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SF PERUSALS

Chekhov In Yalta

(Featuring a Rare and Delightful Visit
by the Moscow Art Theatre)

by

John Driver and Jeffrey Haddow

A Samuel French Acting Edition



New York Hollywood London Toronto
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ISBN 978-0-573-60129-3 Printed in U.S.A. **#5594**

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CHEKHOV IN YALTA was first presented by the Center Theatre Group at the Mark Taper Forum (Gordon Davidson, Artistic Director) in Los Angeles, California on May 24, 1981. It was directed by Ellis Rabb and Gordon Davidson; the scenery was by Douglas W. Schmidt; the costumes were by John Conklin; the lighting was by Martin Aronstein; the original music was by Catherine MacDonald; the fight and dance choreography was by Anthony De Longis. The cast was as follows:

Fyokla ..... Lois Foraker

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov ..... Robin Gammell

Maxim Gorky ..... Keene Curtis

Ivan Alexeivich Bunin ..... James R. Winker

Masha Chekhov ..... Marian Mercer

Olga Leonardova Knipper ..... Penny Fuller

Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko ..... Dana Elcar

Lilina Stanislavski ..... Andra Akers

Luzhki ..... Michael Bond

Moskvin ..... Jeffrey Combs

Konstantin Sergeievich Stanislavski ... Rene Auberjonois

AUTHORS' NOTE

CHEKHOV IN YALTA may be performed in two acts as written, or may be broken into three acts if this better serves your particular needs.

Even two language experts will differ as to the pronunciation of the Russian names, places, and terms herein. What matters most is that your chosen pronunciations remain consistant throughout your production.

This play is *not* meant to be a parody of Chekhov's plays. Nor is it meant to be a lugubrious dirge. What seems to work best is a happy balance of comedy and drama. This at times may seem like walking a tightrope, but by approaching the piece from the point of view of emotional truth, a stylistic unity can be maintained.

CAST

MASHA CHEKHOV — *30's. Anton's unmarried sister and housekeeper.*

FYOKLA.— *21. Chekhov's maid.*

ANTON PAVLOVICH CHEKHOV — *40. Writer and doctor.*

MAXIM GORKY — *30. Writer of the people. Living in Yalta to treat his consumption.*

IVAN ALEXEIVICH BUNIN — *31. Popular writer of aristocratic descent. Summering in Yalta.*

OLGA LEONARDOVNA KNIPPER — *30's. Leading lady of the Moscow Art Theatre.*

VLADIMIR NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO — *39. Co-director and business manager of the Moscow Art Theatre.*

LUZHKI — *Mid-thirties. Fat, sentimental actor of the Moscow Art Theatre.*

MOSKVIN — *Late twenties. Young, acrobatic character man with the Moscow Art Theatre.*

LILINA STANISLAVSKI — *31. A delicate beauty and wife of Stanislavski. Ingenue and costume designer for the Moscow Art Theatre.*

KONSTANTIN SERGEIEVICH STANISLAVSKI — *37. Co-director and artistic force behind the Moscow Art Theatre.*

ACT I, SCENE 1

Anton Chekhov's villa in Yalta, April, 1900.

ACT I, SCENE 2

The same, the next day.

ACT II

The same, two days later.

CHEKHOV IN YALTA

ACT I
Scene 1

Lights up on the patio terrace of ANTON CHEKHOV'S villa in Yalta. Downstage Left, a path leads off toward the sea. Upstage Left is a stone wall beyond which is a Tartar cemetery. Stage Right, a walkway skirts the side of the villa leading off Upstage towards the front of the house. Farther Right can be seen the edge of a sub-tropical forest bordered by a well-tended row of acacia trees. The rear facade of the three-story villa dominates the Upstage area. Two entrances lead from the patio into the house, one small entrance Stage Right to the kitchen, and one larger double-door arrangement opening into the parlor. On the terrace is a grouping of wicker furniture — armchairs, sofa, table — Downstage left is a small gazebo. It is spring. Morning fog covers the ground. In the distance can be heard the sound of the sea. A boat whistle blows.

MASHA CHEKHOV appears at a second floor window in a frumpy housedress. She is a plain, hard-working woman who has devoted much of her life to looking after her brother's welfare. Looking off to the right, she becomes very excited.

MASHA. Fyokla! *(She disappears into the house, still yelling.)* Fyokla, get up! He's coming. Up, up, up, up, up! *(Brandishing a broom, she chases Fyokla, the maid, an unselfconsciously voluptuous creature.)* Come on, come on, he's here. Get the samovar.

FYOKLA. *(going into the kitchen)* Tired.

MASHA. *(Sweeping FYOKLA out of the house with the broom.)* Trollop! Strumpet! You should have thought of that last night.

FYOKLA. *(from kitchen)* Last night, miss?

MASHA. *(wiping the dew from the patio furniture)* I saw you sneaking back from the cemetery.

FYOKLA. *(returning with the samovar)* No, miss.

(Sound of carriage approaching.)

MASHA. I watched you climb in through the window.

FYOKLA. *(setting down the samovar)* It wasn't me.

MASHA. Liar! Go get his blanket. *(She shoos FYOKLA back into the house.)*

(ANTON CHEKHOV enters with medical bag. He is forty, but looks much older. He is in a highly energized state common to sufferers of consumption, a state which, though giving the appearance of robust health, is in reality an exhilaration brought on by fever.)

CHEKHOV. What a night!

MASHA. *(wiping off the chair)* Antosha, come, sit. Rest.

CHEKHOV. *(pacing around)* But it was worth it. On the

way back here I saw a curious thing. A drunken ice merchant had run his cart into a ditch. He was sitting on a block of ice, sobbing and tearing his hair out. I can probably turn that into a very amusing story. *(MASHA is trying to lead him to the chair without success. FYOKLA enters with blanket.)* Fyokla, there's a crate in the droshky. Fetch it here, will you?

MASHA. *(Snatching the blanket and sending FYOKLA off. Leading CHEKHOV to chair.)* You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Out all night in your condition. Why does God give me such a brother? *(She finally gets him seated, places the blanket over his legs.)* Where were you?

CHEKHOV. At Tolstoy's estate. It's all very generous of him to go about preaching independence of spirit to his peasants, but it's only succeeded in making them afraid to ask for medical help when they need it.

(FYOKLA enters with a crate containing a live chicken.)

MASHA. What is that?

CHEKHOV. My fee. These people have no money. *(FYOKLA takes the chicken to the kitchen.)* I delivered a baby, set a few limbs, pulled a tooth ... Then for the rest of the night, I had to sit and listen to Tolstoy expound on the simplicity of the Russian soul. *(He pops up out of the chair.)* God, I'm hungry. Must be the sea air. Fog is burning off. The weather is going to be perfect today. I'm so bored here, unimaginably bored. *(He coughs as he takes a cigar from his pocket and pats his jacket for matches.)* Masha, do you have some matches?

MASHA. *(disapprovingly, indicating cigar)* Anton ...

CHEKHOV. It was a gift from Tolstoy.

MASHA. Please, you promised. *(He reluctantly hands the cigar to her. She leads him off once more to the chair.)* Antosha, I know you're having one of your good days, but *you* know very well all this exhilaration is not natural. Your cheeks are flushed with fever. It'll catch up with you. It always does. *(FYOKLA Has fallen asleep over the samovar. CHEKHOV takes out his notebook and begins writing as MASHA takes a bottle of medicine and spoon from her apron. Seeing FYOKLA, MASHA bops her on the head with the spoon.)*

FYOKLA. Ow!

CHEKHOV. Semyon! That's a good name for an ice merchant.

MASHA. *(reaching for the notebook)* No writing. Just rest.

CHEKHOV. *(jerking notebook back angrily)* No, Masha, no! Now just go away and leave me alone.

MASHA. *(Stops CHEKHOV's speech by shoving a spoonful of medicine in his mouth.)* I'd appreciate it, Anton, if you would use some of your boundless energy to speak to Fyokla. She was in the cemetery with her corporal again last night.

(MASHA exits into house. FYOKLA serves tea, starts to go.)

CHEKHOV. Fyokla, come here. What were you and that soldier doing in the cemetery last night?

FYOKLA. We were ... picking mushrooms, sir.

CHEKHOV. You know how much that upsets my sister.

FYOKLA. Picking mushrooms, sir?

CHEKHOV. Masha tells me your nocturnal harvesting companion is known throughout the district as a notorious cad. Now, believe me, I understand the temptations and the joys of your midnight trysts...

FYOKLA. Thank you, sir.

CHEKHOV. But if you cause a scandal, Masha will make all of our lives a living hell. Do you understand?

FYOKLA. I think so, sir.

CHEKHOV. That will be all, Fyokla. By the way, I'm looking forward to mushrooms for lunch.

FYOKLA. Yes, sir, I'll go to the market and buy some. *(She exits.)*

CHEKHOV. Hm. The body of a goddess, the brain of a flea. *(He takes out notebook again. Writes.)*

(MASHA enters, listens as she cleans.)

CHEKHOV. Where was I? Oh, yes, Semyon, the ice merchant. One day, while he's making his rounds, he receives word that his nagging, gluttonous wife has choked to death on a piece of black bread. That's good. That's funny. *(MASHA shakes her head and exits. CHEKHOV sips tea, grimaces.)* Feh! Medicinal tea. Ah, Yalta, Yalta, my warm Siberia!

(Enter MAXIM GORKY, tall, dark, Tartar features, flowing black hair, dressed in peasant blouse, breeches, and riding boots. With him is IVAN BUNIN, elegant, aristocratic. They are carrying on a mock duel with fishing poles.)

GORKY. Parasite!

BUNIN. Hypocrite!

GORKY. Tsarist pig!

BUNIN. Crass peasant!

CHEKHOV. Masha! Bunin and Gorky are here.

BUNIN. *(Scores a hit.)* Aha! A hit!

GORKY. *(Grabs BUNIN's pole and snaps it in two.)* Touche!

BUNIN. You're a barbarian, Gorky.

CHEKHOV. Masha! How can you let three of the world's greatest writers languish from thirst?

GORKY. *(Swipes the notebook away from CHEKHOV.)* Ah, ah, none of that today.

CHEKHOV. What are you talking about?

BUNIN. Gorky's just formed a writers' union.

GORKY. And today we're on strike.

BUNIN. Like all strikes, Anton, it's merely an excuse to go fishing. And to that end... *(handing CHEKHOV a sack)* ... we've come bearing a gift.

CHEKHOV. Worms. How nice.

GORKY. *(quietly)* Come here and look, but keep talking. *(He crosses to wall.)*

BUNIN. They're fat ones too, Anton.

GORKY. From the cemetery. You can find all sorts of crawling things in the cemetery. *(He indicates that two men are behind the wall.)*

CHEKHOV. So? A couple of gravediggers playing cards.

GORKY. They're secret police.

CHEKHOV. *(as they all peek over the wall)* Nonsense.

GORKY. Look at the one on the right. See the bulge in his blouse? That's an oak truncheon filled with lead.

They say he's killed five men with it.

CHEKHOV. They're simple gravediggers, Maxim. You flatter yourself terribly to think the Tsar's men are watching you from behind every tree.

BUNIN. It's the leaflets. He's writing those leaflets again.

GORKY. They don't dare arrest *me.* The public outcry would be too great.

BUNIN. I can hear the crowds now, yelling "Give us Barrabas!"

GORKY. They've heard us.

(FYOKLA enters and serves tea.)

CHEKHOV. Fyokla, have you seen my fishing pole?

FYOKLA. No, sir.

CHEKHOV. Well, find it, and bring it here, please. Maybe this bait will change my luck.

BUNIN. *(Drinks tea, spits it out.)* Ptooey! Yeccchh.

GORKY. Wonderful tea. My grandmother made tea like this.

FYOKLA. I'll make a new pot.

BUNIN. Oh, don't waste it. I can always use it to clean my shotgun.

CHEKHOV. My fishing pole, Fyokla.

FYOKLA. Yes, sir. *(FYOKLA exits. GORKY begins winding his fly. BUNIN repairs his pole.)*

(MASHA comes out. She's taken off her apron and primped a bit.)

MASHA. Good morning, Ivan, Maxim.

BUNIN and GORKY. Masha.

MASHA. *(Smiling at BUNIN; notices shirt.)* Ivan, what happened to your shirt?

BUNIN. I was attacked by an animal.

MASHA. Well, it can be mended. The tear is on the seam.

(FYOKLA enters with fishing pole. Hands it to CHEKHOV.)

FYOKLA. It was on the piano. *(She exits.)*

MASHA. *(Swipes the fishing pole from CHEKHOV.)* Oh, no, you're too weak to go fishing. *(She's about to exit when BUNIN stops her.)*

BUNIN. Masha, surely a woman capable of such affection, such devotion, should be able to recognize the enormous theraputic value of fishing.

MASHA. I don't know...

BUNIN. The soothing music of the babbling brook, the healing vapors of the pine glade...

MASHA. No, Ivan, what if he catches a fish and gets all excited?

BUNIN. Why should today be any different?

MASHA. *(weakening)* But he was up all night.

GORKY. *(to CHEKHOV)* You were?

CHEKHOV. Yes, I was at Tolstoy's.

BUNIN. Oho, that's enough to exhaust a plowhorse. Take a nap. We'll come back later.

CHEKHOV. No, no, don't go. Masha, pack a basket for us to take with us.

BUNIN. *(to MASHA, delicately taking fishing pole)* Please.

MASHA. Well...

BUNIN. Thank you, Masha. *(She smiles at him and exits into the house. BUNIN hands pole to CHEKHOV in triumph. The men continue tying flies.)*

CHEKHOV. You won't believe what Tolstoy came up with this time. He said he couldn't tolerate Shakespeare's plays.

BUNIN. What conceit!

GORKY. Only Tolstoy could get away with that.

CHEKHOV. Then he said my plays were even worse. *(imitating Tolstoy)* "Nothing happens in your plays, Anton." *(silence)* He must have seen Stanislavski's production of *Seagull.* All those pauses. *(pause)* I nearly fell asleep myself.

GORKY. Have you finished *The Three Sisters?*

CHEKHOV. Yes.

BUNIN and GORKY. Congratulations.

BUNIN. Has the Moscow Art read it yet? *(silence)* You *have* sent it to the Moscow Art...

CHEKHOV. No ... I've sent it to the Imperial Thaetre. *(pause)* I know what you're thinking. Everyone says Stanislavski is a genius, but you saw what he did to my *Seagull.* Granted it was supposed to be night, but the lights were so dim the audience could hardly see the stage. And that constant cacophony of nightingales, hoofbeats, creaking gates, rustling leaves, strange noises in the forest. And his brilliant idea of a plague of imaginary insects. All through the second act the players were slapping themselves so loudly you couldn't hear what they were saying. If I gave them the new play, I'd have to have someone make an entrance in every scene

just to say, "What a marvelous place! There are no mosquitoes."

BUNIN. But the Moscow Art is in Sebastopol. They'll be here tomorrow. What will you tell them?

CHEKHOV. I'll say it's not finished.

BUNIN. Better not tell Knipper till after she's been to the beach house, eh. Anton?

GORKY. Olga Knipper?

BUNIN. You should see them together.

GORKY. Serious?

BUNIN. Methinks fatal. *(GORKY hums the "Wedding March.")*

CHEKHOV. Nonsense. I have escaped the dreaded snare of matrimony for 40 years. My religion is to remain single.

BUNIN. Has the Temple of the Beach House been made ready for Knipper?

GORKY. One actress moves out, another moves in. I hope at least you changed the sheets.

CHEKHOV. Not a word about Komisarevskaya to anyone.

BUNIN. The secret of social success unveiled! Become a consumptive playwright and beautiful actresses will tug at your breeches.

GORKY. Nothing fires a woman's loins like a coughing writer.

CHEKHOV. Pleasure always has its price, my friends. After Komisarevskaya left I was an invalid for a week. Thank God she had an engagement to star in an Ibsen play in Rostov. Ach, Ibsen, now there's an atrocious playwright.

GORKY. Nothing happens in his plays.

CHEKHOV. Why does Stanislavski insist on doing my plays the same way he does Ibsen's? I write comedies. *(BUNIN whistles a little tune. Awkward silence.)*

(Sound of the sea.)

GORKY. Wind has shifted to the south. You can hear the breakers.

CHEKHOV. Ivan, how would you describe the sea?

BUNIN. The sea ... The sea. A wall of tears ... fallen from the eyes of the Mother Of Life. A restless opalescent tabletop ... reflecting the depths of cosmic sorrow.

CHEKHOV. Maxim?

GORKY. The enormous black sea appears calm. But beneath that serene facade lies a monstrous denizen of discontent. It is an embroyo, never having seen the light, never having breathed the air of freedom. For centuries it has gathered size and substance. It is waiting, waiting for the right moment to burst from its womb and cut the night fog with the fiery blue sword of Justice.

BUNIN. Thank God. For a second there I thought you were going to get political.

CHEKHOV. I was looking over some of my old copybooks, and I came across this quote. In my opinion it is the most perfect description of the sea ever written. "The sea is huge." *(GORKY and BUNIN assent. Awe.)* I always carry it with me as a reminder to write simply.

(Enter OLGA KNIPPER, strong-willed, vital, uniquely attractive, a commanding leading lady who is both self-centered and ambitious.)

OLGA. Dr. Chekhov, I presume?

CHEKHOV. Olga.

OLGA. *(She kisses him on both cheeks and sweeps around the terrace.)* Oh, this is paradise. Palms, hibiscus, bougainvilla...

CHEKHOV. I planted all the acacias myself. *(OLGA is standing before BUNIN.)*

BUNIN. *(bowing)* Madamoiselle Knipper.

OLGA. Monsieur Bunin, how are you?

GORKY. *(Approaches her.)* Olga Leonardovna, may I say you were wonderful as Arkadina in *Seagull.*

OLGA. A man of exquisite taste.

CHEKHOV. Oh, I'm sorry, you two haven't met, have you? Olga Knipper, Maxim Gorky.

OLGA. *(She offers her hand to GORKY. He shakes it vigorously.)* I'm dazzled. Surrounded by literary lights.

(MASHA enters.)

MASHA. Olga! You're a day early!

OLGA. Masha! *(She embraces MASHA.)* I'm sorry, dear, we tried to telephone but you know how those machines are.

CHEKHOV. You'll be staying the night, then?

(Enter VLADIMIR NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO, dapper, bearded managing director of the Moscow Art. He is carrying a small parcel.)

NEMIROVICH. I'm afraid not. We'll be rehearsing till all hours this evening but I promise you, after the perfor-

mance tomorrow night your villa will become the Pension Moscow Art.

CHEKHOV. Nemirovich!

NEMIROVICH. Anton Pavlovich, how are you?

CHEKHOV. Fine, fine. Ivan Bunin, Maxim Gorky, this is Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, director of the Moscow Art Theatre.

NEMIROVICH. Co-director, please.

CHEKHOV. Ah, yes. With ... what's his name.

NEMIROVICH. Masha, how nice to see you again. *(OLGA takes the parcel from NEMIROVICH, hands it to MASHA and whispers something in her ear.)*

MASHA. Ah! Fyokla! *(She exits into the house.)*

NEMIROVICH. Gorky, why didn't you come backstage to see us while you were in Moscow?

GORKY. I was under surveillance. Still am as a matter of fact. I didn't want to get you involved in that.

NEMIROVICH. Ah, yes. I've heard it said you attract police like baklava draws flies.

CHEKHOV. When did you leave Moscow?

NEMIROVICH. On the twelfth.

GORKY. Then you were there when it happened. The students must have marched right past your theatre.

CHEKHOV. What are you talking about?

NEMIROVICH. You didn't hear about it? Last Tuesday. People were killed. Students and Cossacks fighting in the streets.

OLGA. It was terrifying. Several students were trampled to death. I saw a Cossack cut off a boy's hand.

NEMIROVICH. We had to cancel rehearsal.

CHEKHOV. There was no mention of it in the newspapers.

GORKY. *(contemptuously)* The newspapers.

NEMIROVICH. The gutters ran with blood.

OLGA. At the station we saw them loading coffins onto the mail train.

GORKY. They'll pay for this. For each one killed, a thousand will rise to take his place.

BUNIN. Even in Russia, there can't be that many suicidal fools.

OLGA. Anton, last week we saw Chaliapin in *Boris Godunov.* Bravo Chaliapin! *(No-one is listening. OLGA heads for the house. To herself, in her lowest register.)* Bravo, Chaliapin! *(She exits into the house.)*

GORKY. Wait till the workers start joining the students.

NEMIROVICH. God help us if that happens.

CHEKHOV. It won't happen.

GORKY. It will, Anton. And in our lifetime.

CHEKHOV. But to burn, to tear down ... No, give the people books, teach them to read, make them healthy.

GORKY. No, the solution is quick and simple — chop off the head of the Imperial Eagle!

BUNIN. *(glancing toward the wall)* For God sake, Gorky, keep your voice down.

(OLGA enters carrying a tray of oysters. She is followed by FYOKLA and MASHA.)

OLGA. Anton!

CHEKHOV. Oysters! Where did they come from?

OLGA. I brought them packed in ice.

CHEKHOV. Ah, Olga, you know so well how to make

me happy. You all must be hungry.

NEMIROVICH. Ravenous.

GORKY. How many dead?

OLGA. Can't we please talk about something else?

BUNIN. For Maxim there is no other subject.

GORKY. Everything is political. Even these oysters. A metaphor for the masses.

BUNIN. Perfect. After all, they are lazy and stupid. Day in, day out, lying passively on the bottom doing nothing.

GORKY. Not at all. They're working, always working, silently producing pearls to hang about the necks of bourgeois swine.

OLGA. But Maxim, what about the oysters that don't produce pearls?

CHEKHOV. They, my dear actress, make excellent appetizers. *(Everyone digs into the oysters.)*

NEMIROVICH. So, Anton, how is the new play coming? *(ANTON, chewing, cannot speak.)*

MASHA. He's finally finished it, thank God. *(CHEKHOV chokes, the choking turning into a serious coughing fit. MASHA rushes to him.)*

OLGA. Are you all right?

CHEKHOV. I'm fine. You see? I've stopped.

MASHA. Come on, Antosha. You need to lie down.

CHEKHOV. Nonsense. I'm perfectly well. I must have choked on a pearl.

OLGA. I'll help you upstairs.

MASHA. I can manage myself, thank you. *(MASHA leads CHEKHOV into house.)*

BUNIN. He was worn out. We should have left him

alone. *(GORKY coughs.)* Maybe we should put you in bed, too.

NEMIROVICH. Good lord, does everyone in Yalta have consumption?

BUNIN. Almost everyone. But you needn't worry. It isn't contagious.

NEMIROVICH. I know that. *You* certainly look healthy enough.

BUNIN. Yes, and its kept me out of all the better social clubs. Well, Maxim, shall we?

GORKY. By all means. *(to others)* Until tomorrow. *(They start to leave.)*

(FYOKLA runs in with jar full of brown liquid.)

FYOKLA. Wait, Ivan Alexeivich! *(Hands BUNIN the jar.)*

BUNIN. What's this?

FYOKLA. It's tea. For your shotgun. *(BUNIN and GORKY laugh and exit. FYOKLA exits. OLGA takes a cigarette from a case in her handbag.)*

NEMIROVICH. *(He lights it for her.)* We must have that play.

OLGA. Your concern for his health is touching.

NEMIROVICH. I am concerned. I am very concerned. It is up to you to make sure he continues to be our playwright.

OLGA. Why, Vladimir? Why are you pressuring me like this? You can't use me like you did in former times. I'm not your adoring student anymore.

NEMIROVICH. Sometimes I miss those former times.

OLGA. How's your wife?

NEMIROVICH. As promiscuous as possible at her age.

OLGA. You two have so much in common. But this time you're going too far.

NEMIROVICH. What are you talking about?

OLGA. Your current assault on Madame Stanislavski is a mistake.

NEMIROVICH. I have no intention...

OLGA. You have every intention. The longing looks across the room, the significant smiles, the well-chosen words of extravagant praise. Don't forget, you played that game with me, but I'm strong, Lilina is not.

NEMIROVICH. You have an over-active imagination.

OLGA. Do I? Stanislavski may not be able to see anything beyond the footlights, but you can't fool me. Lilina is terribly unsettled right now about her marriage and her work. She pours valerian drops into her tea and still she can't sleep.

NEMIROVICH. Does Anton love you?

OLGA. Don't change the subject.

NEMIROVICH. Does he?

OLGA. That's none of your business.

NEMIROVICH. Believe me, it is.

OLGA. Why should it be? If you want my help, you'd better tell me.

NEMIROVICH. All right. This is in strictest confidence, Olga. Last month we could barely afford to heat the theatre. If we don't have a financial success this season, and that means a new Chekhov play, the doors of the Moscow Art will close forever.

(MASHA enters and hovers silently in the background.)

OLGA. Dear God...

NEMIROVICH. You see now. We didn't come to Yalta for our health.

OLGA. My relationship with Anton has nothing to do with the Moscow Art.

NEMIROVICH. Oh, please, don't play the fool with me. What actress wouldn't want to be Madame Chekhov. *(MASHA drops something. They turn and see her.)* Ah, Masha, may I use your telephone?

MASHA. You can try.

NEMIROVICH. How is Anton Pavlovich?

MASHA. A little better now, thank you. *(NEMIROVICH exits.)* I'm so worried. He seems much worse.

OLGA. Oh, you're exaggerating.

MASHA. He had an attack! He coughed up blood. Consumption runs in the family, you know. Our brother Nikolai died of it.

OLGA. Oh, yes, Anton was fond of him, wasn't he?

MASHA. Yes. Poor Nikolai. He was a wonderful artist. His illustrations for Anton's stories were so sensitive. He was quite young. *(pause)* Olga, can I ask you a favor?

OLGA. Of course, dear.

MASHA. Well ... What do you think of Bunin?

OLGA. He's witty, charming...

MASHA. Oh, yes, he is, he is. Well, you see, Ivan and I have become friends. We talk, we have long conversations. But the subject is always Anton. To him, I'm only Chekhov's spinster sister.

OLGA. A spinster! Don't be ridiculous, Masha. You're

younger than I am.

MASHA. I am?

OLGA. Perhaps not.

MASHA. But you have charm, Olga. You know how to talk to men. *(hopefully)* You could even talk to Bunin about me.

OLGA. Oh, Masha, I have no talent as a go-between, and I hardly know the man.

MASHA. Please...

OLGA. And if he's not interested in you?

MASHA. Then I'll forget all about him.

OLGA. Well...

MASHA. Thank you, thank you. Oh, Olga, Olga, what would I do without you.

OLGA. All right, I'll do it. But from now on, you must be completely honest with me.

MASHA. I've always been honest with you.

OLGA. Not when it comes to Anton.

MASHA. I just don't want you to be hurt, Olya. He's not as good as you think he is.

OLGA. What does that mean?

MASHA. Nothing.

OLGA. You see? You're holding back.

MASHA. Less than a month ago, Komisarevskaya was here.

OLGA. What?

MASHA. For three days.

OLGA. And how many nights?

MASHA. He calls her his Russian Duse.

OLGA. His Russian Duse!

MASHA. I shouldn't have told you! I shouldn't have.

OLGA. I will talk to Bunin, and I'll be as honest with you as you've been with me. Komisarevskaya, that scheming bitch.

MASHA. I'm sorry I told you.

OLGA. Why? It's the truth, isn't it?

MASHA. But it's so unfair. Oh, Olya, how can we go on living with this hopelessness? *(They cry and embrace.)*

(CHEKHOV enters.)

CHEKHOV. Did Stanislavski direct this scene?

MASHA. What are you doing down here? Go back to bed. I sent for Dr. Altschuler. He'll be here soon.

CHEKHOV. What do I need a doctor for? I am a doctor. I take my pulse. *(Can't find it.)* Strange, it was here yesterday. Ah, there it is. And when I look at Olga, it beats twice as fast. I'm healthy as a bull. Masha, bring my cigars.

MASHA. I will not let you smoke while I'm in this house.

CHEKHOV. Fine, bring me my cigars and leave. *(MASHA storms out.)* Olga. *(They kiss passionately.)* Mmm. Can't do that in a letter.

OLGA. You've tried, Anton.

CHEKHOV. The things we've done on paper.

OLGA. You've lost weight, Antosha.

CHEKHOV. Ach, it's nothing. But you, look at you. How is Moscow?

OLGA. The same. Oh, there's a new restaurant. Last Thursday after the performance we went there with that critic Piontov, you know, the one you call...

CHEKHOV. Pontifikov.

OLGA. He's really quite amusing. There he sat, holding court, praising the delicate subtleties of Chekhov's plays while caviar dripped from his beard and his fingers groped my knees under the table.

CHEKHOV. Filthy pig.

OLGA. Oh, we had such fun. Why didn't you come to Moscow as you promised?

CHEKHOV. Ah, Dr. Altschuler, that Prussian tyrant, forbade me to travel.

OLGA. Why? Are you so sick, Anton? You can trust me.

CHEKHOV. But I do, you know I do, my little Russian Bernhardt.

OLGA. Bernhardt? Why not Duse?

CHEKHOV. Duse? Oh no, Duse is a tragic figure.

(FYOKLA enters with humidor.)

FYOKLA. Your cigars, sir.

CHEKHOV. *(Tries to open the humidor. It's locked.)* Fyokla, it's locked. Where's the key?

FYOKLA. Masha has it.

CHEKHOV. Well, tell Masha to bring it to me.

FYOKLA. She's not here. She went to market. *(Starts out, comes back.)* Oh, here's your matches. *(She exits.)*

CHEKHOV. Could I borrow one of your hairpins? *(OLGA gives him one.)* I've built a little house on the beach.

OLGA. Oh?

CHEKHOV. Very private. Two rooms, the sound of the sea, and it's particularly romantic when moonlight

streams through the bedroom window.

OLGA. Is that where you made love to Komisarevskaya?

CHEKHOV. The devil made this lock.

OLGA. I said is that where you made love to Komisarevskaya?

CHEKHOV. What a part I've written for you in *The Three Sisters.*

OLGA. The mistress of a famous writer?

CHEKHOV. That wouldn't be quite accurate, would it? Not yet. *(pause)* Ah, Knipschütz, you're taking this whole matter much too seriously.

OLGA. And you're not taking me seriously at all. Love is no joke, Anton, people shoot themselves over it. *(pause)* Tell me about the part.

CHEKHOV. It's only the best woman's role I've ever written.

OLGA. We *will* do a reading while we're here, won't we?

CHEKHOV. Olga, if some other theatre were to do this play, would you consider doing the role?

OLGA. Anton! How could you even *think* of such a thing. What ingratitude! It's an outrage.

CHEKHOV. You don't have to decide right now.

OLGA. Do you have a contract?

CHEKHOV. I believe soon.

OLGA. Why?

CHEKHOV. You know why.

OLGA. Stanislavski. *(pause)* You've never understood him, have you, Anton? He's bold, he's an experimenter.

CHEKHOV. My plays are not laboratory animals.

OLGA. But you can't deny that as an actor there's no one to compare with the man. Such a force, such a presence...

CHEKHOV. Such an idiot. He can't even remember his lines.

OLGA. Antosha, please, tell me you'll reconsider. *(He coughs.)* Your cough is timed so conveniently.

CHEKHOV. *(coughing more)* Sounds quite natural, doesn't it?

OLGA. *(concerned now)* Perhaps you should be in a sanitorium.

CHEKHOV. Yalta is the biggest open-air sanitorium in Russia. I'm receiving treatment with every breath I take. *(more coughs)*

OLGA. *(becoming a bit alarmed)* Is there anything I can do?

CHEKHOV. There is one thing. Dr. Altschuler has recommended the beach-house cure.

OLGA. Hmm, I wonder how many actresses have fallen for that? *(CHEKHOV holds up four fingers, five. OLGA playfully slaps his hand down.)*

CHEKHOV. *(taking out notebook)* What was that you said before? "Love is no laughing matter, people shoot themselves over it." I can't use that. It sounds like fiction.

OLGA. But it's not fiction.

CHEKHOV. *(writing)* "Sounds like fiction, but it's not fiction." Good.

OLGA. Am I just another one of your short stories?

CHEKHOV. I don't know. We haven't gotten past the first few pages, have we?

OLGA. You've never written a novel, have you Anton?

(NEMIROVICH enters.)

NEMIROVICH. Olga, we must be off. Good-bye Anton Pavolovich.

CHEKHOV. Good-bye. Oh, Nemirovich, do you happen to have a cigar?

NEMIROVICH. Shouldn't smoke, Anton, bad for the lungs. *(He exits.)*

OLGA. Well, until tomorrow.

CHEKHOV. Until tomorrow night. There'll be a full moon.

OLGA. Dreamer. *(She exits.)*

CHEKHOV. *(returning to notebook)* Semyon the ice man. Where was I? Damn! Olga makes me nervous. *(He renews his assault on the humidor lock.)* Even when she's not here, she invades my privacy. I can't get any work done. *(pause)* The clinics never helped Nikolai. He slept all day. His face became flushed and bloated. His clothes hung about his emaciated body and flapped in the wind. His fingers didn't even have the strength to hold a pencil. He had to be bathed. Humph. And I can't even bear to be seen without a tie. *(The lock springs open. He takes out a cigar and lights it.)* No, I don't have time to write a novel.

(Lights fade.)

END OF SCENE 1

ACT I
Scene 2

The following night. Sound of a door bell. Shouts. Group heard singing Russian folk song accompanied by gramophone carried in by one of the actors. OLGA, BUNIN, GORKY, NEMIROVICH, and FYOKLA burst onto the terrace carrying bottles of wine and vodka. With them are LUZKHI, a fat sentimental actor, MOSKVIN, a young, acrobatic character man, and LILINA, the delicately beautiful wife of STANISLAVSKI. MASHA enters from the kitchen with tray of medicines. Dancing and singing continue, featuring a beautiful solo by OLGA, and ending in a spectacular Cossack dance by MOSKVIN. Applause. Silence. Crickets.

MASHA. *(having gotten caught up in the merriment, now picks up tray and heads for house)* Fyokla, bring some glasses. *(FYOKLA exits.)*

OLGA. How is Anton Pavlovich?

LUZHKI. Did he like us?

MASHA. He's resting well. He apologizes for having left early and says he'll be down later. Excuse me. *(She starts for the house.)*

OLGA. I'll go with you. *(MASHA and OLGA exit into the house.)*

NEMIROVICH. Where's Stanislavski?

LILINA. Still at the theatre signing programs for young girls.

LUZHKI. I was mobbed once in Petersburg — But they were creditors.

BUNIN. Would somebody please tell me why all the actors were crying during the second act?

MOSKVIN. We were drunk.

LILINA. Just before the curtain went up some prankster put vodka in the samovar.

LUZHKI. It was the best performance of *Vanya* we ever did. *(MOSKVIN mimes disagreement.)* Where are those glasses?

(FYOKLA enters with glasses.)

NEMIROVICH. It's one o'clock already.

EVERYONE. No. It couldn't be ...*(etc.)*

LILINA. Moscow seems a million miles away.

LUZHKI. *(crying)* Ah, Moscow, Moscow.

MOSKVIN. Warm night.

LILINA. It was terribly hot onstage.

BUNIN. At least there's a cool breeze tonight.

NEMIROVICH. Why discuss it? There's nothing to be done about the weather.

LUZHKI. It's in God's hands.

GORKY. Why should that be?

LILINA. Why?

GORKY. Why should God control the weather and man have nothing whatsoever to say about it? When there's a storm is it God who gets shipwrecked? Is it God who freezes to death catching fish to feed His starving family?

God doesn't depend on the wheat, God's skin doesn't blister in the desert. It's quite clear. God forfeited His rights by His supreme indifference. *(NEMIROVICH is asleep.)*

BUNIN. Gorky, you've whipped us all into a frenzy. *(MOSKVIN burlesques a fit of frenzy culminating in a backflip.)*

LUZHKI. Fyokla, you have some fish in the house? Maybe a little herring? I'm hungry.

GORKY. Fish would be nice.

LUZHKI. *(draining the last drop of vodka)* The vodka's finished. Anybody want more?

LILINA. You do.

BUNIN. *(starting toward the house)* I know where Anton Pavlovich keeps his private stock.

GORKY. Anyone else drinking bordeaux? *(GORKY and BUNIN exit into house.)*

LUZHKI. I can't drink another drop.

EVERYONE. What?

LUZHKI. Unless we have music. Moskvin, did you see? Anton Pavlovich has a piano inside. Come play.

LILINA. Luzhki, Moskvin's tired. What do you think he is, a trained monkey? *(MOSKVIN exits imitating monkey. LUZHKI shrugs and follows. LILINA gazes at NEMIROVICH. LILINA starts toward house.)*

(Singing and piano are heard.)

NEMIROVICH. *(catching LILINA's arm)* My blood boils for you.

LILINA. Why, Vladimir, why this sudden ardor after all these years?

NEMIROVICH. Feel my forehead, I'm on fire.

(OLGA enters.)

NEMIROVICH. You see, if the hat comes down to the eyebrows, the face is obscured. Other than that, your designs for the Hauptmann play are exquisite.

LILINA. Why, thank you, Vladimir Ivanovich.

OLGA. Can't you two talk about anything but the theatre?

NEMIROVICH. Is Anton Pavlovich all right?

OLGA. Yes, he's all right, no thanks to Masha.

NEMIROVICH. Ladies, if you'll excuse me. *(He exits. LILINA takes out her needlepoint, begins to work.)*

OLGA. Masha wouldn't even let me stay in the room. She's hovering over him like a mother hen. If you confine a man to a sickroom he'll become a sick man. He's no invalid when he's with me. *(LILINA breaks down.)* Lilina, what's the matter? It's Nemirovich, isn't it? That snake.

LILINA. No. It's everything. Everything. What will happen to us? The government is spying on the theatre, everyone is spouting high-minded words about revolution. I don't understand. And that riot last week. I keep seeing those bodies in the street.

OLGA. The other day there was no bread in the shops.

LILINA. Where is it all leading, Olga? The ground is moving under our feet. Last month a group of drunken workers from Kostya's factory stood under our bedroom window and shouted horrible obscenities. I was terrified.

Especially now that Kostya sleeps in the study.

OLGA. Oh?

LILINA. For six months now.

OLGA. It is another woman?

LILINA. Yes, the theatre. The theatre is his mistress. He's slipping away from me, Olga. His mind never leaves the stage. My presence does nothing but irritate him. I suppose I remind him that he's mortal. He wants me to stop acting.

OLGA. He said that?

LILINA. It's the subtext of everything he says. You've seen how he abuses me with his criticism.

OLGA. He abuses everyone.

LILINA. You don't have to go home with him.

OLGA. Lilina, look, you've sewn your ring into the pattern.

LILINA. *(ripping the cloth violently)* What's wrong with me? I can't even act anymore. There's a hollowness now, and the audience can feel it.

OLGA. You're imagining that.

LILINA. Well, there's one thing I'm not imagining. Kostya sees me as an annoying piece of baggage that won't stay home in the closet. Look at me. There are dark circles under my eyes. How much longer will I be able to play ingenue roles?

OLGA. Lilina, what are you talking about? When we're onstage together, I work twice as hard, and still everyone is watching you. Nemirovich has surely been taken by your charms.

LILINA. Yes. Oh, Olga, I'm tempted, but it's impossible.

OLGA. Careful, darling. He has an uncanny talent for sniffing out unsatisfied women.

(MASHA enters.)

MASHA. He looks like a little boy when he sleeps. So peaceful. He needs me, Olga.

OLGA. I think this may be a good time to have that little chat with Bunin.

MASHA. Oh, yes, yes!

NEMIROVICH. *(poking head in)* Come join us, ladies. How can we dance without you? Lilina?

LILINA. I'd love to. *(She exits with NEMIROVICH.)*

OLGA. Go on, Masha. Tell Bunin I want to have a word with him.

MASHA. Don't you think tomorrow would be better? What if he rejects me? I couldn't take it. I'll kill myself. I'll enter a convent.

OLGA. Very well, I won't talk to him.

MASHA. All right, all right. *(She exits.)*

OLGA. Poor Masha. What a cruel fate to be such a nonentity. *(Finds CHEKHOV's hat on bench.)* I wish I could put this on and know your thoughts. *(talking to the hat)* What do you want from me? Oh, God, I'm tired of casual affairs. Please don't let this be another one.

(Laughter is heard from the house. BUNIN enters.)

BUNIN. Olga Leonardovna, is something wrong?

OLGA. What do you mean?

BUNIN. Well, Gorky was in the middle of a humorous

anecdote when Masha woke me and said you wanted to see me. She was pale as chalk. What is it?

OLGA. Oh, it's nothing, really, Ivan Alexeivich. I simply wanted to have a little chat with you.

BUNIN. Ah, a chat.

OLGA. Actually, I need your advice.

BUNIN. Well, I must warn you, I'm much better at pointless conversation.

OLGA. Forgive me if I don't mention names, but I have a friend who is in love with a certain man.

BUNIN. Ah, a friend.

OLGA. But she's very shy, and she's not sure how this man feels about her.

BUNIN. Why are you telling *me* all this?

OLGA. I value your opinion. You're an astute judge of character. I see that especially in your poetry.

BUNIN. Continue.

OLGA. The man in question is everything a woman could want: good-looking, talented, very intelligent...

BUNIN. And your friend?

OLGA. She would make an excellent wife. In fact, they would make an ideal couple, if the man loved my friend as much as she loves him.

BUNIN. Is this mysterious man a writer?

OLGA. I think you understand who we're talking about.

BUNIN. Oh, yes, it's quite obvious, isn't it? But I don't believe the woman loves the man as deeply as you say.

OLGA. Take my word for it, she does, and she must know the man's true feelings for her. What do you think?

BUNIN. I think you're absolutely wrong for him.

OLGA. What?

BUNIN. If Anton marries you, he'll be committing suicide.

OLGA. Oh my God!

BUNIN. You know how sick he is. In his condition he's an easy mark for a beautiful woman like you. If he tries to keep up with your hyper-active Moscow social life, he'll be dead before the honeymoon's over.

OLGA. How vicious!

BUNIN. No, just frank. You keep him out revelling till four in the morning, you encourage him to drink, you buy him cigars...

OLGA. What crimes! When he's with me in Moscow, he's invigorated. He enjoys life.

BUNIN. And we bring him back to Yalta on a stretcher coughing up blood. Don't you see? This is hardly the time in Anton's life for you or anyone else. *(OLGA laughs.)* Did I say something funny?

OLGA. The man in my little story was not Anton.

BUNIN. You said he was a writer.

OLGA. That's right.

BUNIN. *(astonished)* Gorky?

OLGA. No.

BUNIN. *(surprise)* Ahhh! *(pause)* Don't tell me you're in love with me.

OLGA. The woman is Masha.

BUNIN. Masha! *(Laughs. Stops laughing.)* Masha.

(Sound from the house. CHEKHOV has come downstairs. Enter CHEKHOV followed by NEMIROVICH, LILINA, LUZHKI, MOSKVIN, GORKY and MASHA.)

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