

# Chekhov's Plays

By KENNETH REXROTH

IT COMES as a bit of a shock to sit yourself down and deliberately think, "in the first half of the twentieth century the position once occupied in ancient Greece by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides was held by Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov in the estimation of those who sought serious satisfaction in the modern theater." What had happened in 2,000 years? Had it happened to the audiences, or to the playwrights, or to the self-evolving art of drama? Or was the change more profound than this, more profound even than a change in the meaning of civilization—was it a change in the very nature of man? We still say we enjoy *Antigone* but if we go directly from a performance of that play to Chekhov's *Three Sisters* it is difficult not to believe that the men of classic times were different from us—a different kind of man.

In certain plays both Ibsen and Strindberg set out deliberately to compete with the great past, with Shakespeare or Schiller or Sophocles or Aeschylus. The results are hardly competition. *Peer Gynt* or *Damascus* bear little resemblance to the past, though certain Strindberg plays do contain distorted reflections of Euripides. But Chekhov—what would the Greeks have made of *The Sea Gull*? They would have classed it with Menander, with the New Comedy of domestic conflict and absurd situation. So did Anton Chekhov. Few pay attention to half-titles in *Collected Plays*, but there it says, right on the page: *The Sea Gull*, "A Comedy in Four Acts." *Ivanov* is called "a drama," *Uncle Vanya* "scenes of Country Life," *Three Sisters*, a "drama," *The Cherry Orchard*, certainly the saddest of all, "a comedy."

So simply Chekhov states his esthetic, and with it a philosophy of life. If we take these heartbreaking plays as tragedies in the sense that *Oedipus the King* is a tragedy, we are self-convicted of sentimentality. No one has ever had a more delicate sentiment, a more careful sensibility, when it comes to portraying and so judging the lives of ordinary men and women, but no one was ever less a sentimentalist than Chekhov. This is why he outraged a swashbuckling sentimentalist like D. H. Lawrence, who hated him and who couldn't understand why he didn't plump for the Good Guys and The Life Force.

Chekhov always insisted that the five

plays of his maturity that his audiences insisted were tragedies were simply developments of the hilarious short farces of his youth. But if Uncle Vanya's impotent pistol shots and Irena's "Moscow, Moscow, we'll never see Moscow now!" are not tragic, then Chekhov is mocking us and his characters, and, not least, his actors, too. No. Chekhov is the master of an art of such highly refined modesty that he can present his people in their simplicity and let life do the mocking.

He wanted a new theater, a theater that would tell it the way it really was. There was plenty of realist and naturalist theater in Russia in his day and since, but there is only one Chekhov. The naturalist theater uses a whole armamentarium of devices to create an illusion of real life and then drive home its points, all derived from the storehouse of literary dramatic morality. There have been many more lifelike plays than Chekhov's. His is not a circumstantial naturalism of décor and talk and event—it is a moral naturalism. These lost people, off in the vast provinces of Russia—frustrated, aimless, hopeless, or full of utopian unrealizable hopes, all alike coming to trivial ends—actually make up a highly stylized theater of their own, as formal or classic as the *commedia dell'arte* or Plautus and Terence. What is naturalistic, what is "life as it really is," is the silent moral commentary that underlines every speech, like an unheard organ pedal. Is it a judgment—in the sense that "Judge not lest ye be judged" is a judgment?

THERE is something intrinsically ridiculous about the people in all the plays. Chekhov's is truly a theater of the absurd. Yet we never think of them as very funny—and we don't think of them as very sad, either. The play as a whole may sadden us, as life saddens us with the massive pathos of mortality, but Chekhov's people we simply accept. We do not judge Uncle Vanya to be a fool or Irena to be a silly girl or Trigorin to be an ass and a cad, although they certainly say foolish and silly and asinine things. And that recurrent character always says, "Someday life will be splendid and people in those far off days will look back on us and pity us in our filth and misery and thank us for having endured our agonies for them, so that they might be." But we neither laugh nor sigh nor believe. At the most we think, "Perhaps. Not likely. It won't matter."

Chekhov would have been horrified

if anyone had cold-bloodedly accused him of moralizing—but so he does. We accept his tragic comedies the way we would accept life if we were gifted with sudden wisdom. Chekhov places us in a situation, confronting the behavior of a number of human beings in what seems to them at least an important crisis. We are so placed, so situated and informed, that we can afford to be wise. We can regard the affairs of men as they should be regarded, in the aspect of timelessness. But this is what Sophocles does.

Once we accept both the idiom of Chekhov and the idiom of Sophocles we can compare them, and we can see very clearly the great precision and economy with which Chekhov works. His plays are preeminently in modern times playwrights' plays, a joy for a fellow craftsman to see or read. How right everything is. How little time or speech is wasted. How much every line is saturated with action. Sophocles, Molière, Racine—very few other playwrights have been as accurate and as economical. It is this genius for stating only the simplest truth as simply as can be that makes Chekhov inexhaustible—like life. We can see him for the hundredth time when we are sick of everything else in the theater, just as we can read his stories when everything else—even detectives and science fiction—bores us.

QUITE unlike Ibsen and Strindberg, who were tireless preachers and manipulators, Chekhov's people are not alienated. They have trouble, as men always have had, communicating, but the cast of each play forms a community nonetheless. One feels that Ibsen and Strindberg didn't like any of their casts very much and made them up of people who wouldn't listen to Ibsen and Strindberg. Chekhov doesn't want to be listened to. He isn't there. He is out of sight, in the last row in the balcony, listening. "I imagine people so they can tell me things about themselves." This is an unusual, but certainly an unusually effective, credo for a playwright.

It is easy to accept Orestes or Hamlet as archetypes. Hundreds of books are written analyzing the new pantheon of heroes that make up the inner dramas of our subconscious. They are very spectacular personages, these. It is hard at first to believe a playwright who comes to us and says, "The schoolteacher and the two stenographers next door to where you live in Fort Dodge—these are the real archetypes." But until we have learned this—and most of us will never learn it, however many Chekhov plays we see, not really, not deep in the bowels of compassion, but only as we learn things in books—we will never learn to approach life with the beginnings of wisdom, with that wisdom so characteristic of Sophocles.

## LITERARY HORIZONS

### Dull for Bright Young Brains

**A**MONG the comments I received concerning my piece on the teaching of literature in high school, "The Media Crisis in the Classroom" (SR, April 15), the ones that interested me most were those written by high school students and recent graduates. With one exception, my correspondents felt that they were being or had been gypped by their literature courses. A few college freshmen and sophomores wrote with some bitterness about what they had not learned in high school.

The exception, now a junior, not majoring in literature, at one of the more illustrious Eastern universities, prepared at a public high school in a prosperous suburban community in the Middle West. He was full of praise for the English courses he had been given at XYZ High School; indeed, he said he had found the courses in his college so inferior that he was no longer bothering with them.

This position is so unusual, and my correspondent presents it so forcefully, that I shall quote at length:

It is still the case that the good teacher interests the bright students and the bad teacher bores everyone. The added problem of selecting or at least being allowed some leeway in the books to be assigned has merely produced more bad teachers. In areas of curriculum XYZ has reached something of a saddle point. Students are assigned to classes by ability, so that at least theoretically each class will have a group of students of approximately equal intelligence, and the teacher can gear his work to a specific depth. Also, XYZ adjusts its curriculum according to the level of class, so that each student will find something (again, theoretically) which is of interest to him. With regard to teacher freedom of material selection, XYZ has a broad base of works that are supposed to be covered for any given year and level, and within that framework the individual instructor is given a fair amount of

freedom to assign more or to concentrate on certain works, or both. My senior English teacher spent an entire semester on Conrad, principally considering *Heart of Darkness*, while another teacher of upper level students spent almost the same length of time on *The Brothers Karamazov*, which our class was not even assigned. On the other hand, all senior top level students were expected to read *Hamlet*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and a unit of British poetry. There were good teachers and poor, but every student was bound to be exposed to some good literature during the year, despite the instructor if not because of him.

My correspondent went on to say—and several others made the same point—that most high school English teachers underestimate the intelligence of their students. He wrote:

One cannot carry too far your example of the preferability of *Rascal* to *Silas Marner* as a method for convincing teen-agers of the pleasure and profit of reading. I have known more young people to become bogged down in the doldrums of dull literature than to be overwhelmed by the complexities of too great a challenge. Moreover, I know of no library—public, private, or school—which attributes to students the intelligence many of them have. Librarians notoriously underestimate the maturity of young readers, and are often completely unreliable as guides to reading. Then in high school if a student is confronted with a teacher who assumes that the method of persuading him to read is to present him with material that will not force exercise upon his intellect, he may well be lost to the pleasures of literature thereafter. Almost universally English curricula lack inspiration because they lack challenge.

There is another paragraph—this is, by the way, an eight-page letter—that I must quote to round out my correspondent's argument.

The consideration for the necessity for integrity and the uniqueness of lit-

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- 27 "The Devil Drives: A Life of Sir Richard Burton," by Fawn M. Brodie
- 28 "The Seventh Step," by Bill Sands
- 28 "Thomas Nuttall, Naturalist: Explorations in America, 1808-1841," by Jeannette E. Graustein
- 29 "Where Do We Go from Here," by Martin Luther King
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- 30 "From Plantation to Ghetto: An Interpretive History of American Negroes," by August Meier and Elliott M. Rudwick

erature must extend from the assignment into the classroom. The teacher should not ask the student the summary of the plot; he should give to him or bring forth from him new ideas or motives of which the student was unaware. The high school classroom should not be a glorified show-and-tell. All too often it becomes so, and the student gains absolutely nothing from it. Anyone will be bored sitting listening to someone else mutter something he already knew; if the classroom is not a location for stimulating discussion and the presentation of material gleaned from the teacher's presumably longer experience with the work being treated, it is a waste of time. . . . My junior and senior English teachers at XYZ, to my great fortune, shared this desire for analysis. A deep discussion of author intent and technique, criticism and argument (a dirty word in far too many classrooms) was as key in their sessions as it is essential to the value of any class. The literature session should return to the Greek schools for inspiration; classes should be give and take, not recitation by either teacher or pupil.

It will occur to many readers, I imagine, that XYZ High School must