

Unfortunately, Chekhov's innovations were well received by neither directors nor theatergoers. Nor did they receive proper treatment from critics. Chekhov always insisted that he created cheerful, funny short stories and dramas, while critics labeled him a creator of dismal works: "Chekhov's play makes a hard, if not to say, oppressive impression on the audience" (Sochineniia 13: 449; trans. John Holman); "Three Sisters appears to be a heavy stone on one's soul" (13: 449; trans. John Holman); "I do not know another work that could 'infect' one with such a heavy, obsessive feeling" (13: 449; trans. John Holman). That Chekhov intended his work to be seen as a farce has not yet received a comprehensive evaluation.

His first comedy, *The Seagull*, failed. And no wonder! Spectators who anticipated vaudevillian scenes became extremely angry with the dramatist for misleading them with the subtitle and for representing, instead, a depressing story that ends with the suicide of a main protagonist. The same fate had befallen *The Cherry Orchard*, a play that was planned to be a farce (as reflected in Chekhov's letters to his wife, Olga Knipper). In 1901, he wrote to her: "The next play that I am going to write will definitely be funny, at least by its concept" (Sochineniia 13: 478). Critics accused Chekhov of lacking skill; they naturally did not see anything funny about the distressing plays that Chekhov called comedies. But what happened to *Three Sisters* was even worse.

A struggle for the CNT: conservators and innovators. Just as any other innovator, Chekhov suffered for his pioneering changes of the comedic genre, which he unfortunately never discussed in a more logistical way. As Savely Senderovich states, "Chekhov was the most misunderstood Russian writer—be it his prose or drama. Everybody misread him—be it friends, admirers, or arrogant ideologues" ("The Cherry Orchard: Chekhov's" 226). Up to now his major plays have been defined by critics as something between melodrama, drama, and tragicomedy.¹ An interesting phenomenological analysis on *The Cherry Orchard* was done by Senderovich. In regard to dramatic genre, Senderovich states that *The Cherry Orchard* "is a comedy in a very special sense: it is a burlesque, a travesty in its self-referential game" (230). In some cases, Chekhov's plays are also considered satire, which in criticism is interpreted as an equivalent of comedy.² As has been mentioned, however, Chekhov was against such an interpretation of his plays and always stated that he wrote "funny comedies" not satires (Sochineniia 13: 397, 491). Nevertheless, his statement was nothing but a solitary voice crying out in the wilderness, the best evidence of which is the struggle around *Three Sisters*.

Regardless of Chekhov's genuine comic intentions, the opinion that *Three Sisters* was written as a drama still exists in criticism. Moreover, even after reading the evidence presented below, some scholars still refuse to accept the fact that Chekhov was working on a new type of comedy in creating his stories and plays.³ Critics justify their belief by the absence of documents showing that Chekhov wrote the subtitle "comedy" by his own hand and that someone else crossed it out, thus changing the genre designation of the play.⁴

In its first edition, *Three Sisters* was subtitled as "drama"; the fact that Chekhov insisted that he created comedy, even vaudeville (which he seriously argued about with Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko), sank into oblivion. In this regard, the first question that I want to answer is, when did information about the genre of *Three Sisters* first appear? The very first evidence of it comes from fall 1900. On October 14, 1900, a

month before the censored version was registered, V. M. Lavrov—who heard from newspapers that Chekhov was working on a comedy—turned to him with a request to “give that comedy to Russkaia mysl” (*Sochineniia* 13: 434). The name of those newspapers and the sources of the “rumors” about Chekhov’s new comedy require further investigation. However, Lavrov’s letter is one of the first written proofs that Chekhov was working on a comedy, not a drama.

Two weeks later, on October 29, Chekhov visited the Moscow Art Theater (MAT) to have his first reading of *Three Sisters*. This meeting unexpectedly became a quintessence of disagreement between the author and the actors, as well as the directors. According to Stanislavsky, the main conflict occurred because of the genre of the play; while Chekhov considered it to be vaudeville, “everybody else took it for drama and wept” (*Sobranie sochinenii* 1: 235; trans. John Holman). As Stanislavsky stated in his memoirs, this lack of understanding of his comedies amazed Chekhov, who was unable to learn to accept it. Stanislavsky writes: “What shocked him most of all and what he could not reconcile himself to was that his *Three Sisters* and, later, *The Cherry Orchard* were perceived as heavy dramas about Russian life. He was sincerely convinced that he wrote cheerful comedy, almost vaudeville” (“A. P. Chekhov” 394; my trans.).

Later, while working on *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov, who remembered his previous experiences with his comedies, wrote the following to M. P. Alekseeva (Lilina) in 1903: “It turned out to be not drama, but comedy, sometimes even farce, and I am afraid that you will ‘get it for that’ from Vladimir Ivanovich” (*Pisma* 11: 248; my trans.). Thus, though writing in a jocular manner, Chekhov strongly emphasized that his new play was not a drama and that he wanted it to be considered a comedy—no matter what.

Returning to *Three Sisters*, there are some other remarks scattered in letters and memoirs that suggest that Chekhov called this play a comedy among his friends and acquaintances. For instance, M. M. Kovalevsky, who visited Chekhov in Rome when he worked on proofreading *Three Sisters*, remarked that Chekhov told his friends to wait until “his comedy” was directed on the stage to see its genuine mastery (365). So when and how did the subtitle “drama” appear?

Before moving onto the next part of our investigation, I should admit that I was unable to find a direct answer, and the only thing that I managed to do was to trace some facts that allowed me to make some speculations and hypotheses concerning the predisposition of the whole situation. These facts revealed some essential disagreements (and even a hidden conflict) between Chekhov and Nemirovich-Danchenko, who was ultimately responsible for the numerous “misreadings” and “mistakes” that occurred in the first published version of *Three Sisters*.

In his memoirs, Nemirovich-Danchenko remarks that at the first reading (which, as has been mentioned, occurred on October 29, 1900) no one was able to perceive the play as comedy, especially because “in the manuscript it was subtitled drama” (169; trans. John Holman). Nevertheless, this statement about the subtitle seems to be questionable. It remains unclear as to when and how the subtitle “drama” appeared on the front page of the manuscript. The first censored, theatrical version that was registered in November 1900 had only the title of the play, with neither the name of the author nor a subtitle. The final version appeared in December 1900 as a result of discussions and disputed readings (*raznochteniia*) between the dramatist and the director. The edited version prepared by Chekhov for publication in December 1900 had been hidden in

Nemirovich-Danchenko's archives for many years. As Chekhov's *Polnoye sobranie sochinenii i Pisem* (PSSiP; [Complete Works]) suggests, Nemirovich-Danchenko not only kept the corrected version in his archives but was also responsible for *raznochteniia* (different interpretations) and other distortions that occurred during the play's publication in *Russkaia mysl'* (Chekhov, *Sochineniia* 13: 434–37). All subsequent editions of *Three Sisters*, including that of Marx, were based on the defective version published in *Russkaia mysl'* under the supervision of Nemirovich-Danchenko (13: 439–40).

A short article by E. Kostrova, "K istorii teksta 'triokh sestior,'" appeared in *Literaturnaia gazeta* in 1954, in which the story of the final draft of the manuscript was first discussed.

The play *Three Sisters* has been performed on the stage of the Moscow Art Theater (MAT) for more than fifty years. How strange it is that, up till now, nobody has gotten it into his head to check the stage text of the MAT performance against the editing of the play as it was published in its final form in the last edition of the author's collected works published in his lifetime. Whereas there are in these texts, especially in the third and fourth acts, significantly different readings. But how can one succeed in establishing this fact? This year, in connection with the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Chekhov, a film was made, *The Notebooks of A. P. Chekhov*, which revealed to the audience the "creative laboratory" of the great Russian writer.

The author of the screenplay, S. Vladimirsky, while searching out material for the film, began to listen to gramophone recordings of the MAT performance, while holding in front of himself the text of the play, which was published in the twenty-volume collected works of A. P. Chekhov. At first the texts seemed identical. But, the further it went the more often variant readings were detected. It was impossible to admit the idea that in the MAT (which so carefully referred to every authorial remark) there could have been permitted any kind of "ad-libbing" in relation to Chekhov. Consequently, there had to have existed some kind of authorial (or author-authorized) stage edition of *Three Sisters*. It merely remained to be found.

Research led to the MAT museum. With the assistance of the director of the museum, F. Mikhal'skij, an archive was brought up, and in the Chekhov safe there came to light a thick cardboard folder bearing the inscription "not to be examined without the director's permission." The folder had been kept there from the time of the museum's founding, in the early 1920s. In the folder there turned up two little black oilskin notebooks, containing the author's manuscript of the first and second acts of *Three Sisters*, as well as a manuscript of the third and fourth acts, which had been sent from Nice at the end of December, 1900 (O. S.). It is known that Chekhov, having finished the play in the Fall of 1900 and having then turned it over to MAT, continued to work on it nonetheless. After having corrected the first two acts in Moscow, Chekhov left for abroad and while there he "made drastic changes" to the third and (especially to the) fourth acts, as he wrote to O. L. Knipper.

The fact was also revealed that the folder contained a second version of *Three Sisters*. The first (typewritten) version of the play was also kept in the safe; this turned out to be the director's copy. It is marked throughout with insets, inserts, and corrections made in accordance with the clean copy. According to one such director's copy—that belonging to K. S. Stanislavsky—it is possible to judge which "drastic changes" the author had made.

In researching these materials, S. Vladimirsky, the young Leningrad philologist A. Mervol'f, and Professor G. Byaly came to the conclusion that apart from this working, director's copy, there existed yet one more clean, original text of the play. It appeared to them to be the censored copy, which was also kept in the theater's museum.

Although there is no mention of the play's genre, this article reveals the constant disregard for the author's version and thus indirectly supports the speculation that the genre could be also have been altered "a bit" by some anonymous "editors."

To continue the story, according to PSSiP, when Lavrov first contacted the MAT to request the text of the manuscript, Nemirovich-Danchenko replied in bewilderment that he did not have a copy and that it was some kind of misunderstanding. Judging by later discoveries, however, Nemirovich-Danchenko did keep the manuscript and for some reason did not want to give it to Lavrov. As a matter of fact, Lavrov succeeded in getting the manuscript a few days later and informed Chekhov of the incident: "Finally, I 'confiscated' from Nemirovich-Danchenko your *Three Sisters* and set it in type" (Sochineniia 13: 435; my trans.). All this suggests that Nemirovich-Danchenko might have had his own secret ambitions while hiding and "editing" Chekhov's manuscript. As Chekhov writes to Knipper-Chekhova, *Russkaia mysl'* published *Three Sisters* without his proofreading it and Lavrov "states that it was Nemirovich who 'corrected' my play." (Pisma 9: 207; my trans.).

In this way or another, *Three Sisters* lived through a rough time, being corrected by editors other than Chekhov. In 1901, *Three Sisters* was first published by Marx Publishing House (St. Petersburg) as a single edition with photographs of the first performers who played the three sisters—Savitskaya (Olga), Knipper (Masha), and Andreeva (Irina). As I previously mentioned, this edition is based on the distorted version published in *Russkaia mysl'*, which was subtitled "drama" and also was designed with portraits of the first three performers who played the leading characters.

Naturally, with these portraits of the dramatic actresses, the subtitle served to emphasize Stani-slavsky's staging of *Three Sisters* as a drama. The Chekhovian subtitle "comedy" would not work at this point. It is still unclear, however, whether Chekhov himself decided to compromise and give his permission to subtitle his play "drama" or if it was done without his knowledge (as did happen with the last two editions released before Chekhov's death, over which he had very little control) (Sochineniia 13: 439). Thus, there is a very high possibility that Chekhov, who constantly blamed his publishers for the mistakes and distortions of his original text, might not have noticed or had no chance to change the subtitle that contradicted his definition of the genre of *Three Sisters*.

Though we cannot disprove Nemirovich-Danchenko's statement that the play was subtitled "drama" in the first place, we may confirm that it was in complete disagreement with both the description of the censored version and with Chekhov's own statements. As a matter of fact, the further editing of *Three Sisters* was intended to clarify the vaudevillian character of the play.

To this end, Chekhov introduces some traditionally comical remarks that are intended to enhance the sense of vaudeville within the frames of his innovations and to facilitate one's "digestion" of his comedy. For instance, Chekhov introduces the line "Ne ugodno l'etot finik vam prinjat?" (Would you like to eat this date as your medication?) and explains that this is a song from a vaudeville that he wants Chebutykin to sing (Sochineniia 13: 439). At the beginning of the first act, Chekhov introduces ironical

remarks for Solyony and Tuzenbakh as a background for the sisters' conversation, which essentially reduce the lyricism of their dialogue. In addition to this, numerous other remarks, jokes, and stage directions are scattered throughout the play to emphasize the author's comedic intention (*Sochineniia* 13: 431). Hence, from beginning to end, Chekhov worked on a comedy and not a drama when he created *Three Sisters*; and even if he himself once subtitled the play "drama" (we still leave this possibility open), it could be meant in the sense of dramaturgy.

To understand Chekhov's innovations required a shift in conceptual ground. Unfortunately, Chekhov did not like giving explanations, naively believing in his readers' intuition; this failed in most cases because simple intuition was not enough to understand the new type that he created. Stanislavsky writes: "When we began to read the play and turned to Anton Pavlovich for explanations he, being extremely confused, refused to give any, telling us, 'Listen, I wrote there everything I knew'" ("A. P. Chekhov" 394; my trans.).

As follows from his correspondence, Chekhov believed in the "obviousness" of what he was doing and confirmed that anyone who carefully read his texts would interpret it in the same way. Such an underestimation of subjectivity in the interpretation of artistic texts caused constant disagreements between the innovative vision of the author and the traditional mind of his reader/spectator. Stanislavsky writes about *The Cherry Orchard*: "I was crying like a woman; I wanted to restrain myself but I could not. I hear you saying to me: 'Excuse me, but this is just farce.' No, for a simple person this is a tragedy" (*Sobranie sochinenii* 7: 226). Stanislavsky was absolutely right; it was ridiculous to expect from a traditional reader—"a simple person"—complete comprehension of the sophisticated design of Chekhov's new comedy. Chekhov's old dream of a congenial reader was utopian, for it was, according to *Moskovskie vedomosti*, "an excessive demand of working fantasy not only for the reader but also for the spectator" (qtd. in *Sochineniia* 13: 375; my trans.).

Notably, the comic nature of *Three Sisters* was obvious to Lanford Wilson, who subtitles his translation of the play, "a Comedy in Four Acts." Though Wilson does not give any theoretical grounds for such a "free" translation of the subtitle, his artistic intuition leads him in the right direction.