

ICONOGRAPHY OF A.P. CHEKHOV'S PLAYS

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Last years appear more and more theater productions of Chekhov's plays but, the iconography of his plays develops in its own way, keeping its authentic and main motives and elements, which pass over from one production to another. No matter what the directors of these productions declare themselves as traditionalists or avant-gardists.

It is impossible to collect in one article the material on hundreds of productions all over the world and, therefore, we will limit ourselves only to defining the leading tendencies that form a kind of a theatrical "fashion" for staging Chekhov's plays.

The researchers of Chekhov's creative activities have long noted that "the world of things in Chekhov's works is not the background and not the periphery of the stage. It has equal rights with the characters".¹ We can add that the place of action often determines the conflict and the relationships between the characters. Practically not a single production can be made without solving the question of what means can be used to depict a house, an orchard, a lake or a seagull, or the material elements that lie at the basis of Chekhov's iconography.

THE HOUSE

The first and permanent element of the iconography of Chekhov's plays is the house. Perhaps only in the "Seagull", speaking about the house, Sorin says: "I have never been able to live as I like here... I have always been glad to get away from this

place, but I have been retired now, and this was the only place I had to come. Willy-nilly, one must live somewhere."

Constant mentions of the house can be found in all Chekhov's plays. The House is memory about the previous generations, the meeting place of all family members, who return there after long years of absence, and where they meet after parting. The House may be pawned and the corresponding debts may have to be paid up, but none of the characters had ever built or bought the House. It was inherited from the parents, and the character himself keeps the memory about them and becomes the carrier of this memory. The House in Chekhov's plays became an independent character, part of the image of the play on the stage.

This is why the search for the image of the House, for the ways of depicting it and its place in the general solution of the stage design reflects both the approach by the director and the stage designer to the play and which motives are to be placed at the foreground in a particular treatment of the play. And every stage designer who undertakes the scenography of a play by Chekhov must solve this problem for himself in advance. Naturally, each of them turns to Chekhov's remarks and to the dummies and sketches by Victor Simov, the first stage designer who worked in the first productions of Chekhov's plays by the Moscow Art Theater in the end of 19 – beginning 20 century, the productions that determined the entire further life of this theater and the tradition of staging Chekhov's plays by numerous other theaters.

It is possible to stage "Hamlet" without the Ellsinore Castle and "Romeo and Juliet" without Verona, but it is impossible to stage "Three Sisters" and "Uncle Vania" without the house and the "Cherry Orchard" without the orchard. The material environment may be depicted in detail or by way of a hint using the traditional means

of painting, projections, color, or light, but it always remains an inseparable part of any production on the stage.

Chekhov gives no detailed environmental remarks, the material details appear in dialogues and cues by the characters.

"So important is the totality of the stage space in Chekhov's plays that even the photographic documentation of productions has tended to encompass the entirety of the setting rather than the more usual narrow focus on the performers."² Anton. Chekhov's playwriting experienced periods of glamorous success and certain cooling on the part of the theaters.

Changes in the approach to staging Chekhov's plays at first provoked the feeling of a veritable theatrical revolution, and the first place among the innovators certainly belongs to Czech stage designer Josef Svoboda, who staged "Seagull" with director Otomar Krejca (Tyl Theater, Prague, 1960

The stage designer made use of mirrored spotlights that created in the dark space of the stage the feeling of sunlight passing through the foliage of trees.

The tree branches were situated in the upper part of the stage and were present in all scenes of the production, at times brightly lit and sometimes seen as dark silhouettes against the background of the rays projected by the invisible spotlights. These silhouettes created the poetical atmosphere of a summer day, but objects of real life were situated underneath: the wooden stage floor, such as chairs, the stove, the balcony door with thin semitransparent tulle curtains that is all the objects mentioned in the text of the play without which the performers cannot play their roles.

As a matter of fact, Svoboda carried into life the ideas about the role of light as the forming element of the theatrical space by Swiss theoretician and innovator of the theater Adolph Appia, and British director Gordon Craig.

The technical idea was carried out in a virtuoso manner, but, as a matter of fact, the theater could not part from the material world of Chekhov's characters because the text of the play would not allow this. There were no walls of the house on the stage, but there was everything that fills the house: tables, chairs, a buffet, etc. The artistic means had changed, but the form and the function of the space in which the characters act had not. A solution that was close to it in spirit was carried out in "Three Sisters" in the National Theater in London in 1967, directed by Laurence Olivier and designed by Josef Svoboda. "Light curtains were replaced by a round of stretched cords tied from floor to grid, while window-frames were placed between two layers of cords"⁴

The space of the house was marked by strings of light and depicted by light. "Walls, doors and windows become ephemeral, transformable elements..."⁵ Whether ephemeral or not, but the window openings were marked, and inside this space on the stage, there were the same tables and chairs, although their number was brought to a minimum and there was the traditional samovar mentioned in the text.

All these elements were depicted in an unusual way – by light, but each remained itself. The door was a door, the window was a window, and they did not change their everyday function in the context of the production.

Another attempt to reappraise the material environment of a play by Chekhov was made in "Seagull" by director Andrei Serban with stage designer Kaoru Kanamori in Japan (1980). There were five windows or rather window-frames on the middle line of the stage. There was no wall between them, they were not united in any way, and tree trunks were visible behind them as well as an improvised stage floor where Nina played at the beginning of the play. Each of these empty windows looked like remnants of the house that used to exist at the place in the past. This was a

recollection about the house, but a recollection that was material and concrete, while the frontal image of the space only stressed the now non-existent wall that in the past united them. Even though stage designers in other countries did not manage to get away from the traditional image of a house on the stage in Chekhov's plays, it was even more difficult for the designers of the Russian theater, especially for those of the "Sovremennik Theater, whose actors had not only studied at the Art School of the Moscow Art Theater, but had proclaimed the development of its traditions in the new era to be their most important artistic principle.

Stage designer Sergey Barkhin and director Oleg Yefremov. "Seagull" (1970) constructed a divided house on the stage, a house not destroyed, not deserted, but precisely divided. Trunks of trees grew through the walls, and they could not be separated from one another without destroying the organic wholeness of the house and its environment. There was a big flower bed with flowers of irritating wild colors in the middle of this strange space that united the interior of the house with the surrounding garden. The flower bed actually stood in the way of the performers, but no one could make the decision to remove it. The production produced a physical feeling of discomfort, dislike of one's own life where no one can or wants to change anything.

Thirteen years later, director Andrei Serban and stage designer Santo Loquasto in "Uncle Vania"(The La Mama Annex, New York, 1983) used similar approach. The director explains: "There is a line in the play about big empty house being like a maze"⁶

Gigantic wooden platforms connected by steps and situated at different levels created special conditions for the performers. No semitones. The performers had almost to shout at one another to be heard by their partners. The spiritual separation was

physically expressed by the characters separation from one another. Physical inconvenience was expressed in the material way, and spiritual solitude turned into physical solitude.

At the same time, the motive of the house was ever present: the steps of a character were made louder by the squeak and the echo of the wooden boards of the platform and it was precisely these boards that caused an association with a big house not yet lived in. The usual requisite from the furniture and up to the tea cups only stressed the feeling that the spectators faced not simply a theatrical construction, but a real, albeit a clumsy house not yet lived in.

THE GARDEN

The cherry orchard is one of the symbolic characters in the play of this name and it presents a special challenge and special interest for the stage designer who takes up the staging of this play. What is it – the orchard- an image of life that was going away, an epoch that was leaving the present and going into the past?

It should be mentioned that almost all directors and designers that used to stage "Cherry Orchard" avoided showing a real orchard on the stage. The play itself gives a certain basis for it. The only scene, where the action takes place in the exterior is found in the second act of the play. This is how Chekhov describes it: "In the field. An old crooked shrine that has long been abandoned, near it a well and large stones, and an old garden bench. The road is seen leading to Gaev's estate. On one side dark poplars rise, behind them the cherry orchard begins..."

A question arises: Why do the play's characters, which had left the house for breathing some fresh air did not go to their wonderful orchard, but stayed near the road close to the small chapel and former cemetery? Evidently, because the orchard was for Chekhov rather a spiritual symbol of the departing epoch than a real orchard,

where one could sit under the trees on a summer day. Thus, the author himself relieved the stage designers from the necessity to search for means to depict the orchard. According to Stanislavsky, the special mood of the "Cherry Orchard" or its "Atmosphere" was felt already during the rehearsals of the production, and Stanislavsky wrote about it in a letter to Chekhov: "Everything will be light, cheerful... In short, we want to paint everything in watercolors..."¹⁰

In the course of the first half of the 20th century, the orchard was not used by stage designers as an image. The main place for the action was the house, and the orchard was only implied outside the visible space.

The variety of approaches to the depiction of the orchard itself is difficult even to enumerate since everyone used his own fantasy in the imagination of the orchard. From production by director Andrei Serban and designer Santo Loquasto (Vivian Beaumont Theater, 1977, USA), where the elements of the scenery were situated in the center of a gigantic space of the stage and an unmoving and mystical dead wood to production by director Mark Rozovsky and designer Xenia Shimanovsky (in the Theater "U Nikitskikh Vorot", Moscow, 2001), where on a small stage, inside walls that rather resembled a peasant's hut than a landlord's estate there was a cherry orchard depicted as a box, a theatrical model that Lopakhin brought with him after buying it. He literally brought his purchase, it was the dummy of a cherry orchard, that began to disintegrate and the white blossoms to fall down after the protagonists left. However, these are diametrically opposed examples, while the majority of the productions can be found somewhere between these extreme points.

Thus, in his production of "Cherry Orchard" Yury Pimenov (Central Soviet Army Theater, Moscow, 1965) made light-colored transparent tulle curtains falling down from upside and filling the entire gigantic space of the stage to serve as the

main motive of design. Lit by the rays of light-yellow, pink and white light, they created a mood of association with an orchard without actually depicting it in any way. Stage designer Mart Kitayev (Youth Theater, Tallinn, 1971) used silver-white web threads throughout the space of the stage. The web itself became a character in the production. It could be "taken away" by changing the lighting and the web became invisible while all real objects behind it acquired unstable, changeable forms. Various objects (a wardrobe and armchairs in light covers, a billiard and children's toys, advertising pictures and newspaper cuttings), were placed here and there inside this gigantic space of the web. As the play approached the end, the furniture was moved to the background, and old decrepit junk could be seen under the removed covers.

The stage designer created the image of ruin that developed as time went on. And if, at the beginning, the white web created by its air-like appearance associations with a blossoming orchard, by the end, it became what it really was, simply a web, a picture of a house in neglect.

It is of interest to note that different designers staging "Cherry Orchard" in different countries and different theaters did not try to show the orchard as such and almost simultaneously stressed the short time of blossoming, and made the white color the main motive of the plastic solution of the production. The white color was the main motive in the production of the play by Giorgio Strehler in Piccolo Teatro in Milan (1974).

White color was a total master of the stage. During the first act, everything that took place on the stage looked as if seen through frost-colored windows. During the second act, a ghost-like room was seen through tree trunks, and later even these unstable pictures of the room disappeared, and voices were heard as if coming from far away, but the white color still dominated the stage. It was a symphony of white

that included all colours of the spectrum, and the colour of aristocracy, especially in the context of the following events in Russia and the division into the "reds" and the "whites." The white color became the symbol of the disappearing spirituality under the onslaught of the material world.

The ephemeral quality of the white disappeared in the cinema version of the same production.

The white colour was the main element in the production by Anatoly Efros (The Moscow Theater on Taganka, 1975) . Designer Valery Levental united windows with flowing white curtains in a single composition, a white flower bed in the center of the stage with tombstones and cemetery crosses, a bench and a small table covered with a white table-cloth, several small cherry trees that looked like remnants of the cherry orchard not yet totally destroyed. The white colour dominated in all costumes, including that of Lopakhin, stressing in this way that the new owner of the orchard was a person already doomed, just as the other inhabitants of this aging estate. A sign of the new approach to depicting the orchard could be seen in the production of the play by the Moscow Art Theater named after A.P.Chekhov (2004) In this production, designer David Borovski used a method characteristic of post-modernism, a method based on historical and cultural associations. The stage designer staged the play during the year that marked the 100th anniversary of the first production of "Cherry Orchard" and also the 100th anniversary of Chekhov's death, in the theater named after Chekhov and even on the same stage where it was staged for the first time. The entire complex of these historical circumstances determined the unusual characteristics of the artistic solution and put an end to the tradition that had formed during the recent decades.

The theater's curtain, the famous Chekhov Art Theater's curtain with an "art novo" ornamental design and a seagull became the main production design element. The curtain opened into the interior of the stage, and mysterious black space opened behind it in which vertical white cloth strips could be seen and could be perceived as light window curtains of a non-existent house or as something that looked like the reminder of the disappeared orchard. This production put a final full stop in the 100-year-old history of the existence of this play on the stage. The orchard disappeared both as a symbol and as a depiction motive. The time of illusions and idealization of the past had passed away. How will the new time appear and how it would be perceived by the new generations: all this remained in the unlimited blackness of the rectangular stage.

The concrete scenographic solution of the production changes in dependence of the time and place of the production and of the personalities of the director and stage designer, as well as of numerous other factors that influence the production directly or indirectly. Nonetheless, the iconography of Chekhov's plays is a constant value because it has become a part of the text without which the play cannot exist on the stage.

¹ A.P.Chudakov. *Chekhov's poetics*. Moscow,1971, p.152

² Arnold Aronson. "Design for Chekhov" in book *Chekhov on the British stage*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.194

⁴ A. Aronson. *ibid.* p.199.

⁵ A. Aronson. *ibid*

⁶ A. Aronson. *American stage design*. New-York, 1985, p.113

¹⁰ K.Stanislavsky, letter to A. Chekhov, 23 November, 1903 SS, Vol. 7, p. 519, from book by David Allen "Performing Chekhov," London – New York, 2000, p. 29.