

# **DRAMA** *Works*

**Plays Through Practice**

**THREE SISTERS**  
by  
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**EXTRACT**

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# Extract

## WORKING THROUGH THE TEXT IN A PRACTICAL WAY

**N.B. This is a play that I feel must be read through first, before studying it in the following way - just fast-read it to get a sense of the characters and their relationships and the events that occur during the play. Even better for these purposes of course would be to see it. But that is not always possible, sadly.**

**At the very least, read the synopsis at the beginning of this book and the brief character sketches, before going any further.**

**It should go without saying that the students from the start establish the habit of recording all the results of the following experiments, building up a complete notebook of characters, set, lighting and other ideas as they go along.**

**The best way of doing the following work is to work through the exercises suggested and the comments on character and action and then, before going on with the next section, repeat the whole extract by acting/ reading it. The knowledge you have gained on the way will inform the way you do this and it will also throw up any inconsistencies in your decision-making.**

### ACT ONE

#### **THE BEGINNING OF THE ACT [PAGES 1 - 3. methuen; 249 - 251 Penguin]**

Examine the first stage direction carefully with an eye to its implications for the set. Clearly a large space would be useful to accommodate such a lot going on as the lights come up. The impression instantly given, then, is of a sizeable house, somewhat grand - the colonnade separating the two rooms suggests this - with servants to cater to the needs of the inhabitants.

By the end of the Act, we should gain a good idea of what is needed furniture-wise and where the other rooms in the house, the exits and entrances, would be best placed. For this reason, read each stage direction carefully as you get to it and jot down any furniture or props mentioned. If a character is seated, then obviously a chair is needed, though it may not be mentioned. At the end of the Act, we will put all the information together and work on possible settings that will be practical.

Since it is important that your practical work should show an awareness of the setting from the outset, let's come up with a basic set of essentials to begin with.

The front part of the playing-area is the drawing-room where most of the action occurs. At the back of the playing-area is another room, called the main reception room - in some translations, called the ball-room. In it is a large table [large enough to seat 12] and a number of chairs around it [10 or 12 - see note at end of Act.].

We'll think about style and colour as we become more familiar with the play, but for the present, **use whatever you have in your studio or hall to scatter around some chairs - put three together for a sofa - and place as large a table or tall block as you can towards the back. Now we have a space in which to start work.**

Lighting implications are shown in the description of the day as bright and cheerful and the time as noon. Lighting will do a lot to set the initial atmosphere of the piece, which is clearly sunny and pleasant. **Using a standing spotlight, if you have access to**

**one, experiment with coloured gel paper against a white wall to see if you can come up with a colour that suggests sunshine spilling into an interior. Start with the obvious straws, oranges and yellows - but see what it does to mix colours into these, such as pinks. Test out what the colours do to faces - skin colour. This could be important. Then discuss how to show the brightness of the day. Do you need a window - or a large doorway standing open - to show a brighter, whiter light offstage? This would give a sense of space as well as answering the play's lighting requirements.**

The first sight of the sisters is revealing. Olga is instantly identified as the teacher. We wonder why she doesn't sit and mark her books - why is she walking up and down to do so? - it must be awkward. Masha wears black, the colour of mourning; she seems quiet and composed, reading a book. Why is she wearing black? Irina, wearing white - the colour of youth and innocence - is standing dreamily. What is she dreaming about?

See if these questions are answered, or at least hinted at in the next few speeches.

Olga's first speech fills in a lot of information. Their father died a year ago to the day; that day was also Irina's name-day [*saint's day*] [the saint's day after which someone is named is celebrated in Russia as we would a birthday] so it must be her name-day today as well; their father was an army general. Facts are one thing but how Olga puts these over tells us a lot about her and her state of mind. It may even answer the question of why she is pacing and marking at the same time.

Notice how broken-up the speech is. That is usually a clue to a strong emotional sub-text. [The penguin translation, unhelpfully, has fewer punctuation breaks.] Olga is reliving the details of the day of their father's funeral. Even though she says 'we can think about it again quite calmly' [*we talk about it so easily.*] there are undercurrents in the speech which show she is not really calm. She is caught up in this past moment and cannot move on. This is confirmed by Irina's 'Why keep harking back?' [*Need we bring up all these memories?*]

**Look at these phrases in particular. In each case, with this first one start with her pacing around to establish some sort of rhythm both inner and outer: 'It's exactly a year since Father died.' Try this:**

**as if introducing the subject, chattily - wanting some shared response from her sisters**

**building up her pacing feet and then speaking explosively, almost accusingly**

**obviously feeling very emotional, almost choked by memory, but striving to keep down her feelings so that her words come out calmly yet tensely**

**as if her pacing has been her way of quelling her distress - she has paced her way into genuine calm and speaks with a quiet acceptance**

**'it was on your name-day, Irina' / 'This very day, the fifth of May - your Saint's day, Irena.':**

**spoken with surprise, as if suddenly remembering this fact again with surprise - but looking at Irina with realisation that today is her name-day - she'd almost forgotten with sadness - what a shame that the day was spoiled**

**'I thought I should never survive it':**

**calmly - a statement of fact**

**choked with remembered emotion**

**amazed that she did survive and can look back at it**

**'The clock kept striking then, too.' :**  
**drawn back into the past, dreamily**  
**factually, chattily**  
**with bitterness - how things intruded on her grief then, and now**

**Now read aloud the whole section from 'I remember the band playing'... to 'sleeting hard.' [ Penguin 'I remember when father was being taken to the cemetery.... raining and snowing.'] Read it slowly as if reliving each detail. Try 'He was a general, he had a brigade, but not many people came.' as if angry and surprised, emphasising 'general' and 'brigade'. Then calm yourself through acknowledging that it was a foul day and probably the reason why so few turned up.**

**Try Irina's 'Why keep harking back?' ['Need we bring up all these memories?']:**  
**with real affection, gently**  
**with irritation, sharply**  
**firmly, a little suppressed irritation. Tone of 'I want to move on.'**

Don't worry - at this rate, it would take you a year to get through the play! I don't intend to treat every moment in such detail, but openings are important and the students need to be got into the habit of experimenting with every nuance of Chekhov's carefully written speeches, to discover the best way of revealing the sub-text and the character itself.

**Now try the whole little section up to and including Irina's response again. Did your experiments clarify anything about the situation? Olga's character? Her feelings for Irina? and vice-versa?**

Studying a play is about looking at all the clues and asking yourself questions. Here are some that I think should be asked already:

Why does Olga address her speech to Irina, ignoring Masha?

What is Masha doing all this while?

What got through to Irina? When did she stop dreaming and start responding to Olga?

Since I suggested you undertake a fast read of the text before approaching this close study, you will know that Masha is the rebellious one of the sisters and is unhappily married. Perhaps Olga knows she will not get the response she wants from Masha. Perhaps Masha makes this even more obvious by 'reading' with even closer attention as her speech goes on - telling us with her whole body language 'I'm not interested; I'm not even listening.' Perhaps Olga started the speech 'It's exactly a year...' addressing both sisters, but gravitates towards Irina, having got no response from Masha. It is clear that there is a special bond between Olga and Irina. Olga is eight years older than Irina; their mother died a long time ago; perhaps that has made Olga [who is a frustrated mother] a kind of mother figure. Eight years is a big difference when you're a child. There is such affection in Olga's 'You're back in white, your face is shining...'

**Having discussed and experimented, read and act as far as possible, clarifying the sub-text for this opening. Do this as a three-some, including Masha.**

Please note that there is no absolute right way of performing this play; there are always a number of options. It is these possibilities that make Chekhov both so rich in texture and so difficult to perform. What is important is to find some kind of consistency, or at least justification from elsewhere, for every decision you make.

To give an example, it would be equally justifiable to have Irina saying 'Why keep harking back' with some irritation, as a teenager might when hearing an adult going on and on [yes, I know Irina is 20.] - we know she often feels impatience with her life and

this comes out more and more during the play. But, given the affection between her and her elder sister, you could also justify saying this line gently, accompanying it perhaps with a loving touch.

The entry of the three men in the back room is typical of Chekhov, who always likes to give a sense of life in other places than the stage, [earlier we saw the table being laid] going on and occasionally infringing on the main action. They should enter in deep conversation - we cannot hear the words but are aware of their voices in the background. They move to the table and sit at it, or lean against it, gesturing etc. Looking ahead it looks as though Solyony is holding forth, because the first words we hear - on the next page - are Chebutykin's 'Stuff and nonsense, sir!' [*The devil you have!*] and Tusenbach's 'Utter rubbish!' [*It's nonsense, I agree.*]. These are the only words we hear, but they must not just come out of nowhere so:

**Try out the tone that Solyony might be using to explain something, accompanied by the gestures. Think what it might be - an argument to prove that the world is flat might be a good starting point, but choose your own and, in threes work through it. Having done so, drop the voices so the tone only can be heard. When the 'final outrageous proof' is given, Solyony might fling himself back into his seat with laughter and elicit the response we hear from the other two, or, he might look challengingly from one to the other - a pause - and then the heard response.**

Olga has accepted Irina's reproof, whether couched in gentle tones or said with irritation. She has dragged herself away from sad memories and talks hopefully of blossom and spring. Her hopeful tone is perhaps rather laboured - said largely to please Irina and to show willing. The theme of going to Moscow is of course recurrent throughout the play but is here introduced. We should see how the longing for 'home' fills Olga and is maybe mirrored by Irina. Ironically, Olga is still 'harking back' - but over this shared hope she gets no reproof.

**Go back to Irina's 'Why keep harking back?' [*Need we bring up all these memories?*] and try to fit in the argument from the three men as discussed, very much in the background, against Olga's speech. Can you time it so that the heard response happens at the right time? Don't worry if you can't - it's a good practice for listening for your cue anyway - and since the conversation is supposed to go on, in sight of the audience, for another page and a half you can always carry on with the material you have already sorted out, working up to another mini - climax which elicits the laughter further down the page and then the major outrageous climax when Tusenback leaves and comes into the drawing-room.**

Coming when it does, the 'Stuff and nonsense' is a comment as much on Olga's yearning for Moscow as it is for whatever it is Solyony has been saying. As is Masha's whistle perhaps - despite the stage direction that she is lost in thought over her book.

Olga's explosion at Masha seems to come out of nowhere - and it mustn't. What is behind it? Her seeming unconcern over the anniversary of their father's death? Her apartness at the moment? Does Olga see this as selfishness? Certainly that is what she accuses Masha of - not thinking about her hard day - but can Masha be expected to know that she has a head-ache? There is more to this, and it is deep-rooted.

Look at what Olga goes on to say; that she feels herself ageing, that her youth is passing. Olga is going through a classic case of awareness of her biological clock. Nowadays, of course, 28 is nothing. Plenty of time for marriage and a baby. But Olga at 28 in those days is already past the normal age for marriage - and looking ahead to the last line of this first section of the script, before Tusenbach speaks on the next page, Olga says wistfully. 'I should have liked a husband.' [*I would have been very fond of my husband.*] So that is the cause of her irritation with Masha; Masha is married; Olga is

jealous. What is worse, as we see later - Masha is married to a man that would have been ideal for Olga - the schoolmaster; and Masha is bored and unhappy with him. Plenty of reason then to find Masha irritating.

Whistling is not at all 'done' in those days - well, at least not by a young lady of good family. It is something else that marks Masha out as different and rebellious.

How does Masha react to Olga's explosion? She stops whistling anyway. Is she shocked? Taken aback? Does it make her snap out of her dream - lost in her book - and start to listen with half an ear?

Olga has become more and more petulant as she sinks into her misery - until jollied out of it by Irina's 'To go to Moscow.' This is evidently some kind of 'mantra' for them - a comfort, often repeated, to cheer themselves up. It becomes clear during the course of the play that 'Going To Moscow' is a fantasy; it will never happen. Yet they cling to it, the thought of it, as something to keep them sane.

Once again the laugh that draws our attention briefly back to the men in the other room could be a comment on that dream.

Irina and Olga continue to live the fantasy, egging each other on with the details. Irina's line 'The only one who's stuck here is poor Masha.' [*The only problem is our poor Masha.*] could be interpreted a number of ways. **Try it:**

**Slyly, having a dig at Masha and hoping she's listening with genuine regret more obviously nastily - punishing her for her thoughtlessness to Olga**

Whatever choice you make will influence the way Olga says 'Masha will come to Moscow...' [*Masha can come and stay...*] **Try Irina's line again, in the above three ways, but follow it with Olga's response. Again, I have put down three, to match, in the same order, with Irina's:**

**covering up, hurriedly, hoping that Masha has not heard joining in with the regret but giving some crumb of comfort using the tone to reprove Irina**

Masha's whistling this time is clearly a comment on all this: defiance? I don't care? Mocking?

Irina's happiness is part of her youth and her hopefulness. It is important that this aspect of her is emphasised, since she, more than any of them, changes so radically during the course of the play.

Olga catches her mood and her voice lightens too, but she finds it hard work to keep it up. Her constant worries - Masha, their brother, her age - seek to drag her down. But she fights the tendency and tries to look at the positive things. It is as if she is counting on her fingers; the tone becomes more and more brittle and less and less convincing till it peters out, there is a pause, and the real rock-bottom of her mind, always with her, is exposed... her wish she was married.

Why did I include Masha as one of Olga's worries? She seems to be simply saying that Masha looks lovely, out of a sense of diplomacy or fairness, because she has complemented Irina. Yet I can't help feeling that joy over Irina comes naturally to Olga; her feelings for Masha are always mixed with anxiety. Her struggle to say something so nice to her should show.

So this opening of the play tells us a little about Irina and Masha, but far more about Olga.

**In monologue form, summarise what you find out from this scene in the character of one of the three, making clear in your thought-track, what you feel about both your sisters. Don't stray into the realms of the play in general**



here. Stick to what is exposed in this first section alone.

Notice that a window needs to be added to our scattering of chairs etc, already set up as a temporary setting. Place a couple of chairs, or a block, on one side to indicate where this could be.

Now, with Masha sitting - on a sofa? - move the scene. Don't worry about the words at first, but hold your books to check where movements could happen, bearing in mind certain decisions of sub-text you have already made. Do this as a group exercise, using people as a servant or more than one to lay the table and as the three men too. Thus you will see how Chekhov knits things together, giving an impression of many layers of life going on at the same time.

Having walked things through and looked at the general shape of the scene too in this way, put down your books now and improvise the opening in your own words. Try to stick as closely as possible to the gist of what is happening and try to reveal through your tone of voice, your facial expression, or by other means, what is happening beneath the surface. Discuss the findings from this fully, and record them.

FROM TUSENBACH'S ENTRANCE IN THE DRAWING-ROOM TO MASHA'S VERSE [Methuen PAGES 3 - 6; *Penguin* 251 - 254.]

Once again, Tusenbach's 'What nonsense you do talk...' [*Really, you talk such a lot of nonsense...*] undercuts and comments on Olga's desire for a husband, by juxtaposition. He is of course talking to Solyony, who drives him mad - who is, indeed, the kind of character that would drive most people mad!

Most of this excerpt is about 'work' - Irina's Romantic desire for it; Tusenbach's enthusiasm for the new ideas sweeping through the country, which will overthrow idleness and mean that everyone will have to work. He is, in a way, upholding and mirroring as best he can Irina's enthusiasm.

Before that we hear from Tusenbach about the arrival of the new battery-commander, Vershinin, and we observe something of the characters of Solyony and Chebutykin.

Let's take the lesser characters first.

Chebutykin is the Army medical officer - a doctor. He is in his sixties. He confesses that he loved the girls' mother and that makes him feel a special warmth for her daughters, especially Irina. Perhaps Irina most closely resembles her mother? It seems that Irina is the only one who puts up with him and encourages his excesses. He is much given to sentimentality - which we see here - and to drink, which is not apparent here but which may be the reason for his sentimentality. So much a part of their life has he become, that he lives in the basement part of the house as their lodger. This may be partly so that he can act as a substitute parent [they all treat him like a member of the family - a rather silly, cranky old uncle for instance]; he may have wanted to be close to them, to indulge in memories of their mother, or it may be that the small income he brings in is a help to the family. He spends so much time upstairs, though, that he seems almost part of the fixtures and fittings. He treats the place as his own, perhaps feeling that, without both parents, he is kind of *in loco parentis*.

In this section we see two sides to him: the rather doddery old doctor/fool and the sentimental uncle figure.

Solyony we already know is given to holding forth - he has already driven Tusenbach away. Now he enters with some cock-eyed theory which no one pays any attention to. He doesn't seem to mind - perhaps he's so used to it that he doesn't even notice. Chebutykin is not listening to him; nor does he listen to Chebutykin's medical advice.