



Denver Center
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Inside Out

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Can you imagine what would happen if your best friend fell in love with the beautiful woman *you* adore? What's more, this woman happens to be married to your dead sister's husband! Set in the crumbling country estate in the late 19th century, *Uncle Vanya* is a brilliantly told story of unfulfilled dreams and unrequited love.

Ivan Petrovich Voynitzky (Vanya), his elderly mother, Maria, his niece, Sonya, and their impoverished guest, Telegin, lead a quiet, idyllic existence on the estate which Vanya and Sonya manage. But after the arrival of the owner, Serebryakov (a retired professor and husband of Vanya's late sister) and his beautiful wife Yelena, Vanya loses his desire to run the estate. He is disillusioned by the retired professor's idle, egotistical, nagging ways and confused by his own unreturned love for Yelena. Sonya, Serebryakov's daughter by his first wife, is drained by her responsibilities in running the estate and her love for the local doctor, Astrov, who is also in love with Yelena. A crisis arises when Serebryakov announces his plan to sell the estate, an act that would leave Vanya, Sonya and Maria destitute. The crisis is averted when Yelena, still faithful to her husband, persuades him to leave and life returns to normal on the estate. Somewhere between a comedy and a melodrama, the play, subtitled "Scenes from a Country Life," is that and more. *Uncle Vanya* is a human portrait that is critical and satirical, while being moving and compassionate.



PHOTO BY GARY ISAACS

Uncle Vanya

*"Look at yourselves, see how badly
and boringly you live."*

—Anton Chekhov, conversation in 1902 with writer, Tikhonov

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*“to the
interests
of my
family...”*

—Uncle Vanya



Maria

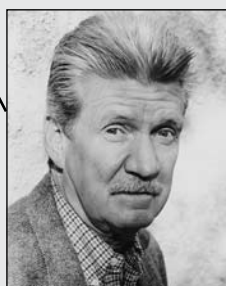
Vanya's mother and
Sonya's grandmother



Vanya

Owner of the Estate

Vanya's
deceased sister;
former wife of
Serebryakov



Serebryakov

The Retired Professor;
husband of Yelena



Yelena

Current wife of
Serebryakov



Sonya

Serebryakov and Vanya's
sister's daughter;
Vanya's niece

**Ivan Petrovich
Voynitzky (Vanya)**

The title character, Vanya has worked all his life to keep the estate going and send money to the professor, Serebryakov.

**Alexander Vladimirovich
Serebryakov**

A retired professor, he was married to Vanya's sister, who died many years earlier. He is Sonya's father and Vanya's brother-in-law.

Yelena Andreyevna

Serebryakov's younger wife who is greatly admired for her beauty.

**Sofya Alexandrovna
(Sonya)**

She has worked with Vanya all her life to keep the estate going. Her duties include managing the servants and hired workers and selling the farm products.

**Maria Vasilyevna
Voynitzkaya:**

Vanya's mother and Sonya's grandmother.

Mikhail Lvovich Astrov

The local doctor who travels about the countryside ministering to the sick. He usually visits this estate at least once a month and has his own desk there.

Ilya Ilyich Telegin:

An impoverished landowner and friend of the family. His nickname is "Waffles" because of the pockmarks on his face.

Marina

An older woman, she is the servant in the household who took care of the family and children since they were young. Consequently, she is called "Nanny."

BIOGRAPHY OF THE PLAYWRIGHT

courtesy of *Seattle Repertory Theatre Playgoers Guide: Uncle Vanya*. Seattle, WA: 1996 by Andrea Allen

The grandson of a serf, Anton Chekhov was born on January 29, 1860 in the poorest neighborhood of Taganrog, a Russian port city near the Black Sea. His grandfather had bought his family's freedom some 20 years prior to Chekhov's birth. Although the system of serfdom was abolished in 1861, this new freedom existed mainly on paper; in reality, there was still a great deal of poverty among the peasants and working class. Chekhov's father ran a small shop until he went bankrupt and was forced to flee the little town in order to avoid debtor's prison.

"That is really what has saved Shakespeare, Euripedes and Chekhov. These playwrights have become great and survived because they are dealing with the human problem which continues to be interesting and alive no matter what the temporary sociological conditions are. What makes Chekhov exciting is that it deals with the richness of the human experience which has been, and will continue to be, with us."

—Nikos Psacharopoulos²

Chekhov stayed in Taganrog on a scholarship and sent his family a small sum of money each month. At 19, he began to study medicine in Moscow (receiving his MD in 1884) and writing stories and articles for a variety of periodicals. Many of his stories were humorous and he began to have financial and critical success. In fact, his writing career more than supplemented his medical practice, as he often treated patients for free. He once said of his dual professions: "Medicine is my lawful

wife and literature is my mistress; when I get tired of one I go to the other."

After having two volumes of short stories published, Chekhov's first play was produced in 1887 — *Ivanov* — inciting a riot of catcalls and laughter, ending in a brawl and an immediate cancellation of all other performances. Around this same time, Chekhov became aware of his failing health. Although he refused to admit it, he had contracted tuberculosis, a fatal disease of the lungs common during this time period. His next play, *The Wood Demon*, was performed in December 1889 and was also a failure, so Chekhov decided to take a break from playwriting. After an eight-month visit to Sakhalin Island, a Siberian penal colony where he studied the appalling conditions, he published a sociological report on the topic.

Fortunately, Chekhov did return to writing plays. On October 17, 1896, *The Sea Gull* (one of his most famous plays) premiered in Moscow. When this production failed as well, Chekhov declared: "This is the end. I shall not write another play." Were it not for Russian theatre artists Constantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, Chekhov might have remained a short story writer. They convinced him to let their new company, the Moscow Art Theater, attempt another production.

The Sea Gull was remounted and was a triumphant success for the Moscow Art Theater in December 1898. Stanislavsky and Chekhov had a number of artistic differences. Chekhov once demanded that an actress be immediately recast, called Stanislavsky's acting "paralytic" and said that under his direction, the characters in *Uncle Vanya* had become "cry-babies." Nevertheless, Chekhov continued to work with the company, using scenes and characters from *The Wood Demon* to create *Uncle Vanya*, which premiered there. Later he would write *The Cherry Orchard* (considered by many to be his

masterpiece) especially for the company.

During the summer of 1901, Chekhov married Olga Knipper, an actress with the Art Theater. The couple was often separated as Chekhov's health had deteriorated to such a degree that he needed to stay in

"...I found with Chekhov that slowly I got to like many more characters than I did at first. At the beginning, I felt I was dealing with an almost black and white statement. Eventually it turned out to be various shades which makes it more and more fascinating because it means that each of the characters defies classification and that is great."

Although they are part of a world, it is a world that cannot be pinned down."

—Nikos Psacharopoulos²

Yalta, a resort on the Black Sea, for the climate, while she stayed in Moscow to perform. In 1904, under the advice of his doctor, Chekhov traveled with Olga to the Black Forest in Germany, telling one of his friends: "I am going away to die like a dog." He did enjoy some small improvements in his health, but in July, 1904, Anton Chekhov died of the tuberculosis that had plagued him throughout his life.

A New Style of Play For a New Century

Courtesy of *Seattle Repertory Theater Playgoers Guide: Uncle Vanya*. Seattle, WA: 1996 by Andrea Allen

Some might say that Chekhov was a writer before his time. Certainly the initial riotous reactions to his work suggest that the general population was not ready for him. Rather than focusing upon action and plot, Chekhov concentrates on characters and their interactions. Therefore, it is easy to say “nothing happens” in a play such as *Uncle Vanya* except the simple depiction of scenes from a country life. Tolstoy, a friend and admirer of Chekhov, said that his plays (unlike his stories) had no point. Instead, Chekhov created a mood — an atmosphere of tension, lost youth and regret.

“My only job is to be talented,” Chekhov once wrote. “That is, to know how to distinguish important testimony from unimportant, to place my characters in the proper light and speak their language.” His plays are character driven and strive to uncover the subtleties

behind everyday conversation. Yelena and Vanya often complain of boredom, but this is their way of masking other emotions — denying that they are truly unhappy. Chekhov was one of the very first dramatists to so sensitively portray human emotions and to suggest that life is a struggle that must be endured in the present moment with no hope for a future happy ending.

Still, *Uncle Vanya* is a dark comedy and Chekhov himself had a good sense of humor. Although he depicts a somewhat dreary existence for the characters, Chekhov was not innately a pessimist. He wrote in correspondence about the play: “The aim of life is life itself — I believe in life, in its bright moments, for the sake of which one can, indeed one must, live; I believe in man, in that part of his soul which is good.”

THEMES AND TOPICS OF THE PLAY

*“In Chekhov’s world, to live is to suffer,
and those suffer least who are least vital.”*

—Maurice Valency³

The themes of the play are embraced in Dr. Astrov’s first major speech: the weary business of the living; the shock of change; the waste of beauty, life and ideals and the failure of human relationships.

In Richard Gilman’s words, the characters are ‘stuck’ in life and with each other on the estate.⁴ Maria, Telegin and Marina have apparently settled into a pattern very early in life and don’t question the merits or possibilities of any other kind of life, so they don’t mind being “stuck.” However, Vanya, Astrov, Yelena and Sonya are aware of their longings but can’t seem to summon the vitality to change their situations. Even Professor Serebryakov, with his education and position, is stuck because he lacks self-knowledge and sensitivity. The symbols of the caged starling in Act IV and the map of Africa suggest the imprisonment of an unexamined and unexplored life. The trifling business of life in Act I returns in Act

IV. “All the despair of the petty and trivial life, of work without purpose or reward, of an existence without dignity, is expressed...”⁵

Change comes in the form of the Professor and his exquisite wife, Yelena. Her name evokes the mythical

*“What matters most
is to break
out of the rut.
Everything else is
unimportant.”*

—Anton Chekhov

Greek character, Helen of Troy, who with her beauty, set the world on its ear and Yelena does the same. She and the Professor completely upset the routine of the household with tea being served after midnight, meals

being postponed and Dr. Astrov in attendance on the estate to minister to the Professor. For Sonya, Vanya and Astrov, life had not previously been unpleasant because they were not tortured by longings and desires, but now in the presence of Yelena’s loveliness, these characters feel a sense of something lost. Unknown passions are unleashed; inflammations and agitations are uncovered, and even the weather changes from just being sultry into a violent thunderstorm. The most profound example of change is when the enlightened and cultured Vanya becomes violent.

The images of waste lie all around. Tea is left to grow cold and food is uneaten. Time is wasting, too, as the characters seem unable to accomplish anything with the guests present. Astrov speaks of the destruction of the forests and forest life with such feeling that he concludes: “Man is endowed with reason and creative force to increase

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what has been given him; but hitherto he has not created but destroyed.”⁶ Astrov even implies that Yelena and the Professor are agents of waste and destruction when he accuses them of indolence and consumerism. But waste is seen most in the lives of Vanya and Sonya. Each has sacrificed to keep the estate running smoothly for the selfish Professor; as a result, they have led unfulfilled lives, lost their ideals and now, especially in Vanya’s case, are too old to change. He has come to the end of his life without living.

None of the characters manages to achieve a satisfying human relationship; Sonya tries with Astrov and Vanya with Yelena, but both are rejected. Astrov says he cannot love and the Professor is too self-absorbed to love anyone. Yelena could have loved, but chooses to remain with her boorish husband and her dormancy. As the failure of love becomes more evident, the suffering becomes less demonstrative and more internalized. For Sonya, the denial of love is most desolating and grievous; when she learns of Astrov’s rejection, she never again speaks of the matter. The only unconditional love offered is from the nurse, Marina, who nurtures and comforts Sonya.

Some critics suggest that Chekhov believed waste and boredom could be overcome by useful and purposeful work. This suggestion is offered to Yelena by Sonya and Astrov in Act III. Yet Astrov will be content with idleness if Yelena will come with him. “Work is always ready to cede to love as the agency of salvation or renewal until the game is played out, after which work will once again claim its right to define how we’re supposed to live.”⁷ Work for Vanya and Sonya will not be a means to happiness, but a tool that will help them forget. But for Chekhov work was highly ambivalent; he never saw work as fulfilling and he detested the notion of working with fervor for the sake of someone else. From his own notebooks came these words: “My ideal: to be idle and love a fat girl” and “To be idle involuntarily means to listen to what is being said, to see what is being done; but he who works and is occupied hears little and sees little.”⁸

HISTORY OF RUSSIA

1881-1905

The turbulent years of 1881-1905 form the background of Chekhov’s life and works.

However, it is useful to go back to 1861, the year after the playwright’s birth. In that year Czar Alexander II, under pressure from the liberal faction of his government, authorized the emancipation of the serfs. From 1881 to 1891, the old autocratic system, with its police cen-

sorship, gave way to a reorganization of justice, some measure of self-government and the freeing of the serfs. But preparation for these new measures had not been taken and the result was little accumulated capital to support new programs; a tiny educated middle class, meager experience in industry, commerce and self-administration and a lack of technical skills and resources.

An attempt made on the Czar’s life in 1866 caused a complete reversal of policy. The government became more and more repressive and, as a result, the revolutionary movement spread. In the early 1870s, young intellectuals infiltrated the peasant class, first to educate them and then to activate their discontent, which resulted in terrorist activity. The culmination of this terrorism was the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881.

Alexander III who, by an imperial edict in 1884, destroyed the autonomy of the universities, dismissed liberal-minded professors, discontinued the higher education of women and tightened censorship succeeded Czar Alexander. Nicholas II, whose reign was equally dis-

agreeable, succeeded Alexander III. However, important changes were taking place that made the official policy inappropriate to the times. Russia was a loose conglomeration of independent estates, isolated villages and a few great towns with little industry; therefore, there was scant communication between the various districts and provinces.

Chekhov himself wrote of this weak

social system and the lack of communication between people.

The Emancipation of 1861 brought about a rapid

disintegration of the land-owning class from which the military and bureaucratic establishment was drawn. The Industrial Revolution of the 19th century changed populations with more people living in cities to work in factories and fewer people living in rural, farming areas. Peasants were drawn to the cities, where exploitation of the workers resulted in the rise of labor organizations, with resultant police brutality. The watchwords of Nationalism, Orthodox piety and Autocracy of government were vanishing. The old order could not stem the tide of onrushing Westernization, industrialization and Marxism. Men who had been weak, paralyzed by failure and hopelessness now began to gain power in the 1890s. By 1905, a year after Chekhov’s death, they had gained the strength and courage to begin the Revolution of 1905.

***“Wretched and abundant,
Oppressed and powerful,
Weak and mighty
Mother Russia!”
“Who is Happy in
Russia?”***

(1873-76) Nikolai Nekrasov (1821-1877)

T I M E L I N E

1855-1881: Reign of Czar Alexander II

1861: Emancipation of the serfs in Russia. Serfs were indentured servants or slaves who worked the land for wealthy landowners.

1861-1865: Civil War in the United States

1864: Emancipation Proclamation in US freeing the slaves.

1865: Assassination of Abraham Lincoln, US President

1866: Attempted assassination of Alexander II

1867: Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* published, one of the founding texts of Communism

1881: Assassination of Alexander II

1894-1917: Reign of Czar Nicholas II, an extremely harsh ruler; his was sometimes called the "Reign of Terror"

1897: Moscow Art Theater founded

1898: Spanish American War

1900: Boxer Rebellion: Russian occupation of Manchuria

1900: *Uncle Vanya* first produced

1914: Assassination of Archduke Ferdinand at Sarajevo that "started" World War I

1914-1918: World War I

1917-18: Russian Revolution, also called the October Revolution, and the abdication of Nicholas II. Led by Lenin and the Bolsheviks (radicals who favored revolution over democratic change) and urged partially by the catastrophic Russian losses in WWI, this period of revolution ushered in a new form of government, Communism, and the eventual creation of the Soviet Union.

1989-91: Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, creating the "Commonwealth of Independent States" to replace the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)

censorship

—Courtesy of the *Seattle Repertory Theater Playgoers Guide: Uncle Vanya*.
Seattle, WA: 1996 by Andrea Allen

Russia has historically had a strong government censor. In the late 17th century, Czar Peter the Great attempted to westernize and transform Russia into a more progressive country. However, succeeding czars were not always so forward thinking.

In 1826, a censorship law was introduced, which allowed the authorities to ban anything that they wished. At first, it was not strictly enforced. But in 1848, after uprisings in France and Poland, the situation changed. Some examples of censorship were silly: a cookbook wasn't allowed to refer to "free air" in the oven as it sounded revolutionary. Articles on serfdom and even the word "serf" were banned for a time. Writers who disobeyed the strictures could be followed, imprisoned, exiled or certified as insane.

In this climate of fear and unspoken truths, fiction became a powerful medium. By creating a fantastical world, writers, like Chekhov, were able to present new ideas that would ulti-

"Contemporary dramatists stuff their plays with angels, scoundrels and fools exclusively— try and find these elements in the whole of Russia? You may find some but not in the extreme forms which dramatists seem to find necessary. I wanted to be original and not bring on a single villain, or a single angel (although I couldn't keep out the fools)..."

—Chekhov⁹

DRINKING:

Tea and Other Beverages

*'Thank God for tea! What would the world do without tea?
... how did it exist? I am glad I was not born before tea.'*

—Sydney Smith (1771-1845), *Recipe for Salad*

Drinking tea was a very important part of life in the Russian family of the 19th century. The mother or feminine head of the household sat at the end of the table beside the samovar. After preparing a very strong infusion in a teapot, she poured the dark and fragrant liquid into cups for the ladies and glasses for the men; then she diluted it with boiling water from the samovar. If someone asked for a refill, the lady of the house rinsed the cup and dried it with a little embroidered cloth before refilling it in the same way. On the tea table were fruit, jams, honey, pastries and slices of watermelon. This meal usually lasted from four until six in the afternoon.

In *Chekhov: A Study of the Four Major Plays*, the author Richard Peace describes how the tea ceremony is used as a means of introducing the characters of the play; the way each receives and drinks his/her tea affords an insight into that character's personality and attitudes. Marina presides at the samovar and she represents the traditional values of the Voynitzky/Serebryakov household. She is the worker-bee of the group and, as such, is identified with the old order; she criticizes the new ways of eating, drinking and sleeping that have invaded the estate with the arrival of the professor and his wife. Vanya appears from his nap but does not take tea. Instead, he complains of this eating, drinking and sleeping too much. Dr. Astrov is the first to be offered tea, but he refuses; perhaps his act might be an unwillingness of a man of science to associate with the "new ways." Instead, he accepts Marina's offer of vodka. In so doing, he prepares us for his drinking and disillusionment in Act II. Meanwhile, Serebryakov returns from his walk

with Yelena; he will take tea but not in the garden. He wants it in his study, demonstrating "his demanding and capricious nature, his aloofness, his isolation and his need to hide behind 'work' as an excuse."¹⁰

Telegin is next to be offered tea. He waxes poetic about the joy of being alive; his optimism and sentimentality are apparent but inappropriate because the family does not live together in "peace and harmony."¹¹ He is followed by Vanya's mother, Maria Vasilyevna, who drinks her tea while engrossed in reading pamphlets. Her whole character is one of oblivious consumption — of tea and reading material.

When Sonya, the professor's daughter, enters, she takes charge of the samovar and dismisses Marina for other duties. This act highlights Sonya's divided loyalties between the obligations of inopportune hospitality and her role as regulator of work and estate. Sonya remarks that the tea is cold, but that is how Yelena drinks it. Yelena's tea drinking seems like an act of indifference; she drinks it while sitting on a swing, the visual symbol of her fragile emotions which will be tempted by her husband, Dr. Astrov, and Vanya. Thus, this taking of tea provides a commentary on a "daily ritual of hospitable communion [behind which] lurk passions and frustrations."¹² It is also a depiction of the theme of consumption and waste.

The other liquid consumed is vodka — the beverage of choice in Russia. Though it has become an international drink, it is known by its Russian name — vodka. Made from fermented potatoes, the drink has special traditions for imbibing it. The tradition of drinking vodka is to:

1. Have vodka neat, never mixing it with any other beverage.
2. Serve vodka cool and drink it from special glasses without any ice.
3. Drink vodka during meals in combination with traditional Russian cuisine such as *zakuski*, Russian hors d'oeuvres.
4. Serve vodka with or without a special occasion, as Astrov and Vanya do.

The habit of drinking has existed since pagan times when drinking sprees were indulged in for several days, even weeks. When religion reached Russia, saints' days, feast days and holidays of religious character were celebrated with quaffing of the alcoholic spirits. Drinking too much was not confined to ordinary people but also to the nobility. The Russian historian N.I. Kostomarov (1817-1865) wrote of nobles "who did not consider it improper to get drunk to a state of unconsciousness."¹⁴ The Czar's ambassadors to foreign countries constantly amazed their hosts by imbibing enormous amounts of alcohol.

In Russia, the host was frustrated if his guests ate or drank too little. To increase consumption, drinking became like a tug of war; the host did his best to get his guests to imbibe while the guests offered resistance. In *Uncle Vanya* we see the opposite: Sonya, the hostess, pleads with Astrov to resist strong drink.



There have been several attempts made at temperance in Russia. In 1490, the Moscow Grand Duchy introduced a state monopoly on vodka; later on, Russian Czars tried to impose temporary restrictions on the consumption of alcoholic beverages. As a result, vodka could only be sold on special weekdays or even several times a year to mark major church holidays. This was the case under Ivan III in the 16th century and in the early years of the reign of Ivan IV, the Terrible. Such restrictions, however, carried little weight and led people to drink excessively "whenever you're allowed."¹⁵

"Keep your stomach half full when you eat, get only half drunk when you drink and you'll live a full life."

—Russian proverb

The Russian psyche or soul has long been a subject of study and circumspection.

Some of the national character must be attributed to the Russian countryside, writes Fedor Stepan in his book, *The Russian Soul and Revolution*. The Eurasians like to call Russia a "land-ocean" with a formlessness undefined by hills or plains; for miles and miles there is a kind of "nothingness" that promotes a sense of isolation and desolation. With such a denial of form, the people develop a renunciation of cultural patterns and tend to persist in a state of nature and barbarism. Yet the Russian Orthodox Church has exalted a Supreme Being but has not portrayed Him; again there is a kind of formlessness. As individuals the Russians love a hero, a person molded according to his own will; on the other hand, they worship saints who have no individuality and no will to create a destiny of their own (like Sonya's character). Thus, Stepan's conclusion: "The antipathy to form in the Russian landscape symbolizes the tension of the Russian soul between holiness and barbarism."¹⁸

In addition to the landscape and the church, history has had a hand in developing the Russian psyche. In the first half of the 13th century, Russia was conquered by Genghis Khan and was under the oppression of the barbaric Mongol tribe; this led to a spiritual isolation from western Christian culture. Later the monarchy of czars, in the name of religion, suppressed all the beginnings of Russian cultural, political and social life. Meanwhile, the Russian peasant (serf) never really owned the land even when emancipated, so he/she felt no devotion to it. Thus, they destroyed the trees (as Astrov noted) and failed to cultivate the soil. With no love of land, the peasants had no love of work; hence there was no work ethic. (Some of this can be seen in Telegin and Yelena.) "Work develops character, but only when it is carried on with love."¹⁹ Finally, by the 1800s,

the Russian intelligentsia (like Serebryakov) surrendered its principles of life to those of the West without much examination.

Overwhelmed by the brilliant, thoughtful, intellectually versatile Europe, the Russians felt insecure and backward.

John S. Reshetar, Jr. in his thesis,

Problems of Analyzing and Predicting Soviet

Behavior points to contradictions in Russian behavior. They "tend to alternate between brutality and tenderness, orgiastic and ascetic behavior, feasting and fasting, agitation and apathy."²⁰ Reshetar draws from a study by Geoffrey Gorer, a British anthropologist, who writes of the practice of swaddling Russian infants. Such constraints result in a feeling of guilt, fear, helplessness and hostility. Consequently, the infant develops a great deal of aggression combined with self-pity. Gorer was also convinced that Russians were incapable of moderation and think exclusively in all-or-nothing absolutes. Meanwhile, two Russian professors, Nicolas Berdyaev and George P. Fedotov, support the contradiction premise based on the dualism of the Russian nationality, part European and part Asian. Both saw Russians as embracing the dualities of despotism and anarchism, humility and insolence, slavery and rebellion, a hatred of authority yet a willingness to submit to it.

Fortunately, one writer, Martin J. Gannon in *Understanding Global Cultures*, gives a more positive picture of the Russian personality. He notes the distance, the climate, the isolation and the suppression, but says these factors have fostered Russian self-reliance, strong will and inner resources. At the core of the Russian individual is an absolute value placed on decency, respect, honesty and moral goodness. He concludes: "The Russian soul is a mixture of intense feeling; it is emotion, sentiment and sensitivity combined."²¹

THE RUSSIAN SOUL

"The spiritual complexion of every people is similar to the land in which this people lives, works, and buries its dead."¹⁷

There is much controversy over what to label Chekhov's plays; he referred to most of them as comedies, while others (notably Constantin Stanislavsky of the Moscow Art Theater) thought them tragedies. Eric Bentley in his introduction to *The Brute and Other Farces by Anton Chekhov* writes that Chekhov's plays always had a farcical component. We can

see such moments in *Uncle Vanya* when Vanya walks in on Astrov and Yelena as they embrace; in farce people are always walking in on each other and seeing things they shouldn't. Vanya's failed attempts at shooting the professor can be viewed comically, while Astrov's trials to pull Vanya out from hiding under his bed smack of slapstick.

There are definitely comic characters in the play. Telegin, nicknamed Waffles, continues to support a wife who left him for another man. His sloppy, inappropriate sentimentality is also laughable. The Professor is humorous, too, with his constant complaining about aches and pains. Finally, Vanya is like a jester in his puppy dog adoration of

CHEKHOVIAN HUMOR

"Chekhov worked out an aesthetic principle according to which the tragic and comic are divided by no wall, but merely represent the two sides of one and the same phenomenon of life."

—Maurice Valency.²²

Yelena and when his "assassinations" fail.

The director's opinion is that the "comedy and the tragedy of the piece come in part from the characters' insistence on setting unrealistic goals for themselves and their inevitable failure to attain them."²³ There is

something comic about the deflation of high hopes and absurd expectations.

"Hope for the best, expect the worst.

Some drink champagne; some die of thirst.

No way of knowing which way it's going.

Hope for the best, expect the worst."

—*"Hope for the Best."* Song by Mel Brooks from the movie, *The Twelve Chairs*.

NOTES

1. Hackett. p. 287.
2. Hackett. p. 233.
3. Valency, p. 187.
4. Gilman, p. 120.
5. Styan, p. 143.
6. Chekhov, p. 12.
7. Gilman, p. 136.
8. Gilman, p. 137.
9. Hackett. p. 293.
10. Peace, p. 53.
11. Peace, p. 53.
12. Peace, p. 56.
14. www. russian vodka. ru, p.22.
15. Ibid, p. 23.
17. Stepun, p. 18.
18. Stepun, p. 23.
19. Stepun, p. 29.
20. Reshetar, p. 17.
21. Gannon, p. 184.
22. Valency, p. 221.
23. DCPA production notes, p. 2.
24. Stanislavski, p. 256.

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ACTIVITIES

Students know the characteristics, location, distribution, and migration of human populations.

Colorado Model Content Standard: Geography #4.1

During the late 19th century, immigration from Russia to the United States was unusually high. Research the historical events occurring in the Russian political and social environment that may have caused such a mass migration. (Hint: Look at the treatment of various religious groups.)

Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience.

Colorado Model Content Standard: Reading and Writing #6

Write a brief description of each character's life as they were before the Serebryakovs came to the estate. You may use the character list in this study guide to help you get started. What does each character learn about his/her life within the course of the play? Do you think his/her life changes after the Serebryakovs leave, if so, how?

Students analyze and assess the characteristics, merits, and meanings of traditional and modern forms of dramatic expression.

Colorado Model Content Standard: Theatre #5

Constantin Stanislavski is considered the watershed of acting theorists. He, primarily through the work of Chekhov, helped actors understand realism versus melodrama and how to re-create it on the stage. (See "Biography of the Playwright" on page 2.) One of the most important methods that Stanislavski invented was the idea of an "objective." **Objective** may be simply defined as what the character wants to gain or achieve in the course of the play. Decide what the objective of each character might be for *Uncle Vanya*. Next, identify the **super-objective** or the larger purpose of the play, in other words the **theme**. As Stanislavski described, "Anton Chekhov wrestled with the triviality of bourgeois life and it became the *leit motiv* of the majority of his literary productions."²⁴ Using your own words, describe the super-objective of *Uncle Vanya*.

Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.

Colorado Model Content Standard: Reading and Writing #4

Define each of the following terms and describe how they relate to the plot and/or characters of *Uncle Vanya*:

Ennui
Realism
Epiphany
Dormancy
Pastoral
Bourgeois

Students know and understand the characteristics of living things, the diversity of life, and how living things interact with each other and with the environment.

Colorado Model Content Standard: Science #3.1

Astrov, through his hobby of forestry, might be considered a

predecessor to the ecological movement of modern times. Why was Astrov concerned with forests and their destruction? Why is this still an issue today? Answer the following questions from Astrov's point of view and from the point of view of a modern scientist or researcher. How has science improved our knowledge about forests and their benefits?

- Why are forests important?
- What percentage of the earth was covered in forests 200 years ago versus today?
- Why is it important to preserve forests?
- What would happen to the earth if forests were completely destroyed?

Students apply knowledge of people, places, and environments to understand the past and present and to plan for the future.

Colorado Model Content Standard: Geography #6

In Act III, Astrov shares a map of the district he created outlining the various topographies of the land and how they have changed over 50 years. Create a similar map for your neighborhood. You may need to research the history of the area through personal interviews or resource materials in order to create a map from 50 years ago. Then, design a map as the area currently exists. Finally, make a map of this area for 50 years into the future. What trends do you see happening that may affect this area? Be sure to include a symbol key and legend/scale on your maps.

Students know how to use and construct maps, globes, and other geographic tools to locate and derive information about people, places, and environments.

Colorado Model Content Standard: Geography #1

In **1989-1991**, the USSR disbanded creating the "Commonwealth of Independent States." Use a map and other resource material to describe how this change affected the nation. How have boundaries changed for independent states? Can you find names of cities that changed? What has not changed in terms of boundaries, names or famous places? Plan a vacation to visit the new "Commonwealth of Independent States." What famous places would you like to see: rivers, seas, buildings, theatres, churches, examples of architecture, etc.?

Students use a variety of tools and techniques to measure, apply the results in problem-solving situations, and communicate the reasoning used in solving these problems.

Colorado Model Content Standard: Mathematics #5

Students know how to use maps, globes, and other geographic tools to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective.

Colorado Model Content Standard: Geography #1.1

Imagine you are Dr. Astrov who must plot his voyage from the Serebryakov estate in Turgenev to Kharkov. Find these places on a map and calculate how far apart they are. Assuming that you are traveling by horse and carriage, how long do you think it would take you to reach Kharkov? What if you are called to

visit Kursk? Using the most direct route, what is the shortest amount of time you could travel from Turgenev to Kharkov to Kursk and return to the Serebryakov estate?

Students understand the results of trade, exchange and interdependence among individuals, households, businesses, governments, and societies.

Colorado Model Content Standard: Economics #3

Students develop number sense and use numbers and number relationships in problem-solving situations and communicate the reasoning used in solving these problems.

Colorado Model Content Standard: Mathematics #1

Imagine that you are Sonya and it is your responsibility to settle the accounts of the estate. One bill charges 2 rubles, 75 kopeks. How much would this have been in American currency? Assuming the value has increased 15 times since the 1800s, what would the total sum be today? Exchange this amount into Russian currency. How much would Sonya be paying today? Use the same process to settle the bill for the grocer: 15 rubles and 25 kopeks.

Suggestions for Further Study

On Theatre

An Actor Prepares by Constantin Stanislavski
Building a Character by Constantin Stanislavski
My Life in Art by Constantin Stanislavski
My Life in the Russian Theatre by Vladimir Nemirovitch-Dantchenko
Acting the First Six Lessons by Richard Boleslavsky
Working on the Play and the Role: The Stanislavsky Method for Analyzing the Characters in a Drama by Irina Levin, Igor Levin
Stella Adler on Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov by Stella Adler, Barry Paris, ed.
To the Actor by Michael Chekhov
Inside the Moscow Art Theatre by Oliver M. Sayler

On Chekhov

The Seagull by Anton Chekhov
The Cherry Orchard by Anton Chekhov
The Three Sisters by Anton Chekhov
Stories by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, et al
Anton Chekhov: A Life by Donald Rayfield
The Notebook of Trigorin: A Free Adaptation of Anton Chekhov's the Sea Gull by Tennessee Williams, et al
Vanya on 42nd Street film directed by Louise Malle based on *Uncle Vanya*
Performing Chekhov by David Allen
Chekhov and his Russia by W.H. Bruford
The Chekhov Theatre: A Century of the Plays in Performance by Laurence Senelick

On Russia

Daily Life in Russia Under the Last Tsar by Henri Troyat
Photographs for the Tsar Photographs by Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorskii, edited by Robert H. Allshouse
The Russian Empire: A Portrait in Photographs by Chloe Obolensky and Max Haywood
Censorship in Russia: 1865-1905 by Daniel Balmuth

Denver Center Theatre Company

Donovan Marley, Artistic Director

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Daniel Renner, Director of Education
Linda Eller, Editor
Sally Gass, Contributing Writer
Linda Eller & Chris McCoy, Activities
Melinda J. Jaz, Designer

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