

ANTON, HIMSELF: First & Last



2 act Monolog
by KAREN SUNDE

What the critics said

“Much of (the Festival's) interest is due to *Anton Himself* and *Masha, Too*...

“It takes a certain chutzpah to write a play more or less in the voice of that master of indirection and self-absorption, Anton Chekhov. It takes chutzpah squared to write two of them. That, however, is what Karen Sunde has done... We'd owe Sunde a measure of grudging admiration merely for the attempt, but in fact she has succeeded in illuminating Chekhov and his sister Mariya, or Masha, at a critical juncture of their lives.”

PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

“An evening in the mind of...Chekhov. ...beautifully sublime portrayal of a man.”

CFRO 102.7 FM Vancouver

“...torn between his passion and his pragmatism...an intensely personal side of the author is revealed...a well-crafted play...a real treat.”

TERMINAL CITY, Vancouver

"While viewers need know nothing about Chekhov to enjoy these three (*To Moscow; Anton, Himself; Masha, Too*) Sunde interlards the action with jokes about the stories and plays especially intriguing to knowledgeable viewers.”

CONTEMPORARY DRAMATISTS London

“You don't have to like Chekhov to love *Anton, Himself* ...Sunde credibly takes us to 1896. Polished, compelling... The audience loved *Anton*.”

THE FRINGE REVIEW Vancouver

**Anton, Himself:
First & Last**

Solo in 2 Acts

**by
Karen Sunde**

Smashwords Edition

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PRODUCTION HISTORY

ANTON, HIMSELF was commissioned and first produced by Actor's Theatre of Louisville, directed by Frazier W. Marsh, performed by William McNulty, and published in *Moscow Art Theater*, a monograph.

This production was exported by Oleg Yefremov, director of the Moscow Art Theatre to be performed at Yalta Festival and at Moscow Art Theatre, Russia

ANTON, HIMSELF was subsequently produced and performed by Richard Levine at CHEKHOV NOW Festival in New York, and by David Wodchis at The Fringe Festival in Vancouver, BC.

MASHA, TOO was meantime commissioned by The People's Light and Theatre Company, Malvern, PA, to be produced together with *ANTON, HIMSELF*, directed by Abigail Adams, performed by Edith Meeks and Frank Wood. Both plays were subsequently directed by Roger Ellis in Grand Rapids, MI, and by H. Lee Gables, produced by LB Hamilton for the Washington Shakespeare Company in Washington DC.

Selections from both *ANTON* and *MASHA*, as well as from Sunde's *TO MOSCOW* appear in *SCENES AND MONOLOGUES FROM THE BEST NEW PLAYS*, Meriwether Publishing.

ANTON, HIMSELF: First & Last was commissioned by director, actor, editor Roger Ellis, and first performed it at Michigan State University, Allendale, MI in January, 2018.

INTRODUCTION

I fell in love with Chekhov by acting him, having had the luck to play in four of his major plays. Then when I quit acting, I found myself sending a farewell “valentine” to that life by writing *To Moscow*, which wound Chekhov’s life and loves (Olga Knipper) with the birth of the Moscow Art Theater (Stanislavsky). It was well-received, produced (as far away as Turkey), and published...but then a funny thing happened: people kept wanting more.

First, Actor’s Theatre of Louisville asked me to write a one-man play about Chekhov to produce in their Russian Classics in Context Festival. I wrote *Anton, Himself*, and *To Moscow* now had an off-spring. Then, most thrilling, the real-live Moscow Art Theatre witnessed it (they’d brought a play to the festival, too), and their legendary artistic director, Oleg Yefremov then took *Anton, Himself* to be performed in its actual setting – at their Yalta Festival in Russia, and then at the real Moscow Art Theatre.

Still that wasn’t the end: Abigail Adams of Peoples Light & Theater, PA, saw *Anton, Himself* at Louisville, and lobbied me to write another play to accompany it, “for Anton’s sister Masha.” so that the two could make a whole evening’s entertainment: I wrote *Masha, Too* so that it leads into *Anton, Himself*, and the scene they both speak of can imaginatively take place during the intermission. (in *To Moscow* this same scene, which Masha relates, is pivotal)

You’d think that would have been enough, but no: enter Carol Rocamora, who saw both these plays together at PLT’s Short Stuff Festival, then hired in-class reprise performances (by actors Edith Meeks and Frank Wood) for her Chekhov Workshop at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts. And then, Carol got a bright idea: would I please write a play about Chekhov for her whole workshop to perform – there must be sixteen roles in it – *et voila: Please God, No Wedding or Shooting at the End!*

And that is why three plays, all offspring of *To Moscow*, were presented in *Chekhovs At Home*, the ebook. But then yet another request came from Roger Ellis, who wanted still more: a full length play for Anton, so I devised a second act, set eight years after the first *Anton, Himself* - which relates the storm of Chekhov’s first major opening, *The Seagull*. This last act (of *First & Last*) erupts in the crisis that preceded his final opening - that of *The Cherry Orchard*.

Proceed at your own risk (of storm & revolution). And welcome! KS

Anton, Himself First & Last

TIME & PLACE: October 18, 1896 & January 16, 1904 Chekhov's study.

SET: Yes, the Chekhovian mood. But the only requirements are

- a door
- a desk
- a chair
- a window light

NOTE: Photographs of Chekhov's Yalta study show a small, spare room.
His country home, Melikovo, was not palatial, had low ceilings.

ATMOSPHERE: Offstage sound creates this lively country dacha, the boisterous milieu in which Anton writes – forever complaining of it, lost without it.

FORM: Don't worry, this is simple prose, but it's been arranged to make the burden on one poor actor as digestible as possible.

(See Production Notes for more guidance)

STAGE DIRECTIONS: They are not orders, they're possibilities. They're me, hoping to be more clear about the ocean of thoughts and feelings I sense between and beneath his words.

ACT ONE

The act is drawn from thoughts—those that flit and those that press upon Anton today as he writes.

He is heavy with a memory he tries to work his way around. Everything he does, especially nonsense, is an attempt to put it away from him.

NOTE: When *ANTON, HIMSELF* is performed after *MASHA, TOO*, the scene Masha exits to play “happens” during intermission, ending with the opening lines of *ANTON, HIMSELF*.

There is mid-afternoon light. And bird sounds. It is autumn.

At his desk, Anton raises his head in the direction of the half-closed door.

ANTON

Push it shut, please, on your way.

(Pause. The door slowly closes. Anton sits waiting until it shuts, then says to the audience—)

What did she mean by that?

(Pause, as though expecting audience to answer.)

What did she expect me to say?

Here I am
barely able to drag myself
from the gallows, and she...

Marry?

So. Masha's decided to marry.
Well. No great surprise.
What does she expect me to say?

Naturally, I'm...shocked.
Coming at me like that. When I'm here in the midst –
finally quiet, into a story
spinning a little yarn, and...

She was so happy. Even...transformed.
Yes
as though a light had come on
way down beneath...

That's why she forgot herself so far.

(He goes on, immersing himself in his memory, painting the scene—)

But so humble.
Lit up, animated with tender excitement
yet overwhelmed, at the same time
with humbleness.

As though beseeching
at an altar. Yes.
She entered on a holy mission.

Transfigured, illumined with joy, certain of being
the chosen one.

Bowing low, worshipful
begging for...

(Joyful) “Anton, I’ve decided to marry Alexander.”

(Flat, realizing–) She wanted my blessing.

And I just stared at her.

(Silence, as he stares at us. Finally, he sighs, looks at the papers in front of him, picks up a sheet, and reads the last thing he wrote:)

“I shall never forget your hospitality as long as I live.
You are so good, and your daughter Vera is so good...
Such a splendid set of people...”

(He breaks off reading and writes, still speaking, playing the characters.)

“Ognev goes on...

‘I’ve been turning up here almost every day.
I’ve stayed the night a dozen times.’
...On the last step he looked round and asked
‘Shall we meet again some day?’
‘God knows!’ said the old man. ‘Most likely not.’”

(With a sudden look up, Anton jumps out of character, without transition, fast as thought.)

It’s her own fault! Coming at me like that.
And right on top of...

When only yesterday...
When I’m doing my best
to get past...

It was not gently, not sensitively, done.

“Anton, I’ve decided to marry Alexander!”

And what am I supposed to do?
Ah ah – forbidden question.
Brothers don't have a claim.
Still, *as* her brother I...
She has a right to life like everybody else.

And I just stared at her.

(Then, perhaps with fingers to forehead, he pulls himself back into his story.)

(Reading) "...the cozy veranda
the silhouettes of trees
over the kitchen and bath-house...
He stepped away, and..."

(He cannot concentrate.)

And what about me?
Sitting here, penned up in this chaos
sweating my fingers off to keep meat in their mouths...

I should be married.

(Reading as he writes.)

"As soon as he was out of the gate
all this would be changed to memory
and would lose its meaning as reality
forever."

(Answering, arguing with himself as he continues writing.)

You should be married.

Then why don't you do it?
If Masha's going to fly off,
abandon you, expose you to...

(Reading something written before.)

"And in a year or two
all these dear images
would grow as dim in his consciousness

as stories he had read
or things he had imagined.”

(Speaking for himself, suddenly bold–)

I don't do it because I'm not in love.

Oh, really?

(Referring to Masha.)

I said nothing.

(Pause, while outside, there's a muffled call: “Masha, will you come and see what Mikhail is doing?”)

(Anton, realizing what should come next, writes it energetically.)

“Nothing in life...
is so precious...
as people.

Nothing!”

(He sits back, satisfied at having pushed the writing through to this point.)

(Now, can he take a safe peek at his own pain? No. It swamps him.)

Then why do I trouble myself
with this chance, this circumstance
this...insubstantial pageant faded...

(Explosion) I don't even *like* the theatre!

Then why think about it?

(With one sweep, pushing pain off his desk, he sits up, stubbornly, to write:)

“When Ognev reached the garden gate
a dark shadow stepped towards him.”

(As he keeps writing) A little mystery, a little suspense, yes ...?

‘Vera Gavrilovna!’ he said, delighted. ‘You here?
And I have been looking everywhere for you;
I wanted to say goodbye...’”

(Lightly, as he searches for a section already written.)

Enter woman.

Aha.

A story without a woman
is an engine without steam.

(Has found the section, reads it.)

“Perhaps because Vera attracted Ognev
he saw in every frill and button
something warm, naive, cozy, something nice and poetical
just what is lacking in cold, insincere women
that have no instinct for beauty.”

(He nods, satisfied, draws a connecting line. Pause.)

And what does he say in parting?
In leaving this warm-naive-poetical woman?

*(Sits completely still a moment, letting us wonder, then writes again, without reading until he’s
through, then leans back, tantalizing, amused, and reads—)*

“Well, be happy,
live a hundred years...
don’t remember evil against me.
We shall not see each other again.”

(Pleased with himself, he leans forward writing, reading as he does.)

“Ognev stooped down and kissed Vera’s hand.
Then, in silent emotion
he straightened his cape
shifted his bundle of books to a more comfortable position
paused...”

(Stops abruptly.)

God. There’s something an actor could do. Pause!

No matter how I put it down here
you don't feel it.

You can feel the nervousness, the reluctance
but you can't feel the enormity of tension
the plain *suspense*, of a pause.

I can't just write "pause" and make it happen.
But an actor could... damn!
It they weren't such vain self-conscious idiots
If they could just behave naturally!

You can see it here, can't you?
The way the pressure builds—
He's leaving. No doubt forever. They take a walk...
There's a million things he ought to say to her
but he pauses...

(Pause – in the moment, as Ognev, teasing the audience, then—)

“What a lot of mist.”

(He looks up for audience's reaction. Then, as Vera—)

“Yes. *(Pause)* Have you left anything behind?”

“No, I don't think so...”

(He throws his arms up in exasperation at Ognev's stupidity, then writes quickly.)

“For some seconds Ognev stood in silence.”

There it is again. You see?
Stood in silence. Another pause.

“...then he moved clumsily towards the gate
and went out of the garden.”

And you, and the audience – If I've done it right –
feels a terrible knot of reluctance:

Don't go, don't go, don't go like that.

(He pauses again, looking at us, making us wait, then says:)

“Stay.
I’ll see you as far as our wood’
said Vera
following him out.”

(Finishing off writing it.)

All right. All right!

(Looking up.)

You see? Now it’s “joined.”
The conflict is set. The action’s begun.
And you... And the audience...
(Correcting himself brutally)...the reader
wants something to...
wants a particular thing
to happen.

Simple.

(As soon as that’s said, he’s deep in himself again.)

How could she...
I have to find *something* to say to Masha.

How she could barge in like that...

(Slipping into acid memory.)

when only yesterday
she rushed home
convinced
I was about to hang myself.

(Low, morose.)

It’s a filthy rash
– the theatre –
a boil, a nasty disease
one picks up in the city.

Why can't I just forget it!

(His agitation makes him cough. As he recovers—)

I sound just like Nikolai.

(Makes a little salute, tapping two fingers to his forehead – the ghost of crossing himself.)

Forgive it, Nikolai.

(Then, leaning in to write again)

This is *not* putting lard in the pan.

The reader wants a particular thing to happen.
And what have we? Vera walking with Ognev.
As far as... the woods, where...

“...the mist was thicker and whiter
it lay heaped unevenly about the stones, stalks, and bushes...”

Good. Good. Very precise, exact
you can see it.

“...or drifted in coils over the road
clung close to the earth...”

Can't you see it?
It doesn't 'haunt,' it doesn't 'devour.'
It just is.

(Absently, he makes the call of a owl, then a night bird, then a frog.)

Oo oooo. *(and etc.)*

And Ognev is thinking...
(Writes) “‘Why has she come with me?
I shall have to see her back.’”

(Outside, a burst of laughter at Mikhail's prank. Then, simple piano begins.)

(Responding) You hear?

They're at it already.
Aha.
Forgotten me already.
My catastrophe is yesterday's news.

(Barks like a dog at that.)

But Ognev says *(Writing continuously)*
“One doesn't want to go away in such lovely weather.”

That's it. Admit, deny. Say it, Ognev.

“It's a quite a romantic evening,
with the moon, the stillness,
and all the etceteras.”

(Head up with a sudden thought.)

I wonder if Lika's coming.

(He stays with the thought a beat, then pushes back from the desk and moves to look out the 'window' – perhaps, created by gobo-leaf light. Then–)

Dear Lika:
I love you passionately
like a tiger.
I offer you my hand.

Signed: Prince of Mongrels

P.S. Answer me in gestures. You do squint.

(He laughs boldly, stopping only to prevent a coughing jag.)

(Catching his breath) That's what I need – a whiff of Lika.
Should be on the evening train.
Unless she's still angry about Nina.
Well, what does she think?
She ought to be flattered if she turns up in my play.

(Bitterly) My play.

(The thought of his play sobers him. He frowns, turns abruptly, and returns to the desk.)

(Pause, as he sits completely still. Audience does not know if he's thinking of the play or the story. When he writes it comes all in a rush.)

“Do you know, Vera Gavrilovna
here I have lived twenty-nine years in the world
and never had a romance.
No romantic episode in my whole life
so that I only know by hearsay of rendezvous,
avenues-of-sighs, and kisses.”

(Speaks about himself, while he catches up on the writing.)

Masha says not to tease Lika anymore.
Well, I require it.

(Then, back at it, Ognev talking.)

“It's not normal!”

I should say it's not normal.
No episodes. Not even one.
Poor Ognev.

“In town, when one sits in one's lodgings
one does not notice the blank
but here in the fresh air one feels it.
One resents it!”

(He sits still again, then speaks quietly as he begins to write.)

Now, be careful Vera...

(As Vera) “Why...is it?”

“I don't know.
I suppose I've never had time
or perhaps it was I have never met women who...”

(He breaks off, half stands, speaks crassly to the air. It's another imaginary letter.)

Ivan
You son of a bitch

If you don't stop flirting with Lika
I'll drill a corkscrew into you
right up the place that rhymes with brass.
Signed: Lika's Lover

(Musing.)

Not tease Lika?

Besides, she's a grown up now.
Gone off and had her own affair
(with that swine – my-good-friend Potopenko).
So I don't see why she can't handle anything she'll get from me.

Masha will know if she's coming.

(He starts for the door. Stops.)

If I call Masha
I'll have to say something about...

(Sighs. Goes disconsolately back to his desk. Sits.)

“Well, here is the bridge. Here you must turn back.”

Ah ah. But Vera says–

“Let's sit down.”

Maybe Masha's marriage will move me to...

(He doesn't like the train of thought, and goes straight back to writing.)

“Vera looked away into the distance
so that Ognev could not see her face.

‘What if we meet in ten years' time?’ he said.
You, the respectable mother of a family
and I, author...

*(A sudden noise outside. Dogs barking, then horses and wagon pulling around. Voices calling;
“Marya Pavlovna!” “Masha, come look who's...”)*

(Anton, trying to hold his mood.)

“...author of some weighty statistical work
of no use to anyone.

When we meet
we will not remember the day
nor the month.
nor even the year
we saw each other for the last time on this bridge.”

(Belatedly responding to the outside noise, he goes to look out the window.)

Only old Anfisa.
Sometimes there's a line of them.
Waiting to see the doctor, camped out the whole day...
if no one tells me.

Waiting here...
where we should only think of perch
and reels
and all the worms
that thread the broad lawn.
To catch a perch is nobler and sweeter
than love.

Here, we're all waiting
...for cholera.

It's out there.
It's coming.
Only a question of how long it takes
and how badly it hits.

I've organized.
Set up makeshift hospitals.

Another reason I'd better get out a crop of stories.
Cholera doesn't pay.
In theory, maybe, but...

And it'll be straight through once it hits.
Not much sleep.

Now, you see, if Masha's out of sorts
she might not tell me they're out there, waiting.

(Leaves the window, back towards work, but his thought stops him again.)

The grand "literati" in Moscow
refuse to understand –

“Why waste your time, your precious...“
(no doubt they mean to say ‘dwindling’)
“energy?”

“Don't squander yourself in quick stories!”
– while all the time they refuse to observe
that a bursting bustling household *feeds*
on the imperfect bits of trash I spew out!

(He's worked up to coughing.)

Have you noticed? This arrogance in the well-fed?
It generally expresses itself
by lecturing the hungry.

(Coughing overcomes him.)

It's nothing. Nothing.

(When he calms down, he speaks quietly.)

Nikolai would laugh me down.
Wave a bottle at my head and giggle.
A bottle, but never a brush
a painter nevermore.
(Sighs) Oh, Nikolai.

(Pause) At the end he was gentle.
As though *he* were the little brother.
Might as well be.
There was no childhood
in our childhood.

(Pause) Where was I?

Ah. Trash. Literati. Yes.

(Attacking again, with energy.)

And just as they make absolutely no sense of my being a doctor
they refuse to acknowledge my lawful, sober wife – medicine.

They would prefer I spend myself entirely
with this noisy, impudent mistress – literature.

(Aside) When I get tired of one
I spend the night with the other.
This may seem disorderly
but it isn't dull.

And neither of them loses a thing by my infidelity.

Now, unfortunately
my wife is not nearly as reliable a provider
as my mistress.
My patients may often pay me in good will –
or quail – and, as a result...

But there's another thing, you know
that my esteemed colleagues will never grasp
not in a thousand years.
I'll always stand for these people
because I am one.
Worse even: I come from *slaves*.

That's why I haven't a pinch of sentimentality about peasants.
Yes, they suffer hideously
but they can also be ignorant, lice-ridden
brutal and debauched.

But these elegant people whine and tear at me:
“Where are your politics –
liberal or conservative?
What are you, wishy-washy, without principles?
Declare yourself!”

Whereas to me, all that is false.

Labels are only grounds for prejudice.
All that matters to me...
is truth against lies.

And as for my friends
who accuse me, first, of having no creed
no social/political program
and *then*, of “wasting my time”
collecting for libraries
building schools out of my thin pocket
fighting epidemics on no sleep
and less pay –
what are they doing with *their* politics, I wonder?

I spent my life
bit by bit
squeezing the slave out of me
until one morning I woke
and found my veins running
with real human blood.

My holy of holies? Simple things.
The human body. Health. Intelligence. Talent.
Inspiration. Love.

And...absolute freedom.
Freedom from violence, and freedom from lies –
In any form whatsoever.

(Hold. Then, suddenly embarrassed.)

And if you'd like freedom-from-hunger thrown in
you pompous peacock
you'd better take your ass in both hands
back to that chair.

(Moves quietly, humbly, to his desk, picks up paper, reviews last lines he wrote, quietly.)

“When we meet
we will not remember the day
nor the month nor even the year
we saw each other for the last time on this bridge.”

(Still quiet, he begins to write.)

“You will be changed, perhaps...”

(Looks up, pause, then –)

Lika’s a ruin now.
She’d like to blame me
but she can’t, entirely.
She misjudged, that’s all.

(Head down, writing again.)

“Tell me, will you be different?”

“Vera started and turned her face towards him. ‘What?’”

“I asked you just now...”

“Excuse me, I didn’t hear what you were saying.”
Only then Ognev noticed a change in Vera.

(Looks up.)

I suppose...
as long as I played with Lika
I could remain a child.

She was so...breath-taking
the only approach I dared make was in fun.
Teasing, chasing
mock-romance
got me close enough
to breathe her loveliness.

I didn’t notice when she changed.

(Writes again.)

“She was pale, breathing fast
and the tremor in her breathing
affected her hands and lips and head
and not one curl as usual, but two

came loose and fell on her forehead.”

And what does Ognev make of that?

“I am afraid you are cold
It’s not wise to sit in the mist.
Let me see you back, nach-haus.”

Ah ah, too late, you imbecile.

“Vera turned her back to him
looked at the sky for half a minute
and said:

‘There is something I must say to you, Ivan Alexevitch.’”

(Another burst of laughter, some running steps. Anton notices, but draws a breath, still holding the audience’s attention–)

“I am listening.””

Oh oh oh oh oh.

When they have “something to say to you”
...watch out.

(Another breath. Then, as Vera–)

“You see...”

(Something comes pushing under the door,)

(Loud) I told you: No newspapers.

(Coughs) I don’t want to know.

It *won’t* help me write this story!

(He gets up, retreats as far from the door as possible, spouting imaginary headlines.)

“Seagull Dead In Mid-Air”

“Total Rigor Mortis Before Hitting The Ground”

(Glances back at the door. A single envelope lays there.)

No papers. Good.
Just a... (*Squinting at it*) ...letter.
(*Loud again*) And no condolences!

(*Coughs, then mockingly—*)

Why did you run away?
We missed you at the party!

(*Grimly, to audience.*)

There is no sight so astonishing
and...grotesque...
as the faces of your friends –
whom, openheartedly, you have cherished
dined with a million times, defended from their enemies
these well-loved faces, twisted...
into odd, incredibly odd shapes
at intermission
when your play is *flopping*.

(*He coughs, a coughing jag. He goes back to sit at desk, weak. Determined to be finished with the subject, he says nothing. Pause.*)

(*Finally, he picks up his pen.*)

“You see...’ Vera began
bowing her head and fingering a ball on the fringe of her shawl.
‘You see...this is what I wanted to tell you...’

Vera’s words died away in an indistinct mutter
and were suddenly cut short by tears.
Ognev cleared his throat in confusion...”

(*Amused*) Umum umhm...

“When, trying to console her
he cautiously removed her hands from her face
she smiled at him through her tears and said:
‘I...love you.’”

(*He gets up swiftly, walks to the window and back, muttering.*)

Ah, there it is, there it is.
It slides out so easily.
Doesn't it, when it's there.

Impossible to spit out, when absent
impossible to hold in, when present:

Masha's in love. Yes.
Of course she must marry.
Alexander's a good man, a wonderful man.
Well placed.
I trust him.
No doubt she wants children.
And I...

(Long pause. No move, only thinking. Then—)

I'll just have to rearrange my life.

The old bachelor
useless life
burn to the end.

(He sits swiftly, about to write again.)

I love you.

“These words, so simple
were uttered in ordinary human language
but Ognev, in acute embarrassment
turned away from Vera
while his confusion was followed by terror.”

(He gets up, turns around, sits down again.)

(Half-laugh) That's it. Terror. Now where's that...

(Searches for, finds a previously written sheet, reads quickly.)

“...by declaring her love for him
she had cast off the aloofness
which so adds to a woman's charm.
She seemed to him shorter, plainer, more ordinary.

‘What’s the meaning of it?’
he thought with horror.

(Reaching the end, he adds a last sentence, energetically.)

‘But I...do I love her or not?’

(He leans back, breathes deeply.)

Do I love her?

(Pause. Then quiet, intense, he explains.)

Sometimes
you’re living it with them so...intensely
and at the same time you’re so excited to be there
to be creating the moment
that...it builds, and builds, and finally...
you can’t breathe.

(Breathing, calming.)

Do I love her?
She ‘s torn away all the fences
– one stroke – and it’s terrifying.

Before, he was sad,
but it was comfortable.
Something wasn’t right between them
but nothing was out of place.
His action could proceed.

(As he gets “into it” again, his intensity builds.)

Now, it’s wide open. Terror.
And she...*(Realizing)* She’s released!

How is it...? How do we see...?

If I gave this moment to my dear departed brother Nikolai
his painting of Vera would...*transform*.

I can almost see it, you...devil.
Fiendish skill. Your brush-tip, limpid as music.
Don't give me that smile, you son of a...

I don't have TB!
I take care of myself, mongrel!
Well...reasonably.
I don't flop about drunk
half-naked, lost in...

Oh Nikolai.
I denied and denied
until...
I no longer could.
So then I tended you
for weeks and weeks, until...
it was so boring
so tedious
but then
the moment I slipped away
to breathe some clear air
you were gone.

And the storm that rose
to bar my way home
was merciless.

(A moment suspended, picturing Nikolai; then a sudden burst of dance music, shouts, stamping feet – a full-scale party set loose.)

(Ironic) Listen to them.

And I can't live without it.
Absolutely cannot.

They're all nice people
but egotistical, pretentious, jabbering, penniless
and accustomed to stamping their feet.

(Moving to the door to get the letter, he shouts toward the hallway.)

There's a lunatic suicidal scribbler
locked up in here...!

who desperately needs one hour of *peace*
in which to twist out of his ruined carcass
one final week's nourishment
for you all!

(Mimicking) What about Anton? Is he...?"
Whispered voices from the kitchen:
"Good as new – Back writing a story –
No need to tiptoe."

*(He bends, reaching for the letter, then shies away again without touching it.
Sharply, to the audience.)*

You think I'm a coward.

Hiding. Whining. Sniffing.
You don't have any idea.

I can *will* myself to deal with anything.
And have. But this is...
An artist is very public...

I mean, the artist may be private
many are, extremely. But his work is...
completely exposed.

And trying to be a *theatre artist*...
you're just asking to be...

How much more "exposed" can you be?

You gather a crowd on purpose and say
"on this night at this hour
for your pleasure and edification
I will expose myself.

And the whole world is free
to come and treat me as it will."

Isn't it unsound
psychologically
to desire public approval
so much

that you're willing to risk
public humiliation?

This desire must be born of profound self-hatred!

(He virtually spits this last, holds bitterly, then turns, moves swiftly, with apparent purpose, back to his writing. But he sits motionless over it, unable to shake his last thought. Then—)

What is particularly insane

is that the qualities of personality
most needed
to produce a fine theatre artist

– Emotional range
sensitivity
expressiveness –

are those least suited
to combat public humiliation.

(He pauses, looking out, then rises, walks slowly forward.)

In the beginning
it was just fun.

I scribbled out stories.

Of course, the grandest fun were the charades –

to play a prank in some wild costume
titillate the guests
scandalize the neighborhood.

Then...
the moment someone actually
bought a story and paid me for it
the whole thing
metamorphosed
into a back-hours industry:

so many kopecks a line
speed and volume the essence

such and such subjects preferred
such and such tone

avoid what the censor will cut.

(May laugh to himself, then stop short at a memory.)

When Grigorovich wrote me, I was ashamed.

Great old man of letters –
the story he so admired
I'd whipped off in one sitting...
in the bath-house.

Little "smelt"
literary excrement

appearing in papers I called
"Filth of the day"

– but art!

Miniature tales, calendar jokes
dramatic sketches, telegrams, reviews

imaginary letters

articles, aphorisms
caricature captions
picture ideas.

After all that, the little plays
the one-act farces
sliced easily off my loaf.

I could write a hundred a year.

Subjects sprout out of me
like oil from the soil of Baku.

And it's fine to write plays as a sport
to go for your take
as a fisher approaches the net

– with expectation...
then delighted surprise
at the catch.
But these long plays...
How did I ever trick myself into...

Everyone speaks about plays
as though it were easy to write them!

Worked up again.

To write a good play
takes a certain talent.

To write a poor play
then change it into a good one

– to take a new focus
cross out, add, insert monologues
revive the dead and bury the living –

takes far more talent.

It's like buying an old soldier's pants
and trying to make
a dress coat of them.

(Finally, nearly bawling it out.)

I *know* The Seagull is a mess!

It's comedy...but I couldn't keep to the form.

I began it forte
and wound up pianissimo
used practically no action
lots of talk about writing
and tons of love.

I'm clearly
not a playwright.

(Animated tussle with himself.)

Then why not stand and take it like a man?

I did!

I behaved perfectly!

– exactly as a wooer
who makes a proposal
is refused
and quietly leaves.

And the panic?

That's not my affair.
I can't be held...

(An envelope pushes under the door.)

Leave me alo- !

(Seeing what it is.)

It's Mikhail. He...

(He bends to pick up the oversized, homemade envelope, but stops, seeing the envelope that still lies there. He takes them both, stares at the latter, surprised at who it's from. Pause.)

Won't be harmful, of course not harmful
but...between the lines...

(He decides against opening it, drops it back on the floor where it was, and begins to open Mikhail's.)

(Speaks loud, as though Mikhail is listening.)

If you don't leave me alone
you *understand*

we'll be out of duck soup
have no vodka next week
no cakes on Sunday
and worst of the worst...

No Story For Tonight!

(He holds Mikhail's letter, about to read it, but his attention is drawn back to the envelope on the floor. He looks at it, at the audience, then, with a resigned sigh, begins to explain—)

It's really very simple.
I expected the worst from the start.

And right off the leading lady backed out
had to be replaced.
We lost three rehearsals over that.

And *then*...
they didn't know their lines
they did too much "acting"
and everywhere I felt
...hovering malice.

I considered staying away.

As the house filled
I counted off the blondes and brunettes:
hostile, hostile, hostile, coldly indifferent.

But that's only
if they'd been a real audience

and they weren't.

It was a benefit.

And there's nothing worse.

It's better to play to two, three people
or no one
no one at all is better
than an audience
that *didn't* come to see your play.

They came for farce
to cheer the comedienne Levkevya
– who wasn't even on the stage.

The performance began
and my heart died
at the restlessness
but at first they held.

Then, as expectation built
to the play within the play
and Nina appeared...

(the one enchanting actress I had)

...with the moon behind her
beginning her solemn incantation:

“Men, lions, eagles and quails...”

They burst out laughing.

And they whistled.

Then booed.

(He begins to cough.)

Complete nightmare.
The actors were in a panic.
Critics buzzed with glee.

(Overcomes the coughing. Quiet.)

I stood, like stone,
unable to remember where I was.

It is one thing to undergo an agony
– but to have *advertised* yourself
– to have sold *tickets* to it?!

To die, to disappear
to be nobody
nobody.

(Silence, frozen. When he “snaps to,” he turns without transition to Mikhail’s paper, still in his hand.)

So, young man...

- 1) Very Young Lovers
- 2) Devouring small green apples.
- 3) Are come upon by landowner.
- 4) Who, for his amusement
forces them to beat each other.”

(He waves it as though it's hot.)

Well! There's something.
Hearty...chilling...
but only an idea, my friend.

It's not an outline
just because you break it in pieces
and put numbers to them.

Ten. Only ten.

(Takes coins from his pocket and counts them into the envelope.)

Green apples, hmmh? *(Shudders)*

At least you're getting out of autobiography.

At least I *hope* this isn't...

No one wants to hear *your* life, *your* thoughts.
Or mine.
Give than real human beings.

(Seals envelope, slides it back under the door.)

All right...accepted.
I can use it.

(He straightens, takes a deep breath, and focuses out, as though seeking immersion, a trance.)

Now, Nikolai. Release her.

Show me Vera, Verotchka...
(savors the word-) ...illuminated.

(Muttering, as he moves to sit.)

I love you, she said
I love you.

(Continually returning to his outward gaze, as though holding onto a vision, he begins writing, hesitantly.)

“She...
breathed easily...freely
now that the worst, most difficult thing...was said

and...began talking...
rapidly...”

(He leans back, imagining, picturing her. Then begins speaking what happens in his head, gets carried away, seldom referring back to write anything, maybe carried to the window, as the images occur.)

“...warmly...irrepressibly.

Ognev remembers her voice
...stifled
husky with emotion

the extraordinary music and passion
of her intonation.

Laughing, crying...
tears glistening
on her eyelashes.

The copse, the wisps of mist
the black ditches at the side of the road
seemed hushed
listening to her...

Telling him of her love

Vera was enchantingly beautiful.”

(Pause. Then softly-) Thank you, Nikolai.

(Then, angry, staccato.)

“Still...
his feeling whispered
that what he was hearing and seeing now
was more important than any
statistics and books and truths.

And he raged and blamed himself.”

(As though suddenly coming to himself, he sits, begins writing, swiftly.)

““Vera Gavrilovna...
I am very grateful to you
but...

happiness depends on equality

– that is, when both parties are...
equally in love.””

(He looks up sharply, as though the scene is happening in front of him.)

“She suddenly turned pale
and bent her head.

‘You must forgive me‘ Ognev muttered
‘I respect you so much that...’

Vera turned sharply and walked rapidly homewards.
Ognev followed her.

‘No, don’t!’ With a wave of her hand,
‘Don’t come. I can go alone.’”

(Anton stares, as though watching Vera go.)

(Then, when she’s gone, he rises, performing Ognev’s outburst.)

“My God
there’s so much life
and poetry
and meaning in it
that it would move a stone
and I...!

(He stops, confused, suspended inside the imaginary scene, and its emotional release hurtles him into reliving his own “catastrophe.” He flings out at the audience—)

By the second act...

hysterical cacophony
filled the house.

While actors played tender scenes
the audience whooped and guffawed
turned their backs on the stage
chattered to friends behind.

So I left.
But did *not* flee.

I sat rationally composed
in Levkevya ‘s dressing room
until the end.

And then I walked the streets.

I can’t answer for anyone else.
If they went frantically looking
it’s their affair.

They should have known.

Next morning I packed, wrote letters, and left.

Yes, on the early train.
Yes, even though it wasn’t express.
Twenty-two hours to Moscow? Fine.
I’ll sleep and dream of fame
bliss, tomorrow...
Melikovo – no actors

producers, audience, papers.
Bliss.

I didn't even squeak
I simply left.

Potapenko came.
I let him see me off.
Only because he hadn't seen the play.

I wouldn't talk to anyone who had.
Yes, not even Masha.

Potapenko hadn't come
because Lika had been there
and he's the third-rate writer
who ruined Lika.

Potapenko came.
And I joked.

(He coughs, fumbles for handkerchief, which becomes red-stained, hurriedly refolds and conceals it.)

Pain is strange.

You can hold it in
but it twists your face.

Dignity.

When you're stripped bare
it's dignity you reach for.
It may be the last pole of civilization.
But no doubt I slander
the animals
in saying so.

Dignity.

Self-preservation precludes
sharing the pain

letting *any* other soul presume
you are so far hurt
they may dare
step in the boat with you.

To meet one
who witnessed your humiliation
is to suffer it again.

The only way to minimize
is to avoid.

(Sprightly, mischievous.)

And at the station
are there newspapers on the platform?

Look – the newsboy’s sweet-natured face
but in his hands
poison.

Poisonous reviews.
And everyone, coming or going
just this minute
read them!

(Brief choking, caught immediately.)

If, as an artist
you are working at peak
pushing the limits
of what you’ve done before...

you are wide open.

You cannot richly connect
with what lies under the conscious mind
and remain
protected.

So when work is done
without care
its negative reception

is a matter of fortune only

but when
the artist unveils
his developing essence...

one hostile word
will wither
his center of being.

(Silence.)

Masha came on the train
directly after me
worried, no doubt
that I'd hang myself.

Nevertheless
today I am well
I am working

but my heart is tin.
I feel nothing for my plays
but disgust.

Never
not if I live *700 years*
will I write another one.

(Decisively, lightly, he moves to the door and sweeps up the unopened letter.)

D'accord?
D'accord!

(Reading the return address—)

“Anatoly Koni”...is neither a writer
actor, director or critic
and wasn't at the opening night.

What damage can he do?

(Quickly opens, begins reading it, rapidly, detached, at first speaks only phrases.)

“...letter may surprise you...
drowning in work...
The Seagull is a work whose...

He has seen it.

(He nervously reads ahead, then begins reading aloud, shakily, quietly.)

“It is life itself on stage...
with all its tragic alliances
eloquent thoughtlessness
and silent suffering

– the sort of everyday life
that is accessible to everyone
and understood
in its cruel internal irony
by almost no one

the sort of life
that is so close to us
that at times you forget you’re...”

(He chokes, breaking off, reads down, moving to sit, then finally reads the end aloud.)

“Perhaps you are shrugging your shoulders in amazement.
Of what concern is my opinion to you
and why am I writing all this?

Here is why.

I love you
for the moments of stirring emotion
your works have given
and continue to give me

and I want to send you
a random word of sympathy
from a distance

a word which
as far as I know

may be quite
unnecessary.”

(Anton puts his head down on the desk, weeping freely.)

(A carriage is arriving outside. Dogs intersperse their greetings with human voices. Lika: “Oh...Mikhail! Mama Anna!” Young male: “Lika!” Lika: “You look like a string-bean, Mikhail” Laughter. Male: “Marya, get out here. Lika’s come!”)

(Anton pushing up, lifting his head, still heavy with emotion, but bold–)

I’m sorry, Masha.
I’m sorry.
I’m stupid, selfish
and pigheaded

and deserve...
nothing you’ve done for me.

Of course you have my blessing!

Go love your Alexander.
Be fruitful.
The blessings will fall
back upon me.

(Pause. Then, lightly–)

That’s what I’ll tell her.

(Chuckles at his grandiloquence.)

Surprise her, won’t I?

She’ll tap on the door
thinking she’s only
knocking us in to tea

Now.

(He picks up the last page of his story, and reads:)

“There’s so much life in it

that it would move a stone
and I...”

(He writes.)

“When Vera disappeared
Ognev longed passionately
to regain what he had lost.”

Yes. All right. He longs. But what does he *do*?

She’s gone.
She said “Don’t come.
I can go alone.”

But he follows. Doesn’t he?

Yes. He follows. And then...

(Long pause.)

I can’t do it.

I don’t know.

Damn!

(He sits, vacant. Laughter outside, “Come on.” Piano, gaily. “I’ll not sing unless you behave!”)

That’s Lika! She came! How did I miss...

(He goes to the window. Sunset.)

Ivan !
You – you chunk of filth!
Don’t tell me you don’t know
Lika belongs to me
and we already have two children!
You Cow-pie.
You rat!!
Leave the girls alone!
Signed, Lika’s Lover

Masha's right.
If I won't take her
I should let her be.

Can I help it if the silly girl adores me?

(Moves again back to the story.)

Have to finish now.
Et alors...?
Do something, Ognev!

(Pause, pregnant with creative intensity, but—)

But I can't.
Aach!
You recalcitrant swine!
Impotent of soul!

Just sit there.
I'm leaving you.
You deserve it.
All alone in the mist, with the...

(Suspended, realizing he is Ognev. Then, startled by a knock on the door.)

I'll be out in a minute. I'm finishing my story.

(Footsteps start away from the door, and Anton looks up, remembering his plan.)

Masha? Masha...

(Footsteps stop, then return. The door opens a crack. He speaks passionately, moved—)

I'm sorry, Masha
I'm sorry.

I'm stupid, selfish
and pigheaded

and...

(He stops. He cannot bring himself to say what he planned.)

and I'll read my story
right after tea.

(He is frozen. Footsteps retreat from the door.)

I can't do it, can't...say....

(He stares, helpless, at the audience; then to cover his failure, he goes swiftly to his files.)

Something else! Yes?
Here...this one.

(He lifts a small manuscript packet, and begins to describe the story.)

In this one
there's an old man
crossing the steppes
in a blizzard
cursing his wife behind...

but when he looks back...

(Looks teasingly at the audience, opens the door, calls—)

Hello?
Ready out there?

(Then, he howls like a wolf.)

Uhooo, uhooo. OOOOooo

(Goes quickly through the door, and shuts it.)

(Calls: "Anton! Anton's coming!" Laughter, applause, overtaken by Russian music.)

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO

Mid-afternoon. Anton's study in Moscow, eight years later: January 16, 1904

Offstage, female voices protest: "No, Anton." "Anton, please."

Anton hurries in, strides toward his desk— Offstage: "Don't do this. Think!"

ANTON

Shut it, please. And go. *(silence)*

I'm taking it away! What else can I do?

It can't be performed like this!

Not like this.

(Door reluctantly closes. He adds, with a touch of guilt—)

I'll compose a statement
to the Art Theatre's Board
and give it to you.

Now leave me alone.

(He listens for noise outside. Silence. Then he paces, muttering—)

"Dear and respected members of the..."

(He happens to catch sight of the audience, and is startled—)

Oh. You still here?

(amused, mischievous)

Well, you missed a lot.

Hah - everything.

Since you last saw me called in to supper
eight years have come and gone.

Seems only minutes ago?

Time's funny that way.

A snap- *(snap his fingers, becoming 'the magician')*
and decades roll by.

I can't believe how fast
we're flying into the future... can you?

Out there (*behind the door*)
they think I'll change my mind.
(*mimicks*) "He always does...
...starts by swearing he'll never write another play
but next day he has a cold bath
takes castor oil, et voila: writes another play." Hah!

(*mock grimness, to audience*)

Only the dead are consistent.
They stay dead

But when I swear something...
the more vehemently I swear
the more certain they are
that I will next week (if not next day)
reverse my pronouncement entirely.

The surest sign of life...is change.

(*brightly, great mood*) How do I look?

When Lika said "You look..."
I said "all but dead?"
and told her *she* looked just born.

But eight years: that's a life time!
Well, for me it is.
And what have I to show for it
other than looking all but dead?

I did write more plays
and now...

(*clamor rises outside: more people enter, alarmed. He makes fun*)

Outside they're clamoring.
You think these women would learn!

Yes: women.

Now there are two: Masha *plus* Olga.

(mischievous, swiftly—)

Reminds me of the time my painter friend, Levitan —
you remember: I told Masha not to marry him
because he needed a Balzac-ian woman?

Well, Levitan was having two women at once
a mother and daughter, and....

(stops himself, mock fear) Oooh no, don't go there!
I should never have put that in a story, but...

(realizing he's avoiding his task he inhales, takes paper and pen, and...)

My sister Masha is out there now.
And yes: she chose not to marry Alexander.
I never understood why.

(starts to write as he talks—)

And now she's out there
joined by my...enchanted...wife.

Yes, wife. *(looks up at audience, mischievous)*
How could a wife happen to me - the eternal flirt?
Surprised 'em, didn't I? Myself most of all.
The elusive bachelor - married.

(starts to write again-)

Gives you some idea how enchanting
this radiant actress is.
If I hadn't met Olga
I'd never have written another play.
But now...*(interrupts himself. stares...)*

(...finally writes—)

“My dear and respected Board of Managers....”
(mutters as he writes—) They've gone too far:
To take my masterwork, my final play...

(looks up suddenly as though the audience protested—)

Don't look at me like that.
You can see, anyone with eyes can see
that I don't have another work left in me.

(bending to write again, speaking offhand as he writes—)

Remember how I once whipped off a whole story
in one sitting in the bathhouse?
Well, this play has taken me Three Whole Years to...

No, I haven't been writing it the whole time.
How could I?
What with our medical...catastrophes
and not only mine.

(looks up as though he's been asked)

Do I have TB?
They say I do. *(conflicted, annoyed)*

And I'm not an idiot.
I'm a doctor who's nursed countless...TB...
and not only them, but my own dear Nicolai... *(grief)*
so my brain knows what's in store for me:
"Slow down. Conserve your strength!"

(distracted, may get up and move. Realizing his pattern—)

But I can't stop. And the result is...
I propel myself through space - over the globe -
restlessly
endlessly in motion
because every lovely spot I find -
when I stop to rest there -
reminds me I'm not long for this earth.

So up I get again
and run off someplace new
where my idiot's fancy tells me
my story may find a new ending
- a different prognosis -

wherein the hapless writer is allowed
to go on drinking as deeply
of this beautiful thing life
with its glorious future forever out of reach—
around the next bend, or peak, or river, or song...

(He's swiftly flown to a poetic ending, then switches gears to joke—)

Just wait: the day I finally fall
I'll be packing for my trip to the Arctic!

I even told my darling Olga —

(interrupts himself with a delicious secret-)

Did I tell you she is now
the premiere actress in all of Russia?

Well, I said: "Never fear, doggie
I'll write another play just for you:
you'll be breaking through walls of ice
in a ship bound for the Arctic
when, in the midst of a howling gale
the ghost of your lost lover
will come to you, and..."

*(He drifts into a happy dream in which the ghost is him, for he'll be dead - but is jolted back by
SUDDEN CHATTER or noise offstage, and shouts toward them—)*

It's a comedy!!
How dare you defy my instructions!

(sharp knock on the door)

Yes !!

(another knock - he approaches the door)

What is it?

(Voice offstage: "I've tea for you." The truth is, he's enjoying himself immensely)

All right.

(friendly, to audience, as he opens the door...)

Here's devotion for you:
while I'm in here deciding their fate...

(takes a tea-tray from someone as he yells past them, gleefully—)

Is that rat Stanislavky out there too?
He who raved: "God has smiled!
Your *Cherry Orchard* is a gigantic masterpiece..."

Then why did he proceed to wipe his boots all over it?!
Run and hide, Konstantin.
Tail between your legs!

If he's out there, tell him to sit on a cake of ice!
I'll teach him to honor my directions!

(swiftly sets the tray on his desk, but ignores it, sits down to write quickly—)

"I regret to report that extreme..."

(stops to think, then carefully writes—)

"...creative differences..."

Good phrase.
Absolute; not too insulting...
"compel me to..."
Yes. They can save face with "creative differences."

What do they think?
They can talk me out of my rage - I'm justified!
And they needn't think I'll be softened
by their supposedly secret plans
to honor my Jubilee.

(Note: he's relishing it all, loves sharing with us, telling us - everything)

What's a Jubilee?
Well, after you've been 'at it'
for a whole quarter century

they think you need a public celebration
to be assured of society's gratitude to you. Hah!

Buy more tickets. That's the gratitude I want!
They think I don't know what they're planning.
They know if I knew I'd never show up.
Ceremonies embarrass me.

And what's the point of gratitude...
(raising his voice to 'out there')...when with the same breath
without even blinking
you blithely destroy the essence of everything
I've poured my last drop of inspiration into
and then...
you have the unmitigated stupidity
to expect me to applaud you for it?!

(sharing with audience). I'll never write another:
I feel it here *(hits his chest)* - I'm done for.
And I will not go out like this!

Sentimental, whimpering...
(shout to those out there) ...It's a COMEDY!
Did I neglect to mention that?
Or even more reprehensible, did you fail to notice?!

(having wound himself into a rage, he sits heavily, breathes to calm himself)

(Outside: voices; guitar or balalaika - all of which he LOVES. "can't live without" begins)

Now they've got music? Bring in the guitars!
They're not listening to me.
Have a party! Fiddle while...I burn.

(He pours tea, but is delayed from drinking it by realizing how he loves all this—)

Who do I think I'm fooling? *(quotes himself—)*
"If I hadn't met Olga, I'd never have written..."
when the truth is
I've always been tempted toward theatre
like a helpless moth.

I tried and tried to write for it

but it took Olga to...turn the key of my passion
so my brain could let in...theatre

But she's not to blame for this particular mess.
No, it's that self-appointed bearer of the Torch of Truth:
Konstantin Alexeyvitch Stanislavsky.

When he was starting out
and barely had an amateur company to his name
he flattered me that I alone among writers
had put real human beings in a play

and that he alone among directors
could bring them to life on stage.

So he put my *Vanya* into rehearsal
without permission

and when I saw Olga perform Elena...
they were no longer words I'd written —
it was life there before me
as though I'd created it
breathing.

And she smiled...so warmly
that I knew...she felt it too.

I had to have her —
even if I was already ill
even if I couldn't stay long
in Moscow, even if...

(remembers he's angry)

You want truth on stage, Konstantin?
I gave you truth, and you've turned it into
sickly sweet porridge!

(His breath catches in a rage that makes him cough)

How did I become so helpless?

(coughs again, gulps tea to stifle coughing, and quiets, breathing heavily—)

It wasn't only a woman that happened to me -
It was a whole...force field: theatre. So that now...

(uncertain how to explain, but swiftly, quietly-)

By the time Stanislavsky and the Art Theatre
came to Yalta to play *Vanya* for me... *(beat)*

It turns out Konstantin was right: he and I "made" each other.
I was now famous as a playwright and his theatre was "on the map."

Well, by then - I was a goner.

Remember what splits Ognev from Vera
in the story I was writing before intermission? Love is...
(quotes himself) "impossible to spit out when absent
impossible to hold in when present."

Love tripped me
try as I would to deny, delay, dissemble...
once I knew Olga - illogical, nonsensical
insane as it was - I could fool no one
least of all her.

So I wrote them *Three Sisters*.
And can you believe it -
I named two of them "Olga" and "Masha."

No no, not as themselves - in reverse!
The minx who's like my Olga I named "Masha"
whereas "Olga" in the play is the family's rock
like my sister Masha was from birth, and still is.
So it's a joke on them both!

But I had to have Olga
and she had to marry
so there was no way out of this familiar story.

Even if I squawked
even if Masha fumed
which of course she did
in part from jealousy, but also

because I was so sickly.

Plus - though she fell in love again
Masha has not married.

But oh, my happiness...

(throws his hands up, mocking himself)

So I've done it to myself?
Ever so sweetly, I was seduced
by my love, by the theatre
and my soul...pays
daily.

(hands on head, thinking. Voices offstage- "Look who's here!" Anton hears them, and anxious to finish it, reads what he's written—)

"My dear and respected Board of Managers....
I regret to report that extreme...
creative differences compel me to...
"withdraw..."

(writes and reads with pain)

...my play."

(troubled, he breathes heavily)

But what will Olga say?
Olga the magnificent, my beloved
after all her work and faith in me - will be devastated.

(but then his tender dismay morphs into fury—)

Then why won't she play this crowning role as I wrote it?!

(switches in a split second to soft intimacy—)

Women are such...essential creatures
I cannot exist without...
Nothing sparks life in me so surely
as the presence, the sight, the being...

of an interesting woman.

(pours more tea while sweet thoughts of women make him playful—)

But actresses are fatal.
I forever flitted after them
flirting until they were dazzled...
but then withdrew
like the moon turning new.

Maybe that's why I endow
actresses in my stories
with vain, shallow, characters...

just because I'm annoyed
they disturb my peace —
with their delicious...liveliness?

Of course, it's also true
that I'm partial to female doctors
but they're rare birds.

Even in Russia
they have a hard time existing.
You might say they're endangered?

Unlike actresses.

And my wife is an actress who can portray anything
she sets her mind to - anything.
Though she has been fighting Konstantin over this role.

And I warned him a whole year ago -
that he'd have to hire an older actress
for this "Grande Dame of the District" -
this Madame Ranevsky.

And, though I hate to admit it, Konstantin is right:
there's no one but Olga who can play her.

Our old actresses are all artifice and mannerisms -
utterly incapable of coming on stage as real live women.

So Olga must find it in her soul
to play Ranevsky - why does she resist?
Surely she can imagine herself as...

(stopped by a horrible realization—)

It's Lika!

Ach what a mess: *(stunned—)*
Olga knows...what I concealed
even from myself:

that the seed of Madame Ranevsky
is Lika. Again, it's Lika.

*(Note: here and everywhere - he **loves** telling these stories- he's a story-teller!)*

But how could I see the harm?
Given that everyone knows
even Lika knows - I'm head over heels
in love with my wife -
where's the harm?

And why should my wife object
to my helping Lika...
to a modest place, as a minor actress
in our almighty Moscow Art Theatre.

Yes, thanks to Konstantin and all of them, really
it has achieved greatness! - So...
what harm can there be in Lika?

Konstantin was happy to have her -
he said Lika brought...
an essential whiff of danger
to roost
amid our proper young ladies.

But my wife -
the peerless Olga Knipper (whom I adore)
won't even speak to Lika.

Olga, who is always so kind!

That's women for you: senseless jealousy.
Even the magnificent do not escape it.

Lika IS there in my play
plain as day, and I didn't see it—
the Grande Dame who flies off to Paris
besotted with a scoundrel
who's too stupid to even...

And then this silly woman - however glorious -
is disgraced, robbed, left bankrupt by that scoundrel.
And to boot - she loses her child!

Who is that but Lika?!
Face it, Anton -
you old vulture in an artist's mask.
How can Olga portray... with truth and spirit
a role inspired by her husband's...

Oh, no, no, no - much as I adore her
Lika was not my mistress!

Remember that love is
"impossible to spit out when absent"?
That's what made Lika run mad:
much as I adore her, I couldn't love her.

Even now, when Lika's so excited
by the new play,
I say "Remember Babkino?"
and she squeals:
"Summer by the river! Am I in it then?"

"Of course not. No one is in it." I say.
"You teased, how you teased..."
"Ah ah ah," I warn her: "The more boys tease
the more they don't dare anything more."

Then she wants to know what the play's about?
"The future," I say. But don't worry."
"And it's funny?"
"Hilarious."

(remembering the battle he's in over the play)

And it HAS to be.
So what are they on about?
Weeping, moaning...

If Olga wants to triumph as Ranevsky
she'll have to comprehend the vast emptiness
of my darling Lika: how fatally funny -
how precisely human - that is.
We have to laugh!

(tries to pull himself back to writing - noises like party offstage and sound effects from The Cherry Orchard: hoots, a train whistle, harness bells jingling)

My god, is the whole company out there?!
Let's find my evidence...

(quickly grabs a pack of letters to search through, talks playfully as he works—)

The facts of life for a writer (or an actor) are...
you draw on life - what else is there?
And it has nothing to do with your heart -
with where your heart lies.

My *Cherry Orchard* comes from Babkino
that magical estate whose dear -
but unfortunate - owners lost it.
That, and my own Melikovo
where I lovingly planted cherry trees
till its barbaric new owner chopped them down - simple?

When people accuse me of "using my friends"
I say "Ridiculous! That character is not you."
And it's always the truth
but...it's also true that inspiration...
is a subtle thing -
so if you pin me down and say
"Tell me, on your honor
that your dear friend Levitan's affair
with your friend Sophia-the-doctor's-wife
did NOT inspire your 'Grasshopper' story?"

I'd mumble nothing, and excuse myself...

for the truth of a writer's material is.... (*delicious secret*)
it's always stolen.
Stolen and changed.

So even when your dear friend
threatens you with a duel
even if he won't speak to you for years
you'll do it again.

If you're a writer, that is.

(*finds a letter he's looking for*)

Hah. Here it is.

(*opens letter, but, feeling guilty, stops to confess—*)

Who are we kidding?
The artist is ruthless; you know it.
Only art drives him; he'll sacrifice anything
anyone on its altar and think he's justified
that he has a "calling" to do so.
Oh, the arrogance...

I don't deserve the friends I have -
though I love them like my soul -
but in order to love me
they must accept me as I am
that I'm ruthless.

Poor Lika. I used her folly
and the human tragedy it caused
in *The Seagull*.
Of course her character
is broached sweetly as "Nina" -
with innocence at first, and delicacy...

Nina's a fool:
she throws herself at a man and comes back ruined
...but she does survive.

If you care for an artist, you'd better know -
 he has to use what life gives him.
 Or her. God help her.
 That's why Olga can portray anything:
 All Of Life.

But she's not the real problem: he is!

(finds passage he wanted in the letter, writes swiftly, reading—)

“Konstantin - much as I honor him -
 and after our long, fruitful (and profitable!) partnership -
 has not only failed
 to create the tone I require (and have described)
 for *The Cherry Orchard*
 he has blatantly defied my direction -
 regarding the central male role:
 the serf who buys the orchard - Lopakhin.”

“My direction in the script is clear:

(reading letter, copying)

“‘white waistcoat, yellow suede shoes, book in hand’.
 It's the perfect picture of elegance! And I wrote Konstantin...”
 where...? *(pages through pack of letters)*

Yes — here! *(reads as he writes)*

“I described Lopakhin...

(reading as he copies)

“...he is in every sense of the word a decent man;
 he must be presented as a wholly dignified,
 intelligent individual
 not remotely petty or capricious...”

And what did he give me onstage?

(reads as he writes, furious)

“Lopakhin the tramp: cursing, smoking, spitting...
 cleaning his chair with his coat!”

(flings himself back, exhausted by outrage, coughs, struggling to speak—)

And I told them, warned them, over and over...

(searching the letters)

Yes, here: *(reads)*

“*The Cherry Orchard* has turned out not a drama but a comedy - in fact, in parts, it is a clear farce!”

There! And then here: *(reads as he copies)*

“The last act will be cheerful like the whole play - cheerful and frivolous.”

(snaps to the audience, with finality:)

So there’s my proof. In black and white.
I have grounds for closure:
since they don’t obey me
I’ll shut them down!

(writes furiously, and reads—)

“You will herewith Cease and Desist to rehearse or perform *The Cherry Orchard*.”

(decisive clap as he sweeps to his feet, paper in hand, hurries to the door, slides his paper under the door, and stands with his hand up as though saying “Wait for it”. until.... Boom! Tremendous clamor offstage, and he scurries away from the door)

(Offstage - people wail, beg, groan, shout, as Anton hurries back toward the audience - to drown out the protests, he shouts back to those behind the door—)

It’s only a play!!

Not life and death.

Not a revolution -

aah-oops! Shhhh! *(to audience ‘don’t say that dangerous word’—)*

A country gone mad with their politics
cannot hear the truth.

Have you noticed? Politics are dangerous now.
So artists are dangerous, too.
But what good are artists
if they aren't free?

“What side are you on?” they ask
but I won't answer liberal or conservative:

“I'm on the side of the human race!
I'm for the health of our planet.
I'm for the Truth.”

A country gone mad with their politics
cannot hear the truth.

What I do stand against is anti-Semitism
but that's not politics - that's just hate.

And hate
in any form
is sin.

(Offstage, sentimental music & stomping. A knock on the door; then a message slides under it with a playful series of knocks. He loves their “show must go on” mood)

See that?
They can't stop; they won't take “No”
They're all out there rehearsing the fourth act
even when they know I'm taking it away.

(He moves to sweep up the message, while—)

Think you're free? Tell you what:
If you want freedom - go to Siberia!
There no one's afraid to say what they think
No politics, no opposition. nowhere to exile you to!
You can be liberal as you like!

(finally reads the message he's picked up—)

“Dear beloved playwright...”

(he looks up at the audience - what can he do?)

“Please find it in your genius’ heart
to give us one more chance...”

(he sighs, crumples, tosses the message, then stares at the audience)

‘Course there’ll be hell to pay.
Admissions to return.
Company in an uproar
general devastation...
not to mention: my Jubilee cancelled.

If you’d heard how they begged for this play.
In Yalta, when I began to lose heart
feeling I had “run out as a writer”
my wife wrote from Moscow—:

“Go on writing!
Love each word, each idea
each soul you elevate, and realise
that we - all people - *absolutely need* them.”

“Nowhere in the world is there a writer like you.
We wait for your play like manna from heaven.”

And Konstantin is so perpetually...enthusiastic
and so sure of himself.

In the beginning
how he hounded me, until...I can’t deny
he did open the door to my life in the theatre, and...
he’s deeply sincere as well - but that’s the problem:

He “feels” things.
That’s his whole program - how he creates reality
but he cannot feel, he doesn’t know...life...as I do.

He’s from wealth, the owner of factories
and I’m from serfs - peasants who were slaves.

There it is.

(beginning to get riled up, angry again—)

So it's all wrong!
 Their performance is not what I wrote.
 They can't understand it:
 that when they're sentimental, they insult...
 ...you insult humanity, as if to say—

(moves to door so they'll hear him "act", making fun of them, exaggerated—)

"Look at me: the sensitive artist
 portraying these unfortunate people
 who don't have the moral character
 to rescue themselves."

(Outside Voices: "No no no, we don't!", so Anton continues, but louder—)

"Look how daintily I weep.
 See, I'm shedding real tears!
 Aren't I wonderful?
 Weep with me, so we **all** can say
 we've had a 'profound cultural experience.'"

(shouts at the door—)

But that's not truth - it's hypocrisy!
 Don't you dare call yourselves artists!!

(He strides away from the door, back toward the audience)

They'll never understand. I'm taking it away.

Even worse than his ruining my play:
 Konstantin has no idea what he's done!

(mimicking Stanislavsky) [The following could be done as a two-character scene Anton plays by himself. If so: CUT "And I'm outraged" "he whines" "I scream", etc.]

"My dear Anton Pavlovich, what's wrong? It's beautiful!"

And I'm outraged: "Beautiful?!"

First, you make a simpering crybaby out of me...
 and then... you allow the most agonizing pain in all of *life*

let alone the theatre – it's BORING!”

But he whines: “Nothing is final. We can change everything. Nothing in theatre is ever final!

“Your *Cherry Orchard* is simply the most profound of Russian tragedies”

“That’s an insult!” I scream—
“What happens in it? Some useless, wasteful spineless people lose the wealth and privilege they have never in their lives deserved!

“Yes. It was beautiful – their charming old life – and they have happy memories (and sad ones)... but they are ridiculous, ridiculous people!

“Whereas the serf - Lopahkin - who is on the rise who cuts down their precious, magnificent but unproductive, remember that please unproductive...Orchard, may seem opportunistic... but the youngest of them, all the bright ones see what the future should be, and are glad!”

“And *no* one - mind this - not one of them ever **weeps!** Except Varya, the sad-sack daughter and that’s only because she’s a genuine cry-baby!

“And that’s funny!!

(at the end of the build, as he fights off coughing—)

“And when, after their fuss about taking the senile old butler to the hospital, they go off and lock him in the house to die – it's hilarious!”

(he’s worked himself up - needs to rest, but doesn’t stop-)

“And my god, Konstantin—
why won't you play Lopahkin?!
I told you over and over...
it needs an impressive actor as the Serf.

“But no. You play the pathetic brother
 who trots out our most pompous tribute:
 ‘Dear and respected...so and so’
 to an inanimate object, to a *bookcase*:

“ ‘Dear and respected *bookcase*’ ?!
 “The man is sheer refuse!
 And you, Konstantin Stanislavsky
 bearer of the torch of truth, have the nerve
 to ask us to shed tears over him?
 It's nauseating!
 The audience will be nauseated.”

And when he whines: “I’m sure the audience...”
 I scream: “They must laugh!
 “It's all there. You didn't read the play.”

(exhausted, leans-)

And he whimpers— “But there's so much love in it.
 Excuse me, honored Anton Pavlovich
 a thousand pardons, but we love them.
 You make us love them.”

And I - who can barely stand - snap—
 “If you love them so much
 point the way, play for their future!
 For equality, for sharing, for saving the earth itself.”

Finally my sister Masha says:
 “Are you sure that's what you've written?
 There's so much pain.”
 And my Olga adds —
 “And if we love them all
 who will we love the most? *(beat)*
 Those that you're calling ridiculous.
 The most weak, most lost, the helpless ones.”

And I realize—
 “No no no, that's *sentiment*, not tragedy!

“The trouble isn't the love and it isn't the pain.
 The trouble is that you haven't felt

not yourselves, not yet felt...*enough* pain.

“When you feel that
when you feel the full force, the blast...
of losing your world...without any hope
ever, of recovering it, then
smashed inside the fist of that pain
you will begin to hear yourself laugh.

“*That* is the laugh I want.
The laugh that clears the eyes...
because they refuse to go dark.
It clears the eyes...and heals.”

(He slides down, thoroughly exhausted, but satisfied that he’s made his point)

That’s what I want.
And there’s no chance.
They don’t understand.
Maybe they never will.

(Having battled it all through, he sees he can’t punish them for what they can’t understand, so he writes a note to rescind his ‘cease & desist,’ reading as he writes—)

“You may perform *The Cherry Orchard*...this once.”

(resigned, as though speaking of children he loves, as he goes on writing—)

So that’s how it goes, in theatre:
when you bring your sweetest essence to the boards
you’re at the mercy of all those...other artists.

(finishes writing, and reads-)

“Perform it this once...and then we’ll see.”

(he stands, looking at the note he’s written, says to audience—)

That’s the price
of admission....to the game.

They all have to work together, you see.
They draw on each other’s inspiration

and on you, too - where you sit with your emotions
tucked safely away - in the audience.

So they're free to ruin my play, and I'm helpless —
Imagine you're a writer sitting in the audience
when an actor *forgets your lines*.

(stares at the audience until they imagine, then nods—)

Helpless?
Working in theatre
you're dependent on colleagues...
who may not understand you
while their whole art is to "live"
what you have written.

*(Throws his hands up - "what can you do?", takes his new note to the door, slides it under, waits
for the explosion offstage: cheers, laughter - a dance starts, then harness bells - while Anton
resumes chuckling about himself - to his audience—)*

And you're lucky
if once in a million years
they do your play the way you dreamed it.

It could be, the reason actors mostly don't
- do your play the way you dreamed it -
is so you'll be reminded
every single time
that it is **live** out there:
loaded by you, the writer
shot through the actors
straight to the soul of the audience.

(Dance is fading. Harness bells swell, growing louder)

The *audience*; you...
who are every single time
different
but every single time come together
with the potential
perhaps even the prayer
that you will feel as One -
and experience, together

something
that will transform you
and thus, all of us
as we share life itself
in theatre.

(Pause. Deep breath. He could be finished, but then—)

Want to know my dream...
of the future that's coming
when we'll save the earth
and one another?

You say "How can I hope
when my country shudders in terror:
after feeling such joy - that equality was near
that we were almost there...
until...old hatreds flare
when people fear change
and workers are lost
while rich men's souls
are crumbling rust...
for greed corrodes them.

What future? When?
When I'm forgotten.

Think: a century from now? The new millenium.
It could come! Science is moving so fast...
Of course I won't see it; I'll be gone
and my words may not last.
But what do you think?

When even now, in my primitive times
any living soul knows the truth
that every child, everywhere...must be fed
and schooled and sheltered and safe
that government must honor all its people
that no person of power or wealth can rest
while *anyone* starves.

That's all I want.

(smiles; shrugs; then mischievously—)

Too much for theatre to do?

Work with me.

And I'll thank you
for coming together
to share this...life.

(lights go to black, harness bells swell, then fade into distance)

END OF PLAY



PERFORMANCE NOTES

All you need is a 'feel' for Chekhov. You may decide he's selfish, arrogant, a womanizer, but we're talking human here, and richness of character - which is double edged - and his opposing face is pure appeal. He's irresistible.

ANTON (Act One) is extremely hard work--for the director and actor. It requires a guy who's an 'entertainer'--can take the audience in his palm with his sense of fun, then bounce them among his myriad, often tortured thoughts, still keeping their balance, never letting down, through to the end. It's very like a roller coaster ride. And while the tone and pace is lightning fun like the surface of Chekhov, the base of it all is deep emotion, available throughout, that finally releases after the Koni letter.

The "tossing" of the audience requires clarity--ie, instantaneous transitions, no warning, and absolute control of focus, while moving the audience requires unrestricted emotional flow. As I try to describe it, it occurs to me it's like asking an actor to pat his head and rub his tummy. But there you are. I've seen it done by a master entertainer who had trouble going to emotional depths. And then by an actor who was often brilliant at both, but if he didn't hook his feeling deep enough at the very outset, he'd go flying off and not be heard from again that night.

MASHA, TOO allowed me to help the audience for *ANTON* to relax by introducing a lot of background ahead.--eg. If they hear play they know all about Alexander. And in *TO MOSCOW* you'll find Masha's description of the scene between them that occurs just before the opening of *ANTON*, and also there's alot about Lika.

I have 'cheated' these events into the same few days that didn't occur that way. Eg: "*Verotchka*" is a story Chekhov had written ten years earlier.

The 2nd Act of *ANTON* is much easier to play: it needs the same spirit, but now he has the confidence of a seasoned playwright. And his driving force is singular: outrage at betrayal of his work by colleagues he depends on. His bounce off that - the fun - comes from his now-intimate familiarity with his audience: he can gleefully bring them up to date, then recruit their fighting souls to battle his final storm.

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Karen Sunde, a playwright and screenwriter, lives in New York

Her other plays about Chekhov: the collection *CHEKHOVS AT HOME* can be acquired free online and at [www.karensunde.com](http://www.karensunde.com); *TO MOSCOW* is available at [www.dramaticpublishing.com](http://www.dramaticpublishing.com)

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PLEASE GOD, NO WEDDING OR SHOOTING AT THE END+
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