

A FEW WORDS ABOUT CHEKHOV

I. Duo

Olga Knipper (mezzo-soprano)
We met in 1898 at one of the
Moscow Art Theatre's early rehearsals
of "The Sea-Gull."

We actors were filled with immense excitement at this first meeting with Anton Pavlovitch, the author beloved by us all.

How exhilarating it was to feel in that dark, empty theatre that he who was our 'soul' sat listening.

We did not know how to take his words - in jest or in earnest. He looked at us, sometimes with a smile, sometimes with the utmost gravity, pinching his beard, twirling his pince-nez by its cord.

Anton Chekhov (baritone)
We met in 1898 at one of the
Moscow Art Theatre's early rehearsals
of "The Sea-Gull."

An actor
asked me to discuss the character of the author in "The Sea-Gull." I replied,
"Why, he wears check trousers!"

Another actor
wanted to know what one was to make of a certain role. I answered,
"The best you can."

Ah, but
Olga Knipper, *she* was magnificent.
Voice, dignity, earnestness - her acting was so good it brought a lump into my throat. She was the best of them all.

Had I stayed in Moscow, I should surely have asked her to marry me!

II. Solo (Olga)

On the 25th of May we were married.
From then on, we were constantly parting,
always seeing each other off,
always having to say 'goodbye.'
Though his heart was drawn to Moscow,
for his health he had to live in Yalta -
his 'warm Siberia,' he called it.

Through his efforts and great love
for everything the earth brings forth
he transformed a wilderness into a
luxuriant, exquisite varied garden.

Still he always yearned to be in Moscow -
to be near the theatre among actors, to talk, to joke,
to be near life, to watch it, feel it, take part in it -
even so, he took a simple, wise and beautiful attitude
to his bodily dissolution, saying it is because
'God has put a bacillus into me.'

III. Solo (Anton)

*It's the devil who has put this bacillus into me
and the love of art into you, Olga!*

Yalta November 12th

We are having glorious weather for November,
although for the past few days it has been pouring down
incessantly.

It is so damp that toads and frisky young crocodiles
are hopping about all over the garden.
The performing fleas continue to serve the sacred cause of
art. There is even an operetta at the theatre.

Oh, if only we could spend five years together, and
then let old age catch us; then we should really have
something to remember. But, what is the use of talking about it?

And though the weather here is magnificent for
November, it would be far nicer in Moscow,
in Moscow, driving in a sledge with you.

God bless you, my little German. I love you, but you
have known for ages now.

I send you 1,013,212 kisses.

IV. Duo

Olga

Chekhov as I knew him was the Chekhov of the last six years of his life - slowly growing weaker in body but at the same time stronger in spirit, stronger in mind.

The impression left by those six years is one of anxiety, and of rushing from place to place - like a sea-gull, a sea-gull over the ocean, not knowing where to alight: endless trips between Moscow and Yalta; dreams of traveling along northern rivers, traveling to Sweden and Norway. And the most cherished dream of all:

to travel through Italy which allured him with its colors, its pulsing life, and above all, its music and flowers.

Anton

My darling: the winter is so very long, I am not well, no one has written to me for nearly a month - and I had made up my mind that there was nothing left for me but to go abroad to someplace new, to a place where it is not so dull.

You are living, working, hoping, drinking; you laugh when someone says something amusing. I am a different matter, I am torn up by the roots.

I am not living a full life; I don't drink, though I am fond of drinking; I love excitement and don't get it - in fact I am like a transplanted tree... hesitating whether to take root or to wither.

V. Solo (Olga)

Our first performance of "The Cherry Orchard" was a triumphant occasion, but there was a feeling of anxiety, a sense of something ominous in the air. I do not know.

(Anton: When are you going to take me away?)

Chekhov listened very gravely, very attentively to all the speeches read in his honor, but from time to time he threw up his head and it seemed as though he were taking a bird's-eye view of all that was going on, as though he had no part in it, it was nothing to do with him...

(Anton: When are you going to take me away?)

...and characteristic lines appeared around his mouth, his face lit up by a soft, twinkling smile. Still I could not escape the sense of something immense swooping down upon me. I do not know.

VI. Solo (Anton)

There is a feeling of black melancholy about your letter, dear actress - 'something immense swooping down upon me' and so on.

You must think about the future, otherwise we shall never live, but go on sipping life from a tablespoon, once an hour.

When are you going to take me away?

We shall go first to Vienna, stay a day or two, then on to Switzerland, then to Venice (if it is not too hot) then to Lake Como, where we shall take a villa and settle down properly.

VII. Duo

Olga

Anton

We went instead to Badenweiler, a health resort in the Black Forest.

One night he woke up, and asked for the doctor to be fetched. The doctor came and ordered champagne. Chekhov sat up and said aloud to the doctor:

"Ich sterbe..."

Then he took the glass, turned to me, and with his wonderful smile he said:

'It's been a long while since I have drunk champagne.'

He calmly drank it to the last drop, quietly lay down and soon afterwards sank into silence forever.

A huge black moth burst in and dashed itself in terror against the electric light. The doctor went away.

Gradually it began to get light. I stood alone on the balcony and there in the stillness I looked at the rising sun.

You ask what is life? That is just the same as asking what is a carrot. A carrot is a carrot, and nothing more is known about it.

Then I looked at the lovely, serene
face of Anton Pavlovich, smiling as
though with the comprehension of
something. . .

There had never been such a
moment in my life.

Nor, I suppose, will there ever
be again.

based on "A Few Words About Tchehov" by Olga Knipper-Tchehov (1924)
and "Letters of Anton Tchehov" (1899-1904)
Edited and arranged by the composer