

# BRISTOL OLD VIC



# THE CHERRY ORCHARD

EDUCATION PACK



# Introduction

**“A poem about life and death and transition and change”**

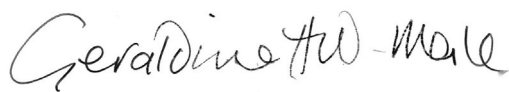
**PETER BROOK, 1981**

## FOREWORD

*The Cherry Orchard* was written over a hundred years ago and the dominant issue of anxiety and change are still with us in a tumultuous twenty-first century. As teachers, we are in a position where we can challenge ideas and stimulate discussion within our classrooms while exploring a wide range of performance opportunities. This is a play where seemingly very little happens on stage but events of rapid economic and cultural change are happening all around. We know the old way of life is doomed but are not sure whether the new dawn will ultimately be any better than that which is being cast aside.

This is a play of many contradictions and is wide open to a director's interpretation. Does the future look bleak or alluring? Chekhov wrote *The Cherry Orchard* while he was dying and knew that this would be his last play. Does this create an air of melancholy? How does this sit with the conjuring tricks and circus skills in this self-declared 'comedy in four acts'? Is it a naturalistic or symbolic play or a combination of the two? We can decide on any one or all of these interpretations and each are as valid as any other. This is a play where crises are addressed and avoided with equal vigour. Chekhov tells us like it is and empathises with every side of the equation.

I hope this resource pack is useful. In this year of change at Bristol Old Vic, it is good to see continued investment in teachers and audiences of the future. Bristol Old Vic sees 2018 as 'a tipping point in many fields' – and nowhere is this more evident than in the teaching of drama in our schools. We need to fight for our subject and its place in the lives of our young people in an increasingly disconnected world.



**Geraldine Hill-Male**

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### **Bristol Old Vic Production Photography credits (pages 5–8):**

**1953\*** Roger Gilmour  
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**1975\*** Derek Balmer

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# Chekhov, A History

***“Medicine is my lawful wife and literature is my mistress.  
When I tire of one, I go and sleep with the other.”***

**ANTON CHEKHOV**



Portrait of Anton Pavlovich Chekhov by Osip Braz, 1898

Anton Chekhov was born in 1860, in Taganrog, South Russia and was one of six surviving children. His father was a grocer in the town who had started life as a serf – his grandfather bought freedom for himself and his family in 1841. Chekhov attended the local Russian grammar school and worked for his abusive father in his shop. His father got into financial difficulties and fled to Moscow to avoid the debtors' prison, leaving the 16 year old Chekhov behind to complete his education and dispose of the family possessions.

At the age of 19, he left Taganrog to join the family and to pursue medical studies at Moscow University in 1879. To supplement their meagre income, Chekhov started to write short stories and by the time he was 20 was receiving a regular income from this. He qualified as a doctor in 1884 and as he was now financially self-sufficient as a writer, he often treated his patients for free. His reputation as a writer was made by the time he was 28 when he won the prestigious Pushkin Prize.

## CHRONOLOGY OF CHEKHOV'S LIFE AND WORKS

- 1860** Chekhov born in Taganrog
- 1876** Family flees to Moscow, Chekhov in Taganrog to finish school.
- 1879** Enrols in Medical Faculty of Moscow University.
- 1880** Published his first comic sketches in periodicals. Becomes very successful.
- 1882** Platonov, his first full-length play, is rejected.
- 1884** Qualifies as a doctor. First symptoms of tuberculosis.
- 1887** Publishes short play, *Swan Song*.
- 1888** Awarded prestigious Pushkin Prize; meets Stanislavsky.
- 1889** Ivanov a full length play, successfully staged in St. Petersburg, *The Wood Demon* opens to hostile reviews.
- 1890** Travels to convict settlement on Sakhalin Island and interviews inmates.
- 1891** Writes his final one-act play *The Jubilee*; health deteriorates.
- 1892** Purchased a house at Melikhovo, outside Moscow, where he moved with his family, works actively on social reform.
- 1895** Writes *The Seagull*; meets Tolstoy.
- 1896** *The Seagull* premieres disastrously in St Petersburg.
- 1897** *The Wood Demon* rewritten as *Uncle Vanya*.
- 1898** *The Seagull* premieres to great acclaim at Moscow Art Theatre (MAT).
- 1899** Premiere of *Uncle Vanya* at MAT; meets Olga Knipper, MAT actress who performed in *The Seagull*. Moves to the more benign climate of Yalta in the Crimea.
- 1901** Premiere of *The Three Sisters* at MAT; marries Knipper; continued poor health.
- 1902** Knipper miscarries; receives award for *The Three Sisters*.
- 1904** Premiere of *The Cherry Orchard* at MAT; Chekhov dies July 2 seeking a cure at German spa town of Badenweiler.

# Chekhov, A History

Chekhov travelled in 1890 to the furthest extremes of Russia and interview settlers and convicts on Sakhalin Island (just north of Japan). This experience had a profound effect on him. He bought a small estate south of Russia in 1892 where he lived and wrote until 1899. Chekhov's health was blighted by tuberculosis and in denial about the condition, he refused treatment for three years. Following the death of his father in 1889, Chekhov moved into semi-retirement and built a house in the Yalta.

In 1901, he married the actress Olga Knipper who continued to work in Moscow while Chekhov's health kept him in Yalta. Chekhov finally succumbed to the disease in May 1904 at the age of 44 and was buried in Moscow. Olga was at his bedside and recounts that the doctor injected him with camphor and then handed him a glass of champagne. He drank this after noting that it was long time since he had last enjoyed a glass of champagne and then lay down and died gently.

Chekhov's wrote some plays in his early 20s and these are not well-remembered. Aged 36, he began to turn his attention back to theatre and in the years leading up to his death produced *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*.

The first night of *The Seagull* in St Petersburg in 1884 was booed by the audience, who were expecting a comedy. Chekhov vowed to 'never again write plays or have them staged'. However, the Moscow Arts Theatre, under the direction of Constantin Stanislavsky, revived the play in 1898 to huge acclaim. This prompted Chekhov back to the theatre and *Uncle Vanya* (formerly *the Wood Demon*), *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* were all produced by the company with great success.

## CHRONOLOGY OF RUSSIAN HISTORY

- 1855** Tsar Alexander II begins reign.
- 1860** Railways develop to link the wide expanses of Russia.
- 1861** Emancipation of serfs. This results in unrest in St. Petersburg and Moscow.
- 1863** Educational and judicial reform.
- 1864** Conquest of Central Asia.
- 1865** Press censorship, attempted assassination of Alexander II, Dostoevsky publishes *Crime and Punishment*.
- 1869** Karl Marx publishes *Anna Karenina*
- 1874** Military reform; Tartars revolt.
- 1876** Public demonstration in St. Petersburg against tsarist repression.
- 1878** Strikes in St. Petersburg.
- 1879** Stalin and Trotsky born.
- 1880** Assassination of Alexander II and Alexander III begins reign.
- 1882** Pogroms against Jews.
- 1885** Student riots.
- 1890** Anti-Jewish legislation enforced.
- 1891** Trans-Siberian railway is built, famine kills nearly half a million.
- 1894** Death of Alexander III; Nicholas II succeeds
- 1895** Lenin is kept in solitary confinement for 13 months and then exiled to Siberia.
- 1896** The Khodynka Tragedy. A stampede in Moscow results in the deaths of over 1,300 people.
- 1900** Russian occupation of Manchuria.
- 1901** Social Revolutionary party founded.
- 1905** Bloody Sunday Massacre and 1,000 killed, general strike, Workers' Soviet founded in St. Petersburg, Duma (Russian parliament) created.
- 1914** World War 1 breaks out
- 1917** The Russian Revolution – the February Revolution is followed by the October Revolution.



# Exploring the Story

## ACT I

*"The Orchard's just the same as it was back then, nothing's changed"*

### LOPAKHIN

The play opens before dawn on a frosty May morning with the cherry trees in bloom. Lopakhin, a merchant and friend of the family, is waiting in the nursery with Dunyahsa, a maid, for the return of the owner of the estate, Lyubov Ranyevskaya. Ranyevskaya, who has been in Paris for the last 5 years arrives accompanied by her daughter Anya, Yasha, a young servant, Charlotta the governess and a small dog. Other family members arrive with the party: Ranyevskaya's older brother Gayev, her 87 year old manservant Firs and her adopted daughter Varya. Ranyevskaya is delighted to be home again after such a long absence while Anya reveals to Varya the details of her mother's time in Paris and that in order to pay their debts the family's estate is to be sold at auction on the 22nd of August. We also learn that Ranyevskaya left for Paris to get over the death of her husband and the drowning of her 6 year old son, Grisha.

Lopakhin and Ranyevskaya discuss the auction. He suggests dividing up the land and building summer cottages for the developing holiday market. This idea is dismissed by Ranyevskaya and Gayev who are not prepared to see their beloved cherry orchard cut down. Lopakhin cannot see how they can keep it and offers to lend them sufficient money to buy the estate. This is turned down. Trofimov, a student who was Grisha's tutor then arrives. Gayev offers financial alternatives to Lopakhin's plan to save the cherry orchard.

## ACT II

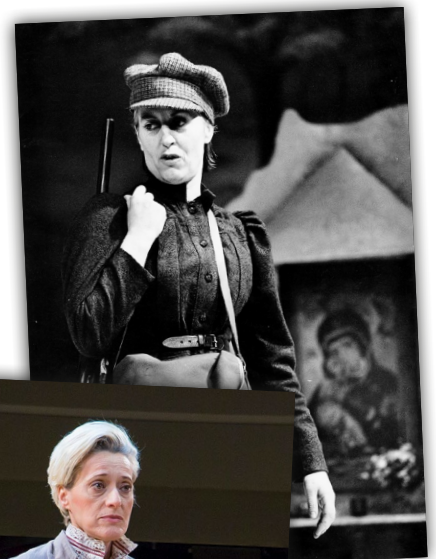
*"Where I am from and who I am – I do not know"*

### CHARLOTTA

This is set some weeks later in a field on the estate and the relationships between Dunyasha, Yasha, and Yepikhodov are developed. Yepikhodov loves Dunyasha, Dunyasha loves Yasha, and Yasha is very much in love with himself. Lopakhin, Ranyevskaya, Gayev, Anya and Varya then appear debating Lopakhin's plans for the summer houses on the cherry orchard. Lopakhin becomes frustrated with Ranyevskaya's inability to face reality; she, in turn, thinks his plan is vulgar. She reveals that she has left a lover in Paris who has been sending her telegrams, asking her to return, and whose behaviour drove her to a suicide attempt. Trofimov appears and talks a great deal about the meaningfulness of work and how Russian intellectuals are lazy and stupid. This is followed by a silence which is broken by the sound of what appears to be a snapping string, the source of which cannot be identified. A drunken passer by appears asking for money and directions and is given



Top to Bottom: Lopakhin and Ranyevskaya in 1975 and in 2018



Top to Bottom: Charlotta 1988 and in 2018

# Exploring the Story

several gold pieces by Ranyevskaya, an action she regrets immediately. Most of the group depart, leaving Anya and Trofimov together. Trofimov declares that they are “above love”. The Act ends with Yephikodov sadly playing his guitar and Varya calling out, in vain, for Anya.

## ACT III

*“It’s all over and done with, there’s no turning back”*

**TROFIMOV**

Ranyevskaya puts on a party on the day of the auction for a range of local guests. It is a shadow of previous triumphs with only a handful of people there, many decidedly lower class. A series of magic tricks are performed by Charlotta while Ranyevskaya wants to know why Gayev and Lopakhin have not yet returned from the auction. She is fearful that things have gone wrong and that the orchard has been lost and that all the options explored have come to nothing. Ranyevskaya and Trofimov get into an argument; he accuses her of not being able to face the truth, and she accuses him of being unable to fall in love. Lopakhin and Gayev soon return from the auction. Lopakhin reveals to everyone that he has bought the estate and intends to carry out his plans for the orchard’s destruction. Anya tries, in vain, to comfort her mother.

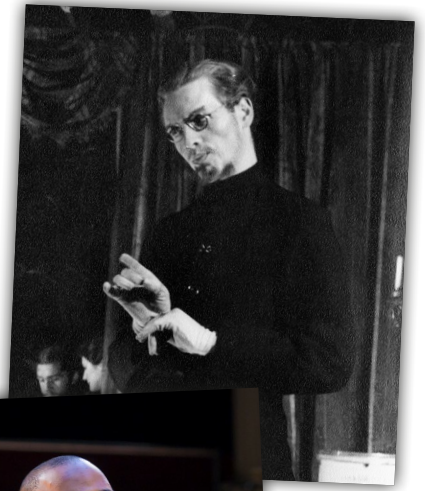
## ACT IV

*“Farewell house! Farewell old life!”*

**ANYA**

It is now October, and the destruction of the cherry orchard has started. The characters are all about to leave the estate; Lopakhin will depart to Kharkov for the winter, Varya will go to another family who lives fifty miles away. Gayev has a job at the bank and will move to town while Anya will go away to school. Ranyevskaya is about to leave for Paris with Yasha, to rejoin her lover. Charlotta has no idea what she will do, but Lopakhin assures her he will help her find something. Trofimov and Lopakhin exchange an affectionate if contentious farewell; Yasha leaves Dunyasha, weeping, without a second thought; and Anya tearfully says goodbye to her mother. Anya worries that Firs, who has taken ill, has not been sent to the hospital as he was supposed to be, but Yasha indignantly assures Anya that he has. Ranyevskaya encourages Lopakhin to propose to Varya; but the proposal is never made – Lopakhin leaves Varya alone, and in tears. Finally, Gayev and Ranyevskaya bid a tearful farewell to their house. Everyone leaves, locking the doors behind them.

Firs has been left behind and has been forgotten by the rest of the characters. He walks onstage after everyone else has left, quietly talking about how life has passed him by. He silently lies down as the sound of an axe cutting down a cherry tree in the orchard.



Top to Bottom: Trofimov in 1953 and in 2018



Top to Bottom: Anya and Varya 1975 and in 2018



# Dissecting the Characters

***“In essence it is an engrossing novel that embraces the life of the people in Russia just before Tsarism began to collapse”***

**YURI ZAVADSKY**

**This is a play with a cast of 15. There are also around 30 characters mentioned who never actually appear – fathers, sons, lovers, husbands, others who stay on the estate, plus those who make a fleeting appearance such as the passer by in Act II who is most likely on his way back from exile in Siberia.**

## **LYUBOV ANDREYEVNA RANYEVSKAYA**

Ranyevskaya is the owner of the estate and the cherry orchard where the play is set. She is beautiful, sexy, enigmatic and complicated. A member of the aristocracy, she is unable to face the realities of life which she spends a great deal of time physically avoiding. At the opening of the play, she has just left an abusive and unfaithful lover in Paris where she spent the last five years after the deaths of her alcoholic husband and her five year old son. Ranyevskaya is paralysed by her illusions of the past and her unwillingness to face the inevitability of what the future holds with the loss of her estate and the destruction of the orchard. The opening scene is set in the nursery and there are some rather bizarre eulogies to pieces of furniture which have survived the last century where she and her brother Gayev try to recapture the idyll of their childhood and block out the tragic events of the past six years.

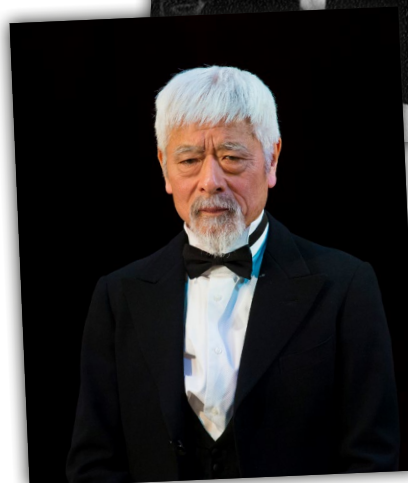
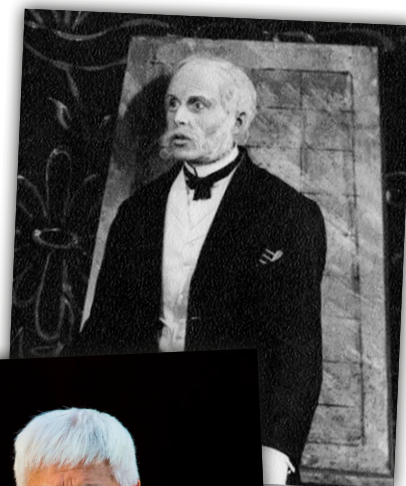
Ranyevskaya is excessive and recklessly generous, giving money she can ill afford to whoever happens to pull her heart strings, and also enormously in debt. She is a victim of her excessive emotions – her judgements are clouded by this and the perceived vulgarity of money. She cannot pay the mortgage on the estate but her sense of entitlement cannot see the consequences of this. She rejects Lopakihin's business ideas and wilfully refuses to accept that she is now seriously in debt. All she is left with at the end are the abusive lover in Paris and Yasha, the rather unpleasant man servant.

## **FIRS**

Firs is the old retainer – a serf born on the estate who has stayed because he has no other options. Unlike Lopakhin, he has not been able to adapt to the changes which came with the emancipation of the serfs. He symbolises the past and changing times and at the end of the play as the rest of the characters move on, he is left behind, presumably to die. This marks the passing of the old class system, the passing of the aristocracy's reign on the cherry orchard, and the ending of a phase in Russian history.



**Top to Bottom: Ranyevskaya in 1966 and in 2018**



**Top to Bottom: Firs in 1953 and in 2018**

# Dissecting the Characters

***“Chekhov often expressed his thought not in speeches but in pauses or between lines or in replies consisting of a single word. The characters often feel and think things not expressed in the lines they speak.”***

**STANISLAVSKI**

## **YERMOLAI ALEKSEYEVICH LOPAKHIN**

Lopakhin is Ranyevskaya’s neighbour. Born a serf on the cherry orchard estate, he has become a wealthy landowner and successful businessman. He ends up buying the estate he was born on and oversees the dispersal of the family who have lived there for generations and symbolises the success which is now available to previously subjugated serfs freed in 1861.

He looks forward to a better future and his energy and decisiveness drive the action of the play forward. He struggles with his brutal memories of being born a serf and with his relationship with Ranyevskaya who is a member of the aristocracy who oppressed his forefathers. He is grateful for her kindness but angry about her condescension towards his humble origins. Money brings him power and influence but while well dressed and prosperous, he is embarrassed by his lack of education and cultural awareness. His feelings towards the family are ambivalent and his rejection of Varya can be seen as a symbolic rejection of his past. He is unable to enjoy the emotional side of life and there is an ambiguity in his relationship with Ranyevskaya that is never really resolved.



**Top to Bottom: Lopakhin in 1953 and in 2018**

## **PYOTR TROFIMOV**

Trofimov is another ambiguous character – the perennial and idealistic student who has many opinions about the world but an unwillingness to participate in it. He links the old world of Ranyevskaya as the tutor of her dead son with the new order of Lopakhin. He is intellectually curious and he demands a level of humanity going forward previously unknown in Russia. He is passionate and lives in his head – there is little room in his world for an emotional life. He explores the ideological concerns of the play and his idealisation of work as a principal are juxtaposed with the more pragmatic and materialistic Lopakhin. It is difficult, however, to ever imagine him doing a day of hard labour. His search for the truth is a sharp contrast to the delusional world of love and beauty symbolised by Ranyevskaya. Whereas Ranyevskaya sees the orchard as beautiful and interesting, to Trofimov it is a symbol of Russia’s oppressive past. His conversations with Anya, Ranyevskaya’s daughter, lead her to see the orchard differently – it is no longer the magical centre of her childhood, but a symbol of age old oppressions and the injustice.



**Top to Bottom: Trofimov in 1975 and in 2018**



# A Note from the Director



Director Michael Boyd

**It is widely understood that you have wanted to direct *The Cherry Orchard* for years. Why did this feel like the right time for you?**

It's always the right time to stage one of the greatest plays ever written, that dares to take on the central questions of "how should we love?", "how grieve?", and "how could we all live together better?". Right now, two other great questions asked by the play: "how do we bring about urgently needed change?", and "how do we cope with change?" seem particularly current.

Privileged and progressive liberals are being challenged and displaced in many parts of the western world; squeezed between the noise and the muscle of powerful capital, the disruptive ideologies of the disenfranchised, and the primitive yearning for a long gone status quo. There is a sense in the air of great and threatening change to come, and indeed already in progress. The threat comes from the transformative power of new money, new technology, and the resentment, anger, and impotence of the long dispossessed. All the old certainties, of cultural supremacy, of prosperity, and even of the natural world, seem under attack. All the old values must now be questioned. This was true of *The Cherry Orchard*, premiering one year before the 1905 revolution, in Russia, and it also chimes with much mainstream commentary on liberal European and North American culture right now.

**Many critics see this as a deeply symbolic play, both in character and action. How have you approached the fragile relationship between realism and symbolism?**

As a self-taught artist from humble origins, Chekhov was wary of literary fashion, and of anything he saw as self-indulgence on the part of wealthy, privileged authors. And yet, he was a great theatrical poet.

Trained as a doctor, his first great strength as a short story writer and playwright was his clear eyed, objective observation of human behaviour: an observational realism so acute and unflinching that it can often seem stark, strange, even comically absurd: beyond naturalism.

In *The Cherry Orchard* he is experimenting with a realism stretched to a point beyond naturalism. Trofimov invites us to see the cherry trees as haunted by the serfs who had been made to work the estate. The whole play is haunted by the death of Grisha and characters repeatedly threaten to cross the fourth wall, addressing the audience directly.

The significance of the mournful sound of a cable snapping in a distant mine shaft is felt to be greater than the simple fact of it, and the moon pulls mystically upon would-be lovers every bit as much as it does in Maeterlinck's symbolist masterpiece *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which premiered the year before.

In this new translation of the text, we are trying to dance Chekhov's ambiguous dance with symbolism and theatrical poetry.

**How did you approach translating a very Russian play into English?**

Rory Mullarkey and I might well be the first Russian speaking Translator/Director team to tackle *The Cherry Orchard* in British theatre, and it's useful for us to preserve the deluded ambition of getting closer to Chekhov's true voice than ever before. The last major English translation by a Russian speaking playwright was Michael Frayn's excellent one in the 80s, and we felt that enough time had now passed for a new 'restoration' project to be useful.

We wanted something that was accurate, less English in tone and manners, more direct, more rude, and more Russian in its address. We were also particularly keen not to iron out the comic oddness in Chekhov. Rory did a brilliant first draft, which we then edited together, with invaluable input from Julie Curtis, a Professor of Russian literature at Oxford. Now we are refining some of the lines as we discover new ways of "sounding" them on the rehearsal room floor.

# A Note from the Director

**The relationship between Lopakhin and Ranyevskaya is complex and pivotal to any interpretation of the play. How have you approached this?**

The whole play is held taught by the tension of unrequited love, and Lopakhin has been haunted by Lyuba since they were both children; him a peasant child, her the heir to the estate.

During Lyuba's years away in Paris, he has grown rich and very close to Lyuba's adopted daughter Varya, who is, like him and his author, from humble origins. On Lyuba's return he hopes to rescue her and the estate from ruin, and perhaps become closer to her than was ever possible or thinkable before. Lyuba is hugely fond of Lopakhin, but his rescue plans involve the destruction of everything she holds dear on the estate, he is virtually promised to her adopted daughter, and escape from her abusive lover in Paris becomes impossible for her.

In rehearsals, we are exploring the extent to which they miss each other by an agonising whisker, and how much the gulf between their worlds and histories, together with the fact of Varya, makes failure inevitable. Either way, Varya becomes collateral damage.

**The play is described as a comedy in four acts, yet Stanislavski directed the opening version as a drama while underplaying the comic potential. Do you see the play as a tragedy or a comedy or a combination of the two?**

Chekhov wrote that Stanislavsky spoiled *The Cherry Orchard* by sentimentalising the grief, sadness and threat that is in the play, rather than showing a cruel and comic portrait of how ridiculously we can be made to behave in extremis. As a doctor, Chekhov was inclined to be ruthlessly objective, and honest, about his fictional 'patients'.

The odd humour of Chekhov's literary hero, Gogol, is the chief precedent for Chekhov's comedy, and the absurdism of Samuel Beckett and Ionesco are important parts of its legacy.

Hamlet is (mis)quoted in *The Cherry Orchard*, and terrible change does take place in the play, but we are best to stick with Chekhov's title page designation of "A comedy in four acts".

**What would you like your audience to take away from the play?**

As vivid, as profound, and as true a portrait of Chekhov's masterpiece as we can conjure.





# A Note from the Designer



Designer Tom Piper

## **What was your initial response when asked to design *The Cherry Orchard*?**

Excited, as it is play I know well having designed it many years ago at Nottingham Playhouse, but it was intriguing to see how Rory and Michael would approach the text. It is always a challenge to go back to a play you think you know and find new meanings and insights into the text and how the play reads now in these times of great change and social fluidity.

## **What research did you do to help you with your ideas?**

I have a lot of books of old Russian photographs and especially enjoy the ones with early colour photography, which seem to bring the people to life in an extraordinarily vivid way.

## **Can you explain the process you went through when designing the set for *The Cherry Orchard*?**

Because this is a co-production with Manchester Royal Exchange Theatre, which is in-the-round, we wanted to create as close a playing space for the actors in both theatres and to get that close relationship between them and the audience that in-the-round theatre gives, in which actors and audience are in the same space sharing the same air and very aware of each other reactions.

## **Can you explain your design for *The Cherry Orchard*?**

So, as we wanted to be in-the-round, the challenge in Bristol is to work with the beautiful listed auditorium and make it truly feel that the audience are encircling the action and that there is no upstage or downstage or preferred view point. Therefore, we decided that the seating on stage should match the balcony structures of the theatre so it is as democratic a space as possible. We have thrust out into the auditorium with a curved forestage which conceals a revolve, which we plan to use in a symbolic way to perhaps evoke the sense of outdoors or the mad whirl of the party.

So the auditorium becomes the loved, yet shabby old house. As it is a theatre we are using a red curtain to start and finish the piece and it may be part of the party too, when we hope to illuminate the whole space with festoon lights.

## **How does your design change to reflect the four acts in *The Cherry Orchard*?**

Very little in some respects as the theatre is the house, it remains throughout and when we move outdoors we hope that simple gestures such as a wooden ladder and bench will evoke the sense of the countryside, the ladder used to climb the trees for harvest but also a symbol of impending renovations and building once the orchard is sold. The main development over the acts will be in costume where we plan to move from a sense of 1905 at the beginning through the summer acts to a definitely more chilly feeling of the present day. This is hopefully not a 'concept' rather a way of slowly stripping away the distance that full period costume sometimes creates to our full engagement with the characters to a simpler revelation of their natures and how the situations in the play still reverberate with our modern audience visible in the in the round staging. By the end the actors should become like us.

## **How do you work with the design areas such as lighting, sound and costume?**

Lighting and sound will be key in the in the round staging to evoke our different settings and times of year. I work closely with all creative colleagues trying to adapt the design to fit in their needs. I am designing the costumes and am lucky to have great supervisor Emma Cains who knows Bristol well. We have sourced clothes from Bristol and Manchester and then through the fitting process have tried to create the narrative journey for each character that reflects not only their journey, but also this desire to strip back to a simpler look by the end.

# A Note from the Designer

**This play is set in 1903 Russia and has been performed more or less continually since then. How does your design reflect this and how is this relevant for a contemporary audience?**

As above the desire to look at the play through our modern eyes is not about a slavish reconstruction of 1905 in Russia, rather what are the universal themes of the play that still work? As Rory and Michael are both Russian speakers I think the version will be truer to the original text and to their knowledge of Russian character. I hope this will be a most un-English Chekhov.

**What are the challenges for a designer when working at Bristol Old Vic?**

In the current state of arts funding it is always a challenge creating a large play, the theatre has an excellent scenic department but sadly in the cost cutting of a redevelopment they have had to lose their costume department. This means that everything has to be sourced off site and it is much harder to create a unified vision for the show. Also a lot of time in freezing warehouses looking for clothes!

**How closely do you work with the director and the cast?**

I have collaborated with Michael since the early 90s and we have done over 30 productions together, so we do have a short hand and theatrical ideas that we are interested in exploring. So much of our work is in discussion over the play, and how to create an evocative space that leaves possibilities open for the actors to play and discover in rehearsal. With each actor, I discuss their character and then through fittings we work together to find clothes that tell the shared story we are trying to create.

**What would you like your audience to remember from your design for *The Cherry Orchard*?**

I want them to be truly immersed in the play and not even think there is a design, they are sharing the characters stories and hopefully will find the journey both intriguing , funny and moving.

**What made you want to be a designer? What advice would you give to aspiring designers?**

I was going to be a biologist but got into student drama at university. I loved building the sets and creating these worlds that allowed so much room for an audiences imagination to create the picture.

My advice go and see as much as possible and make stuff!



The model box during design development



# The Moscow Arts Theatre

***“There is no line between comedy and grief”***

**PETER BROOK, 1981**

## **CHEKHOV AND THE MOSCOW ARTS THEATRE**

***“It was Chekhov who suggested to me the line of intuition and feeling. To reveal the inner content of his plays it is necessary to delve into the depths of his soul.”***

**STANISLAVSKI**

The Moscow Arts Centre (MAT) was set up in 1898 by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and Konstantin Stanislavski to counteract the dominant genre of the contemporary Russian Theatre – melodrama. They aimed for a more naturalistic approach and to emulate the developments happening in other European countries. Between them they hoped to focus on acting processes and more intellectually challenging work and thus create a more naturalistic theatre which was available to a much wider audience.

The theatre opened to a polarised audience – some loved the commitment to naturalism in both acting and design, others hated it. Plot was subjugated to ambiguity, there was no clarity in the dialogue or the writer’s position on the ideas and actions explored. Only gradually did Chekhov’s new form of drama, emphasizing characterization, detail and symbolism instead of plot development and incident, gain acceptance. Their first resounding success was *The Seagull* in the same year – it was so successful that a seagull was adopted as an emblem for the Moscow Arts Theatre. Chekhov became the theatre’s resident playwright.

## **THE CHERRY ORCHARD AND THE MOSCOW ARTS THEATRE**

***“It hasn’t turned out a drama but as a comedy, in places even a farce”***

**CHEKHOV**

***“This is a tragedy”***

**STANISLAVSKI**

Chekhov had initially intended the play to be a vaudeville, and it is indeed subtitled as ‘a comedy in four acts’. However, when staged at MAT, and directed by Stanislavski as a tragedy (against Chekhov’s wishes), the most common reaction to the play was typified by his wife: “by the fourth act I burst out sobbing”.

Many noticed and applauded its new innovations in terms of the use of the empty stage, indirect action and its mixing of comic and tragic elements. The fourth wall was built up, pauses were commonplace and subtext became as important as the words spoken along with a focus on the psychological state of the characters. But many (including Stanislavski) saw the play as undeniably tragic, focusing on Ranyevskaya’s downfall as pivotal to the story. However, Post 1917 there was a tendency to make the play more comedic and use it to poke fun at the doomed aristocracy. There are certainly aspects of each character and their actions – Charlotta’s circus tricks, Gayev’s obsessions with billiards, Dunyasha’s fainting and Yasha’s preening – which are undeniably humorous and have elements of classic vaudeville comedy.



Scene from *The Cherry Orchard*, Moscow Arts Theatre, 1904

## SYMBOLISM AND NATURALISM

**“Chekhov has refined his naturalism to a symbol”**  
**STANISLAVSKI**

George Claderon in 1912 described Chekhov’s style as ‘centrifugal’ as it focusses less on the characters and their actions and more on how they express the wider world of which they are a part. Naturalism was very much to the fore in more experimental theatre, and the MAT, in the late nineteenth century. It aimed to recreate in detail the everyday lives of real people with all its social complexities. In early Chekhov plays, Stanislavski populated the stage with many artefacts and sound effects. Meyerhold, whom Chekhov admired greatly, considered that the play had been spoiled by the approach, and that ‘your play is abstract, like a symphony.’ Symbolism looks at a more abstract interpretation of action and pace. There is a real cherry orchard, but it also signifies the destruction of the past. Firs is a real man, but also a symbol of the serf who never really wanted freedom. Trofimov is a student, and an eternal one at that, but also a symbol of the future and the power of work. The broken string is used to signify the end of the Russian aristocracy.

Chekhov never lets us sympathise too much with the position of any one character – for example, Lopakhin’s gloats on his journey from his brutal origins and his interventions to help Ranyevskaya are tactless in the extreme.

## RUSSIA IN 1903

**“All Russia is our orchard”**

**TROFIMOV, ACT III**

A number of reforms intent on modernising Russia had been set up since the time of Peter the Great in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. European fashion and culture, and especially influences from Paris, were adopted by the aristocracy who often spoke French to each other. Reforms continued during Chekhov’s childhood, which is when the Emancipation Declaration of 1861 freed the serfs from bondage. These reforms had a marked impact on the aristocracy, undermining their power and putting them sometimes into acute economic hardship that they were unskilled to manage. Indeed, Chekhov’s own father was born a serf. *The Cherry Orchard* exploring the predicament of a wealthy landowning family forced to sell their estate in order to pay their debts was a familiar idea in the Russian society of Chekhov’s day. As Russia moved towards revolution in 1917, the play, and particularly Trofimov’s views of the workers, was interpreted by the Bolsheviks as a microcosm of Russian society.

## LEGACY

**“Hearing Chekhov’s plays made me want to tear up my own”**

**GEORGE BERNARD SHAW**

Chekhov was a celebrated writer in Russia and by the time of his death was held in huge esteem. The ambiguity at the heart of *The Cherry Orchard* left open a variety of interpretations. Post 1917 emphasis was put on to the emergence of the workers such as Lopakhin along with Trofimov’s ideology rather than the plight of Ranyevskaya. Meyerhold directed the play as a political vaudeville and celebrated Chekhov as a proto revolutionary.

Chekhov’s critical reception outside Russia was mixed. There were some translation problems and also the issue of the Russianness of the play which Chekhov foresaw as being an obstacle for a foreign audience. However, amongst the literary sets in Europe and America, he had a wide fan base from such an eclectic mix as George Bernard Shaw, Katherine Mansfield, and Raymond Carver.

MAT arrived in New York in 1923 and helped transform the craft of acting and was ultimately developed into the ‘method’ acting style of Lee Strasberg which in turn produced actors such as Marlon Brando, Robert de Niro, Daniel Day Lewis and Heath Ledger. Playwrights such as Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Samuel Beckett were influenced by the limited action and the small matters of day to day life.



# Key Themes

**“Chekhov has refined his naturalism to a symbol”**

**STANISLAVSKI**

## **BROKEN STRING AND OTHER SOUNDS**

***“A far off sound, as if from the sky, the sound of a breaking string, dying away, sad.”***

**ACT IV**

We hear the sound of the breaking string twice, once in Act II after Gayev speaks of the eternity of nature and then again at the end of the play. We do not know what the noise is, and it is never explained. Lopakhin speculates that it is the sound of a cable breaking in a mine while Gayev and Trofimov think it is a bird. Firs tells us it was heard before, around the time the serfs were freed. It is last heard just as

Firs lies down at the end of the play, followed by the sound of an axe striking a cherry tree. This image of a break in time and tradition makes it clear that the future will look very different. We also hear the sounds of the incoming trains, doors locking and carriages departing -all these auditory symbols show a break from the past.

***“According to Chekhov, once a gun appears in a story, it has to be fired.”***

**HARUKI MURAKAMI**

## **THE CHERRY ORCHARD AND NATURE**

***“On the twenty second of August the cherry orchard will be sold at auction. You have to make a decision!”***

**LOPAKHIN, ACT I**

The Cherry Orchard is at the centre of the play and Chekhov himself grew up near a cherry orchard. The biggest cherry orchard in Russia at 2500 acres, it is uneconomical due to the incompetence of its owners and we are told that the recipe for the cherry jam which sustained the estate in the past has been lost. It has no use in the present or the future and is destroyed to make way for Lopakhin's summer houses where the emerging middle classes to spend their summers. This is even though he believes it to be ‘the most beautiful place on earth’. Alongside this beauty is tragedy – little Grisha drowned here - and the destruction of the old order which is collapsing as the play ends. It is a place where the past haunts the present - Ranyevskaya sees the ghost of her dead mother and Trofimov is haunted by the memories of dead serfs who lived and died in oppression. During the play the action is drawn towards the cherry orchard although very little actually takes place there. We are very aware of external action however – the ever encroaching modern world symbolised by the telegraph poles crossing the estate and the vagrant on his way to somewhere on a long journey from Siberia.

## **THE PASSAGE OF TIME**

***“Maybe you can see what's true and what's a lie, but I can't see anything”***

**RANYEVSKAYA, ACT III**

The play is about a world about to be turned upside down. The serfs have their freedom and the aristocracy are on their way out. The values of old Russia are idealised and those of the west, and particular Paris, are spiritually and morally bankrupt. This tension is realised in the conflict between Ranyevskaya and Lopakhin and developed in the speeches of Trofimov in Act II.

The audience is caught in a dilemma which recognises the triumph of the former serf buying the estate and the desolation of a landowner losing her ancestral home. These two dominant ideologies are at the heart of the play which are realised in very human dilemmas. Firs does not want to change, he has nowhere to go. Ranyevskaya cannot face the reality in front of her and lives in the past. Lopakhin is a success but lacks empathy and tact.

The past looms at the centre of the play – the death of Ranyevskaya's son, her time in Paris, Lopakhin's brutal childhood, Trofimov's views of feudal Russia, Firs' memory of times before the freedoms of the serfs. At the end he is forgotten by the cast as they move into an uncertain future – they literally leave the past behind.

Money is a dirty word – Ranyevskaya is profligate and literally lets money run through her fingers. It is dropped, lent, given away with no sense of worth. She is horrified that her brother Gayev will go and work in bank for 6000 roubles a year. Lopakhin is obsessed with the money he has made.

A great deal of time is spent waiting for love. Varya waits and waits for Lopakhin to propose – surely one of the longest pauses in theatre – and there is the love triangle between Dunyasha who is being wooed by the calamitous estate manager, Yepikhodov, and the quasi sophisticated Yasha with his Parisian airs and graces. Despite being given permission by Ranyevskaya to marry Anya, Trofimov is above love and leaves her high and dry.

# How to Write a Review

**Now write your own review after you have seen the play. Before you start, go online and find some reviews of *The Cherry Orchard*, either the current production or some of the more recent ones. These will help you get a sense of how to approach your review.**

Then on to your own individual review. You will have many opinions about the production and you must remember to justify any statements you make. Always give examples to support the point you are making, use details from the performance such as acting, set, sound, lighting.

## INTRODUCTION

Start with the essential information. Make sure you mention:

- The full title of the play and the name of the playwright
- The date, time and location of the place you saw this production
- The name of the director
- Names of the main characters and the actors

## PLOT

- Give a brief summary of the plot
- Which were your favourite sections?
- Was there a clear message for the audience in the play? What was it?
- Did the production hold the audience's interest?

## THE DESIGN

- Describe the set and the position of the audience.
- How appropriate was this to the production and to the space it was being performed in? What did you think of it?
- How did it work for the performers and the audience? Exits and entrances?
- Describe how lighting was used to create atmosphere. Did it add anything to the production?
- How did the designer use music, singing and sound? Did it add to the atmosphere?
- Did the music choices add to the play?
- What were the costumes like? Did they help to express the characters or themes of the play?
- Don't forget to add labeled illustrations and diagrams to support your statements.

## THE ACTING

- Describe some of the performances. Choose a couple of characters and analyse the acting: voice/body/facial expression/gesture/proxemics and movement choices.
- How did the actors use their bodies differently to show the characters they played and how they felt?
- How did they relate to other characters?
- Give some examples of some actors do that particularly impressed you and justify your choices with examples from the play.

## SUMMARY

Was it a successful production? Were you interested and involved all the way through? Would you recommend the play to other people? If so who? You need to pull together all your opinions make a nice punchy final paragraph.

## EXAMPLES

*"The delicate connections Mr. Brook draws between Beckett and Chekhov are inevitable and to the point, not arch and pretentious, and they help explain why this Cherry Orchard is so right. Though Chekhov was dying when he wrote this play, he didn't lose his perspective on existence and the people who endure it. Horrible, inexplicable things happen to the characters in The Cherry Orchard – the shadow of death is always cloaking their shoulders, as it does Beckett's lost souls - but, as Mr. Brook writes in the program, "they have not given up." They simply trudge on, sometimes with their senses of humour intact, sometimes with a dogged faith in the prospects for happiness."*

**NEW YORK TIMES, 1988**

*"This is the fourth Cherry Orchard that the National has given us in 27 years. But, even if Trevor Nunn's new production does not efface memories of its predecessors, it is a good, well-cast version that gives us Chekhov's concrete particularity. And although David Lan's new version is very direct, I can't help wondering what's wrong with the dozen other existing translations. But it is a clear, soundly conceived production that reminds you that, beneath the imperishable beauty of Chekhov's play, lay intimations of revolutionary upheaval."*

**MICHAEL BILLINGTON, 2000**

*"The Cherry Orchard has been translated into English on countless occasions. Since Stanislavski's first production of the play at the Moscow Art theatre in January 1904, it has never been out of production and has been performed all over the world. It could be argued that the last thing the world needs is another version of the play."*

*I think the reason it continues to be reimaged and restaged is because nobody has ever got it right. Nobody has ever captured the depth and spirit of the play. Nobody has done this because nobody can, because language doesn't work like that and language in theatre certainly doesn't."*

**SIMON STEPHENS, 2014**



# Activities

Here are a series of activities based on Stanislavski's System. Any exploration of Stanislavski's system can be applied to *The Cherry Orchard*. There are many more to explore, including emotion and sensory memory, the Magic If, super objectives.

## IMPROVISATION

There are so many possibilities for this. What happens to the characters at the end of the play? As soon as Act 4 ends? One day later? One week later? One year later?

Reverse for the start of the play.

Improvise scenes which took place between each act.

Improvise the scene where Ranyevskaya learns of Grisha's death.

## CHARACTER

Start with the given circumstances for each character. What do we know about them from the text? Then move onto what we may deduce from the action. From this create one sentence which summarises their objective in the play. Then create tableaux of each group in the play – the family, friends and servants. Look carefully at the posture and facial expression of each character. Justify your choices. Then refine this to a tableau at the start of the play and one at the end. Thought track each character in both.

## SUBTEXT

Look at this section of Act IV. Varya and Lopakhin are alone together.

**Varya:** (Spending a long time going through the luggage) Strange, I can't find it anywhere...

**Lopakhin:** What are you looking for?

**Varya:** I packed it myself and now I can't even remember.

*Pause.*

**Lopakhin:** Where are you off to now, Varvara Mikhailovna?

Experiment with the length of the pause. Try 5 seconds and 30 seconds. How long can you make it last? What is the subtext here?

## ACTIONING

Go through each act and break down into Units of Action. These usually start when a new character enters. Consider the areas you will explore – suggestions would be what happens, characters, movement, objectives, subtext.

## PROXEMICS

Take one action and play around with proxemics. How would you use this to explore status, relationships and objectives?

## SYMBOLISM AND NATURALISM

Look up the meaning of the two words.

Write a list of characters and locations in the play and then try and see if they have a symbolic role in the play. For instance, do the keys associated with Varya mean anything?

Write a list of all the sounds in the play and see if they could have any symbolic meaning. Create a soundscape to support key moments in the play.

## COMEDY

There are some comical moments in the play. Try and enact the scene where both Gayev and Ranyevska get sentimental about the bookcase.

Try playing for laughs and in a more straight forward way. Which is easier.

Try and improvise a ball and then introduce Charlotta doing cartwheels. Explore other potentially comic moments. Are they difficult to do? If so why? Is it because they are dated? Too Russian?



Scene from *The Cherry Orchard*, Bristol Old Vic, 2018