

Anton Chekhov (1860-1904)

Born the son of an abusive clerk (and later grocer) and grandson to a liberated serf, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov is regarded by many as one of the greatest writers of short stories in the history of the style. In the theatre he is highly regarded for his only four plays and his work with the Moscow Art Theatre (MXAT), specifically his collaboration with director Konstantin Stanislavski.

His writing began out of necessity to provide for himself and his family in Moscow where his father had fled to avoid debtors' prison. In order to provide for the family as well as pay his tuition to medical school, he began to submit daily humorous, short stories to publishers. Although his fame comes from his writing, he always considered his work as a physician his primary career.

Ironically (for a physician), Chekhov found himself wrestling constantly with tuberculosis from 1884 onwards. He was not officially diagnosed until 1897, when he suffered a hemorrhage in his lungs that resulted in a necessary change in lifestyle, prompting his move to the countryside town of Yalta.

Anton's brother Ivan worked as a school teacher and tutor in Voskressensk, outside of Moscow. Each year the Chekhov family would spend their summer in the village with Ivan. A military battery, led by the Colonel B.I. Mayevsky was also stationed in Voskressensk at the time. Anton became close friends with the Colonel and his family, and it was from his time in the small town that he gained the military and rural-life inspiration for *Three Sisters*.

As his popularity as a playwright grew, he would split his time between his home in Yalta and Moscow where he could attend rehearsals at the Moscow Art Theatre. He died in 1908, finally succumbing to tuberculosis.

Chekhov & Stanislavski

Aside from a few sparse prior acquaintances, the now famous relationship between Chekhov and Stanislavski began, according to Stanislavski, in the spring of 1897 when Chekhov was among the first to become a shareholder in the new Moscow Art Theatre. According to Stanislavski, Chekhov expressed a real zeal for the goings on at the MXAT, particularly the repertory that the theatre would produce. Despite this, it took a great deal of convincing on the part of Stanislavski's partner and MXAT co-founder Vladimir Ivanovich Nemirovich-Danchenko to convince Chekhov to allow a staging of his *The Seagull* in 1898, which had been disastrously received previously, leaving the writer crushed and swearing off the producing of plays. Stanislavski, as director and performer in the role of Trigorin, goes on to describe the overwhelming success that the play had in its opening. So great was the audience's reception of the premier that they insisted that a congratulatory telegram be immediately sent off to the author, who was not in attendance.

Chekhov and Stanislavski went on to have a fruitful partnership in the MXAT, although Chekhov's specificity of character's look and mannerisms would, at times, clash with

Stanislavski's psychological approach to acting. Despite this, the two would work together to produce the subsequent three plays that not only made Chekhov's name historically famous in the theatre, but helped to establish the MXAT as one of the best producers of theatre worldwide, a status that it still enjoys today.

Anton Chekhov continues, to this day, to be considered among the greatest pioneers in psychological realism in the theatre, continuing the work that Henrik Ibsen began in the 1870's. He has been noted to have influenced the writing of such luminaries as James Joyce and Virginia Woolfe among others and continues to touch audiences with his subtle use of small talk and middle-class issues.