

Understanding the Purpose of Modern Adaptations of Classic Works of Dramatic
Literature:

A Case Study of Anton Chekhov

Corinne Hundt

An Essay Presented to the Department of English and American Literatures in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Fall 2010

Middlebury College
Middlebury, Vermont

“Artists who do not go forward go backward.”

-Konstantin Stanislavski

Table of Contents

Chapter	Page Numbers
I. Abstract	i
II. Introduction	1-2
III. Translation Versus Adaptation	3-9
IV. A Unique Tragicomedy	10
V. Sam Holcroft's <i>Vanya</i>	11-24
VI. Howard Barker's <i>Uncle Vanya</i>	25-41
VII. David Mamet's <i>Uncle Vanya</i>	42-54
VIII. Appendix: Other Adaptations of <i>Uncle Vanya</i>	55-56
IX. Conclusion	57-58
X. Works Consulted	59-60

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank Professor John Bertolini, Professor Richard Romagnoli and Professor Michael Katz for all their time and patience in helping me to distill the beautiful works of Anton Chekhov and the many artistic adaptations he inspired in order to write this essay. Also, I am indebted to Professor Elizabeth Napier for her help in our senior seminar and making me believe that, yes, a sixty-page essay can in fact be completed in one semester, all you need to do is start writing. Lastly, I want to acknowledge my high school drama teacher Mr. Al Romano for instilling in me a love and appreciation for dramatic literature.

I. Abstract

As arguably the most famous playwright that Russia has ever produced, Anton Chekhov has written works that have been read and performed on an international level since their first publication in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His literary genius has helped to further the genre of realistic theatre with a tragicomedy of simultaneous humor and melancholy unique to his plays. In comparing three contemporary dramatic literature adaptations of Chekhov's seminal play *Uncle Vanya* to the original (Sam Holcroft's *Vanya*, Howard Barker's *Uncle Vanya* and David Mamet's *Uncle Vanya*) I will prove that Chekhov's particular use of tragicomedy creates a human universality that dramatists try to emulate to this day, while each individually adjusts the text to fit their own distinctive writing style and vision for the plotline. In doing so, Holcroft has created a more contemporaneous tragicomedy, Barker a more absurd tragicomedy and Mamet a more conversational tragicomedy. This comparison asserts that classic works of dramatic literature contain an isolated universal human element that compels playwrights to create modern adaptations.

II. Introduction

The beauty of a classic piece of dramatic literature is that it has already stood the test of time. Selected by fellow writers, critics and the masses of prior generations to arrive at the reader's fingertips with a stamp of approval, such masterpieces not only help to document the historical context of a specific era, but also contain a certain element of human universality that proves relevant beyond the age in which it was originally written. It is because of each piece's specific enduring quality that contemporary artists utilize classic pieces of dramatic literature as the basis for artwork of their own, years after their original publication. In doing so, artists simultaneously retain a very specific element of the original text while consciously rejecting other aspects of the piece as well. An example of a playwright who serves as a muse for such works is the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov. Arguably the most famous playwright that Russia has ever produced, Chekhov has written works that have been read and performed on an international level since their first publication in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His literary genius helped to further the genre of realistic theatre with a unique tragicomedy of simultaneous humor and melancholy. In comparing three contemporary dramatic literature adaptations of Chekhov's seminal play *Uncle Vanya* to the original (Sam Holcroft's *Vanya*, Howard Barker's *Uncle Vanya* and David Mamet's *Uncle Vanya*) it is clear that Chekhov's particular use of tragicomedy has a human and universal appeal that dramatists try to emulate to this day, while each individually adjusts the text to fit their

own distinctive writing style and vision for the plotline.¹ As a result, Holcroft has created a more contemporaneous tragicomedy, Barker a more absurd tragicomedy and Mamet a more conversational tragicomedy. Holcroft accomplishes this by narrowing down the cast and adding a humor of wit and sarcasm to appeal to more contemporary audiences.

Barker takes the plot in a new direction creating an *Uncle Vanya* that is characteristic of his theory of Theatre of Catastrophe containing human suffering deprived of receiving pity for the pain that is endured. Lastly, Mamet stays very close to the plot but changes parts of the diction and syntax to better fit his own writing style and vision for *Uncle Vanya*. In comparing these three works to the original, it can be proven that classic works of dramatic literature contain a universal human element that can be isolated and thus compels playwrights to create modern adaptations. For Holcroft, Barker and Mamet, Chekhov's particular use of tragicomedy is the universal human element that they all emulate in one way or another in their writing.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the direct translation of Chekhov's original *Uncle Vanya* that will be used for all comparisons is the Paul Schmidt version.

III. Translation Versus Adaptation

In dealing with a work of dramatic literature that is in a language that differs from the one in which it was originally written, understanding the dichotomy between a translation and an adaptation is important. Ideally, all works of dramatic literature would be read and performed in the language of origin and understood by all, but as such a utopian society has not yet been created, readers and audience members rely on translators to remain as close and truthful to the original text as possible. After all, the phrase “lost in translation” indeed exists for a reason. According to Graham Ley in the chapter on “Translation and Adaptation” in his book *A Short Introduction to the Ancient Greek Theater*, “Translation is, like theater itself, an art of presentation, and all translations bear the mark of their originators” (82). In any language vocabulary is individual to each person, so even though varying translations of a text usually portray the same basic idea, they differ stylistically as well as with the specific choice of diction that the translator feels represents the word best in the other language. Both of these aspects in turn can affect the overall mood or feel of the piece. A good example of this phenomenon with direct translation is Sonya’s soliloquy at the very end of *Uncle Vanya*. The following are two of the most widely accepted direct English translations of *Uncle Vanya*, translated by scholars of Russian. Sharon Marie Carnicke translates:

What is there to do but go on living! (*Pause.*) We’ll live, Uncle Vanya. We’ll live through a long, long series of days, and lengthy evenings. We’ll patiently get through whatever tribulations fate sends us. We’ll toil for the others, now and in

our old age, without knowing any peace. But when our hour comes, we'll die humbly. And then, there beyond the grave, we'll say that we have suffered, that we cried, that it left a bitter taste in our mouths, and God will pity us, you and I, Uncle, dear uncle, and then we'll see life as something bright, wonderful, luxurious. We'll rejoice, and we'll look back at our present unhappiness with tenderness, with a smile, and we'll rest. I believe, Uncle I believe fervently, passionately... *(Kneels before him and places her head in his hands; with a tired voice.)* We'll rest! *(Telegin quietly plays the guitar.)* We'll rest! We'll hear the angels, we'll see a sky full of diamonds, we'll see all earthly evil drowned in the mercy that will engulf the whole world. And our life will become quiet, gentle and as sweet as kindness. I believe, believe... *(Wipes his tears away with her shawl.)* Poor, poor Uncle Vanya, you're crying... *(Through tears.)* You haven't known joy in your life, but wait a little, Uncle Vanya, wait a little... We'll rest... *(Embraces him.)* We'll rest!

The watchman is heard tapping. Telegin quietly plays; Maria Vasilyevna writes in the margins of a pamphlet; Marina knits socks.

We'll rest!

(The curtain falls slowly.) (166-167)

Meanwhile, Paul Schmidt's translation reads:

I know. But we have to go on living.

(Pause.)

You and I, Uncle Ványa, we have to go on living. The days will be slow, and the nights will be long, but we'll take whatever fate sends us. We'll spend the rest of our lives doing other people's work for them, we won't know a moment's rest, and then, when our times comes, we'll die. And when we're dead, we'll say that our lives were full of pain, that we wept and suffered, and God will have pity on us, and then, Uncle, dear Uncle Ványa, we'll see a brand-new life, all shining and beautiful, we'll be happy, and we'll look back on the pain we feel right now and we'll smile... and then we'll rest. I believe that, Uncle. I believe that with all my heart and soul. *(Kneels down by Ványa and puts her head in his hands; wearily)*

Then we'll rest.

(Telégin plays softly.)

We'll rest! We'll hear the angels singing, we'll see the diamonds of heaven, and all our earthly woes will vanish in a flood of compassion that overwhelms the world! And then everything will be calm, quiet, gentle as a loving hand. *(Wipes away his tears with her handkerchief)* Poor Uncle Ványa, you're crying...

(Almost in tears herself) I know how unhappy your life has been, but wait a while, just a little while, Uncle Ványa, and you and I will rest. *(Embraces him)* We will, I know we will.

(We hear the night watchman outside the house, tapping his stick as he makes his rounds. Telégin continues to play quietly; Mrs. Voinitsky makes a note in the margin; Marina knits her stocking.)

We'll rest. I know we will.

THE CURTAIN FALLS SLOWLY. (253-254)

In both works, Sonya's utter despair is clearly portrayed, however, a difference in exclamations in the Schmidt version versus the Carnicke version (two versus five, respectively) could indicate a degree of hesitation in Sonya's belief in the goodness to come in the afterlife. Especially as the difference comes at the very end of the soliloquy when Sonya is affirming her own belief in what she has said to comfort Uncle Vanya. This differentiation calls to mind the following questions: Is Sonya perhaps saying such things out of a desperate need for comfort instead of a genuine belief in the afterlife? Can the number of exclamation points a translator decides to put in be the deciding factor in such a differentiation? However, the syntax also brings this discrepancy into question. The Schmidt version reads, "I believe that, Uncle. I believe that with all my heart and soul. *(Kneels down by Vanya and puts her head in his hands; wearily)* Then we'll rest." (253). In this excerpt, the choice of repeating of "I believe that" can be taken as mantra of self-convincing. While Carnicke's translation contains a certain zeal that the Schmidt lacks because of the specific choice of adjectives utilized, "I believe, Uncle I believe fervently, passionately... *(Kneels before him and places her head in his hands; with a tired voice.)* We'll rest!" (166). Also, the distinction between the stage directions of

“wearily” and “with a tired voice” furthers this point, the former example being more representative of pure exhaustion than the latter (Chekhov Schmidt 253, Chekhov Carnicke 166). In this case, Sonya’s soliloquy represents a microcosm of the variables present in the art of translation. The basic idea indeed proves the same, however, the stylistic and diction choices of the translator affect our understanding of the details and intention, leaving those not literate in Russian left to wonder what exactly Chekhov had in mind.

This example invokes two large debates that loom in the field of translation. Ley notes the first debate when he writes, “These [translations] will often vary according to whether the author is directing attention predominantly to a readership or to a live audience” (86). To this end, translators of dramatic literature usually publish with either readership or performance in mind and thus if the script is used for the opposite purpose of which it was intended, it can be considered to be lacking. The other primary debate in the field of translation is whether it is more important to have the actual language and construction of the wording match the original, or, if the focus should rather be on the quality that the language exudes, even if the language and construction differ slightly as a result (Ley 87). It really comes down to the preference of the translator for which direction they want to take their translation in and then the preference of the reader or director in choosing a translation that is best suited to their own needs. This means deciding what one prefers: either “what was actually there” or “how it felt” to an audience of the time, period and culture.

On the other hand, adaptations are even further away from the original text than direct translations. In the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, Georges L.

Bastin writes, "Adaptation may be understood as a set of translative operations which result in a text that is not accepted as a translation but is nevertheless recognized as representing a source text of about the same length" (5). Generally, adaptations of dramatic literature fall into two larger categories: local adaptations and global adaptations (Bastin 7). Local adaptations deal with changes specifically related to transferring over the culture and language of the original text to the text that is trying to be written (Bastin 7). Often times, this means that problems are limited to particular parts of the text and not the entire text itself (Bastin 7). In this instance, the overall effect of the piece as a whole is preserved as much as possible from one version to another (Bastin 7). Mamet's *Uncle Vanya* follows this formula, as he is not proficient in Russian in order to translate the piece on his own and therefore has interpreted Chekhov's intention through another translator of Russian to English in order to mold his version to what he feels to be most culturally appropriate for a text in English. As a result, Mamet's adaptation is two levels away from the original *Uncle Vanya*, although he tries to stay true to the text.

On the other hand, global adaptation is used as a result of factors outside the original text and involves more wide-ranging revision (Bastin 7). This includes plays that aim to reconstruct the function, purpose or impact of the original text (Bastin 7). Sam Holcroft's *Vanya* and Howard Barker's *Uncle Vanya* both utilize this adaptation technique as they take some of the characters and plotline of the original but the work they have created is in no way meant to stay true to the original text. Additionally, with both translations and adaptations of dramatic literature, when a piece is actually performed the problems are further exacerbated as the director's interpretation, actors'

choices and varying design elements all can change and reinterpret the original intention of the playwright.

IV. A Unique Tragicomedy

Chekhov's works were not only innovative in their time for the realistic universes they created, but also for the mastery of modern (in this sense, of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century) tragicomedy (Wilson 283). With Chekhov's tragicomedy, the comic and the tragic are continually blended producing a bittersweet effect in all of his plays (Wilson 283). The result is that the humor does not override the tragedy, but rather heightens the awareness of the melancholic circumstances that are ongoing throughout the play (Wilson 284). After all, it is no coincidence that of Chekhov's four major plays none are listed as tragedies. For both *The Seagull* and *The Cherry Orchard* are subtitled as, "A Comedy in Four Acts," while *Three Sisters* reads, "A Drama in Four Acts," and *Uncle Vanya*, "Scenes From Country Life in Four Acts" (Schmidt 109, 331, 257, 207). Yet, there are actions in all of these works that prove tragic and heartbreaking to those living domestic lives on the countryside estates in which they take place. This bittersweet effect is contradictory in a sense, but as Chekhov's writing is considered realistic, the contradiction appropriately mirrors the lifelike behavior of human beings who are not typically straightforward and easy to categorize. Here is wherein lies the beauty of Chekhov's work; a simultaneous humor and melancholy that radiates throughout his four dominant plays. It is this duality that modern day adaptations try to emulate and contain in their work.

V. Sam Holcroft's *Vanya*

Sam Holcroft's *Vanya* is an adaptation of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* written in 2009 that takes components of the original that are still relevant and transforms them to answer the demands of theatre in the twenty-first century². For those familiar with Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, there are two over-arching elements of this adaptation in particular that differ drastically from the original and catch one's eye immediately. The first is that this is distinctly a piece of contemporary theatre and therefore not of the realistic genre to which Chekhov's plays belonged. It is indeed a work that is unapologetically more psychological and visibly conscious of being a piece of theatre, not an attempt to replicate real life; therefore it does not intend to directly reproduce the work that Chekhov has created. The second drastically different element is that the plot of the play is cut down and streamlined. Within the framework of these changes, however, Holcroft maintains the core tragicomedy for which Chekhov is known and applies it to the work in a contemporary manner all her own.

When walking into The Gate Theatre in London for the world premiere run of Holcroft's *Vanya* in Fall 2009, I immediately recognized that this was not your usual piece of Chekhov. The theatre is a small black box that seats around seventy patrons, hardly reminiscent of the large proscenium theatres in which Chekhov's works were first produced in Russia (*Vanya*). Instead, this work purposely tries to create an ambiance of intimacy from the moment one walks into the theatre (*Vanya*). Theatre Critic Kate

² All subsequent references to the written version of *Vanya* refer to the edition I received from Holcroft's literary agency, Casarotto Ramsay & Associates Limited, on October 7, 2009, of which I have obtained written permission to quote from freely for academic purposes.

Bassett of London's, *The Independent*, describes the work as an, "experimental staging" of a "semi-modernised, free adaptation" of *Uncle Vanya* (Bassett). Director Natalie Abrahami anchors the setting in the West during the twenty-first century, yet not in a manner that allows it to be pinned down to a specific location (Vanya). While the interactions that ensue between characters are realistic, the overall concept is much more abstract than the original. The entire set is inside of a large wooden packing crate that rotates and is disassembled and then reassembled throughout the production (Vanya). Phrases such as "fragile" and "handle with care" are emblazoned on the outside of the box (Vanya). The costume design is contemporary, but very general in a manner that is suitable for each character as their age and class permit (Vanya). The lighting design is saturated, colorful and expressive (Vanya). The sound design is also recognizably current and proves quite pertinent in transitioning in between scenes when the packing crate rotates and set pieces are changed (Vanya). All of these elements add up to a contemporary and more abstract feel than the realistic, period pieces for which Chekhov is known. Holcroft has created a play that is aware that it is a piece of theatre, whereas Chekhov created slice of life works where he institutes a fourth wall in which the audience members are witnesses to the lives of those on the other side of the stage.

As for the second major differentiation, *Vanya* is a narrowed down and streamlined version of *Uncle Vanya*. To start with the respective lengths of the plays, Holcroft's work runs straight for ninety minutes without an intermission, while Chekhov's runs approximately two solid hours not including the three intermissions, one provided between each act, that must be added onto the total time in the theatre. Additionally, Holcroft's work is separated into fifteen scenes, with an individual

transition in between each scene provided by the design (e.g. music, lights, rotating stage) while Chekhov's original work is divided into four separate acts which run fluidly because of its realistic nature. Most importantly, *Vanya* whittles down both the characters and plotline from the original (Holcroft). Holcroft keeps four characters: Sonya, Yelena, Vanya and Astrov. A fifth character, the professor, is an entirely offstage character that is continually mentioned throughout the work (Holcroft). Meanwhile, Chekhov's work involves nine characters: Sonya, Yelena, Vanya, Astrov, the professor, Marina, Telegin, Mrs. Voinitsky and a hired man, all of whom make it on stage as Chekhov is being faithful to the realistic nature of a country estate. Because of the economy of Holcroft's plotline, the crux of the plot revolves around the romantic web of Astrov and Vanya being in love with Yelena, while Sonya and Yelena are both in love with Astrov. The complication of this web, and the inevitable unrequited love that comes with the territory, creates most of the tension of the piece. The themes of loss of time, death of family members, tedium of the work necessary to life and hypocrisy are also touched upon just as they are in the original, but fall secondary. In cutting five onstage characters and streamlining the plot, Holcroft has created a more abstract version of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* accessible for modern audiences, while still emulating Chekhov's mastery of bittersweet tragicomedy. In comparing this adaptation with the original work, Holcroft's updated humor of sharp wit and sarcasm becomes quite evident by contrast to Chekhov's more humanistic humor therefore creating a contemporaneous tragicomedy.

Holcroft combines two types of humor with the underlying melancholy in her version: contemporary humor of the twenty-first century and humor that is still relevant today from back in Chekhov's time. One of the first instances of this tragicomedy at work

in *Vanya* is in scene two between Yelena and Vanya when they are alone and are discussing the professor's health problems. Yelena states:

YELENA: He's much worse, he was up all night.

VANYA: I know.

YELENA: He was hungry, then he was hot, then he was hot and sick, then he was cold and bloated, then he was stiff-

VANYA: And you're running around him like a-

YELENA: What? A gofer? A serf? Or were you going for slave?

VANYA: Blue arsed fly.

YELENA: I'm his wife. Don't you pity me- I know what you're all thinking. I make my own decisions.

VANYA: You're tired.

YELENA: That's great, nice, telling a woman she looks tired-

VANYA: I didn't say you *looked* tired.

YELENA: Oh right, I just-

VANYA: You look like a summer morning. (*Beat*). Truly.

YELENA: Alright

Yelena gathers herself to go.

VANYA: Can't I tell you're beautiful?

YELENA: Not again, no. (6)

This exchange is quite witty considering how sarcastically Yelena and Vanya discuss their dying relative. The passage illustrates the contemporary take Holcroft has on Chekhov's tragicomedy by combining wit and sarcasm, as these types of humor were neither characteristic of the characters that Chekhov originally created nor the humor of the time period in Russia. The extent of the wit and sarcasm reads almost like a sitcom at times, especially the manner in which these comedic devices are used in the subtext. Thus the humor is not only present in the specific diction utilized, but the dialogue is also dependent on the delivery and interpretation of the lines as what is implied is just as important as what is explicitly stated. However, in addition to these contemporary elements of humor, the humor of Chekhov's original humanistic tragicomedy still contains relevance today. For example, when Vanya accidentally insults Yelena's appearance when he is trying to earnestly sympathize with her by saying, "you're tired," it is still as much of a taboo to reference a woman's beauty today as it was one hundred years ago. The end of this passage also translates over the years because Vanya's desperation and infatuation for Yelena represent the archetype of unrequited love that is as much a part of today's society as it was in Chekhov's. Meanwhile, witnessing Yelena's discomfort provides a contrasting humor to Vanya's sadness because of the awkward tension of the situation. The comparable passage to this excerpt in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* starts when Yelena states:

YELÉNA: He was driving me to distraction. I haven't got the strength left to stand.

VÁNYA: He drives you to distraction; I drive myself to distraction. This is the third night in a row I haven't slept.

[...]

YELÉNA: You ought to try to make peace, not always be quarreling with everyone.

VÁNYA: First tell me how to make peace with myself. Oh, my darling- (*Reaches for her hand*)

YELÉNA: Stop that! (*Takes her hand away*) Just go away will you?

[...]

VÁNYA: My feeling for you is hopeless, like a ray of sunlight falling into a black hole. I'm dying.

YELÉNA: Whenever you talk to me about love, I simply freeze up, I don't know what to say. Forgive me. There's nothing I can say. (*Starts to leave*) Good night.

(222)

Here, it is evident that Holcroft has stayed true to the core plotline, but changed the humor to make it her own in the process. The humor in the comparable Chekhov passage lies in Vanya's hyperbolic profession of love that is rejected by Yelena and the awkwardness that ensues as a result. In Chekhov's very humane humor, his characters have a genuineness that sometimes leads to clumsy overstatements of their feelings that the audience finds entertaining. Yet what remains constant in both pieces is that the situation of the dying relative and sadness of unrequited love prove tragic, but this does not stop Vanya from incessantly pining after Yelena giving comic relief. In this instance

Vanya serves as the epitome of a character without nobility, a character in fact to be pitied and laughed at.

The next time the element of tragicomedy reappears in *Vanya* is in an exchange between Astrov and Sonya when Sonya is preparing a snack for the doctor. The two are conversing about the medical treatment Yelena is to provide for the sick professor and starts with Astrov stating:

ASTROV: I've given her pain relief for when he's at his worst. He'll be more comfortable. More inclined to sleep. Maybe even at the right time.

He winks at her

She grins and hands him the snack, he takes it, eats

SONYA: So she can give it to him then?

ASTROV: Yes.

SONYA: You needn't do it with her?

ASTROV: No.

SONYA: So you won't be coming back then?

ASTROV: No, I shouldn't need to.

SONYA: Oh. *Beat* Is it good?

ASTROV: What?

SONYA: That?

ASTROV: Delicious. Just what the doctor ordered. (17)

This time the desperation of unrequited love belongs to Sonya instead of Vanya. It is clear that Sonya is attempting to detain Astrov, if only for a single moment longer. Sonya's insistence on speaking with Astrov and his one-word dismissal of her questions, followed by his not even being aware of her asking about the food she has prepared for him, is funny and melancholic at once. The humor that could be taken from Chekhov's time is present in the transparency Sonya has in her yearning for Astrov while the melancholy is a result of her inability to articulate her love at this moment in the play. The quickness and brevity of the exchange also provides a universal humor in how one-sided the dialogue is when Astrov only replies in one-word answers such as "Yes", "No" and "Oh". The realistic nature of the exchange as it is presented in the original is something readers or audience members might be able to relate to in their own lives. The updated, witty humor that Holcroft provides is present with the corny joke at the very end, "Just what the doctor ordered," of course having the double meaning of a well known cliché as well as a way to half-heartedly humor Sonya's barrage of questions and showering of attention on Astrov. The parallel moment in Chekhov's original occurs when most of the family is onstage and Sonya tries to create conversation with Astrov in order to appeal to him to stay a bit longer:

SÓNIA: Oh, that's wonderful! It's always a special occasion, having you stay over. Have you eaten?

ÁSTROV: No, I'm afraid not.

SÓNIA: Then you'll stay for dinner. Although nowadays we don't eat until after six. *(Drinks)* The tea's cold!

TELÉGIN: There has indeed been a significant decline in the temperature of the teapot.

YELÉNA: That's all right, Iván Ivánich³, we'll drink it cold.

[...]

SÓNYA: Ilyá Ilých is our right-hand man. We couldn't do without him.

(Tenderly) Here, Godfather. Have some more tea.

[...]

ÁSTROV: Thanks a lot. Well, that's that; I've got to go. *(Looks around for his cap)* Christ, wouldn't you know.

SÓNYA: Oh, that's too bad! But you can come back when you're finished and have dinner with us.

ÁSTROV: No, it'll be too late. (213-215)

The passage makes it clear that Holcroft's adaptation augments the simultaneous humor and tragedy by keeping the extreme desperation of unrequited love that is present in the original. She then adds her own element to the text by narrowing down the scene to only Sonya and Astrov while also increasing the amount of small talk Sonya makes. In turn, the humor from the desperation of getting Astrov to stay is furthered and the tragedy of her letdown when he finally departs is as touching as in the original.

Another example of the tragicomedy at work is the comedic conversation that takes place between Vanya and Astrov in scene nine of *Vanya*. Vanya asks:

³ Iván Ivánich, as well as the later used Ilyá Ilých, are both different versions of the same name that the characters have for Telégin in the original text.

VANYA: Ants as a metaphor?

ASTROV: Yes.

VANYA: Sexy talk.

ASTROV: It's not-

VANYA: For the women?

ASTROV: What? No.

VANYA: You don't put it on for the girls?

ASTROV: No, of course not-

VANYA: You big love bug. (27)

Here Vanya accuses Astrov of preaching on socio-ecological topics for the sole purpose of using “sexy talk” to manipulate and attract women. The idea behind the question is humorous, because Vanya’s accusation of Astrov as a whole sounds bizarre and ill founded, albeit containing truth. However, the true comedy of this particular passage clearly lies in the modern choice of diction that Holcroft employs. “Sexy talk” and “big love bug” help to define the dynamic and bold character of Vanya, while also functioning as entertaining phrases in themselves (Holcroft 27). The juxtaposition of having a classic Chekhovian character utter such contemporary terms makes the comedy two-fold: funny in itself and funny as a result of who is uttering the phrase. The underlying melancholy of the thought emerges because Astrov does indeed actually value beauty over other attributes and therefore turns into a hypocrite who hurts two fragile women, hopeful Sonya and lost Yelena, in the process. The corresponding passage of the original starts

with Vanya commenting to Astrov after he has just finished one of his tangents on climate change:

VÁNYA: (*Laughs*) Bravo, bravo! That's a very lovely speech, dear, but it doesn't convince me. So... (*to Ástrov*) please don't hate me if I go on cutting wood for the stove and timber to build a new barn.

ÁSTROV: You can burn turf in your stove and use bricks for your barn. Look, I'm not against cutting wood, but why do they destroy the forests?

VÁNYA: Why not? To listen to you, you'd think the only thing forests were good for is shade for picnics.

[...]

ÁSTROV: I've got to go. I, ah, must have sounded like a freak just now. Nice to see you all. (216-217)

The comedy in this chunk of the original once again results from Vanya's words and the dynamic, larger than life character that comes out when he says, "*(Laughs)* Bravo, bravo! That's a very lovely speech, dear, but it doesn't convince me". Meanwhile, the sadness lies in Astrov's being a hypocrite and false idol for both Sonya and Yelena.

A final example of Holcroft's version of tragicomedy at work can be found in scene ten in a conversation between Sonya and Yelena:

SONYA: He values human kindness: I'm kind.

YELENA: Yes

SONYA: He values selflessness: I'm selfless.

YELENA: Yes

SONYA: I have sacrificed.

YELENA: Yes

SONYA: *I am his vision!*

Beat

YELENA: You like him then.

Yelena smiles

He's handsome.

SONYA: That's not the point.

YELENA: Bonus. (33)

Again, Holcroft updates the tragicomedy by adding in the sharp, witty remarks that are commonplace expressions in the twenty-first century, such as Yelena's brief comments, "He's handsome" and "Bonus" (33). The final three lines of the scene are concise, quick and get the point across well. In doing so, Holcroft encapsulates a very real element of women's teasing each other about a possible love interest that has not changed over the years. The teasing is also implied in the subtext of the scene as the stage directions read, "*Yelena smiles*" in between "You like him then" and "He's handsome" (Holcroft 33). It is a case of friendly goading on Yelena's part, as she finds Sonya's romantic crush endearing and tries to obtain more information from her. The passage's interest also lies in it not having any correlative in the original. Instead Holcroft adds it on as a continuation of a scene that is in the original text to enhance Sonya's lamenting her

plainness and love for Astrov. In Chekhov's version, Sonya speaks of her affection for Astrov but does not provide reasons as to why they would make a good match as Holcroft continues on to do. The original reads:

SÓNYA: I'm ugly.

YELÉNA: You have beautiful hair.

SÓNYA: No I don't! (*Turns to look at herself in the mirror*) That's what people always say to an ugly woman [...] I've been in love with him for six years now; I love him more than my own mother [...] And I have no shame anymore- I hang around talking to him, I keep looking him right in the eyes... I just can't help myself anymore! Yesterday I told Uncle Ványa I was in love with him... and the servants know, they all know.

YELÉNA: And does he know?

SÓNYA: No. He pays no attention to me. (233)

Chekhov again addresses the notion of a woman's appearance in this exchange, a theme throughout the work, which is a universally understood taboo since it is traditionally considered to be an important trait for women to be beautiful. Hence the comedy in Chekhov's line, "That's what people always say to an ugly woman" (233). The tragedy of course lies in the unfortunate truth that Yelena has a better position in life as the professor's wife and as the recipient of Astrov's interest because she is naturally beautiful unlike Sonya.

Indeed, Holcroft's *Vanya* is a global adaptation of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* as it has been widely revised and aims to reconstruct the impact of the primary text (Bastin 7). Holcroft accomplishes this feat by altering the original *Uncle Vanya* in two primary ways. First, by streamlining the play in terms of characters and centralizing the plot around the consequences of unrequited love. Second, by adding elements of writing for the contemporary theatre such as wit, sarcasm, sharp remarks and more subtext to better appeal to an audience of the twenty-first century. However, despite these two differences there are still many parallels between the works as Holcroft attempts to emulate the bittersweet tragicomedy of the Chekhovian original. The four examples discussed all illustrate the mix of contemporary humor with humor representative of Chekhov's time period. The mixed humor paired with the underlying melancholy, form a unique blend of tragicomedy that is specific to Holcroft, but inspired by Chekhov. As theatre critic Kate Basset ends her review of the premiere run of *Vanya* in Fall 2009, "Holcroft's humour, at its most charming, and her contemporary ear for conversational floundering ("I think you're brilliant, and I want to be stuck with you for ever!") probably would have made Chekhov smile" (Basset). Indeed, Holcroft has found the comedy present in Chekhov's work and added techniques of twenty-first century humor to make *Vanya* her very own work.

VI. Howard Barker's *Uncle Vanya*

Howard Barker's global adaptation of *Uncle Vanya* is rooted in the basic framework and characters of Chekhov's original *Uncle Vanya*; however, it is his own telling of the story distilled in a manner that shows Barker's distinctive writing style and supports his views on theatrical theory⁴. There remains tragicomedy throughout the work, but unlike the classic Chekhovian tragicomedy of reconciliation that redeems itself or even the more contemporary and accessible tragicomedy in Holcroft's *Vanya*, Barker's tragicomedy is burlesque in a manner that proves dark and disturbing.

Barker, a major British playwright, has shown his work at large dramatic institutions like The Royal Shakespeare Company as well as independent, experimental theatres such as The Wrestling School (Barker Arguments i). His plays center on a theatrical theory entitled Theatre of Catastrophe, the definition of which he has narrowed and defined over his time as a playwright, most prominently in his manifesto entitled *Fortynine Asides* (Barker Arguments 17). The overarching concept behind Theatre of Catastrophe focuses on works of tragedy not having any reconciliation to the trauma that occurs (Barker Arguments i). This in turn makes a demand on the audience to focus holistically on the experience occurring in the theatre itself, asking an intellectual understanding, as opposed to gaining anything specifically from the moral content of the work (Barker Arguments i). Much of Barker's theatre has poetic, emotional, imaginative and tragic elements, the plot often taking a backseat to such aspects of the production (Barker Arguments i). Overall, Barker strongly believes an audience should adapt their

⁴ All references to Barker's version of *Uncle Vanya* are taken from his *Collected Plays: Volume Two*.

own behavior to fit the requirements of the theatre, instead of playwrights' conforming to the demands of an audience (Barker Arguments i). What Barker requires is a complete transformation in how one thinks about the theatre.

Understanding the theory of Theatre of Catastrophe helps one to see what Barker thinks he is accomplishing with his reinvention of *Uncle Vanya*. The notes that Barker includes which precede the text are integral in creating a context for the changes that he has tried to make, "Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* is a *danse macabre*. Its charm lies in its appeal to the death wish in ourselves. In its melancholy celebration of paralysis and spiritual vacuity it makes theatre an art of consolation, a funerary chant for un-lived life" (292). Here Barker makes note of the characteristic melancholy that pervades Chekhovian works and the universal acceptance of the sadness in a wasted life that accompanies this notion. However, the melancholy in Chekhov proves contrary to the primary principle in Barker's theatrical theory that the purpose of theatre is not reconciliation and moral understanding. Barker goes on to reiterate his belief, "It is Chekhov's bad faith to induce in his audience an adoration of the broken will. In this he invites us to collude in our despair" (292). This highlights the motivation behind the changes Barker makes in his adaptation. He eradicates the urge in the audience to enjoy wallowing in the tragedy, instead refocusing attention onto the experience in its entirety. Barker concludes, "I remade Vanya because I loved his anger, which Chekhov allows to dissipate in toxic resentment. In doing this I denied the misery of the Chekhovian world, where love falters in self-loathing and desire is petulance. In rescuing Vanya from resentment I lent him no solution, since there is no solution to a life" (292). It is possible to trace this sentiment throughout Barker's adaptation of *Uncle Vanya* by looking at the

element of tragicomedy that he has retained, but adapted in order to fit his theory of the Theatre of Catastrophe. Together these notes illustrate the idiosyncratic view Barker holds of Chekhov's work, as he uses *Uncle Vanya* as a basis for his play even maintaining a sense of tragicomedy (albeit altered), but in doing so actively rejects the tenets that Chekhov holds dear in a piece of theatre instead substituting his own theatrical theory. It is quite contradictory that one would emulate a piece of work that one does not find valid in many respects but alas Barker has accomplished such a feat, using such a juxtaposition to his advantage.

In terms of the actual content of the work, there are three primary differences between Chekhov's and Barker's *Uncle Vanya*. In Chekhov's work there are the previously mentioned nine characters that compromise everyone on the country estate. Barker also includes nine characters, however, instead of the watchman who is continuously at work tapping away throughout the original, Barker replaces him with the playwright on which he has modeled his work happening to make an appearance late in the play⁵. Second, Barker's version is comprised of three unevenly spaced acts in contrast to Chekhov's very realistic mode and typical four-act format. Lastly, Barker's version commences at the climax of the Chekhovian original where the characters are feuding and Vanya is running after the professor with a gun. Barker's version starts off truthful to Chekhov's in this manner but then continues on with a plotline of his own where the original has already ended. In changing the plotline Barker has Vanya actually disfigure and kill the professor with the gun. Meanwhile, in an even more convoluted turn of

⁵ Chekhov makes an appearance as a character himself within Barker's *Uncle Vanya* replacing the watchman as the ninth character. In the character list Barker provides with the play he writes, "A Loved Dramatist" next to Chekhov's name (Barker Collected 294).

events, Sonya has a role reversal and asphyxiates Astrov. Then the professor and Astrov both return as ghosts while Chekhov enters himself in the second act. As Barker's piece is quite absurdist, it makes sense that he chooses to start at the climax of Chekhov's work, skipping the exposition and repetition that occurs in some of the earlier acts and instead cuts directly to the primary sequence of events. Yet even with the additional plot that Barker adds in the middle of where he departed from Chekhov's original action, Barker retains specific details from Chekhov's original version that he finds important to his story and disperses them throughout the changed part of the plotline. An example of this retention of detail can be seen:

MARYIA⁶: That is so- so very- (MARINA *enters.*) Marina! Mikhail⁷ is dead!

(MARINA *looks at the dead man.*)

MARINA: Now that's peculiar because only this morning he said to me,

'Nanny,' - he called me nanny-

TELYEGHIN⁸: Everybody did-

MARINA: Everybody did at one time, yes- 'Nanny, how long have we known each other?' Eleven years I said. He must have known he was about to die... (*She goes out.*) (320-321)

⁶ Maryia is another spelling that Barker uses for the character of Mrs. Voinitsky (Maria Vasilyevna) in the original.

⁷ Mikhail is Doctor Astrov's given name.

⁸ Telyeghin is another spelling that Barker uses for the character of Ilyá Ilých Telégin in the original.

The question, “Nanny, how long have we known each other?” is Astrov’s second line, the fourth of the entire play in the original text and illustrates the long relationship that Astrov has had with this family on the country estate (Chekhov Schmidt 211). Barker brings back the detail to illustrate the juxtaposition of how far he goes back with the family in contrast to the fact that one of the members of the family, Sonya, has just choked him to death. Another example of such retention of specific details is the discussion of the samovar earlier in the text that allows for Marina to ask, “Tea, anyone...?” at the very end of Barker’s play, just as she does at the end of the original version (Barker Collected 334, 338):

MARÍNA: Don’t you want some tea before you go?

ÁSTROV: No, thanks, Nanny.

MARÍNA: How about a little drink?

ÁSTROV: (*Hesitates*) Well, I wouldn’t mind... (252)

By inserting this question at the specific location that Barker does, he highlights the disturbing calm and lack of change after such a sequence of morbid and rash events occurs. The question is amusing in the superficial way that the classic question of, “Tennis, anyone?” appears in stereotypically deadly theatre (Brook 9). Such examples show concretely how Barker combines aspects of the old with his vision for an updated *Uncle Vanya*.

In creating this new text, Barker not only alters the content and format to suit his own theatrical theory, but also maintains the play’s identity as a tragicomedy by altering

its appearance just as Holcroft has done. Instead of making the comedy more accessible and contemporary, Barker creates a burlesque humor in the piece characterized by a twisted, bizarre and dark nature. It is certainly a black humor, but humor nonetheless. As for the tragedy, instead of allowing the audience to pity the characters and hence, themselves, Barker creates a drama of defeat without the aspects of reconciliation and catharsis. An appropriate quote that summarizes this type of tragicomedy comes from the well-known American editor, Bryant H. McGill. He has been quoted as asking, “Why do we laugh at such terrible things? Because comedy is often the sarcastic realization of inescapable tragedy” (Bryant). Indeed Barker makes tragedy, in a way, humorous. His writing appeals to the uncertainty of how one approaches devastating tragedy, a dilemma all human beings must confront at some point in their lives. The absurdity that permeates much of Barker’s work encapsulates the fine line between tragedy and comedy. It indeed exemplifies the emotion of “crying so hard one starts to laugh” or “laughing so hard one starts to cry”. It is this delicate balance that Barker explores in an absurdist fashion, thus creating humor in people’s discomfort with the grotesque. Barker’s adaptation of the tragicomedy therefore updates *Uncle Vanya* to accomplish such goals he set out to achieve with his Theatre of Catastrophe while maintaining much of the framework of the original version along the way.

An example of Barker’s own individual and more perverse take on Chekhov’s tragicomedy takes place in the scene where Vanya professes his love for Helena⁹.

Marina, the old servant of the house, tries to get Vanya to leave Helena alone:

⁹ Barker uses the Anglicized version of Yelena in his work, which translates as Helena. Therefore, in all references to Barker’s *Uncle Vanya* the character will be referred to as Helena, while all references to Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya* will remain as Yelena.

MARINA: Shh...

VANYA: I was

MARINA: Shh... *(She goes out.)*

VANYA: Because I love you.

HELENA: Love...!

VANYA: Yes, love. Love, yes. Love. Love. Why not love? That is the thing I mean, the word is certainly adequate, and though I dislike you I most cogently affirm love is what I mean and love is what I intend and no other synonym will suffice neither lust nor desire **Don't go out of the room I'm talking** (HELENA stops.)

HELENA: You are the most exasperating and I must tell you I am not interested in you in that regard, so please

VANYA: **In this regard**

In that regard

In this regard

In that regard (297)

Helena's disgust at the confession combined with the exasperation with which Vanya exhibits his infantile behavior lends a humor to the characters that almost discredits the profession of love Vanya has desperately proclaimed. Vanya even goes so far to mock Helena after she rejects him, taking his child-like behavior to a new level. In comparison to this passage, the original reads:

YELÉNA: Don't look at me like that. I don't like it.

VÁNYA: How else can I look at you? I love you. You're my life, my happiness, my youth! I know there's no chance of us ever... being together-zero- but I don't care; all I want is to see you, hear your voice-

YELÉNA: Be quiet, someone may hear you!

(They start into the house.)

VÁNYA: Just let me talk to you, tell you how much I love you- that's all I need, that's enough to make me completely happy.

YELÉNA: You really are aggravating... (218)

In both versions, Vanya's desperation remains the same. However, in Chekhov's original, the scene ends after Yelena admits her frustration with Vanya. Barker instead chooses to have Vanya continue on to mock Helena aggressively. The childish repetition Vanya utters, "In this regard, in that regard [...]" (Barker Collected 297) provides humor as well as a more sinister characterization of Vanya that exemplifies the Theatre of Catastrophe because the repetition itself is funny while his words prove excessively harsh. Also characteristic of Barker's reinvented vision of *Uncle Vanya* is the vast distinction between love and sexual desire that is present in this exchange. For example, Vanya says he is in love with Yelena but the audience knows it is really a matter of desire for Yelena's beauty based on the lines directly preceding Vanya's confession of love. The preceding dialogue is as follows:

VANYA: The Phallus

ASTROV: Oh...!

VANYA: Its energy is

ASTROV: Stop trying to exercise power by- (VANYA *lets out a long cry.*)

VANYA: I was

I was

ASTROV: Bullying young women

VANYA: **Trying to take power I was I was** (MARINA *crosses the stage.*) (297)

In most cases throughout the adaptation such sexual desire, as opposed to love, drives the action of a scene. Thus the element of jealousy is more forceful in Barker's play than Chekhov's, straddling both a humor as well as disgust for the characters. Barker's Vanya is funny in this discomfoting manner, while Chekhov's Vanya would certainly not have the heart to jeer at the woman he loves.

The shushing of the previous scene is indeed a motif throughout Barker's *Uncle Vanya* because it manifests the aggravation the characters feel with each other and the angst and meaninglessness that encompass their world. The constant shushing again makes an appearance providing dark humor when the professor is trying to speak:

SEREBRYKOV¹⁰: I dozed off just now and imagined my left leg didn't belong to me

HELENA: Shh...

¹⁰ Serebrykov is the name that Barker uses to refer to the professor, which is taken from his full name of Alexander Serebriakov in the original text.

SEREBRYKOV: I am disgusting even to myself.

HELENA: Shh... (*The SERVANT crosses the stage.*)

MARINA: Shh... (*She goes out.*)

SEREBRYKOV: You find me repulsive, admit it.

HELENA: If you wish me to.

SEREBRYKOV: I wish you to.

HELENA: All right, I admit it.

SEREBRYKOV: I am a monster of egotism and self-regard I am a savage of acquisitiveness and gratification but I deserve it aren't I talented aren't I rare?

MARYIA: You are talented. You are rare.

VANYA (*to HELENA*) You are in the room next to me. I can hear you breathe at night.

HELENA: Shh.

VANYA: **All this shhhing!** (299)

Two humorous elements dominate this scene. The first is the recurring joke of no one wanting to hear what anyone else has to say in the play. Everyone seems to shush each other, therefore regarding their thoughts as pointless and unimportant. Barker purposefully undercuts the dialogue, to establish that they do not want to hear what the others have to say. The culmination of such undercutting gradually builds tension in the scene until Vanya finally screams, "All this shhhing!" at which point the aggravation reaches a peak and becomes comedic (Barker Collected 299). The other humorous aspect to this scene is the manner in which the characters constantly express the repugnance they

feel towards one another and themselves alike, when they can finally get a word in the conversation. Everyone seems to be swarming in a vast sea of unhappiness and blaming it on each other. This is especially true in the case of the professor as he is both filled with self-pity and expects it from others. He thus tethers those around him to his own needs and wants. This is clear in the quick exchange when the professor asks Helena, “You find me repulsive, admit it.” So she does, not only because she is asked to admit it but because she finds it true as well. It is indeed a setup often found in comedy: the initial refusal and then immediate acceptance of the request. The Chekhovian equivalent between the professor and Helena of the Barker version reads:

PROFESSOR: Damn old age! God, how I hate it! I got old, and now I’m repulsive. I repulse myself, and all the rest of you too, probably.

YELÉNA: You talk as if the rest of us are to blame for your getting old.

PROFESSOR: You more than any of them. You *really* think I’m repulsive.

(Yeléna moves away from him and sits in another chair) [...]

YELÉNA: For God’s sake, will you please stop it? I’m worn out.

PROFESSOR: I wear everybody out: that’s what it’s come to, hasn’t it? I bore everybody, I make you all miserable, while I sit here enjoying my retirement. Oh, yes, of course!

YELÉNA: Be quiet! You’re driving me crazy!

PROFESSOR: Yes, of course! I drive everybody crazy.

YELÉNA: *(Almost in tears)* I can’t stand any more of this. What do you want from me? Just tell me!

PROFESSOR: Nothing.

YELÉNA: Then just be quiet. *Please.* (219-220)

Barker has clearly changed his version from the original by adding a black humor with Helena's agreement to the professor's request. Chekhov's version is humorous as well, albeit in a different way as it revolves around a greater amount of agony and self-pity as well as Helena's repulsion of the professor's complaints. There are three examples of Yelena's repulsion in this small excerpt of Chekhov's dialogue alone. They include: "You're driving me crazy!", "I can't stand any more of this" and "Then just be quiet" (Chekhov Schmidt 219-220). The result is humor with a more dramatic side that does not provide quite the same humorous release of tension of the Barker piece. Another factor of Helena's repulsion that is present in this exchange is that the professor is a man she believed she loved when she married him, only to find out later that she was attracted to his seeming prestige not the person underneath all of the (fraudulent) accolades.

A final example of Barker's specific grotesque humor is in a portion of the text where he deviates from the Chekhovian plotline, which has no equivalent in the original text. In this passage the characters are waiting for Chekhov to make an appearance when the set starts to break apart and water floods the stage:

A sudden sound of further collapse, both masonry and splintering wood.

TELYEGHIN ducks. This shock is followed by a surge of sound as waves break and flow with the appearance of the sea. TELYEGHIN points, in dumb astonishment, to the spectacle.

MARYIA: Oh, look, a view!

SONYA: The sea!

VANYA: **The sea! The sea!** (*They gawp, rejoice.*) Chekhov won't come now...

MARINA (*entering*): The tea urn's gone! Look, the tea urn's in the sea! (*They laugh. MARINA picks up random small objects and pelts the urn. SONYA joins her.*)

SONYA: Got it!

MARINA: No, that was me!

SONYA: Sorry!

MARINA (*throwing again*): Got it!

SEREBRYKOV: Chekhov knows the brevity of pleasure

The insubstantiality of

MARYIA: I'm paddling!

Anyone?

I'm paddling! (314)

This passage represents the logical progression of absurd events that is present in Barker's version of *Uncle Vanya*. Far from Chekhov's realistic setting, a Russian country estate, a natural disaster serves as a meta-theatrical tool that caps the sequence of absurd events that has characterized the play. In this case, the flood signifies the arrival of the playwright upon whose play this version of *Uncle Vanya* is modeled. The excitement of the women at the notion of the water appearing and the way in which they play in it as if they were children is amusing and once again representative of the infantile nature of the

characters in the play. The excitement of Maryia as she paddles like a young child swimming for the first time combined with the pure chaos that is unfolding onstage furthers the dark humor of the play that is often characterized by the regression of adults into silly, child-like behavior. Additionally, this visual image (or the equivalent representation that can be physically performed onstage) literalizes the wallowing in melancholy that many of the characters in Chekhov's work engage in. Such a strong image therefore also critiques the sense of pity and reconciliation present in Chekhov's work. It does this both through its sentimentality and analogy of water filling the stage as representative of characters filling with self-pity.

In contrast to the dark humor present throughout the work, the final image the audience is left with at the end of Barker's play hosts a sense of tragedy similar to Chekhov's, yet without the pity. In comparing passages from both works, it becomes clear that Chekhov's tragedy is characterized by disaster that can be reconciled with pity, while Barker presumes a tragedy without resolve. Barker illustrates this tragedy by picking up once again at the very end of his play with the format and plotline of Chekhov's original but with one significant alteration. He remains faithful to Chekhov's plotline of having multiple characters continue on with their exhausting, yet futile, work just as they were at the very beginning of the play, but instead of Astrov leaving at the end of the play Vanya is the one to leave. The final image of the tragedy is as follows:

VANYA: Also- (*He stops suddenly.*)

Where am I going (*A catastrophic silence.*)

Where am I

VANYA *closes his eyes, and with an effort of will, strides out of the room. Pause.*

TELYEGHIN *lets out a small cry of satisfaction at a chess move.* SONYA

murmurs to MARYIA. Time passes.

SONYA: He'll be back... (*Insignificant moves. Time passes.*)

MARYIA: He'll be back...

They proceed with their lives. The lights diminish. VANYA does not return. (341)

The ending here encapsulates Barker's intense and burlesque theory of Theatre of Catastrophe while maintaining certain aspects of Chekhov's original work. Barker's theory is most aptly defined in his stage direction "*A catastrophic silence*" (Barker Collected 341). Such a potent silence followed by Vanya's final words of, "Where am I," and his immediate departure illustrate Vanya's extreme unhappiness and conscious refusal to wallow in his own sorrow (Barker Collected 341). Meanwhile Barker maintains the shell of Chekhov's play when most of the same characters (Sonya, Maryia, Marina and Vanya) are left to the banality of the tedious and meaningless work that they take up in the original version. The difference being that instead of Astrov departing, it is now Vanya who leaves. Therefore, Vanya fulfills his destiny to wander, regardless of the destination, because of his inability to regain the control he had over his life. In leaving, he repudiates his past and functions as a catastrophic hero, a hero that does not exist in the Chekhovian original because of Vanya's stagnation in self-pity. In Barker's play, the significance of the devastation is heightened because it is the title character who leaves his family, presumably never to return, despite the steadfast belief Sonya and Maryia

have that he will come home. The comparable passage when Marina and Sonya discuss Astrov's departure is as follows:

(Pause. The sound of the departing carriage.)

MARÍNA: He's gone.

(Pause.)

SÓNYA: *(Comes in, sets down the candle on the table)* He's gone. (253)

There are definitive parallels between these two exchanges: both have their own individual sense of hope, overwhelming insignificance and continuation of life despite all unhappiness. However, as previously mentioned, Barker leaves his indelible mark on his version of *Uncle Vanya* with his diction choice in the stage directions that reads, "*A catastrophic silence,*" in addition to elevating Vanya for what Barker considers the higher purpose of no longer having him find pleasure in his own pity. Barker asserts in his notes preceding the text of *Uncle Vanya*, "Vanya's quitting of the Chekhovian madhouse became a metaphor for the potential of art to point heroically, if blindly, to the open door..." (293). Although Barker makes an arguably vague and heady assertion, he believes that in creating a more active Vanya than Chekhov originally devised himself, therein lies a larger purpose for art and theatre that does not revolve around pity (Barker Arguments 10). In altering Vanya and having him depart, the loss of the family is increased and Vanya is no longer susceptible to the emotional justification that remaining would involve, but rather the intellectual justification, a pillar of Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe (Barker Arguments 11). Therefore, Barker believes his piece of theatre will

force an audience to think intellectually by diminishing the role of pity while leaving the tragedy. Such a technique is clearly influenced by playwright and theorist Bertolt Brecht who created the idea of the *verfremdungseffekt* or alienation effect (Esslin 126). Martin Esslin describes this dramatic technique in his book *Brecht The Man and His Work*, “The audience in his view should not be made to feel emotions, they should be made to think” (131).

Although Barker’s *Uncle Vanya* rejects many of the doctrines of Chekhov’s ideas of theatricality, he still maintains the shell of Chekhov’s plotline as well as the core element of tragicomedy that Chekhov is so well known for in his realistic work. Barker’s absurdist vision involves a burlesque comedy characterized by dark humor and a tragedy bereft of pity, but tragicomedy nonetheless. In creating his unique kind of tragicomedy, Barker writes an *Uncle Vanya* that follows his own tenets of theatrical theory, Theatre of Catastrophe, therefore requesting a larger intellectual involvement on the part of the audience in order to grasp the play holistically and without emotional involvement. Similar to what Holcroft has done with her play, *Vanya*, Barker’s revision of Chekhov exemplifies the global adaptation genre. Together, both works maintain certain core elements of the Chekhovian original, while each bears the individual playwright’s own distinctive mark on the text.

VII. David Mamet's *Uncle Vanya*

David Mamet's adaptation of *Uncle Vanya* differs from both Sam Holcroft's and Howard Barker's version because it is much closer to Chekhov's original text, and as such, can be labeled as a local adaptation in opposition to the global adaptations of Holcroft and Barker¹¹. The overall effect of a local adaptation is that the original text is preserved as much as possible and usually deals with changes specifically related to adapting the cultural indicators and language of the original text to the text that is written (Bastin 7). Since Mamet is not fluent in Russian and therefore could not create a direct translation of the text, he instead adapts the play from a direct translation by Russian scholar Vlada Chernomordik, altering the diction and syntax to fit his own writing style in the process (Carroll 141). However, as the literal translation that Mamet based his adaptation on by Chernomordik is unpublished, likely a result of a private interaction between the two, it is unattainable for comparative purposes. Therefore, it has been substituted with the Paul Schmidt direct translation as is used in the rest of the paper because it is one of the most widely used modern Russian-English translations that exists today. In comparing Mamet's version to Schmidt's, the result is a local adaptation that carries Mamet's distinctive verbal style as a playwright while maintaining the structure, themes and characters that are present in Chekhov's original *Uncle Vanya* (Carroll 141).

Interestingly, this is not the only Chekhov play that Mamet has chosen to adapt. He also adapted both *The Cherry Orchard* and *Three Sisters*, clearly showing a specific interest in the universal elements of Chekhov's work that are still relevant today. In

¹¹ All references to David Mamet's adaptation of *Uncle Vanya* refer to the 1988 Grove Press edition.

creating his local adaptation of *Uncle Vanya*, Mamet tries to stay faithful to the plot of the text while also leaving a stylistic mark all his own. The question then emerges, why would a playwright known for his conspicuous capturing of American colloquialisms and often unrestrained use of profanity set out to adapt a Russian playwright whose works were created roughly a century prior and often set in countryside estates? As Professor Dennis Carroll writes, “[Mamet] created plays in which characters walk a fine line between despair and hope, dissolution and integration, solitude and communion. Dichotomies, paradoxes and dialectical tensions are central to his work, and apparent in the personality he projects” (Carroll 3). These “dichotomies, paradoxes and dialectical tensions,” are not only a staple of Mamet’s work, also serve as a technique that runs throughout Chekhov’s major plays, specifically in his use of tragicomedy (Carroll 3). For Mamet, as a playwright interested in these techniques, there is no one better to emulate than one of the dramatists considered a master of such methods. The following is a humorous passage from Mamet that illustrates the changes he makes in order to add his own touch to the script, while still maintaining the tragicomedy of the piece. The exchange occurs between Yelena and Ivan¹² when they are pointing out each other’s character flaws at the end of the first act:

YELENA ANDREYEVNA: You, Ivan Petrovich, what, have you fallen in one of your “moods” again...?

IVAN PETROVICH: ...excuse me...?

¹² Ivan is the proper form of Vanya’s given name and the version that Mamet uses in his adaptation.

YELENA ANDREYEVNA: You were being impossible.

IVAN PETROVICH: ...was I...?

YELENA ANDREYEVNA: Well, yes, you *were*. Why are you baiting your mother... and, today, at breakfast you quarreled with Alexandr¹³.

IVAN PETROVICH: Hmm.

YELENA ANDREYEVNA: Excuse me. How petty.

IVAN PETROVICH: Petty?

YELENA ANDREYEVNA: Yes.

IVAN PETROVICH: But if I “hate” him...?

YELENA ANDREYEVNA: And why should you hate him? He’s like everyone else. He’s no worse than you.

IVAN PETROVICH: Oh, please, look at yourself, your face, look at the way you *move*... You are too lazy to *live*, with your “torpor”...

YELENA ANDREYEVNA: “Too lazy to live...”

IVAN PETROVICH: Yes. You are.

YELENA ANDREYEVNA: Yes. I am. And too bored. Do you know? Everyone berates my husband. Everyone berates him. Everyone pities me. “Oh, the poor woman... saddled with such an old man...” They’re so *concerned* for me. You must *excuse me, but it’s quite disgusting*. Don’t you *think so*...? Tell me. [...]

IVAN PETROVICH: Yes. You know, I don’t care much for this philosophy. (17-18)

¹³ Mamet has the characters sometimes refer to the professor by his more formal given name in the dialogue, which he chooses to spell Alexandr (Vladimirovich Serebryakov).

The direct translation of the original reads:

YELÉNA: Ványa, you're impossible. You never stop, do you? There was no need to quarrel with your mother like that. And calling Alexánder a perpetual writing machine! And you got into another argument with him at lunch. You're being very petty.

VÁNYA: It's because I don't like him! I hate him!

YELÉNA: Why do you hate him? He's no different from anybody else. He's no worse than you are.

VÁNYA: I wish you could see your face right now. Or see the indolent way you move. You're so... so *detached*. You don't care about anything, do you? You just drift through life.

YELÉNA: Detached? Oh, yes. And bored. (*Beat.*) Nobody likes my husband; they all pity me; oh, poor thing, stuck with an old man like that! But all this sympathy for me- oh, I know what's behind it. [...]

VÁNYA: I hate it when you get philosophical like this. (217-218)

In comparing both works, it is clear that the characters, the action of bickering and the topic of argument remain the same between Mamet's version and the direct translation. However, the diction and syntax differ in a way that illustrates Mamet's distinctive writing style. The first clear differentiation is that although Mamet stays true to the plotline, he adds to the length of the text in this passage creating an even more

quarrelsome atmosphere between Yelena and Ivan. The addition of short interjections between Yelena and Ivan effectively creates this argumentative atmosphere.

YELENA ANDREYEVNA: You, Ivan Petrovich, what, have you fallen in one of your “moods” again...?

IVAN PETROVICH: ...excuse me...?

YELENA ANDREYEVNA: You were being impossible.

IVAN PETROVICH: ...was I...?

YELENA ANDREYEVNA: Well, yes, you *were*. Why are you baiting your mother... and, today, at breakfast you quarreled with Alexandr. (17)

The sharp, quick nature of their conversation contrasts with the same dialogue that is wrapped up in a single speech of Yelena’s in the direct translation, even though the same basic information is shared:

YELÉNA: Ványa, you’re impossible. You never stop, do you? There was no need to quarrel with your mother like that. And calling Alexánder a perpetual writing machine! And you got into another argument with him at lunch. You’re being very petty. (217)

By inserting Ivan’s interjections in between Yelena’s lines, Mamet furthers the strained and quarrelsome relationship that Yelena and Ivan have with each other, stemming from Ivan’s unrequited love for Yelena.

Besides adding length to the text, another major difference between the Mamet adaptation and the direct translation is in the stylistic alteration of the diction and syntax that Mamet implements. Carroll notes that distinct aspects of Mamet's writing emerge in his adaptations of plays, including, "syntactic dislocations, repetitions, elision of connectives, sputterings, and collapses into pause and silence" (141). This passage illustrates the distinguishing style of Mamet's writing, especially with its use of ellipses to represent pause or silence, which he does thirteen times alone in the quoted passage. His frequent repetition of particular phrases (in this case, "too lazy to *live*", "petty" and "hate him") also emerges in this paragraph (Chekhov Mamet 17-18). Lastly, his syntax choice is carefully chosen to put a slightly different edge to the text as he interprets the characters to speak in *Uncle Vanya*. For example, he replaces Ivan's accusation of Yelena "I wish you could see your face right now. Or see the indolent way you move. You're so...so detached", with his own choice of, "You are too lazy to *live*, with your "torpor"" (Chekhov Schmidt 217, Chekhov Mamet 18). Specifically, Mamet's replacement of Chekhov's more pitiful and sympathetic diction choice of "indolent" and "detached," with his own "laziness" and "torpor" creates a more negative connotation, thus it serves as a harsher accusation (Chekhov Schmidt 217, Chekhov Mamet 18).

Even though Ivan's interjections and Mamet's overall tendency to have disruptive elements in his writing differ from the direct translation, the core elements of the piece, such as the tragicomedy of unrequited love and humorous bickering present in the previous example, do remain. There is humor present in Ivan's reaction to Yelena's accusations because what he says is almost patronizing, yet also clearly influenced by the love that Ivan holds for Yelena. Additionally, there is the simultaneous realization of pure

unhappiness in both the lives of Yelena and Ivan, but it is a situation in which they are trapped. Such unhappiness shows itself when Yelena's anger surfaces, "They're so *concerned* for me. You must *excuse me, but it's quite disgusting*. Don't you think so...? Tell me" (Chekhov Mamet 18). The bickering and sly comments prove humorous for the audience, while the sadness associated with the pent up anger and disgust also materializes at the same point in the text. In such a way Mamet retains the Chekhovian tragicomedy in his adaptation.

It seems that it is this very sense of contradiction that attracts Mamet to Chekhov's works; the humor that is present in some of the unhappiest of circumstances and how the dichotomy between humor and unhappiness -rather unfortunately- accurately represents real life. Author C.W.E. Bigsby notes in his book, *David Mamet*, that this attempt to capture truthfully such contradictions, specifically in the lives of Americans, is what Mamet's work centers on (Bigsby 12). Bigsby writes, "[His] work has addressed not only the 'actual life' of Americans but also the fantasies with which they choose to cloak that life and the language with which they express what he sees as its growing anxiety and desperation" (12). This philosophical view was first captured by Chekhov a century earlier, except with Russians feeling the decay of the long-instituted class system they had always known. Thus a strong link can be made between the despairing characters in Chekhov's plays and the Americans of which Mamet frequently writes. Bigsby furthers this argument when he asserts, "The irony of Mamet's characters derives not from a collapse of faith in the American Dream but from the persistence of that faith beyond reason, and from the prosaic nature of the dream they choose to embrace" (Bigsby 17). Although not directly referenced in the example above, the concept of "faith

beyond reason”, surely a faith despite all unhappiness, is the epitome of *Uncle Vanya* and is solidified in the final words of the play, that of Sofya’s¹⁴ monologue. The Mamet version maintains this “faith beyond reason”:

But what can we do? Uncle. All we can do is live. We’ll live through a long row of days. And through the endless evenings. And we’ll bear up. Under the trials fate has sent to us. We will constantly toil for others. Now, and the rest of our days. And when we come to die, we’ll die submissively. *Beyond* the grave we will testify that we have suffered; that we’ve wept, and have known bitterness. And God will pity us. You and I. *(Pause.)* Dear Uncle, God will take pity on us. And *we*, Uncle, shall live a life of radiant beauty and grace. And look back on this life of our unhappiness with tenderness. And smile. And in that new life we shall rest. Uncle. I know it. I have faith. I have passionate faith. We shall rest. *(Pause.)* We shall rest to the songs of the angels. In a firmament arrayed in jewels. And look down, and we will see evil, all the evil in the world, and all our sufferings, bathed in a perfect mercy, and our life grown sweet as a caress. I have faith. Oh... Poor Uncle Vanya. You’re crying. I know. I know. You have no joy in your life. But wait. And only wait, Uncle Vanya, we shall rest. *(Embraces him.)* We shall rest. *(The WATCHMAN taps. TELEGIN plays softly on the guitar. MARIYA VASILYEVNA writes on her pamphlet. MARINA knits.)*

We shall rest. (81-82)

¹⁴ Mamet refers to Sonya in the cast of characters as Sofya Alexandrovna (Sonya). Therefore outlining her character as Sofya, but having the other characters in the play call her by her nickname of Sonya.

As previously outlined, the Schmidt translation of the same monologue reads:

I know. But we have to go on living.

(Pause.)

You and I, Uncle Ványa, we have to go on living. The days will be slow, and the nights will be long, but we'll take whatever fate sends us. We'll spend the rest of our lives doing other people's work for them, we won't know a moment's rest, and then, when our times comes, we'll die. And when we're dead, we'll say that our lives were full of pain, that we wept and suffered, and God will have pity on us, and then, Uncle, dear Uncle Ványa, we'll see a brand-new life, all shining and beautiful, we'll be happy, and we'll look back on the pain we feel right now and we'll smile... and then we'll rest. I believe that, Uncle. I believe that with all my heart and soul. *(Kneels down by Ványa and puts her head in his hands; wearily)*

Then we'll rest.

(Telégín plays softly.)

We'll rest! We'll hear the angels singing, we'll see the diamonds of heaven, and all our earthly woes will vanish in a flood of compassion that overwhelms the world! And then everything will be calm, quiet, gentle as a loving hand. *(Wipes away his tears with her handkerchief)* Poor Uncle Ványa, you're crying...

(Almost in tears herself) I know how unhappy your life has been, but wait a while, just a little while, Uncle Ványa, and you and I will rest. *(Embraces him)* We will, I know we will.

(We hear the night watchman outside the house, tapping his stick as he makes his rounds. Telégin continues to play quietly; Mrs. Voinitsky makes a note in the margin; Marina knits her stocking.)

We'll rest. I know we will.

THE CURTAIN FALLS SLOWLY. (253-254)

Mamet maintains the backbone of the monologue by holding onto the idea of a strong faith despite all loss in his adaptation. It even can be applied to lives of Americans, Mamet's focus, even though Chekhov originally characterized such a sentiment as taking place on the Russian country estate. Mamet's adaptation fluidly transfers this faith because of the melancholy he retains throughout the monologue. The primary difference between the two lies in how Mamet breaks up the monologue into curt sentences. While this is characteristic of his more disruptive writing, his brief sentences add a very modern feel to the words that the direct translation more poetically and at greater length communicates. As the middle section of the Mamet reads:

(Pause.) Dear Uncle, God will take pity on us. And *we*, Uncle, shall live a life of radiant beauty and grace. And look back on this life of unhappiness with tenderness. And smile. And in that new life we shall rest. Uncle. I know it. I have faith. I have passionate faith. We shall rest. (81)

The comparable middle section of the direct translation reads:

And when we're dead, we'll say that our lives were full of pain, that we wept and suffered, and God will have pity on us, and then, Uncle, dear Uncle Ványa, we'll see a brand-new life, all shining and beautiful, we'll be happy, and we'll look back on the pain we feel right now and we'll smile... and then we'll rest. I believe that, Uncle. I believe that with all my heart and soul. (*Kneels down by Ványa and puts her head in his hands; wearily*) Then we'll rest. (253)

With the same exposition given in both examples, the Mamet version is comprised of ten succinct and simpler sentences while the direct translation is four lengthier sentences containing more descriptive language. The dramatic effect is that in the Mamet version Sofya's monologue consists of more declarative statements thus appearing increasingly melancholic and reassuring for both Vanya and herself.

Both the contemporary relevance and more conversational American tone of this specific adaptation is captured in the best-known film adaptation of *Uncle Vanya*, that of Louis Malle's *Vanya on 42nd Street* (1994). This film adaptation is an interesting mix of theatre made for film and a straight theatrical production that is filmed for the sake of preservation. *Vanya on 42nd Street* was originally a theatrical performance at an abandoned theatre in Manhattan's theatre district in New York. Actor/Director Andre Gregory decided that after reading Mamet's new adaptation of *Uncle Vanya* he wanted to stage a performance. Rehearsals for the theatrical production began in summer 1990 and for eight weeks the actors worked by improvising as an ensemble. When fall came, the

group had to split up to fulfill their own previous acting commitments and rehearsed as their schedule permitted over the course of the next year. By fall 1991, Gregory felt that it was time to perform in front of an audience and the idea was created to stage each performance as if it were a run through for only twenty to thirty people, most of whom were friends of those involved with the production. In doing so, the production was by no means a traditional rendering of *Uncle Vanya* even though the textual adaptation on which it is based is a very close to the original text as it is Mamet's local adaptation. Far from the realistic rendering of a Russian country estate, the actors sat on tables and chairs and wore their street clothes, while the audience sat on the stage and changed locations after the actors moved to a new place after every act. Thus, the aesthetic of the piece was modern, casual and in a way, gritty. As time moved on and the play received press and word of mouth, there was a high demand to obtain tickets to such an intimate and innovative version of *Uncle Vanya*. Then in 1992, after the passing of one of the original cast members, Ruth Nelson, the production stopped with the rest of the cast feeling as though it would not be right to continue without her. However, the next year in 1993 the cast felt as though it was time to revive such an innovative take on *Uncle Vanya* by filming the production and preserving a unique representation of *Uncle Vanya* that had been created. After several weeks of rehearsals and a few adjustments that would translate it into film, the play was filmed with an audience over the course of two weeks. As film director Malle commented, "They knew it was the last time they were doing [the play], and they were doing it for the camera. All this time and love and energy they had devoted to the project was reaching its end. So there was an enormous energy and incredible concentration that I've rarely seen with actors. And a certain sadness, that also

got onto the film” (Vanya on 42nd Street). In this way the melancholy that is characteristic of Chekhov made it into the film both in terms of the text and the actors’ devotion to the project as well. Indeed, after opening in 1994 *Vanya on 42nd Street* was named one of the best films of the year by at least a dozen of America’s most well known film critics. As James Kaplan of New York Magazine wrote, “[It stands as] a bold little movie that takes a breathtaking dare. It asserts the absolute relevance of Chekhov in 90’s America...extraordinary!” (Vanya on 42nd Street). Overall, while very truthful to the original plotline, the design concept and aesthetic of the piece is realistic not in relation to the period in which Chekhov wrote, but in a modern context completed in a gritty and conversational manner that forges the contemporary relevance of Chekhov.

Analysis of Mamet’s text and *Vanya on 42nd Street* reveals that the simultaneity of hope and despair, humor and melancholy that is the universal to Chekhov’s works speaks to generations across cultural boundaries. Mamet has most certainly stayed true to the structure, themes and characters that make *Uncle Vanya* the masterpiece that it is, all the while maintaining the ever-important tragicomedy that he admires because of his love of contradictions. It is in allowing his distinctive writing style of “syntactic dislocations, repetitions, elision of connectives, sputterings, and collapses into pause and silence” (Carroll 141) to present itself, that he makes the piece his own, modernizing and Americanizing the work. In doing so, there is a sense that the loyalty to the period of the original is somewhat lost, however, as this is an adaptation and not a direct translation, this intention is purposeful and thus masterfully accomplished (Carroll 141).

VIII. Appendix: Other Adaptations of *Uncle Vanya*

In addition to the adaptations of dramatic literature that Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* has inspired over the years, there are also multiple examples of other artistic media that have utilized the same bittersweet story as the basis for their work. Such mediums I have found include: film, opera and radio drama. Although some of the media are more loosely adapted from the original than others, the element that remains constant with each of the pieces is the tragicomedy modeled from Chekhov's work. The following is an appendix to provide guidance in further exploring the wide range of adaptations that have been created in response to Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*.

Screenplay adaptations include:

- Anthony Hopkins' *August* (1996), which is set in Northern Wales at the turn of the 20th century (August).
- Michael Blakemore's *Country Life* (1994), which is set in rural Australia during the 1920's (Country Life).

Adaptations of theatre made for film include:

- The British Broadcasting Company's 1970 production from the *Uncle Vanya* section of the Anton Chekhov Collection that uses the direct translation by Elisaveta Fen (Uncle Vanya Morahan).
- The British Broadcasting Company's 1991 production in the *Uncle Vanya* section of the Anton Chekhov Collection that uses the David Mamet adaptation (Uncle Vanya Mosher).

A filmed live theatrical performance:

- Stuart Burge's 1963 production in association with the National Education Television Playhouse (released on video in the USA in 1967) that stars Laurence Olivier and uses the translation of Constance Garnett (*Uncle Vanya* Burge).

An operatic adaptation:

- *Sonya's Story* is the first ever operatic adaptation of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* (Rose). It is a one-act opera for two singers and a chamber orchestra that was performed at The Opera Festival in London on August 7th and 8th 2010 and focuses on Sonya's specific perspective of the events that unfolded on the Russian country estate the summer that Sonya's father and stepmother appeared (Rose).

An adaptation made for radio drama:

- The comedy troupe, The Reduced Shakespeare Company, known for their abridged versions of varying famous pieces of literature and historical events performed *Uncle Vanya (Abridged)* on their British Broadcasting radio show (Reduced Shakespeare Company). It went as follows:

Are you Uncle Vanya?

I am.

[Gunshot sounds]

Ouch! (Reduced Shakespeare Company)

X. Conclusion

Pieces of dramatic literature classified as classics have managed to stick around for generations after their initial publication. Their retention is a direct result of each individual work's ability to retain relevancy over generations. In focusing in on a specific piece of classic dramatic literature it is clear that a universal human element can be isolated in a play that does not lose its pertinence with age. For Chekhov this universal human element can be singled out as his mastery of realistic tragicomedy that contains simultaneous melancholy and humor. Such tragicomedy is present in all four of Chekhov's major plays, but especially his "Scenes From Country Life in Four Acts", *Uncle Vanya* (Schmidt 207). This seminal piece of dramatic literature has remained an applicable story to all types of artists over a century after its publication. In comparing Sam Holcroft's *Vanya*, Howard Barker's *Uncle Vanya* and David Mamet's *Uncle Vanya* with a direct translation of Chekhov's original *Uncle Vanya*, it becomes clear that tragicomedy is the universal human element that these modern playwrights are attempting to maintain from Chekhov's work. But in the process each playwright leaves his or her own mark on the original text stylistically as well as with changes to the plotline, consciously rejecting particular aspects of Chekhov's work to support their own vision for the piece. For Holcroft, her play serves as a global adaptation that contemporizes and narrows down the plot and cast of the original in order to increase the accessibility even more for audiences of the twenty-first century. Meanwhile, Barker creates a global adaptation altering parts of the text to fit his own theory of Theatre of Catastrophe resulting in an absurd, dark and burlesque version of the play. Mamet goes

yet another route by creating a local adaptation based on a Russian scholar's direct translation by changing the style of the writing and small details to fit a more American and modern version of Chekhov's intention behind the piece. Yet the breadth to which Chekhov inspires artists is not limited solely to playwrights, but also artists of other media such as film, opera and radio drama as well. Each of these media has also utilized Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* and the tragicomedy it contains as a model for their own work. Chekhov himself once wrote, "There is nothing new in art except talent" (Anton Chekhov Quotes). To this end, modern day artists have taken the universal human element they find relevant in Chekhov's work and added their own talent, building upon a master's ingenuity in the hopes of creating a piece of art that speaks in its very own right. Indeed, it is a cycle that shall continue on for years to come, one generation inspiring the next.

X. Works Consulted

“Anton Chekhov Quotes and Quotations”. *Famous Quotes & Authors*. N.p. n.d. Web 11 Nov. 2010. <http://www.famousquotesandauthors.com/authors/anton_chekhov_quotes.html>.

August. Dir. Anthony Hopkins. Perf. Anthony Hopkins. Granada Film Productions, Majestic Films International, Newcomm, The Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1996. Film.

Barker, Howard. *Arguments for a Theatre*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989. Print.

Barker, Howard. *Collected Plays: Volume Two*. New York: River Run Press, 1991. Print.

Bassett, Kate. “Vanya, Gate Theatre, London.” *The Independent* 6 Sep. 2009. Print.

Bastin, Georges L. “Adaptation.” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. 1998.

Bigsby, C.W.E. *David Mamet*. London: Methuen, 1985. Print.

Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. New York: Touchstone, 1968. Print.

“Bryant H. McGill Quotes”. *Think Exist*. N.p. n.d. Web 27 Nov. 2010. <<http://thinkexist.com/quotation/why-do-we-laugh-at-such-terrible-things-because/370981.html>>.

Carroll, Dennis. *David Mamet*. London: Macmillan, 1987. Print.

Chekhov, Anton. *4 Plays & 3 Jokes*. Trans. Sharon Marie Carnicke. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2009. Print.

Chekhov, Anton. *The Plays of Anton Chekhov*. Trans. Paul Schmidt. New York: Harper Perennial, 1999. Print.

Chekhov, Anton. *Uncle Vanya*. Trans. Vlada Chernomordik. Adapt. David Mamet. New York: Grove Press, 1988. Print.

Country Life. Dir. Michael Blakemore. Perf. Sam Neill. Australian Film Finance Corporation, Dalton Films, 1994. Film.

Esslin, Martin. *Brecht The Man and His Work*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971. Print.

- Holcroft, Sam. *Vanya*. Casarotto Ramsay & Associates Limited, 2009. Play is yet unpublished. Print.
- Ley, Graham. *A Short Introduction to the Ancient Greek Theater*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991. Print.
- “Reduced Shakespeare Company”. *Reduced Shakespeare Company*. N.p. n.d. Web. 3 Nov. 2010. < <http://www.reducedshakespeare.com/>>.
- Richards, Thomas. *At Work With Grotowski on Physical Actions*. London: Routledge, 1995. Print.¹⁵
- Rose, Jenny. “Sonya’s Story”. *Sonya’s Story*. N.p. n.d. Web. 3 Nov. 2010. < <http://www.sonyasstoryopera.webs.com/>>.
- Uncle Vanya*. Dir. Christopher Morahan. Perf. Anthony Hopkins. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 1970. Film.
- Uncle Vanya*. Dir. Gregory Mosher. Perf. David Warner, Ian Holm, Elizabeth Mastrantonio. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), WNET Channel 13 New York, 1991. Film.
- Uncle Vanya*. Dir. Stuart Burge. Perf. Laurence Olivier. NET Playhouse, 1967. Film.
- Vanya*. By Sam Holcroft. Dir. Natalie Abrahami. Perf. Fiona Button, Robert Goodale, Susie Traylin and Simon Wilson. The Gate Theatre, London. 2 Oct. 2010. Performance.
- Vanya on 42nd Street*. Dir. Andre Gregory. Perf. Julianne Moore, Brooke Smith, George Gaynes and Wallace Shawn. Channel Four Films, Mayfair Entertainment, The Vanya Company. 1994. Film.
- Wilson, Edwin, and Alvin Goldfarb. *Living Theatre*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1983. Print.

¹⁵ This is the citation information for the epigraph.