

## **Better Storytelling:**

### **An examination of structuralism as a useful tool for the actor analyzing Chekhov's *Three Sisters***

Literal descriptions of action and literary descriptions of character for a Chekhov play supply little to the actor. Nostalgic, melancholic, emotional, and even neurotic are the words several seminal scholars have used to describe the behavior of the characters in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. The play itself has been categorized as a Play of Indirect Action. These assessments may be true and indeed may be shared by an audience at any given production, but these assessments provide only a snapshot of the final result that the actor is trying to achieve, and they provide little indication on where the actor should begin and what path to take. Perhaps this attempt to close the gap between the audience or critical perspective and the actor's task is just an echo of the original struggle between Chekhov and Stanislavski. In his book *Performing Emotions*, Peta Tait reasons that the "gap between the text Chekhov believed he had written and Stanislavski's productions seems to lie in a perceptible difference in Stanislavski's imposition of a theatrical logic over emotional reactions so that there was a unifying sequential pattern to the production of mood" (104). This argument was not about a director's liberty (a more modern notion) so much as whether or not the very act of patterning, justifying and creating a consistency to a character's emotional life was essentially "verifying a stable depiction of reality" (105), which is at odds thematically with Chekhov's play and his view of the world. The analysis of the given circumstances of a character and his/her objectives all ground the actor in a reality, but a thorough structural analysis and understanding of how a character functions thematically within the structure will help ground the actor in the reality of the text. Adding structural-thematic analysis to the actor's tools for interpreting Chekhov's *Three Sisters* ensures a greater fidelity to

the text while providing a more specific key to unlocking the point of view and possible actions of a character.

When an actor begins to define the given circumstances within the play, a perusal of the historical setting and period can be exhaustive, but littered with helpful clues. What structural analysis provides is a framework for determining significant historical information. From the historical record, a researching actor will discover that the feudal system of serf ownership in Russia was abolished in 1861, when Anton Chekhov was just one year old. Czar Alexander II was trying to bring Russia forward out of their medieval conditions. But the new freedoms existed almost solely on paper. With no means for change provided to the serf class and many of the protections of the system removed, Russia's feudal system was essentially destroyed in name, but not in practice. Chekhov's Russia was in turmoil and transition. The characters in *Three Sisters* are right in the middle of a turbulent period in Russian history that runs a course from feudalism through multiple Czar transitions to the Bolshevik revolution. The actor using structural analysis can narrow the field of historical research and decide the importance of a given set of historical issues, like the above, by determining whether any thematic elements in the play echo those issues. In other words, historical issues are only relevant to the play if the playwright makes them so. John Tulloch, a structuralist critic, describes the society of Chekhov's works as "unified (while yet hierarchical) in that the mass of its members, from peasants to the elite, seem unaware of any fundamental values other than those based on subservience to status and rank" (163). A trickle down brutality and widespread ignorance set up conditions where each class cruelly treated their immediate inferiors, thereby maintaining the virtual presence of a feudal system. The only real change was the few new masters moving up from the lower classes, some more brutal and vulgar than the old masters, but nevertheless, they were still masters. The

contrast between Natasha and the Prozorov sisters is perhaps the most obvious illustration of this historical theme within the play. The sisters are a part of a fading elite class, girls who were educated in languages, concert piano, and trained in other delicacies meant for a society that is no longer available to them in their small provincial town. Natasha is that one change in the system. She can now climb it, but she also continues to reinforce the system every step of the way. The sisters clearly see her as inadequate for their brother. Masha pokes fun at her clothing and her “little, pink cheeks, scrubbed clean, clean, clean!” (267) Olga later confronts Natasha directly about her choice of belt and Chebutykin leads a chorus of teasing laughter which Natasha seems to take as evidence of her inadequacy: “I just don’t know what’s the matter with me; they just make fun of me all the time...I’m not used to these social occasions...” (275). By the second act, Natasha has obtained her new status through marriage to Andrey and sets about to secure it by yelling at the servants, putting out candles, and by beginning a slow, almost Machiavellian, removal of the sisters. Reviewing the plays contrasting structure here against the historical backdrop reveals a political component to Natasha’s actions, which may lead an actor to construct the point of view of a person who must defend and protect a stolen position. Natasha’s status will never be legitimate to the Prozorov sisters. And as for the servants, an audience may read Natasha’s treatment of them as cruel and vulgar, but this point of view allows the actor to find the hero in her character. Unlike the sisters, Natasha has not grown up with the servants. There is no familial element to her relationship to them. Anfisa is just an old woman who can no longer work and is costing her money, which can be perceived as a threat to all Natasha has achieved for herself and her children.

From the very opening moments of the play, a whole host of contrasting characters, language, and symbols are revealed. Olga, the oldest sister, is seen correcting blue books in a

teacher's uniform, signifying duty, discipline, and hard work. She talks of the past, using words and phrases like, "I remember...I remember it exactly...I remember it all exactly" (259). Even her lament about not being married is phrased in the past tense: "I would have loved my husband" (260). Masha wears a black dress, signifying death and mourning. She sits and reads and whistles and soon decides to leave the failing party. But Irina, dressed all in white, is full of hope and has not yet been disillusioned with love or the rigors of real work. Her language is naïvely authoritative on the topics of hard work, man's purpose in life, and achieving fulfillment. After only a few pages, Chekhov has provided visual cues in dress and action and textual patterns that arm the actor with important clues for each sister's contrasting point of view.

Against the background of a bright, sunny spring day, signifying an overall tone of renewal and hope, each sister operates from her own point of view while trying to escape her surrounding reality. Chekhov gives us several textual hints and structural evidence of this action of performing reality-avoiding rituals. The first two acts are set at parties. Chekhov does not show Irina at her various jobs, Olga at work, and Masha at home with Kulygin. Chekhov leaves their real lives off stage and in between the acts. What he puts on stage are the moments when these characters are desperately trying to escape the reality of their lives. Andrey becomes involved in emblematic escapist activities: eating, gambling, gossip, and drinking. Chebutykin reads popular newspapers and records trivial remedies. Fedotik has his photographs and childish presents. Tuzenbach and Vershinin philosophize. Each man engages in a set of strong and idiosyncratic behaviors all toward the same pursuit: shutting out their reality. Within these parameters, the actor can begin to more efficiently gather textual clues to justify the above behaviors.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A quick perusal of Tuzenbach's philosophical musings reveals several inconsistencies in logic until one realizes that many of his speeches parrot or support Irina. This pattern combined with textual clues to the nature of

Much like the barflies in O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, the chorus of men attempting to briefly escape their realities underscores the ultimate pipe dream in the room: "Moscow. Going back to Moscow!" (260). In the first act, there is hope. For Irina, Moscow is the chance to reach her potential and meet the man of her dreams. Moscow represents the ascriptive society for which they were all groomed. For Olga, her desire for Moscow is one of wishful memory – her thoughts and language are in the past tense. As the oldest sister and surrogate mother figure, she lives for the hope surrounding Irina – the hope for the next generation. This hope for the next generation and the struggle to keep it becomes thematically important as it repeatedly surfaces in the play. Irina loses ground over the course of the play as her predicament eventually mimics that of her sisters in the final act – she prepares for a life working in a school and is engaged to marry a man she does not love. The pattern of the older generation's stagnation crippling the potential of the new generation emerges; and as Andrey laments, "...the children end up just as aimless and dead as their parents..." (313).

Chekhov also provides a kind of musical counterpoint within the scenes to highlight the harsh reality beneath the party/escape ritual. On stage, phrases from totally separate conversations surface at precise moments to give the audience the perception of a composite meaning. Olga is stirred by the bright beautiful day to share her hope for returning to Moscow: "...everything was so bright, I felt such a wave of happiness inside me, and I wanted so much to go back home" (259). Chekhov immediately directs the audience's attention to a conversation already in progress between Chebutykin, Tuzenbach and Solyony:

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Tuzenbach's love ("I have such a desire to live, Irina, and to work and fight for something, and my love for you makes that desire even stronger.") reveals a possible action for his philosophical speeches. If Irina is in the room, then she is Tuzenbach's perfect escape. The action during these speeches could be: making love to Irina. After all, talking is as close as Tuzenbach gets. Playing this action irons out the inconsistencies for the actor while keeping them intact for the audience.

**Chebutykin:** The hell you say!

**Tuzenbach:** You're right, it's all a lot of nonsense. (260)

After Olga and Irina exclaim their desire to return together, a burst of laughter emerges from the men. And then finally, Tuzenbach leaves the men with one final jab, "Nothing you say makes any sense! I can't take it anymore..." which immediately follows Olga's lament over never having married. (260) Chekhov is establishing an important thematic conflict by creating a world where even unrelated conversations threaten the delicate construction of pipe dreams. The actor can perceive this as an indication that escaping the harshness of reality is a constant and bitter struggle for these characters.

After the struggle to escape reality has been established in the first Act, two new visitors arrive, Vershinin and Natasha. We have already briefly touched on what a strong force Natasha is in the sisters' lives, but Vershinin represents an opposing vision at work on the sisters' world. Both characters have a considerable impact on the family from the beginning. Andrey of course becomes totally consumed with Natasha's needs. Vershinin's effect on Masha is decisive and clear. After hearing his vision of the future world, she removes her hat and announces, "I'm staying for lunch" (269).

I don't think there could exist – a town so dull and boring that it didn't have a real need for intelligent, educated people. All right, let's agree that this town is backward and vulgar, and let's suppose now that out of all its thousands of inhabitants there are only three people like you. Of course you won't be able to overcome the unenlightened mass that surrounds you; little by little you'll disappear into this crowd of thousands, life will swallow you up. But you won't simply disappear; you will have some influence. And after you've gone there will be six more, let's say, like you, then twelve, and so on, until finally people like you will be in the majority. In two or three hundred years, life on earth will be unimaginably beautiful, astonishing. Man needs a life like that, and if we don't have it yet we must wait for it, dream of it, prepare for it, and that's the reason we must be able to see and know more than our fathers and grandfathers. [*Laughs*] And you complain that you know a lot that's unnecessary! (269)

His vision speaks of a hope for the progressive evolution of man. He speaks to the work they must do and the suffering that they must endure in order to create this vision for future generations, which resonates with Andrey's and Olga's hope for the next generation. Natasha and her offstage lover, Protopopov, represent a different evolution, one devoid of humanity. As Andrey confides to Chebutykin, "...there's something blind and vicious and mean [inside Natasha]...whatever it is, she's not really a human being" (311). Natasha cuts down trees. She helps Andrey turn from a potential scholar to a henpecked husband pushing babies around that may not even be his. His greatest achievement is a post on the town council, which is chaired by his wife's lover.

If one accepts Vershinin and Natasha as two opposing forces introduced into this stagnant community, each offering solutions to dealing with a reality that grows harsher day by day, then an entire thematic structure begins to emerge. This structure ultimately places each character into a specific function within the thematic dialogue. The three sisters are the experiment. With Olga clinging to the past, Irina dreaming of a future, and Masha resigned to the present, they begin a journey. Natasha strips away the illusions of their former life and they must finally face reality head on in the last act. They have been pushed out of their home, the soldiers are leaving and Irina is in danger of repeating the cycle of her sisters. Tuzenbach's presence and his potential marriage to Irina represent a circularity in development for the sisters, the threat of stagnation in the new generation. Some of Tuzenbach's philosophizing with Vershinin supports this thematic function: "Not just in two or three hundred years, but even in a million years, life will still be the same as it's always been. It doesn't change, it always stays the same..." (283). Tuzenbach's death breaks the cycle for Irina. And now, with the men gone, Irina and her sisters are confronted with a choice – Vershinin's vision or Natasha's.

**Irina:** Someday everyone will know what this was all about, all this suffering...but until then we have to go on living...and working...I'll go away tomorrow, by myself. I'll teach school and devote my whole life to people who need it...who may need it...

**Olga:** The music sounds so happy, so positive, it makes you want to live. Oh, dear God. The day will come when we'll go away forever too. People will forget all about us...but our suffering will turn to joy for the people who live after us, their lives will be happy and peaceful, and they'll remember us kindly and bless us... (318-319).

“Happy” music underscores the discovery of a new purpose and the acceptance of the suffering and hard work that must be performed to ensure the happiness of future generations. This is an important indication of the tone Chekhov may have been trying to create for this final scene. Although a speech about working, suffering and slowly being forgotten may superficially appear maudlin and depressing, an actor who has identified the positive thematic turn in this moment is perhaps closer to finding a positive action that matches the tone set forth by Chekhov’s choice of music.

Understanding the specific thematic function of a character provides a kind of outer-marker against which the actor can test the validity and specificity of his or her choices. Chebutykin functions outside of progressive time. In the third act, Chekhov has him attempting to symbolically destroy time when he smashes the sisters’ mother’s clock. His subsequent speech resonates with his continual motif of “what difference does it make?”

Maybe I didn’t even break it. Maybe it just looks like it’s broken. Maybe I don’t even exist; maybe it just looks like it...What are you all looking at? Natasha’s having a little affair with Protopopov, but you can’t see that. You just sit there, and you can’t see that Natasha is having a little affair with Protopopov. (297-298)

Shifting from his defensive posture of self-justification, he confronts the room with a peculiar logic: if you can ignore Natasha’s affair, then don’t judge me for ignoring whatever I want. The insistence that nothing makes any difference suggests his complete denial of the demands of a changing world. Chebutykin is a perpetuator of the stagnant world from which the sisters are



trying to escape. Chekhov consistently uses Chebutykin as a counterpoint voice that undercuts expressions of hope and desire from Andrey and his sisters. Chebutykin, often in the background, is the constant presence of apathy. Understanding Chebutykin's relationship to time and change can illuminate the character's point of view on Irina for the actor. During the uproar over his wildly inappropriate gift to Irina he justifies himself with some very telling phrases: Darling, I...my sweet little girl, I've known you since the day you were born...I carried you when you were a baby...I was in love with your sainted mother..." (264). Chebutykin's gift may have been meant for the woman he loved, Irina's mother, now frozen in time within Irina. Again, the actor can use this to find the hero in his character. If when Chebutykin looks at Irina he sees her mother, then this point of view can explain or justify what the audience may read as an old man's inappropriate or misplaced affections for a young woman.

Structural analysis will rarely, if ever, provide the actor with something immediatelyactable. The job of the actor is to convert the analysis of structure and text into a set of given circumstances and actions all operating from a specific point of view. When the actor comes to the theatre each night, he must concern himself only with the actions and point of view of his character. But in the early days of rehearsal and script analysis, a more thorough and specific understanding of the text through structural analysis can be an invaluable tool, which roots the actor's choices in the larger story being told. Theatre artists are fundamentally storytellers, and better storytelling begins with a more specific understanding of the story.

## Works Referenced

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