

University of Theatre and Film Arts, Doctoral School

Chekhov-cinema

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THESES

I. RUSSIANS AND I

I became a director because of Chekov. Chekov was a doctor, a doctor filled with curiosity. He knew the present reality that everyone was trying to escape, people in his medical practice, on the taigas of Siberia and on the streets of Moscow. He understood the fallibility of human nature. More than anyone else in the history of playwriting, he can tell us about ourselves, myself, and even you.

II. MY CHEKHOV PERFORMANCES

The most important performance I've ever directed was *Uncle Vanya*. The first Chekov in my life. First I directed it in 1998 at Nyíregyháza, then in 2001 in the US. When we rehearse Chekhov, it tries our souls, we cannot hide from it. We cannot lie, neither the director nor the actors. That's the point of doing the whole thing, one looks into the mirror, talks to one's self about conflict, betrayal, love, doubt, weakness, etc. My third Chekhov was *Platonov* on the Ódry stage in 2002. Then came *The Seagull* in 2008 in Bárka Theatre with Alföldi Róbert and my wife, Bognár Gyöngyvér. Then the *Three Sisters* in 2008 at Kecskemét, then *The Seagull* again in 2009 at the American Repertory Theatre, but that performance had nothing in common with the one in Bárka. And throughout three decades, university courses kept bringing Chekhov to my attention. At the universities where I had the privilege of teaching actors, Chekhov was a magic word. The suffering that led to presence, to truth, to character. A good actor does not simply work, but also suffers and struggles, entirely lives alongside their character. The key thing is the approach. The journey towards.

III. PLATONOV, KECSKEMÉT, 2017

Platonov is a play about degeneration and decline, but it is not only the title character who declines, all the characters do, all souls are lost by the end of the story. This is a real societal play, a real message. We are Platonov, and we are all the other characters too. We, the lost Hungarian intellectuals of Buda and Pest are sliding downwards in this country with viscerally terrible traditions and an unspoken past behind our backs. Before the first read-through, I thought, we need our own text. That wasn't simple, since the whole piece is 200 pages long, and our Kecskemét book was merely 95, less than half. How do we edit a text? What are the criteria? There's too much talk? There

should be less? This is the death of dramaturgy. Make it accurate. Make the intent clear, this can provide the “philosophy” behind the edits. *Platonov* is not a philosophical piece. Volcanic seething discontent, hatred and self-hatred defines the original play, the performance. I hate lazy theatre, I hate mediocre, intellectual articulation, where only the two actors who face one another and live through the scene experience what real theatre feels like. But the rest of us, sitting outside, are bored. I have had enough of theatre that claims “everything is true on the inside.” I remember, when I worked in the Moscow Art Theatre, I learned a lot from Russian actors. When I recall Russian performances, every one of them that I’ve seen, I’m always struck by the genius of form, the truth, the held-out moments and the practice that actor always played turned towards the audience.

The question is raised at the very first rehearsal: who is this man? What makes him modern, why is he not a historical curiosity, like we would assume some Chekhov characters are. In our age – troubled by laziness – *Platonov* is a play about a brave and grandiose man, who says what he means, feels no fear, makes no compromises. And when it comes to himself? He himself is the only person he cannot face. He has a manly and distinct opinion about everybody except for himself. Platonov is honest only once in the play, when he is talking about the stone block on the ground. He probably surprises even himself with the cruelty of his self-assessment. The he quickly shrugs off the topic, resolves the conversation, escapes. And then he breaks, he is done, he retreats into solitude and alcohol. This is a play about a fallen man, but a daring one. The key question of *Platonov* is where we start and what we move towards.

If we look at previous translations of *Platonov*, Radnai’s and Elbert’s version mix and fit together quite splendidly. Annamari Radnai’s translation is accurate, faithful and true to the text. János Elbert’s version has more power, more passion. Checking it against the Russian original, it turns out to be somewhat less accurate, but in key points it is a tremendous help in navigating the emotional map of the performance.

I dream of a performance where the audience is interflows with the performers, and the on-stage plot. We are going to create intimate moments, or at least make an attempt to create them, where the audience is increasingly uncomfortable with our proximity. They should feel like interlopers, like they entered a private sphere where it is embarrassing and confusing to be. And the play, the performance, the film begins.

Unremarkably, like stepping out of real life, as if we were entering Chekhov's "cinema" through a door.

That was my first thought about this *Platonov* as well. We must begin unremarkably, no preamble, no fripperies, no theatrical clichés, we are in the middle of something before we even know it. Such a sneaky start will define the performance as well. The actors. The acting. They must play quietly, less like acting and more like a private conversation. If the performance is good, the audience will feel like interlopers. They entered a space that is not theirs, but the performance is not about anything other than them. Their husbands, their old unfulfilled dreams, their relationships, their drinking, the unbearable interminable evenings they live through, etc., I want the "familial" moments the audience shares with the performers to be familiar as well. Now this is why *Platonov* is a great work. Chekhov develops the fate of each character with care, everyone changes, becomes different, but mostly they decline. Because this is a play about decline. Every actor must choose a starting point, the zero on a scale, the place where the audience first sees them. First impressions are incredibly important. When we first see *Platonov*, he is well-groomed, but casual, a bit like a bear waking from its winter sleep. His shirt might be freshly ironed. He is happy, because he's a man of habits.

Analysis is important, no matter how long it takes, because without analysis the performance will be like a body without a skeleton. We gain firmness, certainty, knowledge, we must not be afraid to spend time on it, because this is the most important time we spend on the material. After the read-through, I realised that this is not about individual doom, but the end of all the characters in the piece. This is the most pessimistic work of Chekhov, the darkest, here everyone gets what's coming to them by the end, almost everyone is as good as dead. We must look at the characters, one by one.

It's important to observe how Chekhov depicts characters. When the characters talk about themselves, we should probably be doubtful – of course it matters which character we are talking about, but when they are talking about someone else, describing someone else, that's the most interesting, defining chekhovian insight into the character's true nature. My previous experiences with Chekhov have given me the impression that uncertainty itself is crucial. Previous performances cannot provide a safety net. We cannot be certain of anything, we cannot just boast how much Chekhov we have directed before, how well we know the recipe. When you direct Chekhov, it

always confronts you with your own reflection, and cuts you to the bone. We cannot and must not dodge that. I always tell myself – do not direct Chekhov solely because you were commissioned to direct Chekhov. Instead, I have to be fevered with it.

As I am getting closer to sixty, browsing through Platonov I decided there will be nothing showy. No effects, no music, no space that attempts to create an illusion, only a black box with actors in it, who speak the way genuine people do, not acting but living. Existing. The hardest thing is creating this genuine-ness on stage. So Platonov must happen in opposition to my previous directions of Chekhov. I will not torture heated emotional moments with music and effects, but we must solve everything in there, with real, genuine, simple existence as actors. The other conclusion drawn from previous directions: when it comes to Chekhov, text is the most important. This is the foremost certainty before we begin our “journey.” We must submit this to our own message, this is our stable ground. One of my most important experiences is that cuts, directorial connections and disconnections provide the structure for realising the play on stage.