

2018

Conquering the Fear: A Journey of Triumph Through the Exploration of Creating the Role of Masha in Anton Chekhov's Three Sisters

Cassandra Noel Hackbart

Follow this and additional works at: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Hackbart, Cassandra Noel, "Conquering the Fear: A Journey of Triumph Through the Exploration of Creating the Role of Masha in Anton Chekhov's Three Sisters" (2018). *Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Problem Reports*. 5729.

<https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/etd/5729>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by the The Research Repository @ WVU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you must obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in WVU Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Problem Reports collection by an authorized administrator of The Research Repository @ WVU. For more information, please contact researchrepository@mail.wvu.edu.

Conquering the Fear:
A journey of triumph
Through the exploration of creating the role of
Masha in Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*

Cassandra Noel Hackbart

Thesis Submitted to the
College of Creative Arts
at West Virginia University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts
in
Acting

Cathy O'Dell, M.F.A, Chair
Jerry McGonigle, M.F.A
Radhica Ganapathy, Ph.D.
Mary McClung, M.F.A

School of Theatre & Dance

Morgantown, WV
2018

Keywords: Three Sisters, Masha, Anton Chekhov, Olga Knipper, Michael Chekhov, Sanford Meisner

© Cassandra Noel Hackbart

Abstract

Conquering the Fear:

A journey of triumph

Through the exploration of creating the role of
Masha in Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*

Cassandra Noel Hackbart

This thesis is a documentation of my process for undertaking the role of Masha in Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, performed in the Gladys G. Davis Theatre at the West Virginia University Creative Arts Center. This document will serve to archive the application of my graduate training while performing a major role; as well as, record my personal growth in a single production. In a reflective tone, I expound on the pressures and fears that I encountered, and the techniques that informed my self-realizations throughout the production process. The production process is composed of the three major sections. The first section reflects the nerve-racking initial audition and callbacks. The most intensive section of my process encompasses the day-to-day discoveries in the rehearsal hall. The rehearsal section will include a thorough dissection of my research into the history of Russian society in the 1900s and the playwright; as well as, my application of techniques as created by Sanford Meisner and Michael Chekhov. The last section will examine the performance process of *Three Sisters*. Though I have chosen this specific role to encapsulate the mastery of my graduate studies, I would be remiss if I did not give recognition to how this process has influenced my career beyond my graduate studies. This role has challenged me to observe how my fears and hesitations have influenced my acting, and provided a solid process to conquer my fears in future endeavors. This thesis role was a true testament to my training at West Virginia University and my capabilities as a theatre artist.

Acknowledgements

To the performance faculty of the School of Theatre and Dance at West Virginia University, thank you for your guidance and encouragement. From breakthroughs that I experienced in-class and/or on stage to the times I would sit in your office and talk for absolutely no reason, I would not trade my time with you for anything in the world. Thank you for teaching me about the craft, but most of all thank you for teaching me about my capabilities.

To my fellow graduate colleagues, I cannot believe it either. What was that? Where did the time go? Did we really make it out alive in that petri dish of an office? Yes, we did. I am overwhelmed with joy to be able to grow and experience so much with you. Through good times and bad, I am glad we made it out together.

To all the local coffee shops in Morgantown, WV, thank you for being my fuel during this three-year process and while writing my thesis. I never drank coffee before graduate school, but I can honestly say that I'm glad I discovered such solace in a local cup of coffee.

To my friends and family, thank you for your never-ending support. You were always there to pick me up when all I want to do give up. You know exactly what to say, even when I am stubborn and say nothing at all. You have provided me with such a beautiful life. You are my rock.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Jay Randall Trickett

I wrote a 70-page paper,
but I still do not have the words to describe
how much you meant to me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract....	ii
Acknowledgements....	iii
Dedication....	iv
Table of Contents....	v
Illustrations....	vi
An Introduction....	1
Part One: The Audition Process....	4
The General Audition....	5
The Callbacks....	8
Part Two: Research and Rehearsal....	15
Straight from the Horse’s Mouth: Anton Chekhov....	16
Getting to Know You: The Table Work....	23
Music and Literature....	24
Getting on Our Feet: The Rehearsal Exploration....	32
The Meisner Approach....	34
The Other Chekhov: Michael Chekhov Techniques....	50
Part Three: The Performances....	58
A Conclusion....	64
Works Cited....	66

Illustrations

Fig. 1- *The "Russian Wedding Cake" depicting social division.* Llewellyn, Jennifer, et al. "Russian society" at Alpha History, 2014, <http://alphahistory.com/russianrevolution/russian-society>.

Fig. 2- *Final rendering for the WVU production of Three Sisters; courtesy of set designer, James Raymond.* Raymond, James. West Virginia University, 2017.

An Introduction

Undertaking the iconic role of Masha in Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* is filled with the challenge of several pressures: the pressure of tackling a different time period and culture, the pressure to personalize my contemporary American perspective with a piece of Russian history, and the pressure to live up to others' expectations. It is befitting that the last pressure I mentioned is the biggest reason I decided to pursue graduate school for acting. Towards the end of undergraduate studies, my confidence in my acting abilities faded. I felt like there was some sort of pressure on me to go directly to New York City, audition, and make it big (Whatever "make it big" means). Then, once I graduated, none of that happened. I did not know what I wanted for myself. I kept lingering on other perspectives rather than my own. All I could think was "How am I going to do this?" and "With what money?" These questions kept adding up and propelled me into a search for what I wanted to do with my life. It was not until I started graduate studies in elementary education that I knew what I needed to do with my life.

The semester in elementary education was appealing when I was still using my theatrical abilities. I remember making up completely new lyrics to Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody* as a part of my final lesson plan presentation in one of my classes. Unfortunately, when I was not using those abilities I still felt lost. Finally, I found out that The School of Theatre and Dance at West Virginia University was still choosing candidates for their Masters of Fine Arts in Acting. I stopped asking questions and found an answer. As a part of my audition and interview for the program, I was asked, "Why do you want to go to grad school?" I responded, "So, I can stop being scared." Now, being cast in my thesis role, as Masha in *Three Sisters*, in my final year of graduate school, my training has equipped me to conquer my fears and break through the barriers of any challenge set before me.

With that being said, how does one confront the pressures of living up to such a world-renowned role as Masha? After all, the role was written specifically for Olga Knipper, the wife of Anton Chekhov. Then, there is the legendary playwright and one of the fathers of modern realism, Anton Chekhov. Not to mention Knipper was also an actor alongside Constantin Stanislavsky in Moscow Art Theatre's premiere production of *Three Sisters*. All three figures changed the face of theatre for their time and influenced theatre as we know it today. As quoted by Vershinin in Act One of *Three Sisters* (translation by Allen Fletcher).

“Everything that we think now as serious and important and meaningful – someday will be forgotten – or at least will seem insignificant. And it’s interesting that, now, we can’t possibly know what will really stand up as great and significant then, or what may be considered trivial and ridiculous. Didn’t the discoveries of Copernicus or, say, Columbus once seem trivial and ridiculous, while a lot of absolute nonsense written by some crank was taken as the truth?”

(Chekhov 10-11)

I would often refer to this quote whenever I felt the challenges of those pressures. No one can tell what the future will hold and what parts of life will be remembered throughout history. Did Anton Chekhov know this play would impact the theatre over a century after it was written? Did Olga Knipper know that she would be portraying a role that would be desired by generations of women? I am sure everyone hopes to leave a significance in their lifetime, but no one can possibly know what that will be until future generations give it a definition. This thesis experience gave me the opportunity to define the play for my purposes and the role's

significance, and become a part of history. I was able to personalize with a timeless classic, rather than be burdened with “doing it correctly” for some “crank”.

Along with personalizing to the role and the play, I discovered the significance of my abilities as an actor. I was able to strengthen my confidence, instead of wading in my doubts. My experience as portraying Masha in *Three Sisters* has led me full circle in my graduate career. From wanting to abandon my insecurities at my initial graduate school audition to using my training to defeat those re-occurring insecurities, I recognize the growth in my abilities; such as creating a beneficial warm-up before rehearsal, collecting in-depth research about the history of the culture and environment of the play, relying on the words of the playwright as opposed to my own justifications, preparing my personal relationship to the role, and building a relationship with the rest of the ensemble. This recognition of my abilities has served as a marker for just how far I have come in my training.

I also know I have further to go. My graduate education and thesis experience is only one spark in my career. It has taught me to be a forever learner, to take every experience and transform it into an experience that will help me learn and grow. This thesis experience, in particular, has taught me to strengthen my mission as a theatre artist. I truly believe that my job is to preserve stories. The pressure to preserve stories can be challenging. In the future, I need to seek out more points of view, and stay open to the significance of what differing points of view have to say. It takes a committed theatre artists to preserve and pass down empathy.

Part One: The Audition Process

Preparation for West Virginia University's fall semester main stage season was not anything new or unfamiliar. The biggest difference between this semester's audition and the other semesters was this audition would determine my thesis role. With the first production slot already cast, I was auditioning for the final two production slots, *Assassins* and *Three Sisters*. We had to prepare one Chekhovian monologue and 32 bars of a dramatic musical theatre song. Having experience in both forms, it was easy to choose my selections. I auditioned with a monologue from *Uncle Vanya* as Yelena and "You Don't Know This Man" from Jason Robert Brown's *Parade*. With such familiarity with the material, it was pretty easy to rehearse and uniformly put together a complete package. While I continue to utter the word easy, I find myself reflecting on the progression of the following audition experience. I realize that I struggled drastically trying to find the difference between easy and having ease. The biggest testament to that struggle would be the general audition. With that being said, the difference between easy and ease continued to resound as the audition process progressed.

The General Audition

My struggle between easy and having ease started with the general audition process. It's not unlike most college audition set-ups. I remember signing in and filling out minor paper work in the audition holding area. The collegiate audition process for the School of Theatre and Dance incorporates both graduate and undergraduate students auditioning together. I find this to be a unique aspect due to the varying levels of experience, and how that effects an audition holding area. I was surrounded by a few dozen undergraduates trying to prepare their auditions. It was like a petri dish of nervous energy. There were people stretching and jumping up and down, people vocally warming up, people reciting their monologue/song packages to imaginary figures that they placed on the wall, people listening to music, and people just trying to talk to other auditionees to distract their nerves. Surrounded by this nervousness, I tried to relax in the chair and wait. I had physically and vocally warmed up in a practice room downstairs to avoid adding any disruptive noise outside the audition room. I felt satisfied in my warm up preparation before leaving the practice room, but for some reason, in the audition holding area I felt like my confidence in my preparation was starting to dwindle. I felt like it wasn't enough. There was a rush of self-doubt as I observed myself and my surroundings. I kept thinking it shouldn't feel this easy. The habit of trying to live up to expectations started to overwhelm me. Whose expectations was I trying to appease? The fellow auditionees? They did not have any expectations of me. They were only thinking of themselves, and rightfully so. They're trying to prepare themselves for the audition ahead. Nonetheless, I felt the need to match the energy of the room. I tried to listen to energizing music. I recited my audition package to the wall. I felt obnoxious, tense, and self-conscious. I sat back down in my chair. I looked around and realized I was getting in my

own way. I was not letting my rehearsal and preparation affect me, instead, I was affecting my rehearsal and preparation.

This realization has not been that obvious to me in the past. One of the biggest obstacles I had to tackle throughout my graduate studies was getting out of my own way. Not *making* it happen, but having the ease to *let* it happen. I have slowly, but surely, started to make this lesson the theme of my acting career. Once I realized that I was struggling to get out of my own way, I knew that this was an opportunity to reacquaint myself with what I have learned through my graduate training. I reminded myself about discovering the specifics of a person, place, thing, or event, and immersing myself in that situation. Just like in real life, when people know exactly how they feel about a specific person, place, or thing, they do not need to knowingly stop and pre-plan what to say. People speak with abandon, whether it be good, bad, or ugly. Granted monologues, songs, and plays are pre-written words, but they must be a reflection of real life. Reciting pre-written words are not good enough. I had to fix a problem within the monologue and song.

I settled myself in a chair, took a breath, then heard my name called. I was on deck to audition. With one person, ahead of me, I triple checked my music and tried to subside any last-minute nerves. The auditionee in front of me finished their audition, and then I started putting one foot in front of the other until I saw it- A room full of professors that have seen me grow for three years. They have seen me go through the ringer of intensive training and various roles. So, why was I nervous? Normally in the professional world, it would be getting through the general audition to show them more of what I can do, but in this case the auditioners were my teachers. Two people who had influenced my growth in a very significant way. It was at that very moment that a rush of my graduate training ran through my memory. It only consumed the couple

seconds that it took me to turn the corner and look them in the eyes, but the flashback was filled with the various struggles and accomplishments that I had experienced up to that point. I realized I am not the same person as I was when I started my graduate training. This evolved person is in a room with some of the people who have helped facilitate that evolution, so I was ready put my training to the test.

I finished my package, smiled and said the ever-so-familiar “Thank you”, and walked out of the room. Once again, I came back to this question of “Should it be that easy?” Should I not have felt more or less confident once I walked out of the room? As I kept reflecting on the audition, I started thinking less about the final product of the audition, and more about what I brought to the audition. I brought two pieces that followed the instructions of the audition notice, and showcased my strengths and abilities. Also, by immersing myself into these two specific sets of imaginary circumstances, one for the monologue and one for the song, I brought two problems that only I had the ability to fix. By the end of that reflection, I felt confident in what I can bring to an audition, rather than allowing the audition to somehow define who I am. All I could do was go to sleep knowing that I brought everything I could bring, and wait to see what was in store for the upcoming week.

The Callbacks

The next day, I walk into the Creative Arts Center, and the lobby is filled with students waiting for callback lists to be posted. It was an atmosphere of hopeful uncertainty. Whether people were quietly waiting or bouncing off the walls, everyone was trying to distract themselves from saying what was really on their minds, “Is my name going to be on the callback list? If so, what do I prepare? If not, does that mean I’m not cast?” It was an unspoken dialogue that could be seen scrolling across their faces like a marquee. This atmosphere was a bit too overwhelming for me to continue to stay, so I went about my business until noon.

At that point, the questions that everyone had written on their face would be answered, for the most part. The atmosphere would also switch from a collective nervousness to a vast range of disappointment to excitement. Making my way down the hall, there was an overwhelming crowd of people surrounding the lists. A hoard of actors calmly directed their way to the board. They did not say a word, but the decision on the paper overwhelmed their entire physicality.

As the hoard started to dwindle, I finally had a chance to look at the callback lists. I was on both lists. I began to take down the information, and realize that I had a busy evening ahead of me. My first callback audition was for *Assassins*. After that, I was to go to a callback for *Three Sisters*. As I continued to write down the callback information, I saw that there was nothing specific to prepare. So, my next step was to get in the mind set of being ready for anything and everything.

For the following night of callbacks, I felt as prepared as I could be. I had read both of the shows, and familiarized myself with the history and styles of both shows. This preparation helped me throughout the night, but I could not have prepared myself for the juxtaposing

processes between the two callbacks. These varying processes gave me insight into the two shows and directors, but more importantly, it gave me insight into what show would truly test my graduate training.

When I arrived at my first callback for *Assassins*, we started by learning a piece of music. We learned the duet, “*Unworthy*”, from the show. Although it was a basic melodic line, it tested our skills on learning music quickly and how effectively we could hold our own part. The factor that really brought the callback to life was the addition of objectives. After we were confident in learning the song, the director of *Assassins*, Professor Lee Blair, had everyone partner up (male/female) and sing the duet with random objectives that he had written down for us. The activity itself was full of lively improvisation, allowed everyone to make big choices, and tested our ability to involve the music to get what we wanted from the other person. The exercise was not about our ability to sing the parts with perfection, it was about how to use the music and lyrics to fulfill our objective. This exercise was not only a challenging test, but also a great ice breaker to prepare us for the next part of the callback. Blair had us partner up with a different person to prepare cold readings. Without any direction, we would be able to make big and bold character choices, but most importantly, it was vital to let those character choices be informed by the text. Another factor that would inform our character choices was historical research. All of the characters in *Assassins* are actual people that have attempted assassinations throughout history. Having knowledge of the time periods of the assassins and their assassination attempts were factors to bring into the cold reading and a test of our research on the show.

After the *Assassins* callback, I was feeling very confident. With my preparation and research, I had displayed my capabilities to do my homework on the show and apply it in response to the director. I went directly to my second callback for *Three Sisters* with the

expectation of the same confidence. I had put in the same amount of preparation and research. When I walked through the door, I was aware of a different atmosphere. Improvisation or use of music was not present. The room, where we were assigned scenes and roles, was small and confined. We were told to prepare them to the best of our abilities. Once again, familiarity with the play and research on the culture were huge assets. I knew I had read the play and felt confident in my familiarity with the story and the characters. This will be “easy”, I thought. The confusion of ease and easy came back to haunt me. The first scene the director, Professor Jerry McGonigle, assigns to me was a section from Act One as Masha. Throughout the scene, Masha has very little dialogue, in fact, most of the section she was whistling and reading a book. I took these activities to be light-hearted in nature. The rest of the dialogue was dominated by the rest of the characters. Within the context of the play, I just kept thinking what is going on here? Why is Masha whistling? This is one of the main activities I am supposed to do in the scene and I have absolutely no idea why. I decided to boldly whistle to my heart’s content. The rest of the scene I was very attentive to everyone else and what they had to say. We finished the scene, I still was not sure, but at least I made a choice. McGonigle requested that I read the same part with the next group, and gave me a bit of direction. He told me not to acknowledge anyone in the room, even if they referenced or acknowledged me. I took the note, but still questioned why I was whistling. With the note I had just received, I applied it in terms of Masha keeping to herself and whistling a song that she and her father used to share. The song I chose was heart-warming and uplifting. So, the scene played out while I sat in the corner reading a book whistling the happiest little tune I could imagine. McGonigle said, “Thank you. Send in the next group.” As we were walking out the door, he pulled me aside again and gave another bit of direction. He said that

Masha is at the lowest point of her life at this point in the play and to let that influence my thought process in the scene.

I walked out the door, sat down in the hallway, and felt a rush of ineptitude. I had performed the role the exact opposite of what the director was expecting. With the note McGonigle had given, I started to prepare myself for another round of the same scene. I sat in the hallway for twenty minutes reviewing the scene and preparing myself to find my lowest point. I had expected to be assigned to a group to redeem myself in the scene that McGonigle told me to prepare. Instead, I was given a different scene. It was the same role of Masha, but it was a scene from Act Two. The scene was between Masha and Vershinin. At first, I was concerned that I was a lost cause due to the scene from Act One, so I needed to do justice to Masha in this scene if I still want to be considered. I read through the scene and my concerns were gone. I had no doubt of what was happening. The scene was simply enchanting. It was a personal moment where everything that these two characters felt about each other were expressed. My scene partner was Rick Mugrage, a fellow graduate student. It was nice to prepare for such an intimate moment with someone I trusted. We performed the scene for McGonigle, and I discovered I was allowing myself to be authentic and vulnerable. I placed myself right in the middle of that imaginary situation and followed my instincts, instead of striving for something that I thought the director wanted to see. After performing the scene, my viewpoint of the entire callback changed. It was not about knowing everything before-hand, or doing everything correctly, or making it look “easy”. It was about allowing myself, as the actor, to approach the scene with ease, and trusting that my vulnerabilities would help me work through the character's set of given circumstances and confictions. Once we were done with that scene, I was done for the evening. The first round of callbacks left me proud, yet uncertain as to what to expect the next day.

The following day was another round of callbacks. There was a “Groundhog Day” effect when it came to waiting for the next sequence of callback lists to be posted. The same air of tension, excitement, and uncertainty filled the lobby yet again. Once the callback lists were posted, I noticed I did not receive a second callback for *Assassins*, but I did receive a second callback for *Three Sisters*. This time there were specific scenes assigned to read. The entire night I would be reading for the role of Masha. I read the section from Act Two again with various other men playing Vershinin. I read a couple sections from Act Three. It was an exploration into the evolution of Masha within the arc of the play. At that point, I thought to myself, if I was not cast as Masha, then I probably was not going to be cast. Throughout the whole second night of callbacks, I became increasingly fascinated by the character of Masha, but I was also intimidated because she was not a character that I absolutely understood. Not in terms of needing to know everything about a character to be cast, but I was intimidated because Masha is such a famous role. I felt as if I were somehow unworthy of the role. This pressure started to fester inside of my brain as I kept reading for the role. However, as much as this pressure started to build, I was not going to let it deflate my capabilities.

The day of posting the cast list was upon The School of Theatre and Dance at the West Virginia University Creative Arts Center. The time was ticking by until the storm of the noon hour. Everyone congregated in the lobby like they did for the previous callbacks lists. Only this time the air was thicker with tension. An actual decision would be posted. Everyone’s doubt, fears, hopes, and worst nightmares would be answered. With the stage managers ever so stealthfully posting the cast lists, people flocked to the callboard. After a while, I made it to the callboard. There it was in black ink. I was Masha. I, very calmly, signed my initials by the role,

walked back to the lobby, sat down, took out my journal, and began to pour out my stream of consciousness. My initial reflection is as follows...

“Where to even start? Well now I’m Marsha! I’m very excited and it seems like many others are excited for me as well. I guess the best example would be a friend and colleague mentioned how excited he was for me and that “this is one of the greatest female roles of all western drama.” Wow, no pressure. So, I guess I feel a little intimidated that I have some major shoes to fill. But to be honest, she seems like a relatable person who struggles with being stuck. Been there. I guess if I keep thinking of those things that I personally relate to, I won’t feel that intimidation. I will say it is rather odd how much I relate to Marsha. Minus living in Russia, I am in the middle of three sisters. I am not married, but I have been quite close to marriage. I have been in secret relationships. These relationships that she goes through really touch on a personal level for me. To be honest, it’s a little scary for me. Scratch that. It’s very scary for me. Cracking into relationships are hard, and I feel like I may need to have talks with the director to keep me in check. Who knows until we start!”

After taking the time to jot down my thoughts, I felt confident in knowing that I had a launching-off point. I was still fearful of the uncertainty of where that launching-off point would lead me, but I knew I would find growth enough to conquer my fears.

Part Two: Research and Rehearsal

In developing a role, there are always two types of research that I find are fundamental. The first approach is to undertake scholarly research. It is in the homework and table work where I discover history, style, and define the given circumstances of the world. The second is more of a hands-on, physical experimentation. This is the ever-evolving research of character breath and movement, spatial awareness, and as Sanford Meisner would say, “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances” (Meisner and Dennis 87). Both types of research were involved in my process when creating Masha. Also, both types of research stemmed from the words of the playwright, Anton Chekhov. It is important to note that the techniques used while developing the character, throughout my research and rehearsal, always tested my abilities to stay truthful to the text. Moreover, whether it was more written or more physical, this work was not just an individual effort. My research and rehearsal experience would be nothing without the involvement of the rest of the ensemble. This collaboration helped me to explore and question my character choices and contribute to the world of the play.

Straight from the Horse's Mouth: Anton Chekhov

Before rehearsals took place, I spent the majority of my time reading and re-reading the play. I did not immerse myself in highlighting my lines or memorizing. I simply read the play. I wanted to be captured by the story like I was reading it for leisure, as opposed to dissecting it as an actor preparing for a role. I used this as an opportunity to be an audience member, and to let the entire play take me on a journey. I found that leisurely reading the play helped me in my preparation for rehearsals. It took away some of my anxieties about playing the role of Masha. Also, I was able to form opinions and empathize with everyone in the play, not just my character. Lastly, and most importantly, it led me down the path of researching the catalyst for this play. I found myself asking why did the playwright write this story? What is the lesson or moral or statement he is trying to make? What was happening with the playwright when he was trying to write this play? Did that have an impact on the story? All of these questions flooded my brain and challenged me to seek an answer.

I started to research when the play was written and what was happening with the playwright at that point in his life. Digging through research to answer my questions was a unique experience for me. Most of the events that Chekhov experienced while writing *Three Sisters* was very well documented through letters. In past productions, I never had the experience of a first-person reference point when researching the playwright and the show. The letters that Chekhov wrote to various people provided an intimate look into his work and personal life.

Before writing *Three Sisters*, Chekhov had already written many successful dramatic works; including *Ivanov*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *The Seagull*. That success led him and The Moscow Art Theatre to the Crimean cities of Sevastopol and Yalta. Crowds of people flocked to the cities. In fact, there were so many people that the occasion was called “The Migration of the Peoples”

(Chekhov, et al. 385). Unfortunately, during that time, Chekhov was suffering from medical issues. According to a letter sent on April 27th, 1900, Chekhov wrote to Mayor Pavel Iordanov of Taganrog,

“The week before Easter I had a hemorrhoidal hemmorage from which I don’t seem to be able to recover. During Easter week, the Art Theatre was in Yalta and I can’t recover from that either. After a long, quiet and boring winter, I had stayed up every night until three or four in the morning and have a large group in for dinner every day. I am now resting from it all.”

With these medical issues, Chekhov took refuge in hospitalization and found solace in a getaway retreat with friends (Chekhov, et al. 385). Once he returned back, he started working on *Three Sisters*. According to a letter written on August 18th, 1900, Chekhov told his wife, Olga Knipper, he continuously struggled with interruptions during his work.

“I am being constantly interrupted- cruelly, nastily, meanly. I have the play in my mind, it has taken shape and form, it begs to be put on paper, but the moment I touch the paper, the door opens and some swine comes crawling in.”

(Chekhov, et al. 386)

Information about Chekhov’s medical issues and interruptions was not what I was expecting to come across in my research. With him being one of the fathers of modern realism and *Three Sisters* being such an iconic stage drama, I had this false assumption of success surrounding the evolution of this play. With further research, the reality was actually filled with numerous challenges and turmoil.

By the end of October, he went back to Moscow and read his first draft of *Three Sisters* with The Moscow Art Theatre. Unfortunately, he was not pleased with it. He continued to write, yet continued to face interruptions. With lack of focus and privacy, In December 1900, he left the Moscow social life, and settled in Nice to finish the play (Chekhov, et al. 386). He would send revisions and new bits of the play to Moscow while the theatre was in rehearsals. On January 2nd, 1901, Chekhov wrote to Stanislavsky concerning the new addition of Act Four as well as giving advice to Stanislavsky's directing approach in Act Three.

"I sent off Act Four long ago, before Christmas...I've introduced many changes. You write that when Natasha is making the rounds of the house at night in Act Three she puts out the lights and looks under the furniture for burglars. It seems to me, though, that it would be better to have her walk across the stage in a straight line without a glance at anyone or anything a la Lady Macbeth, with a candle- that way it would be much briefer and more frightening."

(Chekhov, et al. 391)

These letters would obviously have taken time to travel back and forth between the playwright and the company. With the time in between, both sides could only do their respective duties and anticipate new edits. Chekhov also often wrote to Olga Knipper, his wife and actress playing the role of Masha, asking for updates on rehearsals. On January 28th, 1901, Olga wrote,

"The first dress rehearsal of The Three Sisters took place yesterday. I sat in the theatre and wept, especially during the third act. They stage and acted it splendidly."

(Simmons 522)

Although, I cannot even fathom having to give notes and receive feedback through letters, it was wonderful to observe such specificity from the playwright about his work. As a contemporary actor, I am used to the privilege of rehearsing and then receiving instant feedback. Reading about these experiences also served as many reminders for me as I embarked on my own rehearsal process. First, these letters reminded me that theatre takes time and patience. There is no such thing as getting it right the first time. If that were true then there would not be re-writes and rehearsal. Secondly, I was reminded that this production was brand new for the time. Sure, the playwright and the Moscow Art Theatre had been established for a while, but this was a brand-new work. It had every chance of flopping as much as it had at being successful. In fact, stresses such as medical issues, play interruptions, moving from one place to the other, and time delay seemed to add to the odds of the play potentially becoming a flop. Lastly, I discovered that Anton Chekhov, Stanislavsky, and Olga Knipper were artists with some of the same insecurities as me. They were not always these ideal people that we sometimes put on pedestals. They started out as people with a passion for theatre. They struggled the same struggles and dreamed the same dreams as most of today's theatre artists.

After reading through accounts of what was happening in Chekhov's life and the rehearsal process, I still wanted to know why he wrote *Three Sisters*. Was there supposed to be a lesson or a moral? I didn't really get the answers from his letters during their rehearsal process, so I sought out other resources. I began to research the audience responses and other letters Chekhov wrote and received after the premiere of *Three Sisters*.

After viewing the premiere of *Three Sisters*, there were varied responses to Chekhov's play. One of Chekhov and Stanislavski's collaborators, Nemirovich-Danchenko, refers to the original 1901 production and interprets the play as...

“The events of the play crept along even as life itself during this epoch, in a tired sort of way, without any visible logic. Human beings acted under the influence of chance happenings; they did nothing to build their own lives. Here is the substance of his first act: a birthday party, the spring, gaiety, birds singing, bright sunshine. And of the second act: triviality gradually takes into its hands the power over the sensitive, nobly inclined human beings. Of the third act: a conflagration in the neighbourhood, the entire street is aflame; the power of triviality grows intenser, human beings somehow flounder in their experiences. The fourth act: autumn, the collapse of all hopes, the triumph of triviality. Human beings are as chess pawns in the hands of invisible players. The absurd and the pathetic, the noble and the worthless, the intelligent and the stupid, are all interwoven.”

(Borny)

Another description came from Anatoly Vasilievich Efros, a Russian and Soviet theatre director. He described the play as an “immense success”.

“It was a miracle how the Moscow Art Theatre actors’ became their Chekhovian characters. The Prozorov Family and all the artillery members remained in our memory as if they were old acquaintances, not even theatrical but from real life.”

(Ignatieva 83)

Nemirovich-Danchenko and Efros give lovely reviews of the realism portrayed in *Three Sisters*. Phrases such as "*Human beings acted under the influence of chance happenings...*" and "*...not even theatrical but from real life.*" lined up exactly with the vision that Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky had in mind for the Moscow Art Theatre. In Modern Drama in Theory and Practice: Volume 1, Realism and Naturalism, J.L. Styan references Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky's plans to revolutionize theatrical practices and productions. Styan says,

"...they had together drawn up the rules for a new kind of theatre. They determined to discard what was bad in the past, indeed everything that was characteristic of Moscow's leading commercial theatre, the Maly. Out would go the cheap repertoire of French and German farces, the star system that denied the possibility of ensemble work, and the declamatory manner of acting with all its stale theatrical tricks and habits."

(71-72)

It was a revolutionary theatrical practice for its time. Although the style of realism was not heavily explored throughout the rehearsal process of WVU's production of *Three Sisters*, I did want to pay homage to the Moscow Art Theatre's contribution. My research into the birth of realism inspired me. This research also surprised me due to the general public's reaction.

Much of the general public had a problem with production's realistic qualities. In Chekhov: A Biography, Ernest J. Simmons, the author, reflects upon the audience reception after the play's premiere. Simmons makes an interesting observation saying, "Nemirovich-Danchenko and Gorky at once singled it (*Three Sisters*) out as the profoundest and most effective Chekhov's plays, but it took the general public and the critics several years to recognize this fact." (522)

With realism being brand new for its time, much of the general public had a problem with the Moscow Art Theatre's attempts. "The press at first found the company to be somewhat of a joke" (Styan 72). I was shocked and confused by the audience's displeased commentary.

It was hard to comprehend the initial 19th century audience reaction. Although, in my search for comprehension, I began to compare the 19th century audience and the 21st century theatre audience. Much of today's live and cinematic theatre is full of spectacle; jokes, sight gags, car crashes, bombs, fight sequences, superheroes, animals that take over the world - the list goes on and on. It is very rare to find theatre without some sort of spectacle. The 21st century theatrical spectacle is interesting to compare to the "star systems" and farces of the 19th century. I can only imagine the amount of risk and courage it took to perform productions against the norm. Reflecting upon these comparisons was very informative of the rehearsal and performance experience I was about to encounter; as well as, humbling to know that the simplicity of theatre can stand the test of time and revolutionize any audience that receives it.

Getting to Know You: The Table Work

At the very beginning of the rehearsal process the ensemble started with table work and written research. We were starting to envelop ourselves into time period as well as the Russian culture. When starting into research about *Three Sisters*, it seemed a bit overwhelming with the copious amounts of knowledge and facts out in the world. Thankfully, we did have a launching off point. We refined the research down to the given circumstances of the script. After we did our first read through, we were assigned different research topics based off a list compiled by subject matters in the script, such as; music, literature, military, education, local government, marriage, women's roles, travel, food and drink, fashion, medicine, and photography, etc. Each member of the cast selected a couple research topics that applied to our character's given circumstances. I chose music and literature. With these research topics, we would come to next rehearsal equipped to present our research to the rest of the class. The following is my initial table work materials I collected based off of the given circumstances in the script.

Literature and Music

At the very top of the play Masha is found softly whistling and reading a book. With this as my catalyst, my research into literature would kick start the creation of my world. Masha's first line is a literary quote taken from Alexander Pushkin's 1824 poem "Ruslan and Ludmila". She recites, "A green oak grows by a curving shore and round that oak hangs a golden chain." The quote can be found as the first line of the poem's prologue. Also, later in Act Two, Masha also quotes another Russian literary icon, Gogol. While philosophizing with Vershinin and Tuzenbach she states, "Gogol says, It's boring to live in this world friends." There are many literary quotes and references dispersed throughout the play and spoken by a variety of characters. It is an excellent indicator of their education and class status.

According to historian, Michael Lynch, the 1897 census categorized the population of Russia in these broad class groups:

Upper classes: Royalty, nobility, higher clergy:

12.5 per cent.

Middle classes: Merchants, bureaucrats, professionals: 1.5 per cent.

Working classes: Factory workers, artisans, soldiers, sailors: 4 per cent.

Peasants: Landed and landless farmers: 82 per cent.

(Llewellyn, Jennifer)

At the very beginning of the script, Olga indicates

that their father wasn't just a soldier. To be exact, she says, "He was a general, a brigade

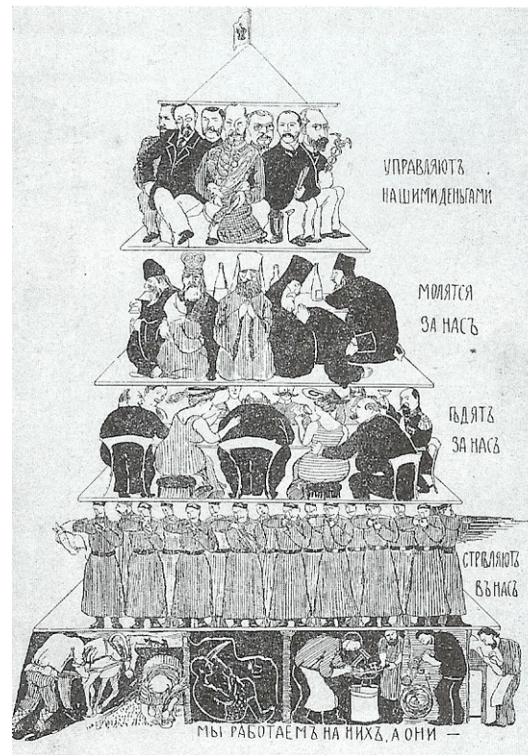


Fig. 1- The "Russian Wedding Cake" depicting social division

commander.” (Chekhov 1) He had the rank of a military professional. That would put the family in the 1.5 per cent middle class. The family’s education is also a fascinating reference point I found while gathering research.

“One-tenth of percent of the female population attended primary school. Boys in the elementary system, in contrast, represented 1.3 percent of the male population and outnumbered the girls by more than eleven to one. Even fewer girls had access to secondary education. The very wealthy nobility sometimes employed foreign tutors to instruct their children, but it was much more typical for well-to-do gentry and officials to send their daughters to elite boarding schools, the only girls' institutions beyond the primary level.”

(Johanson, Christine 3)

Johanson goes on to state what a Russian woman’s education entails.

“These preserves of the privileged cultivated the social arts deemed most appropriate to future wives and mothers of aristocratic households. Conversational French and music, therefore, dominated the six-year course of study, whereas daily routine emphasized deportment and obedience, presumably the cardinal virtues of well-born ladies.”

(4)

Not only has the Prozoroff family had the privilege of education, the women of the Prozoroff family had an exceptional education based on the society surrounding them. While socializing in

Act One, Andrei makes reference to him and his sisters knowing three languages, and the youngest sibling, Irina, knowing a fourth language. Unfortunately, Masha declares their education as “superfluous nonsense” (Chekhov 13). No one in the gathering contradicts Masha’s declaration except for Colonel Vershinin. My research in the literature and education that the family would have experienced revealed a great deal about their status and privilege in society.

Another revelation in my beginning research was music. As I began researching the Russian music of this time period, the music added even more specificity to the culture and privilege that surrounded this family. I chose to research music due to the script’s references to Masha’s connection with music. As I started researching general Russian music and musical instruments of the last nineteenth century, a majority of the music that I found was categorized into public spectacle, parlor music, and folk music. All of these categories brought life to the given circumstances of the script and infiltrated the world of the play.

Public spectacle music was built upon the Industrial Revolution and a larger amount of people having more money to spend for leisure. There was a “bigger is better” mentality, which led to the composition of operas and symphonies (Moore, J. Kenneth, et al.). Operas written by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Igor Stravinsky, and Sergei Prokofiev (to name a few) became internationally known and staples of classical music. Listening to this music, it was filled with grandiose installments and very picturesque compositions. It gave me a sense of boldness and regality.

One specific opera referenced in *Three Sisters* is in Act Three. In a moment of privacy, Masha and Vershinin begin to sing a section of Tchaikovsky’s opera "*Eugene Onegin*". Vershinin begins to sing, “All men surrender to love’s power.” Then, they begin to sing a call

and response type orchestration that signifies their secret love. To be completely honest, I had no idea that this

section was some sort of secret love call and response until later on in the process, with the help of the director. Even once I had discovered the true implications of this section, it was difficult to justify the exchange of emotion through this song. Initially, I researched further into the song and the opera, and I found its origin. The opera is based off a verse of Alexander Pushkin's poem. With this correlation, I started to realize that these references are not just an indicator of Masha's education or status. These references signified great personal significance to Masha as they followed her throughout the entire play. These literary and musical references were not placed among the script carelessly. They were significant references that infiltrated Masha's language.

Masha's connection with music does not stop there. There are many references to Masha's musicianship and passion of playing the piano. This passion for playing the piano could have led to dreams of playing in a symphony or orchestra, but that is not revealed in the script as a given circumstance. What is revealed is the incorporation of parlor music. Parlor music also became popular during this time period. "At the time, home life was centered in the salon, or parlor, where children played and learned with adult supervision, and where the family entertained company." (Moore, J. Kenneth, et al.) Parlor music also played into a family's education. "Children were often taught to play musical instruments as part of a well-rounded education; for girls, playing an instrument was more important than learning to read." (Moore, J. Kenneth, et al.) This research only added more gravity to the given circumstances of privilege that surrounded Masha and the rest of the Prozoroff children. The only witnessed account of parlor music is in Act Two when Tuzenbach decides to play the piano. People join him by singing and partaking in the parlor music at hand. Although Masha is never seen playing parlor

music there is reference to her piano skill. In Act Three, there has been a fire throughout the village and there is a discussion of a benefit concert to aid relief efforts for those affected by the fire. Tuzenbach suggests Masha be a part of the concert, but there are some hesitations expressed as well...

Tuzenbach

Everyone's asking me to arrange a benefit concert to help the fire victims.

Irina

Well, but who could...

Tuzenbach

Oh, it could probably be done, if we wanted to. Marya Sergeyevna plays the piano beautifully, in my opinion.

Kulygin

Oh, she plays beautifully!

Irina

But she must have forgotten. She hasn't played for three years—no, four.

Tuzenbach

In this town, no one appreciates music, absolutely no one. But I, I do know good music. And I can tell you, Marya Sergeyevna plays magnificently, almost with genius.

Kulygin

You're right, Baron. I love her very much, Masha. She's wonderful.

Tuzenbach

To be able to play like that and yet to realize that no one, absolutely no one, understands you.

Kulygin

Yes... but would it be proper for her to appear in a concert. Well, I really don't know anything about it. It might be perfectly alright. Everyone knows our director's a fine man. Really admirable, but he does have very definite opinions... of course this is none of my business, but still, if your serious, maybe I should speak to him, if you think so, that is.

(Chekhov 48-49)

There are many given circumstances revealed throughout this excerpt. First, Irina mentions how long it has been since Masha has played piano. Up to this point, about three-years-time has passed since the play started. Also, the play starts on the one year anniversary of their father's death. It can be closely assumed that Masha stopped playing piano after her father's death. It is never stated, but that timeline helps define a more specific story. Another circumstance given is Masha's used-to-be passion for playing the piano. Using descriptors such as "magnificently" and "genius", only shows one man's opinion, yet an opinion that still stands after four years. This sections' given circumstances, in correlation with the given circumstances at the beginning of the play, reveal how Masha's passion for music reflects her evolution as a character. One of the last

given circumstances I noticed was the wording of Masha's husband, Kulygin. He keeps going back and forth between Masha's capabilities and what other people would think. He seems to be grappling with which would be the better option, supporting his wife or bowing to the admiration of the school's headmaster. This was a significant indicator of the relationship between Masha and Kulygin. This back and forth and lack of support plants the seed for their strained relationship.

There was already a flood of information surrounding the character of Masha due to the given circumstance of music. Although, there was one musical reference that I had yet to explore, folk music. Throughout Act Two, there is reference to carnival week and the maskers. At the top of the act, Natasha insists that Andrei not allow the maskers to come to the house because the noise and festivities would disturb their newborn baby. With this given circumstance, it paints a picture of the lively and raucous nature of carnival week. My research into the sounds of Russian folk music added even more life to the given circumstances. It also turned out to be my favorite category of music that I researched. It was filled with eclectic instruments such as; various styles of accordions, domra, balalaika, gudok, buben (equivalent of a tambourine), korobochka (equivalent of woodblocks), Lozhki (equivalent of spoons). The sounds were still as bold as the spectacle music, yet extremely festive and earthy. I couldn't help but dance whenever I heard it. It was beneficial to have a research topic that was so sensorial. It made me reflect upon the similarities between Russian folk music and the music that influences my heritage, Appalachian folk music. Both cultural folk styles are filled with raw exuberance and a distinct sound of home. When I heard these Russian folk songs, I could not help but think that they were meant to create life on stage not just reflect life.

My beginning research on literature and music was an informative invitation into the world of the play. They were crucial for me to gain a better understanding of the given circumstances of the world we were creating, how my character related to these research topics, and to help me build my imaginary circumstances that I needed to live in throughout rehearsals and performance. To take these research topics a step further, I needed to let this knowledge resonate in a physical life.

Getting On Our Feet: The Rehearsal Exploration

After our initial read-throughs and table work discussions, the cast started to get on its feet and move within the space. We had taken the time to let our research of the world of the play impact our logical understanding. Now it was time to let that knowledge impact our physical lives within the world of the play. This production was very fortunate to work in the performance venue for the entirety of rehearsals, as well as; the ability to manipulate the majority of the set pieces from the beginning. We wasted no time starting to live in this environment. We also wasted no time memorizing the show. The director challenged the cast to be memorized for the first act at a very early date. With the elements of creating an environment and memorization intact, it gave the whole cast the ability to spend more time on discovering how to live within this Chekhovian world.

With the ability to experiment with our characters almost immediately, I thought I would be more willing to jump in and go. Reversely, there was an intimidation that overwhelmed me at the beginning of these rehearsals. I wanted to apply the copious amounts of information that we received during table work, and I still had several unanswered questions about Masha and the play. I had this fear that if I did not logically understand and physically embody every element of the play's content from the beginning, then I wouldn't succeed as Masha in *Three Sisters*. When I was initially reading the script for leisure, I did not feel this fear. I journaled page after page about those insecurities. My reflections lead back to our read-throughs and table work sessions. The director would have sit-down discussions with the cast about the process. Everything sounded so serious and intense. The discussions were jam-packed with all of this internal psychological knowledge. When it came time for the discussed knowledge to take shape, rather than fill me with excitement it scared me. I began to question if I was being lazy because

of this reaction, and I do not consider myself a lazy person. I'm usually on top of things. It was just so much to think about. How could I physically embody all of that knowledge? It was like all these insecurities started to overwhelm my abilities to make Masha into a living, breathing human being with a spine and a personality. Then, I took a breath and uttered the phrase, "It's only day four." I was treating the role of Masha as this precious thing, and falling into bad habits of needing to "get it right". After I uttered that phrase, I gave myself permission to make a mistake, or a discovery, or an achievement.

The Meisner Approach

Though liberated from self-inflicted pressures, I still experienced more questions than answers. The biggest question I had, at the beginning of rehearsals, was how to relate to this character. From the direction I had received during callbacks, and during read through discussions, especially during the beginning of the play, I discovered that Masha and I had different outlooks on life. Masha expels negativity through jaded experiences and her spontaneous temper, as opposed to my need to avoid conflict through positivity. I began to explore the source of her unhappiness and melancholy. With the need to personalize with this character, I began to refer back to techniques that I received throughout my graduate training.

In the second semester of my first year of my degree, we spent a semester studying Chekhov, Ibsen, and Strindberg. While studying Chekhov, I learned about 19th century Russian culture, and some great techniques to personalize with this unfamiliar time period. These personalizations were instigated through the techniques of Sanford Meisner and the exercises created by Larry Silverberg in his workbooks, entitled The Sanford Meisner Approach.

In On Acting by Sanford Meisner, he says, “Learning to act takes time. It’s made out of the human being who’s doing the work. Each of you in your own way has certain human elements which on the surface and are easy to play. Other elements are more difficult... You know if you were a painter or musician you choose material because it already meant something to you, but in acting you have a much more difficult problem. More often than not you’re given material which is not related to you, and you have to learn how to make it your own. You have to learn how to use yourselves as actors.” (Meisner, Sanford, and Dennis Longwell) This quote, along with many other quotations from his book, intrigued me to discover his method and how he used it to help his students. Meisner’s book journals the accounts of his interactions with his

students, and explores the exercises he used as a theatre practitioner. As interesting and inspiring as it was to read about the teachings of Sanford Meisner, it is still a journal with pre-answered lectures and pre-explored exercises. Meisner's book was a catalyst to find my own exercises. Thankfully, On Acting has been dissected by a plethora of theatre scholars and translated into various forms of how to implement the Meisner technique. The Sanford Meisner Approach workbooks, by Larry Silverberg, are a familiar reference from my graduate training that I decided to revisit during my rehearsal process. These workbooks give definition to the training Meisner presents in his book. They also provide many exercises and challenge actors to "fill-in-the-blanks" with their own word.

Workbook four of Silverberg's collection laid the ground work to find deep personalization with Masha. I started with Chapter Five, *The Key Phrase*. At the beginning of the chapter, Silverberg highlights, "the process of bringing you and the words of the playwright into a more specific relationship; bringing yourself into a personal, inner alignment with the 'point of view' of the character" (93). He goes on to say, "Reading the play over and over and over again was really your first step in becoming more acquainted with the point of view of the character. The next step in uncovering and honing in on the point of view of the character is the use of what I call key phrases" (99). Silverberg references Meisner stating, "These phrases are things the character says that you feel are of true importance to him or her" (99). He gave examples of key phrases and then instructed how to find your own key phrases. Key phrases I found for Masha were:

MASHA'S KEY PHRASES

ACT ONE

“In the old days when father was alive there used to be thirty or forty officers at every birthday party. It was lively and noisy. It was almost deafening. But today about one and a half guests and still as the grave.”

“I must go. I’m depressed today.”

“I can’t stand that Protopopov.”

“Imagine I’ve already begun to forget her face. That’s how we’ll be forgotten too, I suppose. Forgotten.”

“Good God, how she dresses. Well it’s not that her clothes are exactly ugly or even out of fashion. They’re just wrong, wrong. Anyway, I don’t believe Andrei’s in love with her. He couldn’t be. He’s just trying to annoy us. You know I heard the other day that she’d been carrying on with Protopopov. Well fine. Let her. They’d be a perfect match.”

“In this town, to know three languages is a shocking luxury. It’s abnormal, like having a sixth finger. We’ve learned a lot of superfluous nonsense.”

“...Damn. Another endless boring evening at the directors.”

ACT TWO

“...after father died it was ages before we could get used to not having orderlies around. But I must say, habit or not. Now it may

not be true in other places, but in this town at least, the most well-bred and best educated people are the military.”

“I was married when I was eighteen and I was afraid of my husband because he was a teacher and I’d just finished school. He seemed terribly impressive to me then. So intelligent and important. Well not anymore unfortunately.”

“...Among civilians here generally there are so many crude people and I can’t help being upset when I meet people who are coarse and unfriendly. Sometimes when I’m with the teachers, my husband’s colleagues, I simply suffer.”

“When you speak to me like that somehow I can’t help laughing even though I’m frightened.”

“Let’s just hope Natasha doesn’t find out about the gambling.”

“It seems to me we must have some sort of faith or we must at least search for it otherwise our lives are empty, empty. And to live and not know why the cranes fly, why children are born, why there are stars in the sky. Either we try to know why we live or our lives are senseless. A waste.”

“I don’t like civilians”

“When you’re happy you don’t notice whether it’s summer or winter. I think if I were in Moscow I shouldn’t care about the weather at all.”

“You are boring, boring, boring.”

*“You’re sixty years old and you still act like a spoiled brat.
Blabbering on about the devil knows what. Just shut up.”*

ACT THREE

“Tram-tam-tram-tam-Tram-tam”

“I am bored, bored, bored.”

“I can’t get it out of my head. It’s so annoying like a nail driven into your brain. I’ve just got to talk about it. It’s Andrei. He’s mortgaged the house and his wife has taken all the money. But the house doesn’t belong just to him. It belongs to all four of us. He must know that if he has any decency.”

“I don’t need anything, but I can’t stand being cheated.”

“I love Vershinin.”

“When you read about it all in a novel it seems so familiar and easy to understand. But when you fall in love yourself, you know that no one understands anything about it. That everyone must decide for himself.”

ACT FOUR

“When you get happiness in snatches, in pieces, and then you lose it like I’m losing it, then little by little you harden grow bitter. In here I’m boiling. There’s Andrei. Our brother. All hopes lost. Thousands of people worked hard and spent money to raise a great bell and suddenly it fell and shattered. Suddenly for no reason at all. That’s how it is with Andrei.”

“Oh, it’s like that here all day. Talk, talk, talk. It may rain or snow at any moment, but it’s still talk, talk, talk.”

“Life is wasted. I don’t want anything now. I’m quiet now.”

“We’re left alone to start our lives over again. We must go on living. We must go on living.”

Once establishing those key phrases, I was to select a list of the “most provocative” key phrases.

(Silverberg 105)

PROVOCATIVE KEYS PHRASES

“Imagine I’ve already begun to forget her face. That’s how we’ll be forgotten too, I suppose. Forgotten.”

“In this town, to know three languages is a shocking luxury. It’s abnormal, like having a sixth finger. We’ve learned a lot of superfluous nonsense.”

“I was married when I was eighteen and I was afraid of my husband because he was a teacher and I’d just finished school. He seemed terribly impressive to me then. So intelligent and important. Well not anymore unfortunately.”

“It seems to me we must have some sort of faith or we must at least search for it otherwise our lives are empty, empty. And to live and not know why the cranes fly, why children are born, why there are stars in the sky. Either we try to know why we live or our live are senseless. A waste.”

“I am bored, bored, bored.”

“I love Vershinin.”

“When you read about it all in a novel it seems so familiar and easy to understand. But when you fall in love yourself, you know that no one understands anything about it. That everyone must decide for himself.”

“When you get happiness in snatches, in pieces, and then you lose it like I’m losing it, then little by little you harden grow bitter. In here I’m boiling. There’s Andrei. Our brother. All hopes lost. Thousands of people worked hard and spent money to raise a great bell and suddenly it fell and shattered. Suddenly for no reason at all. That’s how it is with Andrei.”

“We’re left alone to start our lives over again. We must go on living. We must go on living.”

Once this list was established, the technique instructs to choose one of the statements, write it down at the top of the page, close my eyes, and say the key phrase to myself. While uttering the phrase silently, I was to continue with my eyes shut until the phrase ignited my imagination. Then, when I opened my eyes, I put the pencil to the paper and continued to write without stopping, without punctuation. I was to write unpremeditated words rooted in how the phrase informed my imagination. I used this free associative writing technique to personalize with the statement; as well as, expounding upon my point of view. Silverberg gives very specific instructions to “write whatever comes out of you as a result of saying the provocative statement to yourself and allowing it to work on you” (110). This is how the key phrase manifested in my personalization.

“When you read about it all in a novel it seems so familiar and easy to understand. But when you fall in love yourself, you know that no one understands anything about it. That everyone must decide for himself.”

“I thought the story went that you should find that person that you absolutely love, marry them, have kids and grow old together
When I look at the statement I just wrote that doesn’t sound like a very good story where are all the bits in between it seems pretty bland also I’m confused as to how that story equates to complete happiness It’s also just completely unrealistic what about what the couple gets mad at each what about when the couple doesn’t like each other’s in-laws what about when they go to bed unsatisfied what about when they don’t want to be in the same room as each other What about when something or someone else makes them happy This is not a fairytale I sometimes wonder if I’ve been looking for a fairytale my entire life to help get me out of a nightmare Now I still feel like I’m in a nightmare but there’s finally someone there telling me to wake up I thought this would be completely different than it has turned out to be I thought my marriage to Kulygin would be the only thing that I would ever need or want and it would be happily ever after I don’t believe in happily ever after anymore because everyone has their own definition of how they see the future I saw the future with my

husband as moving to Moscow and doing something better with my life He sees our future with contentment and complacency just where we are and we are a couple who pleases the his boss, the headmaster and his friends and we can just show off in front of them well there is nothing to really show off I am completely unhappy and suffocated Then there come this person out of the blue who helps me breathe unexpectedly it wasn't written in some story He makes me feel alive and makes me want to move forward instead of feeling stuck I logically know that this is wrong and adulteress but the rest of my body feels like its running to be with him So I am with one man that I do not love and then in the other hand there is a man that I love but cannot be with shouldn't you be able to be with love shouldn't the things that are bad from you just disappear from your life Shouldn't there be a clear distinction of what is good and what is bad It should be written out more clearly I thought but it's not You have to write your own story and it will be filled with more questions than answers and even when you start to answer those questions there is the possibility of someone getting hurt but you have to make sure you are able to live with your story make sure you are happy with the story you are writing. There is only one copy. The mass-produced stories are just fantasy.”

The cast also spent time in the rehearsal hall applying these key phrases and free associative writing. Our director instructed us to compile our own lists of people, places or things from the script. These people, places, and things were meant to be of extreme importance to our individual characters. My list was compiled of my father, birthday parties, Solyony, Protopopov, Vershinin, Old Basmany Street, mother, Andrei, Natasha, Education, Kulygin, the director, Chebutykin, and Pushkin's quote "a green oak grows by a curving shore, and round that oak hangs a golden chain." After we compiled our lists, we were further instructed to choose our top four. Then, we were to partake in free associative writing about our top four. My top four, in order of importance, were 1.) Vershinin, 2.) Kulygin, 3.) Father, and 4.) Education. The following are my personal thoughts contained within my free associative writing.

1.) Vershinin

"So, there he is just everything that I want. I probably could have been with him if it weren't for the age difference and his wife. I mean we lived on the same street. The same street! How strange of a coincidence is that? Why couldn't we have stayed in Moscow till I was older? Then maybe I wouldn't be in the situation with my husband. I mean I think it's clear my marriage is a mistake but it happened and now what? My life ends? I'm going to return to happiness. I don't feel that way when Vershinin's around. He's so wonderful, and illuminates this positivity that I wish I had it every day. I need that. I flock towards it like sunlight. I see the way he looks at me. Of course, it could be completely different and misconstrued. Maybe I just think he's looking that way that

because that's what I want. I want him. If I had it my way we would marry. We would both get divorced and we would take his kids with us. Of course, he would have to stay with this fleet so we couldn't move, but I don't think I would mind. But then again, I don't know what people would say around town. Now that I think about it, it would probably be harder than it looks to really find happiness? But, I know I would have a husband who loves me and I love him. I never thought that someone would turn my world upside down and make me excited to see them again and again. What he says is not a criticism or an 'I'm right. You're wrong'. He has this way of seeing things. I wish I could see the world through his eyes. I feel like if I stayed around him a little while longer it just might stick. It's filled with so much love and positivity that you would think he's delusional, but here I am soaking up every last bit like a sponge. I need to be around him. I need this talk and thoughts. It's like air and breath. It's how I can move. But how can I tell him that? I don't think I will or can. That's scary to think about. I wouldn't want it to. Maybe I can keep it this way."

This free associative writing about Vershinin was taken from what Masha says in the text, but put into my own words. I used my personal experiences to influence my imagination. I was able to connect to Masha in my own words, and without the judgement of thinking like someone else. I could have very easily been caught in the restrictions of the time period or the Russian culture. Thankfully, the free associative writing allowed me to keep digging for the personal meaning.

Defining the personal meaning of Vershinin in my own words unlocked my ability to personalize with my own relationships. In my life, I have very specific instances where I have been in secret relationships, have experienced moments of pure love, entertained thoughts of marriage, and lust, and produced daydreams of how my life would change if I were to marry. The ability to tap into those specific moments in my personal life gave specific meaning to every word I would say *to* him or *about* him

2.) Kulygin

“When I wake up in the morning, I see his face. It’s not what I want to see. It’s someone I don’t know. Someone I don’t love. I try to escape it. But it’s like I’m obligated to come back and live my life that way. It’s like repetition. And if I have to hear one more thing about the director. Honestly, he loves the director more than he loves me. It’s like I’m some sort of trophy to show off. To say everything is perfect and squeaky clean. It’s not. I just wish I could shout to the rooftops about how I feel trapped. I wish someone would save me. Sometimes I think that’s what I’m looking for, a Savior. Not to do the same thing he does, but to show me how beautiful life can be. I don’t want to go through life thinking it’s unbearable. I want to go through life seeing why I am supposed to exist. He gives me no means of that. What happened? I mean I was attracted to him once, but it changed. How? Why? Was it me? I think he just turned out to be someone that I thought would be something else. I thought I could be something, and that’s what

was so great. And then something turned to nothing. Does nothing change? I mean it can grow, but it's not and I'm through with it. So why don't I just go? Why do I stay? It makes no sense. I guess what would people say? I could fight them. I'm no stranger to that. But I'm ready to keep going. That's it."

When personalizing to my free associative writing about Kulygin, I think back on all the failed relationships that I have experienced. It was pathetically easy to relate to what Masha says in the script and associate that to my real life. It was interesting to note that I had less trouble associating to the pain and questioning of a relationship than to the love of a relationship. Without trying to make this a depressing notation, I reflected upon how easy it was to question a relationship. It may have been easy to personalize with failed relationships, but it was not easy to personalize why she decides to stay with Kulygin. The 21st century version of myself thinks if you are so unhappy why don't you leave? The 19th century Masha knows the gravity of what would happen if she were to leave. These two worlds had to come together to depict Masha's struggle with her husband.

3.) Father

"Was he hard on us? Yes. But did he know how to have a good time? Even more so! He had this ability to bring life to everyplace he went. I miss the life. I could always go to him for an escape. He never really asked why are you here he just said hey you want to talk? It was never really about what was wrong. It was more about politics and what was going on around us. I miss that senseless talking. I never wanted it to stop. I sometimes got scared when it

would and. Like a little kid not ready to go to bed. I know you have to but you don't want to and that makes it 10 times scarier. He was the guy that calmed that fear until I was ready to go to bed. He never really would get to keep the conversation going until I was ready to go to bed. But I guess it all happens for a reason. I want to remember those conversations we used to have but they seem to fade away every day. It doesn't make sense. I want to talk or give a sign but nothing. I really wish he was here to tell me what to do about my husband. I guess that is what all this education was for. For me to make my own decisions but here I am not doing that. Why? Father wouldn't have wanted that."

The importance of my father was a little harder to define. At the top of the play, Masha's father is dead, so I have no interactions with him throughout the play. Without those interactions, I can only rely on the script to discover how important he is to her. From the very beginning of the play, her father's importance is rendered through her actions and words. The very first words of the play are "Father died a year ago- this very day, May fifth." Spoken by the eldest sister, Olga. Masha gives no spoken reaction to that, and continues to speak no further upon it, other than to whistle (which is also put to a stop). Masha keeps to herself at the very beginning, until she decides to leave. Then, she continues to give confirmation about the importance of her father stating,

"Oh, nevermind. I'll be back later. Good-bye, darling. Best wishes again. In the old days when father was alive, there used to be thirty or forty officers at every birthday party, it was lively and noisy-- it

was almost deafening—but today—about one and a half guests and still as the grave! I must go—I’m depressed today, don’t mind me. We’ll talk about it all later, dear. Good-bye for now. I’ll go somewhere for a while... Somewhere...”

(Chekhov 5)

With this being one of the first statements out of her mouth, it gives a very prominent indication of the importance of her father in the past, and how that importance impacts her life at the present moment. She later continues to reference the “superfluous nonsense” that educated her and her family, as due to her father’s expectations. In Act Two, she continues to use her father as a reference point to engage in philosophizing with Vershinin, who used to be under the command of her father. This mutual relationship is mentioned again and again throughout the play. All of these clues in the script give stimulus to how I can begin to personalize and associate with this father/daughter relationship.

4.) Education

“Here we are playing cards and games just like everyone else. If this education were to really come in handy wouldn’t we be solving the world’s problems? I don’t know I just feel like there’s so much more that could be done. Like if that game where the universe, I feel like I would definitely conquer the world. So why not? Why not go outside and conquer it fearlessly? I know I can do it in my here. So just leave. What’s stopping you? Nothing I suppose and Kind of everything. If it’s not me, it’s someone else. I

need to stay for. This education and furious drive could go out there, but it's stuck in the mud. I want to exercise it more.”

This was this hardest aspect to relate to. Throughout the script, Masha never really has the opportunity to exercise her education, which she refers to as “superfluous”. Most of the time it is only referred to. She does get the opportunity to philosophize with Vershinin and Tuzenbach in Act Two. This use of comradery highlights Masha’s personality and offers a glimpse into her opinions. Unfortunately, the glimpse closes with Vershinin’s exit later in the scene. It is never really opened again. With so much of Masha’s education being unused, how does a woman trying to receive her master’s degree relate to that? With this production being a part of my educational career, I had to constantly put my education into practice.

I can relate to my education being deemed as superfluous from outside points of view. Many of my family, friends, or even strangers think that my getting a Master’s degree in acting seems like a pretty superfluous acquisition. I can also relate to Masha’s passion for the arts, and desire to use that passion to its full potential. If I had to go through life without pursuing that desire, it would be detrimental. I had to put myself into her shoes, as if I were never allowed to use the education I am receiving right now.

Some of my favorite parts of the whole rehearsal process were when we would indulge in free associative writing. It gave me the freedom to write down exactly what I was thinking without judgement. I allowed myself to ask questions and not have all the answers. I continued asking questions of myself and other people. I discovered that I have so much more to explore when I do not have the answer. I was overcoming my self-inflicted pressures, and gained the confidence to continue moving forward in the rehearsal process.

The Other Chekhov: Michael Chekhov Techniques

Even though techniques such as *key phrases* and *free associative writing* helped my exploration into personalization and conquering my fears of attaining success, as the process went along, I noticed that a mass of negativity from the perspective of other ensemble members, started to echo upon the character I was building. During the down time, whenever we were not on stage, I would hear negative terms reflected upon my character; like “crabby” or “bitchy” or “spoiled”. This name calling was hard to take in stride. I would often journal about the challenges of fully taking a character with premeditated judgments that I would have to listen to during breaks, or notes, or day-to-day between rehearsals. There was a scrutiny that slightly scared me. Masha’s temper, her very clear aversion to her husband, and a willingness to speak her mind were all elements written into the text that might have fueled this name-calling. As rehearsals went along, the opposing personality traits of Masha and myself became the next obstacle I had to face. In my personal life, when I have to handle tense situations, I tend to restrain myself, walk away, think about the situation, and then come back to discuss. Masha tends to speak her mind and erupt with a treacherous temper. Although we abide by opposing personalities, I still needed to embody it. So, was I really concerned with the name calling of Masha, or was I more concerned that I would be seen in the same light? I stepped back to assess the question, and came to the conclusion that instead of embracing someone else’s judgements, I needed to embrace my own justifications.

I started to embrace the differences between myself and Masha. I continued to personalize, but I also needed to find Masha’s personality. Personalities tend to be more of an abstract concept. Personalities subjectively fill an entire room, and change drastically according to who you interact with. People also tend to hide their personalities and project something else.

With such subjective concepts not written directly into the text, I wanted to explore more abstract theatrical teaching methods. I referred to theatre practitioner, Michael Chekhov. Specifically, I found myself referring to Michael Chekhov's use of atmospheres.

I started off applying Michael Chekhov's methods to the first act. I found myself saying "no" or something negative on so many accounts throughout the first act. It was as if Masha could not see the bright side of anything. With this in mind, I began applying Chekhov's atmospheres to my rehearsal preparation. Chekhov describes atmospheres as "limitless and to be found everywhere" He also goes on to state, "...you would undoubtedly grasp the content of the scene with your intellect, but you would not be able to penetrate its psychological aspects as profoundly as you might if you let the atmosphere of the scene help you in this" (48). I tried to penetrate the psychological aspects of Masha in the first act by taking into account the given circumstances surrounding her at the top of the act. I started listing; "I don't have a job, I'm married to a husband whom I don't love or want to make a life with, I can't go home with my husband, but I can't stay at my childhood home because my father isn't there anymore." I realized she completely focuses on the negatives. I began to let that negativity overwhelm my atmosphere. Once I did that everything became cold to me. This coldness sparked a need to find warmth. As I reflected on my experience, I found myself having a short fuse with people because they could not give me the warmth that I needed. I found myself very lost and confused like I was stuck and I could not get out. Physically, this cold atmosphere affected the use of my costume. I kept my hat and cape on, so I could find some sort of warmth. It wasn't until Vershinin entered that warmth started to surround me.

It is important to note that my atmosphere began to change once Vershinin entered. As Chekhov goes on to describe atmospheres, he mentions that two different atmospheres cannot

exist at the same time (51). Once Vershinin entered, he brought in an atmosphere that overwhelmed mine. The warmth that his atmosphere provided was enriching and consuming. Masha ultimately gives in to the atmosphere stating, “I’m staying for lunch”. One of the first positive statements she uses in Act One. Another atmosphere shift happens when Kulygin, Masha’s husband, enters the room. Masha stops speaking and the atmosphere turns cold again. The negatives start to fill Masha’s atmosphere and dialogue as she declares, “I’m not going”, “Just leave me alone now, please”, and “Oh, It’s unbearable”. These atmospheres may start from what is said in the text, but continuing to live in the atmosphere helped me to justify and empathize with Masha’s personality.

As I continued to apply atmospheres to the second act, I began to notice the brilliance in which the play was written. Anton Chekhov made this play unfold moment by moment. I believe a lot of that has to do with how the atmosphere of the scenes evolves due to the addition or subtraction of characters. For instance, near the top of Act Two, Masha enters with just Vershinin in a secluded room. That intimate atmosphere is filled with such personal tensions that one wrong move could make the whole thing crumble. Then, just as they are about to embrace, Tuzenbach and Irina enter. They break apart the intimacy paving the way for more characters to involve themselves in the scene. This interruption also provides light and festivity to fill the rest of the act. Another aspect that pours out of the interrupted intimacy is Masha laughter. This continuous laughter not only fills the atmosphere with hope and positivity, it also changes Masha’s use of language. She begins to philosophize and talks of “faith.”

“It seems to me we must have some sort of faith or we must at least search for it otherwise our lives are empty, empty. And to live and not know why the cranes fly, why children are born, why there are

stars in the sky. Either we try to know why we live or our live are senseless. A waste.”

(Chekhov 30)

Her passion and curiosity for life comes alive and illuminates the entire atmosphere. It isn't until Colonel Vershinin is called away to attend to his wife that there is a different shift yet again.

Vershinin leaves and Masha automatically starts to project her unhappiness onto others. The moments when her flaring temper would arise were some of the hardest acting moments for me to obtain. I knew why she was upset, I could personalize with her situation, but I was still limiting myself. I continually felt like I was not allowing myself to unleash Masha's frustrations at their full capacity. I decided to find strength in my imagination. Another tool that Michael Chekhov teaches throughout his technique is the use of the imagination and the incorporation of images. He states, "You will begin to appreciate it as soon as you realize that you need not 'squeeze' your feelings out of yourself, that they will rise from within you by themselves, and with ease, as soon as you learn to 'see' the psychology, the inner life, of your images" (26). I took the time to imagine there was a fire inside me. I chose fire because it has the ability to provide light and productivity, but it also has the ability to destroy everything in its path. I carried the image of a fire with me for the rest of the act. The fire started within myself, then I let Anton Chekhov's words be kerosene to the fire. This use of imagination gave me the strength to create who I wanted to become. It also helped me to get what I wanted. Most importantly, it helped me explore what I am capable of as an actor.

The image of a fire continued into the third act. There is a fire that consumes the atmosphere of the world of the play, literally and figuratively. Within the act, everyone must deal with the heightened circumstances of a fire spreading throughout the town. They must also deal

with high stakes relationships and secret confessions that could destroy life as they know it. Everything about this act embodied fire. Act Three was one of my favorite parts of the entire show because everyone reveals their true selves.

With the combination of high stakes and complete abandon, I always found this act to be more like a musical or an opera. My training in musical theatre, in my undergraduate and graduate career, has always taught me that the circumstances of a song must be so heightened that the only thing one can do is sing. There are moments in Chekhov's text that reflect this notion, especially for Masha. Within the act, Masha and Vershinin reveal their true passion for each other through song. They begin to sing the aria, All Men Surrender to Love's Power from Tchaikovsky's opera *Eugene Onegin*, in the form of a call and response. Of all the dialogue that Chekhov could have written for them to say, he chose this operatic banter. Why not have them straight up confess their love? Why were they singing it instead of saying it?

These questions continued to pester me as we would run the act. I made a discovery as I continued to re-read the act. There is conversation before Masha re-enters the room between Tuzenbach, Kulygin, Irina, and Vershinin. They discuss the possibility of a musical fundraiser for the victims of the fire. One line in particular that Tuzenbach says stood out to me as an answer to my questions. He says,

*"To be able to play like that and yet to realize that no one,
absolutely no one, understands you."*

(Chekhov 48)

Music becomes a language that only Masha understands. The musicality of the moment between Masha and Vershinin becomes their own secret language and understanding. Anything else would seem ordinary. It is the only thing they can do at that moment.

The fiery passion of that moment was so surreal to step back and analyze. It was not surreal in the fact that the scene was difficult to conceive. It was surreal because the imaginary circumstances of Masha falling in love and her confession to her sisters was a reality that was easily accessible to me. I always prepared myself for that scene by remembering the first time I experienced the “L” word. I was filled with so many emotions that I became uncontrollably giddy. Then, when I told my friends about it the next day, I was on the floor rolling around, describing every detail, and saying “He loves me!” Moments of love are filled with so many emotions that all you can do is burst. People do things they would not normally do, or react in ways they did not know was possible. With that preparation, I began to think of Masha in the third act. She is erupting with love in so many strange ways. She sings, she confesses private matters with her sisters, she begins to express her true thoughts on her relationship with her husband, she even leaves to go find Vershinin, who is calling to her from another room, even though her husband and his wife are in the same house. In my real life and working on the role of Masha, I always wonder why did I do that? What came over me? I came back to my touchstone image of a fire. A fire also has the ability to represent passion. I let that fire lead me. It was all I could think about, the only motivation for my doings.

The imagery and the atmosphere of the fourth act did a complete reversal, shifting from a burning fire to a cold dampness. I attribute this shift to a few given circumstances of the act. Act Four is the first time the play actually takes place outside. Being outside in Russia, at any point of the year, is going to be cold. Most outside environments are filled with nature, openness, and fresh air. One would think that this location would allow for an atmosphere of freedom and adventure, but the text gives an opposite effect. At the end of the act, much of the text specifies in what way many of the characters have lost their hope. When reflecting upon Michael

Chekhov's notion that opposite atmospheres "cannot exist simultaneously" (51) it gives Anton Chekhov's play an effective ending.

Atmospheres are not strictly interpreted through the actor's imagination. Design and Technical elements are sensorial elements to help build the atmosphere within the world of the play for the actors as well as the audience. Throughout this production, the design elements helped to build the environment and the use of my imagination. The design elements in the fourth act amplified my understanding of location and the sense of hopelessness that the script requires. In this production, set designer, James Raymond, incorporated the presence of the beautiful birch trees, referred to throughout the text. This technical element helped me to build

the bridge between subjective images and concrete images. The trees were a concrete element that the ensemble and the audience were able to experience. They provided specificities in my environment such as height, color, textures, and angle. They combined neutral colors and dark colors, such as blue and purple. Also, the transition between the third and fourth act provided the concrete visual of growth. Sometimes when creating a 360 world, I remember to think about

what is surrounding me from side to side and front to back, but I forget about the top of my world. These trees helped me to expand my environment upward. The trees ignited my sensorial experience onstage.

These concrete experiences became a touchstone for my imagination. I found an interesting juxtaposition to be surrounded by the upwardness of the tree with the deteriorating



Fig. 2 - Final rendering for the WVU production of *Three Sisters*; courtesy of set designer, James Raymond.

hope of the text. Also, the color and texture helped me to imagine the cold, jagged nature of the scene. If the act were filled with smooth edges and manufactured shapes, it would have contributed a completely different environment and atmosphere. Lastly, being surrounded by the trees made me feel imprisoned, especially during Masha's "dear, happy birds" sequence and the final exit of Vershinin. Using the design elements of the fourth act strengthened my abilities to allow the environment to affect my imagination.

Applying Meisner's techniques and Michael Chekhov's technique was a unique challenge. At first, they seemed like opposite sides of the spectrum. The Meisner techniques I used are textual and writing based; as opposed to, the image driven atmosphere techniques of Michael Chekhov. Although, when it came down to combining them two words stuck out in my mind, "Imagination" and "Truth". Meisner promotes living truthfully under imaginary circumstances, and Chekhov says, "...to give life means to feel life throughout your whole being." The imagination and imaginary circumstance must be supported by reality.

With the application of Meisner and Chekhov, I accomplished some great feats within the rehearsal process. I found a personal connection to this iconic role. At a certain point, I even stopped viewing Masha as iconic, and allowed myself to experience her flaws. I overcame my fear of judgement from others within the ensemble and within myself. I stopped thinking about the opinions of my character, and learned to justify the reality of my character. I was able to live as Masha through the basis of the text and the support of my imagination.

Part Three: The Performances

When we started to perform *Three Sisters*, I was worried about the audience reaction. A majority of the audience for WVU mainstage productions are students from general theatre elective classes, who are required to see the show for a grade. This means for much of the audience this may be their first theatrical experience. The requirement to see live theatre is a necessary educational tool, and has the ability to encourage the student population to view more productions throughout the continuation of their education. With that being said, there is a stigma surrounding our general elective student audiences. Our students are accustomed to film and television; they can eat during the performance, text or talk during the performance, or press pause at any point. Most audiences when interacting the theatrical arts are used to a screen between them and the performance, not a fourth wall. Not to mention the content produced by film and television happens to be majorly action packed and sex driven. As the performance dates approached one question kept nagging me in the back of my mind. How would the college student audience of West Virginia University react to a 3 hour, 19th century Russian play?

One of the first performances that began to answer this question was the crew view performance. This would be the first performance for an audience that had not been watching us rehearse for six weeks. It was also the first time we had a full run of the show in its entirety. Needless to say, I was filled with anxiety. I was anxious that the show would fail to run cohesively. I was anxious that I would not have the stamina. I was anxious that run time of the show would be too long. With all of this in mind, I focused on relieving my anxieties by reflecting on my experience thus far and taking note of how far I had come. I started with only a basic understanding of the role and play. As the process went along, I grew in my expertise of the given circumstances and the world of the play, gained an extremely personal connection to

the role, and gained a moment-by-moment understanding of the motivations that influenced Masha's decisions.

As the crew view performance continued through its entirety, I was pleasantly surprised. The show progressed from one event in the play to the other. I had this assumption that I would need to "plan out" how I "felt" about the circumstances of the play, and how I "felt" about other characters. It takes a certain amount of preparation because the play jumps time, but due to Anton Chekhov's masterful playwriting, performing the play was effortless. One event meshed right into the next event. Also, the story started to unfold flawlessly. Overall, this revealing performance put me in a positive mode moving forward into the rest of the performances.

With that being said, I cannot deny that I had some difficulties during that performance. I mainly had difficulty at the beginning. My weakness as an actor usually lies at the beginning of a performance. In my experience, the first exposure of any character that I play onstage is one of the most misgiving parts of a performance. There is this predetermined judgement that I place on myself that takes a while for me to conquer during the run of a show. I remember trying to think about being sad or thinking of situations that would just make me sad. I was not allowing myself to live fully in the circumstances that Chekhov provides at the top of the show. After the crew view performance, I knew that I needed to continue working on the beginning of the show.

As the performance continued, I began to settle into comfortability. The performance became more like a continuation of rehearsal instead of a performance. Putting myself in the mindset of a continuation of rehearsal instead of performance mode took me away from the anxieties of the audience. This mind set was only a temporary solution. Although I know I should not become too concerned with how that audience will react, there is still a part of me that knows it is impossible to ignore them. The audience is physically there, they make sounds, they

breathe the same air that we do as performers. The audience even provides the comfort of knowing someone is on my side. For example, the crew view audience's vocal responses were gratifying. In the Act Two scene between Masha and Vershinin, they would "ooh" and "aah" and snickered whenever our intimate moment was interrupted by Tuzenbach and Irina. Then, when the play evolved into Act Four, there was a huge vocal response to Masha kissing Vershinin and Kulygin watching their embrace. Their responses and involvement made me want to invest myself even more in the play.

The experience with an audience always leaves me with an abundance of questions. Am I doing this for them or myself? Am I wrong for wanting the audience to react? Is it selfish to think that the performance is supposed to be for my own gratification? At the basis of it all, what is the line between staying involved in the world of the performance and letting the audience in? In my experience thus far, I have come up with an ever-evolving answer to these questions. The audience will be as invested as you are. They want to be involved in something, or else they wouldn't be there at all. An audience is looking for something to relate to, a reflection of themselves brought to life. Once the audience leaves they will be changed in some way. Ignoring the fact that the performance is changing a room full of people makes no sense to me.

The schedule for the public performances of *Three Sisters* was a bit unusual for West Virginia University. We performed for two days, November 16th and 17th, 2017. Then, we had an entire nine days off for Thanksgiving break. With such intense work on this play the break was well-needed. Although, I was a bit nervous to think that I might lose all the momentum that I had gained from rehearsal. Our first day back from Thanksgiving break there was a pick-up rehearsal. The pick-up rehearsal gave me a sense of ease. I was expecting some dramatic loss of rehearsal, but there was nothing of the sort. It was like we never left.

The first performance after Thanksgiving break was another story. There was an audience and minor things started to change. Lines were being dropped, the energy of the ensemble and the audience was down, some cast members started to overcompensate for the lack of energy, and in return, began to change the things we had rehearsed. We were experiencing a weird performance and trying to pull things together as best as we could. The performance as a whole was fine. Honestly, it may not have seemed as off kilter as I had experienced. Although, it made me realize how comforting it is to be in the rehearsal hall.

In our rehearsal hall, the ensemble would perform in front of a select audience, composed of the director, stage manager(s), vocal coach, and designers. This select audience experienced the play throughout the entire process. It was an enclosed world in which I could keep myself grounded. Only when it was opened to an unfamiliar audience did something begin to overwhelm the ensemble. Theatre has to let the audience in. How else will a story continue to be told? There's an energy every audience brings and it's undeniable. When the energy of an audience is combined with a performance, it can start to take on the characteristics of Michael Chekhov's "Atmospheres". Two atmospheres "cannot exist simultaneously" (51). The atmosphere of the audience can take over the stage or the stage can take over the atmosphere of the audience. That Tuesday night the audience had consumed the whole performance.

As the performances continued, the ensemble and myself carried a very valuable lesson throughout the rest of the run. We learned to focus less on an unpredictable reaction from the audience, and focus more on our character's wants and desires. The rest of the run continued without a hitch. On Saturday, December 2nd, an unexpected circumstance would impede the day and put the rest of the performances in jeopardy. That day I had received a life-altering call that my step-father, Jay Randall Trickett, passed away. Once I had received the call, I went into slow

motion, but everything else revolved around me at normal pace. When I heard about the news I drove straight home to be with my family. Along the way, I had received a call from the director, Jerry McGonigle, asking me what I would like to do. From that point forward, I kept asking myself should I perform my thesis role or should I stay with my family? He encouraged me that I had time to figure it out, but that he would need to keep checking in with me.

When I got to my grandma's house, the whole family was there. We were stunned and silent. As we were waiting for a call from the hospital, the reality still was not sinking into my brain. I was expecting him to walk through the door. We finally got the call to travel to the hospital. As we got in the car, I informed the director about what was happening. He respectfully and kindly reminded me that I would need to make a decision about the show. It was an hour-by-hour countdown that seemed never-ending, and I was being dragged along.

When my family and I got to the hospital, everything started to happen all at once. Hospital personnel came into the waiting room to ask a bunch of questions. Then, we had clearance to go see his body. You know how people say it happened so fast. Well it really did. For me, that was the most relieving part. I think people see the quick pace of a hospital as a bad thing, but in that situation information was being given right away. We did not have to wait, and I was eternally grateful for that. After everything, I had to ask my mom the most difficult question that I have ever had to ask. I asked to have her blessing to go perform in the show. She said yes and that Jay would have wanted me to perform.

I called the director and informed him that I would be there. At this point, it was around 4 pm. I had not eaten. I did not have the will to eat. All I could do was cry and hope that I was doing that right thing. Once I made it to the theatre, I had a few moments to myself. After those few moments that rest of the cast started to trickle their way into the dressing rooms. Everyone

was informed about the situation, but were also very cautious to mention any condolences. As I was putting on my make-up, Elise Rucker (playing Olga) and Jordan Crow (playing Irina) walked into the dressing room. We did not know what say at that moment, but in a moment of pure synchronization, they put down their things and hugged me. After that, we sat in silence and prepared for the show.

After I had finished warming-up and preparing for the performance, I could only anticipate what I rehearsed. I remember having a heightened sense of love and loss. Honestly, I do not remember much about the last two performances of *Three Sisters*. I remember feeling guilty. I felt guilty doing my vocal warm-up because my step-father cannot breathe anymore. I felt guilty moving around because he could not move any longer. When the performances were done, I remember saying to myself and McGonigle, “I wish that I did not feel so bad about my thesis role.”

When I reflect back on the performances of *Three Sisters*, it is hard to stop myself from letting those last two shows overwhelm the entirety of my performance experience. The only thing I can truly reflect upon is how this thesis role has helped me to strengthen my capabilities as an actor and human being. I gained the ability to build the mental and physical stamina for a 3-hour, 19th century Chekhovian drama. I was able to conquer my fear of casting judgement on my performance based off the audience response. I defined my weaknesses and hesitations in the show, and continued to strengthen them for each performance. Most importantly, I learned that each performance will have unique, unexpected factors that every actor must face.

A Conclusion

Since the first rehearsal of *Three Sisters*, the director of the show, Jerry McGonigle, challenged the ensemble with the metaphor of weaving a detailed tapestry of life to be put on stage. We had to weave the tapestry together. Sometimes it would be a success, and sometimes the tapestry was a mess. In my own experience, I found it difficult to genuinely trust in my abilities and the tools I received throughout my graduate training. These roadblocks would shed light upon my insecurities as an actor. Thankfully, the way I tackled and conquered those roadblocks gave me the ability to witness what I am capable of as an actor.

I was able to weave my own thread and pattern among the *Three Sisters* tapestry. Then, I expanded my view by weaving among the other threads of the cast. After that, I was able to examine how the tapestry of West Virginia University's production of *Three Sisters* started to weave its way into my graduate studies and my personal life. Lastly, the production and the training I received helped me to define my unique process in a historical tapestry of the role of Masha.

When auditioning for the MFA acting program at West Virginia University, I was searching for training that would help me conquer my fears of the industry. Throughout my training, there were many obstacles that I had to overcome. I had to survive intensive Meisner training and the techniques of Michael Chekhov. I had to dedicate myself to finding my individual voice and the freedom to move my body freely. I received training into time periods that I had never experienced, such as Shakespeare, Chekhov/Ibsen, Absurdism, and Non-western theatre. I was challenged to delve into many specific theatrical art forms, such as performance art installations, musical theatre, and acting for the camera. I am thankful for my exposure to so many challenging situations. There will always be my own insecurities and unforeseen trials that

I must conquer. My graduate training has helped me embrace that fact. Thankfully, I have training that has provided me with confidence in a plethora of specialties.

My thesis role as Masha in *Three Sisters* has provided me with a specific process. This opportunity challenged me to apply my training into the process of a show. From the audition, to the rehearsal process, and throughout the performances, I never stopped analyzing and applying technique. I have come to realize that the work never stops. It is constantly changing and evolving. I have also come to realize that change and evolution are extremely scary, yet inescapable. I recognize that I am not the same woman that I was when I started this program. I have the ability to rise above any pressures. I am completely capable of conquering my fears.

Works Cited

- Borny, Geoffrey. "Three Sisters: 'Oh If We Could Only Know!.'" *Chapter 6. Three Sisters: 'Oh If We Could Only Know!'*, ANU E Press, 2006, press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p24651/html/ch06.html.
- Chekhov, Anton. *The Three Sisters*. Translation by Allen Fletcher. ()
- Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich, et al. *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought: Selected Letters and Commentary*. Northwestern University Press, 1997.
- Chekhov, Michael. *To the Actor: on the Technique of Acting*. Routledge, 2002.
- Ignatieva, Maria. *Stanislavsky and Female Actors: Women in Stanislavsky's Life and Art*. University Press of America, 2008.
- Johanson, Christine. *Women's Struggle for Higher Education in Russia: 1855-1900*. McGill-Queens Univ. Pr., 1987.
- Llewellyn, Jennifer, et al. "Russian society" at Alpha History, 2014, <http://alphahistory.com/russianrevolution/russian-society>.
- Meisner, Sanford, and Dennis Longwell. *Sanford Meisner on Acting*. W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2017.
- Moore, J. Kenneth, et al. *Musical Instruments: Highlights of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015.
- Silverberg, Larry. *The Sanford Meisner Approach: Workbook Four: Playing the Part*. Smith and Kraus, 2006.
- Simmons, Ernest Joseph. *Chekhov. A Biography*. Univ. of Chicago Pr, 1970.
- Styan, J. L. *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice. Volume 1: Realism and Naturalism*. Cambridge University Press, 1983.