

DRAMA *Works*

Plays Through Practice

THE SEAGULL
by
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EXTRACT

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Extract

WORKING THROUGH THE PLAY IN A PRACTICAL WAY

From the beginning the exercises assume a knowledge of the story-line and what happens to the characters. It is important, therefore, that before you start the following work you will have read the play. At the very least, you should have read the synopsis and character sketches that precede this section.

I try never to be dictatorial in the practical work. There is no version that is more right or more wrong than another. What the following work hopes to encourage is the habit of experiment. Too often, when you read a line it is the first meaning that becomes fixed in the mind. Often this could be just the most obvious and other subtler interpretations might add richness to the character.

It is important that you also get in the habit of recording the results of all the work you do. When experimenting with a character this is especially important. At the end you will need to go through all your work on each character once more, checking that your decisions make sense. People can be contradictory in real life, of course, but not to the point of absurdity!

THE OPENING STAGE DIRECTIONS

Read Chekhov's stage directions for the setting carefully first. It is important to have some idea of the stage set-up before you begin practical work on the play. You will need to make decisions at least as to where the 'improvised stage' is and where the seating. Then make sure that you set up an approximation of your group decision every time you work on this first act. This group decision doesn't mean that you can't make your own different decision as to design - but you still have to move the characters around in your design and need to check that all decisions are practicable and make full use of the playing area.

Many of the exercises that follow through-out the play are related to Stanislavski and Naturalism, as would make sense with a Chekhov play. But the setting does not have to be naturalistic. There is a good argument to be made for a symbolic setting, or an atmospherically impressionistic one. Those of you who are working from the Methuen student edition might start by reading the very full section in the introduction [Pages liv to lxxvii] which details many different productions of the play. A large number of these are experimental. Many are symbolic. These details will add to your ideas, even if only by showing that such outlandish [in some cases] choices are possible.

In your discussion, you need to bear in mind that Acts Three and Four are indoor settings, two different rooms, whilst Act Two is described as taking place on the croquet lawn - a different outdoor setting to the first Act. If you decide in favour of retaining these multiple settings you will need to come up with a way of changing the set easily and as quickly as possible.

It is of course possible to come up with an atmospheric space in which both indoor and outdoor settings can occur. I have seen a number of versions in which the main setting has been hung gauzes. These can be back-lit to make them transparent, or front-lit to make them opaque. Thus they can become interior walls or give onto a view of a shimmering lake, night sky, setting sun, or whatever. They can have partings in them too to suggest entrances and exits. If the gauzes are many hangings rather than one solid piece of material, these gaps can be varied in different scenes to further vary entrances.

You might want just an open space in which only such furnishings as required are used in which the audience are required to imagine the indoor or outdoor setting. Shadowy edges to an arena stage will allow imagined doorways, walls or the lake. Perhaps, like some productions, you will want the symbolic shape of the seagull hung over this setting. Is the seagull image complete without the lake? Perhaps the symbolic lake needs to be there too - a shimmer on the back cyclorama, a suggestion of space

beyond the characters - a space which their aspirations or imaginations seek - and fail - to fill.

Have some preliminary discussions around these ideas first of all, bearing in mind that minds can be changed - especially once you are thoroughly into the text of the play.

Next think of the placing of the improvised stage and the seating of the characters. Chekhov suggests garden furniture. If you are pinpointing period, or at least status, then this furniture should look ornate - ironwork, curlicued and much decorated for instance, perhaps painted white - or a pastel shade. Not everyone needs to sit for the play. Perhaps half a dozen seats will do. I doubt whether Konstantin will be relaxed enough to sit himself. Plan the angle of the 'stage' and the audience of cast, making sure that all will be visible. Chekhov's plan appears to suggest that the improvised stage is central at the back. How practicable is this? How important is the stage? Is it in itself a symbol? [One experimental production described in the Methuen introduction has the stage, neglected and falling apart as a physical feature of the last act, for instance, to symbolise the state of Konstantin's mind.] This might suggest other design features - for instance having this stage as a permanent feature, still recognisable even in the interior scenes where it could be used as a useful raised level, with the hung frame of a window, for instance, over it, giving onto a view of the lake, perhaps.

Having planned the placing of your seating, make a note of it so that on every occasion you work on this act you can reproduce where to put chairs and indicate the placing of the makeshift stage.

The sun has just set, says Chekhov. But we don't want a dark stage. Perhaps a part of the setting are garden lights [modernising it a bit] - strung 'fairy' lights, flares or similar. Even one or two of these can justify pools and pockets of light to bump up the overall dim evening light. Light can also be thrown up by the lake, even if the latter is unseen. Later in the Act, the moon rises and further increases the light. These ideas accord with a naturalistic setting, but a symbolic setting would need no such justification. Discuss this too.

Decide whether you would want to emphasise the transitoriness of the improvised stage by showing it being completed, before Masha and Medvedenko enter. This would make sense of the sounds off, giving a physical presence to the workmen from the start. Perhaps they could be fixing up the front curtain, drawing it across when the two walkers come in, for instance. [Later on, when the play begins, Chekhov says that the curtain rises. How practicable is this? Discuss what this would need, design-wise, and alternative ways of using improvised front curtains. Curtains can become a frame for Nina when she performs or a distraction, if you want to emphasise the amateurishness of the production.]

Plan the scene suggested above through improvisation to try out the idea of showing the completion of the stage by the workmen. Use sticks, cloths and anything lying about in your studio to employ for the imaginary structure - it doesn't need to be realistic; just give the improvisors something physical to do. Establish a reality of language - laughs, whistling, shouts to each other, discussions of the instructions as to the structure they received from the 'young master', and so on. They might have opinions about these instructions too.

Having improvised a lively scene, discuss what kind of an opening this might make for an audience. Does it sound a lighter, more comical note? Is this the sort of note you would want to achieve, bearing in mind that Chekhov calls the play a comedy? [Although Stanislavski played it as a tragedy.]

This exercise will be worth remembering later when you have got further with your experiments on the text. Built in to the following practical work are comic options, allowing for a view of the play as Chekhov saw it.

The workmen are making possible the putting over of Konstantin's play. They may not be able to understand it, but without them it could not happen. Do you think there is significance in the fact that Chekhov opens his play about art and artists [writing and writers] in this way? How 'practical' do the arts have to be? Think of your own examples.

This might also be a 'class thing.' Working class labourers slave away whilst the estate owners walk, discuss art, find time to bemoan their unhappiness, while away the time with games. Is there a point to be made here? How important is it? Remember the unrest in Russia at the time Chekhov was writing; the country is working up to the Revolution in a few years' time. Would you, as a director, want to make something of all this? Discuss all of this in your group. Perhaps there are historians amongst you who can inform the rest about the conditions in Russia before the Revolution.

Personally, I think this point is part of the slant in which Chekhov wants us to view these characters. We should laugh at their silliness, much of which would not even feature if they didn't have too much time on their hands.

MASHA & MEDVEDENKO up to Sorin & Konstantin's entrance on Page 2 [Page 4 NHB]

In the light of this discussion, look at the first two lines of the play. Neither of these two characters are particularly high-flying socially. They are of the solid middle classes, I suppose - though, arguably, this is not a very clear stratum of society in Russia. Medvedenko is a school-master; Masha the daughter of the estate manager, who was once a middle-ranking officer in the army. [Actually, there are hints that Dorn is really Masha's father - but she would not be aware of that.]

It is a strange opening to the play. **Try Masha's line:**

deliberately dramatic - tragically

gloomily, meaning what she says

challengingly, flippant, trying to needle the teacher

Which works best? You need to decide why Masha is needling Medvedenko. Does she want to see if he can rise to her flamboyance? Match her tone? Sympathise? Is she trying to find out if there is any lightness to him - whether there is anything other in him than what appears - a dull, rather prosaic man, who is pedantically literal about everything?

However you decide to present Masha here, it is clear that Medvedenko is as dull as she feared. He is bothered by Masha's approach to life. If she is being ironic, or attention-seeking, he cannot see it and takes her literally.

Only someone who has enough money can afford to say idealistic things like 'Even a beggar [*pauper NHB*] can be happy.' Discuss Medvedenko's response. How far do you think he is being realistic? Or is he just a moaner, in your opinion?

The teacher's account of what they need are mainly basics, showing us that he is not well-off by any standards. But he is not rock-bottom poor either. He includes little luxuries like tobacco, tea and sugar on his list of necessities. All of these are above the level of necessities 'to eat and drink.'

So by the bottom of Page 1 [*Page 3 NHB*] we have a pretty clear idea of the school-teacher's circumstances. We can also see how prosaic and dissatisfied he is and can perhaps guess at how frustrating Masha finds his company.

Now look at the whole little section, up to the entrance of Sorin and Konstantin. Notice how the conversation doesn't flow between the two. There are pauses. There are changes of subject and non-sequitur's; changes of position too.

Read through the whole little section in pairs, trying out the following:

Medvedenko:

passionate, unable to take his eyes off her, his dissatisfaction with his financial circumstances entirely rooted in his certainty that his lack of money is the reason why she is not interested in him

miserable, obsessive about his dull life and poverty, even his declarations of love sounding hollow, worn away by the bleakness of his outlook

prosaic, dull - given to totting his problems up on his fingers, the sort of man who would make even words of love sound as if he were reciting a grocery list.

Masha:

rebellious, wanting to be shocking but not quite succeeding, given to dramatic statements - wearing black, taking snuff - a mannish habit. [Snuff is powdered tobacco.] Take this further - mannish striding, sitting in an unfeminine way - and so on. I am not suggesting Masha is masculine - just that this is a way she has found to be shocking and different - to attract attention to herself, perhaps a deliberate contrast to the fluttery feminine Nina.

gloomy, restless, fed-up, feeling trapped by life, the estate, her circumstances - everything. This Masha would feel snappy over Medvedenko's love

excited, light-hearted, caught up in enthusiasm for Konstantin's play and wanting to be supportive because she loves him. Perhaps she hopes he will notice her, or at least realise

artist at
protestations
taken seriously.

to show herself as a
prosiness of the

Experiment with the different ways of presenting these two characters.

Masha's 'Well, you wouldn't understand...' would sound bored and dismissive, impatient, laughingly careless, according to your choice.

heart, in tune with his ideals. Medvedenko's of love are just a slight irritant, not to be This is a restless, brittle Masha, trying lover of the Arts, impatient with the teacher.

SORIN & KONSTANTIN [KOSTYA] Pages 2-top of 7 [NHB Pages 4-8]

This conversation, as is also so of the one between Masha and Medvedenko, starts in the middle - giving the impression that they have been talking for some time and have just entered in mid conversation. This is a trick typical of Naturalism, showing the audience that the characters have lives elsewhere - that the corner we are spying on is just one small aspect.

Sorin, Konstantin/Kostya's uncle is seen here leaning on a stick. At the end of the play, two years further on, he is in a wheelchair. An impression of ill-health must be established from the beginning. The two bracketted stage directions establish the two most important things about this character from the start: that he is ill and that he laughs off his own sense of failure over all aspects of life. Often in the play he describes something he would like to have done or been and then laughs self-deprecatingly. He feels a failure but is not gloomy with it - his own ambitions and inability to fulfil them cause him much amusement. Or is this laughter covering a real sense of frustration at lost opportunities?

What is Konstantin/Kostya's state of mind at this point? Is he really listening to his uncle's laughing complaints, or is he caught up in anxiety about the forthcoming production of his play? Try 'You're right - you ought to be living in town' [*similar in NHB*]:

absent-mindedly

very concerned - caring

only just concealing irritation

Which works best?

Konstantin/Kostya doesn't want anyone to have their illusion of the play spoiled by being in the audience witnessing the last putting together of the stage. Once again this chimes in with the idea of a discussion of theatre, which is one of the themes of *The Seagull*.

Look at the line: 'Listen, you'll be called when it starts...' to the end of the speech. [*Excuse me - you'll be called...*'NHB] Try it:

snappily - extreme irritation, matched by shooing gestures

gently explaining and trying to shepherd them off, perhaps with a hand on a shoulder

surprised

Which fits best?

Next look at Masha's 'You can talk to my father yourself...[*similar in NHB*]. Is her tone a response to Konstantin really - especially if she has been hurt by his shooing them away?

Masha could be angry, hurt on several levels: that her support of his play is not recognised; that her love for him is not noticed; that she feels doomed to be with Medvedenko... Discuss the possible sub-texts to her line and experiment with them.

Thought-tracking explores sub-text and is a useful approach to parts of this play. Having discussed and experimented with these few lines, divide yourself up into Konstantin/Kostya's or Masha's and tell us in a brief thought-track monologue what each one is going through in this short section.

Notice that both are accompanied by a 'partner' to whom they are not really listening. Another comment on 'life' by Chekhov.

Sorin employs a trick of speech that is common to many Chekhovian characters - at least one in every play. He is a garrulous person who plumps out his speeches with clichéd phrases that mean little in themselves...etcetera, etcetera...no question about it ...when all's said and done... simple as that ... [*In the NHB version examples are: all things considered ... that sort of thing ... by and large...*] See if you can collect up some more from the rest of his speeches in this section.

Does this give us a further clue to his character? How does one say such phrases? They are throw-away lines. Perhaps the speaker is using them to formulate his next idea; or perhaps they are just where he tails off, can't complete a thought. Does it suggest a kind of hesitancy - about himself and about what he feels is his place in the world? Is someone who uses clichés a lot someone who is not very bright? Or has no opinions of his own? Or is insecure? Or he could be trotting them out to hide a profound discontent, a real sense of his own failure, hidden by aphorisms which can be said in a light tone - like his self-deprecating laugh? Discuss all this; it might help you decide on the character of Sorin.

Yakov and other workmen exit at this point. Decide how you bring Yakov on. Does he put his head out from the front curtain or does he come out from behind? Would you want to continue the feeling of 'us and them' begun at the start of the play - if that is the choice you made? If so, you might want to see the other workers too - or hear muffled laughter and comments before Yakov