

HPEPA 2019

Humanistic Practice in Education in a Postmodern Age 2019

DRAMA BY A.P. CHEKHOV IN THE MODERN CULTURAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the consideration of the problem of the reception of dramatic works by A. Chekhov's contemporary directors, playwrights and writers. It is logical that the directors become not only interpreters, but also some kind of co-authors of the work, bringing their own nuances to the reading and comprehension of the plays, setting their own accents when staged. In recent decades, another version of "co-authorship" has been established: our contemporaries such writers as B. Akunin, L. Ulitskaya, L. Petrushevskaya, N. Moshina and others created remakes of Chekhov's plays. The authors taking literary source as a base write their works "based on" canonical plays ("The Seagull", "Three Sisters", "The Cherry Orchard"); experiment by placing heroes at another time (usually in modern reality); they conceive dramatic collisions and re-solve key conflicts of plays. Dramatic experiments on transferring the action of Chekhov's plays into the modern context, a kind of "transfer" of the past to the present are of undoubted interest. The heroes of the new dramatic works are "populated" by the doubles of Chekhov's plays but they exist in a different reality. The authors of the article investigate what kind of artistic problem writers solve by creating on the basis of classical texts, deliberately connecting a powerful stream of reminiscences connected with the masterpieces of Chekhov's drama to the perception of the modern reader and viewer.

2357-1330 © 2020 Published by European Publisher.

Keywords: Drama by A. Chekhov, pretext, remake, reminiscences, theatrical interpretations.



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1. Introduction

The modern literary process is inextricably linked with the heritage of the great predecessors. One of those that contemporary authors constantly appeal to is A. Chekhov, who outlined the development of literature and drama for many decades to come. The great writer realizing his creative mission wrote in a letter to A. Lazarev on October 20, 1888: “Everything I have written will be forgotten in five or ten years, but the paths that I have laid will be safe and sound - this is my only merit ...” (as cited in Chekhov, 1976, p. 38).

Numerous “remakes” written on the basis of the canonical plays (“The Seagull”, “Three Sisters”, “The Cherry Orchard”) unconditionally confirm the correctness of the words about the “laid paths”. Many modern playwrights create plays based on precisely those artistic discoveries that Chekhov introduced into Russian literature: the “undercurrent” of the narration, the subtext, which is distinguished by subtle psychologism. Works full of deep, ambiguously interpreted meanings give start to the creation of original texts inspired by the innovative playwright.

2. Problem Statement

The subject of consideration is the problem if this “co-authorship” of modern playwrights with Chekhov is ironic parody, travesty, or can it be taken as another proof of the invariance of human psychology, the statement of the moral and spiritual closeness of modern heroes living in a different temporal or cultural context, with their literary predecessors.

3. Research Questions

The subject of the article is the latest “remakes” - the works by L. Ulitskaya “Russian Jam”, N. Moshina “Pink Dress with a Green Belt” based on Chekhov’s books. The nuances of dramatic collisions are examined as well as the peculiarity of the plays conflict of modern authors who transferred the effect of their works to the 21st century.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the undertaken research is to find out what kind of artistic problem the authors try to solve by creating on the basis of Chekhov’s texts, deliberately connecting to the perception of the modern reader and viewer the stream of reminiscences associated with the works of the greatest playwright.

5. Research Methods

The basis of the study was the comparative and system-functional methods, as well as intertextual analysis techniques of works by contemporary authors.

6. Findings

Drama by A. Chekhov has long ago become an integral part of world culture with endless interest. This is evidenced by numerous modern theater interpretations, various types of co-authorship with the creator of an innovatively updated drama. There has been created a great variety of contemporary remakes of prose, comedies and dramas by Chekhov.

“Co-authorship” with the writer can be seen in two ways. The first one most widely represented, is the numerous directorial interpretations of the plays. Fair judgment by Hajnady (2015), who notes:

The directors consider the written texts of Chekhov’s plays to be not a finished work, but only a foundation that is finalized thanks to the creative community of the author, director, actor, scene designer and costume designer <...> Purpose of the production is to give a clear meaning a text that is “silent” without interpretation; to reveal what is hidden. (p.133)

Skipping the insoluble task of reviewing all the stage productions of recent decades, we will pay attention only to some of the latest interpretations of A. Chekhov on the stages of European and domestic theaters.

Polish director Christian Lupa staged Chekhov’s “The Seagull” at the Alexandrinsky Theater in St. Petersburg. According to researcher Bashinjaghyan (2016):

The director staged the play with careful thoroughness, but with unexpected twists: we won’t see the “witching lake”, but the witching power of the water will show itself. <...> A warning was sent to the estate: somewhere there, high, in the attic or around the corner of the roof, a huge, dusty water tank was already buzzing... It had been motionless for a long time. It began to spin only when the noise of complacency and indifference from below had reached its climax. Then everything happened like in Chekhov’s book: Nina and Treplev’s life was over. (p.182)

Variants of dramatic experiments on transferring the action of Chekhov’s plays into the modern context, a kind of “transfer” of the past to the present are of undoubted interest. This phenomenon has been the subject of an article in An Meyer-Fraatz (2011), who notes:

Especially in the last three to four decades, Chekhov’s relevance has often been emphasized by the transference of action at present. <...> One of the most radical examples of this kind of directing theater is the production of “Three Sisters” in the Zagreb Theater. In his final paper the young director Dario Kharyachek reduced the number of characters to three sisters and, in fact, rewrote the play, included fragments of the rest characters’ phrases not present on the stage in the phrases of three sisters (p.99).

The researcher comprehending this modern trend uses the term “transfer”, emphasizing its correlation and understanding of intertextuality but also reveals their fundamental differences:

Transformation of a classical text always includes the meaning of transfer in the sense of transfer from one cultural environment to another or one era to another. <...> Transfer occurs during parody, counterfeiting or travesty of the literary text. While intertextuality concerns issues of the text, mainly the equivalence of the secondary text with the primary one and how the meaning of the secondary text expands, the transfer deals with the problem of how the primary text changes when its elements are transferred to another temporal or cultural context. (Meyer -Fraatz, 2011, p.100)

The second direction is “co-authorship” with a great playwright, the creation of “remakes” of plays written “based on” Chekhov’s texts populated by heroes doubles, as well as the presentation of their own original options for continuing and completing collisions of his works. These latest remakes are written by both venerable and novice writers, they can be conditionally designated as “Three Sisters” +, “Seagull” +, “Cherry Orchard” +. The most famous remakes are the plays by B. Akunin “The Seagull” (2000), L. Petrushevskaya “Three Girls in Blue” (1989), L. Ulitskaya “Russian Jam” (2003) and the latest version - the one-act play by N. Moshina “Pink Dress with a green belt” (2018).

Questions arise what genre and stylistic features of the plays of the great writer make it possible to introduce a new, foreign word into his texts and what exactly allows filling the discharged atmosphere of Chekhov’s dramatic action with modern realities. It is important to understand whether these secondary alterations and layers are always organic, whether they create works that are new in meaning and spirit, without becoming rehash of the Chekhov’s dramas.

Chekhov’s drama is studied by domestic and foreign literary criticism. Particular attention in scientific works is drawn to the subtext of plays and the impressionistic beginning in the writer’s work. It seems that these concepts characterizing the features of the style of Chekhov’s dramatic works can be considered as deeply interconnected, almost identical.

The subtext is a complex artistic phenomenon that has not received an exhaustive theoretical understanding and definition. Varying motifs, nuances, artistic details, remarks, “rhyming” and discordant phrases of heroes and characters, interacting with each other, create a deep, hidden meaning, which involves many readings.

The artistic fabric of Chekhov’s plays is woven from many nuances, they all work in unison, creating a unique Chekhov’s intonation. Heroes are “here and now” in the stage space they are connected by invisible threads to the their own past by nostalgic associations. All artistic means contribute to the creation of a special, melancholy mood, emotionally charged remarks that do not have a clarifying, detailing character play a huge role in the play.

Amazing features of Chekhov’s remarks were noted by Kuleshov (1982):

Not all remarks can be played. <...> For example, Chekhov indicates in a remark of the first action: “The room which is still called the nursery.” Who is it called, the play has just begun, not a single word has been spoken yet. A little later, joyfully with the tears in her eyes, Ranevskaya will call the room her “former nursery.” So, Chekhov wants everyone to feel that this room is “nursery”. Or: “Dawn, the sun will rise soon.” What task does the remark set for the juicer and decorator? Or: “It’s

May already”, “but the garden is cold.” How to play “cold”? No words have been given for this (p.131).

An essential feature of Chekhov’s dramas is their fragmentation, the unfinished plot lines. In this context Hajnádý’s (2015) observation seems quite interesting:

In the play [“Three Sisters ”] there are characters who do not appear on the scene, for example, hysterical Vershinin’s wife, or Natasha’s lover. Chekhov did not consider necessary to show these characters, the rest only talk about them. He gave the recipient the freedom to conceive and complement these images himself. <...> The recipient must mentally repeat the path laid by the author, almost turning into a co-author. The playwright becomes more powerful through the things he did not say. We are grateful to him for letting us guess. (p.133)

Perhaps the most controversial play in the work of A. Chekhov is the drama “Three Sisters” (1900). For more than a century it has been on the stage of many domestic and foreign theaters, generating new directorial interpretations and numerous adaptations, the newest of them are “Three Sisters” by Valeria Bruni Tedeschi (2015), “Three Sisters” by Yuri Grymov (2017). Contemporary literature did not ignore this work as well. L. Petrushevskaya created her remake of “Three Sisters” - the play “Three Girls in Blue” (1989), and in 2018, the Ufa playwright Natalya Moshina wrote the mono-play “Pink Dress with a Green Belt”.

The person being in a pink dress with a green belt in a Chekhov’s drama is Natasha, she is the bride and future wife of Andrei Prozorov. It is easy to guess that she becomes the only character in the text. In the modern “version” of Chekhov’s drama, the image of Natalia, a provincial district young lady is unambiguous. If in the classical play this heroine is the embodiment of vulgarity and aggressive philistinism, a “rough animal”, then in the monoplay of a modern author she appears as a bearer of worldly wisdom, a person of the “golden mean” living simple and at the same time eternal joys and cares.

According to the author’s plan, Natalya appears in the play as a reasoner, expressing sound thoughts and giving accurate estimates of the life of the Russian middle class tired of hopelessness expecting the “upcoming storm”. Here are just a few examples:

Anyway [Andrei said]. And this is not from Christian readiness to accept any outcome, and not from some particularly exalted philosophical nature. These people did not live, but only prepared to live. Somewhere there in another place, in another time, in another society. Therefore, everything here and now was not important anyway. It seemed that the present for them did not exist: there was either the past, where they are in Moscow, and the mother is still alive, or some ideal, in the pink haze, the future. (Moshina, 2019, p. 17)

Is there any pleasure to run away from life, when it is here, nearby, just reach out your hand. Why is it necessary to talk constantly about some wonderful future, if the future comes every minute, and not

thirty years later, tomorrow is already the future, and you yourself can make it beautiful (Moshina, 2019, p. 18).

Sustainable motives of Chekhov's drama (garden, labor, tears, suffering, wilting, the upcoming storm) "migrate" to the Moshina's play. However, amusing transformations take place in the work of the modern author, which are filled with subtle authorial irony: the cherry orchard turns into "apple blossoms in the morning haze", the dream of creative work becomes a fulfilled prediction that in thirty years "Everyone will work! Everyone!". Chekhov's aphorism: "Everything should be fine in a person: face, clothing, soul, and thoughts" configures in a shorter version: "As someone said, everything in a person should be beautiful, including clothing" (Moshina, 2019, p. 19).

The place where the action takes place in Chekhov's "Three Sisters" is only guessed - this is one of the many provincial Russian towns, in the play by N. Moshina, the action was transferred to the shore of the Kama River, to Perm. Spatial and temporal coordinates are precisely indicated. The events recalled in the monologue are arranged in a clear chronological sequence: from 1897 to 1922. It is mentioned that G. Fedotova, A. Yablochkina, V. Komissarzhevskaya, M. Petipa toured the city; the first cars and electric lighting appeared, a cinema opened; when the time for historical cataclysms, devastation, famine, arrests came.

The mood of the transitional time is reflected in the thoughts of the heroine. Actually, her assessments of the Prozorov's family do not go beyond the standard philistine ideas about the Russian nobility:

I looked and thought that probably these three should have some very special, magical life: walks under the moonlight, family reading at a cozy crackling fireplace, noble courtship of loving officers, ballads. <...> One must have a collection of poems on her lap - something most modern and strange, some kind of Balmont (Moshina, 2019, p. 20).

In Chekhov's play (all dramatic conflicts are outside the scope of the stage action), built on the dialogues of heroes who practically don't hear each other, Natasha becomes the most energetic character. She remains the same in the mono-play "Pink Dress with a Green Belt". The sensible young lady in the play is not the winner, defeating the inspired dreamers - the Prozorov sisters, but defeated. Natalya loses everything. Irina Prozorova, who dreamed of breaking out of the stuffy provincial reality receives a new life in Moscow. However this is not the Moscow of her childhood, with a house at Chekhov's Staraya Basmannaya, but the capital of Soviet Russia (Moshina, 2019). The fate of Andrei and Masha was tragic. The first died of a stroke, and the second committed a suicide. Natalya, who dreamed of a joyful life had lost her son and daughter (the first died on Lake Baikal in 1920, the second left her mother for Moscow after her aunt Irina Prozorova in 1922), she remains completely alone. She picks up a mop and mops the floor in a provincial theater, thus earning herself crust. Therefore, she pronounces her whole passionate, full with bitterness and nostalgia monologue on the stage which ironically reduces the "revealing" pathos of her speech.

The multifaceted Time, Chekhov's heroes dreamed so much about, becomes the main character of the monopiece. The author combined historical and everyday, associated with the most important stages of

the transitional era of the late XIX and early XX centuries. We can say that in the play by Moshina there is no future not only for the suffering and shedding tears middle class, but also for those who live the most mundane and down to earth. “The far and beautiful future” turned out to be cruel to all heroes, and even the most predatory and practical Natasha was thrown to away. The new theatrical reception actualizes and fills with modern sounding the collisions originally laid down in the Chekhov’s play.

The play “Russian Jam” by Lyudmila Ulitskaya is an interpretation of Chekhov’s “Cherry Orchard”. The genre originality was discussed a lot of time. Researchers attribute it to the “series of endless sequels characteristic of postmodernism” (Zhang, 2016, p. 56), call it the “periphrasis of The Cherry Orchard” (Redko, 2011, p. 260), note the remake features that are easily found in the work: “partial continuation of the plot of “The Cherry Orchard”, a set of characters, a motive-thematic complex” (Burovtseva, 2010, 146).

The title of the play by L. Ulitskaya “Russian Jam”, in contrast to other modern remakes, which already have a dialogical relationship with Chekhov’s pretext in the nominative structure (compare B. Akunin’s play “The Seagull”, N. Iskrenko’s “Is the Cherry Orchard Sold?”, A. Slapovsky’s “My Cherry Orchard”, etc.), does not correlate with the predecessor text, but carries a parody beginning. The multilayer semantics of the image of the cherry orchard, perceived as a cultural concept of Russia, completely disappears in Ulitskaya’s play: it all comes down to the sort of cherry that the heroes of the work could not cultivate, and Russian jam, which is being prepared in the final of the play.

The play shows the Lepekhins family surviving in a market economy. All events take place in the “old neglected summer house” which crumbles in front of the heroes. At the same time, the Lepekhin’s house seems to recreate the Chekhov’s interior: a buffet, a grandfather’s decanter, a rocking chair, a piano, a bookcase. The older nostalgic generation idealizing the past recalls the childhood when they “ran around in the garden”, “rocked on a swing”, dreams of restoring the family archive, and the young live only by one day. The topic of general misery pervades the play. “The features of regressive utopia” (Olaszek, 2011) become characteristic of the life of the current summer house residents. However, the phrase of Rostislav, Natalya’s son, proposing to exchange the summer house for a prosperous “near Moscow region”, causes a storm of emotions of the heroes; since the summer house is perceived as a family nest, which is impossible to leave either physically or spiritually. This situation is perceived as a metaphor for historical choice with no escape.

Heroes give for rent the city apartment, returning to Moscow causes their rejection (Elena dreams of Paris, Lisa prefers Amsterdam, Elena’s husband Konstantin, talks about China and India). In Varvara’s remark: “It’s absolutely impossible to live in Moscow...” (Ulitskaya, 2008, p. 91), a hint at the Chekhov phrase “To Moscow, Moscow” can be found, which has become a popular expression. These two phrases come into conflict which indicates the intention of the maneuver, the sarcasm of the author, who grotesquely distorts the Chekhov text.

Chekhov becomes an invisible character in a modern play: he is present in the remarks of the work, in the phrases of the heroes: “Anton Chekhov composed a lot: exaggerated something, changed something ...” (Ulitskaya, 2008, p. 102). At the beginning of the play, a portrait of Chekhov hangs on the wall in the dilapidated living room of the Lepekhins, in the finale of the play, when nothing is left of the ancestral home, it is in the hands of Natalya. The circle closes. The heroes themselves recall Chekhov as a writer who once “portrayed” the Lepekhins family. True, according to Andrei, he had “some ironical approach”

and therefore they are eager to “restore justice” (Ulitskaya, 2012). The heroes also recall direct associations with the name of Chekhov, who “composed a lot, tared something, embellished somewhere, and raised something to the extreme” (Ulitskaya, 2008, p. 103). The intertextual game is laid already in the epigraph of the work - “afterchekhov”. The cultural myth of the great playwright, rooted in the minds of the modern reader is rethought: on the one hand, there is a direct recognition of the classics, on the other hand, the ironic inconsistency of modern life with the cultural and historical realities of the past.

The characters of the modern play are represented at a deeper intertextual level referring us to the Chekhov characters. Barbara Olaszek points to obvious associations of heroes by L. Ulitskaya with the characters of “The Cherry Orchard” and “Three Sisters” by A. Chekhov: Lepekhins Andrei and Natalya resemble Ranevskaya and Gaeva; the children of Natalya, the son Rostislav and the three daughters Varvara, Elena, Lisa, are comparable with the heroes of “Three Sisters”; Makanya, the housekeeper of the Lepekhins family reminds Uncle Vanya and Chekhov’s nannies, etc. (Olaszek, 2011). According to the researcher, L. Ulitskaya turned to contamination as a thoughtful reception of the presentation of characters. Among other heroes the image of the extra-scenic character of Ivan Lepekhin is unnoticed. His name corresponds with the name of the Chekhov’s hero of the Cherry Orchard, the merchant Yermolai Lopakhin. In our opinion a method of tracing Chekhov’s history - selling the cherry orchard - is connected with it: it all ends with the cultivation of a new sort of cherries. The repeatedly mentioned Ivan Lepekhin is represented as a breeder who received the Stalin Prize, an academician who “wanted to restore the local breed of cherries, but failed ...” (Ulitskaya, 2008, p. 132).

The story of Dudya’s father who didn’t succeed with cherries, but developed a new kiwi variety, and the “gooseberry “Dawn of Communism” was particularly good ” (Ulitskaya, 2008, p. 132) also fits into the context of the play; in addition, it reads the ironic reminiscence associated with the text of Gooseberry. We can talk about the “transfer” of the Chekhov plot to the present. Similar transformations are negatively estimated by N. Redko: “Modern authors demonstrate skill, but not art, a conscious attitude towards playing with tradition, eclecticism as the leading principle of text construction” (Redko, 2011, p. 261). However, this happens at the level of an intentional grotesque distortion of Chekhov’s pretext. The picture is complemented by Andrei’s remark about gardens that remained in the distant past: “When Lepekhin bought these lands, the gardens have finally died out” (Ulitskaya, 2008, p. 103). Obviously, at the level of subtext an inextricable relationship of times and eras is demonstrated, but it is presented in an ironic manner.

7. Conclusion

Explicit and implicit Chekhov quotes and reminiscences associated with pretexts, direct references to A. Chekhov, included by the authors in the picture of modern Russian reality perform certain functions. They become the original version of the polemic with a stereotypical perception of the works of Russian classics. Appealing to its predecessor modern authors conduct a complex and long dialogue between the past and the present. In the plays by L. Ulitskaya, “Russian Jam,” by N. Moshina, “Pink Dress with a Green Belt,” the action has been moved a century ahead. The heroes are explicit and implicit doubles of Chekhov’s heroes seem to continue the trajectory of the characters’ lives already beyond the framework of the canonical text. In some remakes the characters in the plays of the literary source can only be guessed, they

appear as a kind of reincarnation of the literary predecessors placed at other times and in other cultural realities.

Obviously it is precisely the subtext, the presence of a special atmosphere of Chekhov's works, full of omissions, semantic and emotional gaps, fragmentation, understatement, clipping of plot conflicts that push and provoke contemporary authors to original understanding and emotional "replenishment" of Chekhov's creations.

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