

DRAMA

Chekhov Without Inhibitions

The Moscow Art Theatre in London

"I CAN hardly form an estimate of a play," wrote Chekhov while at work on *The Cherry Orchard*, "merely by reading it." Evaluation of drama on the evidence of the written, or even the broadcast, word is a dishonest critical method, in the sense that it would be dishonest to set oneself up as an expert on Titian, having seen only monochrome reproductions and other people's responses in print. There is no proper substitute for performance, the thing done; and the skilled dramatist is the one who has learned what words and actions will come to life when taken off the page and filtered through an actor. Exactly what sort of life it will be, nobody—not the author himself—can tell. There are too many variable factors. On the Moscow Art Theatre's first night at Sadler's Wells, Fiers made his first entrance and immediate exit in silence; two nights later there was a round of applause as he went out of sight. In between there had been press notices, and Saturday's Chekhov has a different atmosphere from Thursday's. That is the fun of it.

Multiply such trifles and you have the basic appeal of live theatre. It reminds you with a jolt that the Stanislavsky System, as he pointed out time and again, is only a means to an end; that read about in prim translation, or divined from photographs of its inventor (each more like a stern Father-Image than the last), it had become meaninglessly independent, like Shakespearean variants tossed around from thesis to thesis. Even if you understand only three words of Russian it is now clear that the System is humane enough to produce happy actors, flexible enough to provide entertainment, adaptable enough to assimilate young replacements, tough to the point of surviving purge, revolution, and war, and above all, sufficiently complex to cope with Chekhov. We have seen satisfactory productions of Chekhov before, notably by Komisarievsky and St. Denis. These have been valuable, for any performance tells more than a cloistered reading. But now it seems that even

The Three Sisters of 1938, in which St. Denis directed the finest naturalistic ensemble yet seen in England, was not definite Chekhov. The Chebutikin was marginal and Redgrave's Baron, played with a skill and sincerity that stole the show, too prominent. Redgrave has a presence and height which rivet the attention, a thing the Baron can rarely do. His opposite number at Sadler's Wells effaced himself, while the Chebutikin was often dominant. The tones vibrated with a different emphasis.

If the M. A. T. compels readjustment of ideas about Chekhov even when considered at the St. Denis level of direction, it makes other productions seem to have borne the relationship to these plays of Pater's dreamy *Mona Lisa* to Leonardo's portrait; the enigmatic sadness of the original caught and the virile statement, along with the earthiness of the subject, left out. Compared with English productions the lighting alone is as brilliant in impact as the primary colours hitting one for the first time from a masterpiece recently cleaned. At the start of *The Three Sisters*, Irina stands radiant at the French window in her white party dress, with sleek birch trees in the background echoing the highlights, while effects range through the amber circle of Andrey's table lamp, subdued and intimate in a darkened room, to Solyony, almost completely blacked out for a moment as he advances towards Irina. In *The Cherry Orchard* the tree tops, loaded with blossom and translucent behind crystalline windows, join with a room very sparingly furnished and a dawn as bracing as the opening act of *Oklahoma* to weigh the scales heavily on the side of youth. Anya, a coltish schoolgirl with pigtailed, is at home in this room, more than anyone else. After all, it is still called the nursery.

This play has been out of the repertoire for eleven years, allegedly awaiting a replacement of Kachalov, the last Gaiev. We know Chekhov wanted the brighter side of it emphasised, but certain aspects of this version are questionable.

In flat contradiction to the "oppressive sense of emptiness" asked for in his stage directions to the last act, the set looks even gayer when its meagre furnishings are covered up; it looks suitable, in fact, for conversion to a recreation room in the most hygienic of youth hostels, and in the only movement undeniably external to Chekhov, Anya and Trofimov strike an attitude reminiscent of propaganda posters as they make their final exit. Still, explicitly in the text, she does say good-bye to the old life and he greets the new. The lines ask for attitudes, though perhaps not that one. Then bronzed workmen are glimpsed outside, closing the shutters and leaving Fiers to die in a room gently dappled with sunbeams through the apertures. It is as benign a stage death as you ever saw, mellow Shakespearean Chekhov.

IF THERE are some brash lighting and scenic effects hardly to be expected from the "austere" M. A. T., the sound effects are astounding. Instead of a few apologetic chirps in *The Cherry Orchard*, there is an all-out dawn chorus and later a solo from a cuckoo. *The Three Sisters* is equally uninhibited. Suppressed a little after the first night—when it seemed nearer to the auditorium than the stage, so that the audience was in league with the absconding soldiers—it is still a loud, swaggering band, with a stake in the future. As for the mysterious sound of a string snapping "as if out of the sky" in *The Cherry Orchard*, it is deep, plangent, and in context disturbing beyond imagination. Considered side by side with the décor and lighting, this use of sound leads one on to the impression of virile energy—conveyed at times with an almost childish directness as when the clumsy Yepikhodov collides with a door-post—which impregnates the M. A. T.'s acting. Supreme ensemble work was expected of it, but not the rampant individualism attainable within the pattern, not the savage power of Gribov in Chebutikin's drunkenness, not this panache and violence, with more than a hint of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, in Chekhov; and certainly not the revelation of supposedly minor-key naturalistic plays, even when seen from the back row of Sadler's Wells' circle, as broadly theatrical, at times operatic.

The M. A. T. has developed a way of presenting the intimacies of Chekhov in a pattern of external effects which accommodates all the familiar reticences, hesitations, and interruptions of the dialogue without relying on fleeting, inspirational expressions of the eyes and other minutiae that invite camera close-ups. Whatever Stanislavsky may have taught about ignoring the audience, the actors are aligned on it, one often

standing behind another when talking to him in a position absolutely meaningless anywhere except on the stage. The relevance of this to drama in general is obvious when you recall the constant attacks on naturalism as something remote, finicky, anti-theatrical, and so forth. As practised by the M. A. T. it is none of these things; they behave as if the so-called fourth wall were a crowded auditorium, as it really is. Hence the slight swagger, the hint of conscious artifice admired in public, which prevents the disciplined actions from appearing mechanical; hence the happy, relaxed faces enjoying applause at the finish.

It was this traditionally theatrical projection of voice and gesture, carried over for very different purposes from the kind of drama Stanislavsky despised, which (along with some unashamedly obvious effects) gave the Sadler's Wells performances their unexpected freshness and punch. In a television programme before the season began, only St. Denis emphasised that the ultimate aim of the System is to get across. Guthrie suggested that the M. A. T. might have become a bit old-fashioned, claimed that Ibsen and even Granville-Barker had done much of the cleaning up ascribed to them, and said the drama was moving on—in the direction, for instance, of stylisation. We now know that the M. A. T. can adopt stylisation too, stylised naturalism which throws new light on that old scapegoat of a convention, can allow Astrov to deliver a major speech direct at the audience as if the two other people on stage at the time did not exist. It also accommodates extremes of dandyified bravura (Vershinin, Gaiev, Solyony, Charlotta) and harsh realism (Chebutikin, Lopakhin) beyond the twilit passivity and crude farce we are accustomed to, so that assessment of Chekhov as dramatist aside from this company's interpretation is at present academic, like separations of "form" and "content." No doubt the M. A. T.'s picture of Chekhov is no more definitive than Burbage's was of Hamlet, but it has authority in detail and in total effect.

FOR violent impact Lopakhin's assumption of ownership in *The Cherry Orchard* is a case in point. Following Chekhov's expectation that Stanislavsky would choose the part for himself, and his reminder that Varya would not love a boor, Lukyanov plays him for the first two acts in a respectable loose-limbed, restless way, exasperated, kind, and impatient. Getting things done in this environment, he lets us know, is like swimming in treacle, the more frustrating the better your normal rhythm. After the sale he comes in unobtrusively and sits quietly on a settee. What sets him off is Varya's action in throwing the keys on the floor, and to mark this

she does not just toss them down, but crashes them down directly in front of her, centre stage, with an overarm movement. Alone with Ranevskaya, he begins his triumphant tirade sitting down, rises after a few lines as if lifted by his own mounting emotion and picks the keys up. He throws them a yard or so in the air and catches them, right-handed in a movement like a punch which carries his whole body up stage towards the ballroom; he storms into it through the first of two arched openings in the wall.

Inside the ballroom he halts, well in view of the audience through the aperture, and orders the band to play. The pause before it obeys is agonising. When the music starts, Ranevskaya, who until now has held a monumental "freeze" while seated on the chair she reached out for on hearing the news, and is alone on the main stage, begins to weep. Lopakhin breaks something in the ballroom with a violence in tune with the sacking of the Czar's palace and comes into full view again, a tall man holding high on to both sides of the second aperture. We see him there, a few yards behind Ranevskaya, wild-eyed and panting, bestially dominant though limp from the emotional effort, until the woman's misery seems to restore his humanity as a sense of guilt. He staggers miserably into the room and to the opposite side of the table against which she is sitting, like a child seeking reassurance after doing something outrageous. She does not even look at him.

This episode illustrates, among other things, Chekhov's organic use of the stage, including spatial build-up of dynamic movement and use of props every bit as important as the dialogue, and confirms that if Stanislavsky had not existed it would have been necessary to invent him. By the time he came to write this play, Chekhov knew his interpreters to the extent of making suggestions for its casting within the company. In the scene as now played there are distinct overtones of pillage, arising from director's hindsight, author's prophetic intuition, or both; and the rhythm of the acting may allude to physical violation, in reinforcement of the spatial penetration required by the author's stage directions and choice of set for the entire act. Add to this the ambivalence, the contrary pulls in Lopakhin of real, if slightly contemptuous, affection for the family and retrospective resentment of serfdom touched off by Varya's insult—which anyway is partly motivated by infatuation—and you have naturalistic modern drama as good as anything in the classical poetic repertoire, without taking account of any additional effect the dialogue has if you understand it. Moreover the preliminary ballroom incidents modify one's response to the climax and deepen its effect, not only by the obvious allusion to fiddling while

Rome burns, but by lulling the audience into identification with the family, into their vulnerability. In order to do this, such things as Charlotta's party tricks must be dazzlingly professional and make their own separate effect. We now know why Chekhov made Charlotta a fairground performer in childhood, why he insisted on strong casting for the part. He wanted to draw us into the family circle by direct traditional means.

THIS seems unwarrantably remote from Lopakhin's big scene, but art on *The Cherry Orchard* level casts wide for its coherence. Lukyanov's acting of the scene has affinities with Stanislavsky's poor relation, the Method, a shaggy quality also present in Trofimov and the Beggar. What we are totally unaccustomed to is the development of a strand in the pattern such as Vershinin's seduction of Masha in *The Three Sisters*. Although it does not obtrude from the general harmony, as happened in an English production with Richardson and Leighton in these parts, the M. A. T.'s version of this episode can be viewed separately at, say, a second visit and found to withstand very close inspection.

Yurieva at Sadler's Wells was playing Masha for the first time, but such is the training and rehearsal that you would not have guessed it. She is what used to be called a fine figure of a woman, solidly sensual, with square shoulders and a rather broad face. Before Vershinin arrives she sits alongside a table, reading her book, very prim and Victorian-looking. One hand steadies the book and another touches, with an elegant upward inclination from the wrist, a chain which hangs from neck to waist and is her anchor throughout, strictly according to Stanislavsky principles of resort to props for the attainment of relaxation. Often her fingering of it is the only indication of the ferment below the disdainful, classically posed exterior. From the word go, this Masha, with nothing to say for some time and marooned in a corner, is indisputably *there*. Vershinin enters at length, as played by Rassalsky a dandy of a colonel, done up to the nines, boots and medals aglow. He makes great play with his spotless white gloves, but they do not ask him to sit down until they have found out that he comes from Moscow, and when he does it is Olga, the school teacher, eager and looking quite attractive, who monopolises him. Masha, however, is on her feet now, and although she turns her back on him and on the audience for her quick weep at the memory of those gay military parties, Vershinin is allowed a good view of her most of the time.

Masha's next undertaking is to get out of the corner behind the table and nearer to Vershinin,

subtly, as clever women do at a social gathering. The chance comes when Andrey comes in and sits down on a sofa in the centre of the stage. Having shown Vershinin what fun she can be by joining in the teasing of Andrey, Masha sits on the sofa next to her brother. Nothing more natural, and it brings her close to Vershinin. During the set speech about the glorious future he looks more often at her, without neglecting the others, enough to gauge the effect he is making. He is not rude in his casual responses to the Baron's enthusiastic intervention, as might appear from the text, merely absorbed in Masha. She has soon announced she will stay to dinner, walked up stage to the piano, taken off her hat and patted her hair, crisply and without fuss, while Vershinin has manoeuvred so that he can still see her, his audience. Aware of this, she takes a brief interest in Olga's exercise book and is up by the french window when her pedantic husband comes in, so that we can see her disgusted reactions to his chatter, the hypertension when Kulygin and Vershinin shake hands. All this time the other characters are given the focus demanded at any particular moment; during Kulygin's longest speech, for instance, Vershinin is quenched by having his back turned to the audience.

There follows the dinner party, diagonally recessed in deep focus with Vershinin at the extreme end of the table and Masha near the other, closer to the audience but not distracting attention from the forestage, unless you consciously ignore what is going on there from time to time. Basically she gives a display of basking in Vershinin without looking at him, except rarely and covertly. In spite of the tension, happily relieved when the Baron sits down next to her, she has a whale of a time amid the convivial eating and drinking. It is the real beginning of the thaw. The end of it comes in the second act, when she is side by side with Vershinin on a sofa and allows the hand nearest to him to rest invitingly on the fabric. After he takes hold of it there is a demonstration of Stendhal's dictum that it is the first mutual pressure of hands which counts; when he kisses it Masha undergoes a minor convulsion, starting as a tremor of the wrist and transmitted along the arm, visibly, to the shoulder, after which her whole body seems to become limp. Neither seems to resent the Baron's intrusion very much, and Vershinin, the fish now hooked, can afford to give him full attention for the first time, while Masha strokes her fur cape luxuriously. It has temporarily superseded the chain. After Vershinin is called back to his wife, Masha works off her frustration by flirting with the two young officers, well in the background of the major action.

If one is justified in isolating these elements of the total effect, it is because they show how faithfully the Stanislavsky system operates within it, how economical and theatrical the functioning is, how free from fussy neurotic tension; and how true it is that Chekhov is always inviting one to look between the lines. The present M. A. T. version succeeds, a bit surprisingly in view of those prophetic utterances about the future, in making Vershinin little more than a catalyst and giving Masha the emphasis. It also brings out, so easily that it can hardly be a mis-interpretation, a Chekhov more robustly sensual than is generally accepted, as does the Lopakhin scene.

But in that marvellous last act of *The Three Sisters* there emerges an unanswerable vindication of the visual element in drama, to such an extent that the language, it seems, can almost be dispensed with. Television Chekhov has made the point negatively, by showing how much goes to pieces when selective grouping is imposed by the camera. This act, even more than the others, is conceived in plastic terms for a stage, and the M. A. T. actors secure much of their effect, thanks to that austere discipline aimed ultimately at joyful concentration in face of the public, simply by being there, immediate as Franz Hals. We know as much as we are ever going to know about the sisters by now and it is a question of rounding them up and drawing the final conclusions. Masha is centred on a garden seat, with room enough for a man on it, though there is not going to be one. At Irina's age the verandah steps will do. Olga is on the move, placating and protecting as usual.

The surprise, beyond anything possible from a reading, is Chebutikin. Gribov, who has already placed him by one shattering outburst of drunken fury and what can only be called the dynamic reading of newspapers, now sits leaning against the balustrade of the verandah, hunched like a beady-eyed toad, if anything more in relation to the audience than with the characters; something of a vulture, also, ready for a bit of scavenging after the shots have been fired. There is cynical resignation, but there is also an atmosphere of positive, active despair about him, like the blaspheming of an over-worked army doctor in an advanced dressing station. Now and then he rubs the back of his hand, deftly, as if applying ointment. At the bottom of his savage mood in a sense of identification, up to a point, with everybody concerned, together with the knowledge that no intervention will make much difference to the course of events. He is a thoroughly Yeatsian angry old man, incurably detached. A likely conclusion from this interpretation is that Chebutikin is Chekhov.

IN THESE regions of final discrimination, it is time to admit, quickly and firmly, the limitations imposed by the language barrier, the danger of being foxed by the brilliance of the acting, the subjective factor. For instance my wife, who compares the supposedly optimistic endings of these plays to the hope of a cancer patient that science will discover the cure in time, sees this particular Chebutikin as a rough old bear, *au fond* too kindly to hurt a fly. If this is correct, the impression of sinister brooding would have been derived mistakenly from Gribov's rasping diction and the fact that he plays most of the act hunched over the balustrade with his greatcoat draped loosely on the shoulders. Still, there is undoubtedly more fibre in the character than we have been able to suspect from English productions, and strength enough to knock over a chair in the drunk scene with one swift slap. The point is that discussion of the essential Chekhov may crystallise here on a single actor's performance. There is no dim subservience to the requirements of *ensemble*.

Lopakhin, a fanatically hard worker descended from serfs and climbing to equal terms with the landed gentry, seems about as close as a projection can be to the dramatist himself. An extract from the play shown at the National Film Theatre records a Lopakhin coarser and more insensitively rugged than the present one, along with Knipper-Chekova's Ranevskaya, altogether more perky and resilient than that of Tarasova at Sadler's Wells and with more backbone. It must have been difficult enough to take over a part from the author's widow, who had played it long enough almost to justify a change by deed-poll, without being landed as well with a more sympathetic Lopakhin, a livelier Trofimov and what appeared to be an unusually passive place in the action. One was prepared to admit that there had been too much of Turgenev, or even Paula Tanqueray, in English interpretations, but scarcely to expect such unwieldy neutrality, such cosy acquiescence from Ranevskaya. Revolving on this axis, deliberately no doubt, the production had enough stability under its glittering surface to show how far *The*

Cherry Orchard can be slanted without collapsing; again a Shakespearean characteristic, arising here from Chekhov's ambivalent attitude, so faithfully reflected in Lopakhin, to the feckless and lovable family. If he rejects anyone it might be Yasha, odious in the text but redeemed in performance by Leonidov, who does as much for Solyony, so that both can now be regarded as within the scope of Chekhov's compassion, though on the hinterland.

This enrichment by humanisation runs, with the odd exception of Ranevskaya, right through the M. A. T. Chekhov and nowhere more plausibly than in the stranded spinsters, all cast and played as warm and wholesome, eminently marriageable; it extends to *Uncle Vanya*, as recorded by Kenneth Tynan in what reads like the best dramatic criticism in the English language since the death of Sir Desmond MacCarthy. All the same, *Uncle Vanya* still comes across as unsatisfactory compared with the other two masterpieces, too explicit in Astrov-Chekhov and his afforestation plans, rhetorical in its advocacy of the desperate uncle. Who can accept a chairborne Don Quixote?

Finally, what about the "yearning for a better life" aspect of the plays which the M. A. T. insists on? Do they over-emphasise it? Kedrov, the very distinguished director of *Uncle Vanya*, has a theory about the organic construction of the plays according to which the characters in them are subjected to increasing pressure, turned inside out and left destitute of everything except hope. The yearning becomes stronger as the possibilities of attaining happiness decrease, more refined and concentrated until it is expressed at the close by Olga, Sonya, Anya, or Trofimov. Then, he believes, "the acting has stopped" and the author is speaking his mind. One might add that the inflection of Chekhov's voice, the tone of the message—if it is one—remain as much a matter for debate as ever, supremely non-committal. When consulted about the décor of *The Seagull*, all he would say of the lake was, "Well . . . it is wet."

Laurence Kitchin

The Fate of Imre Nagy

IN August 1849 the Hungarian armies surrendered to the Russian commander in Transylvania, and their leaders were handed over to the Austrian authorities. The Habsburg government, which was entirely independent of Russia, hanged the most eminent of the prisoners. The Russian Tsar Nicholas I, an extreme reactionary but an honourable man, was disgusted by this act of revenge, which he could not prevent, and expressed his feelings.

In November 1956, when the Hungarian Revolution was crushed, there was no authority in Hungary but that of the Soviet army: Mr. Kadar's "government" was and is still its helpless agent. The Hungarian commander-in-chief, General Maleter, did not surrender. He was invited on 3rd November to discuss with the Soviet High Command the evacuation of Soviet troops from Hungary. While conferring with the Soviet generals, he was kidnapped by the Security boss, General Serov. This officer, who visited London in 1956 to prepare the Khrushchev-Bulganin visit, may claim to be something of an expert in terror, treachery, and torture. He organised the deportation of the Balts in 1940 and of the Caucasians and Crimeans in 1944; he personally instituted the Communist security police systems in Poland and East Germany in 1945; and it was probably he who planned the "invitation" to the Polish resistance leaders in 1944. These men, it will be remembered, were given a safe conduct, but were arrested, tortured, condemned at a show "trial," and mostly died in prison (Madame Okulicka, wife of the commanding general of the Polish Home Army, was informed of her husband's death nine years after it had taken place). The kidnapping of General Maleter closely followed this earlier Polish model, but that of Imre Nagy, who as Prime Minister in November 1956 may at least formally be regarded as the civilian head of the Revolution, presents some original features. Nagy was lured from the sanctuary of the Yugoslav Embassy by a safe conduct from the Kadar "government," only to be seized together with his companions within a few yards of the Embassy. Eighteen months later it was announced that both men had been executed. Unlike the Polish leaders, they were not put on public show, presumably because they refused to confess to the appropriate crimes. A sinister indication of the pressure put on them during a year and

a half of captivity is the admission that one of their colleagues, Geza Losonczy, died during interrogation. Certainly the Soviet leaders have improved on the methods of Nicholas I: outmoded "feudal" conceptions of honour, dear to a reactionary Tsar, cannot inhibit the representatives of the most progressive government in the history of mankind.

It would, however, be unfair to cast doubt on the consistency and sincerity of the Soviet leaders, which is at once apparent when one takes the trouble to translate into common speech certain expressions of Communist double-talk. Nagy, they say, was a "counter-revolutionary." In common speech a counter-revolution is a violent action that overthrows a revolutionary government and restores the régime that existed before the revolution. In this sense a counter-revolution certainly took place in Hungary in 1956—not on 23rd October but on 4th November, when Soviet tanks crushed the Revolution and installed a régime which differed from that of 1947–1956 only in the rather minor detail that Messrs. Kadar, Marosan & Co. are intellectually and morally much inferior to Messrs. Rakosi and Gero. But in Communist double-talk "counter-revolution" has a different meaning. The highest form of revolution, the culmination—according to Soviet historians—of the whole previous history of mankind, is the Great October Socialist Revolution of 1917, the only valid model, applicable, in the course of time and with minor local variations, to every nation on earth. A revolution of this type was carried out, by the "salami tactics" of Rakosi and the efforts of the Soviet occupation forces, in Hungary between 1945 and 1947. Any move away from the régime thereby created must therefore be counter-revolutionary, and any one responsible for such a move must be a "fascist," a "reactionary," a "traitor," a "criminal," and so forth.

Nagy and his colleagues were also guilty of another no less impious crime: they led military action against Soviet troops. In Soviet doctrine there are two kinds of wars—just wars and unjust wars. The distinction is very simple: a just war is one waged by the Soviet Union or by any government approved by the Soviet Union. The usual formula defines a just war as a struggle for the working class or for "national liberation." The interests of the working class of the whole world are of course