

THE CHERRY ORCHARD

BY ANTON CHEKHOV

APRIL 17 - MAY 10, 2009

A STUDY GUIDE FOR STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS



This study guide is researched and designed by the Education Department at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater and is intended to prepare you for your visit.

It contains information that will deepen your understanding of, and appreciation for, the production. We've also included questions and activities for you to explore before and after our performance of

THE CHERRY ORCHARD

Study Guide Created By

Janine Bannier,
Education Intern

and

Rebecca Witt,
Education
Coordinator

Edited By

Jenny Kostreva,
Education Director

Kristin Crouch,
Literary Director

**If you would like to schedule a
classroom workshop, or if we can
help in any other way, please contact:**

**Jenny Kostreva at (414) 290-5370
jkostreva@milwaukeerep.com**

**Rebecca Witt at (414) 290-5393
rwitt@milwaukeerep.com**



INSIDE THIS GUIDE

*Synopsis/ About the
Author*

2

Historical Context

3

Who's Who

4

*An Interview with
Ben Barnes*

5

*Glossary of Terms/
Themes*

6

Visiting The Rep

8

SYNOPSIS

THE CHERRY ORCHARD is the story of Madame Ranevskaya, her family and their cherry orchard estate in Russia. The play opens in May, with everyone awaiting the return of Madame Ranevskaya and her daughter Anya from Paris. When they arrive there is much talk of love and happiness between the family members. Unfortunately, the homecoming is not completely happy. Madame Ranevskaya is now in debt and neither she nor her brother, Gayev, have money to pay the mortgage on the estate. If they are unable to pay for the estate by August, it will be auctioned off. Lopakhin, a former servant of the family and now a shrewd businessman, suggests that Madame Ranevskaya build villas she can lease and then use the money to pay the mortgage. Madame Ranevskaya and Gayev object, saying they will work something out on their own. On the night of the auction, Madame Ranevskaya has taken no action about her increasing debt and even holds a dance at the estate. But, she is still nervous about the outcome of the auction and hopes for a miracle. Will her cherry orchard estate be bought or will Madame Ranevskaya be given another chance at paying off the mortgage?

ACTIVITY: *The play focuses memories and items that are sentimental for the family.*

Madame Ranevskaya has an attachment to the nursery in her house because it reminds her of better times. Bring in something that is sentimental to you and share the item with a small group. Why is it important to you? Would it be hard for you to let it go if you were forced to?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anton Chekhov was born January 29, 1860 in the small town of Taganrog, a port on the Sea of Azov in Russia. He was a grandson of a serf who bought his family's freedom before their emancipation. Chekhov attended a Greek Parochial school as a child and later went on to attend the Taganrog Classical Gimnaziya (high school). He studied both Greek and Latin classics in school, which is the literary basis that led him into writing. His father ran a grocery store and went bankrupt in 1876, forcing Chekhov's family to flee to Moscow in order to avoid debtors prison. Three years later, Chekhov joined his family in Moscow and attended the medical school at Moscow University. Through his medical work, Chekhov had become the bread winner of his family as his father could not find steady employment. He also began to obtain odd jobs as a freelance journalist and wrote comic sketches.

His writing career began to take off as he continued to write humorous journals and farcical sketches. By 1888 he became very popular with the lowbrow public. During this time, there was a sudden drop in the number of sketches that Chekhov was producing a year, but the quality of his work began to rise. The humor in the stories became more and more obscure, and the now underlying comedy in his works was the staple of his portfolio.

In 1889, Chekhov began to focus on more serious stories. The most notable was A DREARY STORY, the study of the mind of an elderly professor of medicine who was about to die. The play, IVANOV, was also written at this time. These works are called Chekhov's clinical studies, which focus on the experiences of the mentally ill. In the early 1890s Chekhov worked as a doctor, helping to relieve the poor and the sick of the famine that had struck Moscow. During this time, Chekhov wrote many short stories considered today to be masterpieces. Village life took hold of Chekhov's work, dominating most of the themes and story lines. After two years, Chekhov began an expedition on the island of Sakhalin to study the indigenous peoples who lived there. There he wrote UNCLE VANYA, one of his most highly regarded plays. It was published in 1897.

Chekhov co-founded the Moscow Art Theatre with Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and Konstantin



Stanislavsky. Though he wrote much of his late works for the theater he was dissatisfied with many of the productions. He was disappointed by the direction of plays which, according to him, overemphasized the occasions in which the characters argue against the boredom and futility of their lives. Despite Stanislavsky's reputation as an innovator who had brought a natural, non-declamatory style to the Russian stage, his productions were never natural enough for Chekhov who wished his work to be acted with the lightest possible touch. Though Chekhov has become one of the most popular playwrights of this time period, it is believed that if he were still alive, he would be unsatisfied with virtually all the productions of his work. Chekhov insisted that his last play, *THE CHERRY ORCHARD* was a comedy. He wrote the play to be "a picture of the Russian landowning class in decline, portraying characters that remain comic despite their very poignancy." *THE CHERRY ORCHARD* was first performed in Moscow on January 17, 1904. Less than six months later Chekhov died of tuberculosis.

Chekhov became internationally famous after World War I when his work was translated into English. It was not until 40 years after his death, when the 20-volume *Complete Works and Letters of A.P. Chekhov* was published that Chekhov was presented on a level of scholarship worthy. Eight volumes of this edition contain his correspondence amounting to several thousand letters. Outstandingly witty and lively, they are contrary to what the public had painted Chekhov to be: a pessimist, hopelessly dissatisfied with life and society.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the 19th century, Russia was the only nation in Europe that still clung to the ways of feudalism. Feudalism refers to a system of political organization, in which an elite individual called a "lord" has control over several common people who work for him. In Russia, the peasants who served the lord were called serfs. A serf is a laborer who is bound to the land. Serfs differ from slaves in that serfs were not property themselves and could not be sold apart from the land which they worked. Serfdom was a hereditary state which was passed to the next generation. It evolved from agricultural slavery of the Roman Empire and spread through Europe in the 10th century and became dominant during the Middle Ages. In England, serfdom lasted up to the 17th century, in France until 1789. The last European country to abolish serfdom was Russia, in 1861. During the time that *THE CHERRY ORCHARD* was written, about fifty percent of Russian peasants were serfs.



A painting by K.V. Lebedev depicting Russian serfs.

In 1861, when it became clear that Russia was no longer a great power, Czar Alexander II issued the Emancipation Manifesto, which called for the freedom of all serfs. Peasants were now able to buy land. The hope was that a transformation of the social order would spark a market economy. During this time a middle class rose to power peopled by industrialists, businessmen, merchants and other professionals. These reforms caused great controversy as they introduced what was the beginning of a free-market economy, undermining the power of the nobility and sometimes even impoverishing them. *THE CHERRY ORCHARD* takes place during this period of difficult shift, which required an intense ability to adapt to new modes of living. The situation displayed in the play is of a wealthy landowning family that is forced to sell their estate in order to pay their debts. The family also has to deal with the serfs rising up and becoming as wealthy as they are. These circumstances were familiar in the Russian society of Chekhov's day.

DISCUSSION: *How does the freedom of the serfs compare to the freedom of the slaves during the Civil War? In small groups compare and contrast the two emancipations. Do you think everyone was truly free?*

WHO'S WHO

Madame Ranevskaya: The owner of the cherry orchard estate. She comes from an aristocratic family, but married beneath her. After her son Grisha drowned, Madame Ranevskaya fled to Paris. Since then, she has accumulated many debts and lives in the past.

Yermolai Alexeyitch Lopakhin: His family were former serfs on Madame Ranevskaya's estate. Although he was born into a family of serfs, Lopakhin is now a wealthy landowner and a shrewd businessman.

Leonid Andreyitch Gayev: Madame Ranevskaya's older unmarried brother who often describes billiards shots at inappropriate times to try to relieve tension.

Varya: Madame Ranevskaya's oldest daughter who is adopted. She is the estate manager and works very hard but has little to show for it.

Anya: Madame Ranevskaya's youngest daughter who traveled to Paris with her. Anya lives a very sheltered life.

Peter Trofimov: Tutor of Madame Ranevskaya's deceased son and a scholar at the local university.

Firs: Born a serf on Madame Ranevskaya's estate. Though he is free, he has not been able to adapt and reminisces of the past.

Dunyasha: A young servant.

Yasha: Madame Ranevskaya's manservant who traveled to Paris with her.

Simeon Panteleyitch Ephikodov: A clerk who works on the estate.

Charlotte Ivanovna: Anya's governess. Popular for her magic tricks.

Simeonov-Pishchik: A land-owning neighbor. He spends the play in debt, although he is able to pay off some of it at the end.

ACTIVITY: *What would your name be in Russian Society? Share your new Russian name with friends and make a name tag for yourself. Try to spend a whole day being called only by your new Russian name.*

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Russians have three names. Using Madame Ranevskaya's name as an example, here is the explanation of the three names.

A given name: *Lyubov*

A patronymic name (male name) identifying one's father: *Andreyevna* (daughter of *Andrey*)

A surname (a family name): *Ranevskaya*

In Chekhov's time, decorum prescribed several proper uses of names.

Title and surname is used for formal relationships: *Madame Ranevskaya*

Given name and patronymic were slightly less formal: *Lyubov Andreyevna*

Given name alone for family: *Lyubov*

Diminutive of the given name for affection (nickname): *Lyuba Andreyevna Ranevskaya*

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Chekhov, Anton. *The Essential Tales of Chekhov*. Harper Perennial, London: 2000.

Donahue, Tim. *A Teacher Guide to Anton Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard*. University of South Carolina. 2005. Department of Theatre and Dance. 2 March 2009. <<http://www.cas.sc.edu/thea/2006/cherry%20orchard/cherry%20orchard%20guide.pdf>>.

Lindheim, Ralph. *The Cherry Orchard: Chekhov's Praise of Folly*. University of Toronto. 3 March 2009. <<http://www.utoronto.ca/tsq/10/lindheim10.shtml>>.

Rayfield, Donald. *Understanding Chekhov: A Critical Study of Chekhov's Prose and Drama*. University of Wisconsin Press, Madison: 1999.

Thomas, Steve. *Letters of Anton Chekhov*. 1 January 2003. University of Adelaide Library. 2 March 2009. <<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/c/chekhov/anton/c51lt/chap1.html>>.

Thompson, John M. *Russia and the Soviet Union: A Historical Introduction From the Kievan State to the Present*. Westview Press, Colorado: 2003.

AN INTERVIEW WITH BEN BARNES, DIRECTOR

How did you get into theater? Did you always want to direct?

I have never done anything in the theater other than direct (and as an Artistic Director, of course, produce). I became interested in directing when I was at University studying Medieval Irish history; I received a scholarship from our Arts Council to study directing after I graduated and have been doing it steadily since then.

You've worked with The Rep numerous times before as a director. How does the rehearsal process differ from show to show? Are there any similarities?

If it is a small show like *ENDGAME* you tend to have more access to the actors and can develop a close and intense rehearsal process. With big shows like *A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY*, and now *THE CHERRY ORCHARD*, the logistics are much more complicated- actors in other shows, separate choreography rehearsals, crowd scenes, etc. The management of the time is crucial and much more pre-planning to maximize the available hours goes on. I would also say that much of the staging has to be done in a piecemeal fashion and then assembled during the technical period on stage. This can put quite a lot of pressure on those technical days late in the process.



From *ENDGAME*, which Barnes directed for The Rep in 2008. Pictured are Resident Acting Company Members Lee Ernst and Laura Gordon.



Each show has its own appeal. What attracted you to directing Anton Chekhov's *THE CHERRY ORCHARD*? What do you want the audience will get out of watching the play?

I have spent my career working in equal measure on new and contemporary plays on the one hand and classic plays on the other. Classics have that status because they are timeless and can speak to people across the generations. I have always admired the plays of Chekhov because they seem to mirror for me the majesty as well as the imperfection of life. They are full of hopeless characters who somehow muddle through but are not without their moments of majesty. These are timeless plays of deep human emotion beautifully crafted. The stories seem

incidental. And Chekhov is *always* a surprise. The whole is so much more than the sum of its parts.

Why do you think Chekhov's work is so widely produced to this day? How is he relevant to current society?

I think Chekhov's greatness is bound up with all the things I referred to in my answer above. *THE CHERRY ORCHARD* describes a world in transition, which started with the emancipation of the serfs and finished with the Russian revolution. The old aristocracy is swept away in this 'once in an era' event when the earth shifts on its axis. And in those momentous times there will always be those who can cope and those who can't. Those who will adapt and those who cannot. Winners and losers. Have we not reached another such moment in the cycle of human experience? It seems to me that the death of capitalism as we have known it is upon us and *THE CHERRY ORCHARD* might be, at some level, a cautionary tale from another time. So: relevant? I think so.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

allez: go (French)

basta: enough (Italian)

dachas: a Russian country villa

illusory: deceptive; unreal

intelligentsia: people regarding themselves as the educated or intellectual elite

kopec: 100 kopecks equal 1 ruble (Russian currency); equals \$77.52 U.S. Dollars

kvass: a Russian drink distilled from barley or rye

livery: a uniform worn by male servants

muzhik: a male Russian peasant

Nietzsche: Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900); a German philosopher

patchouli: a small mint-like shrub used in perfumes

samovar: a metal urn used to boil tea in Russia

versts: a former Russian unit of length (0.663 mile)

ACTIVITY: *There are many other terms in THE CHERRY ORCHARD that are important to understanding the play. Some of them include: mitigating, palpable, vagrant, patchouli and lout. Knowing what the play is about, come up with your own definitions for these words in small groups. After you do this, look up the words in the dictionary and see if you were right. Find other words in the script you might not know and do the same activity.*

THEMES

THE CHERRY ORCHARD has many themes that weave in and out of the plot. While many writers of the time used these themes in their writing, Chekhov was the only to view them in a new light. His interesting sense of humor and view on life helps his plays stand out among others. Even more important is the fact that these underlying themes are still important today.

The Struggle Over Memory

In THE CHERRY ORCHARD, each character is involved in a struggle to remember or forget aspects of his or her past. Ranevskaya wants to remember the past and forget the present because the estate contains awful memories of the death of her son. She is reminded of these memories when she sees Trofimov, her son's tutor. Lopakhin's memories are oppressive. His memories are of a brutal, uncultured peasant upbringing that he wishes to forget. They conflict with his identity as a well-heeled businessman, with fancy clothes and allusions to Shakespeare. Trofimov is concerned more with Russia's historical memory. He wishes Russia to forget the beautiful and redeeming aspects the past, which he views as oppressive and need of renunciation if Russia is to move forward. Firs lives solely in memory. Most of his speeches in the play relate to what life was like before the serfs were freed, telling of the recipe for making cherry jam, which now even he can't remember. At the end of the play, he is forgotten by the other characters, symbolizing the forgotten era he represents.

ACTIVITY: *By yourself, write down some memories, either good or bad. Do you think that these memories help dictate how you act now? Do they influence the decisions that you make today? Have you ever tried to forget something that happened in the past? If so, why? Jot down your ideas to these questions. Share some of your ideas with small groups.*



Modernity vs. The Old Russia

A recurrent theme throughout Russian literature is the clash between the values of modernity and the values of “old Russia”. Modernity signifies rationalism, secularism and materialism. Much of late nineteenth-century Russian literature was written in reaction to the change from old Russia to modernity and in praise of Russia's history and folklore. In *THE CHERRY ORCHARD*, the conflict between Gayev and Ranevskaya on the one hand and Lopakhin and Trofimov on the other can be seen as emblematic of the disputes between the old feudal order and Westernization. The conflict is made most explicit in the speeches of Trofimov, who views Russia's historical legacy as oppressive, something to be abandoned instead of exalted.

DISCUSSION: In small groups discuss the idea of modernity today. What new technologies have come about in the past 10 years? Do you think that people of the older generations are having a more difficult time adapting to the new, modern world? Where have you seen conflicts of interest in your own life? Do you think that this new technology will help or hinder us?

Social Change and Progress

Several characters address the difference between social change and social progress. Firs and Trofimov are two of them. Both question the utility of the Liberation. As Firs notes, it made everyone happy but they did not know what they were happy for. Firs himself is living proof of this discrepancy: society has changed, but his life has not progressed. Both characters agree that the Liberation is not enough to constitute progress; while it was a necessary change it was not enough to bring mankind to the idealized future Trofimov imagines. The play leaves the impression that while change has come, there is more work to be done.

DISCUSSION: THE CHERRY ORCHARD is seen as a social commentary on life in Russia in the early 1900s. Find modern examples of TV, movies, plays and books that comment on our society. What social problems can you identify in our world? Are any of these problems similar to issues in THE CHERRY ORCHARD? What differences do you see?

Independence, Liberation and Freedom

Much of *THE CHERRY ORCHARD* deals with the theme of independence. Fundamentally, it demands that we ask what it means to be free. In the play, Russia has been liberated but most of the population was not free. Lopakhin has been able to take advantage of his liberation to make himself independent. However, Firs, though he is technically free, has not changed his position at all and is still subject to the family he serves. Madame Ranevskaya is not free either, but in a very different way from Firs. She has enough assets to be able to control her own destiny but she is a slave to her passions, spends extravagantly and makes poor decisions. The difference in these situations demonstrates the observations of many Russians of the time: officially liberating a group of people is not the same as making them free. If you do not also equip them with the tools they need to become independent, such as education and land, they never will be truly independent. Trofimov, the play's idealist, offers an interesting definition of freedom for the audience to consider. According to Trofimov, he is a free man because he is beholden to no one, which is why he refuses the offer of Lopakhin's money.

ACTIVITY: With your class, make a chart of freedoms we have today. Rank these freedoms in order of importance. Why have you chosen these freedoms over others? Do you think that freedoms vary depending on who you are? Why is this so? Does freedom make us independent? Discuss these questions as a class. Try to relate your answers to your own life.

VISITING THE REP

The Milwaukee Repertory Theater is housed in the Milwaukee Center at the corner of Wells and Water Streets, downtown. Our building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway and Light Company. This name is still carved on the wall outside.

You'll enter on the Wells Street side into a large, open space. Our box office will be visible on your left as you come through the front doors. The large space is the main hub for the businesses that share this building: a bank, an office tower, the Pabst Theater, and the Intercontinental Hotel. There will be a staircase on your left. You will take this staircase to the Powerhouse Theater lobby.

Inside the lobby are restrooms, water fountains, and a coat check. If you decide to bring a snack, please know that food and drink are NOT permitted in the theater. However, you can leave things (at your own risk) in the coat check room, and enjoy them outside the theater during intermission. Most plays have one intermission that is about 20 minutes long. You might also want to look for signs in the lobby which give the full "running time" of the play.

For more information on our education programs and our productions, please visit our website at www.milwaukeeep.com

Programs in the Education Department receive generous funding from:

**The Helen Bader Foundation
The Einhorn Family Foundation
The Harley Davidson Foundation
The Richard and Ethel Herzfeld Foundation
Dorothy Inbusch Foundation, Inc
Johnson Controls
The Milwaukee Arts Board
MPS Partnership for the Arts**

"The theatre is so endlessly fascinating because it's so accidental. It's so much like life."

Arthur Miller

Our lives are greatly enhanced with theater. Studying and viewing it teaches us about other cultures and times, collaboration, work ethic, and imagination. We become more aware of the world around us with these concepts, and in addition to this, more alert to and responsive of human nature. With this improved understanding of what theater can provide for us we are able to gain a better appreciation not only for theater, but for life as well.

THE MILWAUKEE REPERTORY THEATER EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Jenny Kostreva, Education Director
414-290-5370
jkostreva@milwaukeeep.com

Rebecca Witt, Education Coordinator
414-290-5393
rwitt@milwaukeeep.com

