the dramatic and psychological power of the play.

First, and most importantly, he elided the best character with the worst and produced Astrov, in all his dark, self-contained complexity. And he made Astrov's complexity fascinating not only to Sonya but to another man's wife, so that the same characteristic ambiguity spread to infect the people around him. Secondly, he reverses the interrupted embrace, so that it is now Vanya, clutching his autumn roses, who walks in on Astrov, making the scene both comical and poignant. Lastly, in *The Wood Demon* Vanya commits suicide with his pistol at the end of Act III and in *Uncle Vanya* he points the revolver in the opposite direction, which entirely changes the nature of the last act.

This change did cause a problem when Chekhov offered the

play to the Maly Theatre. The members of the repertoire committee objected very strongly to the scene: they thought it quite inadmissible that a university professor should be shot at on stage, and asked Chekhov to write a different ending to the act. Chekhov listened quietly to this extraordinary demand and asked that a copy of the committee's decision should be sent to him. He showed this ('with ill-concealed indignation,' Stanislavsky recalled) to the directors of the Moscow Arts Theatre, and informed the Maly Theatre that he had decided to give *Uncle Vanya* to the M.A.T.

Failure

Chekhov is often regarded as pre-eminent among writers in portraying failure – emotional, social, financial, political. Eric Bentley (1953), in discussing *Uncle Vanya*: 'the Might-Have-Been is Chekhov's *idée fixe*. Astrov's yearnings are not a radical's vision of the future any more than the Professor's doctrine of work is a demand for a worker's state. They are both the daydreams of men who Might-Have-Been.'

Maurice Valency (1966) suggests that Chekhov's characters suffer from a disease of the soul characteristic 'of those who do not dare to live'. There is an inherent conflict between 'desire', which surges periodically on the surface and 'a tragic lack of energy' to fulfil these desires.

Maxim Gorki wrote to Chekhov after seeing a production of *Uncle Vanya* and noting the disasters and failures heaped on the characters: 'You know, it seems to me that in this play you are colder to people than the devil himself. You are as indifferent to them as the snow, as a blizzard.'

Chekhov himself, however, is more sympathetic and less judgmental than all this suggests. From a letter of 1888: 'Dividing people into successes and failures means looking on human nature from a narrow preconceived point of view. Are you a failure? Am I? Napoleon? Your servant, Vasili? Where is the criterion? One must be God to be able to distinguish successes from failures and not make some mistakes.'

Characters

In spite of Gorki's accusation of coldness, Chekhov is clearly capable of feeling sympathy for characters whose plight, if inestimable in the scale of things, can appear both pathetic and moving. At the same time he ensures that our empathy does not exclude the possibility of laughter. His rewriting of *The Wood Demon* made all the characters more complex, more ambiguous, more human and consequently more open to the combination of sympathy and laughter.

The Professor is pompous, demanding and self-centred, but has achieved some success and can be reasonable; Astrov is a convinced conservationist but does enjoy the sound of his own voice; Vanya has devoted his life to the family estate but woos the Professor's young wife; Yelena is both conscious of her sexuality and frightened of it. Sonia does seem to be the most wholly sympathetic figure but do we watch her final speech 'through a mist of tears' (Guardian 1988) or is it somewhat defeatist, self-pitying and sentimental?

Comedy?

‘When Korsh (owner of the Korsh Theatre in Moscow) asked Chekhov for a play, he was expecting a comedy. Did he get one? The question hovers over the five completed full-length plays. Chekhov often designated them as comedies. He frequently chided actors for behaving in an overwrought, tragic way. But is there really a puzzle? The aim was to show life plain, and the question ‘Are these plays comedies?’ can be answered with another, ‘Is life?’

Tom Stoppard.

Chekhov and Realism

Chekhov to an actor in the Moscow Arts Theatre who had said they were trying to make everything ‘look’ realistic.

‘Realistic? The stage is art. Kramskov (Russian painter) has a picture in which the faces are painted beautifully. What would happen if one cut out the painted noses and substituted a real nose for it? The nose would be ‘realistic’ but the picture would be ruined.’

Chekhov reflecting on dramatic structure:

‘In real life people don’t spend every minute shooting each other, hanging themselves and making confessions of love. They don’t spend all the time saying clever things. They’re more occupied with eating, drinking, flirting and talking nonsense – and these are the things which ought to be shown on the stage. Let everything on the stage be just as

complicated, and at the same time just as simple, as it is in life. People eat their dinner, just eat their dinner, and all the time their happiness is being established or their lives are being broken up.'

Doctor or Playwright?

Like Astrov, Chekhov had two major careers/interests in life, though he pursued both with rather more energy than the character in *Uncle Vanya*.

'Medicine is my lawful wife, literature my mistress. When I tire of the one, I spend the night with the other. As long as it does not become a regular habit it is not humdrum, and neither of them suffers from my infidelity. If I did not have my medical pursuits, I should find it difficult to devote my random thoughts and spare time to literature.'

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