

## *Three Sisters* Program Notes

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Anton Chekhov accomplished what the sit-coms “Seinfeld” and “Friends” did at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thanks to Chekhov, a Russian living room circa 1900 can feel as familiar as Jerry Seinfeld’s New York apartment. Military officers, friends, and neighbors come into the Prozorov house as freely as Chandler enters Rachel and Monica’s apartment from across the hall, or as Kramer slides through Jerry’s never-locked front door. *Three Sisters* character Fedotik’s new contraption – the camera – captures candid moments with his assembled friends just as phones, MP3 players, and digital cameras snap pictures onto their micro memory cards today. The characters in *Three Sisters* obsess over love, work, Moscow, and their unrefined small town just as Seinfeld, Elaine, Kramer, and George obsess over “Yada-yada-yada,” or the six New York 30-somethings stare at “Ugly Naked Guy”. If Seinfeld was the first TV show about “nothing”, Chekhov wrote the first plays about “nothing.” But what is it about “nothing” that kept viewers glued to their TV’s for each week’s new episode, or keeps theatregoers lining up for tickets to any of Chekhov’s plays? Within this “nothing” is *something* that encourages laughter, wrenches the gut, tugs at the heartstrings, penetrates the soul.

Chekhov loved, most of all, the jokes that made him laugh at himself. He was aware of the humor that filtered into his own life from boyhood to his untimely death at forty-four. As a doctor, journalist, world traveler, family man and playwright, Chekhov saw the world from many different angles, and throughout an extraordinarily compressed, multi-tasking existence, was able to observe, examine, absorb, experience, dread, relish, loathe, and cherish the many different pieces of life that he encountered.

Chekhov was born at a time in Russia when the entire country was pulsating with change and growth. After the abolition of serfdom in 1861, he celebrated his first birthday in a brand new Russia. In his forty-four years, Chekhov witnessed rapid population surges which occurred in rural regions among the peasant class where the standard of living decreased as the size of families living in tiny huts increased. He experienced the Latin and Greek courses that were introduced to schools by newly developed county and city councils hoping to discourage poor students from advancing in school and turn them back to farming or enter the lowest ranks of the military. By the late 1880s, the Russian army became the largest peace-time force of any European country, deploying soldiers by the thousands into small towns to prevent any potential peasant uprisings. At the end of the 1890s, Russia was producing more steel, iron, and coal than ever and was economically ripe for trade with other nations. Unfortunately, the underdeveloped harbors and means of transportation across national borders made trade almost impossible. By 1899 (the year before Chekhov completed *Three Sisters*), Russia seemed to be on the verge of a socio-political revolution even more radical than that of Chekhov’s infancy.

Chekhov must have felt this change coming, as his most philosophical character Tuzenbach articulates in Act One of *Three Sisters*: “...there’s a storm gathering, a wild, elemental storm, it’s coming, it’s almost over our heads!” Throughout his lifetime, Chekhov experienced a world of people who affected his writing. As a doctor, he began his medical practice at twenty-four, traveled across rural Russian in all weather conditions tending to every ill family member or friend, diagnosed and treated whores and drunkards, conducted mental and physical studies of prison convicts in an effort to initiate national prison reforms, erected two primary schools in underdeveloped cities, and did his best to hide his own deadly tuberculosis from friends and family. As a journalist, he gossiped about Moscow’s exclusive social elite; as a

writer of fiction he saw his comedic and farcical stories viciously competed for, by publishers in St. Petersburg and Moscow. As a family man, he took financial care of his mother, father, four brothers, and sister, as well as occasional aunts, cousins, and uncles, from the age of sixteen until the end of his life. He repeatedly fell in and out of love (and love affairs) until, at the age of thirty-eight, he met actress Olga Knipper (who played Masha in the *Three Sisters* premiere), the love of his life and, in 1901, his wife. As a playwright, Chekhov synthesized his experiences as doctor, family man, writer, and lover. Many authors draw upon a vast array of life experiences, but few have come close to capturing reality or humanity with the same detail-driven sensitivity and ingenuity. Chekhov was uniquely attuned to the “nothingness”, the seemingly unimportant yet life-altering moments that make up every individual’s life; and much to the dismay of his contemporary critics, he put that “nothingness”, the minutiae of everyday life, on the stage. Chekhov’s early full-length plays confused and at times upset his audiences, but as he gained more experience and confidence, he flouted the conventions of the time to reveal an incredibly rich, often funny, and always dramatic world that was simultaneously closing in on itself and on the verge of exploding.

Through subtle, yet vivid, details, Chekhov reveals more than fifteen years of history behind the characters of *Three Sisters*. His snapshots – of a birthday, an impromptu dance, a snowy evening at home – can feel uncannily similar to the moments Jerry Seinfeld and George Costanza share in Jerry’s apartment, or Monica Geller and Rachel Green treasure at their coffee shop. Yet something much deeper hovers below Chekhov’s seemingly ordinary surface. In *Three Sisters* more than four years will pass; major, life-altering events will occur almost unnoticed. *Three Sisters* is a mosaic of snapshots pulled from the quiet, cataclysmic changes, and Chekhov, using time as the glue, unified these moments by leaving the space between the pieces. Like our Russian counterparts in *Three Sisters*, we too experience our lives from moment to moment, piece by piece, unaware of a narrative through-line full of drama worthy of the stage. A love affair, unrequited passion, fidelity, intense jealousy, the tightest of family bonds, philosophical and political musings, and ardent hopes for the future create a marvelous mosaic in which Chekhov invites us to recognize ourselves.

– Jenny Jacobs

## Captions



“A *samovar!*” – Olga, Act I

**Samovar:** A samovar was traditionally given by a husband to his wife on their silver or golden anniversary, not on birthdays. It is even more inappropriate for a sixty-year-old Doctor to present it to a girl forty years his junior.



“Wonderful, uncomplicated birch trees.” – Lieutenant Colonel Vershinin

**Birch Trees:** Birch trees have been called the “symbol of the Russian soul.” In Russian folk legends it was believed that touching a birch tree restored emotional health and helped reduce stress. Parents thought carved birch bark would ward off evil spirits from their children.





*Ryazhenye* (Carnival People) toured cities and were invited into homes to entertain for the evening.

“When are the carnival people coming?”  
– Irina, then Tuzenbach, Act II

**Butter Week:** *Maslenitsa* is similar to American Mardi Gras and takes place in late February for the entire week leading up to Orthodox Lent. The foods eaten during this week are as fatty and buttery as can be. Entire towns were turned into wonderlands of wild and fantastic diversions. Shows, troupes of performers and artists called



*Troikas* (Russian sleighs), with their many bells, flowers, ribbons, and special harnesses, glided across the countryside. (An illicit lover who brings a troika to pick up his adulterous partner for a late-night tryst is drawing the most attention possible to their “sleigh-ride.”)

from “On Morality: A Carnival Tale” a short story by Anton Chekhov, 1886



Court Counselor Semyon Petrovitch Podtikin sat down at the table, spread a napkin across his chest, and quivering with impatience, awaited the moment the blini would appear... Finally, the cook arrived with the blini. At the risk of scorching his fingers, Semyon Petrovich snatched up two of the hottest from the top of the pile and slapped them onto his plate with gusto. The blini were crisp, lacy, and as plump as the shoulders of a merchant’s daughter. Podtikin smiled affably, hiccupped with pleasure, and doused the blini in hot butter. Then, as if to tease his appetite, luxuriating in anticipation, he slowly, deliberately heaped them with caviar. He poured sour cream over the places the caviar left bare. Now he had only to eat, right? Wrong! Contemplating his creation, Podtikin was not quite satisfied. After a moment’s thought, he topped the blini with the oiliest slice of salmon he could find, and a sprat, and a sardine; then, no longer able to hold back, trembling with delight and gasping, he rolled up the two blini, downed a shot of vodka, wheezed, opened his mouth – and was struck by an apopleptic fit.

Copyright © Jenny Jacobs, February 2007

**People's Names:** Each Orthodox Russian is named after the saint whose name day is closest to his or her actual birth date. Irina was named after St. Irene and celebrates her Name Day (or Birthday) on St. Irene Day, May 5, even though Irina may not have been born on that exact date. Anton Chekhov was named after Saint Anthony and so celebrated his birthday on January 17 instead of his actual January 16 date of birth.

Every Russian has a given name and a last name; then there is a middle name, a *patronymic*, based on the father's name. Example: Andrei Sergeyevich Prozorov is the son of Sergey Prozorov; Andrei's sisters are Olga Sergeyevna (the feminine version), Masha Sergeyevna and Irina Sergeyevna.



*“Your father was a battery commander in Moscow, and I was an officer in his command.”*

– Vershinin, Act I

In 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia a colonel had command of a regiment with 2000-3000 soldiers. Lieutenant colonels managed the batteries of 650-1000 soldiers. A total of six batteries occupy the town where the three Prozorov sisters and their brother live, which means their home away from Moscow is filled with over 18,000 military men. (Pictured: almost an entire Regiment of over 2000 soldiers marching in Red Square, Moscow)

*“How wonderful it must be not to know whether it's winter or summer.”* – Masha, Act II

Because of Russia's high latitude, the sunset and sunrise vary drastically depending on the season. In the peak of summer, sunset could occur at midnight and sunrise at about 4:00 am. In the winter, sunrise could be as late as 11:00 am followed by sunset at about 3:30 pm. Winter is the most prominent season in Russia, with a few months of summer and minimal weeks of spring and autumn on either side. The average winter temperature for Russia is around five degrees Fahrenheit; sometimes Moscow endures thirteen to twenty-two degrees below zero.

*“Masha, don't whistle like that! Really!”* – Olga, Act I

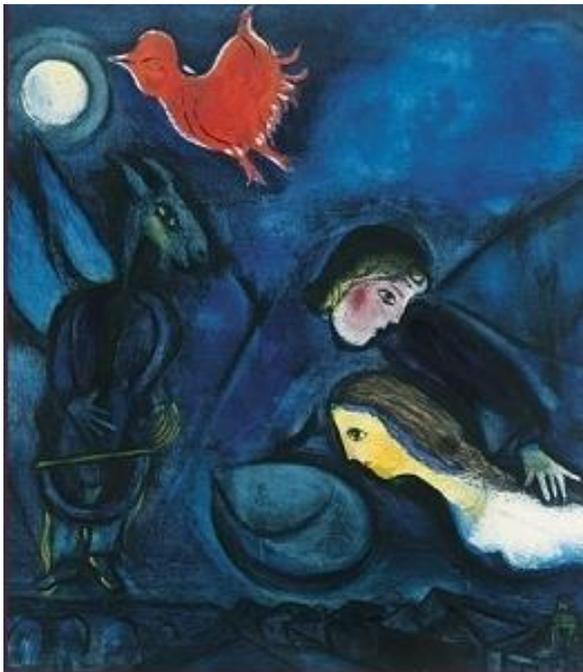
Whistling indoors used to be considered a sin because it was thought to invite and entertain the devil.

*“Feci quod potui, facian meliora potentes”* – Kulygin  
*“Je vous prie, pardonnez...”* - Natasha

Ever the school teacher, Masha’s husband Kulygin constantly quotes Latin phrases he has learned and taught to students over the years. Chekhov struggled most with Latin and Greek in primary school, which may shed light on the affectionate send-up of Kulygin’s comprehensive Latin quotes. (Picture of Chekhov’s primary school in Taganrog)



Natasha’s French is of a less pedagogical nature. It was the fashion at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to be fluent in everything French. Every good housewife had Elena Molokhovets’ book “A Gift to Young Housewives,” gave their children French names, copied French fashions, and employed French phrases wherever she could. But Natasha struggles with her French and French names. When her son was born, she gave him the most popular French name she could think of – Bobik. Little did she know that Bobik was popular in France because it was the name every French woman was giving to her little lapdog.



*“Forget thy wrath, Aleko! Forget they dreams...”*  
- Solyony, Act II

Aleko is the hero of the romantic verse tale “The Gypsies” by Aleksandr Pushkin (1824). Aleko, depressed by civilization, turns his back on elegant St. Petersburg and lives with the gypsies; he falls in love with a gypsy girl and commits a murder out of jealousy. (Poster for Rachmaninov opera *Aleko* designs by Marc Chagall)



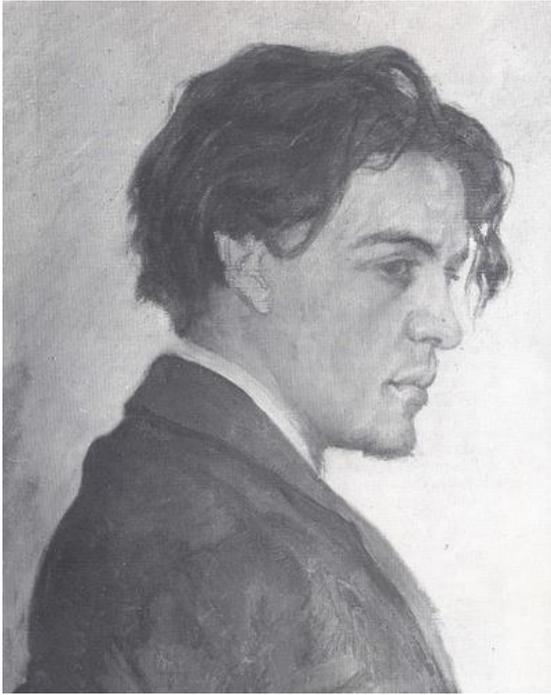
*“Beside the sea there stands a tree...”* – Masha

A quote from the famous fairy tale poem *Ruslan and Lyudmilla* by Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837), Russia’s most famous poet. Russians know poems, especially Pushkin’s, the way Americans know stories like *Little Bo Peep*, *The Old Woman in the Shoe*, or *Three Little Pigs* – but Russians memorize the poems word for word. On her wedding night, Lyudmilla is abducted by a wizard and Ruslan finds her only after many adventurous encounters including a truth telling cat and a giant talking head.

*“I think a person has to believe in something, or has to look for something to believe in, otherwise his life is empty, empty...Just to live and not know why the cranes fly, why children are born, why there are stars in the sky...Either you know the reason why you’re alive, or nothing makes any difference.”* – Masha, Act II



Anton’s garden in Yalta, so far away from Moscow, was kept company by two cranes. Legends hold that the crane lives for a thousand years, and symbolizes peace and long life. Many different species of cranes live in Russia.



Anton Chekhov as painted by brother Kolia, 1884



Chekhov family and friends, April 1890



Anton Chekhov with wife Olga Knipper, 1901