

*Insignificance is sickening and love means  
nothing at all;  
all it is is the strength to keep going on no  
matter what happens*

by Fly Steffens

An adaptation of Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*



(artwork by Lucy Campbell)

Actor's Packet

Compiled by Anna Jennings, Dramaturg

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# BIOGRAPHIES

## ANTON CHEKHOV



Anton Chekhov, in full Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, (born January 29, 1860, Taganrog, Russia—died July 14/15, 1904, Badenweiler, Germany), Russian playwright and master of the modern short story. He was a literary artist of laconic precision who probed below the surface of life, laying bare the secret motives of his characters. Chekhov's best plays and short stories lack complex plots and neat solutions. Concentrating on apparent trivialities, they create a special kind of atmosphere, sometimes termed haunting or lyrical. Chekhov described the Russian life of his time using a deceptively simple technique devoid of obtrusive literary devices, and he is regarded as the outstanding representative of the late 19th-century Russian realist school.<sup>1</sup>

## FLY STEFFENS

Fly Steffens is a member of the inaugural cohort of the University of Arizona's MFA in Generative Dramaturgy. Fly works nationally as a dramaturg, performer, and playwright. Fly's plays include *Love is a Horse with a Broken Leg Trying to Stand while 45,000 People Watch*, *Bell and Bliss*, and *Frozen Fluid*, among others. Their notable credits include: Milwaukee Repertory Theater, Milwaukee Chamber Theatre, Playhouse on the Square (Memphis, TN), Shakespeare & Company (Lenox, MA), Spooky Action Theater (Washington, DC), Chicago Dramatists, Playwrights Foundation (San Francisco, CA), and The Drama League (NYC), among others. Fly received their BA in Playwriting/Dramaturgy from the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee. Fly belongs to the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA); The Dramatists Guild.

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# THE THREE SISTERS – SOURCE TEXT

## CHARACTERS

OLGA- The eldest Prozorov sister, a school teacher, unmarried

MASHA – The middle sister, married at 18 to Fyodor, calls herself an “educated cat” and frequently quotes poetry, falls in love with Vershinin.

IRINA – The youngest sister, yearns for Moscow, gets a job in a telegraph office, loves no one but is engaged to Tuzenbach.

ANDREY – Their brother, a musician, scientist, and intellectual, dreams of being a professor in Moscow, addicted to gambling, married to Natasha.

\*VERSHININ – A Lieutenant Colonel from Moscow, knew the sisters when they were young, married to a woman who frequently fakes suicide attempts, falls in love with Masha.

BARON TUZENBACH – Born in Moscow, the Baron is a 1<sup>st</sup> lieutenant, loves Irina.

\*CHEBUTYKIN – An army doctor, 60 years-old, functions as a father-figure, loved their mother.

SOLYONY – A strange and crude soldier, in love with Irina, kills Tuzenbach

NATASHA – Andrei’s fiancée then wife, initially an outsider, becomes an overbearing presence

FYODOR KULYGIN – Masha’s husband and teacher at the high school

\*FERAPONT – An elderly man working at the council house

\*ANFIFISA – The family’s elderly maid.

\*FEDOTIK – A soldier in love with Irina and brings her gifts

\*RODE – Another soldier

\*Characters not present in *Insignificance*

## SUMMARY

Act I begins on Sunday, May 5<sup>th</sup>, the one year anniversary of their father’s death. Vershinin, a lieutenant Colonel from Moscow, arrives and quickly becomes the object of Masha’s attention and desire. The Prozorov family and their friends are gathering to celebrate Irina’s birthday. Natasha, Andrei’s love interest, arrives wearing a hideous green-belt which the sisters make fun of. During lunch, the group chats and philosophizes, but when Chebutykin teases Natasha, she storms out. Andrei follows and proposes to her.

In Act II, two years later, Natasha and Andrei are married and have a baby, Bobik. Vershinin has fallen for Masha; Irina has a new job at a telegraph office, which she finds unfulfilling; Andrei’s gambling problem has worsened. has been losing at gambling. One evening during carnival time, the group awaits some company. But when the group gets too rowdy, Natasha kicks everyone out and turns away the other carnivals. By now she has taken over the Prozorov household and insists Irina share a room with Olga for the baby. However, she is having an affair with another man. Meanwhile, Solyony professes his love to Irina he loves her and the whole town is talking about Andrei’s gambling debts.

In Act III, one year later, a fire in town has nearly burned down Vershinin’s house. Everyone’s situation has remained the same, in some cases worsened. Tensions with Natasha increase when she tries to

fire the family's elderly maid and tells Olga to move to the basement all while continuing her affair. Andrey still owes money all over town and fights with his sisters. Olga advises Irina to marry Tuzenbach; Masha officially loves Vershinin. Irina agrees to marry Tuzenbach if they can go to Moscow.

At the beginning of Act IV, we learn the military brigade is leaving the town and Vershinin with it. Chebutykin, Irina, and Tuzenbach are also leaving for Moscow. Olga is now the headmistress of the school. Before they leave, Irina tells Tuzenbach she doesn't love him and he leaves briefly before their departure. Vershinin says goodbye to Masha and they kiss when Fyodor enters. He immediately forgives her. Meanwhile Solyony and Tuzenbach are dueling, resulting in Tuzenbach's death. None of the sisters will make it to Moscow or change their circumstances— they embrace as the play ends.

## ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

*"I cannot abandon four important female roles, four young women of the intelligentsia, to [Stanislavsky], for all his talent and his understanding." -Anton Chekhov<sup>2</sup>*

Chekhov was heavily involved in the original production of *Three Sisters* and experienced artistic tension with Konstantin Stanislavsky of the Moscow Art Theatre. This tension between the two famous Russian theatre-makers is frequently examined in Chekhov studies, generally agreeing that, "Chekhov was a symbolist playwright trapped in a Naturalist theatre."<sup>3</sup> Stanislavsky's heavy focus on perfect Realism not always work in harmony with Chekhov's interest in the story's "poetic essence."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Chekhov frequented rehearsals, carefully rewrote scenes, and took on responsibilities such as "[organizing] the sound effects for the fire."<sup>5</sup> Critics of the original production found it long, cheerless, and full of trivialities.<sup>6</sup> Theatre critic Viktor Burenin of the *New Times* considered it a "stupid success" which "hypnotized the public and especially the younger element while obfuscating any wholesome meaning."<sup>7</sup> Additionally, he considered Chekhov to be a "minstrel of hopelessness."

But not all the criticism was bad. Chekhov intrigued audiences by breaking of conventional rules of drama. Some felt the performance was especially realistic, like "paying a call on the Prozorovs."<sup>8</sup> A voracious reader, young Chekhov familiarized himself with the existing European literature and drama and tested the limits of these forms and genres. Disregarding spectator and reader expectations, his short stories and plays provided few conclusive or morally sound answers to the questions raised and lacked action-packed plots.<sup>9</sup> Chekhov's plays demand we create our own meaning. Despite mixed reactions, Chekhov valued the collaborative nature of theatre, stating: "Solitude is a terrible thing. Bad criticism is better than none."<sup>10</sup> Stanislavsky and the actors of the Moscow Art Company also warmed to the play after a while. The comically tragic (or, tragically comic) play began to work when the artists discovered their characters' "joy and laughter" as well as their darker complexities.

The original actor to play the Baron wrote these notes on his character:

Longing for life.  
Call to work.  
Tragic quality against laughable comedy.  
Happiness as future destiny.  
Work. Loneliness.<sup>11</sup>

## HISTORICAL, CULTURAL, AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Loneliness and melancholy are common traits of Chekhovian characters. However, his characters also portray subtle humor or irony: “the characters have a habit of taking calamities lightly and trivialities tragically.”<sup>12</sup> Encompassing a range of characters and varied locations, the Chekhovian mood is a product of his position in Russian history. The Russian society of the time manifests in the characters’ expression of “the general mood and feelings of a generation which has lost its ideals.” Shortly before the Russian Revolution, Chekhov responded to the general dissatisfaction of the Russian people at the onset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some uniquely Russian influences on this mood include the country’s oppressive cold, varied and vast land, and high suicide rate.<sup>13</sup>

While broad generalizations are useful in understanding the context of Chekhov’s writing, he was more interested in the individual: “I have faith in individuals, I seek salvation in individual people, whether intellectuals or peasants. They are scattered all over Russia, they have power, although they are scarce.”<sup>14</sup> Despite the bleak and hopelessness on the surface, Chekhov maintained an optimism for the future of Russia and the earth: “Life is long and there will be many good and bad happenings, Mother Russia is so vast.”<sup>15</sup>

## ADAPTATIONS OF *THREE SISTERS*



*Brace Up!* Link: [Wooster Group's Website](#)

Adaptations of Chekhov’s plays proliferate in contemporary theatre, partly due to Chekhov’s Shakespeare-like genius and understanding of human nature. Perhaps adapting Chekhov’s work is an attractive venture today because he wrote during a time of great anxiety in Russia. Contemporary adaptations range from simple translations (often updating the language) to alterations (i.e. introducing new characters) to radical reimagining of the play (Wooster Group). It is also common to mix and match Chekhov characters, plots and themes from his entire body of work. While it is unnecessary to read other adaptations for this production, it is useful to know the range of Chekhov adaptations being generated in contemporary theatre and which artists are interested in the play. *Scripts/reviews available upon request.*

## SELECTED ADAPTATIONS:

*The Three Sisters* by David Mamet  
*Three Sisters* by Tracy Letts  
*Chekhov's Three Sisters* by Sarah Ruhl  
*The Fourth Sister* by Janusz Glowacki  
*The Break of Day* Timberlake Wertenbaker  
*Crimes of the Heart* by Beth Henley  
*The Sisters Rosenweig* by Wendy Wasserstein  
*Afterplay* by Brian Friel  
*Brace Up* Wooster Group  
*We Are Three Sisters* Blake Morrison<sup>1</sup>  
*There, There*, by Kristen Kosmas\*

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## ARTICLES/REVIEWS

### IN DRAMATURGY SUPPLEMENT:

"After Chekhov: The Three Sisters of Beth Henley, Wendy Wasserstein, Timberlake Wertenbaker, and Blake Morrison," Verna A. Foster – Foster explores four adaptations and how they handle the educated women characters through a modern feminist lens. She discusses Chekhovian mood, concept of "Moscow" in each adaptation, and explores each adaptations complicity with source text.

"Adapting Chekhovian Mood," Tatiana Smorodinskaya – Smorodinskaya discusses film adaptations of Chekhov compared to theatrical adaptations with a focus on the "Chekhovian" mood.

"Adapting Chekhov: A Primer for Dramaturgs," Valleri J. Robinson - Robinson gives a pedagogical overview of teaching dramaturgy and adaptation of Chekhov to students, with an emphasis on the adaptations of Chekhov's short stories in the *Orchards* collection of plays.

"EF's Visit to a Small Planet," by Elinor Fuchs – Fuchs gives useful guidelines to exploring the world of a play thoroughly before analyzing its characters

"Marthaler Meets Chekhov," by Lydia Stryk – Stryk details the famous Swiss direct Christoph Marthaler's production of *Three Sisters* which was put forth the philosophical idea that "humanity situates itself in the absurd" (52).

### IN PRINT (OR ELECTRONICALLY BY REQUEST):

"Robert Strurua's *Three Sisters*," Nick Worrall – Worrall describes a postmodern adaptation with detailed production notes: "*characters are painfully aware of their own absurdity... Tragic one minute and comic the next, these actors do not so much perform Chekhov as express his very essence*" (80).

<sup>1</sup> In this adaptation, the three sisters are the Bronte sisters. It is rumored that Chekhov originally based his play on the real Bronte sisters.

“Chekhov’s Stories and the Plays,” Donald Rayfield – Rayfield’s explores and compares Chekhov’s plays and how they echo themes and characters in his short stories: *“Chekhov’s plays can best be understood through short stories whose characters, situations, techniques, and even phrases they recycle”* (204).

“The Stage Representation of Chekhov’s Women,” Cynthia Marsh – Marsh gives an excellent survey of classification and analysis of Chekhov’s women characters. *A Theory of Adaptation, Linda Hutcheon* – Hutcheon’s How/What/when/Where/Why of adaptations includes explorations of concepts of forms, contexts, audiences (aware and unaware of source), and process: “What is involved in adapting can be a process of appropriation, of taking possession of another’s story, and filtering it, in a sense, through one’s own sensibility, interests, and talents. *Therefore, adapters are first interpreters and then creators*” (18).

#### IN THIS PACKET:

“Where Chekhov Meets Christopher Walken” – Review of *There, There* by Kristen Kosmas. **Page 19**

“Chekhov: Shorter, Faster, Funnier, and Uncut,” by Tom Donaghy – Donaghy gives a very readable and approachable analysis of successful techniques in adapting Chekhov and maintaining his humor. **Page 16**

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## CHEKHOVIAN CONCEPTS IN *INSIGNIFICANCE*

### BIRCH TREE

*“A conversation about earth from another planet 1000 years from now: do you remember that white (birch) tree?”<sup>16</sup>*

Chekhov uses the birch tree to symbolize Russia in much of his writing. Frequently evoked in other Russian art and literature, the birch tree symbolizes purity and renewal. Sometimes a symbol for Russia itself, the birch tree is as essential to Russia as the bear or Chekhov himself.



# MOSCOW



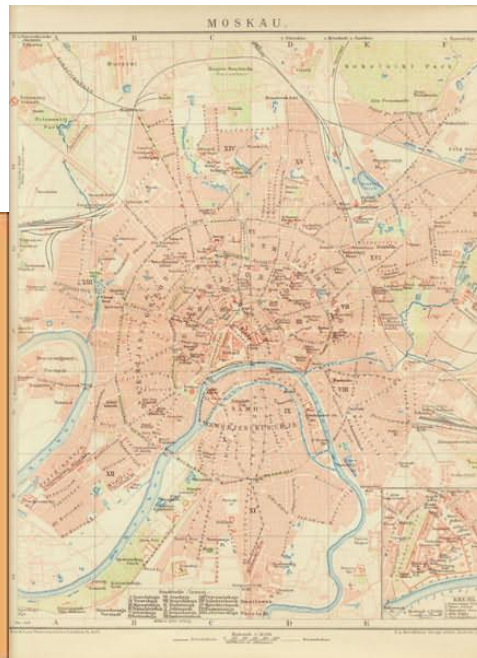
*St. Basil's Cathedral*

While many of his short stories take place in Moscow, Chekhov's major plays more often reference Russia's original capital as a place of hope and symbol for the birth of Russia. When Chekhov was alive, St. Petersburg was the capital of Russia, but Moscow has since reclaimed the title. In the source text, Moscow symbolizes the characters' hopes for the future and changing their present, static circumstances. In *Insignificance*, the symbol of Moscow remains close to Chekhov, but encapsulates much more about human delusion.

If you want to fantasize about Moscow, a travel guide will be available in the rehearsal room. Or check out Lonely Planet: <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/russia/moscow>.



*Moscow, Russia*



*1899 Map of Moscow*

## BEAR

*“In both Eurasia and North America, the bear occupied a prominent and unique place in early cultures and had a special relationship to humans.” (Brunner 2).*

Respected and honored by many cultures, bears bear strikingly humanlike features and possess a powerful virility. However, in addition to honor and respect, humans also fear bears, sometimes to the point of the species’ destruction. Yet, despite our multitude of emotions concerning bears and our endangerment of the species, Brend Brunner points out that the Bear continues “to populate our personal and collective dreams.”<sup>17</sup>

While a bear has not yet appeared in an adaptation of *Three Sisters*, the use of the human/bear relationship in literature is frequent. For Fly, the Bear in *Insignificance* originated from the Russian bear, a common symbol for the former USSR and contemporary Russia (a Eurasian brown bear). An old Russian legend describes the bear as “the product of a relationship between a forest spirit and a woman who was half-human and half-animal.<sup>18</sup> Often, the Bear is the part of an “inter-species love” story, much like *The Beauty and the Beast*.<sup>19</sup> In these narratives, the Bear commonly “embodies raw power, sexuality, and pagan magic beyond civilization and outside established religion.”

It is important to realize that bears are wild animals: “For the most part, bears are far less interested in us than we are in them.”<sup>20</sup> Humans who keep bears as pets often delude themselves into thinking the animal loves them, but more often than not, bears see humans as a source for food. Once the cub grows, its size and wild instincts make them unsuitable for household pets and it becomes particularly difficult to convince them to go back to the forest. The forest is an important component of bear narratives, functioning as a romanticized space outside of society. By entering their territory (which they mark by scent), the human invasion of the Bear’s forest can result in excellent metaphors in writing, but often injury in reality. After all, “writing about bears [...] is dangerous business.”<sup>21</sup> People can easily be seduced by the bears, but due to human delusion and romanticization, a relationship with a bear can ultimately be a person’s destruction.

In *Insignificance*, the Bear embodies many functions as it is what the character project onto it. We do not want to close off meaning by explicitly defining the Bear for the audience (or ourselves). Instead, the Bear should offer an opportunity to communicate a range of meanings for the audience.

*An excerpt of the introduction to Bernd Brunner’s Bears, which explores human relationships with bears as well as biological information about bears, can be found on **page 21**. More excerpts can be found in the Dramaturgy Supplement and the full print book is available in the rehearsal room.*

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# CHEKHOV'S OTHER WORK

*Throughout Chekhov's body of work, repetition of theme and character emerge. The following are brief synopses of his major works and theme or characters that relate to Three Sisters.*

## FULL-LENGTH PLAYS

### *THE SEAGULL* (1895)

The main characters, all artists, are guests at a country estate. They are Mme Arkadina, a middle-aged actress; her lover, Trigorin, a successful writer; her son Konstantin, a writer; and Nina, a young aspiring actress whom Konstantin loves. Mme Arkadina, jealous of Nina's youth and promising career, acts cruelly and hatefully toward Konstantin, belittling his new play and withholding the approval he desperately seeks from her. Nina, impressed by Trigorin's fame, ignores Konstantin, who kills a seagull and shows it to her, perhaps symbolically referring to his broken dreams. All four go their separate ways, but two years later they are reunited at the same estate. When Nina again rejects Konstantin, he destroys his writings and shoots himself while his mother, unaware, plays cards in another room.<sup>22</sup>

*This play also has a Masha, who seems to suffer from similar alcohol problems. Additionally, the play presents themes of "indifferentism" and general regret and guilt about life passing the characters by. Because the play begins with the characters trying to put on a performance, the play lends itself nicely to meta-theatricality.*

### *UNCLE VANYA* (1896)

Ivan Voynitsky, called Uncle Vanya, is bitterly disappointed when he realizes that he has sacrificed and wasted his life managing the country estate and business affairs of his former brother-in-law, Serebryakov, who, Vanya discovers, will never be anything more than a pedantic second-rate academic. Sonya, Serebryakov's daughter and Vanya's assistant, silently endures her unrequited love for a local physician. Vanya attempts to shoot Serebryakov but misses, and little changes. Neither of them can give up the work, however meaningless, to which they have devoted their lives.

*The characters' bitter disappointment and inability (or lack of desire to) change their lives echoes that of Three Sisters. Additionally, the play discusses marital fidelity, nature, and boredom— "A boring life can't be an honest one" (226).*

### *THE CHERRY ORCHARD* (1903)

Madame Ranevskaya, who has spent five years in Paris to escape grief over her young son's death, returns to her home in Russia ridden with debt. She is obliged to decide how to dispose of her family's estate, with its beautiful and famous cherry orchard. The coarse but wealthy merchant Ermolai Lopakhin suggests that Mme Ranevskaya develop the land on which the orchard sits. Eventually Lopakhin purchases the estate and proceeds with his plans for a housing development. As the unhappy Ranevskayas leave the estate, the sound of saws can be heard in the orchard.

*Probably the most separated of Chekhov's plays in terms of themes and characters, this is one of his most well-known works and similarly explores the loss of a family history and the unknowableness of the future.*

### **IVANOV (1889)**

In this lesser performed full-length play, Nikolái Ivánov suffers from deep depression but refuses to move to a warmer climate which would aid his wife Anna's tuberculosis. When Anna dies, he tries to remarry but is accused of gold digging, he kills himself.

*The general tone and characters' inability to act in Ivanov is reminiscent of Three Sisters. Anna asks, "The flowers come back every spring, why not happiness?" (63).*

## **ONE-ACT PLAYS**

### **THE BEAR (1888)**

In this short comedy, a young widow, Yeléna Popóva, shuts herself away after her husband dies to spite her husband's poor treatment of her. Her elderly servant, Luká, insists she go out and live her life while she is young, but she stubbornly insists she will grieve forever. When a young man named Smírnoff comes knocking to collect a debt owed by her husband, she eventually falls in love with him.

*The title comes from Yeléna insulting Smírnoff: "You peasant! You bear! You vulgar bear! Monster! You ... radical!" (29). The play comments on love, courting, marriage, and death humorously.*

### **SWAN SONG (1887)**

In this one-act, an elderly actor is worried his talent is gone and he's wasted his life.

### **THE PROPOSAL (1888)**

In this breezy one-act comedy, a marriage proposal is derailed by petty arguments over ownership of land and quality of dogs.

### **THE DANGERS OF TOBACCO (1902)**

An old man prattling on more about his life than about tobacco.

### **THE WEDDING RECEPTION (1889)**

### **A RELUCTANT TRAGIC HERO (1889)**

### **THE FESTIVITIES (1891)**

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES

*Chekhov wrote over 20 short stories. Thematically, the short stories are sometimes darker with his ever-present humor just under the surface. I find “The Lady with the Dog” especially resonant with Three Sisters and have included it in the Supplemental Dramaturgy PDF. All other short stories available in rehearsal room or by request.*

### “THE COOK’S WEDDING” (1885)

A young boy’s impression of marriage and the woman as victim of man’s injustice.

### “THE DEAD BOY” (1886)

A traveler comes upon two peasants guarding a dead body on a chilly summer night.

### “THE STUDENT” (1894)

A student walks home in the cold, learns of the connection of time and is mysteriously happy.

### “WARD NO. 6” (1892)

In a mental asylum, a patient disagrees with the director’s running of the institution which is in poor condition. Eventually, due to the stress, the director too becomes the victim on mental illness.

### “THE LADY WITH THE DOG” (1899)

A man briefly meets a young woman while he is in town for a short while. He cannot stop thinking about her when he returns home and eventually finds her to express his love, but is met with a reaction he did not hope for.

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## OTHER RESOURCES – DRAMATURGY SUPPLEMENT

***THE FOLLOWING SOURCES CAN BE FOUND IN THE PDF DRAMATURGY SUPPLEMENT.***

FULL CHEKHOV BIO

ARTWORK/IMAGES

EXCERPTS FROM *BEARS*

CHEKHOV’S SHORT STORY “LADY WITH THE DOG”

ARTICLES/REVIEWS

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# NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "Anton Chekhov," Encyclopedia Britannica Online.
- <sup>2</sup> qtd. Senelick 58.
- <sup>3</sup> Aronson 135.
- <sup>4</sup> Aronson 136-137.
- <sup>5</sup> Senelick 58.
- <sup>6</sup> Senelick 59.
- <sup>7</sup> qtd. Senelick 65.
- <sup>8</sup> Senelick 67.
- <sup>9</sup> Kuzicheva 277.
- <sup>10</sup> qtd. Kuzicheva 273.
- <sup>11</sup> qtd. Senelick 59.
- <sup>12</sup> Hollosi 47.
- <sup>13</sup> Polotskaya 25.
- <sup>14</sup> qtd. Polotskaya 26.
- <sup>15</sup> Polotskaya 25.
- <sup>16</sup> Polotskaya 26.
- <sup>17</sup> Brunner 7.
- <sup>18</sup> Brunner 24.
- <sup>19</sup> Gerould 401.
- <sup>20</sup> Gerould 139.
- <sup>21</sup> Brunner 5.
- <sup>22</sup> Summaries of *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Cherry Orchard* from Encyclopedia Britannica Online.

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**Chekhov: Shorter, Faster, Funnier and Uncut: A Translator Susses out ...**  
 Donaghy, Tom  
*American Theatre*, May 2005, 22, 5; Performing Arts Periodicals Database  
 pg. 20

# CHEKHOV: SHORTER, faster, Funnier AND UNcut

A translator susses out the true Chekhov—with some surprising results

By Tom Donaghy

In the Novodevichy Cemetery, on the outskirts of Moscow, the legendary director Konstantin Stanislavsky lies entombed under an enormous marble gravestone. The marker is etched with the slightly abstracted image of a seagull, the icon of the Moscow Art Theatre, where Anton Chekhov's play *The Seagull* premiered, and where, not so arguably, modern drama was refined in the wake of Ibsen and launched into the world.

A few yards away, the gravestone of Chekhov himself can be found. It is, compared to Stanislavsky's, demure. Perhaps four feet tall, it is a white obelisk, hewn from unpolished marble and capped with a bronze gable. On it, the playwright's name is spelled out in Cyrillic lettering, slanting in the triangled curve that was the style of the then flourishing Art Nouveau movement. Chekhov's wife—Olga Knipper, who would perform in his masterwork, *The Cherry Orchard*, for some 40 years (photo records show her becoming stout and severe as the decades pass)—is buried at his side.

On July 15, Chekhov will have been dead for a century and a year. He breathed his last in a ritzy spa in Badenweiler, Germany, 1,500 or so miles from his grocery-store beginnings, after drinking a glass of champagne and sighing, "It's a long time since I drank champagne." His body was returned to Moscow, and since then his legend has grown there and everywhere.

A portraitist by nature, originally writing humorous sketches and stories for newspapers in St. Petersburg, Chekhov was revered in his lifetime for four complex and cherished plays before tuberculosis and its ravages exiled him to the seaside resort of Yalta. It was a Chekhovian end to 44 years of labor, love, ennui and empathy.

His legacy is certain. His plays, however, remain open to interpretation. He himself notoriously insisted that *The Seagull* and *The Cherry Orchard*

were "gay, lighthearted, comedies," but this was ignored by Stanislavsky, who directed the plays, according to Chekhov, as "weepy." The two men were often at loggerheads as a result. The premiere production of *The Cherry Orchard*, rehearsing in Moscow while the playwright withered in Yalta, gave Chekhov his final chance to decry what he saw as Stanislavsky's enduring misinterpretation of his work. As his strength waned, he roused himself, fired up his pen and dashed off acid-tinged missives that warned Stanislavsky against employing his familiar, cloying theatrical tricks. These usually involved the offstage sounds of dogs barking, birds singing and frogs croaking. Early in their collaboration, an exasperated Chekhov even exclaimed, "I shall write a new play and the first words will be, 'It's wonderful, this calm! No birds, no dogs, no cuckoos, no owls, no nightingales, no clocks, no sleigh bells, no crickets.'"

But Stanislavsky ignored the directives, and Chekhov, when finally taken to Moscow to attend opening night, was more or less disgusted by what he saw onstage. "Stanislavsky has ruined my play," he wrote Olga. "Oh well, I don't suppose anything can be done about it."

He supposed right. And in the 100 years that followed, something intractable began to take hold. By ignoring the playwright's intentions, Stanislavsky seems to have established a tradition for how Chekhov's plays

would be directed—and often misdirected—to this day. They have been remade and deconstructed. They have been springboards for directorial theories, from Eva Le Gallienne's to Joshua Logan's to Andrei Serban's to Peter Brook's. A recent production of *The Cherry Orchard*, directed by Einuntas Nekrosius of Lithuania, docked in at six hours. New York City's Wooster Group refracted *Three Sisters* through live video feed. The plays have been set in decrepit theatres, Northern Ireland, the Gul-



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editor's note

This month's special section on indigenous theatre from around the world, titled *Cultures in Peril*, is a compelling, thought-provoking, sometimes stark reminder of things we know about the theatre but seldom step back to contemplate.

For example: The fascinating symbolic parallel, suggested (in Leslie Asch's cover story, page 24) by Basil Jones of Handspring Puppet Company of South Africa, between the eponymous 16-foot-high giraffe in the production *Tall Horse* and the "girls" that have flowed out of Africa during the past century to enrich the world—Cubism, jazz, modern dance, even Modernism itself, in Jones's view—reinforces what we know about theatre as a humanizing bridge between nations, and between the past and the future. Playwright Lynn Nottage's heartrending accounts of "theatre of necessity" in Uganda (page 26) remind us of the elemental nature of performance; the courageous efforts of Mayan women in Chiapas, Mexico, (page 28) underscore the art form's enduring potential as a tool of political transformation.

For me, the most potent theme running through the collection is the irreducible significance of the actor—the importance of the body of the performer as a site of cultural knowledge, and as an instrument of its preservation and transmission. As Susan Leigh Foster points out in her 1995 study *Choreographing History*, the ability of the actor to communicate signs, complex ideas and history through gesture, performance, dance and sexuality puts the body on an equal footing with, or in an even more powerful position than, the book or the archive. Because no written record exists of many of the stories being told in these indigenous performances, the actor's body becomes paramount: not merely the conduit of a narrative but a literal incarnation of it—and a living link to theatre's ancient origins in ritual and magic.

The international focus carries over into other parts of the issue: In addition to *American Theatre's* annual directory of international summer theatre festivals (page 37), Joan Channick's editorial (page 4) advocates a greater role for artists in U.S. diplomatic policy; Melanie Joseph is inspired by the energy and rigor of a progressive gathering in Brazil (page 54); and French director Ariane Mnouchkine extols the art of theatre in two languages on the occasion of *World Theatre Day* (page 59).

At a time when the U.S. seems politically alienated from many parts of the world and culturally suspect in others, theatre can be an indispensable reminder that we are not alone. —Jim O'Quinn

## CONTRIBUTORS



**Playwright Tom Donaghy's** first encounter with translating and adapting Chekhov—for a production of *The Cherry Orchard* that opens May 25 at New York City's Atlantic Theater Company—prompted a treatise, sometimes irreverent essay (page 20) on the Russian dramatist's theatrical prose and dramatic intentions. He was particularly struck, Donaghy writes, by "the twin strains of brutality and hilarity" that run through Chekhov's final play.



**Performer and scholar Ellen Fisher** began her research in Sri Lanka 30 years ago, as a young dancer studying the upcountry Kandyan dance. "I recently returned to document the authentic rituals of this island culture through writing and filming," she says. "Seeing the rituals and their effect on the people has reinforced my belief that art can both entertain and heal through the transformative powers of the performer." She shares her experiences on page 34.

## AMERICAN THEATRE

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lah Islands—you name it. They have often bored audiences to tears, and sometimes they have been as full of bells and whistles as a Ringling Brothers dressing room. They have played like Strindberg at his gloomiest and Neil Simon at his schtickiest. No doubt somewhere on this earth the curtain is about to rise on a shadow puppet version of *Uncle Vanya*.

What of the text, though, unethered to directorial interpretation? What does it say to us on its own? Even more important, how does it say it?

Lately, I've been reading a literal translation of *The Cherry Orchard* for an adaptation I'm creating for Atlantic Theater Company's current season. The work is by Ronald Meyer, director of the M.A. program in Russian literary translation at Columbia University. It is a verbatim translation from the original Russian text to American English—as close to reading Chekhov's original script as any non-Russian-reading reader can get. What's more, it's eye-poppingly different from any "Chekhov" I've ever read in the 20 years that I've been familiar with his plays.

What is striking at first about the translation is the text's sui generis nature. It is its own

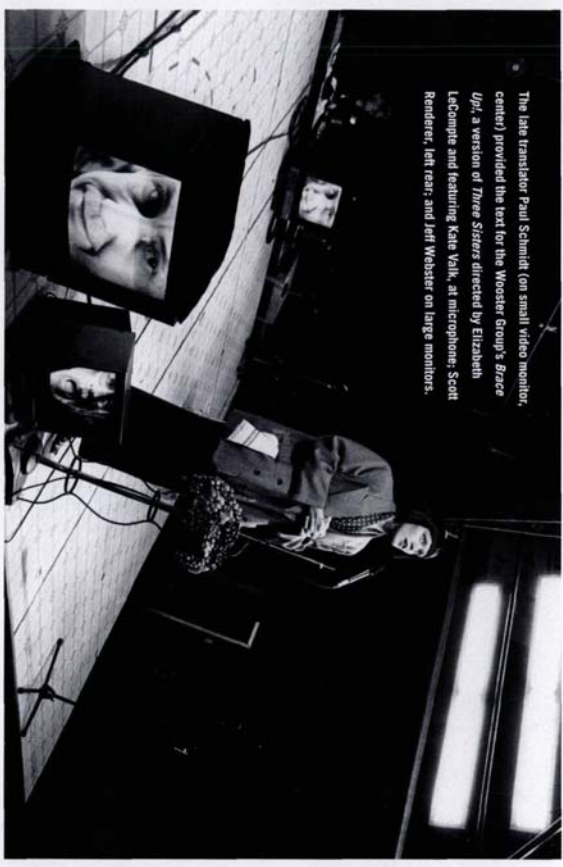


**"Stanislavsky has ruined my play," Chekhov wrote Olga. "Oh well, I don't suppose anything can be done about it."**

thing—exotic and resistant to seeming like anything else, adaptable to no other settings. Its integrity is surely sound; to transpose its characters to a different time or place seems unnecessary and slightly cuckoo. And yet, of course, Chekhov's plays—more than any other playwright's save for Shakespeare—seem to suffer a kind of mania for interpretation.

The other striking thing about the translation, which is apparent from the first page, is its twin strata of brutality and hilarity. The play possesses both, with very little transition between the two. The characters and their emotions, as Australians say, "all over the shop." At a moment in time when drama seems to need to explain, spell out, comfort and offer lessons, Chekhov's final play stands in gorgeous resistance to these tasks. It jerks you through the air; yet there is no net below. It does not comfort, on the contrary, it agitates—but at the most fundamental and emotional level. This is upsetting, but also exhilarating and, yes, very funny. You are unprepared as a reader—and even though you think you might be familiar with the play, you have no idea where you are being taken. And you are, no question, being taken. For something that seems on the face of it plot-

*continued on page 62*



The late translator Paul Schmitz (on small video monitor, center) provided the text for the Wooster Group's *Brace Up!*, a version of *Three Sisters* directed by Elizabeth LeCompte and featuring Kate York, at microphones; Scott Rensler, left rear; and Jeff Webster on large monitors.

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**Chekhov: Shorter, Faster, Funnier and Uncut** *continued from page 21*

less, nonlinear and willfully static, these courses underneath this play a vitality that is antic and not entirely kind. The play wants to toss you about. Similar to the vertiginous feeling you get as you try to grab hold of Virginia Woolf's sentences, with their incantous swoops, Chekhov's play can fling you somewhere, and you arrive before you even realize you've been flung. And then you are off again. At the end of the play, when axes are heard taking great chunks out of the cherry trees, the reader is breathless, shaken and suspicious of the ground beneath. But giggle—giddy even. People behave ridiculously; this is life.

**THEN WHY IS IT WE DON'T ALWAYS** feel this when seeing a production of these plays? I have a hunch the problem begins with adaptations. Adaptations happen. But how? One

of two ways, really. They can be generated from a literal translation of the original text (what I'm doing); the translator one person, the adaptor another. Or, in rare cases, such as when a playwright speaks Russian, the translator and adaptor can be one and the same. This is the case with the elegant adaptations of the scholar and theatre artist Paul Schmitz.

There are, however, a whole lot of danderheaded adaptations of Chekhov's plays, such as the one I—and many others—first read in college by the artistically named Constance Garnet. The fault with these adaptations seems to be embellishment; straightening out the kinked way Chekhov's scenes proceed; having the characters make more "sense" by smoothing over what seem to be their abrupt reversals of mood; theatricalizing the plays, akin to what Stanislavsky did in his productions, in

order to foster a kind of naturalism that the plays do not really possess on the page. Often adaptations want to make the characters merly tragic, or worse, loveable.

In Janet Malcolm's *Reading Chekhov*, she observes that when you utter the name "Chekhov" in Russia, no less than in our own country, people "arrange their features as if a baby deer had come into the room." This fawning reference surrounding Chekhov's reputation has transferred itself to the adaptations and productions of his plays, resulting in a kind of pretty veneer that has built up over them in the course of the last century. But this gauzy, huggable overtness is not warranted. It would have outraged the famously unsentimental playwright, who spent many years hacking due to the blood in his lungs.

There are also adaptations that politicize the plays, by tilting them toward a present and specific awareness of the Russian revolution to come. But Chekhov was not concerned with politics. On the subject of political action his plays are, if anything, about people's inability to actually engage in it. Chekhov is not like his friend, the revolutionary Maxim Gorky. Chekhov wrote about people and their inability to organize their own world, not about people who were able—or even truly interested in—reorganizing the larger one.

All of these interpretations have the ability to distort adaptations and wrench Chekhov's plays from their very simple conveyance of life as it is actually lived—even today. People go about talking and making love and hoping and having tea, and all the while things are being simply, effortlessly lost.

The most striking thing about the literal translation I am basing my adaptation on, however, is its remarkable brevity. It is 73 pages. As many of us know, a playwright is usually nearer 120 pages, signaling—the rule is a minute a page—a two-hour play. A 73-page play starting at 8 p.m. would then come down about 9:13 p.m. This begs an important question: Who among

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us has ever seen a Chekhov play and made it to dinner by 9:45?

**WHEN I ASKED MEYER WHAT HE** may have cut to make the play so short, he said, "Nothing. You're getting it world-for-word from the original Chekhov text." Why then have we endured three-to-four-hour versions of *The Cherry Orchard*? Chekhov himself said the last act should run 12 minutes—he even wrote it this way because the characters are running for the train.

And as I read the translation for the first time, I saw exactly why the play shouldn't be long: Its brevity is precisely what creates the 3-D nature of its power. It is fast because it is dire. One wants it to slow down for the sad parts, and it does, but then it lifts again with velocity because it is inexorably moving toward its end—an end, by the way, that has shades of both light and dark. Before seeing the literal translation, I only ever remembered the tragedy of the characters losing their cherry orchard, but Meyer's translation suggests there is, for the characters, just as much relief as grief.

Indeed, one gets the feeling that Lyubov Ranevskaya, the owner of the orchard, will be able to finally axe this Russian part of her life, lived near the river where her only son drowned, to return to Paris where she can continue to cheerfully—as they say today—reinvent herself. When she's asked when she'll return to visit, she evades the question. Leonid Gaev, her brother, remarks that everyone seems much more content now that the orchard is sold. Her daughter, Anya, is made positively buoyant by what we have come to think of as a crippling loss. A new life without the worries of a big estate sounds just peachy to her. There are only three characters who seem to be truly put out: Varya, but she is heading to a new job in town; Charlotta, the governess, who as a former circus performer has been itinerant her whole life anyway; and the ancient servant and former serf, Firs, who wants nothing more than to die, and then promptly does—

it seems so anyway—as the lights come down. What is so "weepy" about this?

In the end, perhaps, any adaptation should adhere to the only dictum I was able to glean from Anatoly Smeliansky, an associate director at the Moscow Art Theatre and head of the Moscow Art Theatre School. I met Smeliansky, an elfin man full of charm and seriousness—considered by many to be the world's foremost authority on Chekhov—in his offices on Kamergersky Lane, several floors above the stage on which Chekhov's plays were first presented. When I asked him how long my adaptation should be—or how many minutes he thought the

play should run—he gave me a level look. "The play works long, and it works short," he said in his thick Muscovite accent. "Yes, but—" I said. "Listen to me," he said, cutting me off. "If it takes four hours, fine. If it takes 90 minutes, that's fine too. The important thing is that your audience understand the story you think Chekhov wanted to tell."

"Aha," I thought—and set about my work. **AT**

*Tom Donaghy's adaptation of The Cherry Orchard opens May 25 at New York City's Atlantic Theater Company.*

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THEATER REVIEWS | THEATER REVIEW

# Where Chekhov Meets Christopher Walken

‘There There,’ by Kristen Kosmas, at the Chocolate Factory

**There There** | NYT Critic’s Pick | Off Off Broadway, Play, Comedy

Closing Date: January 12, 2013 | Chocolate Factory, 5-49 49th Ave. | 866-811-4111

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO JAN. 2, 2013

For those of you still in the market for a New Year’s resolution, here’s a manageable one: Get yourself to the Chocolate Factory and see Kristen Kosmas’s new play, “There There.”

I can’t think of a better way to start the theatergoing year than with this language-drenched, resonant knockout, part of the Coil festival, organized by Performance Space 122, which commissioned the show with the Chocolate Factory.

On paper, the concept for “There There” is a bit wacky: during a Russian tour of a solo show inspired by Captain Vasily Vasilevich Solyony from Chekhov’s “Three Sisters,” the actor Christopher Walken meets with an unfortunate accident involving a ladder. Karen (Ms. Kosmas) must replace him, performing in English with an accompanying Russian interpreter, Leo (Larissa Tokmakova). Karen, naturally, isn’t very familiar with this play, and Leo is the usual interpreter’s understudy.

What follows is something of a dual monologue (Matvei Yankelevich wrote the Russian translation, which has its own poetic life), and it’s a virtuosic feat.

“Two women talking philosophy. Pff!” Karen tells Leo in an aside, echoing Solyony’s comment about female philosophizers “talking through their hats.”

As these two women plunge rapidly down their parallel tracks, the layers of meaning stack up, and the edges begin to fray. Did Mr. Walken (who appears in name only) really have an accident, or was he — like the Baron in the Chekhov play — dispatched by Solyony in a duel? Karen explains the past a lot. But whose? And are she and Leo working as a team or engaged in a duel of their own?

They are, I think, operating somewhere in the muddy middle, just as “There There,” directed by Paul Willis, a frequent collaborator of Ms. Kosmas’s, is both a close exploration of certain themes in “Three Sisters” and its own, marvelously sovereign world; you can experience it in conversation with Chekhov or simply sink into Ms. Kosmas’s lucid yet complex riffs on, among other things, the inarguable nature of love and the fine lines between responsibility and guilt.

“Did I kill him?” Karen asks, amid talk of dueling, imploring audience members who sit closely on both sides of the small, rectangular space, which is carpeted, festooned and hung with Futurist images and portraits of military men. (Peter Ksander designed the evocative set.) “Did I turn her into the flowering tree?” she asks of her love.

Her jury and her interpreter stare mutely back at her. And so this strange, solitary chatterbox presses on, falling into language as if to escape from herself.

**There There** | NYT Critic’s Pick

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website: <http://www.chocolatefactorytheater.org>

**Category** Off Off Broadway, Play, Comedy

**Credits** Written by Kristen Kosmas, directed by Paul Willis

**Opened** December 18, 2012

**Closing Date** January 12, 2013

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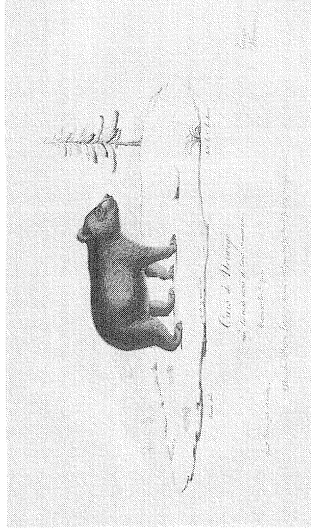
## Introduction

What might the first encounter between human and bear have been like? Perhaps a prehistoric hunter watched from his hiding place as a bear stood up on its hind legs. What other animal had he ever seen stand erect? Other than bears, only a few types of rodents and—oddly enough—owls stand upright as humans do. Our ancient observer was probably also amazed by how dexterously the bear could reach for fruit with its forepaws. He could have noticed how the bear's paws differ from his own hands: since the bear has no thumbs, each paw's five "fingers" possesses equal importance. Despite its large nose, the bear's face, with his eyes aligned in a nearly frontal plane, would also have seemed familiar. Since its feet seem almost humanlike as well, the hunter would have realized which animal had produced the tracks he had seen earlier in the forest. And he may have drawn the comparison between the bear's long claws and his own fingernails. Once he had killed and skinned the animal and had seen how slim and light-colored its body was under its fur, the hunter would certainly have recognized how much the bear resembled him.

As early humans became more familiar with bears, they may have realized that the animals

Humanlike  
features

Norwegian Bear,  
by Etienne  
Geoffroy Saint-  
Hilaire (1824).



ate the same things they did: whether the herbs and berries that they plucked, the roots that they dug from the ground, the gophers and other small animals that they hunted, or the fish that they caught. A bear may even have guided them to sources of honey. On occasion, humans and bears also surely came into conflict over their choice of caves. Over time, ancient people began to perceive bears in two ways: as intimately related to them, but also as serious competitors. In the long run, humans were the victors, even though they possessed only primitive weapons and their opponents were considerably stronger. They pushed their way farther and farther into the bears' territory and drove the shy animals out, felling entire forests to clear the land for planting.

In both Eurasia and North America, the bear occupied a prominent and unique place in early cultures and had a special relationship to humans. Wherever people and bears lived in proximity, humans displayed the same ambivalent behavior: although the bears were driven out, hunted, and killed, their relative resemblance to humans

Conflict



Auf der Ahtenig.

Early bear  
hunt in  
Germania.

and their enormous strength commanded our respect. This paradox formed the cornerstone of *Bear Ceremonialism in the Northern Hemisphere*, a study published by American cultural anthropologist Irving Hallowell in 1926. Although the festivals celebrated by both Eurasian peoples and many Native American tribes varied from region to region, Hallowell found that they shared the same basic impetus: the bear was honored as the lord of the forest or the son of the supreme ruler, whose calling it was to uphold justice. Groups that were widely separated geographically, Hal-

Novos  
& respect

lowell claimed, shared the belief that a bear killed in the hunt would enter a new life.

Even the similarity of the euphemisms used in various cultures to refer to bears—referring to the word “bear” itself was often thought to be tempting fate and was therefore taboo—demonstrates that the animal occupied a comparable role in all of them. According to Holloway, the bear was called “cousin” by the Abenaki, Tsimshian, and Tahltan Indians; “grandfather” by the Penobscot; and “four-legged human” or “chief’s son” by the Plains Cree. The Siberian Kets endowed him with noble names such as “fur father,” “old claw man,” or “beautiful animal.” The Samoyeds, also from Siberia, called him “old father,” while the Estonians named him “broad-foot,” and the Carpathian Huzuls referred to him as “little uncle” or “great hairy one.” Finally, the Laplanders dubbed the bear “the old man with the fur garment,” while their Swedish neighbors used the names “old man,” “gold feet,” or “twelve men’s strength.” If these aliases sound romantic to us today, we need to keep in mind that they reflected a completely different relation to the animal kingdom, one in which the bear represented the single large animal that resembled, and competed with, humans. The existence of apes, let alone their close genetic relationship with us, was unknown in the Northern Hemisphere.

THIS BOOK EXAMINES the shared history of humans and bears. This history is composed of

many stories—some of them recorded, some of them lost, and some of them told and retold so many times that boundaries between fact and fiction have become blurred, making it difficult or impossible to untangle the two. The relations between humans and bears throughout history are complex because they play out within the poles of attraction and repulsion, combining these seemingly irreconcilable opposites in almost every possible way. In other words, our interactions with bears are laden with mixed feelings: our forebears venerated, killed, caressed, tortured, nurtured, ate, respected, and despised them. In some instances, these paradoxical attitudes can even be found within the framework of a single culture. In comparatively recent times, humans have also begun to scrutinize bears closely out of scientific interest. It may often seem that this rational outlook has completely replaced our forefathers’ more emotional or even spiritual views of bears. A return to older worldviews may not be possible or even desirable, but, if we look more closely, we will see that bears continue to exert a powerful and seemingly inexplicable fascination for us.

\* Writing about bears, however, is a dangerous business. The existence of so many pleasurable accounts of bears can easily blind us to the importance of those that are less so. And it can seem as though everybody is reading over your shoulder: teddy bear lovers, biologists, hunters, poachers, animal-rights advocates, and others, all of whom—in one way or another—have a stake in

Attraction  
+  
repulsion

resemblance & competition

bears and bring their own perspective and history to the subject. Rather than try to single out the “correct” perspective on bears, I trace these interwoven strands by focusing where cultural and natural history intersect. I will tell some of the stories of humans and bears and explore certain key topics and questions. A number of the examples I provide along the way are drawn from outside the borders of the English-speaking world. While the saga of bears in America plays an important role in this book, the tangled histories of bears in places like Russia or Japan are equally fascinating and deserve our attention. At the same time, the complexity of the subject means that no book about bears can hope to be comprehensive. However, I want to provide a sense of the scope of these remarkable animals—the many varieties and their habitats and behaviors summarized by the misleadingly simple term “bear.”

Despite their diversity and illustrious history, the state of bears today is sobering. These once abundant animals are now largely confined to areas with little or no human civilization. Is it possible for humans and bears to share the same space at all? Why is it so hard for us to imagine these extraordinary creatures clearly without caricatures immediately filling our minds? Do we really know what bears are like, what they feel? Do bears deserve their reputation as particularly dangerous predators? And, if so, who is actually preying on whom these days?

Bears are strong, intelligent, and fascinating

animals whose ways deserve respect. Examining our dealings with bears throughout history will improve our understanding of our relationship to them today. What other animal occupies as much space in the human imagination as the bear? Bears are present in our entertainment and advertising, in our art and literature, in our folk wisdom and popular sayings. Although bears have disappeared from vast stretches of the earth, they continue to populate our personal and collective dreams.