

## spotlight on craft: acting chekhov

The work of Anton Chekhov has attracted actors from its earliest days on the stage. Why is this the case? Is it the depth of emotion that exists in all of Chekhov's work? Is it the truth of humanity that one finds beneath the everyday lives of his characters? McCarter's Education Department was lucky enough to grab a few moments with actors Michael Siberry and Natacha Roi who play Astrov and Yelena respectively in this production. With two weeks of rehearsal already under their belts, here is what these actors had to say about approaching *Uncle Vanya* and about working on this particular production.



### **ED: What attracts an actor to Chekhov?**

Michael: Chekhov is wonderful because it is both difficult and true. It seems that every time any of his plays are adapted by someone else what comes through is an eloquence and a very accurate portrayal of human nature - of the way people behave, the way people are, the way they are in relationships - and these things are so beautifully observed. It is very satisfying for an actor to deal with something that has this kind of emotional through-line to it that expresses emotional problems beautifully, poetically, eloquently. It is challenging for an actor because Chekhov has more in it that you can possibly know. It grows and changes even in every performance because of what you are going through emotionally and how that expresses itself. That is what makes the work so

rewarding.

Natacha: One of the beauties of Chekhov is that it is written in such a way that it really does portray the messiness of human nature. We are so guarded, and these characters are also, but at the same time they are like a volcano of emotion with both laughter and crying and all of that always underneath the skin at all times. This is the way it is in real life too. You know when somebody looks at you wrong at a certain time and you will suddenly just well up or you'll be deeply pained? But, because we are so guarded against that we don't express or acknowledge it. What Chekhov does is that he allows the characters to be able to show that. They show the vulnerability and the emotional life that the characters have and that human nature has.

**ED: You are now in the third week of rehearsal. How are you feeling about the work and where do you feel you are at in the process of bringing this play to life?**

Natacha: I think that in the first two weeks of rehearsal you feel good because you figure out where you are and what your blocking is and you learn your lines and then the third week is about how do I make this person real. What are the little subtleties, the little bubbles of life that go a million miles a minute in every single moment, that is basically what you are trying figure out. It's all those bubbles that make a character three-dimensional. So this part of the process is really about deepening the character. In terms of the Astrov/Yelena relationship there is so much that is said in code and they are so torn, at least Yelena is. She feels so many things so strongly - her loyalty to Serebryakov, her longing for what she can't have, the desire to be the good wife - and all these things and more coexist at the same time, so the issue becomes which one of these emotions is going to surface in each moment. That's what I'm figuring out now and it's why I use the metaphor of the bubbles because you are always just at the boiling point.

Michael: And all of these characters have choices. Astrov and Yelena certainly do. Chekhov so often in his plays brings up situations where characters can go either this way or that way and inevitably they kind of miss. They don't take the choice that seems to be coming. It's terribly sad, but at the same time terribly funny. There are all sorts of complications that screw you up that keep you from saying something like, "I want to do this, so I'll do it."



Natacha: There are very few real people that actually do make the brave choice. So many of us justify it really well and therefore we make the choice that is just a little

bit more comfortable rather than the one that is more exhilarating but might blow your life to pieces. The fear factor really governs human nature. The fear of getting hurt, the fear of not being happy - sometimes these fears cause you to make the wrong choice. And the audience is yearning for you to make the exhilarating choice.

**ED: There have been so many productions of this play in the past hundred years. How do you create something that is new or distinct?**

Michael: There are thousands of different ways to play this material and it really is a matter of coming together with this particular group of people and doing this particular version. Every actor's interpretation depends on the person they are playing against. How they are in a particular scene affects the way you are.

You are making choices all the time in the work, but you also reflect off each other. Chekhov really is such ensemble work. And, of course, you have a director there and with her guidance you do make choices. Part of those choices is what's brought to the table but the other part of those choices is what happens in the rehearsal room. You can really always turn Chekhov on its head.

**ED: The play contains so many long speeches, how do you figure out the pacing of those moments?**

Natacha: Right now I don't know the pacing. I think that is why you have third and fourth week of rehearsal, to figure that out. Chekhov is so rich in the way he writes that sometimes you'll take a left turn and you'll think, "Where is that coming from?" That's real life. So, at first you try to take it really slow to make sure you aren't missing anything and then suddenly you find yourself in a long, self-absorbed monologue and then you need to try and speed it up to find out what fits and what doesn't. With my particular monologue we just realized that it flies off the page when you give it rhythm because Yelena's brain is going in many different directions. She has all these dreams that died when she married Serebryakov but those things are still there, they are just buried. All that comes up unexpectedly in those moments and in those monologues.

**ED: On the page these characters can be mistaken for dreary and without humor. What changes when you bring the characters to life on stage?**

Michael: The joy of Chekhov is that it's funny and it's tragic so that one person in the audience can be in tears and the person next to them can be hysterical laughing. And life is like that. The play becomes melodrama if it is all grief and pain. Chekhov is not like that. He slaps you in the face if you start to get too melancholy. The play should be, I think, in some ways like a Coen brothers

movie (*Fargo*, *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?*, *Big Lebowski*). It is that absurd. Because sometimes the play is terribly sad, but it is also ridiculous because the characters have gone too far. And in that it becomes both terrible and hilarious all at the same time. The danger of this work is that it can become too moody. As an actor you have to know how to go down these emotional roads in a way that lets the audience get there before you do so that they feel it rather than watch it. That's why Chekhov moves people.

Source: McCarter Theatre. *Uncle Vanya: A Teachers Resource Guide*. April 29, 2003. <http://www.mccarter.org/Education/vanya/vanya.html#chekhovian>. April 22, 2013.