



***My Five Days With Chekhov:***

*The 2012 International Anton Chekhov Conference,  
Chekhov Museum, Yalta/Crimea*

***By Frank Gagliano***

## THE DRAMATIC QUESTION

*There is always a dramatic question, of course. And the dramatic question, from the moment I arrived in Yalta was this: "Would they understand it?"*

## THE INVITATION

On 23 January 2012, I received a letter from Alexander Titorènko, Director of the Anton Chekhov Museum in Yalta, Crimea, inviting me to give a reading/performance of my play, *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT*, at the 2012 International Chekhov Conference (Apr 23-27).



My friend and former colleague Pavlo Bosyy, had arranged this. Pavlo is currently the resident designer at the Ukraine Kirovohrad Regional Theatre, and had designed the massive Chekhov exhibition at this year's Chekhov Conference.

Sometime in February — and in addition to being asked to give the reading/performance of “MY CHEKHOV LIGHT” — I was invited, as well, to deliver the Conference’s Keynote Address.

I delivered the Keynote address on 23 April, and gave the reading/performance

of *"MY CHEKHOV LIGHT"* on 26 April. In between, I got to meet a variety of splendid, learned, generous, warm-hearted, world-class Chekhovian's, on the very site where Chekhov lived many of his final years and where he wrote his masterpieces, *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, and where he suffered, and died from, tuberculosis. Sitting in the garden Chekhov himself planted, I was able to love the man, not only as I had all my life, through his plays, but through his trees.



### **PAVLO**

I had met Pavlo Bosyy at West Virginia University in 2005. I was Benedum Professor of Playwriting (since retired) and Pavlo was on a one-year interim appointment as faculty stage designer. This is what I wrote about Pavlo then, on my Web site ([www.gaglianoriff.com/page/UKRAINE](http://www.gaglianoriff.com/page/UKRAINE)):

*Pavlo —who, to me resembles, in aspect and energy, Mickey Rooney playing Puck, in the MGM movie version of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" — was a voracious reader and had read my play, "MY CHEKHOV LIGHT." He'd heard about a recent "MY CHEKHOV LIGHT" reading/performance I'd done at New York's Cherry Lane Theatre and invited me to perform the piece as part of an exhibit of American stage design he was mounting in Kirovohrad, Ukraine. I quickly accepted. For two reasons: 1) The Ukrainian Orange Revolution had moved and inspired me, and I wanted to meet the people who had achieved what seemed like a political miracle—and 2)*

*because I wanted to continue to keep “MY CHEKHOV LIGHT” alive, this time in a (for me) brand new culture.*

Now, once again (because of Pavlo), this time in Yalta, in April of this year, 2012, I had a chance to keep *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT* alive once again; and, because of my work on the Keynote Address, I needed to revisit the master’s masterworks in a new way, and discovered, as a playwright, how his plays —the techniques of them—affected the writing of “*MY CHEKHOV LIGHT*.”

## **PAVLO’S EXHIBIT**

This is how Pavlo, in his own words, set out his goals for the 2012 Chekhov Museum exhibit.

*I tried to show the importance of the Chekhov legacy in the English-Speaking Western Theatre world. Thus, I first collected numerous books, documents, photos, programs etc., and sent them all to the Chekhov museum in Yalta. This collection included items from my personal archive, from the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and from the Stratford Shakespeare Festival (the latter sent a huge collection, which included programs and souvenir booklets and production photos of ALL the Chekhov shows they did).*





*The exhibit consists of these sections:*

*-The tour of the Moscow Art theatre to the States, 1922-23*

- Michael Chekhov (including the manuscript of his book “Actor is the Theatre” (1936, apparently still NOT published!))*
- Translations of Chekhov*
- Chekhov at Broadway and regional theatre (the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, Lithuania - if toured to the States)*
- Chekhov at academic theatres (including “Kolonists” by Steven Dykes and “Chekhov in Yalta”)*
- Stratford Festival*
- Besides the stuff that I collected for them, I also utilized several items from the Chekhov Museum's own collection.”*

Pavlo's exhibit was brilliantly and clearly laid out on the walls of a room adjacent to a larger room, where the Conference was to take place (the permanent exhibit in that larger room, had been devised by Alla Hanilo, about whom, more later). The Michael Chekhov material in Pavlo's exhibit, later in the week, was to help me with the main problem I was facing as I worked on the reading/performance of *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT*. I would give the reading/performance in the large Conference room.

**FIRST IMPRESSIONS**

From the stop where the little city bus left us off, at the top of the hill, I looked down on the Chekhov Museum on the left and the Chekhov estate



on the right. I had not realized that the Chekhov estate was so large, his garden so extensive.

I had noted in my Keynote address that actually being on Chekhov's estate would probably make me do strange things; perhaps, when seeing the actual desk on which Chekhov wrote *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, even singing an aria to it.

It turns out that the desk had been moved from Chekhov's estate into the museum and was now on permanent display there. When I entered the museum and the desk was pointed out to me, I merely touched it: An emotional moment, to be sure (and *through tears*, as Chekhov might have written in his stage directions), but devoid of external theatrics.



*Then, while Pavlo dealt with details of his exhibition, I strolled down into Chekhov's garden.*



*There really are times when something mystical happens, touches you — “your soul,” the Russians might say. Just being in that garden was one of those times for me.*

*A little while later, during a lunch break, Alla Hanilo would make palpable the mysticism.*

But first: Short, preliminary speeches by dignitaries were to be given before the Conference proper was to begin. I was asked to say a few words, as a teaser to the actual Keynote Address I would make, after lunch. This is



what I said (Pavlo translated):

*“I am delighted to be here, in Yalta, at the Chekhov Museum, welcoming you to the 2012 International Anton Chekhov Conference.*

*“I am a playwright, and, later in the week, I will be giving a reading/performance of my play, MY CHEKHOV LIGHT. I will not comment here on my play: I will let it speak for itself. But I will say this: That had I not*



*encountered Chekhov when I did — I would not have had the courage — nor would I have found the technique needed — to write, MY CHEKHOV LIGHT.*

*“Later in the day, I will explore this further in my Keynote Address:  
“Searching for Chekhov, This Traveler Comes Home.”*

*“For now, I simply want to say hello and to welcome you here, and to acknowledge the following Conference personnel: Mr. Alexander Titorènko, Director of the Anton Chekhov Memorial Museum in Yalta, for inviting me; Alexei Zubarev, Associated Director; and Yulia Dogopòlova, Academic Secretary; Lina Titorènko, Chair of the Marketing Department, Marina Ardiukova, principal curator of the Museum Collection, and to my amazing colleague, Pavlo Bòsyy, for his exhibit and for arranging my participation here — and to you all, for this honor. Thank you and, again. . .welcome.”*

As I listened to the speeches, in Russian, (Pavlo leaning over and translating each gist), I began to look around and cast Chekhov plays in my mind’s eye productions from the Russian types around me (*physical types*, of course, I did not know the *actual* characters).

I was particularly excited about one speaker, who was my image of the perpetual student Trofimov, in *The Cherry Orchard*. He was an intense young man, dark suit, wearing glasses, and with darting eyes, apparently questioning, with some passion, some finer point in the exhibit and eliciting some annoyed vocal responses from the participants. I loved it. I was part of a conference of engaged participants.





## LUNCH AND ALLA HANILO

In the garden, Alla Hanilo, a wiry little white-haired dynamo (partial to red or pink knit sweaters, cream colored turtle necks), led Pavlo and me to the green garden bench where Chekhov often met with Gorky and Bunin and Leo Tolstoy. Alla had been with the Chekhov estate and Museum for 65 years, starting in her teens, as a docent and assistant to Anton Chekhov's sister Maria (Masha) Chekhova. Alla is now 84 years old.



Later in the afternoon, when I got through with the Keynote speech, Alla promised she would give me a personal tour of the Chekhov Estate. Meanwhile, Alla pointed out all the trees that Chekhov himself had planted in his garden and told stories of how Chekhov, after he died, had been betrayed (in a petty way) by Gorky and Bunin (The Moscow Art Theatre, under the Soviets, became *The Gorky Theatre*, for awhile). Alla told about the famous Russian actor Innokenty Smoktunovsky, one of the great Hamlets of his day in the Soviet period. Smoktunovsky met Alla just before he started working on a production of Chekhov's early play, *IVANOV*.

Apparently, as part of Smoktunovsky's actor preparation, it was very important for him to know whether Chekhov was religious or not. The Soviets kept insisting that Chekhov was an atheist, so Alla told Smoktunovsky that Chekhov, as well as Chekhov's entire family, *did* have faith. I believe Alla got that from Chekhov's sister, Maria (Masha) Chekhova, and showed Smoktunovsky some kind of hard proof.

Later I was interviewed and asked what I thought about the *Chekhov-As-Atheist* matter (This seemed to be a major question for some of the participants). I said I didn't know, saw no mention of it in any of Chekhov's writings about organized religious matters but that, judging by his intense love of nature and his compassion for the sick and poor, that Chekhov seemed very spiritual, very Christ-like. That seemed to satisfy everyone. Satisfied me.

Alla also told me about a Hamlet play Chekhov had co-authored with someone else. The script, if it ever got finished, was lost, but Chekhov's notes on the play exist (his handwriting authenticated). Apparently Chekhov wanted to create a piece about a mediocre company, producing HAMLET in a kind of "*NOISES OFF*" approach. Alla got the Chekhov/Hamlet notes to Pavlo, who will translate them for me.



*That green bench would be my anchor during the five days of the Conference; I'd return to it again and again. I was truly at my calmest there. From that bench, I could look down the pebbled path and see the grove of bamboo that Chekhov had planted (one of a number of bamboo patches) and that amazed me. There were all kinds of trees he planted in that garden — perhaps hundreds —but somehow, that one exotic touch — the bamboo touch — enlarged his spirit for me.*



A woman named Olga Spachil also talked to me about the magic of that garden.





Mrs. Spachil spoke English very well and taught American Literature at a school in Krasnodar, Russia. She had children and grand children living in the United States and told me that another superb garden of a literary master — one she had visited — is the garden of the American novelist and short story writer, Eudora Welty. I should visit Welty's garden, she suggested; In Jackson, Mississippi. Welty, of course, was a great lover of Chekhov, and had been influenced by him.

One of the nice byproducts of a literary Conference is that you are often reintroduced to artists you've ignored over the years, until the enthusiasm of one participant sets you on that artist's trail again. Soon as Olga mentioned Eudora Welty, my mind shot back to an undergraduate classroom at Queens College, NY, where I was taking a playwriting class with the American critic John Gassner and, for some reason (perhaps because her story is in the form of a dramatic monologue), Gassner read Welty's *Why I Live at The P.O.* to the class — about an hilarious dysfunctional Southern family — and Gassner laughed so hard, he almost fell off his chair. (I am already in the process of re-reading the stories of Eudora Welty — just re-read *Why I Live at The P.O.*, in fact — and was laughing harder than ever, only with a Chekhovian sadness hovering over Sister's monologue).

### ***THE KEYNOTE***





I read the Keynote Address to the Conference participants in English. Pavlo translated each paragraph into Russian.

In the last section, where I talked about bits and pieces of dialogue from the many Chekhov characters that had articulated and defined emotional peaks of my life, I had Pavlo translate *each line*. Which put the brakes on, and gave a better, more dramatic, landing to the address. Which was well received. I did not think I had come up with anything original but, judging by the responses from the speech, it was the emotional content that touched the participants. As a playwright, of course, I tend to think of anything *I put out there* as a dramatic monologue, revealing an emotional voice on an emotional journey. And it is the emotional content that the Russians seemed to respond to in that address. This emotional connection was also to be my salvation during the performance of *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT*, later in the week.

One woman latched onto my brief section in the Keynote Address about Chekhov's *musical structure* of the plays (again, not a new area in Chekhov criticism), which impressed her, because her life was influenced by "The Institute of Rhythmology," that, as I understand it, dealt with *Rhythm* as the basis of life, and was founded by Evdokia Marchenko. Later, in *MY CHEKHOV LIFE*, of course, I would *put out there* Professor Peter Paradise's attempt to fuse his *Chekhov light* with the rhythm of the Universe. The prospect of confronting my play later on in the week with *that* kind of content, excited this Rhythmology woman.

Besides the emotional content of the Keynote Address — *emotional*, because of my being moved by merely being there on the master's turf — the address dwelt on a few of the traditional techniques of drama that Chekhov used in his plays, *but often subverted*: the soliloquy and the classic *obligatory scene*, to mention just two techniques I dealt with.

Had I more time, I think I would have added what I call, *the blatancy factor*, that is also a common denominator in all great drama and that Chekhov renders repeatedly, because the internal pressures in his characters are volcanic — ***blatant***:

***(from IVANOV)***

LEBEDEV: . . .You're a murderer and a vampire and a thief and an adulterer. . .  
IVANOV: That's all nonsense, now I've got a headache.  
LEBEDEV: All because you think a lot.  
IVANOV: I don't think at all.

\* \* \* \* \*

***(from THE THREE SISTERS)***

MASHA: In this town to know three languages is an unnecessary luxury. Not even a luxury, but some kind of unnecessary appendage, like a sixth finger.

\* \* \* \* \*

TUSENBAKH: . . .There's just one thing, only one —you don't love me!  
IRINA: It's not in my power! I will be your wife, true and obedient, but love — no, what can I do? . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

***(from THE CHERRY ORCHARD)***

DUNYASHA: My hands are shaking. I'm going to faint.  
LOPAKHIN: You're really delicate, Dunyasha, too much so. You dress yourself like a lady, and your hair is fixed up the same way. You can't do things like that. Better remember who you are.

\* \* \* \* \*

***(from ON THE INJURIOUS EFFECTS OF TOBACCO)***

NYUKHIN: . . to run without once looking back. . .Where too? It doesn't matter where . . . if only to run away from this rotten, vulgar, cheap life, which has turned me into an old, pitiful idiot, to run away from this stupid, petty, malicious, malicious, malicious money-grubber, from my wife, who

tortured me for thirty-three years. . .

\* \* \* \* \*

**(from *IMPURE TRAGEDIANS AND LEPROUS PLAYWRIGHTS*)**

TARNOVSKY: . . .What you want is for my play to curdle the public's blood. . .for my soliloquies to be so powerful they'll snap off the lights. . .

You can land on any page in any Chekhov play and you will confront a *blatant* outburst. Fascinating. The idea of *subtext* seems to have been invented by Stanislavsky to deal with the Chekhov play. And yet the Chekhov character says what he/she feels and hides nothing. There is no subtext. Not really. On the other hand, what goes on in the ellipses and pauses — *that* is something else.

It's my belief that the dialogue in any good play — certainly any great one — should have a built-in *projectile* quality that the actor merely latches onto (well, not *merely*, perhaps, but *essentially*) and rides out to the audience. The internal pressures in Chekhov characters are so great that that projectile quality is always present. Amazing, that a very great short story, non-blant, *impressionist*, should—when he pivots to the stage— so easily pressure his many *stage* characters into total *blatancy*. The sign of the born dramatist.

It is also my belief that the writers of what, back in the 1970s and 80s, were called *poetic realists*, and who looked to Chekhov as their model, got it all wrong. They seemed to think that Chekhov was about nothing happening on stage — and fashioned pieces of interminable *talk* and minor mantras in a few events that they spun out over many beats. Chekhov, of course, keeps detonating dramatic events—but he often does so *offstage*—and, in any case, it is his *blatancy* that keeps the internal pressure cooker in each character cooking, and the play, as a result, chugging along— journeying on.

Besides the blatancy exploration in an expanded Keynote Address, I think I would explore, as well, the Chekhov play as an example of The Theatre Of The Absurd. Joyce Carol Oates wrote a brilliant essay on the subject. And,

while first (as I mentioned in my Keynote Address), I had been intimidated by the Chekhov play because I could not see how the master did it — I was also attracted, even back then, to something I recognized — something of my view of the world — characters who were alienated and talked past each other. The critic Richard Gilman writes that the German's have one of their foot-long words for such a technique: *Aneindervorbeisprechen*. Gilman also claimed that the famous pauses in Beckett and Pinter owe much to Chekhov's example. I agree. I know I certainly do — *did*, especially in *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT*.

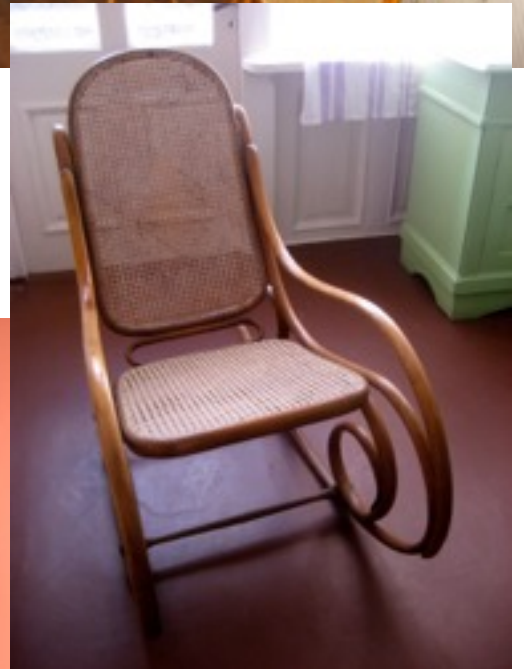
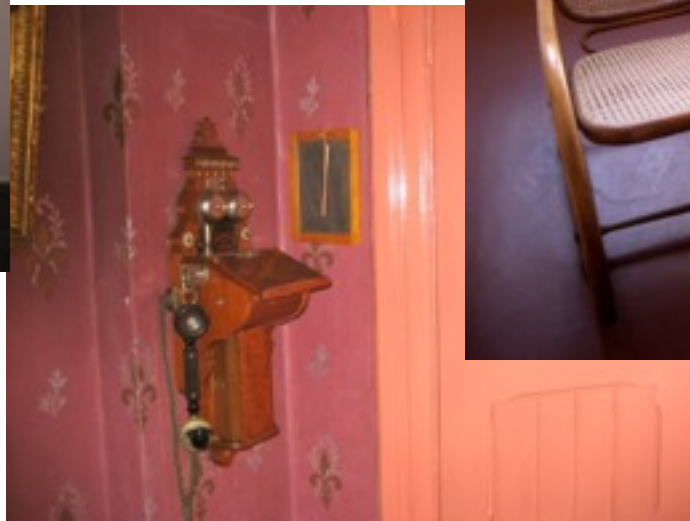
### ***HOUSE TOUR***



Pavlo had warned me that the Chekhov house would be cold — not the decor or furnishings or layout — all of those were quite warm and cozy and reflected the excellent taste of Anton Chekhov and his sister, Maria (Masha) Chekhova, who ran the house for him — but one's body would be quite chilly in that house, warned Pavlo. Apparently, the architect available to Chekhov, and within his price range, was not skilled at gauging climate



needs within the house. Chekhov's workroom was next to his bedroom on the second floor and there was a fireplace between, to heat both rooms. But, Alla said, the fireplace smoked and wasn't useful. So, tubercular Chekhov, who had moved to Yalta to improve his health, had to work on his remaining masterpieces in the cold, presumably while spitting up blood.



Alla also showed us Chekhov's rocking chair, coat rack, a 100-year-old piece of furniture. There is a working telephone hanging on one wall. There is an upright piano on which later noted visitors like Sergei Rachmaninoff and Feodor Chaliapin would play. There are photos and original paintings on the walls.

There is, too, hanging on one of the walls, the famous photo of Chekhov reading his play, *The Seagull*, to the cast at the first Moscow Art Theatre rehearsal of that play. But I was amazed to see, in that original photo, on the far right of the table where Chekhov is reading, an additional actor seated, listening to the master read. I, at least, had never seen him before in copies of the photo. It turned out to be Vsevolod Meyerhold, cast as Konstantin Treplev. Meyerhold would eventually become a revolutionary Avant-Garde director in the early stages of the Soviet regime. Meyerhold came into disfavor during the later Soviet era, when the official view of the arts turned conservative, and Meyerhold was cut out of all subsequent copies of that iconic photograph. Later, of course, Meyerhold was executed by the Soviets, and Meyerhold's wife was brutally stabbed to death.

Unfortunately, with all its attendant Keynote Address pressures — and still jetlagged from a long, brutal flight from Pittsburgh, by way of New York, Istanbul and Simferopol, Crimea — that first day of the Conference had me somewhat groggy and disconnected as I listened to Alla walk and talk us through the house. And her talk was so authoritative, so detailed, so voluminous, so personally connected to Anton Chekhov by way of Maria Chekhova, that I had to keep reminding myself— through my jetlagged haze — that Alla had not been part of the original Chekhov family. But, of course, in a way, she was and, in my opinion, had earned the right to be so.

Later in the week, on the last day of the Conference, Alla took Pavlo and me to the Yalta City Cemetery where Maria (Masha) Chekhova was buried (her brother Anton Chekhov is buried in the Novodevichy Cemetery in Moscow). I believe I was the first American Alla ever took to that grave. The tombstones in the cemetery had cameo-sized photos of the dead on them, as well as religious icons. During the Soviet era, religious icons had been forbidden on the gravestones; now one could have both. There were little tables along the paths on which family and friends could eat while visiting their dead



Alla gave me flowers and a hard-boiled egg to place on Maria (Masha) Chekhova's grave. Alla did the same on the grave of her mother, buried nearby. Alla says that *she* will be buried there when *she* dies, but she didn't plan to die for a long time, because she had so much left to do.



## MY CHEKHOV LIGHT

April 26: Sitting on Chekhov's green bench, the morning of the reading/performance that was to take place later in the afternoon, and reviewing the text of *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT*, I did my usual preparations:



Elongated the vowels, made sure I hit the consonants, worked on the rhythms—especially in the opening chord of the first paragraph; worked out the breathing, as best I could — especially for the sustained, long phrases. And, since there are no stage directions in this monologue play—everything is in the language and punctuation — I had to keep the language and images clear, voice the punctuation, and mark out, what I call the *pressure shifts*. I did all that (as I always did), *technically*. But then something else happened. Sitting on the green bench in Anton Chekhov's garden, I began to see my play in a new light (or, rather, in its *original* light); to explore anew

how Chekhov, initially, had influenced the piece —not only the *content* — but the *technique* of it — especially the section where the protagonist, Professor Peter Paradise, conjures up a Chekhovian scene to explore *his* view of *his* wasted life. In the past, I tended to race through this introspective section, to get, quickly, to the next action. Now —putting on the brakes as I half-voiced the text out to the bamboo cluster — I let the section slowly unfold in all its blatant bitterness; especially allowed whatever time was necessary to drag me through each ellipsis. In addition, sitting there on the green bench of Anton Chekhov, new questions kept dropping in, questions I had never asked myself about the script while preparing it— especially what I call, *the disturbances in the universe*, those given circumstances that precede the action. It was as if I was looking at someone else's script for the first time. Exciting, of course. Exhilarating, certainly; except that I had to put it all out there in a few hours to the participants in the Conference. And what I was accustomed to doing — what I *thought* I always did — was to merely *demonstrate the text*. Nothing



more. Now I was asking myself (or something or someone else — guess who? — was asking me) to try something new: Let the text unfold, and let it take me to places unknown. And what exacerbated the unease was that whatever I did, I would be facing an audience that, in the main, did not know the English language. The official language at the Conference was Russian. Some understood a smattering of English. Some knew the outline of *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT*. Some, apparently, had access to the Ukrainian version of the text and could follow along. I could not expect the understanding of nuance. That troubled me, made me very nervous, very anxious.

Michael Chekhov, Anton's nephew, rescued me.



Anton Chekhov married the Great Russian actress of the Moscow Arts Theatre, Olga Knipper. Olga Knipper had a niece, also named Olga, also an actress, who married Chekhov's nephew, the actor Michael Chekhov. Michael and Olga divorced and, later, after the Russian revolution, Knipper's niece moved to Nazi Germany and became Hitler's favorite actress. Michael Chekhov later became a leading teacher of acting in the United States.

While I was trying to relax and fight my anxiety about the Conference's participants not knowing English, I roamed Pavlo's exhibit and stopped at Michael Chekhov's exhibits, read some samples of his teachings. In one of

them, Michael Chekhov discussed the importance of *concentration* and how, if you're concentrating on *other* than your main focus, that secondary focus (whatever it is) will blur or out-focus the main focus (the pitfalls of multi tasking).

Simple as that. Of course. The language barrier was a given. Nothing — at that point — that I could do about it. Get out there and discover *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT* anew, the way the Master-Of-The-Green-Bench was telling you to do and put it all out there.



I did and it worked. During the reading/performance, I kept making discoveries as I plowed into *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT* and didn't once think about any language barrier.



I had asked Pavlo to just read the last stage direction in Russian:

*(A strong shaft of light streams in  
and floods Peter Paradise,  
on the cot, with light.  
Pounding again. Off.  
Then, silence)*

And before I knew it, that end was there and Pavlo was reading those end stage directions in Russian:

*[Возникает мощный столб света и заливает  
Питера Парадиза на раскладушке. Снова звучат глухие удары.  
Темнота.  
Затем – тишина]*

Like the Keynote Address, *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT* was well received.



Once again, in the Q&A, it seemed to be the sustained, intense emotion throughout the play that held — and told the story. And I got comments thanking me for the piece and, especially (and again), for revealing my emotions. And, of course, there were many questions about Peter Paradise's name: "Was the play about a paradise lost?"

Well, of course.

I am a word man and, before this experience, I never would have believed that a stage story, told in a tsunami of words, could be told without those words being totally understood. Perhaps there was the Harvey Pitcher factor at work. In Pitcher's book, "The Chekhov Play," the critic argues that Chekhov is the playwright of emotions, that Chekhov sets up an *emotional network* between all his characters, a network that keeps them all connected, even when, on the surface, they seem disconnected. Once the Keynote Address *emotionally* placed me within the Conference family, our emotional connection was made and the deeper story of *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT* — the emotional story beneath the words — could be grasped, no matter the language.



Following my reading/performance of *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT*, there was a full out performance by actor Yury Zherebtsòff of his own Chekhov adaptations, “The New Year Torture” and “Champagne.”



Mr. Zherebtsòff is a leading resident actor in the Ukraine Kirovohrad Regional Theatre. His performance was masterful: Presentational, specific, keeping the audience laughing and in awe. I did not know the pieces at all; had failed, alas, to do my homework and find out what the pieces were about. Had I done so, I no doubt would have been able to follow the emotional story, moment to moment, easily, through Mr. Zherebtsòff's performance.



Mr. Zherebtsòff has asked to do a performance of *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT* at the Ukraine Kirovohrad Regional Theatre in September. I am delighted.

***PUSHKIN, ROMANOFF, LEECHES AND CHEKHOV'S RENTAL***



Taking breaks, one sunny, warm, afternoon, Pavlo and I take the twenty minute stroll from our hotel, down *no-cars-allowed* Pushkin Boulevard to the sea, the Black Sea, the resort part of Yalta, past the strollers, the restaurants, nightclubs, stores and stalls, resort hotels and down to the promenade with the replica of the Greek ship of myth, the Argos, anchored off shore, and the men fishing off the dock, and the boats of all sizes floating by, and the bronze statues of the famous Russian actors who played in the Russian film version of one of Chekhov's last great stories, *The Lady With The Little Lap Dog*, near the Chekhov roadhouse theatre that brings in all kinds of shows, from serious plays to farces, and has some wonderful Chekhov exhibits in the upstairs lobby that Alla had set up — and, across the sea, to the left, we stop and gaze at the mountains. . .

. . .and one morning Anna Rudoy, who has a car and is a thoughtful, lovely woman, drives us to the beautiful Romanoff Palace on the Black Sea where the famous 1945 Yalta agreement was signed between Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin, and where the world was divided, after World War II, and where there are photos of the event and the sad image of a great American president, obviously deathly sick, and who, in fact, died that same year,





as well as the sad wax images of the Romanoff family who were later all assassinated, shot down and bayoneted by the Bolsheviks in a bloody execution, but who have now been canonized. . .



and the fascinating walk back to the car, fascinating because Anna Rudoy, in her practice, works with leeches and explains their uses in blood disease and blood circulation issues and how they can even help replicate the Viagra effect, and later, on my layover in Istanbul, I mention this to my former (Turkish) student over lunch and she mentions that she recalls that her grandfather had circulation problems in his feet and would place his feet in buckets of leeches for relief, and when I mention the leeches/ Viagra effect, she is appalled at the thought of where leeches might have to be placed on the male body to achieve the required result (*feet* are one thing). . .

. . . and there is a visit to a house Chekhov rented in town while his estate was being built and that contains further exhibits — but no garden. . .



## **CHEKHOVIAN MOMENTS**

- 1) The final morning of the conference, after the final papers are to be read and the new Chekhov Museum Website is to be launched. I take a plastic cup of instant coffee into the Conference room and place the cup under the seat I sit on. While watching the presentation, someone taps me on the shoulder. It's a little cheerful man who had talked to me outside and, there, showed me — and anyone else who would deal with him — a sample of beautiful handwriting about — who knows what? Everyone told me he was harmless, an eccentric local character. After tapping me on the shoulder in the Conference room, the cheerful little man hands me a large pinecone. I mouth a quiet thank you and turn back to the presentation. Tap again. He hands me another pinecone. I smile and put *that* pinecone in my bag. After five taps and five pinecones that I stuff in my bag, I reach under my chair to sip some coffee and spill the cup all over the wood floor. Pavlo to the rescue with paper napkins. I'm chagrined. Olga Spachil, sitting behind me, leans over and says: "Don't worry. It's not Chekhov's original floor." I scatter all five pinecones over the Chekhov garden.
- 2) A final luncheon is held on the terrace at Chekhov's dacha in nearby Gursuf — a smaller country house overlooking the Black Sea that Chekhov willed to his wife Olga Knipper, leaving the original estate to his sister Masha and his mother.





Wonderful exhibits and original items are in the dacha from the period when Chekhov was writing *THE THREE SISTERS*. On the veranda overlooking the rocky bay and a little beach where some boys are swimming, some of the participants gather, sip drinks and chat.



At one point Yulia Dogopòlova tells me how disappointed she was that I did not precede the *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT* reading/performance with a reading of a lyric of mine, *NOVEMBER IS MY TIME*. I had read that lyric (setting the mood of *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT*) some years before in Kirovohrad and Yulia had read the Ukrainian translation. She asks me to recite the lyric there, at that moment, on Chekhov's dacha veranda. The others second the request. I comply, as best I can, from memory, messing up the middle part. I think Pavlo translates. Everyone is pleased. Then Alla asks me to sing. I'm perplexed (and a little tipsy from the cabernet, I guess). It seems Alla has been impressed with some of the melodies I hummed and sang in lieu of a recorded sound score in the *MY CHEKHOV LIGHT* reading/performance. I respectfully decline, but Alla, being Alla, *will* have her wish. And so, to echo a Chekhov motif in his plays: "What can I do? What *is* there to do?" So I comply. Others are called to attend the event at the steps where I'm standing and the boys from the beach have climbed up and are taking a short cut to wherever, and I a capella *ELEGANCE AND GRACE*, from my musical *CONGO SQUARE*, because it's the one song that quickly drops in and I recall every word of the lyric. Everyone seems pleased, but I half expect the spirit of the nasty Natasha, from *THE THREE SISTERS*, to come flying out of the dacha on her broomstick and screaming, "Stop that bleating! My lover Protopopov and my darling child Bobik, are napping!" Then another participant, standing in the small crowd, says she would like to recite a poem from a collection of her own poems. The poem is called *APRIL*, and she gives it an intense and lyrical reading. Pavlo translates; it's a lovely, impressionistic piece. Then we all go back to eating. And drinking. As we would in any such Chekhov scene.

## ***PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE***

Over a pizza and wine meeting in town one evening, Alexander Titorènko, Director, and Alexei Zubarev, Associate Director of the Chekhov Memorial Museum, invite me to join the Museum's Board of Directors. They talk about the Museum's over 30,000 items, the most extensive collection of





Chekhov's personal memorabilia of its kind in the Chekhov universe. They talk about how they hope to make the Yalta Chekhov Memorial Museum more open to the world and how to make the world interested in supporting the museum's initiatives/fund raising. They are interested in possible Chekhov-related studies and collaborations with western theatres and universities: Interested, too, in touring exhibits and establishing new website/online conferences.

I talk about my experience with new playwrights and new-play development in the US and that it makes great sense, with Chekhov as it's guiding spirit, to start such a new-play development enterprise in Yalta. Apparently, my script-in-hand reading/performance was a new concept in that part of the world (Pavlo had to explain and define this method of presentation to the conference participants, before I began), and Yury Zherebtsòff's on-the-road, stripped-down production in the conference room, could show the way for similar forms of presentation. I recall the early days of the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, when we emerging, founding playwrights of that organization, walked the beaches where O'Neill walked, and how that community of playwrights blossomed in that atmosphere. I think of playwrights sitting on Chekhov's green bench (as I sat that week) in the garden that Chekhov planted, and I know there can be fine results.

I caution, though, that such an undertaking would not be easy. How will the playwrights be chosen? By whom? Will they receive stipends? And where will those stipends come from? Presumably, the first batch of writers would be from Russia or Ukraine but, eventually, they should come from other



parts of the world. And how would the question of languages and translators be dealt with? During the Conference, and in keeping with the theme of *Chekhov The Traveller*, one of the presentations was by a boy from Sri Lanka. He was studying medicine in Yalta. Chekhov, a doctor all his life, had stopped off in Sri Lanka on his way back from Sakhalin Island, where Chekhov had investigated and reported on the terrible health conditions on that Russian prison Island. The Sri Lanka pre-med student talked about Chekhov's visit to his country and showed a photo of the plaque on the hotel door where Chekhov stayed in Sri Lanka. Might there be a budding Chekhov from Sri Lanka who should be in that early batch of playwrights? Lots of questions. Lots of exciting possibilities.

I accepted the invitation to be part of Museum's Board of Director.

### ***TEXTING AT SIMFEROPOL***

I was an undergraduate at the University of Iowa during the heyday of the New Criticism, which was a method of text explication that ignored the biography of the writer. The writer's life and his intentions were excluded. It all had to do with what was called a *close reading* of the text. This method of criticism had shaped my critical life. Yet, here I was, on 28 April, being driven up to the Simferopol Airport by Alexander Titorenko and Alexei Zubarev, and thinking how much my connecting the man Chekhov with his houses, his trees, his green bench, his medical instruments (that he used to help, often for free, ailing peasants), his hundreds of letters that revealed his *playful* voice), as well as his fighting for righteous causes (including the Dreyfus affair), traveling in Europe and Asia, and all the while continuing to write masterpieces, while dying from tuberculosis — thinking, in short, how much ***the total man Chekhov*** was now deepening my view of his works, because I could see *him*, his image, his soul, whole *in* his works.

At the small Simferopol airport, waiting for my flight to Istanbul, I had a further Chekhovian epiphany: One of Chekhov's major themes is the upheaval of change and I began to wonder how at home Chekhov probably would be as an observer in today's globally-changing world. Here's one of Chekhov's favorite sayings:

*"Let everything on the stage be just as complicated, and at the same time just as simple as it is in life. People eat their dinner, just eat their dinner, and all the time their happiness is being established or their lives are being broken up."*

I thought of that when I spotted this group of people sitting together at the Simferopol Airport waiting room — Family? Friends? — talking to each other, laughing on occasion — and all of them — each and every one of them, held a mobile device — and each and every one was texting while he/she talked and responded to other members of the group.

Then I create a short cinematic scene in my mind's eye and I conjure up Anton Chekhov as a spirit, whom only *I* can see and communicate with. The six foot one Anton Chekhov spirit, wearing the long iconic coat of the photos (but sans cane), is observing the waiting room in the Simferopol airport, smoothing his beard with his fingers from back to chin, and I wave him closer to that group, all texting while they talk to each other, and they can't see us and Anton Spirit and I dissolve ourselves into each little screen, and keep dissolving from one mobile device to the other. On one we read that the girl's boyfriend is jilting her and doesn't have the courage to face her or even talk to her. And she keeps smiling to the group, while her heart breaks. On another mobile device, we read a text that the hospital in Istanbul is urging the man to rush to the hospital as soon as he lands; they now have the results of the tests and need, urgently, to see him. He also keeps smiling to the texting group while his heart overflows with dread. On another smiling face, the text reads that his new play (like all the other plays he's submitted) has been rejected by the theatre, but that they wish him well with it. And he puts on a brave face, though the unbearable ache of rejection, once again, fills him with despair. On another . . .

. . . And Chekhov keeps reading each heartbreaking text, and listening to the happy surface conversation, and smiles and says: "Of course."



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