

MY CHEKHOV LIGHT

A Play

By

FRANK GAGLIANO

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Characters

Professor Peter Paradise

Martin (Off/not heard)

Carl (Off/Not heard)

Carla (Off/Not heard)

Time

The Present

Place

Bodoni County Junior College

The World Premiere of  
MY CHEKHOV LIGHT  
took place at  
The E.T.A. Hoffmann Theater,  
Studio Space on Marcusplatz,  
Bamberg, Germany,  
on 28 November 1998

It was translated into German by Jurgen Schlunk  
under the German title,  
MEIN TSCHECHOW-LICHT.

It starred Ernst Hofstetter as Peter Paradise

It was directed by Georg Immelmann  
It was designed by Dietmar Tessmann  
Sound Design was by Jurgen Hanelt  
Lights were by Marcus Gropner

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Review by Gottfried Pelnasch (translated: Jürgen Schlunk) Fränkischer Tag,  
Monday, November 30, 1998

“Powerfully Thoughtful Farewell from Yesterday”

Frank Gagliano's Monologue Play "My Chekhov Light" has European Premiere, 28  
November, 1998, in Bamberg's E.T.A. Hoffmann Theatre's Studio Space.

Peter Paradise has a problem. Not so much with himself but with the world in which he lives. For the aging professor, director, and writer for whom true art is still an "obligation," and values, morals, and tradition still mean something, the present, with its obsession with money and television, represents a world "in which the shit dominates," and in which all poetry has fallen by the wayside.

Instead of giving up, Peter Paradise is working hard to realize his dream and vision: at the Studio Theater of his university, he is searching for the perfect Chekhov light to complete his quest: A quest for meaning in the ivory tower. For a moment he believes to be close to his goal; that his Chekhov light will beam him "away from the lowest common denominator shit down here," up into the great star stuff. But the present cannot be halted, there is no place for ideals. Abruptly, the spotlight fades out into dark nothingness.

Do we have a problem with Peter Paradise? Who or what is this man? A fragmented soul or a hopeless case because he refuses to embrace the future? A Don Quixote who fights against the unstoppable windmills of time and who celebrates his farewell from yesterday with ecstatic fervor? Or are we admiring the appeals to steadfastness by a resistance fighter who is holding on to thoroughly worthy ideals, suffering and hoping with a sympathetic relic-of-a-man who knows that his days, his life, and his world are numbered?

With MY CHEKHOV LIGHT, the American author Frank Gagliano serves to us an edgy theatrical play of ideas, pregnant with thought and requiring time to digest. One could endlessly debate with Peter Paradise the parallel to Chekhov's "Cherry Orchard" with its reflection on the societal end of an era and its melancholic farewell. There is much substance here, especially in the intricately designed "speech gestures" by the protagonist, whose orgy of words are repeatedly interrupted by staccato-like sentence fragments and myriad reflections.

At first reading "a somewhat dry impression," Georg Immelmann, the director of Saturday night's European premiere at the Bamberg StudioTheater, states in the program notes; but then he and the artistry of a single actor create for the

audience an entertaining and impressive theatre event which comes to life on stage. Ernst Hofstetter is Peter Paradise. Alone with himself and his theater in the theater -- a light bridge extending from wall to wall with spotlights and cable chaos (stage design: Dieter Teßmann) -- Hofstetter dissects the tragicomical up into the character's remotest corners. In him someone is suffering, swaggering, poking fun, protesting, reasoning, screaming, crying, despairing, and rebelling; one who truly appears to be "light-years away from the real world," but whose vulnerability, whose self-sacrificing attempt to find himself, we accept -- because he is a human being, which means he is one of us.

A monologue, but not at all monotonous--thanks to the confrontational-dialog which Peter (via headphone with mike) has with Martin, his former favorite student and current representative of the "obscene bucks," who remains invisible in the control room, and with the lighting designer Carl (via amplifying PA system)--both of whose responses we never get to hear.

The actor doesn't try to hide the contradictions of his role. On the contrary: freely based on Chekhov, who, even in his deepest melancholy, did not exclude humor and cheerfulness, Hofstetter creates a multifaceted character-study of phenomenal range, with frequently opposing states of emotion.

Shock and laughter coexist, and the growing tension unexpectedly dissolves. For example, when Peter, waiting to be "beamed up," unfolds his "kaleidoscope of great art works," standing in the midst of a crescendoing multimedia extravaganza of Mozart's "Lacrimosa," Sinatra, Warhol pop faces, and after the sound recording of the snapping string from the "Cherry Orchard," which is supposed to bring salvation, reverberates off stage, Peter sheepishly admits: "It didn't work."

Here, Hofstetter evokes laughter in the audience rather than shock. And this is not the only point where the production skillfully combines music, painting, and light in an atmospheric totality. The successful premiere of the play sheds light on many life situations. By consciously leaving some question marks standing, the author makes sure that enlightenment does not come automatically. For Frank Gagliano, who had traveled here for the premiere, and for the others, there was sustained applause in the end.

WHAT “MY CHEKHOV LIGHT”  
IS ALL ABOUT

". . .Oh, Martin, where has it all gone? My life, my youth, my loves, my  
artistry, my joy."

In a University black box theatre, a television star returns to give his alma mater a large donation for a new theatre, and confronts his former mentor—the now embittered, desperate and betrayed lighting designer, Professor Peter Paradise.

In this one-performer, theatrical star turn, and in an orgy of words and over-the-top emotions, Professor Peter Paradise lacerates himself for his failed relationships and career, berates his student for selling out, and creates a multi-media extravaganza of image, sound, and light -- his “Chekhov light” —which, he’s sure, will get him to transcend all his pain —and break free from all of the “bottom-line shit down here.”

". . .an edgy theatrical play. . .an orgy of words . . .repeatedly  
interrupted by staccato-like sentence fragments and myriad  
reflections. . .One could endlessly debate the parallel to Chekhov's  
'Cherry Orchard,' with its reflection on the societal end of an era and its  
melancholic farewell:"

Frankischer Tag; Bamberg, Germany.

[Professor Peter Paradise  
is focusing lights in the  
black box theatre)

PETER PARADISE  
(Speaking into mouthpiece/head set)

It's unfortunate, Martin, that the things we tend to remember —to dwell on, as we —what's the phrase?. . .ah!—"advance in years" —if not in wisdom. . .are the things of regret.

—I was just regretting —in fact, "dwelling on"—the recent loss of my wife and—. . .Well.

. . .—Oh, thank you, that's very kind; but don't waste your tears, she didn't die; she ran out on me. They all do—did, of course; but this one, I truly regret. Harriet. Harriet Callabro.

. . .—No! Harriet isn't a student. Like all of the others. Ha! —I'm laughing because I see you remember that. I suppose that was the talk when you were a student here; Professor Peter Paradise and his "Penchant" for students.—It's true, I always felt safer with students; more at home with them. . . .Well, grownups never do give one the adulation one demands, and this grownup, as you'll recall, Martin, always demanded adulation; but, as you'll also recall. . . and as I now understand. . . this grownup couldn't give any adulation back.

—I can now, though, Martin; I can adulate a student, if he—slash she—has earned it. —Now!

. . .Students, yes. "Penchant," yes. The blonde young things, especially; with the plump buns. —At least I married them!

. . .though I never gave them children. —No, Harriet isn't—a student. She's faculty. And a grownup. English department. A poet. Closer to my age.

. . .—Too close? . . .Too close.

. . .Dark haired. With no plumps. Sweet. And, with things in common. . . .Still, she runs out on me. Of course. . . .Well.

--What? . . . —No no, not yet!

I don't want you in here--yet! It wouldn't do.

—With all this mess, I mean.

The cables, all over the floor down there, like --what was it you used to call them? —back in the old days, Martin?

. . . Ah! Yesyesyes! Right! “Like eels, ugh!” you'd say! “Undulating and shifting under my feet, ugh!” You'd say.

—God, how you hated working backstage crew, fastidious Martin!

—always the star, Martin! . . . even then.

But who knows—and miracles of miracles—you might be moved to join me up here—help me, perhaps; and this filthy plank I'm standing on—between the filthy ladders—is downright “filthy!”—not to mention, shaky! and I'll be bouncing up and down, adjusting, focusing lights and anyway, there's all the other—stuff to trip over; the stuff of —the detritus of—

theatre-in-the-making; all over this space—Hm.

. . . “The Theatre Of Detritus.”

There! You see, Martin?! I've just coined a phrase for the Theatre of our time; and you're in on that coining. Lucky you.

—No! Until it's safe for me to allow you in— it's best you stay up there in that observation room, observing me.

. . . While I observe you.

—Well lit and clear, you are.

Am I well lit and clear to you?

. . . —Good! Then that's clear.

—Yes, this is best; the intercom, my headphones. I hear you perfectly.

Do you hear me perfectly?

. . . —Good. Then that's perfect.

—And so are you— perfect—perfectly turned out; sleek and tailored; very high style, I'm sure

—like in that recent print ad you're in; with milk all over your upper lip.

—Which must have taken a lot of actor preparation, I shouldn't wonder.

—Hel-lo! I'll bet you bought your high-style look at one of those fancy stores on —what's the name of that place out there?—where those fancy clerks were held hostage and killed some years back?

. . . —Yes! Thank you; "Rodeo Drive." —Now, don't tell me it's off the rack at K Mart, that outfit! —No? Thank "Whatever." If you've got it you should flaunt it—on your back! —The American way. Right? —What was I say

. . .ing?

. . .—"Regrets!" Yes. I regret, for example, that I did not instill in you a stronger obligation to your art. . . .—No no! "I do blame myself." I'm a teacher and a teacher's job —one of them— is to

. . ."instill."

On the other hand, I instilled it in myself; art; once—and look what I've become. . .

—What?

. . . —Omewhatever! I thought that's what you said: "Noble profession?"

. . . "The most noble?"

. . . "Responsible for turning out future—? "—Martin, please! you mustn't make an ass—you'll forgive my French, as my mother used to say—hole of yourself. One, finally, must face facts, Martin: As a teacher I've turned out nothing—or no one of value; including—you'll forgive me — you!

—And as for me, now —well, I'm tenured and I'm dead and tenured dead men have no nobility whatsoever. None.

—CARL! CUE NUMBER TEN PLEASE!

—Oh! Carl, Martin, is one of my students. Lighting major and—

—Oh! Forgive me, Martin; for startling you that way—not warning you about this hand mike; the amplification. That must have hurt your ears! But it's necessary to make contact with Carl; he's so intense and focused, he often forgets to stay on earphones; and he's like a monkey. I never know where he might be climbing at any given moment in this space—which, by the by, we've made into a veritable sound studio—so I often need to be heard over music and other sounds and—whoops!

—prepare your ears, Martin; another mike-message for Carl coming up!

—NOT A FADE IN, CARL; BUMP UP CUE TEN.

. . . --THANK YOU!

—Carl's a lighting genius, Martin, and I need

. . .such genius now.

. . .I don't design lights much anymore —don't do much of anything anymore; just direct; student productions. The Classics, mostly.

—The tried and true, anyway.

So I depend on my lighting genius Carl. He's trustworthy; and a loner—like you were, Martin, back in the old days; and "other worldly" . . .like you were, Martin, back in the old days; and even a tenured dead man needs trustworthy, loner, "other worldly," allies for his little . . ."other world" secret campaigns—and I have such a secret "other world" campaign.

. . .—Oh my good "Whatever!" —I just remembered! We had a secret campaign, you and I, Martin, back in the old days! Remember?

Yesyes!--let me see

. . .—yes, it was after my last Off-Broadway production. I came back to the campus--cruuusssshhhhed! —The New York Times had annihilated me. It was one of those "tsk!tsk! he's lost his talent" obit reviews; mixed with "that's what he gets for going all artsy and choosing language over-bloat plays to light and direct and losing the common touch blah blah" and you—

. . .you, Martin, really felt for me. . .my pain. . .and cried. . . and tried to cheer me up

. . .said, "you're in the big leagues with the great ones,

Peter; and they're in the minors and, therefore, they can't see it

—see you."

. . .Hardly true; but you said that, you really did. Said "and, therefore."

And somehow it was that "and therefore" that stood out; that moved me then. . .and moves me now.

. . .—And then you suggested—as therapy—that we—yes—make an audio tape of all the great bits and pieces of great literature that I loved, that I felt kinship with; and every so often we would play that tape—that little loop of great model pieces in my tiny office; through the largest speakers we could find; and the room itself became a speaker; and we'd switch off the lights and only let the moonlight in; and were transported into an out-of-space experience; and seemed as if we were about to truly touch the great ones!

. . .—And can you remember what the very first great piece was that I recorded? . . . —From Hamlet! Act III; Scene I. . . ."What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?" —Remarkable! You, Martin, were responsible for starting—Well, you see, I've continued the recordings of the words of the great ones over the years!—and not only words; great music, too! —and great art!

—CARL! PLAY SOME OF THAT GREAT STUFF; THE WORDS-STUFF ON THAT LAST LOOP! THE LAST LOOP I RECORDED!

. . .—GOOD, CARL!

—do you recognize any of it, Martin?—That one!

"Astride of a grave and a difficult birth—" Beckett, Carl. Beckett!

—AND THE "LACRIMOSA" CARL! PUT THAT ON, TOO.

. . .Good!

—the "Lacrimosa" Martin.

That means "tears."

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

That's going to be an essential one if I'm ever to do--it.

—AND THE ART, CARL! FLASH THE PICTURES OF GREAT ART AROUND THE ROOM AND ON THE STAGE FLOOR!

—YES! —YES! —YES!

—AND EVEN THE POP STUFF—THOSE GREAT FACES

—THE KIND THAT DON'T EXIST ANYMORE!

—CARL! FREEZE ON THE FLOOR THE FACE OF AVA GARDNER AND SUPERIMPOSE ON IT THE PICTURE CALLED "THE SCREAM"

—BY EDVARD MUNCH!

. . .—YES! YES! CARL! MARVELOUS!

—A kaleidoscope! Like being inside a kaleidoscope of great stuff; is it not, Martin?!

--WE'RE GETTING THERE, CARL! WE'RE ALMOST THERE, IN FACT! --  
NOW CUT IT, CARL! CUT EVERYTHING! PLEASE! . . . —GOOD!

—In fact, Martin, I may have to cut our meeting short because those tapes and art works--and you can see how necessary the mike is to be heard over all that and—oh, yes, I'm also expecting another ally—a student named Carla— genius, too, I think. And, like Carl, another focused monkey. In physics, though. Computers. She's been programming all that in this space

—"that," being the slide and sound razzle-dazzle you just heard and saw  
—in this space!

—Incredibly impressive; n'est pas, Martin? N'est pas!?

—with a minor in music, has Carla, would you believe!--and Carla may have some very important news for me about those recordings and other  
—music; one last piece we apparently need; and, of course, we haven't solved the problem of the proper snapping string yet

—ha!ha!

—You don't know "what the hell I'm talking about!"

—How could you!

—But Carla may come in with a solution--one that may change—Ha!—my very—Ha!Ha!—"existenceHAHA!"

So be prepared, Martin; if Carla does come I may have to boot you out of this theatre.

But to think! you started it all, the idea for the taping, and. . .

—Ah!

Good!

Beautiful!

—THANK YOU, CARL!

. . .Isn't this light beautiful, Martin?

. . .another reason why I can't let you enter yet;  
the light from that doorway would kill this light;

. . .this light we call: "My Chekhov light!"

. . .—And listen to that! Isn't that beautiful, Martin?

—YES, CARL, LEAVE THAT ONE ON. . . .-- AND I DO THINK IT'S A BETTER RECORDING! DID CARLA SEND THAT OVER?

. . .-- GOOD! THEN IT MUST HAVE THE PROPER PROPERTIES—DECIBELS—FREQUENCIES—WHATEVER.

LET IT PLAY AWHILE!

—That music cue that Carl just cued into the ether to homogenize with my Chekhov light, Martin, is Lensky's aria; from Eugene Onegin; by Tchaikovsky.

. . .We needed to find just the just-right, elegant music cue that seems to epitomize the Chekhov world, and this music seemed to be it.

—LET IT PLAY UNDER AWHILE, CARL. BUT SOFT, SOFT. . . .

. . .—Do you remember your Chekhov, Martin?

. . .—Ah! Very good, Martin! That's right! You did play Trofimov in "The Cherry Orchard." Trofimov; one of Chekhov's perennial students. And I did direct you in it. And lighted the show. I wasn't sure you'd remember.

—By that I mean that the silly shit-roles you're known for on television now, are light years away from a role like Trofimov, so I wasn't sure you'd want to remember that you once had to act real roles and—huh?. . . Oh, yes, "the real world!" —one of the constant motifs in your letters to me over the years:

"That's the way it is in the real world!"

"You've got to survive in 'The Real World'," you'd write.

As opposed, I suppose, to this "fake" university world!--Bullplops, Martin!!!

—CARL, KILL THE MUSIC PLEASE! —THANK YOU! WHILE I TELL MARTIN ABOUT HIS SO-CALLED "REAL WORLD."

. . .Martin,

You have been married  
two times in ten years  
in "the real world."  
But I have been married  
three times in that time;  
so what's new?

In this town some screw without blessing of clergy;  
others stay married, but still fool around;  
so what is the difference between your  
"real world" and mine?

The people you deal with,  
you wrote, are the slime  
in your "real world;"  
but some of the slimiest people I know  
own this town.  
Of course they will sell out their mothers and fathers;  
then show disgust for a world that's gone bad;  
so what is the difference between your  
"real world" and mine?

On the other hand  
here there's a fine university leading the way,  
you'll say.

With a road going back to the Greeks  
and a detour through Egypt and Rome;  
and an exit for Cultures and Races and spiritual light  
that one certainly mustn't dismiss;  
but what is the use of all that  
when those same roads lead to the abyss?

The work that you do  
 is the work that you hate,  
 in the "real world."  
 But now all the plays I direct  
 are just history to me.  
 In your line they won't touch a new show that's risky;  
 I won't touch plays unless footnotes are there;  
 so is there a difference between your  
 "real world" and mine?

—Hardly.

Sunshine will shine or will never shine—  
 people will whine or will never whine—  
 Car wheels align or will not align—  
 God will or will not reveal a sign—

Lovers will part or will intertwine—  
 Sex lives are bound to go in decline—

NO!

There is no difference  
 between your "real world"  
 and MINE!

—What? —"Bitter?" Moi? "—Insulting?" Wherever did you get that?

—Of course I'm bitter! Of course I'm insulting! I had dreams for you,  
 Martin; hopes for you, Martin. You were one of those rare student actors  
 —with talent and brains! And I knew you were going to make it and you  
 knew you were going to make it and when you made it—you said—you'd  
 pump the "obscene TV bucks"

—your phrase, not mine—back into a theatre of substance and language  
 and startling visions; into what I used to call—and in a phrase you would

love to hear —what I used to call, "the entertainment that confronts";  
 and you also said—No! Promised!  
 —that you would keep your stage talent sharp, even while making your  
 "obscene TV bucks;" and I believed you! because I needed to believe  
 you, because I had stopped making "entertainment that confronts" and  
 so—and, oh, how I do understand the five-and-dime psychology of it all—  
 I needed to believe it from the person I was living through; the son,  
 perhaps? I was depending on, perhaps? to fill out what once had been my  
 vision? Perhaps.  
 Because I could feel that whatever vision—not to mention "energy"  
 — I still had,  
 was going,  
     kept going,  
         had gone.

But you did not keep your talent sharp, and you held onto your "obscene  
 TV bucks"—until now! And I know why you've come back to Bodoni  
 County, Martin Starr, neè Starovich—to your alma mater, Martin Starr,  
 neè Starovich. You're here, Martin, to talk about giving the school a large  
 check—a very large check, I'm told; to build a new theatre here—to tear  
 down this space—this very space we're in—my space—my space where  
 we've been programming my Chekhov-Kaleidoscope —tear it down to  
 build a new space, a new theatre—to be called —what?—The Martin  
 Starr Theatre?— Oh! Cheap shot?! You don't have that kind of ego? Hm.  
 We'll see. And if I'm wrong I'll apologize. But understand! I don't want  
 you to give your obscene bucks to this institution! So that my space can  
 be torn down—and I intend to stop you!!!

NO! don't come down "to calm me down"—not in here, I said—the door!  
 —Don't open—! —the light! THE LIGHT! Blinding! I'll slip! —back in!—get  
 back up there!

. . .yes. better. keep eyes closed. just for a second.

. . .yes.

Now I'm coming down!

--NO! Stay in there! Stay up there! —I'll MANAGE ALONE!

. . .There.

You see? I'm do

ing fine.

I'm com

ing down fine.

I can do it with

out your help--

with

out

any

one's

help.

—NO, CARL! YOU, TOO! YOU STAY UP THERE!

There.

Feet on

the stage—on my stage!

. . . Good.

. . .—Now, Martin, you stay put in that observation room. I don't want you down here with me in my Chekhov light.

—But don't leave this building!

—don't you dare! Now that I've been able to get it out in the open

—this thing that's been eating at me all these years—we've got to sort it out, you and I!

—CARL! TAKE A SLOW COUNT OF—OH—SAY, TWELVE OR SO BETWEEN CUES AND I WANT YOU TO MOVE FROM CUE TEN THROUGH CUE TWENTY FIVE! THANK YOU!—AND PLEASE CALL OVER TO THE PHYSICS SOUND LAB! I'VE GOT TO KNOW IF CARLA IS COMING!—IT IS IMPERATIVE SHE GET HERE! AND GET HERE NOW!

. . .while I sit on this stool

. . . sort this out. . .

. . .—yes! Pretend I'm on a Chekhov verandah somewhere on the estate  
 . . . vaguely out of sorts, because of an aura of melancholy that hangs in  
 the air. . .

and where I will dissolve into an always-changing light  
 that will take me to darkness  
 and to  
 . . .oblivion.

. . . Strange, isn't it. When you were a student here, Martin, you saved  
 my life. You were the only confidante I had in those days. God knows I  
 couldn't talk to any of my colleagues; what the hell could we talk about?  
 But you-- I used to say that the gifted student Martin Starovich was  
 twenty two, going on fifty. Full of common sense. Intuitive. Sensitive.  
 And now, in a sense, you're my enemy.

. . .—Ah, but not so strange. Enemies do, often, sort things out quietly  
 and despairingly together in a Chekhov light. Until they go offstage and  
 shoot each other to death; in a duel.

—By the way, Martin; does it do? this light?—does it make a Chekhov  
 world?

Do you remember what that world was? the kinds of characters in that  
 world?

. . . Always isolated; each involved in his own soul—shutting out the  
 other

. . . Souls;

each Soul knowing his days and his life and his world are numbered and  
 each

—well, mostly, each

—talking a blue streak to assure himself

—while nobody in the room listens

—that his days and his life and his world are not numbered

—or at least not useless

—even though he knows they are; and even,

believe it or not, continues to assume a future . . .

And there are often professors!—teachers, anyway, in his light. Isn't that extraordinary! Chekhov actually thought professors and teachers were worthy of—first—having souls—and, secondly--being worth the time and effort to be made dramatic characters. Extraordinary!

—On the other hand, not so extraordinary. The Master was a master at dramatizing the petty and insignificant, after all; and we professors, it goes without saying, are the most petty and insignificant Souls of all. Or can be. —Doctors, too; of course; those petty souls, too, are in his plays, in his light. And I think I have captured—we have captured, Carl and I—have been able to create that hue —intensity?—by that I mean, that "pettiness" —albeit a certain genteel —is that the right word?-- "pettiness" that can, I do believe, exist in this light; his light.

—But there is also in his light--and this is where I fail, still, Martin— . . .there is also. . . in the text of his light. . .the compassion; compassion for —what—. . . the pain; their pain; and I don't think I've got that yet; the rendering of that pain-compassion, in my Chekhov light.

—You know what I mean, don't you, Martin? when a Chekhov character-- and they almost all do it—when a Chekhov "Soul," rather, says; "But what is it you want me to do?"

Or,

"but what can I do?"

Meaning that no one is capable of doing anything, really; a real cry from a Soul, that. And there is never an answer to

"but what can I do? "what is it you want me to do?"

. . .And then there is the other refrain. Constant. Said by so many of his Souls: "Oh, if you only knew!"

And they never tell you what it is they know.

But I think that at that moment they do know--or, at least glimpse. . .

the pain;

they know it is "the pain" that they know;

and that they can't face the pain;

and so they get off it

—the pain—

and go about their petty, silly, absurd business

and it is all that that I still need to get into my Chekhov light.

—With the music! Don't forget the music. I became aware of the music—

. . .Ah! . . .THANK YOU, CARL. I DID WANT TO HEAR THAT SOUND CUE! MARVELOUS IMPROVEMENT! MUCH MORE EERIE! I COULD HAVE SWORN THAT WAS IT. BUT CARLA SAYS NO; THE FREQUENCIES, THE DECIBELS

—WHATEVER— ALL WRONG!

. . .AH! GOOD!

—Did you hear, Martin, Carl says Carla called; is sure she's found the right cue— will bring the new cue right over, Martin, and—

. . . That sound cue?

Why, that's the sound of the string breaking.

You don't remember. From The Cherry Orchard. Act 2. Suddenly everyone hears this sound in the sky. Like a string breaking; like a taut cable snapping in a mine. Reverberates. Fills the air.

No one --none of the characters--can define it. Though they try.

Seems to symbolize the breaking up of one social order in the play; the breaking up of something.

—Anyway, Carla is trying to create that sound. Must create it. We're convinced that that sound is the triggering mechanism— along with the Chekhov light —and music, of course --The music!

Wasn't I talking about the music?—I became aware of the music—the first time I ever did a Chekhov play. Off Broadway

I remember I did all the usual things—I lighted and directed then, of course: Soft poetic light coming through the cherry orchard into the Nursery. Act 1.

Poetic lyrical dusk light; Act 2.

Hot, frantic light, Act 3, for the frenzied party scene with the Jewish orchestra.

A settled, solid, very-real, comfortable light for the final act when everyone prepares to leave.

And back to poetic lighting in those last moments when the old servant,  
locked in. . .

forgotten . . .

just lays down and, presumably, dies. And we hear the sound of the  
cherry trees in the cherry orchard, being chopped down. . . bang. . .  
bang. . .bang.

—But, later, as I kept rereading the text I began to see that it was all  
structured in a musical way and characters, ideas, events dropped in like  
musical themes and those musical themes would recur and swell and  
build and fade and reappear again but there was no music of that sort  
anywhere in that production and no music at all in my light then nor in  
any of my lighting designs afterward and that, too, the music, I need to  
get into my Chekhov light.

—AND I NEED MORE TIME FOR THAT, MARTIN; TO ACHIEVE THAT!

I'm sorry I had to go on mike for that last remark, Martin,

but I wanted it to sink in;

in to your eardrums—your sinuses; to resonate in the bones of your skull.

Because I need to achieve what I need to achieve in this theatre

—in this space— with all the other elements we've kaleidoscoped in—and

for—this space you want to destroy

—and which I cannot let you destroy—because all I need is "the  
compassion"

—and the music

—and the triggering snapping string;

which will come, of course, when Carla comes; I have full faith in her.

—but "the compassion" and the music are not yet fully in me;

and so I cannot render them into my design;

into my Chekhov light.

. . .And is it any wonder? How can compassion blossom in a soul that is  
as bitter as my soul is?

I was the poet of light

—yes, that's what they called me; "the poet of light!"  
 But that is not all. I did it all. Directed, wrote, designed  
 —and! I did it in the professional theatre!  
 —when there was one in this country—  
 and then I taught it all and lost it all or it all went astray  
 and there was my arrogance  
 and my losing sight of the poetry  
 and there were the young blonde plumps who adored the poet in me  
 even as the poet in me . . .went!  
 . . .—But the poetry went —everywhere. Didn't it?  
 When did that happen, Martin? How did that happen?  
 What's the difference? Like every other artist of my generation, I  
 abdicated; allowed the shit to take over and somehow —how!? how!?  
 —somehow I wound up in Bodoni County at this College—trying  
 to do both: make the poetry and teach the poetry; but, somehow, over  
 time, I discarded the poetry—the poetry in me—and the blonde-plump  
 student-wives  
 . . .and even my beloved Harriet—discarded me, while I discarded bits and  
 pieces of my fragile soul; which rendered me, quite literally, impotent.  
  
 . . .Oh, Martin, where has it all gone? My life, my youth, my loves, my  
 artistry, my joy.  
 . . .Well. . .

OK. OK. It's over now, Martin; this quiet interlude in this light has  
 sweetened a bit my bitter soul; has helped me to sort things out and I  
 ask your forgiveness: For shouting at you before; blaming you.  
 But when I heard that you had come  
and what you had come for, I  
 —and of course you were right, in your “Real World,” to dive into the  
 shit; be part of the shit. The world of shit is the world as it is and it's  
 healthier, I know, to breast stroke through that shit and, anyway, when I

tried to "instill" —to "instill" the poetry I thought was there, the poetry,  
 as I said before, had all but gone from me;  
 and you sensitive student that you were  
 —saw that,  
 felt that,  
 intuited that;  
 so that you knew I had become a phony.  
 And now you want to pay something back; perhaps try to help build a  
 different kind of "Real World" here that is not shit; an oasis where every  
 student-soul in here can sip the pure waters of true art and craft;  
 isolated; "instilled;"  
 and go out with all that truth  
 and change the world of shit out there.  
 You couldn't; maybe they can.  
 Oh, Martin, if you only knew. I know. I know that I did, then, instill  
 something in you--something pure, something ideal

something that died in me, of course; but still stays alive in you.  
 But now that "something" threatens me; don't you see?  
 And what can I do? What is there to do?  
 It's too late. There is no oasis with the pure waters of art;  
 it's all polluted, full of chemicals, full of shit!  
 I said it before and I'll say it again: Yours, mine, this—it's all the "Real  
 World" and the real world is shit!  
 —GOOD, CARL! YES. BETTER!

—You see, Martin, what's happened? Some light has been taken away.  
 That's when you know you have light, in fact—when you take some  
 away! So now there are shadows; beginning to trail off.  
 . . .and it is a shadow, I know, that will lead me to where I need to go. . .

—NOW, CARL, START THE NEXT CUES—SLOWLY—UNTIL YOU COME  
 TO THE END OF YOUR LIGHTING PLOT! AND CUE IN THE MUSIC

WHEN I CUE YOU. AND BY THEN, PERHAPS, CARLA WILL HAVE ARRIVED.

So, Martin, you're wasting your time. Take back your megabucks consideration and go back to that other world of shit — sort it all out and paddle around in it--in peace.

And if you agree to that. . .

I'll let you in—

embrace you again;

make you part of—

my Chekhov light.

—You're speechless, Martin! What's the problem, Martin?

You can't quite believe this —this piece of detritus—this wreck that once was your adored teacher?—is that it?—this wreck about to go under before your unbelieving eyes? Well, believe it, Martin; believe it, accept my terms, and —get the hell away from my whirlpool or you, too, will be sucked down! Please

. . .what?

—WHAT?!

—CARL, DID YOU HEAR THAT? MARTIN HAS FINALLY FOUND HIS TONGUE AND HE SAYS THEY'RE COMING HERE!

NOW!

IT'S NOT AN ONGOING PROCESS! IT'S ALREADY BEEN DECIDED!  
THEY'RE ON THEIR WAY! A CEREMONY HAS BEEN ARRANGED! HERE!  
IN FIFTEEN MINUTES IN MY SPACE!  
THE PRESIDENT, THE PROVOST! THE CHAIRMAN! MY COLLEAGUES!  
PHOTOGRAPHERS! A PRESENTATION OF THE CHECK THAT REPRESENTS  
THE OBSCENE TV BUCKS; PRESENTED TO THEM HERE IN MY CHEKHOV

LIGHT! CARL, WE MUST GET CARLA HERE! CALL HER, CARL! GET HER HERE!

—How dare you, Martin!? How could you, Martin? I thought this would all take time, lots of time—that your trip here was preliminary—that I'd have the time to. . .

—What?" —"that I'd be pleased!" "happily surprised?"

—Asshole!

—Listen, Martin; this is what it's all about: I am already an embarrassment to the administration. And to my colleagues. Didn't they tell you that?—Of course not! Because you have given them a possible solution to "the crazy Peter Paradise problem." —which is; that I refuse to leave this theatre—this space!

That's right! I have set up house in it;

this space;

my space.

I teach in it. Use the dressing room backstage, the toilet and showers there;

and sleep on the cot—that cot —that cot there in the shadows—I often wheel it in—sleep here—in this space, nice and cozy in this space.

And

I refuse to attend Faculty meetings unless they hold them here;

in this space,

in my space;

which outrages my colleagues: Why should that smug nut, Paradise, dictate to them? They do their work; follow the rules; backbite and bad mouth each other; trash to the world each other's visions and aspirations; ruin student's minds and talents the way they're supposed to!

—O! That's not fair!

—Well, in a way it is!

--Ah, who cares!

—And I get my allies, my trusted students to do my laundry in the costume shop and to run down the corridor and get my food from the shit machines and cook that shit for me in the community microwave oven in the hallway.

But I'm tenured so it's hard for them to boot me out and they were stymied —hoped it would just go away, "the crazy Peter Paradise problem."

And now—because of asshole you! they think it will go away, "the crazy Peter Paradise problem!"

You give them this obscene check and they get to work immediately, razing this space,  
my space,

and raze me, too, right the hell out of here to

—what—to start from scratch elsewhere?

—But where?! How? . . .

—But don't think my students will allow it! Many of them love me—isn't that something?—as crazy and as bitter and as has-been as I've become, they love me;—and they don't question me

—Isn't that something? . . .

—So do something, Martin!

You were a student once and you, after all, loved me, too!

Stop that gang from coming here!

Because I'm so close. Lately I've begun to feel something about and for people and the thing I feel may be, for all I know. . . compassion—the compassion I need for my Chekhov light

. . .for my students, anyway.

. . .For they break my heart, if they only knew.

Revved up! Revved up!

Always the rev up, always there in them;

and what breaks my heart is that the rev-up will get harder to rev, if they only knew.

—But the energy of that rev-up now will help me ! You'll see!

—WHAT'S THAT, CARL? —AH! CARLA'S COME!

—CARLA, TELL ME! —DID YOU RE-WORK THE SOUND CUE FOR THE TRIGGERING SNAPPING STRING?—GOOD! —AND DO YOU THINK THIS ONE'S THE ONE? THE ONE THAT WILL TRIGGER IT ALL?

—OH, GOD, I HOPE YOU'RE RIGHT!

AND DID YOU FIND THE PROPER MUSIC? THE FINAL PIECE FOR THE

—

. . .—YOU DID!? WONDERFUL! AND WHAT IS IT?! . . . AH! HA, HA!  
SUPERB

—Martin, did you hear that? It's a song by Frank Sinatra.

—WHAT IS IT CALLED, CARLA? . . . "Winners."

Ha!

There's an irony for you. N'est Pas, Martin? N'est Pas?

—CARLA! CAN YOU WORK IT IN? ON THE THREE TAPE DECKS UP THERE? —I MEAN IMMEDIATELY!

NOW!

I'M THREATENED. THIS SPACE IS THREATENED. NOW! MARTIN STARR'S BEING HERE WITH HIS CORRUPT BUCKS AND THE GANG ON ITS WAY HERE, LEAVES ME LITTLE TIME. NO TIME!

. . .YOU CAN! GOOD!

—NO, CARLA! THERE'S NO TIME LEFT TO HEAR THE NEW BROKEN STRING CUE--WE'LL HAVE TO TRUST IT! GET THE ONEGIN READY!

—AND CARL! YOU LOCK ALL THE DOORS! NO! WAIT!

—Martin, get out of this building before I lock the doors.

. . .No? You're not going to leave me?

—You're "worried" about your old--sick--mentor?

—That's really sweet and commendable in your nature, Martin--I mean it; your saying that. . .breaks my heart, in fact; and--  
is that it?

is that what compassion is?

—the breaking of one's heart over other people's pain?

. . .—And does that mean my heart has not been broken until now?

—CARL, MARTIN WILL STAY. LOCK THE DOORS!

. . . BANG! . . .BANG! . . .BANG! BANG!

GOOD!

. . . AND, YES, THAT'S IT! THE MUSIC--Lensky's Air. --TWO POINTS LOWER, CARL!

—Listen, Martin; this is what it's all about:

Now that you're here, and that gang is on its way, we have to move fast—  
—even though nothing's been tested. We'll just have to take the chance  
it's all going to work. I trust Carl and Carla and they've both put their  
genius to work on the problem and the problem is this: that I find a way--  
a doorway, you might say— from here to there; that is, from this world  
to another world--and I don't mean suicide; could never really  
contemplate that for some reason; needed to stay whole, for some  
reason;

but not to stay whole here; in all this bitterness and pettiness and  
mindlessness and shallow creativity that now is my existence; needed to  
get there—out there--where all the great souls are; or at least where  
their great works—the models—exist. For great works—great models—  
I'm convinced, rise and stay out there, somewhere, forever!

The shit sinks,

but the great stuff rises and remains!

Out There!

—Yes! Carl and Carla worked with frequencies and things on their  
computers and instruments and sent my tape—the tape with all the  
great pieces that you?

--yes, you put me onto?

—and followed and tracked those great pieces that seemed to want  
to join up with other great pieces  
and scanned the ether  
and homed in on what appears to be a galaxy,  
a cluster of stars or star stuff

that is really the stuff made up of the greatest words and music and colors that ever were and that live forever in the ether.

And, navigating through the detritus of the universe, my taped great words did find them!; joined up with them;

then set to work, did Carl and Carla, to find the trigger that would let me join my soul with that star stuff and settled on —Chekhov. Yes, that's the truth. Of all the great ones, Carl and Carla and their computers found that Chekhov was the doorway out. For me!

For me, in this time!

In this place—Yes!

And if, at one and the same moment, in this time, one could find the right Chekhov light with the right Chekhov music and mix in all the great art that ever was and the snapping trigger string--well, that would be the stuff needed to catapult me out

— No!

—beam me up! Yes! Like in Star Trek?

—Fragment first, then beam up! —to that star-stuff galaxy of the greatest works that ever were!

And we did, find the light—we think—this light; and the music—this music--Lensky's Air from Eugene Onegin.

. . .There is a Chekhov essence in it, I'm sure by now you'll agree. And the frequencies, the decibels, apparently are compatible with the light that's been worked on.

—But that wasn't enough, we found.

Other ingredients were needed—great art works

—the proper pigments, composition, content

—and more music; a piece beyond the Lensky Air—something that transcends —that represents the greatest music that ever was—that even transcends Chekhov and Carla found that piece to be a Mozart piece; the Lacrimosa section of his last Mass—

MIX IN THE LACRIMOSA, CARLA!

. . .YES! GOOD! GLORIOUS!—and Lacrimosa, Martin, means tears--did I mention that before?— and that seems right, n'est pas?; and the decibels and frequencies are right, too;  
but there was something missing—something else was needed and Carla has been working on it and she says—and you heard her--she says she found it and just in the nick SO PUT IT ON, CARLA! MIX SINATRA WITH THE LENSKY AND THE MOZART LACRIMOSA, TOO!  
. . .—THERE! . . . —THERE'S OLD BLUE EYES IN THE MIX!  
—NOW, CARL, BUILD THE LIGHT CUES TO THE CUE WE THINK WILL BE THE LIGHT TRIGGER  
—THERE! GOOD!  
—NOW FLASH ON ALL THE ART WORKS AND THE BEAUTIFUL POP FACES OF ALL THE FACES NOT EXISTING ANYMORE  
AND WHEN WE REACH THAT LIGHT POINT,  
BRING IN THE SNAPPING STRING!  
AND LET THE MUSIC MIX AND BUILD AND BRING UP THE POT A POINT  
. . .ANOTHER POINT  
. . .AND ANOTHER POINT  
. . .NOW! NOW! NOW! IT'S ALL ABOUT TO COME TOGETHER  
AND NOW I'LL FRAGMENT OUT.  
--BEAM ME UP CARL! BEAM ME UP, CARLA!  
AND THEN YOU TWO JOIN ME  
—AND YOU, TOO, MARTIN; WHEN IT BECOMES INTOLERABLE HERE FOR YOU  
—AND IT WILL--JOIN ME  
--ALL OF YOU, JOIN ME!  
—AND GET HARRIET, TOO  
—AND ALL THE OTHER, OTHER-WORLDLY PEOPLE THAT YOU KNOW, AND WE'LL FLOAT TOGETHER WEIGHTLESSLY IN ALL THAT GREAT STAR STUFF AWAY FROM THE BOTTOM-LINE SHIT DOWN HERE!



Close my eyes and take deep breaths. . .Like so.  
 And you come in—  
 . . .and yes, you now have my permission to come in  
 —and don't worry. . . .The strong light . . .that will spill in  
 . . .from the doorway. . . won't matter now. . .  
 so you come in. . .  
 and you stand by me—by this cot. . .  
 defiant—very very defiant. . .  
 and when they get in  
 you'll tell them  
 decisively. . .firmly. . .defiantly. . .  
 with lots of star attitude. . .  
 that you regret  
 —and you can tell them how unfortunate the things of regret are—  
 that you regret, that you cannot—now  
 —give them the obscene bucks you promised.

If they raise any questions—and they will—  
 you can always say:  
 "But what is there to do?"  
 "What can I do?"

And you will see;  
 they will not be able to respond in the face of that.  
 Because  
 —and here Chekhov was quite right. . .  
 when you have said;  
 "But what is there to do?" "What can I do?"  
 . . .you  
 will. . .  
 have. . .  
 said it. . .  
 all.

(A strong shaft of light  
streams in and floods  
Peter Paradise,  
on the cot,  
with light.

Pounding again. Off.

Then,

silence)