



CHEKHOVS AT HOME
a trilogy of Plays by
KAREN SUNDE

What The Critics Say

Please God, No Wedding... "(Sunde's) clever conceit worthy of Stoppard provides an immensely entertaining evening. This hilarious yet also touching tour de force...ought always to accompany Chekhov's <The Seagull>" *PLAYS INTERNATIONAL*

Please God, No Wedding... "Anton's tiny gesture of refusal to aid his lover sets off reverberations of lost connections and ultimate tragedy ... Sunde stealthily plants her emotional bomb, camouflaged under the verbal dazzle of Shakespeare and Chekhov's words, and when it detonates at the end, the effect is quietly shocking." Tim Cusack *NYTHEATRE.COM Reviews*

"Much of (the Festival's) interest is due to **Anton Himself** and **Masha, Too**...Masha becomes a woman of real substance and no little humor, a rounded portrait of someone worth knowing. ... Vaguely echoing *The Seagull* itself, (Anton, Himself) is ingeniously assembled. ... 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." Clifford A. Ridley *PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER*

"Simplicity stretched to its limits is what makes this production so appealing. ...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 (it)." *THE FRINGE REVIEW* Vancouver

TAGS. Anton Chekhov, Maria Pavlovna Chekhova, Isaac Levitan, Lika Mitzinova, Hamlet, *The Seagull*, Melikovo, writing process, plays by women, ensemble plays, writers and reviews, plays about Chekhov, 19th century Russia

CHEKHOVS AT HOME

A Trilogy

PLEASE GOD, NO WEDDING OR SHOOTING AT THE END!

ANTON, HIMSELF

MASHA, TOO

By

Karen Sunde

Smashwords Edition

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION – A passionate affair with no end in sight.

PLEASE GOD, NO WEDDING OR SHOOTING AT THE END

MASHA, TOO

ANTON, HIMSELF

PRODUCTION NOTES – How to do these crazy plays.

WHAT THE CRITICS SAY

OTHER PLAYS AND SCREENPLAYS by Karen Sunde

PRODUCTION HISTORY

PLEASE GOD, NO WEDDING OR SHOOTING AT THE END! was commissioned by Tisch School of the Arts, NYU, and first performed by Table And Chair Handmade Theatre at HERE Theater, New York, directed by Richard Levine.

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

ANTON, HIMSELF was commissioned and first produced by Actor's Theatre of Louisville, published in *Moscow Art Theater*, a monograph, and performed at Yalta Festival in Russia. and at the Moscow Art Theatre, Moscow, at CHEKHOV NOW Festival in New York, and The Fringe Festival in Vancouver, BC.

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.

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, Sergei 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*, are presented here in *Chekhovs At Home*. But please note that their order is last first: although the easiest sequence for the reader to meet them would be *Masha, Too* (a breeze), then *Anton, Himself* (complex), and only then *Please God...* (an extravaganza). Alas, the chronology of their action is the opposite: *Please God* begins when Chekhov is **beginning** to write *The Seagull*, whereas *Masha* and *Anton* take place the day **after** *Seagull*’s opening night. Though time passes, loved ones remain, and some close to the heart in the solo plays come to life in the big play.

Feel free to read them in any order you like. And welcome! KS

[PLEASE GOD, NO WEDDING OR SHOOTING AT THE END!](#)



Photo of Melikovo by Seifkin DR

This play is a dance into life of the writer with his creation.

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It needs an open stage.

Piled on one side: a trunk with props, writing table, two chairs, paper, pens, a candle.

.

ANTON and his sister MASHA are real; all the other characters exist in Anton's mind:

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LIKA and ISAAC are family friends, but the rest are characters from *The Seagull* (created as we watch), and *Hamlet*, which Anton's just seen.

.

ANTON's mind-characters interact with one another, but MASHA is unaware of, and does not see them.

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CHARACTERS: 6 w, 8 m total.

ANTON *immortal writer, fallible man*

MASHA *warm, wise, forgetful of self*

LIKA *devilish, with angelic aspirations*

ISAAC *flamboyant, sensitive, impossible*

TEN "MIRROR" ROLES (characters from *The Seagull* and *Hamlet*):

KONSTANTIN (*mirrors*) HAMLET

NINA (*mirrors*) OPHELIA

DORN (*mirrors*) POLONIUS

ARKADINA (*mirrors*) GERTRUDE
TRIGORIN (*mirrors*) CLAUDIUS

.
The *Hamlet* characters' mission is to help birth the *Seagull* characters, but both only speak lines from their extant plays. As Anton begins to write *The Seagull* *, he has snatches of characters, plot and themes with which he will wrestle as he finds his play.

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* Lines from *The Seagull* are an English version by Karen Sunde; those from *Hamlet* are by Shakespeare.

PLEASE GOD, NO WEDDING OR SHOOTING AT THE END!

As the play begins, a performance of *Hamlet* is ending, with our actors onstage – as performers in *Hamlet* or as audience – but this scene will immediately cross-fade to Anton's study at home. In other words, time and space are leapt, and we're instantly somewhere else, hours later. We achieve this by the happy magic of theatre (audience and players) creating together any reality we need.

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On “stage” - The *Hamlet* characters dressed in black, are all dead, except for CLAUDIUS (saying Horatio's lines), who cradles the dying HAMLET:

.
Hamlet: ...The rest is silence. (*He dies*)

Claudius: Good night, sweet Prince. And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest. (*He dies*)
(ANTON in “audience”, slams his notebook shut, leaves amid applause and cheers for end of *Hamlet*.)

.
(*Cross-fade: MASHA hurries “on” creating “the study,” followed by Anton, who hangs his coat on DORN's head that's poking through a curtain. It's midnight. Home from an emergency medical call he got after Hamlet, Anton and his sister set up a place for Anton to work.*)

(*Dead HAMLET characters stay strewn about the stage. Anton's brimming with ideas and eager to write, but Masha's alarmed by the emergency call–*)

.
Masha: Did Isaac actually shoot himself?

Anton: Idiot. Here. By the window.

(*They are placing the writing table*)

Masha: But it's not bad?

Anton: You ever known him to shoot straight?

Masha: Oh my god.

Anton: Good. Now paper, pens. It's women again.

Masha: Oh no...

Anton: Two at once. Mother and daughter.

Masha: No!

Anton: You should have married him, Masha.

Masha: That's not funny. A mother and daughter?

Anton: It's for the best. Without the shock he gave them, they'd have scratched each other's eyes out.

Masha: Over Isaac? Oh my god.

Anton: Idiot.

Masha: *(Musing)* It's like something from Ibsen.

Anton: *(Annoyed)* Ibsen?

Masha: Like *Hedda Gabler*.

Anton: Ooo, pardon my yawn.

Masha: They all want her. And she shoots herself.

Anton: *(Opening his writing pad)* Except, Isaac Levitan is all passion – his groin pumps straight to his brain. Ibsen wouldn't know a passion if it bit off his noodle.

Masha: *(Laughing)* Anton.

Anton: *(Preparing his pen)* In fact, I'm fairly sure he doesn't have one.

Masha: You're jealous.

Anton: Of what? A pompous, preaching stick? If Ibsen wants to wallow in the sleaziest of arts, let him. Theatre mangles everything!

Masha: Is Isaac safe now? *(Lighting candle)*

Anton: *(Working himself into a rage)* What do they do there? They take the utmost care to obliterate every last syllable it takes me two years to write!

Masha: Anton. Isaac won't try it again?

Anton: And do critics blame the actors? Of course not! Only the author!

Masha: *(Smiles)* I'll fix you some tea.

Anton: *(Jerks round to go on–)* And besides that...

(But Masha slips out, is gone. Anton's left with his mouth open. Rather than be caught off-balance he stares at the audience, says to them–)

Anton: Can you imagine, I'm writing a play.

(Anton seems about to say more, but he's only a writer concentrating on the space we happen to occupy, as he formulates the words he will, in the next instant, write. But without breaking his gaze, he speaks–)

Anton: There's a young man...who wants, desperately, to...

Masha: Excuse me, Anton. I forgot your overcoat.

(Masha takes coat off head of Dorn sticking through curtain. Anton holds, trying to preserve his inspiration till she's gone, but–)

Masha: How was *Hamlet*?

Anton: *(Lost)* What?

Masha: *Hamlet*. The performance you just saw.

Anton: *(Amazed)* I've forgotten it.

Masha: You'd better not!

Anton: Well, you took me off, talking about Isaac.

Masha: They expect your review by morning.

Anton: Of course, of course. *(But Anton's staring hard at the audience)*

Masha: I'll leave you to it then.

Anton: There is a young man...

(Hamlet – the character – stirs into life, stands ready behind Anton)

Anton: ...who wants desperately...to write plays.

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(As Anton conjures Konstantin in his mind's eye, Konstantin – dressed in white like all Seagull characters – emerges in aisle moving toward Anton)

.

Konstantin: And who am I. What am I. Nobody.

(Anton eagerly watches Konstantin, writes down his words, as Hamlet begins to advise Konstantin–)

Hamlet: To be or not to be...

(Anton's listening, smiling, copying all he hears)

Hamlet: ...that is the question.

Anton: Yes...

Konstantin: I left the university in my third year...

(Anton's writing fast, transcribing everything. Konstantin and Hamlet blend like a duet, or the two heads of one mind)

Hamlet: Whether tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune...

Konstantin: ...have no talent, no money, and my passport reads simply...

(As the two overlap, Anton stops writing, and looks up, puzzled)

Hamlet: ...Or to take arms against a sea of troubles...

Konstantin: ...citizen of Kiev.

Hamlet: ...And by opposing end them.

Anton: "To be or not to..." No. I've heard that before.

(Anton scratches out what he's written, Konstantin and Hamlet look at each other, puzzled, while Anton starts over, to the audience–)

Anton: There is a young woman.

(Ophelia stirs, stands, smiles sweetly at Konstantin and Hamlet)

Anton: Who wants, desperately...

(Ophelia moves toward both young men, but Nina comes running down the aisle)

Anton: ...to act.

Nina: *(Bursts on stage, scoots past Ophelia)* I'm not late... Say I'm not late...

Konstantin: No, no, no.

(Konstantin kisses Nina's hands, Hamlet circles Ophelia, while—)

Nina: All day I've been terrified father wouldn't let me come...but at last he's gone out.

(Polonius stirs at the word "father," and listens. Anton transcribes what he hears, as the two couples entwine in an intimate quartet—)

Hamlet: Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

Nina: I raced my horse faster and faster.

Ophelia: No, my lord.

Nina: I've only half an hour.

Hamlet: I mean, my head in your lap.

Nina: They're afraid I'll become an actress...

Ophelia: Aye, my lord.

Nina: ...but I'm drawn to your lake like the gulls. My heart is full of you.

Konstantin: *(Holds her)* We're alone.

Hamlet: Do you think I meant country matters?

Konstantin: What if I follow you home, Nina?

Ophelia: I think nothing, my lord.

Nina: No, Trezor doesn't know you yet – he'd bark.

Hamlet: That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.

Konstantin: I love you.

Nina: Hush!

Polonius: Do not believe his vows!

Konstantin: Who's there?

(Anton protests, but Polonius angrily separates the couples, taking Nina and Ophelia each by an arm)

Anton: Wait a minute...

Polonius: They are panders breathing like sanctified and pious bawds the better to beguile.

Anton: Who's this?

Polonius: From this time be something scunter of your maiden presence.

Anton: Wait a minute.

Polonius: *(Moving off with Nina and Ophelia)* Look to it, I charge you. Come your ways.

Anton: No fathers. I won't have any fathers.

(Polonius bewildered, but at that cue Claudius stirs—)

Claudius: But you must know your father lost a father. That father lost, lost his.

(Claudius rises and moves, speaking to both Konstantin and Hamlet)

Claudius: Think of us

As of a father, for let the world take note

You are the most immediate to our throne

And with no less nobility of love

Than that which dearest father bears his son

Do I impart toward you.

Anton: No, no, no!

Hamlet: A little more than kin, and less than kind.

(Suddenly, Dorn's head grabs focus, speaking to Anton—)

Dorn: And another thing. A work of art needs a clear idea. Know why you're writing, or else you have no goal, you lose yourself, and your talent will destroy you.

(All are dumbfounded)

Nina: It's a strange play, isn't it?

Dorn: Yes it is. Of course I haven't seen the end, but it made a deep impression on me. You have real talent; You must continue your work.

Anton: *(Eagerly, as he writes)* Who are you?

Dorn: I am fifty-five years old. It's too late to change my ways.

Anton: But who are you?

(Polonius pops up to Dorn, happy to have something to say—)

Polonius: This above all, to thine own self be true.

Anton: I said no fathers! Absolutely no fathers. But there will be...*(To audience)*...a mother.

.

(Grand entrance. When they see who's coming, the characters bow, curtsy; Nina pulls a chair into place for the queen – Arkadina in a robe and crown. Suddenly, she lets her robe fall, flops into chair with a groan, yanking off crown, kicking off shoes – like an actress finally offstage)

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(Ophelia scoops up the robe and crown, and waits on Gertrude, who's risen quickly, with no affectation, and now stands quietly behind Arkadina, while Ophelia dresses her in the robe and crown Arkadina wore)

(The seated mother, Arkadina, leans in, as though facing a mirror, to primp. The standing mother, Gertrude, extends a graceful arm—)

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Gertrude: Hamlet...

Anton: *(Like a shot)* No!

Arkadina: What's the matter with my son?

Gertrude: Let not thy mother lose her prayers.

Arkadina: Why is he so depressed?

Gertrude: I pray thee, stay with us, go not to Wittenburg.

(Hamlet refuses, muttering, while Arkadina primps—)

Hamlet: O that this too too solid flesh would melt, thaw, resolve itself into a dew...

Arkadina: I never think of old age or death. I'm in good shape.

Hamlet: *(To Konstantin)* A little month, or ere those shoes were old, With which she followed my poor father's body, Like Niobe, all tears...

Arkadina: Kept my looks, never let myself go, like some women.

Hamlet: ...why she, even she – married with my uncle.

O most wicked speed, to post

With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!

Arkadina: *(Hands on her hips, prances)* See, light as a bird.

Konstantin: *(To Hamlet)* My mother is a psychological marvel. Without a doubt brilliant, talented, capable of sobbing over a novel, nursing the sick like an angel...

Arkadina: I could play fifteen.

Hamlet: *(To Arkadina)* Frailty thy name is woman!

Konstantin: ...but just try praising Duse to her! Oh no! She alone must be raved over, written about, sung to the skies.

Hamlet: Have you eyes?

(Hamlet's directing Arkadina toward Trigorin who's moving in from the audience, jotting in a notebook)

Hamlet: You cannot call it love, for at your age

The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble

And waits upon the judgement.

Arkadina: *(To Hamlet)* That may be so in France, but it's certainly not our way. Here, the woman is head over heels in love before she moves for the kill. Look at Trigorin and me.

Trigorin: I have no will of my own. I never had.

Konstantin: He's not even forty, but already famous and sick of it.

Trigorin: I'm lazy, passive, submissive... No woman wants that! So take me. Take me away with you, but never let me out of your sight.

(Trigorin's falling on his knees before Gertrude. Arkadina yanks him away)

Anton: Who's this supposed to be?

Trigorin: *(Answering Anton)* ...I have to write, write, write! As soon as I finish one story, something compels me to write another, and a third, and a fourth – I never stop, it's like I'm racing without a finish. I'll see that cloud, there, that looks like a camel...

(Polonius jumps up, hearing his cue)

Polonius: By th' mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.

Trigorin: And I think – I have to put that in a story...

Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.

Polonius: It is backed like a weasel.

Trigorin: *(Writing)* ...that a cloud was sailing by...

Hamlet: Or like a whale.

Polonius: Very like a whale.

Trigorin: ...that looked like a camel.

Hamlet: Then I will come to my mother by and by.

Polonius: I will say so.

Hamlet: 'By and by' is easily said.

Anton: *(Beside himself)* Stop everything!

(Masha knocks, anxious—)

Masha: Is everything all right?

Anton: No, it's not.

(Masha slips in, passing in the midst of characters without seeing them, carrying a tray to Anton's table. The tray has tea, newspapers, accumulated mail. Masha pours a cup for Anton, who ignores it)

Masha: I was afraid you'd wake Mama. The guests are all dead to the world. The place is full of musical snores.

(Anton has his head in his hands, in full mental constipation. He groans. The characters regard him fondly, amused. Masha pulls a chair next to the table, and sits to sort the mail)

Masha: God, I'm tired. Haven't been off my feet all day. Didn't even get to the mail. I was hoping your proofs would come from the editor, so we'd get paid.

Anton: Uuuuh.

(Masha has found a rose-colored envelope, and, seeing its handwriting, looks up at Anton, startled)

Masha: Oh.

(She begins to hand it to Anton, but, seeing his condition, thinks better of it, puts it in her apron pocket, and proceeds to "handle" her brother)

Masha: Did you start?

(Anton shakes his head "No," glumly)

Masha: So what's the matter.

(Instead of answering her, he sighs, drinks his tea. Masha watches him, and, getting no answer, looks at the last sheet he wrote, starts to read it, then breaks off confused—)

Masha: This is a play, Anton. You're supposed to write a review!

Anton: No point. It was hideous.

Masha: *(Laughing)* Hamlet was hideous?

(Hamlet characters alarmed, cluster at foot of the table to hear)

Anton: No. *Hamlet* was sublime. I had hopes it would rub off, inspire the actors. But can you imagine, Masha – he whined! Give us the sublime, and that's what we do to it – make a whining Hamlet!

(Hamlet characters collapse in a pile, discouraged)

Masha: Better than no Shakespeare at all.

Anton: But they squeeze him, till there's no blood, no life, no passion left. Our theatre is so shallow, we've got to drag even Hamlet down. We've got no way to portray the grandeur of a human's connection with infinite power and grace. We need new forms!

Masha: And you're going to make them? You're dizzy from watching Shakespeare.

(Ignoring her, Anton reaches for the pile of mail)

Anton: Did we hear from Isaac?

Masha: He's coming for supper tomorrow, so you can change his bandage.

Anton: Tomorrow? You mean tonight.

Masha: *(Yawning)* That'll make fourteen at table. *(Watching him)* You said you weren't going to do this again. Why aren't you satisfied? Everyone loves your stories. All Moscow's waiting for the next.

(Trigorin by Anton's ear, like his mind arguing – a lively exchange grows)

Trigorin: Either you exaggerate my fame, or I can't feel it. I've never liked my own writing.

Anton: So I know how to make them laugh? Silly sketches, vaudevilles, one-act farces...

Nina: *(To Anton)* So what if you're dissatisfied with yourself; to others you're a great and splendid man!

Anton: I spout petty entertainment. How can I call myself a mature artist?

Trigorin: I feel that as a writer, it's my duty to speak for my people – about their sorrows, their future, about science, and the rights of man.

Masha: But you get so upset, Anton, every time, with these long plays.

Dorn: *(Topping everyone)* A work of art must present a great idea. Only in depth can you find beauty.

Trigorin: I'm a detestable fake, through and through.

Masha: Long plays take everything out of you. You go crazy. And no one understands them.

Trigorin: Everyone writes what he wants as well as he can.

Arkadina: Let him write what he wants, but don't make me look at it.

Konstantin: *(Overhearing Arkadina)* She knows I despise today's theatre.

Masha: Why put yourself – and *me* – at the mercy of the theatre!

Konstantin: She adores it, and thinks she's serving mankind through her sacred art, but our theatre is nothing but formulas and prejudice.

Masha: Look what imbeciles you have to depend on – two days rehearsal? They don't learn their lines. They listen to nothing you say.

Dorn: We can't live without theatre.

Masha: You're an important writer. Why go through this pain?!

Anton: Because I love it! Can I help that?

Konstantin: But we must have a new form. If we can't, let's have nothing at all.

Anton: My plays were bound to fail. I was trying to fit a form I despise – all inane prattle and hysterics, not what I believe. I want to put life – full, breathing life – on the stage.

With – *Please God*, no wedding or shooting at the end! If I can dream up a new ending, I'll open a whole new era in theatre!

(Worried, Masha looks again at what Anton's written so far)

Anton: Just think what would happen, Masha – if the air between actors and audience trembled with life, rich and deep, for them to share.

(Masha, moved by his feeling, decides she must help him)

Masha: Well. So far...you've got a young man and woman in love...

(Konstantin pulls Nina forward, and they do a little bow. Hamlet and Ophelia mimic them, like shadows)

Masha: ...and your young man's mother has a lover he disapproves of...

(Arkadina puts a hand on Trigorin's cheek, as Gertrude does with Claudius)

Masha: And your young woman has a father who disapproves.

(Polonius jumps up, eager for action)

Anton: No. No fathers.

Masha: *(Carefully)* Anton. I think you're writing *Hamlet*.

Anton: No, I'm not!

Masha: *(Amused)* Uhuh...I see.

Anton: I'm writing about writing. And theatre.

Konstantin: *(Excited)* You meant it? I should keep writing?

Masha: *(Hoping she hears wrong)* What?

Dorn: I love writers, my boy.

Anton: I want to write about writing.

Masha: *(Groan)* Oh nooo...

Anton: Why not?

Masha: Who'd want to see it?

(Dorn and Nina respond, talking at once. Anton drops his lines in the midst)

Dorn: If I could feel, just once, the high an artist feels in the moment of creation, I'd give up my body, and everything on earth, and fly away.

Anton: It's romantic.

Nina: For the joy of being a writer or an actress, I'd stay in a garret, and live on black bread.

Anton: Everyone dreams about it.

Dorn: Once I passionately desired two things: to get married, and to be a writer.

Masha: But it's nothing like going to sea.

All: *(Beat)* What?

Anton: What are you talking about?

Masha: There's no action!

(Konstantin groans. She's punctured his balloon)

Masha: What does a writer ever *do*? You just sit here groaning.

(Anton rises to argue; Konstantin takes Anton's seat, writing at table)

Arkadina: *(Regarding Konstantin)* What's the matter with him. What did I say?

Anton: You think *Hedda Gabler* has action?!

Dorn: You hurt his feelings.

Masha: Well...

Arkadina: He said his play was just for fun.

Hamlet: What a piece of work is a man...

Anton: It's all about how bored Hedda is, and some wandering manuscript!

Arkadina: Now it seems he's written a masterpiece.

Claudius: ...how noble in reason...

Masha: I just think writing's a bad subject,

Hamlet: ...how infinite in faculties...

Masha: It's the opposite of life!

Claudius: ...in form and moving how express and admirable...

Trigorin: (*Referring to Konstantin*) A young writer, when he's had no success, feels clumsy, anxious, useless to the world.

Anton: Writers suffer...

Claudius: ...in action how like an angel...

Trigorin: ...his nerves are strained to breaking, but he's drawn irresistably to other writers and artists, and hovers about them unacknowledged...

Anton: ...pain drives them...

Hamlet: ... in apprehension how like a god...

Trigorin: ...afraid to look them in the eye, like a compulsive gambler who has no money.

Anton: ...just like Hamlet.

Hamlet: ...the beauty of the world...

Claudius: ...the paragon of animals!

Masha: Maybe *Hamlet's* not a good example.

(*Then tide turns on Konstantin, becoming more than he or Anton can bear, a clump tightens round him – Trigorin, Arkadina, Dorn*)

Hamlet: And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?

Trigorin: There's a strange vagueness about his writing, like delirium.

Anton: Writers have to listen to idiots!

Hamlet: Man delights not me.

Arkadina: See – he's angry.

Dorn: It's a pity he doesn't have a clear purpose.

Hamlet: ...nor woman, neither.

Anton: Sometimes it's so painful...

Dorn: He creates an impression. How far will an impression get you?

Anton: You just want to run off and hide.

Arkadina: I haven't read a thing he's written.

Nina: It's so dull.

Konstantin: (*Yelling*) Aaaaah!

(*Konstantin covers his head, crawls under Anton's writing table*)

Anton: (*Stunned, bleakly*) I keep hearing *Hamlet*.

Masha: I knew it.

Anton: It's the damndest thing.

Masha: Well, in *Hamlet*, there is not a single...writer.

Anton: But it's the best.

Masha: Writing is not a good subject, Anton. Too close to the bone.

(*The characters, put down, sink back. Masha's drawn out the rose envelope, deciding whether to give it to Anton*)

Anton: Maybe I've got to scrape my own bones for a change to really get at life.

Masha: Maybe you ought to get at life by living it.

(Masha places the rose envelope on the pile of mail. Anton sees it and freezes. Ophelia, in Anton's ear—)

Ophelia: My lord, I have remembrances of yours
that I have longèd long to re-deliver.

(Masha's watching Anton, but pretends non-concern, yawning)

Masha: Better sleep on it. You can write the review in the morning.

(Anton reaches for the envelope, warily)

Ophelia: I pray you now, receive them.

Anton: *(Frightened)* Lika.

(Lika appears mysteriously – "materializing" through the audience. Masha's unaware, for Lika exists only in Anton's mind – playful, teasing—)

Lika: Sorry I'm late. You started without me? How could you, Antosha, when I'm your faithful muse. Ah ah ah, you were going to call me unfaithful? Because I've run off with another writer – who writes and writes: Potopenko. Are you really truly jealous now? Good! Because it's lonely being your muse...the more your teasing words ensnare me, the more I need arms, Antosha, flesh and blood arms, to release me. My lover doesn't want me for a muse; he wants my flesh.

(Anton's helpless, listening; Masha's pretending to read, but sneaking glances at Anton. Lika may put her arms around Masha, who's unaware of her)

Lika: Now poor Masha's afraid it's her fault, because she brought me to you, and I met my lover in your house, and it's so so sad that he's already married. Be nice to Masha. And forgive me that I ran off with Potopenko to Paris. You know I have to study opera. You never take me seriously, but you know how desperately I want...to sing.

(On "sing," she mischievously spins round to focus on Nina)

Lika: ...And to go on the stage.

(Nina wary, realizing she is Lika. Konstantin peeks from under table)

Nina: That's my dream. But it won't come true.

(Ophelia scuttles next to Nina, also wary of Lika)

Lika: Ooo, look at all these girls! Poor Anton, you're confused. Good thing I got here. Which one is me?

(Nina's studying Lika, beginning to echo Lika's bearing and gestures)

Lika: And what will I do with her?

(Lika takes Nina by the hand, drawing her to Konstantin; Ophelia tags along, a delicate presence – hovering, inevitable. Other characters are alert, happy for some action)

Lika: This is the writer you inspire?

(Tender moment for Nina and Konstantin, but Lika is surveying the others)

Lika: But where is there a writer to inspire...you?

(Lika has found Trigorin. Arkadina puts a wary hand out, but Trigorin slips out of her reach)

Anton: What are you doing?

(Like a minx, Lika leads Nina – with Ophelia – to stand opposite Trigorin, across the whole width of the stage. Anton is frightened, but stays poised to write. Masha assumes he's mumbling lines to himself)

Nina: I'm terrified.

Anton: Lika, behave.

Lika: Stay in my box, you mean?

Nina: Trigorin's here. Such a famous writer...

(Anton writes. Lika's steering the scene to mirror Anton's jealousy)

Konstantin: *(To Nina)* Is he? I never read him.

Anton: Oh no.

Lika: *(Checks that Anton's writing what they're saying)* That's it, that's it.

(Trigorin smiles, and bows to Nina across the stage)

Nina: *(Embarrassed)* I'm delighted. I've read all your books.

(Konstantin crosses the stage between Nina and Trigorin)

Konstantin: That's enough. Performance over. Curtain!

Anton: Good. Be decisive.

(Konstantin folds, begging Hamlet–)

Konstantin: What am I going to do?

(Hamlet leaps to show Konstantin how to handle a fickle woman, buzzing at Nina and Ophelia, who clings to Nina like her shadow)

Hamlet: Ha, ha! Are you honest?

Ophelia: My lord?

Hamlet: Are you fair?

(Konstantin circles outside, to watch Nina. Trigorin speaks to Nina, from way across–)

Trigorin: *(To Nina)* It's not often I get to meet a pretty young woman.

Anton: Old lecher.

(Trigorin and Nina move slowly towards each other. Ophelia is Nina's tail. Lika watches gleefully)

Polonius: *(To Nina)* Then weigh what loss your honor may sustain, if with too credent ear you list his songs, or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open to his unmastered importunity.

Trigorin: I'd love to change places with you, just for an hour, to see the world through your eyes, and learn what sort of creature you are.

Anton: That's it, pile it on.

(Masha wonders what Anton's writing, takes another sheet from his pile)

Lika: Got things moving for you, didn't I?

(Anton looks sharply at Lika, lets his pen drop. Hamlet characters race on–)

Polonius: Fear it, Ophelia, fear it my dear daughter.

Hamlet: Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?

Ophelia: What means your lordship?

Hamlet: Get thee to a nunnery!!

(Anton picks up the rose envelope, and looks at it. Hamlet strides to Konstantin, flops on floor in front of him)

Anton: Got to get this damned *Hamlet* out of my head.

Masha: *(Watching Anton with the letter)* Better take a rest.

Lika: No use hoping, Masha. He won't open my letter.

Masha: What does Lika say? Maybe she's coming home.

(Lika approaches Anton, teasing, and hovers near his ear)

Lika: He's afraid I've written that I'm happy.

Anton: *(Waving Lika away)* You said Isaac's coming to supper?

Lika: Right, Antosha?

Masha: Yes.

Anton: *(Trying to ignore Lika)* Well? Is he behaving himself?

Masha: I don't think he's shot himself again.

Lika: *(In his face)* You're talking of Isaac, but you're thinking of me.

(To sweep away both women, Anton closes his eyes, drops the envelope back on the pile, and picks up his pen)

Masha: You're going to sit up all night?

Lika: *(Prancing away)* You're afraid I'm enjoying my lover.

(When Nina and Trigorin meet they slowly circle in the center. Arkadina moves down to comfort Konstantin, but Konstantin's on fire, watching. The whole is a cauldron coming to boil)

Konstantin: His books make me sick.

Arkadina: You're jealous.

Anton: I can't leave them like this.

Lika: Open my letter, Anton. You needn't worry.

(Anton writes. Masha sighs, frustrated, and gets to her feet. Hamlet, flat on his back, launches into his depression soliloquy, and it's taken up as a murmur by others)

Hamlet: I have of late – but wherefore I know not – lost all my mirth...

Masha: You're going to be exhausted.

Anton: I have to do something with this pitiful fellow.

Konstantin: *(To Anton)* You see – my mother doesn't love me.

Hamlet: ...forgone all custom of exercises...

Anton: Fight back!

Konstantin: *(In his mother's ear)* I don't respect him.

Anton: That's a start.

Claudius: ...and indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition...

Masha: You won't get the review written...

Konstantin: You want me to call him a genius as you do, but I can't.

Anton: Some genius.

Hamlet: ...that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory.

Masha: ...and you'll be miserable anyway.

Konstantin: ...I can't lie. His books make me sick.

Anton: That's it, woman. Now say it.

Arkadina: What's left for people with no talent, but to condemn those who have some!

(Konstantin in agony. Anton writing furiously)

Masha: Are you listening to me?

Anton: *(Writing)* Go to bed, Masha. Whatever Lika wrote is two weeks old. If I read it now, it'll just keep you awake.

Hamlet: O most pernicious woman!

Konstantin: She loves me, she loves me not...

Anton: Now, turn the knife.

Arkadina: *(Stroking Trigorin)* You're so brilliant, so wise, the best among all living writers.

Claudius: O villain...villain...

(Masha, helpless to do more, moves to the door. Lika sinks into Masha's chair, pouting)

Hamlet: Meet it is I set it down that one may smile and smile and be a villain.

Arkadina: *(To Trigorin)* ...and so fresh, so simple, such rich humor... Your characters are alive!

(The last straw – simultaneously–)

Anton: Disgusting! *(At the same moment as–)* Konstantin: *(Up to run off)* AAaaH!

Anton: No, wait...wait!

.

(Anton swings out of his chair to face his characters. Strange squawking cry off-stage. The clump of Seagull characters scatter to the stage edges, as Isaac Levitan bursts on, with a bandage round his head, a shotgun, and a winged seagull flopping in his hand)

(Konstantin almost crashes into him, but spins and dodges. Masha, not seeing either of them, bustles straight to the door, barely missing both, and stops short a quarter inch from Isaac. Anton sinks into his chair, disbelieving)

.

Anton: Isaac! What are you doing here?

(Masha, distressed that Anton's in a creative daze, shouts back as she leaves–)

Masha: Not only is *Hamlet* not about writers, it's all about revenge!

(Masha's parting shot swipes all the characters, who tumble into each other from the force of it, and spins Isaac–)

Isaac: Whhee, sweet Masha's in a tizzy. Glad I'm not really here.

Anton: *(Warning him)* Get out of my mind, Isaac. I'm trying to work!

(But Isaac's absorbed by the flopping, squawking, bloody bird in his hand. The characters huddle, wary of Isaac and wide-eyed at the ugly spectacle)

Isaac: Help, Antosha. The poor seagull! Look...

Anton: No! I've been through this once already.

Isaac: Look...!

Anton: What are you doing with a gun? You can't hit anything properly. Not even your own head!

Isaac: Kill her, Antosha. I can't do it. Look at her poor wing. I can't bear it...

Anton: Then why did you shoot at her!

Isaac: Do it for me. You've got to. The poor seagull. Please, please shoot her!

Anton: Devil!

(Anton grabs the shotgun from Isaac, and shoots the bird. It flops once and is still. Everyone is stunned and depressed. Silence)

Anton: Now get out.

Isaac: A beautiful soul, gone. And for nothing.

Anton: That's right.

(In the silence, the characters examine Isaac and his head injury curiously. Annoyed, he'll brush them away like creeping cats. They'll also inspect the bird, the seagull and the gun. Only Lika is still)

Isaac: I should shoot myself all over again.

(Isaac turns shotgun to shoot himself, but Anton leaps, grabs shotgun away, and places it on floor by his table)

Anton: And give me the honor of finishing the job? Leave me alone, Isaac!

Isaac: I'm truly sorry to disturb you, my friend, but after what happened the last time...

Anton: What last time?

Isaac: The last time you were privy to my private affairs with a certain...lady.

Lika: And this time it's two at once, right Isaac?

Anton: That had nothing to do with me.

Isaac: Ah. Only with your publisher?

Lika: Like mother, like daughter? Oooo, Isaac.

(Lika takes Isaac's arm; he pats her hand, affectionately)

Anton: It was a brilliant story. Even Masha said so.

Isaac: About me and my mistress?!

Anton: And her husband. It was brilliant. Masha said as an artist, you should forgive me.

Isaac: You can't use people like that.

Anton: Do you leave weeds out of your paintings, just because they're in my lawn? Especially interesting weeds. Or the horse dung you see drop on my drive? No you don't. That's nature. And it's beautiful. And profound. So you picture it. Truth in art.

Isaac: *(Wryly)* And then there's loyalty.

Anton: Loyalty. Well.

Isaac: Antosha, if you ever even dream of using this mother and daughter...

Anton: Lovely women, both.

Isaac: Whose guest you were...

Anton: Who summoned me, desperately...

Isaac: By whose lake you were entertained...

Anton: Who begged me to prevent you from shooting yourself again.

Isaac: If you should stoop so low as to picture them in a story...

Anton: I?

Isaac: And publish it all over Moscow...

Anton: Would I do such a thing?

Isaac: I'll be honor bound to...

Anton: Is this why you're here?! You barge in, force me into this grotesque act – this murder, just because you're afraid your latest antics might be scandalous enough to make a story. The nerve, when other people are laboring at art!

Isaac: Aaah, you're writing?

Lika: Of course he is. Why do you think I'm here.

Isaac: Why didn't you say so. How's a fellow supposed to know. I mean, it's clear enough when I trot out my parasol, my easel, my tin of paints, but you, monstrous Turk, if you so much as wrinkle your nose, it could mean you're drunk, or it could mean you're molding a masterpiece.

Anton: You see paper, you see pens...

(Isaac is stepping among the characters, appraising his fellow "thoughts")

Isaac: I see a hen's coop of likely characters... I say, what's Hamlet doing here? Oh-oh, you are in a mess, aren't you.

Anton: *(Threatening)* Do you mind?

Isaac: So sorry, quite right. I'll be a mouse.

Anton: Out!

(Isaac stretches out on the floor downstage with a sly smile. Lika settles beside him, smiling up at Anton)

Isaac: Oh, but that's more than we can do. If you want us out of your mind, you'll have to put us there.

Anton: Isaac, I'll ask you politely.

Isaac: Now, now...you know that won't help. Not until you truly stop thinking of me. Relax. I'll just float here, light as a breeze.

(Anton sighs, because he has no choice, and focuses, taking stock, while each character straightens, bows, somehow acknowledges she's ready to go to work)

Anton: All right. Here's the young woman, Nina.

(Nina stands for inspection, shyly)

Lika: *(Trying out the name)* Nina. Nina... I like it.

Anton: And the mother...

(Arkadina displays herself)

Anton: Her name will be Arkadina. Her lover is called Trigorin.

(Trigorin joins Arkadina, with affectionate display)

Anton: And the sort of...counsellor is...

(Polonius presents himself hopefully over Anton's shoulder)

Anton: *(Realizing who this character is—)* ...Doctor Dorn.

(Dorn pops in immediately; Polonius is rejected again)

Dorn: It's true women are drawn to me. But what they like best is that I'm a good doctor.

Isaac: *(Applauding)* The roué of a doctor, of course, that's you.

(Anton raises a warning finger at Isaac)

Dorn: Ten, fifteen years ago, I was the only decent obstetrician in the whole district.

Lika: That rascally Doctor Chekhov!

(Anton ignores Lika as he transcribes Dorn, and moves on—)

Isaac: Oh, you must have another woman. Let her be a "Masha," Mashenka, my darling!

Anton: *(Trying not to lose it—)* That's all I can handle right now.

(Lika, as she speaks, picks up her rose envelope to draw hearts on it)

Lika: Poor Isaac. For your sake, I wish Masha would have you. But not for hers, not in a million years.

Masha: *(Enters, ready for bed)* Excuse me, Anton; I'm sorry to disturb you.

Isaac: Oh my bliss. I speak your name and you appear.

Anton: Yes.

Masha: I won't sleep at all if I don't... Forgive me for arguing. You must write whatever you must.

Anton: Thank you.

Masha: I was wrong. And come to think of it, *Hamlet's* always been with you.

Anton: Please could we stop with this *Hamlet*?

Masha: Your heroes have all been "out of joint". Maybe you do need to...go into your own heart, if you want to put life on stage.

(Anton sits staring)

Masha: I'm sorry. I'll go to bed, now.

Isaac: Oh grace, magnificence. *(Kisses Masha's hem as she goes)* And you keep her under lock and key, refusing all suitors. That's how you want them, isn't it? Chaste, under your roof, and obedient.

(Anton sunk in gloom. Nina suddenly flashes bright, moved by Isaac's passion)

Nina: *(Realizing)* I love Konstantin.

(Lika perks up, delighted)

Isaac: Who?

Anton: That's my young man – Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplev.

Isaac: Ah! The artist. He must be an artist.

Anton: Like you? He's insecure enough. Now where is that boy?

Dorn: How nervous you all are! And all this love...

(Isaac cranes, looking for Konstantin)

Isaac: Is he that scrawny one over there?

(Konstantin huddled in far corner, with his notebook, tries to disappear)

Anton: Yes, and he needs work. The rest of you... *(Addressing clump of Hamlet characters)* ...thank you very much, but you're free. I won't be needing you.

(Alarmed, the Hamlet cast edges as a group toward the door, but with the reluctance of actors who hope the casting director will give them one last glance if they linger, they protest with their bits of lines, simultaneously—)

Claudius: What dost thou mean by this?

Gertrude: Have you forgot me?

Polonius: My lord, I have news to tell you.

Ophelia: Say you? Nay, pray you mark.

Hamlet: You are welcome, masters, welcome all.

Gertrude: To whom do you speak this?

(Anton protests, until he finally stops them cold—)

Anton: Thank you. I've seen what you can do. I'll call you. Thank you. No. The rest is indeed silence.

Ophelia: Here's rosemary.

Anton: Hold on to it. *(Concentrating)* Now – Konstantin... If you're my hero, let's take a look at you.

Isaac: Bad case of pouts. What is he, a melancholiac?

Anton: Like you? If he is I'll shoot him and be done with it.

(Isaac signals that his mouth is shut, while SEAGULL characters find Konstantin and consider him. Dorn is closest—)

Dorn: Ooo, how sensitive you are.

Anton: Bound to be.

(From disgruntled and plotting huddle of Hamlet characters in far corner, Polonius raises his voice—)

Polonius: He does confess he feels himself distracted...

(And, happy to be overheard, Polonius leads other characters right back into play—)

Polonius: ...but from what cause 'a will by no means speak.

Arkadina: I'm just sorry to see a young man wasting his time. I didn't mean to hurt him.

Anton: How do you know he's wasting it?

Claudius: What he spake, thou it lacked form a little was not like madness.

Dorn: Here you have a bright young man, stuck in the country, with no money, no occupation, no future, and nothing to do.

Anton: So what do you expect?

Claudius: There's something in his soul o'er which his melancholy sits on brood.

Trigorin: Try jealousy. *(The others turn and stare at him)*

Anton: Of what, you?

Trigorin: Sorry, it's none of my business.

Gertrude: I doubt it is no other but the main, his father's death, and our o'erhasty marriage.

Arkadina: And his constant jabs and swipes at me – I'm sick of it.

Polonius: I do believe the origin and commencement of his grief sprung from neglected love.

Anton: Not that, please, not...

Dorn: Oh no, you're in tears. And so pale.

Claudius: Madness in great ones must not unwatched go.

Trigorin: He sulks, he sneers, he preaches new theatre...

Isaac: Oh no, don't tell me.

Gertrude: How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

Arkadina: But now my conscience is jabbing me.

Anton: As well it might.

Arkadina: Why did I hurt my poor boy? I'm uneasy about him.

Hamlet: I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a hand saw.

Arkadina: How he torments me.

Gertrude: Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off.

Arkadina: He's a bad, egotistical boy.

Anton: Is he.

Gertrude: Let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.

Dorn: Your mother's waiting for you – she's upset.

Polonius: My lord, the queen would speak with you, and presently.

(Konstantin can't take any more, lurches to his feet)

Hamlet: It is not nor it cannot come to good.

Konstantin: Tell her I've gone. And all of you, please, leave me alone!

Anton: No, that won't do.

(Konstantin lurches away from the pack, but they stick right with him)

Hamlet: But break my heart for I must hold my tongue.

Dorn: He's afraid and ashamed of having no work. It's his pride.

Hamlet: But I have that within which passeth show.

Konstantin: Please! Stop following me.

Anton: Stand up, you mouse!

(But the train continues, chattering along behind Konstantin)

Hamlet: These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

Dorn: He's heartsick. *(Calling to Nina)* Please recite something from his play.

Isaac: A play?

Nina: You want me to? It's so dull.

Isaac: He's writing the great Russian play!

Lika: With lovers in it!

(Lika begins to trail Konstantin, lovingly)

Isaac: This Konstantin is you.

Dorn: When he reads from his play, his eyes shine, his face grows pale...

Hamlet: The time is out of joint.

Dorn: ...his voice is so beautiful, so sad. Like a poet.

Arkadina: Maybe he should get a job.

Anton: Good god!

Dorn: It wouldn't hurt him to have a little fun.

Hamlet: O cursèd spite...

Dorn: Go abroad, or something.

Lika: How about to Paris?

Hamlet: ...that ever I was born to set it right.

Anton: *(Getting up, stopping the parade in its tracks)* Halt! Let's set this straight right now. *(Takes Konstantin aside, like a coach)* You are no Hamlet. Hamlet is a prince, the very apple, the center of everything, and your problem is precisely that you are *not* the apple. You understand?

Isaac: You're wrong. Sorry, but you're wrong. Their problems are the *same*. Hamlet's in a tizzy for precisely the same reason. He's supposed to be Prince – or apple if you must – and nobody's paying any attention to what he thinks. Not his mother, not his lover, certainly not his mother's lover...so when does he get his due? *Same play*.

(Anton simply stares at Isaac until he's intimidated)

Isaac: I'll be quiet. *(Aside)* All plays are the same. *(Slaps hand over his mouth)*

Anton: Thank you. *(To Konstantin, holding his temper)* Just tell me, what's on your mind.

Konstantin: Women can't forgive failure. Oh, if you knew how unhappy I am.

(Anton sinks – it's hopeless – hand to his face. Ophelia urges Nina to join scene, murmuring helpful lines in her ear)

Ophelia: With his doublet all unlaced, no hat upon his head, his stockings fouled...

Nina: You aren't yourself anymore.

Ophelia: Pale as his shirt.

Konstantin: Yes, I've changed. Since you have toward me.

Ophelia: And with a look so piteous in purport

As if he had been loosèd out of hell

To speak of horrors – he comes before me.

Konstantin: Your eyes are cold now. You don't want me near you.

Anton: You're going all limp again. Leave love out of it!

Ophelia: He took me by the wrist and held me hard...

Nina: You're so irritable.

Ophelia: At last, a little shaking of mine arm, and thrice his head thus waving up and down...

Konstantin: Your coldness is terrible, unbelievable, as if the lake was suddenly dry, or drained into the earth.

Nina: *(Ecstatic)* Ooooh.

Anton: All right. That's better.

Ophelia: He raised a sigh so piteous and profound...

Nina: I can't understand you.

Lika: I can.

Ophelia: As it would seem to shatter all his bulk and end his being.

Konstantin: What's there to understand?

Anton: (*Leaps up, energized-*) Wait, wait, wait! *Hamlet* is not helping!
(*Ophelia wilts, rejected. The other Hamlet characters clump, to caucus*)

Anton: I'm sorry, but this is theatre. Our problem is Action. And my dear sister is dead wrong – *Hamlet* is *not* full of action. It's all about *not* acting. So here's what you've got to do, you've got to...

Isaac: (*Languidly, from his lounging position*) Could I say something here?

Anton: No.

Isaac: I admit I know nothing about *Hamlet*, but you, I know.

(*Anton throws up his hands in frustration, sinks into his chair*)

Isaac: You hunger after greatness. And what are our new plays? Paper-thin garbage–
(*Konstantin jumps in, instantly on fire, lively-*)

Konstantin: The curtain goes up; we see people in a three-sided room who eat, drink, love, walk, and wear their coats – then try to extract a tiny moral from their insipid conversation, one that goes down easy, won't smudge the carpet.

Hamlet: (*Cool, knowing his line is spot-on*) Anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing,

Isaac: That's right. Thank you.

Polonius: ...whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature...

Isaac: Precisely!

Claudius: ...to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image...

Isaac: Shakespeare is IT - deep *and* exciting.

Hamlet: ...the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.

Anton: (*Weary*) Isaac...

Isaac: The plays we rave about are just tired renditions of the commonplace lives we approve.

Konstantin: (*Fiery*) When I see again and again for the thousandth time, all these plays are the same...

Isaac: You run screaming?

Konstantin: Like Maupassant fled the Eiffel Tower, because it was so trite.

Isaac: (*Winding up, triumphant*) You flee, you long for something new, but you're haunted by...

Gertrude: Hamlet, Hamlet.

Isaac: (*Finger kiss to Gertrude*) *Exactement.*

Anton: All right, all right, no doubt! Could we please get on with it?

(Isaac bows, shakes hands with Konstantin and Hamlet, and cedes the floor. The others nod, back down)

Anton: Good. Thank you. Let's just...go easy. It doesn't do any good to work up a rage if you don't have anywhere to go with it, Konstantin. Just keep in mind, what we have to find is the action. So. What that means is...you have to take things into your own hands and...solve them.

(Anton has no idea what he means, and neither do the characters. They look at each other, worried. Konstantin is still worked up, and stomping about like a caged stallion. The others jostle a little, but come to another standstill. Finally, Konstantin groans, and twists himself sideways, burying his head in his arms, and Ophelia blurts—)

Ophelia: O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown

Gertrude: Look here, my lord.

(Anton starts to react, about to toss Ophelia out, but Konstantin stamps his foot, picking up the cue she's given him—)

Konstantin: It's like a needle has pierced my brain...

Anton: All right, go with it.

Ophelia: Like sweet bells jangled...

Gertrude: Oh, my son.

Konstantin: and it's sucking my life, like a vampire...

Ophelia: ...out of time and harsh.

Gertrude: Alas, he's mad.

(Konstantin finally, under pressure, takes a leap into action—)

Konstantin: Here comes the real literary genius!

(Konstantin pulls Trigorin center to provoke a confrontation, shoves a book into his hands. They circle each other. Gertrude decides she can help)

Anton: All right! Stand off, and...action.

Gertrude: But look where sadly the poor wretch comes reading.

Polonius: What do you read, my lord?

Konstantin: *(Mocking Trigorin)* "Words, words, words..."

(Nina is nervous, but eager. Konstantin faces her)

Konstantin: Already you feel his warmth, you smile, you melt in his rays.

(Hamlet has stepped forward, hearing "Words, words, words." He whispers in Konstantin's ear)

Hamlet: What would he do had he the motive and the cue for passion that I have?

(Trigorin and Nina confront each other shyly)

Anton: Don't let them shut you out. Do something!

Nina: *(Holding out to Trigorin a hand clenched into a fist)* Odd or even?

(Tormented, Konstantin buries his head. As though time stops, Nina and Trigorin freeze in a tableau, Trigorin with his hand out, about to choose)

Lika: *(To Konstantin)* Claim her yourself, idiot.

Hamlet: Am I a coward?

(Konstantin looks at Hamlet, desperate, then as Hamlet flings himself into his next fit, Konstantin mimics him, trying to work up a passion to take action)

Hamlet: Bloody, bawdy villain! Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain! O vengeance!

(Polonius pushes Arkadina into the fray, Gertrude follows)

Polonius: Your noble son is mad.

(Hamlet glares at Arkadina. Konstantin tries to mimic him)

Hamlet: Leave wringing of your hands. Peace, sit you down.

(Arkadina's confused. Gertrude will guide her in what to play)

Anton: Wait. What are you...?

Hamlet: What devil was't that thus hath cozened you at hood-man blind?

Anton: No, you're way off now.

Nina: *(To Trigorin, wanting to play their scene)* Odd or even?

Konstantin: *(To Arkadina)* Why do you let this man control you?

Anton: All right, see where it goes. Showing spine, in any cause, is an improvement.

Polonius: *(To Arkadina)* Pray you be round with him.

(Arkadina is speechless, so Gertrude, over her shoulder, speaks for her—)

Gertrude: What have I done that thou dar'st wag thy tongue in noise so rude against me!

(Hamlet's pleased, lays heavily into Arkadina and Gertrude at once, showing Konstantin how to do it. Polonius gets overwhelmed, hides himself behind something)

Hamlet: O shame where is thy blush?

Konstantin: *(Angry)* I am more talented than all of you!

Anton: Good!

Hamlet: *(Showing off)* Rebellious hell, If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones...

Anton: *(Wits end)* Hamlet...!

(Arkadina terrified, reaches for Gertrude. Ophelia, alarmed at violence, scuttles in, clings to Gertrude's skirt, but Konstantin's flying now—)

Konstantin: You and your gang have overrun the temple – you ordain that only what you create is real art, all the rest you trample and suffocate!

Gertrude: These words like daggers enter in mine ears. No more.

Konstantin: I reject all of you!

Anton: *(Applauding)* All right!

(Arkadina finally feels more anger than fear. She begins to rise up)

Gertrude: Have you forgot me?

Konstantin: You and him!

Arkadina: *(Finally devastating, imperious)* Decadent!

Hamlet: God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another.

Konstantin: Go back to your precious stage; act in your mediocre little plays!

Anton: *(Gleeful)* Aha!

Arkadina: I have never acted in a mediocre play!

Anton: Of course not.

Hamlet: I say, we will have no more marriage.

Arkadina: Leave me alone!

Claudius: What, Gertrude?

Arkadina: You parasite!

Claudius: How does Hamlet?

Konstantin: Miser!

Gertrude: Mad as the sea and wind.

Arkadina: Nobody!

(Konstantin wails, drops to his knees, cries. Arkadina drops to cradle him)

Anton: Oh no. No, no.

Arkadina: Don't cry. You mustn't cry... *(Cries, Kisses his forehead, cheeks, head)*

Anton: Oh my god. *(Head in his hands)*

Gertrude: *(In tune with Arkadina)* Thou hast cleft my heart in twain.

Arkadina: My darling child, forgive me. Forgive your wicked mother.

Gertrude: *(To Konstantin, quoting Hamlet)* O gentle son, upon the heat and flame of thy distemper sprinkle cool patience.

Konstantin: *(Embraces Arkadina)* I've lost everything. She doesn't love me. I'll never be able to write. All my hopes are gone.

Lika: "I'll never be able to write." *(To Anton)* What are you saying, Anton?

Anton: Pathetic.

Nina: *(Trying again)* Odd or even?

(Like a brass gong that ends the action and ups the stakes, Trigorin slaps one of Nina's out-stretched fists)

Trigorin: Even!

Nina: *(Opening her palm)* No, I've only one pea in this hand.

(Konstantin rises in instant rage at Trigorin and Nina, but Hamlet's still caught in the mother/son betrayal—)

Hamlet: You are the queen, your husband's brother's wife, and (would it were not so) you are my mother.

Anton: Stop Hamlet. You lost it. We'll have to start from the beginning. Quiet.

(Silence, a beat. Then Nina takes her chance—)

Nina: I wanted to see if I'll be an actress. I wish someone would advise me.

Trigorin: About that, no one can.

Lika: *(Hanging on Nina's fortune)* Oh, let them go on.

(But the two scenes will be at war – Hamlet's is out of place and his volume is "under")

Gertrude: Nay, then I'll set those to you that can speak.

Hamlet: You shall not budge.

Nina: *(Raising the pea on her open hand)* I'm going on the stage. I'm beginning a new life.

Lika: Yes!

Hamlet: You go not till I set you up a glass where you may see the inmost part of you.
(Inspired by it all, Trigorin reaches toward Nina)

Gertrude: What wilt thou do?

Trigorin: I'm going to see your glorious eyes again, this impossibly tender smile...
(Konstantin, mad to attack Trigorin, grabs Hamlet's dagger)

Gertrude: Thou wilt not murder me?

Trigorin: ...this angelic purity. My darling...
(Trigorin and Nina kiss. Hamlet grabs back his dagger. Konstantin flails around, seizes the shotgun, raises it toward the pair)

Gertrude: Help ho.

Polonius: What, ho, help!

Hamlet: How now? A rat?

(In the same instant – Konstantin turns the shotgun, shoots himself, and Hamlet stabs Polonius)

Hamlet: Dead for a ducat, dead.

(Yells. All rush to center; Arkadina faints, falling into the pile-up)

Ophelia: O heavenly powers, restore him!

Anton: No! I know I said "action," but...no no no!

(Out of confused pile, as it backs away, Konstantin revealed, standing exactly as Isaac did, with bandage on his head, shotgun, dead bird in hand)

Isaac: *(Outraged to see himself)* You can't do this!

(Anton puts up his hand, silencing Isaac. All are still, regarding Konstantin with awe. He staggers toward Nina, tosses the bird at her feet)

Nina: What does this mean?

Konstantin: I'm despicable. Today I killed this seagull. And I lay it at your feet.

Nina: What's happening to you? *(Picks up seagull, looks at it)*

Konstantin: Soon, in the same way, I'll kill myself.

Isaac: Noo...!

Anton: *(Excited)* Quiet! Everyone be quiet...I'm getting the title.

(Anton writes it. Arkadina, revived, sees Konstantin alive, and raises her hand— a flippet of magic sound, and—)

Arkadina: *(quoting from Hamlet)* "Oh Hamlet, speak no more;

Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul;

And there I see such black and grainèd spots

As will not leave their tinct."

Isaac: Are you letting her say that?

Konstantin: *(Responding from Hamlet–)* "Nay, but to live in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed..."

Isaac: They can't say that in your play.

Konstantin: ...stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love over the nasty sty."

Isaac: That's straight from...

Anton: *(Cry of discovery)* The play's the thing! It's the action we need! Nina will perform Konstantin's play. Everything can take off from there. That's it!

(The Hamlet cast, now vindicated and validated, are delighted and bounce about gaily. Polonius leaps up from the dead)

Polonius: The actors are come hither, my lord.

Hamlet: Buzz, buzz.

Polonius: Upon my honor.

Hamlet: Then came each actor on his ass.

Anton: All right, all right. Just set it up.

Polonius: The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral...

Anton: Nothing's happened yet. We're back at the beginning. Where would everyone be?

(Everyone's eager, but uncertain. Lika's excited for "her" Nina)

Dorn: The play will begin soon.

Hamlet: *(To Nina)* Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue.

Arkadina: My God, how they loved me in Kharkov! It made my head spin.

Lika: Oh, I like this.

Konstantin: My mother's jealous, and hates my play because Nina's acting in it, and she isn't.

Hamlet: Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently.

Arkadina: The students gave me a standing ovation...three baskets of flowers, two bouquets...

Gertrude: Methinks the lady doth protest too much.

Lika: Isn't this fun, Isaac?

Konstantin: The curtain goes up with the moon rise, at exactly 8:30.

Dorn: Magnificent.

Anton: Now this is action.

Konstantin: She hates my play, without ever having read it.

Dorn: Calm down, you mother adores you.

Konstantin: She loves me, she loves me not, loves me, loves me not. Is the alcohol ready? And the sulphur?

Anton: Aha, magic. Bit of theatre.

(Lika will tend Nina as she prepares to perform – like a stage mother)

Polonius: Be not too tame neither.

Hamlet: Suit the action to the word, the word to the action.

Dorn: *(To Hamlet)* It's true we have few brilliant actors now, but the average actor's a lot better.

Anton: I'll let that pass.

Hamlet: They are coming to the play. I must be idle. Get you a place.

Claudius: How fares our cousin Hamlet?

Hamlet: Excellent, in faith.

Claudius: What do you call the play.

Hamlet: My lord, you played once in the university, you say?

Polonius: That I did, my lord, and was accounted a good actor.

Claudius: Is there no offense in it?

Polonius: No offense i' th' world.

Hamlet: Be the players ready?

Arkadina: *(to her son)* When will the play begin, darling?

Konstantin: In a moment. Please be patient.

Anton: Let him alone. It's a big moment.

Gertrude: Come hither, my dear Hamlet, sit by me.

Hamlet: No mother. Here's metal more attractive.

Polonius: *(To Claudius)* O ho! do you mark that?

Ophelia: You are merry, my lord.

Hamlet: Who, I?

Konstantin: *(To Nina)* Are you nervous?

Nina: Yes, very.

Lika: Take deep breaths.

Dorn: Let us know when the play begins.

Konstantin: You'll be called when it's time, but you can't be here now. Please go away.

Anton: *(Pain)* Ooo, amateur.

(The characters back off, and sit clumped as an audience)

Konstantin: See, just like a real theatre! The curtain, the stage, and the backdrop is nothing but space. No scenery. The eye is drawn out over the lake and on to the horizon.

Anton: Splendid.

Isaac: *(Immediately on his feet, suspicious)* What lake? What lake are you talking about?

Nina: *(To Konstantin)* Your play is so hard to act. There are no live people in it.

Anton: Calm down, Isaac, there's always been a lake.

Konstantin: Live people? We must show life not as it is, or even as it should be, but as we see it in dreams!

Anton: Nina lives on the other side of the lake.

Nina: But there's so little action, just speeches.

Isaac: You took it from my lover-mother's' lake. You just came from there!

Nina: And every play needs love.

Isaac: *(Suddenly suspicious, approaches Nina)* So who is this Nina? My lover-mother's daughter?

Anton: No. Nina's mother is not even alive. Now, will you get off the stage?

(Konstantin disturbed at Isaac's attention to Nina. The two in bandages look like twins. Isaac ignores both Anton and Konstantin's disapproval, and turns his juiciest seductive mode on Nina)

Isaac: With those looks, and that wonderful voice, it's a sin to be stuck out here in the country.

Anton: Not everyone falls for you, Isaac. Leave my characters alone!

Isaac: *(Mischievously)* Aha, but wait. The thoughts in your mind, like me, should be able to have commerce with other thoughts simultaneously in your mind, like her. Yes? What's to stop us? *(Smiling at Nina)* Hmmm?

Anton: Get away from her!

Isaac: *(To Nina)* My dear, you simply must go on the stage.

Nina: That's my dream! But it won't come true.

Isaac: Oh, but it will. *(Relating to Trigorin)* You will meet an enchanting, though somewhat older, and unfortunately, married writer, and you'll run off to Pari...

(Isaac stops dead, having realized-)

Isaac: My god, she's Lika. Your songbird. You devil!! Nina is Lika!

Anton: *(Caught, but trying to evade)* Call places.

(A flurry starts, and Isaac stands frustrated)

Hamlet: I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play...

Konstantin: Places. The play must begin.

Hamlet: Have by the very cunning of the scene been struck so to the soul...

(Characters shifting into place)

Konstantin: The moon's rising!

Hamlet: ...that presently they have proclaimed their malefactions.

Konstantin: When the red eyes shine, there'll be sulphur fumes.

Isaac: Anton!

(But the performance is beginning, and Anton ignores Isaac.)

Anton: Begin my dear one. From the soul.

Nina: *(Performing)* "Men, lions, eagles, and quails..."

Lika: What's this?

Nina: ...mighty stags, geese, spiders...

Lika: What's she saying?

(Claudius decides to contribute to the ghostly atmosphere)

Claudius: I could a tale unfold whose lightest word would harrow up thy soul.

Nina: ...silent fish that inhabit the waves, starfish, and creatures indiscernible to the eye...

Lika: Oh my god.

Claudius: List, list, oh list...

Nina: Life, all life has died away...

Claudius: O horrible, O horrible, most horrible

Nina: Cold, cold, cold. Empty, empty, empty.

Lika: You're kidding, aren't you?

Nina: Terrible, terrible, terrible.

Lika: I'd be laughed off the stage.

Claudius: Adieu, adieu, adieu...

Nina: I remember all, all, all...

Claudius: ...remember me!

(End of performance. Characters applaud, but Isaac tops it with—)

Isaac: No! I won't let you do this. It's bad enough you do it to me. But to adorable, defenseless Lika?!?

(Lika is flattered, but embarrassed)

Anton: I don't know what you're talking about. This play is about writing.

Isaac: No, it's not. It's about Lika's longing to be a singer, and Lika's running off with a writer who flips out manuscripts like hot cakes. Use me if you must – use the lake, the shotgun, the bandage, even the poor, dead seagull, but darling, innocent Lika?!

Lika: *(Stroking Isaac)* Let it be. What do I care?

Anton: Sit down, Isaac, till your pulse cools.

Isaac: Don't you dare play the doctor with me!

Anton: *(Quietly)* My friend. Is not the artist free?

Isaac: *(Caught off guard)* I...

Anton: Do you really want to hinder my inspiration?

Trigorin: "If ever you should need my life, come and take it"

(Stop. Anton looks at Trigorin, and back)

Anton: Our lives feed our work. And painful parts make the best art.

Lika: That's true.

Isaac: I never feed on my friends for my art!

Claudius: Oh, my offense is rank; it smells to heaven.

Anton: No, you feed on us for your life!

Claudius: Pray can I not.

Anton: You devour me with your hysterics.

Isaac: I am who I am.

Anton: You lure women to debaucheries that destroy them!

Isaac: At least I live, unlike you.

Anton: What?!

Isaac: How was poor Lika to know you didn't want her for anything real!

Lika: I'll speak for myself, Isaac!

Anton: *(Shaken)* You have no idea what my feelings are.

(Anton picks up rose envelope. Murmurs tumble, close in Anton's ear—)

Trigorin: Love alone brings happiness.

Claudius: She is so conjunctive to my life and soul, as the star moves not but in his sphere, I could not but by her...

Isaac: *(Over others-)* But you couldn't resist playing with her, could you?

Trigorin: Love sweeps away the sorrows of the world.

Isaac: ...so you laughed and teased till you'd stoked poor Lika to such a pitch of heat...

Lika: Shut up, Isaac!

Isaac: ...that something had to be done with her!

Trigorin: I've a story in mind: a girl grows up by a lake. Like a seagull she loves the lake; she's happy and free...

Claudius: May one be pardoned and retain the offense?

Trigorin: ...but a man chances by, sees her there, and having nothing better to do, destroys her.

Isaac: You're obscene! You pushed this trusting angel, with all her tarnished dreams of you, at Potopenko.

Anton: *(In pain)* I'm not responsible for Lika.

(Anton rips open the rose envelope. Lika gasps as though she's been torn open, and freezes while Anton reads her letter. Anton reads intently, then breaks into a smile, jubilant, and tosses the letter down. Lika's astonished)

Anton: It's all all right. I knew it. She's coming home!

(Lika, in shock at Anton's reaction, starts to stand, then sinks onto the floor. A door bangs. It's Masha, at a peak of passion. All characters are blown back, as though a gale force wind is coming in)

Anton: *(Gathers manuscript pages to hand her)* Morning, Masha, come see – I've cracked it! And you were right. The play's the thing!

(Isaac drops to his knees, worshipfully--)

Isaac: Adorable Masha – your honey spreads my daily bread.

Anton: With my hero's play, I'll catch the conscience of his mother. And that's action! This is going to work.

Masha: *(Holding in her passion)* Excuse me, but this can't wait.

Anton: What is it?

Masha: *(Short of breath)* Gaev's just back...

Anton: Yes?

Masha: And...he ran into the Potopenkos.

Anton: *(Not getting it)* Oh?

Masha: Not just Mrs. Potopenko. Him too.

Anton: *(Vaguely glad the couple's back together)* Potopenko's back? Good. Then where's... *(Looking at Masha)*

Isaac: *(Like a stab to the heart)* Lika.

Masha: *(Making him wait, beat)* Nowhere. Potopenko abandoned her.

(Anton gets it, and sinks, numb. The characters cower, frightened at all this real passion. Masha sees Lika's letter open, picks it up)

Anton: Read it.

(Lika speaks her letter quietly, without expression, while Masha reads)

Lika: Dear Anton: Don't condemn me. Everyone I love is going to hide their eyes, but I want so much to talk to you. I'm very very unhappy.

(Nina and Ophelia, aroused in empathy, move toward Lika)

Lika: Don't laugh. Not a trace remains of your old Lika, and though I may think so – it isn't even all your fault. My whole life is overturned. My longing to sing on the stage is a bitter joke. Your friend, the writer, has left me, with only a small thing to show. I don't think you will cast stones, since you're indifferent to people.

(Nina comforts Lika, and Ophelia gently undoes Lika's hair, disheveling her)

Lika: I'll soon be coming home, and hope you will see me. How long it is since you called me your angel, and dreamed of my coming "as a Bedouin in the desert dreams of water." Your... Lika.

(Lika concludes and is utterly still in a tableau of the three young women. Masha looks up from the letter, in shock. Anton has skipped over or denied the bad parts, and understood only what he wished to hear)

Anton: See? She might be here already.

Masha: You don't understand? This "small thing" she has to show... Anton, Lika is pregnant.

(Anton stares at Masha, realizing she must be right, feels sick. Isaac groans in pain. Ophelia begins to dance slowly round. Dorn moves to Konstantin, and quietly helps everyone overcome their distress–)

Dorn: Where is Nina now?

Masha: He left her there. She's all alone, in a foreign country...

Dorn: I hear she's led a strange life.

Masha: ...and she's having his *baby*.

(Anton, wanting to weep, swallows his pain, by starting to write)

Konstantin: She ran away from home and joined Trigorin. They had a baby.

Masha: My God, help her.

Konstantin: The baby died. Trigorin soon tired of her and returned to his former lover, naturally.

(Isaac is listening, glaring at Anton)

Isaac: You cur! What are you doing?

(Anton barely lifts an eye from his work. Masha to distract herself, picks up pages to read)

Dorn: And her acting?

(Ophelia, like a madwoman, rocking Lika's baby)

Ophelia: You must sing 'A-down a-down,' and you call him a-down-a.

(Konstantin sits next to Anton, writing just like Anton)

Konstantin: She tried the great parts, but her voice was monotonous, her gestures crude.

Ophelia: *(To Konstantin's back)* There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Pray you remember.

Konstantin: She could shriek well, and die well – but those are just moments.

Isaac: *(Horried)* How dare you!!!

(Anton swings his arm, to shut up Isaac, but it's a sickly swipe)

Masha: *(As she reads)* What can we do, Anton?

(Anton keeps writing)

Konstantin: She'd sign her letters "Seagull."

Isaac: You're lower than low. You as good as caused this! Now you're making a story of her – of a poor naked bird.

Konstantin: And now she's here.

Isaac: No!

Masha: You can't hide from this. We have to wire Lika. And beg her to come to us.

Konstantin: She's staying at the inn. She won't see anyone.

Isaac: I'm not going to let you do this.

Konstantin: Ilya's sure he saw her in the fields about a mile from here.

Masha: *(Seeing Anton is paralyzed)* All right. I'm going to prepare a telegram. We'll talk about it when I'm done. *(Masha takes a paper and pen from Anton's table)*

Anton: I've had enough. You're acting like I'm responsible.

Masha: Am I.

Anton: Lika is a grown woman.

Masha: *(Lit up eyes)* Then why didn't you treat her like one.

(Masha writes; Anton stung as though shot)

Isaac: You clung and cooed like she was your baby doll, and what could she do – but hear you like the woman she is? She begged you to let her go. What could she do? ...but go out of her mind!

(Anton in agony, but Nina's clear voice, with no emotion, no self-pity, tells the story—)

Nina: I've been afraid you hate me. I dream every night that you see me, but can't recognize me.

Isaac: This is agony.

Gertrude: I will not speak with her.

Ophelia: And there is pansies, that's for thoughts.

Nina: I've come near your house many times, but didn't dare to come in.

(Anton weeps as he writes. Nina never weeps. Masha, satisfied with telegram, picks up more pages to read)

Gertrude: Alas, look here, my lord.

Ophelia: There's fennel for you, and columbines.

Claudius: How long hath she been thus?

Nina: Hear it – the wind outside? "Happy is he who's under his roof at night, in a warm corner." I'm a seagull... No, that's wrong. *(Rubs her forehead)* What was I saying?

Ophelia: There's rue for you, and here's some for me.

Nina: If I could only rest – rest. *(Lifts her head)* I'm a seagull!

Ophelia: O, you must wear your rue with a difference.

Gertrude: I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife.

Nina: No – I'm an actress. Yes. Can you imagine how it feels to know you're acting badly?

Ophelia: There's a daisy. *(Singing, dies–)* For bonny sweet Robin is all my joy.

Nina: “A man chances by, sees her there, and having nothing better to do, destroys her.”
(This brings Anton straight out of his chair. He stands with his head down, shoulders shaking with sobs. Nina's speech continues without pause)

Nina: An idea for a story... No – what was I saying? *(Rubs her forehead)*
(All the characters are watching Anton, warily. He draws a determined breath and sits quickly, to catch up his writing)

Claudius: *(Meaning Nina)* Follow her close; give her good watch, I pray you.
(Isaac, with a flourish, swats Anton, in the process scattering his writing. Masha reaches for new pages as soon as they're done. All the men at once, needing to take action, attack Anton–)

Isaac: I challenge you! Friend, savior, monster!

Hamlet: I loved Ophelia!

Trigorin: Her son is using extremely bad taste.

Hamlet: Forty thousand brothers could not with all their quantity of love make up my sum.

Trigorin: First he tried to shoot himself; now he's challenging me to a duel.

Hamlet: What wilt thou do for her?

Trigorin: And what for?

Isaac: A duel? Now everything I do goes straight into your play?

Hamlet: Woo't weep? Woo't fight? Woo't eat a crocodile? I'll do't!

Isaac: For the honor of sweet Lika, I must kill you.

Claudius: You will lose this wager, my lord.

Hamlet: I do not think so.

Claudius: If your mind dislike anything, obey it.

Hamlet: ...If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all.

(Anton looks wearily at them all, picks up paper he was writing, says only–)

Anton: Konstantin?

(Konstantin rouses shakily, begins his most deeply felt speech)

Konstantin: Nina. I've cursed you, hated you, torn up your photograph...

Isaac: Are you saying the scrawny one is you?

Konstantin: ...but every minute I knew my soul was yours forever.

Isaac: You feel betrayed, but you're hers...

Konstantin: To stop loving you is not in my power.

Isaac: If that's it, why can't you say it? And live!

(Anton's rawest nerve – he's stunned, denying his deep emotion, taps genuine fury to demolish the messenger, Isaac–)

Anton: Isaac Levitan telling me to live? How dare you!! *(So furious he's speechless, but–)* Life is *sacred*. So by what obscenity do you preach life to me, whose self-centered hysterics repeatedly end in doing your damndest to eliminate yours?! You're a pathetic, posturing, would-be suicide. By which act you not only mock my friendship, but *you spit on God*. Suicide is a worm's way out. No Hamlet would do it. And I am ashamed to know you.

Isaac: Good that got said. But it doesn't answer my question.

(Anton's passion rises unbearably, but is interrupted by–)

Masha: *(Moved, breathless, sets down pages)* Anton, your play is incredibly good, but can you use Lika like this? It's so painful.

(Anton buries himself in the page he's writing. Gertrude begins softly–)

Gertrude: There is a willow grows aslant the brook

Isaac: No. Don't let her start that.

Gertrude: ...down her weedy trophies and herself fell in the weeping brook...

Isaac: Masha! Stop him. He's going to let her die.

(Isaac has his arm around Lika. Masha picks up what she's written)

Gertrude: ...pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay to muddy death.

Masha: Anton?

(Anton looks wearily at Masha, who hands him the telegram)

Masha: This goes to Lika with money for her passage. It asks her to come to us.

Anton: Let me finish this scene. Then I'll look at it.

Masha: All you have to do is sign it.

Anton: Yes. Well...

(He dismisses Masha with a wave of the hand, but she decides to just wait. Anton clearly doesn't like it, but sinks back to work)

Anton: So...Nina? What happens? Do you sink to muddy death?

Nina: *(Bleary at first)* No, that's wrong. Where was I?

(Masha turns back to reading to distract herself. Nina's a wreck – Lika supports her; Nina gathers herself little by little during her realization–)

Nina: I'm a real actress now, and I act with joy, with ecstasy...

Lika: Yes!

Nina: ...now I understand that whether we act or write, it's not glory that's important, it's having the strength to endure.

Lika: Oh yes.

Konstantin: You've found your way.

Nina: Now I have faith, so it's not as painful...

Konstantin: You know where you're going.

Nina: ...when I think of my calling, I'm not afraid of life.

Konstantin: And I believe in nothing.

Nina: Hush. I must go.

(Nina embraces Konstantin impetuously, runs upstage, taking Lika. Konstantin stands alone. Silence, all breaths held – Masha has finished reading–)

Masha: *(Quiet, awed)* Anton, I don't know what to... You've written something extraordinary.

(Konstantin will hold his place, suspended. Anton's slumped, exhausted)

Dorn: The play will be starting soon.

Hamlet: Get you a place.

Masha: The people are so close, so alive...and funny, and human. And terribly, terribly real.

Gertrude: *(To Masha)* I do believe you think what now you speak.

Claudius: Let's follow, Gertrude.

Masha: But I'm frightened because...how much will it cost you? To use people you love. And who will understand this?

Anton: Lika.

(Lika appears at a distance – disheveled, ravaged – ghost of Christmas past)

Claudius: What do you call the play?

Masha: *(Reading)* *The Seagull*. But my God, Anton, how will you end it?

(Anton upset, looks at Konstantin, who stands motionless)

Konstantin: I'm lost in a sea of images and dreams.

(Anton, helpless, looks to Lika, as though she's his death waiting)

Anton: *(Shaken, almost a wail)* Lika...

(Like a meeting in heaven, Lika now has the serenity of those who've suffered terrible tragedy, and see all life with warmth and compassion – she is unspeakably tender, but hasn't lost her tease–)

Lika: Hurts, does it? Hmm, who would have thought it. You don't like who you are?

Anton: How could you do this?

Masha: Anton, the telegram.

Isaac: Yes, Masha. Make him sign it.

Anton: How could you do this to me?

Lika: To you? That's good.

Anton: You've got the nerve to blame me?

Lika: You're ashamed. Well, well. But here's who you are, here's what happened. You enjoyed it while it lasted.

Anton: You wreckless disaster of a woman.

Lika: You wish you had courage. That you were more loving and generous. Or maybe even self-sacrificing? Write your hero that way.

Anton: Don't you dare make fun of my...

Lika: Your beloved art? But you must forgive me, when I'm forced to live it for you...

(Lika will lightly, sensually, hover, touch, embrace and tease him – any way that works to lovingly instruct – she speaks about her life like a story she’s telling, is amused, bears no sting, all sweetness, never recriminates)

Anton: This is your doing! All of it!

Lika: And it hurts? So sad. What did you think they were for? These exquisitely juicy painful parts. You did this to yourself. You handed me over to Potopenko.

Anton: I didn’t. I swear I didn’t!

Lika: Ah. But you watched? And seeing what was happening, knowing you could stop it, you just watched. Ooo, must be tough to live with.

Anton: You knew you’d hurt me.

Lika: And will you comfort me?

Anton: You were determined to hurt me.

Lika: Grow up, my growling monster. You did it to yourself; we always do. And of course you’ll use it. Who do you think you’re fooling? That’s why you made it happen.

(Lika’s leaving)

Anton: I didn’t. Don’t leave.

Lika: You’re still delicious.

Anton: Don’t leave me.

Lika: Why do you think you’re taking up space? *(Playful)* Idiot.

Anton: Please.

Lika: You’re supposed to learn something.

(Lika’s gone)

Anton: *(Devastated)* Lika. Lika...

Masha: *(Urging)* Anton. The telegram.

Isaac: *(Backing her)* Sign it, Antosha.

(Anton, in frenzy, swings round, seizes telegram–)

Anton: *(Rips telegram)* Comfort her yourself. *(Let moment set, then, to Konstantin–)*
Well? Snap out of it.

Konstantin: I don’t know what my calling is.

(Anton, enraged, picks up shotgun, aims it at Konstantin. Konstantin shocked, then understands, moves to Anton, takes the shotgun from him, bows, disappears behind the stage. Characters all rise, looking after Konstantin, then back to Anton)

Gertrude: One woe doth tread upon another’s heel so fast they follow.

Claudius: How much I had to do to calm his rage! Now fear I this will give it start again.
(A shot offstage. Shock. Silence)

Dorn: An angel of silence flew over.

Isaac: He’s killed his hero. A suicide! How about that.

(Anton picks up his manuscript. Characters afraid, race–)

Arkadina: *(Fast)* Oh I was frightened. It reminded me of...

Trigorin: I can’t remember. I can’t remember.

Arkadina: It’s rough on the lake, the waves are huge.

(Anton rips up his manuscript. Gasps. Ripping will continue to the end)

Masha: Anton, don't.

(Characters frightened – he's tearing them up – they rush their lines, but are fading, as they leave his mind, and effectively, die)

Ophelia: The king rises.

Nina: I must go. Goodbye.

Arkadina: Why so early?

Gertrude: How fares my lord?

Dorn: I may have lost my mind, but I like that play.

(Anton in a frenzy of ripping)

Masha: Don't!

Anton: *(Stops ripping. Overly cheerful)* So, Potopenko's back in town? Invite him to dinner!

(Shock stops everything. Masha, appalled, backs away, then spins and leaves; Isaac follows her off-)

Isaac: Don't leave, sweet Masha.

(Characters in panicked rush, fading, backing away from Anton)

Polonius: Give o'er the play!

Trigorin: I don't feel like going.

Arkadina: It's sad to lose you.

Nina: If you knew how I hate to leave!

Dorn: *(Begging her)* Stay.

Nina: I can't.

Gertrude: All that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity.

Claudius: Give me some light. Away.

Dorn: Stay one more hour. Come now, really.

Polonius: Lights lights lights!

(Light have faded to spot. Anton isolated amidst his shredded manuscript. Dark. Remaining voices from the dark around him)

Hamlet: For some must watch, while some must sleep, thus runs the world away.

Dorn: I hear music up at the house. Let's go in.

Hamlet: Come, some music.

Dorn: Come. My legs ache.

Hamlet: For if the king like not the comedy, why then, belike he likes it not, perdy.

Anton: *(Out of rage and despair, triumphant)* Music!

.

(Happy Russian music begins, Anton gazes into the light. Blackout)

END OF PLAY

MASHA, TOO



Masha is center left in this family photo.

SET: The Chekhovian mood, yes, but the only requirements are: a door, a single bed, a small desk, a chair, a wash basin, a window light – Masha’s room.

.

Offstage sound creates a lively country dacha, the boisterous milieu in which Anton Chekhov writes, and his sister Masha serves his writing.

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

.

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.

MASHA, TOO

(Offstage calls) “Is that the last of the beans out there, Masha?”

“When should I tell the Zargoffs to come?”

“But Masha, what should I put down then? Masha?”

.

MASHA *(Off)*

Just go and do it, Mikhail. And *be quiet*.

I’ll tell you when you can give it to him.

.

(Masha comes through the door, pulls it shut, leans against it breathless, her arms filled with newspapers and mail. She stands excited, thinking, and, after a pause, says—)

.
I'll do it.

.
(Pause. Then, apparently without her realizing, as she speaks again the mail slides to the floor)

.
I'll do it.

.
(Laughs lightly) I'll do it, I'll do it, I'll do it!

.
(Laughs deeply. But then catches herself, stops abruptly, shushing—)

.
Shhhh shh shh shh!

.
(She runs to the bed, climbs on, and listens at the wall)

.
(Hushed) I think...

Yes. I can still hear
He's writing
Scratch scratch scratch

.
(Relieved, she sinks down onto the bed)

.
I didn't disturb him. *(Long pause)*

.
How did I know that I'll do it?
What told me?
Does it matter? No
no no...
Only the feeling
Only this matters
That it's right. And I'll do it

.
(She starts to erupt again, with deep happy breaths, 'twixt laughing and almost crying)

.
Oh calm down, Masha, you goose, Mongoose!
Wouldn't your brothers like to catch you like this?
Hum, hum, just be calm now
You have to *think*
How to do it, what to do first

.
(Completely still, thinking, then)

.
It wasn't on the train back
No. On the train I was still
frightened for Anton
But when I found he was all right
back safe, even writing, I...
It was the note
Waiting. So clean, crisp. Alexander...
Alexander, Alexander. Yes

.
I haven't much time

.
He'll be here by sundown
No doubt in the midst
with everybody else arriving
Oh, what a mess
What a delightful, adorable mess

.
(Laughs again)

.
I'll have to tell Anton

.
Yes. Yes. That's most important
In fact, the only important...
Tell Antosha
I'd better do it right away
While it's quiet, while...

.
Take a breath, Masha, slow down
He's writing. He has to have quiet
And maybe it wouldn't be...
maybe it would be, just the least bit...
indelicate
to be so happy
to be pouncing on him with such good news
when he just, when...
Oh, damn

.
Why does he love the theatre!

.
(Angry pause. Then she bends abruptly to gather the stack of mail)

.
Maybe the reviews aren't so bad as we...
.

(Beginning to open a paper)

.
No... *(She stops)*

.
Even *I* can't look
It was awful

.
They take it so seriously
but he's laughing
Can't they see he's laughing?
At all of them, himself
Isn't he?
Why can't he laugh at himself

.
Because he knows
he's trying to fit on shoes
he can never wear
—the real large theatre
There's never any success
They just don't...

.
I wouldn't go through
another night like that
even if...

.
Traitor!

.
Why aren't you crushed?
The pain of the opening came
but swept by
when before I felt it as strong
sometimes stronger than he
But this time, somehow
I perched somewhere outside it
floating
all on my own

.
(She wonders, then- a little sighing happy breath, then takes up a newspaper)

.
I should make myself read them
in case someone said something good
I could show him, and then...

.
I can't. No. Change the subject

Life at home. Nobody mention it
All on tiptoe. Except. Except...

.
(Bubbling up)

.
Well that's it, isn't it?
Tell him
Life *is* happening. Going on
Something much more important
than a play

.
You're being naive, Masha
Never mind, I have to do it
Alexander's on his way
I've made him wait already
"Wait," I told him
"Just until after the opening
You can't imagine the pressure just now
but when it's over, I'll..."

.
I didn't say
I was unsure myself
Somehow
the pressure on Anton
was fogging my head

.
With Alexander
everything's simple
like earth, and life, and flesh
and children
Oh god yes, children

.
It's not that far
his family's land at Sorochintz
We made the trip easily in only...

.
I can still come back
work in the garden here
help to build more rooms
manage the livestock
It's natural to go off
and start a new home
Anton knows that
And Mikhail can help here

more than he does. And Ivan

.

And Alexander will have to understand
that it's different than with most women

.

Most women are eager
to get out on their own
whereas Anton and I
have already built – reconstructed really
from ashes and near starvation –
this family

.

At only 16
Anton was “father”
for all nine of us
even though he came third
after Alex and Nikolai
and Papa and Mama still live
Still, Antosha was father
and I... his best help

.

And this life
the warm, the bubbling mischief
everything here
is no less than pure rescue
from the cold
forbidding
severe
and self-righteous father
we were born with
whose one spark
clawing his way out of serfdom
was music

.

Only through music
did life dare peek into our home
and only church music

.

But we overwhelmed our father
We and fate

.

And it's only now
in this place
Melikovo

that at last we're beginning to be... (*Sigh*)

.
but you know all this
Yes. Alexander understands
We can go slowly

.
Masha, think!

.
Little beans with the perch –
thank god for fishing –
and Mama's *pirogi*
With mushrooms –
Alexander will love them
Even Anton will have to enjoy...

.
He sat through lunch
like a dead man
shut up in enveloping gloom
Even Mikhail didn't dare
tell Anton his story idea

.
Just as well he reworks it
I don't think the subject
just now, would be...

.
The only thing
the only ray at all
was just the moment he threw his napkin down
after sitting the whole time
just waiting, just daring us all
to say the wrong thing
he pushed back and mumbled –
long after I'd oh so humbly ventured
"Is the writing going...?"
long after he'd stopped me short
with an acid eye beneath his upshot brow –
long after all that
he pushed back and muttered
"If I can be left alone
I'll have a new story
finished by tonight."

.
So that's magnificent
best of the best!

If he does *that*, he'll be himself again
glowing, supreme

.

Why can't he believe in the stories?
Why does he spit
on this great bursting talent
of his?
Because they started in fun
and grew from desperate need
That makes them not serious?

.

And why theatre
Is that any more serious?
So much pain and for what
Only because he knows
he won't ever be Tolstoy?

.

Stop stop stop – breathe

.

I'll ask Anton's advice
give him something
besides his stories
to chew
say "There's a matter about which
I wish to consult you"

.

(Breaks from seriousness to giggles)

.

How pompous!
"Consult with him"
As though he were my father
as though I weren't a grown woman
earning my own living all this time
managing all *his* business besides, and...

.

Of course, the other times
I did consult with him
But I was young
knew hardly anything
and even so, it hurt

.

The poor Lieutenant
with whom I had never even exchanged
one serious word

was touching
in his earnest desire
to wive me
but retreated immediately
when Anton informed him
it was inappropriate

.
And last time
when Levitan, the magnificent painter
fell on his knees...
without warning...
in the middle of the woods...
Anton was right. "Balzacian
Of course you can marry him
but he needs a Balzacian woman," he said
"not a girl like you"

.
I hadn't the least idea
what a "Balzacian" woman was
but the thought that I wasn't
and never, ever could be one
cut me
right-smite in two

.
I stayed in my room for a week

.
Levitan needed me
His fiery eyes –
they'd brood so, then suddenly dance
And he helped my painting
He said my soul was learning to bloom in the sweep
of my brush-tip
And he made Antosha look
look fresh
at the lake, at the grass, at the trees
I suppose
he would have swallowed me whole
But Alexander...

.
It's the warm spot
right here, that spreads
whenever I think – remember
his hand on my back
just there, just strong

just...warm

.

The way he quietly
so quietly
searches my face, my eyes
makes me feel so open
so still
as though there's nothing else
in all of this world
to learn
only him
Oh I've grown
About this, I don't need
consultation

.

Funny
how I don't say the word
even to myself
Of course, I've wondered
"Is this...?
Am I in...?"

.

(As she thinks "the word," she tingles, her breath is agitated with what she doesn't say)

.

Who should know better than Anton?!

.

He writes about love all the time
He's forever dreaming
Still, I wonder
I wonder if he's ever really been...

.

Maybe with Effroc
He called her "fiance"
but it didn't last long
and he was very young
and when it was over he didn't,
as he said, "buy a revolver"

.

But with Lika?

.

Oh I hope she comes tonight
It would help so much because Anton would...
She won't stay angry
She can't. She can't resist him

.
Still, she's right
He did use her for *The Seagull*
the girl, that Nina
He should be careful
Lika was bound to be angry
Everyone can tell

.
But that's no reason to accuse me
to say we have some brother-sister conspiracy

.
How idiotic – “conspiracy”
when I'm not even free
to say what I want, what I feel
for fear of disturbing
upsetting the great one!
That's selfish, Masha
He slaves and provides
He's angel to the family
If he demands
if he acts like the lord
he's entitled

.
Conspiracy!
I beg him to leave her alone
He torments her. He always has
It was never any different
since the first day she came to visit me
and he and Nikolai were peeking
down the staircase
at her golden curls
Maybe he does love her
Then why doesn't he say something real!

.
He drove Lika to Potopenko's arms
He really did. She was beside herself
You can't talk to him
He's a terrible monster
but he winds her back in with his pretty teasing
his pretend-only promises

.
I hope she comes

.
They're all after him

Every single woman in sight
and quite a few not. Single

.

My girlfriends blame me
say I cushion
I spoil him
when really...
Maybe if he'd marry, I could...

.

He's happy with things as they are

.

We get along
I take care of everything
that...disturbs him
I help him with...
He should marry

.

Of course, Alexander and I are...
I mean, until there are children
I could still...
Antosha will want me to
keep his accounts, and...

.

Oh, I've got to remember

.

(She goes to the desk, makes a note)

.

'Cancel the printing'

.

All of a sudden
just because of this opening
he, just like that –
won't let his plays be published

.

So what do we do about the advance?
It's already spent on the mortgage!
Antosha, Antosha...

.

And how can I explain to Suvorin?
Won't publish his plays. That's crazy
Who will ever understand him then?
It's clear the theatres don't
He can't trust them

.

Maybe if I just say to Suvarin
we'd better wait
just until he's feeling more hopeful
more easy, more...yes
generous

.
Then there's this offer
from Marx

.
(Picking up an envelope, taking out the papers and looking them over)

.
He wants to buy it all
all the stories
and all he will write, forever
to set a fee now

.
And everyone but Anton can see
a child can see
how unfair it is
how much he stands to lose
All Anton sees is the gigantic sum
now, all at once

.
I have to talk him out of it

.
Yes, talk him out...
talk him...
Oh God, how do I know
Even if for tonight I know
How do I know forever?

.
Even if I can't turn away
from Alexander's eyes
even if I knew the response
he moves in me
here
and here
and here

.
(She is feeling as though he were there, and has trouble breathing)

.
is the deepest there is
how do I know
it will be there next year

and the next, and the next,
until death

.

You can't know that!

.

How do I know
this fever won't pass
and I awake shivering
and up to my reddened eyes
in dirty underwear
and potato peels

.

While our life here is...

.

Why did Alexander
have to happen to me now
I'm not unhappy with the life I have!
Such triumphs –
carving a life in the city
all artists
Anton, all of us. Of course, I teach
that's only prudent
but Anton's talent is real
he's become so important
and our life...

.

What does Alexander want me for?
A wife
And what is that?
Tiny hands pulling my hem
all night sickness
stoking coals
and on the next pillow
his smile

.

How can I know!

.

People must do things like this
not with eyes open
but shut tight
They must take a breath
shut their eyes
take hands
and jump

.
as into a swollen cold stream
on the first summer day
whether the ice
is all melted
or not

.
I know nothing!

.
(She begins swiftly to do something then stops abruptly)

.
I could say to Anton
“Until there are children“
Children. That will do it

.
(Laughs)

.
Children.
I’ll put it to him that way
Especially since he shows no signs
of producing any

.
(Cough from beyond the wall)

.
Oh, he...

.
(She starts, then catches her breath)

.
I wish Mikhail had just kept quiet
never said a thing
Antosha told him not to

.
(Listens again)

.
It isn’t so much. His coughing
Not as bad as last night. I hope...

.
(More coughing. She gets up to listen, then sinks onto the bed, then grins)

.
What was it he said about...
It was just the other night
I...

.
(She goes quickly to a notebook)

.
...wrote it down

.
(Paging through)

.
Yes

.
“Marriage for love
is the only kind
that’s interesting”

.
Uhuh. All right

.
“The point around which
family life revolves
is love

.
sexual attraction

.
one flesh”

.
(She pauses, wondering about this)

.
Hmmm

.
What does he know!
About “one flesh?”
Oooh plenty

.
“Everything else
is dreary and unreliable
no matter how cleverly
it is calculated”

.
But how am I supposed to know?
It’s all very well for him
but how about me?
And isn’t it just about *time*?
But if I took a lover...oooh.

.
(Abrupt, then sustained coughing. Masha gets up, moves restlessly, not needing to get close to the wall to hear what’s happening)

.
Mikhail should never have told me

He just should have left it, said nothing
Anton *is* a doctor
He'd know if his own condition...
if it were serious

.
And ever since Nikolai...
ever since Nikolai died
every little thing, every time he coughs
I'm hopping like a mother bird
I fret at the least...

.
Mikhail said there was blood
Blood on the handkerchief
And ever since then I've been looking
so very...carefully
checking the laundry
as though we have some guilty mystery
and it's just not fair!

.
Of course he could be laundering
his handkerchiefs himself

.
But I don't think so

.
Why am I glooming over this
when there's so much to...
Don't I have to get it straight?
After all
I *am* trying to figure out
our lives

.
Lives

.
Two, three, four hours, and...
Will Alexander look different to me?
Will my eye break him
into new colors tonight
deeper, or clearer
or a carnival
sparkling, mad

.
Stop it, stop it
The time is going
You aren't being practical

Or orderly. Or anything

.

(Laughing helplessly)

.

Orderly about moonlight?

I can't, I can't

It's a helpless contradiction

The pleasure floods me

my nostrils expand

I quiver like a new-bridled horse

.

And there will be moonlight

It's clear blue all day and the fourth quarter

Oh yes

.

soft and white

smoothing the path

.

And he'll know

I'll have answered

It will have been decided

Our lives

Our...life

.

(From her clear strong vision, she breaks, astonished)

.

What am I dreaming?

This is nonsense. I'm dreaming

.

Who would take care of business

Keep the place quiet

Arrange for the guests

Make sure Anton's cared for

Mama doesn't understand

Of course he's demanding

Who'd oversee the garden

Anton needs these things

And we all need Anton

It's impossible

Fantasy

A page from another story

Not mine

.

We're settled

And happy
Dozens are drawn here
and want to be part of us
Some think, sometimes
they can take a piece home
And we each have our lives alone
So it's possible

.
But not if they take too much
And this is too much
It would unbalance
unsettle
decimate our home

.
And that's selfish
What gives Alexander the nerve?
He can see how it is

.
I'll dismiss him lightly
Say it was maybe moonlight
romantic nonsense
say I'm flattered

.
Good.
Now there's business
Go in now

.
All right. That's right
I'll just take him the mail

.
(Getting up to gather it)

.
But what?

.
I can't show him the papers
He'd scream
Besides, there'll be reviews
All right, the mail...

.
"Suvorin." No
"Avilova." No, she was there
"Yavorskaya," the actress. No, no, no!
"Koni." *Koni?*
He wasn't at the opening

It won't hurt
He couldn't be talking
about *The Seagull*

.
(*Deciding to take him the one letter*)

.
And if there isn't *any* mail
he'll be suspicious of *that*

.
So I'll say
"Excuse me, Anton
there's something that mustn't wait till..."

.
Nonsense

.
"Anton, have you got a minute
there's something I need to...?"

.
I'm dreaming
It was only the wind

.
Of all the thousand summer nights
ripe with stars
why did it happen in autumn
when ghosts walk the mind
colliding in mist

.
It started in the game –
Fortunes –
with the crumpled little papers
messages
passed from palm to palm
like smudged up sweaty giggling
children
without knowing
whose you'll open

.
The wad came apart in my hand
and the most I thought
of the piece that said "Will You"
was that it must be the first half
of a question
If I'd looked up
would I have seen him watching then

for a blush or a shudder
of surprise?
Who knows.

.
I went straight to the rest
not so much engaged as annoyed
that the matted softened edges of the fold
had let go
and raggedly split my fortune
It would have to retire from the game
So it startled me
blank by itself
there on the lone second slip:
“Marry me”

.
Angry
that a flush swept up my cheeks
my eyes darted round the table
more in embarrassment
than in wanting to find the author

.
He was watching

.
I've run it so often
in my mind
him watching
again and again

.
But later
placing my shawl
from behind
on my shoulders
with the little squeeze he likes
a sign of affection
He does it to Mama, too
Just a gentle...

.
But he said something
close to my ear
more a breath than a whisper
So close I couldn't be sure
it wasn't some wind in my head
a suggestion put straight to my brain
without actually passing his lips

It said "Will you?"

.

I froze just an instant, unsure
Does wind, does no more than breath
require an answer?

.

But he drew me outside
no more, no less urgent
than any other night
Only, he was on his way
and asked
no one else to see him off
Only that was strange
And he didn't speak of it at all –
not that he was leaving
for who knows how many weeks
not of the wind
and not of its message

.

But stepping onto the path
I parted the mist
of a world where thoughts
do without speech
but have the pressure of wind
and a whisper
belongs
to no one

.

We had gone as far as the bridge
without a word
when he looked full in my face
and said simply "Shall I talk to Anton?"
I shook my head "Not until..."

.

He knew that wasn't an answer
He knew
he had no more than opened the subject
no more
than set a whisper
in my head
but enough

.

How did he know?

.

Strange, how certain he is
At play we intimidate him
Well maybe not that
but he's quiet
as though waiting his time
then he scores

.
His eyes are amused and...
full of understanding

.
He's inviting me into a life

.
(She catches her breath, then throws herself straight into the scene)

.
“Anton, have you got a minute
there's something I need to...

.
Do you think Lika will come?

.
No one has stopped to ask about cholera
that's a relief...

.
Mikhail has an outline
he's working on for...”

.
Why is he so hard to talk to?!

.
He won't be surprised
He must know
Alexander's been making the trip
too often, and staying too long
for it to be only a matter
of land prices or famine relief

.
“When Alexander arrives
I hope you'll welcome a new brother”
Yes. There

.
Another brother – Alexander –
will shut up our eldest brother
Alexander-the-first
won't it? Won't it?
–who sits off in Moscow
and righteously quips:

.
“There’s something wrong”
he says, “something wrong
in your relations with Anton”

.
Hah. Maybe he’s just jealous
that he couldn’t support this family
Or that he’s made such a mess of his own

.
Something wrong in our relations!
Because we’ve stuck together
because we’ve made it work
because Anton is the genius
the saint, and he needs my help
and I understand him?

.
Because we take care of *everybody* else
We’re the only reason there’s a roof up there
We did that
And when you’ve done it once
you fear nothing
because you always know
you’ll be there to do it again
And, of course, you always fear
because you know always
at any time
you could be left with nothing
At any time
you could need to do it again

.
So maybe you cling together
maybe you hold to what you have
maybe you do make it hard for others
to really...get in

.
Levitan, the painter, said that
He was bitter, of course
“This enchanting family” he said

.
“I fall in love
with all of you at once
and in your midst I float
at ease
and barely notice

I can never share
the secret center heart
you keep only for each other
never
for the chance outsider
such as me”

.
I am *not* afraid of Anton
And I don't see only his good side
I don't do whatever he wants

.
And I'll just go tell him

.
(She starts out the door. Then stops)

.
But just be sure
I don't want to shock him
And he is very wise
And understanding
I could write him a little note
It could be on his tea tray
Mama will bring it soon
He wants it by two

.
“Dear gigantic brother Anton
There's a nice surprise
in store tonight
Before you read your story
I'll explain just how
your family is
growing”

.
Masha, you are such an idiot

.
A cowardly idiot!
You can't start or settle anything
with secret notes
He'll make a game of it
He'll refuse to believe
what he'd rather not believe
is real
He'll joke
And then, once that happens
he won't let the subject

be serious again
Never, never, never

.

I should march right over
and bang on the wall
like he does
in the deep of night
just after I've finally
gone off to sleep
Bang, bang
How about this for a story?
"A man is hobbling
with a ragged team and wagon
across the snowy steppes..."
Well how about this?
"A not very young woman
must tell her
dependent
wise
and remarkably stupid
brother
she wants to marry"

.

No no no
be serious!

.

I have to be sure
he understands me
absolutely
No funny tricks, no sleight of tongue
But still...
I should maybe
not hurt his feelings
by suggesting I've decided
completely
without him
That wouldn't be...
politic

.

And surely
I'd expect the same of him
if he was deciding to marry

.

So

I'll be very calm
Cool, but bright
as though it's a whole new day
new matters can be discussed
I can just say
"Alexander's made me a proposal
What do you think about that?"

.
He'll say "What kind of a proposal?"
to stall what he knows is coming
But that's easy
"Marriage" I'll say
And if I'm carrying it off really well, I'll say
"Marriage. What else?"

.
Then he'll say "That's very nice"
or "I'm not surprised" or
"Congratulations"

.
But whatever he says
and even if he doesn't
go on to ask me how I'm inclined –
as he very well might not
since he'd rather not know
not go into it
put it off no matter what
–even if he doesn't ask
I will go on and I will say
"and I'm planning to give him my answer tonight"

.
That will be the opening
Then he really must ask
"And what is your answer?"

.
But *even* if he doesn't
even if he only says
as he very well might
"Did you get all the beans in?
Did anyone come asking about cholera?"
Even then, I'll go on. I'll say
"My answer is 'yes'"
And that's that!
How's that for frightened?
How's that for dictating my life?

How's that?

.

(She sweeps around the room, straightening herself, scooping together the things she needs, then suddenly stops dead)

.

And if he says "no?"

.

(She stands completely frozen, then carefully)

.

If he says no

If he's even...not pleased

or says something cool

like 'whatever you think'

If he does anything less

than leap up shouting 'at last!'

What will you do?

.

(Long pause)

.

Well.

.

Well.

.

Well, that put the damper down
didn't it?

.

(She is choked up)

.

I couldn't...

.

(She moves quickly to the window, stands gaining control of herself, then, when she is completely steady—)

.

This is your home, Masha

You can't leave

This is your place

He won't let you

.

(Silence. Then, the coldest thought)

.

And what if he dies

.

No question of children then

of husband

or...anything

.
Alexander

.
But why today
why now
when the life I have
is a round
with writers and painters and theatre and music and...

.
I could look at him forever

.
I sing. Inside...I sing

.
We talk
about everything
everything in all the world
until there's not a thing
we haven't said

.
and then we sit there
still
without moving
and I hear him breathe

.
(Silence. Then, without changing anything—)

.
“I need your advice, Anton”

.
Be careful
He doesn't like scenes
Mustn't be too...released
not too angry
not too passionate

.
“I'd like to talk quietly
about something...
that effects us all”

.
(Pause, preparing)

.
Life is never
easy
but you have to always
risk

.
to strike
for what offers
the most

.
life

.
Otherwise
what is it?

.
(She takes a deep, determined-frightened breath)

.
Now.

.
(Thinking she heard her)

.
Mama, is that you?

.
(Muttering)

.
“I need your advice, Anton...”

.
And the guests

.
The boys can go in with Ivan
The neighbors, however many
will go home to sleep
Lika, if she comes, stays with me
And that puts Alexander...
Alexander, better in Mikhail's room
Yes. Anton won't want company
especially after we talk about...

.
(Knock on the door)

.
Alexander

.
(Another knock)

.
Yes, Mama, yes
I'm ready
I'll take it in to him

.
(Deep breath, looking out her window. Then she sweeps straight out the door)

END OF MASHA, TOO

ANTON, HIMSELF



SET: Yes, the Chekhovian mood, but the only requirements are... a door, a desk, a chair, a window light

.

NOTE: Chekhov's 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.

.

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

ANTON, HIMSELF

.
The play is drawn from thoughts—those that flit and those that press upon Anton this particular day, 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 following *Masha, Too*, the scene Masha exits to play at the end of *Masha, Too* has taken place during the intermission, and ends with the opening lines of *Anton, Himself*.

.
There is mid-afternoon light. And bird sounds. It is October.
At his desk, Anton raises his head in the direction of the half-closed door.

.
ANTON: Push it shut, please, on your way.

.
(Pause. Then 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 immediate 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?" Then 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.)

.

“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 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 very 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 with it. 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 outsized, 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 them 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 say what he planned.)

.
and I'll read my story
right after tea.

.
*(He is frozen. Footsteps retreat from the door.)
(He sits still, looking at the audience, then to cover his failure, he goes swiftly to his files.)*

.
Something else that... 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 OF PLAY

(For another with these characters, see TO MOSCOW)

PRODUCTION & PLAYING NOTES

(How to do these crazy plays)

Please God, No Wedding or Shooting at the End!

.
Anton, Masha, Lika and Isaac are historical characters – Isaac Levitan was an impressionist landscape painter. However, all the “mind” characters may be both limited and expanded by how Anton is thinking of them—

.
Those from HAMLET simply serve the creation of Anton’s new-play world. They are icons strong enough to influence artistic creation for 400 years and counting. (Ironically, HAMLET and THE SEAGULL were probably written at equal century marks in 1595 and 1895) The HAMLET characters live in us, and so, suggest things to Anton, as well as to the new characters in Anton's brain.

.
The characters from SEAGULL can range farther, but are not yet in possession of their finished being. They may think of themselves as protoplasm absorbing attributes from the nutrients in Anton's brain, which include his personal life and his experience of HAMLET. Isaac and Lika have the most freedom, because they not only have a real live connection to Anton and Masha, they also have their own motives for appearing.

.
But it takes live play to explore what can happen, and the greatest fun to be had is not written – it exists in the spontaneous moments that spring from a lively ensemble of actors. The teasing irony of characters from HAMLET and THE SEAGULL juxtaposed is

delicious – as is the vivacious action when such opposing characters fling their hearts into a joint cause.

CUES, rhythm, and modulation are of prime importance. This play is a fabric that must be woven and then played with no dropped stitches, or the whole is compromised. Your director becomes like a conductor with sections of a symphony orchestra to blend or like a recording engineer executing a mix.

Multiple-tracked scenes blend lightly, like a round, with the second speaker beginning several words after the first begins. In general, when there are two or three tracks of simultaneous play, Anton's track is always foreground – or loudest. SEAGULL is middle ground – or softer, and HAMLET is always background – soft to subliminal audibility.

Sometimes a single speaker, like Nina in her first scene, leads or drives straight through. Opposing scenes should work out their intrinsic timing before overlapping with each other. Ideal play, like any team sport, requires a sense of "peripheral rhythm" where you hold an awareness of the moves of every player on the field in balance with the specific action you need to carry out. It may feel quick as lightning, but must also be clear.

Agility of play, that is, lively cue action, should let each track in turn make its significant points, stimulating, but not overwhelming the audience with the mix. Similarly, once the fabric is woven and cues are solid, then care must be taken to modulate – let each part breathe at its own richest level; avoid the natural urge to play it all like lightning: loud, louder, loudest.

So, take a deep breath, and... Got it? Now fly! KS

Anton, Himself (and Masha, Too)

(Excerpts from a letter to Vancouver director Stephane Kirkland)

*“The Koni letter, written in the aftermath of *The Seagull*'s opening is the only one that needs crediting. The rest are snips and considerably 'edited.' ... References to stories are apparent in the text. In some cases, I've 'cheated' events into the same few days, that took longer. “Verotchka”, in particular, is a story from about ten years earlier.*

*[To understand and perform *Anton, Himself* or *Masha, Too*] All you need is a 'feel' for Chekhov. Academic tangents can't give you that. And sure, you can decide Chekhov's a selfish exploiter of women, but we're talking human here, and richness of character, which suggests “multi-faceted,” and his opposing face is pure appeal – irresistible.*

ANTON 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 the fun of it, then bounce them among his varied, often tortuous 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 letter.

The "tossing" of the audience requires clarity – ie, instantaneous switches, no warning, and absolute control of focus, while moving them requires unrestricted emotional flow. Funny, 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 sometimes brilliant at both, but if he didn't hook his feeling deep enough at the outset, he'd go flying off and not be heard from again that night.

MASHA's job is similar, but easier, because she's more clearly and passionately driven by only one desire, goal, (problem she must resolve) which keeps topping her many other concerns of the moment. So the audience is never confused, and simply rides the wave of her irrepressible excitement.

And, as you'll see, *Masha, Too* allowed me to help the audience for *Anton, Himself* to relax by introducing a lot of background they can refer to later – eg, after listening to *Masha* they know all about Alexander. In my fourth, but first-written play about them, *To Moscow*, you can find Masha's description of the scene between the two of them that occurs just before the opening of *Anton, Himself*, and several major Lika scenes.

To you and actor David Wodchis I wish great fortune and good fun with *Anton*! KS

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

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LIBERTY

BALLOON *

DARK LADY **

TO MOSCOW **

SWEET LAND OF FIRE

HAITI: A DREAM (in *Facing Forward*) *

NATIVE LAND

OH WILD WEST WIND (in *Rowing to America*) **

ANTON, HIMSELF

MASHA, TOO
PLEASE GOD, NO WEDDING OR SHOOTING AT THE END
*IN A KINGDOM BY THE SEA (in Plays by Karen Sunde) **
*HOW HIS BRIDE CAME TO ABRAHAM **
*TRUTH TAKES A HOLIDAY (in Plays by Karen Sunde) **
GENTLEMAN JOHNNY
ME & JOAN (of Arc)
WHEN REAL LIFE BEGINS
TRACKING BLOOD WHITE
DEBORAH: THE ADVENTURES OF A SOLDIER
2020 SEXCARE
*THE FASTEST WOMAN ALIVE ***
*KABUKI OTHELLO ***
KABUKI MACBETH
KABUKI KING RICHARD
ACHILLES
*KABUKI LADY MACBETH ***
QUASIMODO (a musical)
SPA (an opera)
THE SOUND OF SAND

SCREENPLAYS BY KAREN SUNDE
UNDERCOVER PATRIOT
COUNTDOWN
OVER THE RAINBOW
BOULE DE SUIF
SECRET SHIP
HOW HIS BRIDE CAME TO ABRAHAM
IN A KINGDOM BY THE SEA
THE LINE
PARALLEL LOVES
DREAM HOUSE
FINAL QUEST: THE MOUNTAIN OF THE GODS
TRIPPING TAMMY
THE FASTEST WOMAN ALIVE
LOVE HITS EARTH (& Other Disasters)
NEXT!

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