Chekhov and the Moscow Art Theatre: Crash Course Theater #34

Crash Course: Theater
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

(PBS Digital Studios intro)

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater, and those of you of legal drinking age should get your pickles and bites of brown bread ready because today, we're exploring Anton Chekhov, the Moscow Art Theatre, and the early years of Russian modernism. That means laughter and tears and vodka. Lots of vodka. Also, who is gonna pay the mortgage? Lights up.

(Crash Course Theater intro)

Early Russian drama looked a lot like the early years of theater in France, Germany, or Italy. There were mystery plays and folk comedies that eventually gave way to neoclassical scholastic plays, although in Russia, a bunch of the neoclassical plays were specifically anti-Napoleon dramas, so that's a new twist, I guess. Empress Catherine the Great allowed the first professional theater to open in St. Petersburg in the mid-1700s. She even wrote a bunch of not so great comedies and her own version of The Merry Wives of Windsor, where all the characters got Russian names. She described her own work as a "free but feeble" adaptation.

Russia's dramatic literary tradition didn't really start until romanticism took over, led by Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail (?~1:19), though their works went unproduced for years because of censorship, and then Alexei Tolstoy, a distant relative of Lev AKA Leo Tolstoy, wrote a trilogy of plays about Ivan the Terrible. They pretty much closed the not-very-thick book on Russian romantic theater. It's the only not-very-thick Russian book that has ever existed.

But fun fact, for a country so state-controlled and censorship-heavy, realism came to Russia pretty early. Examples include Ivan Turgenev's melancholy 1950s comedy, "A Month in the Country", about affairs on a rural estate and Alexander Ostrowsky's middle class comedies and dramas. AF Posemsky's "A Bitter Fate" even followed Zola's naturalistic precepts a decade before Zola wrote them.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

Nikolai Gogol and Leo Tolstoy wrote more controversial plays. Gogol's was a farcical look at provinical corruption, "The Government Inspector" and Tolstoy's a baby-murdering classic, "The Power of Darkness", which we looked at in our episode on French naturalism, but censorship meant that these plays sometimes waited decades before being produced. Into this world arrived Anton Chekhov, Russia's greatest playwright and a man who really knew his way around a (?~2:32).

Chekhov was born in 1860. His paternal grandfather had been a serf. Chekhov trained as a doctor and though he continued to practice medicine, he devoted himself to literature, mostly as a short story writer at first. Just as he finished medical school, he developed tuberculosis, but he was financially responsible for his family, so he ignored it. A few years later, he wrote his first produced play, "Ivanov" but even though it was a hit, Chekhov considered it a disappointment. In 1895, he wrote his first major dramatic work, "The Seagull." It was produced the next year and it flopped hard. The actors didn't know their lines, the audience booed like crazy. Chekhov ran out of the theater in the middle of the second act and said that he would never write another play. But a writer and theater director named Vladimir (?~3:25) loved the play and remounted it at the newly founded Moscow Art Theater. Chekhov then wrote three more major works, "Uncle Vanya", "The Three Sisters", and "The Cherry Orchard".

So what makes these plays so indelible? Well, even though Chekhov's plays are full of incidents like murders and attempted murders and suicides and attempted suicides and who is gonna pay the mortgage, they're some of the first plays to feel like life, because here's the thing: Chekhov knew that life doesn't include a lot of climaxes or cliffhangers or neat speeches that explain everything.

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

Most of the time, it's just about playing cards or going for a walk or having a late night vodka sesh. He wrote, "In life, people do not shoot themselves or hang themselves or fall in love or deliver themselves of clever sayings every minute. They spend most of their time eating, drinking, running after women or men, or talking nonsense. It is therefore necessary that this should be shown on stage. Life on the stage should be as it really is and the people, too, should be as they are."

This doesn't mean that nothing happens in Chekhov's plays or that what happens doesn't matter. Plenty happens and it does matter, but Chekhov was also comfortable writing scenes that are just less eventful and it's those scenes that have the texture of life. He also meant many of these scenes to be funny and often fought with his serious-minded directors to make them funnier. He was a master of subtext, a kind of misdirection in which characters can't or won't say what they really mean but the meaning emerges anyway, around and under and between the lines.

Let's take a closer look at Chekhovian realism through his last play, "The Cherry Orchard". Help us out, Thought Bubble. Lyubov Ranevskaya has returned home from some years in Paris with a lover. She learns her home, where her son drowned, will be sold at auction. Her neighbor, Lopakhin, a former serf, encourages her to chop down the orchard and divide the estate into parcels for middle class people to build summer homes. Lyubov won't listen. She sees Trofimov, her son's former tutor, who is now a scruffy student. She weeps. Lyubov is out for a walk with her brother, Gayev, her daughter Anya, and her adopted daughter Varya as well as Lopakhin and Trofimov. A homeless man stumbles in and Lyubov gives him all her money, even though Varya says there's barely enough to feed the servants. Anya is impressed by Trofimov's revolutionary talk of a new world and a new life. She sneaks down to the river with him. Lyubov is giving a ball. It is auction day for the orchard and the family hopes that a rich aunt will rescue them.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

The guests drink, dance, and squabble until Lopakhin comes in and announces the orchard is his. "I've bought the estate where my grandfather and my father were slaves," he says, "Where they weren't even allowed into the kitchen. I'm asleep. It's only a dream, an illusion." Finally, it's time for the family to leave. Lyubov urges Lopakhin to propose to Varya. Lopakhin promises he will, but he can't bring himself to do it. Instead, he moos at her and she throws some shoes. The family departs for the train station, not realizing they've left behind the old servant Firs. Forgotten Firs lays down to die and offstages, the axes bite into the orchard's trees. Timber, Thought Bubble.

We can see Chekhov's prevalent themes and style, particularly his idea that people are sitting at a table having dinner, that's all, but at the same, their happiness is being created or their lives are being torn apart, so I guess that's not all. That's what the ball scene is about. Another playwright would have staged the auction, but Chekhov fills the act with idle conversation instead, and the moo-ing scene with Lopakhin and Varya is a beautiful example of the power of subtext.

If "The Cherry Orchard" is a realistic drama, it also suggests a move toward symbolism, as do the late plays of Ibsen and Strindberg. The orchard represents more than just the orchard. It's a symbol of an old order and at several points in the play, a mysterious sound is heard, "The sound of a breaking string, dying away, sad." Maybe Chekhov would have moved in a more symbolist or expressionist direction if he'd lived longer, but he didn't.

In 1904, a few months after the premiere of "The Cherry Orchard", he traveled with his new wife, the actress Olga (?~7:49) to recuperate at a spa town. He became very ill and after drinking a glass of champagne as ordered by a doctor, he lay down and died. His body was returned to Moscow in a refrigerated car used to transport oysters.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

Chekhov will always be associated with the theater that made him famous: the Moscow Art Theater. Theater monopolies had dissolved in 1882 and a lot of new theaters had sprung up to serve a growing urban population but they staged mostly melodramas, but (?~8:20) who we've mentioned, and his partner, famed theater director Konstantin Stanislavski, wanted a theater devoted to realism and naturalism. Stanislavski had been influenced by a visit from the Miningen troup, but was less interested in period appropriate costumes, props, and occasional mumbling realism and more interested in psychological realism, acting and staging that would make the characters look real, sound real, and feel real. The two men founded the Moscow art theater in 1898. The first play was Alexei Tolstoy's "Tsar Fyodor" and later that year, they revived Chekhov's "Seagull". The play was such a hit that the theater adopted a seagull as its emblem.

They began with a group of amateur actors, aiming to create a troupe of colleagues rather than stars and supporting players, and Stanislavski developed a hugely influential system to train those amateurs. The theater survived the Russian revolution and though it underwent several transformations and a split, it outlasted the Soviet era, too.

If you've studied acting in the West, then you've probably experienced some version of Stanislavski's system, but here's the thing: we don't really know what that system is. Stanislavski was always changing it. In addition to Stanislavski's autobiography, we have three books, "An Actor Prepares", "Building a Character", and "Creating a Role", all translated into English by Elizabeth Hapgood but it turns out that Hapgood mis-translated a lot of stuff. As for the Russian originals, the Soviets made their own edits and the aspect of the system that's most famous in America, the part where actors are supposed to rely on their personal memories, Stanislavski later discounted, but there a few parts that we can pretty much agree on.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

An actor's body and voice should be thoroughly trained and an actor should have a thorough knowledge of other stage techniques, like combat, dancing, all that stuff. Actors should observe how people behave in real life. Before rehearsals begin, the cast will study the play, investigating its themes and the motivations and the emotional arc of each character, and deciding on each character's primary objective and emotional throughline. In order to make characters feel psychologically real, actors will familiarize themselves with a character's given circumstances and ask how a person would behave within those circumstances. This is called "The Magic If". At one point, Stanislavski did suggest that actors should work with their own "emotion memory" to inhabit a role, but he later moved away from this and encouraged more expressive physical explorations and improvisations. On stage, actors should try to live in the moment, reacting with some emotional spontaneity and giving the illusion of the first time, and finally, actors must always keep working toward greater proficiency and skill.

The Stanislavski system, or the less than 100% faithful version of it that we have today, dominates Western theater. Film and televsion, too. Every single one of my friends who studied acting in college took a Stanislavski class. Of course, there are types of plays that don't support a realistic acting approach. We're gonna look at those, starting with one of the weirdest, bloodiest, and most niche forms of theater ever produced. That's right, it's the grand guignol. Thanks. Thanks for watching. Or is that what I really mean? Subtext, Yorick. Subtext. Also curtain.

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===== (12:00) to (12:27) =====

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