

*SEARCHING FOR CHEKHOV,
THIS TRAVELER COMES HOME*
By Frank Gagliano

(Keynote speech, Yalta Chekhov Conference, 2012)

I am so honored and happy to be here, in Yalta, at the Chekhov Museum, welcoming you to the 2012 International Anton Chekhov Conference.

I am a playwright, and, later in the week, I will be giving a reading/performance of my play, *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT*. I will not comment here on my play: I will let *it* speak for itself. But I will say this: That had I not encountered Chekhov when I did — I would not have had the *courage* — nor would I have found the technique *needed* — to write *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT*.

And I will also say this:

For much of my life, I have been a *lone* traveler in the Chekhov landscape. As a creative writer, that's par for the course: *Aloneness*. I wrote *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT* in the *solitude* of my study, and on my *lone* computer. But when I taught *The Cherry Orchard* to bright students, and sometimes shared my Chekhov thoughts with a limited number of like-minded colleagues — I was still alone, and mostly felt I was having a Chekhov monologue within myself — not able to fully articulate the excitement of my Chekhov-text discoveries, and/or the depths of my Chekhov-feelings, to others. And when I discovered what a *subversive* playwright Chekhov was, and *how* he achieved his subversiveness, these discoveries — exciting to me, a playwright interested in the techniques of that strange craft — fell on *unimpressed, non-playwriting*, ears. And left me even more isolated.

Still, semester after semester I dealt, essentially, with one Chekhov play, *The Cherry Orchard*; never tiring of it, never being bored. For each decade of my life, *The Cherry Orchard* had something to say to me; could somehow illuminate whatever abyss I was peering into at the moment. And I even

began to discover *how* it said what it said, and how it achieved what it achieved. But, as I say, I felt these things — the discoveries and depths of these things — alone, isolated.

But here — now — this formerly *lone* traveler is in a *community* of committed, learned, talented participants, *all* focused, *together*, on one of the world's greatest dramatists and short story writers — and here, now — at least for these next five days — I don't need to Chekhov-focus *alone* — AND — can *Chekhov-share* and, perhaps, *Chekhov-absorb* from *you*, in the very place where Chekhov *lived*.

Some of you may have been here before and now can take in stride that we are meeting in the same city where Chekhov *actually* lived, wrote, confronted tuberculosis, planted his garden, and often met with the greatest artists of his time. But I am *overwhelmed*. All my adult professional life I've seen photos of the Chekhov white house and dacha in Yalta, *and* photos of the master's desk (*a magical*, to me, desk) on which he wrote *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, and I have longed to see them, but never *dreamed* it would be possible.

Come to think of it, at my age, I tend to think that my whole life has *been* a dream, and I find myself, either constantly seeking validation of past events, or still dreaming new dreams. Being *here* validates the Chekhov/Yalta dream. . . though I fear that, like silly Gaev, who, in *the Cherry Orchard*, rhapsodizes over a one-hundred-year old bookcase — that I, when I *do* see that Chekhov *magical* desk — I may — probably “*through tears*,” as Chekhov often describes the emotional state of his characters — I may also, probably, like childish Gaev, make an idiot of myself and spontaneously sing an aria to that *magical* desk.

What about the Chekhov play did I learn that enabled me to write — alone — *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT*. And what other Chekhov bits and pieces do I hope to keep exploring and sharing here (*now, however*, as a traveler, stopping over in *this* Chekhov community)?

But, first, you must understand that, while I always admired and was moved by the Chekhov play when I saw it, I was also perplexed and intimidated by

it. Because it was difficult for me to understand how Chekhov did it — how he achieved the effect of reducing me to tears of despair, mixed with tears from laughter. Often at the same time. I, after all, had been grounded in the Shakespearean way of building a dramatic event: Introduce new pressures into a scene, pressures that journey to consequences, and that detonate — in *that same scene*. In the Chekhov play, however, so many scenes of consequence detonate *offstage*: Duels, estate auctions, the drowning of a child, attempt at suicide, and the like. These are big scenes that, in the Shakespearean play structure — or, indeed, the Ibsen, Moliere, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Eugene O’Neill — take your pick — play structures — would usually be rendered *onstage*. And yet these — how shall I say— *oblique* — Chekhov scenes on stage *do work, are effective, hold one’s attention, engage* the emotions, *fire* the imagination. When I finally overcame my fear of confronting the Chekhov play and plunging in to explore it, I did discover — to *my* satisfaction — how the master *did* often do it, and that the *typical* play structure *is*, indeed, rendered *on stage* in the Chekhov play — **but, again**, in a Chekhovian, subversive, way.

I am guided, in my playwriting aesthetic, by critic George Steiner’s definition of drama, who, in his book, THE DEATH OF TRAGEDY, and in a chapter on Georg Buchner’s masterpiece, WOYZECK, wrote, “*Drama is language under such high pressure of feeling that the words carry a necessary and immediate connotation of gesture.*”

This — plus the Shakespearean construction of a dramatic event (*new pressure that journeys to a detonating consequence in the same scene*)— are, to me, the common denominators of all dramatic art. All playwrights — certainly great playwrights — employ these in *their way*, in *their own voices*, as Chekhov employs them in *his way*. . .but — and here was my great discovery — one I needed to make for myself — that he **does** employ them.

He even, on occasion, satisfies one of the mainstay traditions of the French, *very old fashioned*, well-made play, the Scène à faire — the "scene to be made" — the "scene that must be done" — the *obligatory* scene. What is, after all, the scene in *The Cherry Orchard*, which Lyubov sets up to resolve the courtship between Varya and Lopakhin, but an obligatory scene? AND, of course, the scene where Lophakin announces that it is HE

who outbid everyone at the Estate auction, and now owns the cherry orchard — is one of the great theatrical obligatory scenes in all drama. The estate auction scene itself happens offstage; the *resolution* of that estate auction scene detonates *onstage*.

But, because my play is a monologue play, I would like to concentrate for just a bit on another mainstay tradition of the traditional play that Chekhov satisfies on occasion — *the soliloquy*. Sometimes, in a very traditional way. In Act Two of *Uncle Vanya*, for example, Vanya, alone on stage, after Yelena exits, says, “She’s gone.” Then there is an ellipsis, followed by the stage direction “*pause*” — *then* a long solo speech — a traditionally-handled soliloquy — to himself and to the world, that begins, “*Ten years ago I used to meet her at my late sister’s place. . .*” And then he asks himself a dramatic question that he will struggle to answer — and a *question* is the usual springboard that initiates the journey of any typical soliloquy — “*Why is it I didn’t fall in love with her then and ask her to marry me?*”

But In other plays, Chekhov *subverts* the *typical* soliloquy. In Act Two of *The Cherry Orchard*, for example, Lyubov Ranevskaya delivers a speech that begins, “*Oh, my sins. . .*”, that is at once expository and emotionally shattering; a pressured speech that would be *any* highpoint in *any* traditional play. Her brother Gaev and Lopakhin are there *while* she speaks, so, technically, the speech is *not* a soliloquy. But what *does* make it a soliloquy — *in the Chekhovian way* — is that the men *don’t appear to be listening*. They seem to be lost in their own internal monologues; so that, even though they *are* there, they are *not* there, and Lyubov has the stage to her emotional self. And at least one revelation in Lyubov’s speech — *that she attempted suicide in Paris* — must surely have been new news to them — and a shock! In a *traditional* play it would have been disquieting news, at the least, and, in the face of such a revelation, much confrontational dialogue would, could, *should* have been generated. But during *this* speech, no one interrupts. And it is Lyubov herself who ends the speech when she hears, in the distance, the Jewish orchestra, and her total interest turns to *that*, seems to be delighted in hearing *that* — and the pain in the “*I have sinned. . .*” speech — has been wiped away. That moment, by the way, becomes a non sequitur, and so is comic. In a Chekhovian way.

As a man of the theatre, I am intrigued at what kind of inner emotional life the actors playing Gaev and Lopakhin must be generating to stay — as theatre people say — *in the moment*, during that great speech. Chekhov's demands on the live actors are extraordinary. So much of what they have to do is in the pause, the ellipsis, and the silence. New, I think, for the actor of his period. Well— first Wagner and *then* comes the Wagnerian singer. First Mozart — then the Mozart singer. First the great American song — then Frank Sinatra. First Chekhov — *then* Stanislavsky.

So — as a lone Chekhov traveler, I have tried to tell you how I explored for myself — and out of my own *lone* view of the playwriting craft — some of the elements — the *traditional and the unique* — that, to me, make up part of the Chekhov play. And if I dwelled on how Chekhov uses the soliloquy, it is because that is the technique that informed my play, *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT*. A lone character is on stage and makes the play. And I recall saying at some point in my process, that I must, as in the Shakespearean play, create present-tense *events*, and I shied away from allowing the character to pause and muse and take detours — and I became paralyzed, and so, for a bit, could not move on to the next event. But once Chekhov *actually* entered the essence of the piece — as you will see — and I began to think about how *he* might have managed *my* soliloquy . . . and once I realized that Chekhov did, indeed, adhere to George Steiner's definition of drama, by giving each character in *his* plays, monumental internal pressures that erupt on stage in despairing or comic gestures. . . I felt I had been given permission — a freedom to detour from the pure *event* mode, and let it all *go* — in the Chekhovian way.

But — with all this — how the Chekhov play works—and works so profoundly — is still so much a mystery to me, and I want to keep exploring it here; as well as other Chekhov subjects and bits and pieces and observations that I look forward to sharing and exploring here with you.

Like. . . The Chekhov ensemble:

A delight to American audiences, and the envy of the American playwright, is the large cast of characters in the Chekhov play. The economics of American play production make it difficult to write large-cast plays. New musicals are allowed that luxury; new plays are not. I can assure you that if

Chekhov were alive and submitted the manuscript of *The Cherry Orchard* to an American producer, hot off the Yalta press, the producer would start cutting out characters. “*Who needs this Charlotta character? Doesn’t know who she is, makes snide remarks, does magical tricks and eats pickles. Out of your script she goes, Anton. And this Pishchik guy? All he does is fall asleep and quickly wake up and ask to borrow money. Funny but — hey, not worth the expense. Delete.*” But Chekhov is dead and the Chekhov play is considered a classic and so, producers must treat his plays with respect. And American audiences get to see again onstage, the glory of a great many magnificent characters, struggling to overcome their internal and external obstacles, in order to attempt to get what they want. And in simple, understood language.

Or *is* Chekhov’s stage language simple?

Back home, we must absorb the Chekhov play in translation. What I hope to learn, as a Chekhov traveler in *this* community, is the joy of hearing the original language — the sound of it, the music of it, the rhythms of it. Do not be surprised if I collar some of you and ask you to read to me Lyubov’s speech, “*I have sinned.*” As you can see, I adore that speech, but I cannot say I have ever really heard it.

I would also like to find out how one aspect of Chekhov’s dramatic *punctuation* works in the *original* Russian texts. In many of the English translations one often finds an ellipsis — three periods — followed by the stage direction, “*pause.*” Generally, the ellipsis in a playtext usually indicates a fading out of a speech — a kind of “*pause.*” But — at least in the translations — one finds both. I tend to see dramatic punctuation as part of the musical score an actor can use to bring a moment to life. So this is of interest to me.

Then there is the Chekhov musical landscape: Chekhov’s use of live music throughout his plays — guitars, bands, whistling, singing — is exemplary and adds to character and mood. But, I also need to explore another part of Chekhov’s musical mystery — and I touch on this in my play, *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT*: A sense that his plays are as much musical tone poems as they are drama. And what else is the last tableau of the sisters huddled together in *The Three Sisters*, but an extraordinary use of chamber music

— but with a departing Army band playing in the distance, as counterpoint.

And then there is the mystery of why the “*There goes Yepikhodov. . . There goes Yepikhodov*” moment in Act 2 of *The Cherry Orchard* creates such a yearning in me. . .and, indeed, why that whole second act wipes me out, emotionally.

Finally, this: I have found that I tend to identify with various Chekhov characters, who reflect, at any particular time of my life, the *emotional* side of my life. For example: At one time, I was Masha in *The Seagull* ‘. . .*mourning for my life.*” At another, I was Vershinin, accepting the pain and corruption of the present, but *assuming* a bright *future* for mankind. But I’ve also been Yepikhodov, tripping into chairs, and blaming it *on* the chairs. And for years now — as I see what’s happening in my country — I’ve understood Yelena’s, “*the world is not being destroyed by plunder or by fire, but by hatred. . .*” But, at another point, I am Sonya, also in *Uncle Vanya*, sure that “*we shall see the whole sky paved with diamonds.*” Other times, it is Chebutykin’s refrain, “*What can it matter? What can it matter?*” that speaks to me. Lately, I’ve been Firs, with his, “*Life has gone by, as if I hadn’t lived.*”

But now, at this moment, being here, I identify with a one-word Chekhov *stage direction* in *The Cherry Orchard*. It appears in Anya’s two-word response to her mother’s, “*Now we can begin our journey!*” And Anya says, “*Our Journey!*” And Chekhov’s stage direction here, in brackets, is the one word — *Joyously*.

So, now, *joyously*, this traveler looks forward to this brief 5-day Yalta stopover, and with exciting and special anticipation, because, in *my* ongoing Chekhov journey, I feel, quite simply, that I’ve come home. Thank you. And, again — Welcome!

(Mr. Gagliano’s plays (including MY CHEKHOV LIGHT), musicals, essays, and articles, can be accessed on his Web site, www.gaglianoriff.com.)