Professor David Peimer | Anton Chekhov and the Birth of Poetry in Modern Theatre

– And, okay, so today we are going to dive into looking at Mr. Anton Chekhov. And as you all know, we've been looking at Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, Gogol, and so on. And in a sense, today, looking at Chekhov, and then next week we're looking at Stanislavski and the Moscow Art Theatre and the whole beginning of actor training, Stanislavski, really, the grandfather of actor training. So anyway, and he worked with Chekhov, as I'm sure people know. So looking at Chekhov today, who is, in a sense, part of the others in terms of the era of the second half of the 19th century, but of course, he comes after them. And I mean, he's born in 1860, emancipation of the serfs, which is, for me, one of the great moments of Russian history, or world history, in 1861. So he's born literally more or less at the same time. And he's writing in the so-called, what's become known in a way as the golden era of Russian writers. So looking at Chekhov, who, we all know him for his plays, for in particular the four most famous plays. And I'm going to look a little bit in detail at "The Cherry Orchard" primarily and a little bit at "Three Sisters," 'cause I really think 'Cherry Orchard" is the one that resonates powerfully today. And of course then there's "The Seagull," there's "Uncle Vanya," and then a whole lot of short stories that he wrote and so on. He only lived for 44 years, you know, dying very young of tuberculosis, and that's very important, 'cause for the last five, six years of his life he was very sick with TB but carried on writing, and "The Cherry Orchard" is the last play completed, you know, fairly soon before he dies.

So in this short life, an extraordinary amount is achieved by this guy and I think what he covers, for me, is representative a lot of what Russia is going through and changing. And he understands. And in a way he is more contemporary for me than Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Gogol, I think, rides a different wave entirely, because it's such brilliant satire. So with Chekhov, these pictures here on the top right is Chekhov as a very young man. And then this at the bottom right is a picture of the house where he was born in the town called, forgive my pronunciation, Taganrog. So you can see, it's not, you know, the house of a serf. It's not the house of the aristocracy, obviously, or the upper class or even, you know, it's lower-middle class in a way, which is his parents' world, and I'm going to come on to that in a moment. So for me, Chekhov also begins in theatre. Realism in theatre, or naturalism, depending, you know, which term we use, realism but realism with poetry inside. And I don't mean poetry in terms of, you know, language, but the poetic images and a sense of poetic in atmosphere and mood on the stage. And it's that combination, that it's not simple naturalism, you know, sort of hold up a mirror to life and imitate life. It's not that. It's much more. It's woven in a way that leaves one, in the audience, if it's well-directed and acted, it leaves the audience with a haunting, poetic atmosphere, and it should

be a haunting, poetic image, although the language is naturalistic and the characters are three-dimensional, psychologically complicated characters. So he's really bringing this into world literature and world drama after 19th-century drama, which, for me, is much more melodrama and the safe, if you like, you know, the salon dramas or the safe tea room, you know, whatever. He's really trying to push theatre in a whole different direction and is very conscious of the tradition of melodrama of the 19th century, not only in Russia but elsewhere. And Gogol, of course, is doing that with satire and comedy. Chekhov is doing it with more serious theatre.

We're going to come on to the debate, you know, about him, 'cause he called his plays comedies, but Stanislavski, the great director and actor trainer and actor, who rescued his career and in a sense kickstarted it completely, Stanislavski said they were tragedies, and we'll come on to the comedy/tragedy debate. Okay, so that's Mr. Chekhov, who only lives, as I said, 44 years and achieves an incredible amount. This here, these are the plays that he's most famous for. And if you look at it, you see there's quite a rigorous structure, that he's writing these great plays, "The Seagull" and "Vanya," "Three Sisters," "Cherry Orchard," quite consistently. "Cherry Orchard" finishes that year before he dies and he's very sick at this point, so he's really, he's not stopping, he's carrying on working. "Three Sisters," and he's pretty sick in 1900 with TB, but keeps working, and the other two plays earlier. And of course all the short stories, the letters, many other things which he wrote. But I'm going to look primarily at "The Cherry Orchard" and, as I said, a little bit of "Three Sisters." Okay, this is an image here of Chekhov on the left, and with his brother, and the two of them there. We get a sense of the class, of the standard of life, because this is in the family home, and something about the quality. As I said, not aristocratic, not middle class, it's just below middle probably. And then on the right-hand side, you can see the father in the top right and the mother in front, the second row on the right, at the end, the father and the mother, and this is family and some friends, a picture there. And what's important for me is, the reason I'm harping on it is because of the emancipation of the serfs and the impact of that and the change, the huge changes of emancipation. So access to education, access to knowledge, access to reading and writing, access to opportunities in professions for so many of the previous, 90% of the Russian population who were not aristocrats, who could now enter, if you like, the professions, whether it was the military or law or medicine, different kinds of professional activities. And Chekhov is exactly that because he becomes a doctor. Okay, he really is considered one of the great writers, not only one of the great playwrights, and together with Ibsen and Strindberg, those three are regarded as, in a sense, the beginnings of modernism in theatre terms and the beginnings of realism, not that they all stuck to realism. Ibsen and Strindberg certainly branched out into symbolism, where the symbol took much more impact than trying to be psychologically, if you

like, in inverted commas, "truthful to life." Okay, so he's very aware of what's happening in Europe. He's aware, obviously, of the other writers in Russia. And I think he benefits from coming a little bit after Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and that generation. He becomes a doctor, which is very important in his life, very distinct from Tolstoy, who was one of the richest, possibly one of the richest landowners in the Russia of the time, and the Dostoevsky history as well, and Gogol. And Chekhov wrote, "Medicine is my lawful wife. Literature is my mistress." So in this way he's playing with words, but he's also being fairly honest and saying in a way medicine is obviously my job and the money and I'm going to try to do my best, and that's in a way the most practical connection to life. The mistress is the passion, the creative, the love interest, if you like, but it's not the day-to-day realities of life as well. So he's caught between the two, I think, because he never gave up medicine. I mean, he needed the money obviously and the job, but he never gave it up. He carried on, even while he was sick with TB. Okay, the plays I've shown you there and the dates that they were written. And the biggest thing about this idea of the poetic is a haunting atmosphere in the audience from the stage, and it's so often misunderstood, and I think that's when you get very bad productions, which are boring and endlessly, they seem meandering and endless psychological discussions and talking, like talking heads. And I think it's people, directors often, who can misunderstand Chekhov and, you know, try to do the mirror-of-life approach and delve so much into psychological realism. I'm not knocking it for a second. One has to go into the psychology of the characters, no question. But if that is done at the price of atmosphere, mood, light, music, sounds off stage and so on, everything to help accrue the sense of mood and atmosphere, then one's losing out on this idea of the haunting poetic. And I think that's what he brought in so powerfully to the beginnings of modernism in theatre. And Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, so many others later picked this up. And, you know, in O'Neill, you get it absolutely, and Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller later, after the war, and others, where it's not just psychological realism, three-dimensional characters. There is a haunting poetic. I think it's one of the reasons that Arthur Miller called "The Crucible" his best play by far, 'cause he understood that there was a dramatic mood and atmosphere inside the story, the characters, the dialogue, and that's what Chekhov is aiming for, and consciously so, all the time.

Okay, then the other main point, that's on level of theatre, and let's not misunderstand for a second, this prefigures Freud of course and the whole Freudian psychological revolution, but what Chekhov and others are aware of in Europe is the development of, let's call them, ideas which became categorised as psychology later with Freud, Jung, and many others. But ideas are percolating in the whole of Europe and Russia and America and elsewhere. These ideas are in circulation, in the zeitgeist, as it were, which of course a little bit later leads to Freud and so on. And in theatre, it's the change from melodrama to,

let's call it, a poetic realism. That's in theatre. And together with that is the use of ordinary, everyday language, which was almost unheard of. To use ordinary, everyday language? You know, the tradition inherited from Shakespeare all the way through, whether it was France, Germany, wherever, no, no, no, no, no, that wasn't the language for theatre. So how do you combine ordinary, everyday language, which may be very banal, together with very three-dimensional, psychological characters, together with very realistic sets, and yet claim that there's a poetic? That's the challenge and that's the remarkable effect one can have when one does these plays. It's the same with Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and the others I mentioned. The other thing to me that Chekhov is on the cusp of is this whole idea of Russian identity, and I spoke about it quite a bit with Gogol and more with Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, and the idea of assimilation, and I think it's so crucial, especially if we look at today, and I'm not just talking about Putin, but the idea of Russia's location geographically and psychologically in the world. Is it part of Western Europe or not? Does it try to assimilate with the ideals of the Enlightenment, of the French Revolution, human rights, social justice, freedom, et cetera, ultimately democracy, or not? Is there an aspiration of assimilate the ideas from an emerging liberating Western Europe, or does it go on a different trajectory, because it is still ruled with absolute despotism by the tsar, and it's only 1861 that the peasants, the serfs, are emancipated. 90% of the population were serfs, 10% more or less aristocrats, so, and that date is the beginning of a middle class, a mercantile, merchant class. Together with that, as I mentioned, an explosion of learning, education, reading, the ability to read and write, to go to school, to go to universities for so many of the millions of the population in Russia, and all the ideas of course start to come out. But should it be more an autocracy? Should it be more heading towards democracy? And I think that debate continues, you know, that impulse, and I'm stepping way out of line here to say this, but for me, I'm looking at the literature, and through the writer's eyes, I think that's part of what they're trying to get at. What does the Russian identity mean? Does it mean land, as it did for Tolstoy and Dostoevsky? You know, ultimately it's a connection to a land and mythologies going way back, and the Russian Orthodox Church, let's never forget, crucially, and the distinction between the Russian Orthodox Church and the clash between Protestants and Catholic in Western Europe. So, you know, all of this is forging, for want of a better phrase, might be seen as a grooming of a Russian identity which is distinct from Western Europe or assimilate the ideas of Western Europe, and I think caught between the two. And ultimately, to extend a psychological metaphor, which is the child and which is the parent? Who is learning from who? Should there be a distinction and push for a separate Russian idea of what it is to have a Russian identity, or should it go for more absorbing what's coming from Western Europe? And I think that tension can be creative and it can be destructive, and I think we see that played out in Russian history from 1860, 1861 onwards. And it's not so far, in a

way, from, you know, the assimilationist ideas of Hannah Arendt talking about Jewish people, where, you know, Jews are either the pariah or parvenu in that assimilationist debate, going to a host country and becoming either pariah in terms of the perception of the host nation, and I use the word host nation very thoughtfully here, 'cause I know how it has been distorted completely from its true meaning of the word host, or is it parvenu, pariah or parvenu, upstart made good? And in a way, I think in a way the Russian question of identity as seen through these writers' eyes, and I must stress that, I'm not looking strictly at only history, but through the writers' eyes I think they feel this tension enormously and I think this is what they capture in their plays and in their literature. And I think the characters they create, the stories that these great writers create are absolutely in that context, and I think that's why they speak to us today, because we are all part of that context. Assimilate or not? Whether it's about being Jewish or another religion or ethnicity or gender, you know, whatever question, it's assimilate or not to assimilate, and it goes way back to ancient human civilization anywhere in the world.

So I mention that because it's this question of identity together with theatrical innovation that, for me, is what Chekhov really gives to literature and a sense of the position of a writer in a culture. And it starts with Tolstoy: "For who should I write? For whom am I writing? Who do I write for? Why am I writing? What am I doing?" And these are the writers who start to write about that very question, and it's coming from these guys. Okay, he's the third of six children. His father is the son of a former serf, and his wife, and together they have a little grocery store which they run. The mother primarily runs it. The father's pretty disastrous at business and finances. Chekhov wrote, "We got our talents from our father, but we got our soul from our mother." And I'm going to link this to ideas about infantilization later in "The Cherry Orchard." He's obsessed with father/son, mother/son, the idea of the soul, the Russian soul, the soul from the mother, talent from the father. And we get this in Tolstoy, in Dostoevsky, this whole idea of the soul, and, you know, it's something coming out of Russian literature much more than out of Western European literature of the times, and this idea, the separation of the mother and the father, you know, the parental generation, the child generation. In a letter to his brother, he writes, this is to his brother, "Let us recall that it was despotism, the despotism of our father and his lying, the lies that mutilated our childhood. It's sickening and frightening to remember. Don't you remember the horror and disgust we felt when father threw a tantrum at dinner just because there was too much salt in the soup and called mother terrible names, a fool, an idiot, stupid?" So this idea of the generational gap, and I think we obviously get it in Eugene O'Neill and many of the writers afterwards, fathers and sons, parent and child, the generation gap, the generation war, if you like, in their eyes, so, so powerful, which of course goes back to the ancient Greeks and to many others. But it's

such an archetypal theme in Russian literature and in global literature, and it comes out for me in the plays that I'm going to speak about. 1876 his father goes bankrupt because he spent a fortune, or most of their money rather, on building a new house and then hasn't checked the paperwork and legalities and discovered that they've been cheated, and a whole lot of money is lost, bankrupt. And the father flees to Moscow to try and avoid being arrested by the tsar's police and thrown into a debtors prison, basically. And he lives in semi-anonymity in Moscow. The family go and join him and they live in poverty after they have lived, you know, lower-middle class lives, fairly okay, in the town. And Chekhov, in his letters you pick up the feeling pretty strongly that his mother was physically and emotionally broken by this experience: utter poverty, no money, so many children, et cetera, no job, no work and so on, living in Moscow. Chekhov is left behind in the town and he's told to sell the family's possessions with whatever money he can and use that money to finish his own education. Now, that's crucial. He is the one that gets educated, not really the others in the family. And he's told that the money of the last possessions doesn't go back to the family, the parents, but must go to his education. So it's the belief, however much the father is an absolute despot, nevertheless, the father is absolutely committed to education for the children. The father, let's never forget, is the son of serfs, so he will have inherited the stories of being peasants/ slaves to the feudal lords of the Russian tsar system. So he is the one who gains through having what we would call a high school education today at the gymnasium. In addition, Chekhov has to work to pay for education and he does work and he writes stories. He writes little, he keeps writing all the time things and does other work to help pay. And every spare ruble he makes, he sends back to his parents and the other siblings in Moscow. The reason I'm going into detail, it's such a complicated family situation, caught up in the broader Russian context of post-1861 emancipation and this question of Russian identity and what's going to emerge. His early writings, he basically, and you get it in the letters, he assumes responsibility for the family and he knows that he's going to try and support them as much as he can and pay his own tuition fees. He's very connected to the siblings, his mother and his father. He's writing daily short stories, humorous sketches, vignettes of contemporary Russian life, and it brings in the third part of what I would say is about the magazines, 'cause let's never forget, the other writers that I mentioned earlier, they're all writing for magazines, like Dickens. So they're pot boilers. It's like the soapies, soap operas of today. So they've got to make it exciting and fun, and how are you going to, you know, make sure that the readership increases, otherwise no money, and that it's entertaining? And it's bit like Netflix, you know? You get addicted and read the next. 1884 he qualified as a physician, but he didn't make much money from it 'cause he was much more obsessed with treating poor people and he would never charge anybody who couldn't pay. So he's constantly living on the edge of living quite, he could have lived quite a middle class life as a doctor, but he's constantly, you

know, helping people, many people, and not charging. 1885 is when he starts coughing blood and 1886 is when he's diagnosed with tuberculosis. He refuses to admit to the family and friends.

So from 1886 to 1904 is the period of his tuberculosis and it's also the period of the great plays and the writing. He knows, as a doctor, his time is short and very limited and not only that, he's going to get sicker and sicker. 1888, a short story collection called "At Dusk" wins the coveted Pushkin Prize. Of course Pushkin prefigures all of them, you know, as the great poet of the time or the great writer. 1887 he's exhausted from overwork, he's qualified as a doctor, and of course ill health. But he carries on working as a doctor. He carries on, he's a father, and he carries on writing, is the point. He took a trip to the Ukraine. He writes about the beauty of the steppes, and he started to get more and more into the idea of writing theatre, not only stories of course, and starts to try to think about realistic ways to portray characters, "What are characters? What is a story? What is theatre?," 'cause he's not coming from a literary training. He's coming from a medical, a scientific training. Of course he's reading an enormous amount of literature, but it's very important that he comes from a very different training, and this is a totally different life to the privileged life that Tolstoy grew up with. And Mikhail Chekhov, his brother, and they talk about, you know, in the letter, he gives the image of the gun, and the idea being that if you put a gun in the stage in the first act or in the first scene, you've got to use it before the end of the play. In other words, nothing should be put into the script that is not used. Nothing is superfluous. Only have the essentials on stage. And this is very important, because this idea of realism, you know, that you have the imitation of a real house or a real lounge or living room or study, is nonsense. It's not. You only have what is essential on stage and it's that stripping to the minimum essential that helps to reveal a poetic image on the stage. So the idea is not to be realistically truthful to life with your set and costumes even, but to have only what is essential, strip it and only have what you absolutely need. And this is in a very important letter that he writes to his brother, and he wrote, this is a Chekhov writing: "Remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter or the first scene that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter or act, it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it should not be on the stage or on the page." So it's this idea of everything must feed the central image, and that's part of how you create a poetic image which is crafted artistically rather than trying to imitate life, you know, and just put up everything and imagining this is how a Russian living room or a Russian study might look or a kitchen and, you know, just plonk it on stage sort of thing. In 1890, he takes a trip, and of course, you know, the TB has set in quite badly, a journey by train, horse carriage, and river steamer, goes to the Russian far east. He goes to the penal colony on Sakhalin Island, north of Japan. He travels all the way there and he interviews

hundreds of convicts in the penal colony. And it shocked him. He sees flogging, he sees embezzlement, forced prostitution, people walking around with chains. Like, Dostoevsky was four years in a Siberian labour camp. You had to wear chains all the time. This is what he sees, and he sees the way these people are treated, maltreated, malnutrition, dying, typhus, disease everywhere. It's just death in every corner. And death is what haunts him all his life, his own TB, but what he experiences in the penal colony. And he writes to his brother, "There were times I felt that I saw before me the extreme limits of man's degradation, the extreme limits of what a man will do to another man, the extreme cruelty of what man will do to another man. Is this the norm or is it not?" So he's very aware, like Dostoevsky and the others, you know, this isn't just sweet little middle class life like sometimes is portrayed in the plays and so on. He's so aware of the absolute gutter, toughness, and hardships of life. He writes this also to his brother in a letter: "On the river steamer going to Sakhalin Island, there was a convict who had murdered his wife and wore chains on his legs. His daughter, a little girl of six, is with him. I noticed wherever the convict moved, the little girl scrambled after him, holding on to his chains. At night, the child slept, holding the chains, slept with other convicts and the soldiers, and they all slept in a heap, body upon body in a large crumpled heap." It's so visceral and evocative. You get the sense of a really good writer here, finding the terrible beauty of the poetic inside a terrible image of humanity and what it's doing to itself. And he starts to write, again to his brother, that charity, and I'm paraphrasing it here at the moment, charity is not the answer, but that the government has a duty to finance a more humane treatment of people, convicts, poverty-stricken, disabled, and others, et cetera, and he goes on.

But this is an affinity for people suffering, not so much from a detached, distant perspective, you know, as a Tolstoy, from, you know, Tolstoy's account. But he's involved, he's a doctor, he's connected, and he's coming from, he's the grandson of a serf. Okay, then also, his brother wrote also many letters, fascinating to read them, you know, how much the sick came to him, came to him almost as a heroic figure in a way, because he wouldn't charge and he would try and help them as much as possible. And they're very evocative letters from his brother. And his brother also writes, critically, that he gives them drugs, he spends many hours journeying to go to their homes, their families, their little hovels, and so on, and how much that has reduced his time for writing. So this is so important, because this is the context that Chekhov is living in, and it's the period pre the Russian Revolution of 1917, and he knows something big is going to have to change. He knows something is, this can't be sustainable. The inequality gap, as we might say today, is so big. What is going to happen? And as a writer, he feels the commitment, not just to the politics but to the sense of social justice. He writes about aristocrats. This is from a letter: "Aristocrats? The same ugly bodies

and physical uncleanliness, the same toothless old age and disgusting death as with the market women and the market men. The same toothless old age and disgusting death, aristocrat or market woman or man." You feel the rhythm of the language. You feel the rhythm in the visceral, the imagery. This is an amazing writer capturing the terrible cruelty and beauty in language. 1894 he writes "The Seagull." In 1896, it's an absolute fiasco. It's booed. It's a disaster. He runs away. He's never going to write again for theatre. Flop deluxe. But the director Nemirovich-Danchenko, one of the great, important directors of the time, is impressed by it, and he convinces his colleague, Stanislavski, to direct a new production of "The Seagull" for the new, innovative Moscow Art Theatre in 1898. And this begins a whole new century of theatre, of acting, directing, and writing, and the incredible beginnings of Chekhov's real career, and of course the global importance to come of the Moscow Art Theatre and Stanislavski's own work as an actor teacher, as a director, and performer himself and as the ultimate champion of Chekhov's work. And, you know, Stanislavski I want to go into next week, not now, really, in too much detail, but what makes it this different is that Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko, but primarily Stanislavski, recognises in that play, "The Seagull," one-act play, the attention to psychological realism, the attention to so much nuanced, three-dimensional psychological character, and you have to go way back in literature to find equivalence, and that a writer has so much insight into contradictions, complexities, a playwright rather, into complexities and contradictions in characters, as we all do as human beings, as we know. And that is what Chekhov is trying to find, the psychological ambiguity, complexity, incongruities in human beings and characters. You cannot just label them simply as this or that, or, you know, that's a stereotype, as fixed as A or B, you know, this type or that. They're going to contradict themselves. They're going to have incongruities. They're going to have ambiguities all the time.

And the other thing, as Stanislavski realises, together with this intense dedication to psychologically nuanced realism, is the idea of subtext, that inside the text is the hidden or what the great British director Peter Brook later calls the invisible inside the visible. The invisible is the subtext, is what is hidden inside the words, what is hidden, which is not verbally articulated but is underneath, inside the words, in the body language, in the glance of an eye, in a stolen moment, in a kiss, in an angry glance, in a shoulder, in a movement. All those subtle physical gestures capture so much, if not even more than the words themselves. And it's the rise of the beginning of such attention to detail in theatre and acting, directing, of subtext, and the importance of subtext to create what I'm calling the poetic image. That's also how you create it, through silence, through glances, through gestures, through body language. Not as stylized as you might do for melodrama or for comedy, where it's exaggerated and stylized where the body is, but it is through understanding that mood and atmosphere reside in the subtext, not just in the words but in all the

other stuff going on with the bodies relating to bodies, glances, gestures, et cetera. If you've got six, seven actors on stage, well, only one is speaking at any time. What are all the others doing? They're not just statues, standing and looking, and the one even speaking is not a statue. So all of this. Stanislavski brings subtext and an incredible attention to detail, an over-obsessive, in a way, attention to line by line, what's become known as a line-by-line reading or line-by-line phrasing. You know, every single thing must have this rigorous psychological investigation, and of course, character. So this link of psychology and acting, psychology and drama, and dramatic conflict coming through the psychology, not just through dramatic action, not through the military hero winning the battle or losing the battle, or, you know, Macbeth going off and killing, you know, so many people in order to become the king, and then the forest moving, and then Lady Macbeth going nuts, and no children, and, you know, et cetera, et cetera, incredible dramatic action in the brilliance of "Macbeth." No, it's revealed through the psychological subtext, and that's where you find the poetic. And when O'Neill and all the others, Tennessee Williams, when they're all well done, it's the same haunting atmosphere, that is, it comes from this idea of subtext, which is not dependent on the spoken word. It's everything else. And everything in human interaction, in Costa coffee and Starbucks, at a restaurant, a Friday night dinner, everything that is unspoken, and that is where the truth lies of what's really going on. That's how you source the poetic on stage. That's how you create it. And it all begins with Stanislavski and Chekhov.

So 1897, he has a major haemorrhage of the lungs, and of course, you know, it's the TB and so on. 1898 he goes to live in Yalta, so he is travelling around a lot. I mean, he's living in different places even though he's so sick. He's moving around, he's writing, he's working as a doctor, et cetera. And you see a picture of him on the left here, 1893. And in 1896 he goes, 1898, sorry, he goes to live in Yalta with his mother and sister, and again, this links to the plays, "The Cherry Orchard" and "Three Sisters," how linked it is to his own family life. Plants trees. This is a picture of Tolstoy coming to visit him in Yalta, the grandpa of Russian literature, and, you know, the new kid on the block, but the new kid is actually the one dying. And, you know, there's trees and I think Gorky comes to visit and others, where he writes "Three Sisters", "Cherry Orchard." 1891, here, he marries Olga, and this is a picture of them together, sorry, in 1901, he marries Olga. She was an actress in the original production of "The Seagull" and so on, and there's a lot of stuff between the two, and what he, you know, how they work out. She lives mainly in Moscow. He lives in Yalta. He's writing, she's acting, et cetera. And then she's there at the death, and she wrote a very moving piece at the moment of his death, Olga.

Okay, I want to get on to the plays and I'm going to show you here, this is from the National Theatre. This is Laurence Olivier's

production of "Three Sisters" and the trailer.

(A video clip plays of the 1970 film "Three Sisters")

- [Photographer] Everyone look this way, please.

- You're a spitfire, Masha!

- Well, if I'm a spitfire, don't talk to me and don't touch me!

- Don't touch her and don't touch her!

- Oh, you! You're almost 60 and babble away like a little school boy! Nobody ever knows what the hell you're talking about.

- [Narrator] All the power, all the poetry and passion of Chekhov's compelling drama, now brought vibrantly alive on the screen.

- [Narrator] Three sisters, each yearning for happiness. Olga, who clings to hope.

- Whoever wanted me, I would marry.

- [Narrator] Masha, who clings to love.

- I love, I love.

- When you say such things to me, I can't help laughing, I don't know why, even though I'm frightened.

- [Narrator] Irina, who clings to a desperate youth.

- I remembered my childhood when Mama was still alive. Such thoughts, such wonderful thoughts stirred in my brain.

- [Narrator] Three sisters tormented by those who love them.

- How many years we have in front of us, a long, long line of days are filled with my love for you.

- Nikolay Lvovich, don't talk to me about love.

- I swear on all that's holy, I will kill any rival.

- Don't be angry with me. I have no one in the world except you. No one.

- What are you all staring at me for! Natasha has a lovely little affair with Protopopov that you don't see.

- To our jolly life! Come what may.

- [Narrator] Laurence Olivier, Britain's foremost actor, directs the world-renowned National Theatre company and Alan Bates in a magnificent ensemble performance of Chekhov's greatest masterpiece, capturing on film all the excitement, the drama, the romance, the dreams, the private, intimate world of three sisters.

- [Photographer] One more, please.

- So we see here, Laurence Olivier understood it brilliantly. You see nothing on stage which is not essential. It's minimalist. You start to get the sense of a haunting atmosphere, a mood. The three sisters, the one is yearning for love, the other one yearns for hope, the other one has a yearning nostalgia for her past, is almost sort of stuck, you know, in a lost youth. What is each person yearning for? What is each person hoping for? It's so psychological. It's so human in a way. And it is full of such humanity in the plays, and together with this, in the family context. And you get the sense in the staging, yes, it's a nod to realism, but it's everything underneath it, not just the words, as I was speaking before. For me, Olivier has understood it brilliantly, how to get that absolute nuance.

This is, I want to show a short clip from... Alan Bates was of course in it. And this is a short, this is an interview with him, and just show you one brief section of the interview about that production.

(A video clip plays of an interview with Alan Bates)

- I think that's the difficulty of playing him but also the sort of mystery of it and the ambiguity of him. You know, it's a very, you can't quite get him. You can't quite catch him, you know? I think we were both in tune and in sympathy with what we were doing and with what we both brought to it. Of course the three sisters are just waiting for the world to open, you know? They're waiting to the dream, the dream of something beyond their lives, and Masha of course thinks with him that she's found it, and she hasn't. It's a wonderful account of people's lives and them trying to intermingle and trying to fulfil each other's dreams, and being disappointed, and the yearning for a much fuller experience of life. Shooting periods had gotten fairly short by that time, I think. I think it was-

- I think Alan Bates gets it, you know, so powerfully for me, that he gets this idea of the yearning for life, for something beyond, the three sisters, one yearning for hope, love, or nostalgic lost youth, broken dreams, disappointments, you know, what's really happened in life? Because only then is there a certain maturity, which, on reflection, one can have a sense of the dream and what happened to the dream, or what direction did the dream, you know, of youth go in? And of course, I think, Chekhov is so linking it to his own life, because

he's dying all the time of TB. So this sense of yearning and longing, and you get it in that slow motion image of the three sisters walking which Olivier is creating, I think is brilliant, and it speaks again to what I'm saying about the poetic. You can find it. It's not a mirror to life. You know, he slows down the three sisters as they walk and they walk almost like it's a dream sequence. So are they in a dream? Are they alive? Are they awake? Their yearning, their endless hope. They'll go to Moscow and they'll discover, you know, they'll realise their dreams, it'll happen. Of course it'll never happen. Moscow represents an unattainable ideal, what Adam Bates talks about, the ambiguity of the life. And at the end it's unattainable. It's an ideal, it's a dream. It ain't going to happen. So they're never going to leave small provincial town in Russia and get to the big city of Moscow. But they can't live without a dream, because take that away, and of course there's no hope. The other play that I really wanted to speak a bit about in our last bit of time is "The Cherry Orchard." Essentially, I mean, on the one hand it's a ridiculous play, but on the other hand it's remarkable. Is the cherry orchard going to be sold? These people, that family, have a house. Is the orchard going to be sold or is it not, and who's going to inherit, who isn't? Who's going to have the money, the family, the money about it, the orchard itself and the garden and the house? And all the complexities, ambiguities of the family is what is thrown out. Is it a tragedy? Is it a comedy? Chekhov kept calling his plays comedies.

As I said, Stanislavski said they were tragedies. For me, it's about a family that turns in on itself, and you don't have to look further than Eugene O'Neill and many of the others I mentioned earlier to see how much these people took it up later. All come from Chekhov. The play ends finally with the sale of the cherry orchard and the estate, and it goes to the son of a serf, which is important. The futile attempt, it's also about the family and turning in on itself with inheritance and money, and the futile attempts of this aristocratic class to maintain its status. The rise of the middle class, the emancipation of the serfs that I mentioned, the rise of a more educated, roughly-forming mercantile class, a working class, perhaps the slight beginnings of the industrial world, which has happened long before in Western Europe. And the great Italian cultural theorist Gramsci, he had this phrase about the interregnum, which is, his phrase was the old is dying, but the new is not yet born. So the old system, the old culture, the ways of living, the serfs, the aristocrats, et cetera, et cetera, is dying, but the new is not yet born, and that sense of the interregnum and living in this era of the interregnum. And I think we are living in an interregnum of our own, not the same obviously, but of our own, where the old is dying and the new is not yet born. And I'm not just going to be simplistic and say that it's going to be fascism or it's going to be this or that, but something about the old is dying in terms of a perception from writers, and that, to me, is "The Cherry Orchard." And the whole play is this yearning, this longing. Is it about the past? Is it about

broken dreams, like in "Three Sisters"? Is it about hopes and nostalgia for something which can't happen anymore? Is it a revolutionary dream, 'cause of the revolutionary characters, a revolution of what's going to happen and change? What is going to happen in this interregnum period? And for the Moscow Art Theatre, Stanislavski, as I said, kept telling people it's a tragedy, and he accused Chekhov of not understanding his own play, 'cause Chekhov said it's a comedy, and this is important. What does he mean, Chekhov, by saying it's a comedy when it feels like such a tragedy? Everything I'm describing sounds like, you know, the entire Russian system is changing, the revolution of 1917 is coming, and what is going, and the family, you know, is at war with itself. And there's an idea of the comic, which comes from the philosopher Bergson, which is about the incongruity of humour, and this links to me with Alan Bates's saying about the ambivalence, the ambiguities of character, ambiguities of... The times are not stable. It's not so much Hamlet's phrase, "The times are out of joint," but the times are not stable. Something is shifting, something is changing, but we can't quite articulate what it is, but it's felt by the characters, and Chekhov feels it as a writer and the characters feel it. And that's what he's saying. He can't find it himself, Alan Bates, you know, the character is A, B C. There's an ambiguity of the character and that makes an extraordinary poetic image. That's why I think Olivier chooses, you know, that slowed down motion. So incongruity that humour gives us. Does humour give us the theory of superiority, where we laugh at other people's misfortune, which is a adaption of Plato's thought? Is it the relief theory, which is we reduce our tension through laughter, our tension, you know, which is triggered by some fear, through laughter and we get the relief? Or is it a way that characters can behave, when characters behave in a way that is ignorant of the society around them? They're ignorant that they're living in the interregnum, they're ignorant they're living in times of extraordinary, huge change, or they're aware of it but they're not living as if they're part of it. They're in a hothouse plant and they're not really aware that the zeitgeist, the times are changing so powerfully, but they retreat into hothouse plants, and that in a way means that they can't adapt. They stick with their costumes, they stick with their customs, stick with what they've known. It's safer, it's secure, as opposed to what may actually rarely come to happen or come to pass. They can't believe it. They can't accept that it's really going to change. And it's so powerful in the play, "Cherry Orchard," for me, this idea, they can't adapt, can't give it up, the comfortable habits, the ways of being. And I think this is the source of comedy, where we the audience pick up that something is changing, you know, to adapt Dylan, "Something is going on, but I don't know what it is, Mr. Jones." Something is changing, something is cooking, going, but let's rather retreat, because we have the money and the house and the cherry orchard. Let's rather retreat into the family, and even if we're going to fight and argue, whatever, it's to the known, the hothouse plant, than forge into the world and go to the penal colony, go elsewhere, see what's rarely happening, you

know, whether it's extreme inequality or unemployment or sick or disabled, whatever it is, see what's really happening in the society. And there is a humour, a dark, ironic humour in seeing characters trying to adapt but not being able to. There's a tragedy in it and a pathos, and I think Chekhov is extraordinary, because that's what he sees. Society is shifting, changing. The ground everyone walks on is unstable and yet people don't know whether to go with what they imagine as the new or stay with the nostalgia of the past, and that, to me, is what this whole play is about. It's the human quality caught up inside that zeitgeist. And when he says it's comedy, it is a possible thought. There's something, and it's not a belly-laugh comedy. There's irony. It's an ironic thing, ultimately, because it's ironic that they are aware but they can't adapt to the change, whether it be pleasure or horror to come, but the change to come, so they retreat to the known of the nostalgic past. And in this way, perhaps it's not, as I say, a belly-laugh comedy, but there is a certain ironic, comic element inside it all, because we recognise ourselves as the same. We would much rather stick to what we know and is stable and secure than forage out into something, you know, completely unknown and we don't know what the future, et cetera, et cetera.

And Alan Bates, he's getting it when he talks about the ambiguity of character and trying, what the hell do you do to act this character which is full of so many ambiguities, contradictions, and complexities? The other idea is that I think, and this is what I do think you get in Chekhov, and this goes back to what I was saying right at the beginning, the family and the infant, or the child and the parent, and we might call it in today's world, in today's jargon, the arrested development, that it's a period where all these characters are in arrested psychological development. They're stuck at a certain stage in their lives and they can't accept either they're getting older or getting sicker or the idea of maturity. They're stuck and they can't accept that things around are changing and their own age and life is changing in the play. And in this way, and the play opens in a nursery, fascinatingly. I think he's aware, imagistically, of what's going on. All the characters are ultimately stuck in infantilization, and the society is infantilizing and yet is empowering, and society is tearing itself apart with so many contradictions and complexities going on, and ultimately will result in a revolution to come. So it's, and I'm pushing the idea here of from parent to child, you know, but it's not by chance he writes "Three Sisters," family, "Cherry Orchard," family, "Uncle Vanya," et cetera. These are family plays, and his own family's story that I mentioned so much at the beginning. So this is, for me, the family is caught up in this period where it's staying with infantilization of itself and the characters are, rather than the idea of maturing, growing up, and so on. What is it to mature, what is it to grow up in the psychological context of the family and in the broader context of Russian society, you know, given the 1860 change and so on? So all of this is cooking. All of this is happening in this interregnum and more

than most other writers, Chekhov captures it. The paradox is also the paradise of the one class is built on the sweat of another. This idea of the nobility and the aristocrats, a paradise lost, an Eden lost, centuries of privilege and power going or lost. Like, what is to come? Who really knows? He's trying through anguish and struggle to get to grips of this, more than Dostoevsky and Tolstoy and the others, because I think he's part of the next generation. He's living into the early 1900s and he, I think, instinctively or consciously, somewhere is aware of it. And if I may leave you with this at the end, and this is the incongruity sometimes of humour and comedy, and the ambiguity of character and inner life, Chekhov says, "I am an artist. I'm not a conservative, I'm not a liberal, but what I do hate is lies. I nourish truth, because truth is the core of art. The human body lives or dies," frailty. "I nourish truth, I nourish health," the body. "I nourish intelligence, freedom from lies. Please do not lie to me." Extraordinary. This guy is writing all this over 100 years ago. For me, how it just resonates, you know, in so many different ways today. Okay, I'll hold it here and thank you very much, everybody.

– [Judi] Thank you, David. Do you have time to do a couple of the Q&A questions?

– Yeah, sure. Sure, thanks.

Q & A and Comments

– From Saul, "Chekhov born in Taganrog." Yes. "The port city is 67 kilometres west of Rostov on the Sea of Azov." Thanks. Thanks, Saul.

– Romaine,

Q: "Did not Shakespeare predate Chekhov in poetic realism?"

A: It's a great question. I think Shakespeare is so different because Shakespeare is writing iambic pentameter, and he is writing poetry, in that sense, for his own times. And yeah, sure, you get the gravediggers in "Hamlet" and others where he's playing with, you know, sort of natural language, if you like, but it's not natural language, the rest of all of Shakespeare's work. The language is iambic pentameter. That's the structure in which they're all writing or they're adapting or, you know, they're playing with. So I think it's very different to the actual language use, so it's different to me from a poetic realism.

– Anita, "I see Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller as more in line with Ibsen and Strindberg as they seem to carry a message to the audience more than a mood. I see Chekhov as a direct lead in to Tennessee Williams." It's a great idea and thanks for that distinction. Yes, but I do think "Moon for the Misbegotten," for me anyway, "Long Day's

Journey into Night," you know, I think quite a few of the O'Neill plays, and "The Crucible," they do lead that one can stage in this poetic realism way, and I think Ibsen as well. You know, there's some amazing productions you can stage in that way, and with Strindberg. But I mean, it's a fascinating idea for a debate, what you've mentioned here, Anita.

– Mitzi,

Q: "What are the chief characteristics of Russian identity?"

A: Whew. How much time do we have? I think there's Russian Orthodox Church. I think there's the land and I think the end of feudalism in 1861. This distinction between are they part of Europe, Western Europe, the Enlightenment, or not, the history and so on is so different, and are they going to assimilate certain things from the Western Europe or not?

– Monty,

Q: "Why is Clifford Odets ignored when talking about major American playwrights?"

A: Yeah, great point. I just didn't think of him at the moment, I mean, in my notes. But sure, Odets is, you know, right up there.

– Romaine,

Q: "Did Chekhov see himself as a family hero, do you think?"

A: That's a great question. I think probably yes, 'cause let's, I mean, his letters, he says, "Well, hang on, although our father was a despot, you know, we got our talent from our father and our soul from our mother," in a letter to his brother. So he's not dismissive, even though he calls the father a tyrant and a despot, and every money that he earns, he sends back to the family who are living in poverty in Moscow. And the father says, "Sell the family possessions and use it to finance your education so you become a professional, a doctor."

– Natasha, "Thank you." Thank you. Bobby, "I thought there was some fairly useful treatments for TB in the 1880s and 1890s." I don't know, maybe. I would need some medical expertise on that. I think he had it more severely maybe than if others had it less or others were treated maybe different or better.

– Romey, thank you, Romey. Esther, thank you. I appreciate it. Rose, thank you.

– Karen, "The characters' orientation might be summarised as better the devil you know than the devil you don't know." Brilliantly put.

You know, there's the great British psychologist, Fairbairn, who is a development on Melanie Klein and object relations psychoanalytic theory, and Fairbairn talks about how we often choose better to live in a world with the Devil than in a world of God that we don't know, which is a slight variation of what you're saying, but yes.

– Wilma, thank you. Kind comment. Myrna, "It would appear that 'Cherry Orchard' is in a way a mirror of the world today, especially America's struggle," yeah, "towards the conservative movement, which is struggling to move backwards." I mean, let's go back to Lincoln's phrase that America will destruct, America will end when it self-destructs, not a foreign war. Fascinating insight of Lincoln. I don't know. It's in interregnum today, for sure, not only America, I think, Britain as well and I think the West. But is it going to be a self-destruction or is it going to rise to the challenge and overcome, you know, as it did, you know, the Vietnam War and other things? I don't know.

– Barbara, thanks. Carol, thanks. Avron, thank you.

– Mary, thank you. M. Sefton,

Q: "Isn't this ambiguity what is happening to our institutions as we emerge from COVID lockdown?"

A: That's a great question. Yeah, fascinatingly, 'cause we've all gone out onto Zoom and the screen. We've all gone in a way into another world and now we're coming back to the so-called real world, but we're stuck with two years, or a year and a half, year of lockdown. Where are we?

– Eric, thanks. Monty, "The parents of Odets were Jews." Yep. Angela, thank you.

– Gene,

Q: "Did you say the father were the son of a serf?" Yes. "How was he expected to know good business practise in one generation?"

A: Well, we might say the same of the Jews, Gene. Small wonder that he went into bankruptcy, and the further tragedy was the punishment, maybe. Tough, you are right, very right. I mean, one generation to understand, father to business practise, running grocery store, et cetera. It's great. It's a very interesting idea.

– Susan, thank you. Sheila, "Tuberculosis is treated with antibiotics." Ah, thanks, Sheila. "There's only really effective treatment from the 1940s. Before that it was more palliative care." Appreciate it.

- Joanna, thank you. Gene, "First TB treatment was streptomycin." Thanks, Gene, and discovered in 1943. "Before that treatment was sunshine and nutrition." Thank you. Scladdelin, C-Ladden? "America's on the verge of self-destruction." Maybe.

- Okay, Lorna, thank you. Okay, so thank you, Judi, so much, and thank you, everybody, and hope you have a great rest of the weekend.

- [Judi] Thank you, David, and thank you everybody who joined us. Take care. Bye-bye.