

## REVIEW ARTICLES

## TRANSLATING CHEKHOV FOR THE AMERICAN STAGE

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Chekhov, Anton. *Five Plays*. Trans. Marina Brodskaya. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2011. xxvii + 282 pp. \$17.95 (paper).

Chekhov, Anton. *The Seagull*. Trans. Laurence Senelick. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010. 175 pp. \$11.95 (paper).

Chekhov, Anton. *Three Sisters*. Trans. Laurence Senelick. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010. 192 pp. \$11.95 (paper).

Chekhov, Anton. *The Cherry Orchard*. Trans. Laurence Senelick. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010. 176 pp. \$11.95 (paper).

Translations of Chekhov's plays began to appear in America in 1912, in a collection translated by Marian Fell which included *Ivanov*, *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *Swan Song*. Prior to this publication, a few of Chekhov's plays had been performed on American stages in Russian by traveling theater companies: Pavel Orlov's company performed *The Seagull* in 1906 and Vera Komissarzhevskaya's company performed the same play and added *Uncle Vanya* in 1908, but audiences had only synopses of the plays as guides. Both companies failed to attract English-speaking audiences in large numbers. Until Fell's translations arrived and prompted conversation and eventually theatrical production, Chekhov remained, for Americans, only a great Russian writer of short stories. Julius West offered *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* in 1916. These translations were trumped by the beautifully engraved translations of Jenny Covan, whose translations of *Three Sisters*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *The Cherry Orchard* were published in 1922, by impresario Morris Gest, in anticipation of the 1923 American tour of the Moscow Art Theater. Widely circulated as marketing tools to American theater artists, businessmen and their wives, these texts introduced American theatergoers to Chekhov on a broad scale. Covan's translations of Chekhov, Gorky, and Tolstoy, characterized by her contemporaries as earthy and vivid, remain in circulation. A 2011 production of *Uncle Vanya* in Pennsylvania used this translation, and Dover reissued her translation of *The Lower Depths* in 2000. The British translator Constance Garnett offered collections in 1923 and 1927, and her work, too, is often anthologized, reissued, and used for production. The early translators had the difficult task of drawing interest to their subject, and often took liberties in "smoothing out" the differences between cultures. The results were sometimes flat and colorless, lacking Chekhov's unusual (and lively) stylistic and linguistic attributes. Translators, even contemporary ones, subtly making a case for an English-language or American Chekhov, sometimes cut long speeches, cultural references, repetition, and alter or omit punctuation, sudden tonal shifts, and rhythm to aid clarity and the actor's vocal abilities. While these early translations of Chekhov spurred a growth of interest in

Chekhov in the last century, they often limited readings and simplified the complexity and nuance of the preeminent modern dramatist. Contemporary American artists and audiences, as well as students and scholars, are fortunate to receive the recent translations of Chekhov's plays by Marina Brodskaya and Laurence Senelick, which offer broad interpretive opportunities and insights into the world of Chekhov. These carefully and perceptively rendered translations, suitable for the stage as well as the classroom, amplify and expand possibilities for staging these masterworks.

As languages, cultures, and critical theories change, new translations appear to bridge new distances. Dozens of translations of Chekhov's plays have appeared in the last 20 years, many by playwrights with little or no Russian working from commissioned 'literal' translations, who wish to dialogue with the Russian dramatist. A diversity of emergent views of Chekhov and his work inform all new translations, and while each of them resemble Chekhov, each offers a lens with which to see the palette he used to paint his characters, his linguistic technique, his sense of theatrical space and time, his stylistic ties, his musicality, and his sense of humor. Translations inform the degree to which Chekhov's milieu (the literary, artistic, political, social, and personal contexts of his time) is visible. Because most American theater artists and audiences have no access to the original, translators largely determine their sense of what is meant by "Chekhovian." They begin the interpretive process which will be completed by directors, dramaturgs, actors, designers, and, finally, audiences. Translators of Chekhov's plays must keep in mind contemporary stage practices, be knowledgeable of the rehearsal process, and anticipate the challenges of producing Chekhov. In 2010, the 150th anniversary of Chekhov's birth, W.W. Norton and Company issued Laurence Senelick's translations of *The Seagull*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard* in individual volumes prepared for rehearsal use. The following year, Stanford University Press issued *Anton Chekhov: Five Plays*, translated by Marina Brodskaya. These translations, similar in their regard for Chekhov's language, rhythms, humor, and characterizations, evoke Chekhov's Russia and celebrate the richness of his dramatic worlds. Both translators have worked closely with actors and directors in the rehearsal process and present texts which are exceptionally stageworthy even as they are useful to students and scholars.

Brodskaya's volume includes *Ivanov*, *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*. Additional material includes an introduction by Tobias Wolff, a note on translation by Monika Greenleaf, and a note on Russian names that offers a guide to patronymics, diminutives, and symbolic usages. In the introduction, Wolff offers a biographical sketch of Chekhov, highlighting his father's brutality and Chekhov's contrasting mercy and humanity in his life and in his writing. Wolff briefly points out some characteristic features of Chekhov's writing, such as "the choral intertwining of voices" (xiii), but offers little analysis or interpretive strategies for the plays, leaving the translations free to stand for themselves. Greenleaf's "Note on the Translation" offers an excellent argument for Brodskaya's translations. She delineates the defects in previous translations, such as the "arbitrary omissions of whole passages; gross and absurd mistranslations; blatant insertions [...]; the use of stylistically impossible or anachronistic expressions [...]; and the failure to sense and render the elusive melody of each character's intonation as well as the musical intertwining of the ensemble's voices [...]" (xix). Greenleaf's analysis of the deficiencies of previous translations corrected by Brodskaya offers an excellent guide to the complexities of Chekhov's craftsmanship. The Stanford University professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures details the way Chekhov's linguistic precision determines the tone, the rhythm, the humor, and the web binding the characters together in his plays. "Repeated phrasings and bouncing echoes," Greenleaf writes, "are the secret handshake, the musical through-line and rhythm within the plays, making the characters part of one another's world, inextricably linked in ways unbeknownst to themselves" (xx).

Marina Brodskaya, born in St. Petersburg, is a translator, interpreter, and lecturer who has taught courses on Chekhov and Acting at Stanford University. Offering only the acknowledgements, a two-sentence biography, and brief endnotes, Brodskaya's presence as translator-interpreter is sub-

merged in the texts. She provides endnotes rather than footnotes for each play to explain references in the text, and this approach creates a fluid text that subtly removes the hand of the translator from the reader's consciousness. Brodskaya carefully captures Chekhov's sense of language in his use of repetition, rhythm, and punctuation, and she elegantly transfers the plays into a non-abrasive American English. Brodskaya's sensitivity to Chekhov's linguistic and rhythmic precision accounts for the unmistakable musicality of her translations. Because these five plays appear together in a volume by a single translator who takes careful note of repetition and specific linguistic features, the echoes within as well as among the plays are delightfully apparent. The inclusion of *Ivanov*, sometimes omitted from anthologies, is especially welcome here as its resemblance to Chekhov's later plays is often lost. Though the resemblances among the plays are heard in these translations, Brodskaya skillfully captures the distinctive voices of Chekhov's characters. Even the most similar characters cannot be mistaken—their choice of words and imagery, phrasing, and rhythms are hardly interchangeable.

Laurence Senelick, Fletcher Professor of Drama and Oratory at Tufts University, is a preeminent scholar of Russian theater. His recent publications include *The Chekhov Theatre: A Century of the Plays in Performance* (2000) and *Historical Dictionary of Russian Theatre* (2007). His Chekhov anthology, *The Complete Plays* (2006), offers the most comprehensive edition of Chekhov available. The book contains all of Chekhov's plays, variations of the plays, and extensive notes and contextual material. Senelick's thorough knowledge of Chekhov's stories, letters, and plays in addition to the theatrical and literary traditions of Chekhov's time informs his rendering of the plays into English.

Senelick's translations of *The Seagull*, *The Cherry Orchard*, and *Three Sisters* have been published individually in Norton's Stage Edition Series. Each volume contains a biography of Chekhov, a chronology of his life, a note on translation, a pronunciation guide, and an introduction to the play. In his introductions, Senelick offers a brief production history, contextualizes the plays, and gives insight into the characters' language and rhythms. Most importantly, Senelick offers extensive footnotes throughout the texts, providing explanations for references and noting difficulties in translation. Senelick also provides the reader with excerpts from Chekhov's letters regarding characters as appropriate throughout the volumes. Footnotes, rather than endnotes, here constantly remind the reader of the intertextual nature of these works and the presence of the translator. A dramaturg's dream, the wealth of material in each volume provides a production team and cast with the extensive research support necessary to embark on a production of the plays. All materials are concisely and usefully presented. Senelick's translations provide us with a Chekhov whose palette was extensive and who used a variety of bold as well as subtle strokes. In Senelick's translations, we clearly see the Chekhov who admired Maeterlinck and inspired futurists as well as the Chekhov of the Moscow Art Theatre.

Like Brodskaya, Senelick is keenly attuned to the sound as well as the meaning and visceral quality of Chekhov's language. In fact, Senelick relishes the sounds and imagery of Chekhov and carefully searches for English approximations. In a departure from Brodskaya, Senelick transfers the speech of Chekhov's peasants and servants into a folksy American English. First makes an excellent example. Senelick presents his speech in Act Two of *The Cherry Orchard* as:

I've lived a long time. They were making plans to marry me off long before your daddy even saw the light ... (Laughs.) And when freedom came, I was already head footman. I didn't go along with freedom then, I stayed by the masters .... And I recollect they was all glad, but what they was glad about, they didn't know. (114)

Brodskaya translates:

I've been around a long time. They were getting ready to marry me off before your father was even born... [Laughs] I was the head valet when the freedom came. Only I didn't agree to freedom and stayed with the masters ... *A pause*. Everybody was happy, but why, they didn't know. (247)

The meaning remains the same in both, though the texture is decidedly different. In the first case, the strangeness of having together in the same space characters of such distinctive ways and beliefs resonates boldly. The other quiets the jarring effect such distinctions can create.

While both authors attempt to capture Chekhov's imagery in relation to character, Senelick works to grasp the visceral effect of language, even if unpleasant. For example, he translates Lopakhin's line «со свиным рылом в калашный ряд» in Act One as "Like a pig's snout on a pastry tray ..." and offers a note, giving a literal translation (70). Brodskaya acquires Lopakhin's feeling of being out-of-place but drops the food imagery, creating the more digestible, "A pig in a china shop ...." (226). Both retain the pig, which Lopakhin uses again to describe himself in the second act. Senelick, though, opts to underline Chekhov's use of food imagery as key in establishing character traits and relationships to others (remember Liubov's coffee addiction, Varya's bean-fed servants, Trigorin's denial of sweets, Gaev's candy, Medvedenko's mouths to feed, doctors' abuse of alcohol, shared meals, and cold tea, etc.). Lopakhin may be used again to demonstrate a distinguishing feature of the translations. Toward the end of Act Two, Lopakhin teases a distressed Varya using Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Chekhov wrote «Охмелия, иди в монастырь...» Brodskaya translates it lyrically as, "O-Varya, get thee to a nunnery" (250); whereas Senelick, trying to capture the vulgarity in the phrase (referring to drunkenness), gives us a more coarse play on Ophelia, "I'll feel ya, get thee to a nunnery" (121). These strikingly different versions offer actors playing Lopakhin a very different feel for the character who almost obscenely celebrates his purchase of the orchard and hires the disastrous, unrefined Yepikhodov to guard the grounds. Senelick exposes the raw, uncouth traits of the character, while Brodskaya's Lopakhin appears more civil, if lacking polish. A similar example of the diverse styles of Brodskaya and Senelick can be found in Nina's description of her life in Act Four of *The Seagull*. In Brodskaya's translation, Nina says that in Yelets, "merchants will bother me with compliments" (110). In Senelick's, the businessmen will "pester [her] with their propositions" (158). The latter is a far deeper descent for the 'angelically pure' creature described by Trigorin in the previous act (Brodskaya 98; Senelick 136).

Both translators offer beautifully stageable scripts that capture the comedy, lyricism, and key imagery of Chekhov. Both translators are attuned to the rhythms, cadences, and tonal shifts marking each character, each moment, each scene and act of Chekhov as unique and infinitely layered. Their Chekhov is a decidedly nineteenth-century Russian author whose characters continue to echo his specific milieu. They share a basic approach to translation, though Senelick's approach foregrounds the act of translation and interpretation, while Brodskaya obscures her presence as translator-interpreter. Brodskaya's light touch tends toward the lyrical and displays Chekhov's elegance and sophistication. Senelick, too, reveals the beauty of Chekhov, while embracing Chekhov's "linguistic audacity" (*The Seagull* 50), giving us the more sordid and, as Senelick puts it, "fruity" Chekhov (52). Directors with a specific disposition toward Chekhov will prefer one approach to the other, but these translations are excellent additions which should be consulted by theater artists, scholars, and students. They will enrich their view of Chekhov, the playwright.

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