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Cast (in order of appearance)

Kenneth Branagh
Ivanov, landowner and regional councillor. His financial difficulties are compounded by his wife’s failing health. Often anxious and irritable, he appears to be on the verge of a breakdown.

Lorcan Cranitch
Borkin, Ivanov’s estate manager. The life and soul of a party, the scheming Borkin always has a plan for making money.

Malcolm Sinclair
Shabelsky, Ivanov’s maternal uncle. A member of the old aristocracy, he longs for the olden days and to visit his wife’s grave in Paris.

Gina McKee
Anna Petrovna, Ivanov’s wife. She’s desperate for her husband to return to his happy self and spend more time at home, as her illness keeps her confined indoors.

Tom Hiddleston
Lvov, a young doctor treating Anna. His self-declared honesty and moralistic attitude put him in conflict with Ivanov, whom he regards as despicable.

Sylvestra Le Touzel
Zinaida, Ivanov’s wealthy neighbour. A moneylender anxious about reclaiming her loans, particularly from the unreliable Ivanov.

Lucy Briers
Babakina, a wealthy young widow - she’s making her advances on Shabelsky and his aristocratic title.

Malcolm Ridley
Yacob, an older gentleman and frequent guest at Zinaida’s house.

Ian Drysdale
Anasim, a younger gentleman and guest at Zinaida’s parties.
James Howard

Nikander, a young gentleman and potential suitor to Zinaida's daughter.

James Tucker

Kosykh, an excise officer, obsessive cards player and a terrible loser.

John Atterbury

Yegorushka, an aging dependent of Zinaida's.

Linda Broughton

Avdotya, an old woman and local matchmaker, eager to pair her niece Babakina with Shabelsky.

Emma Beattie

Natalia, a young lady and guest at Zinaida's parties.

Kevin R McNally

Lebedev, Zinaida's husband and an old friend of Ivanov's. He's embarrassed by his wife's penny pinching and troubled by his friend's decline.

Andrea Riseborough

Sasha, Lebedev's daughter, and his pride and joy. She's passionately in love with Ivanov and hopes to save him from his troubles.

Jonathan Battersby

Gavrila, Zinaida's long-suffering servant.

Giovanna Falcone

Lipa, Zinaida's maid.

John Atterbury

Pyotr, Ivanov's aging servant.
Creative Team

Tom Stoppard, Author

Michael Grandage, Director
Artistic Director of the Donmar Warehouse. Recent work includes, for the Donmar: The Chalk Garden, Othello, John Gabriel Borkman, Don Juan in Soho, Frost/Nixon (also Gielgud, Broadway and USA tour), The Cut (also UK tour), The Wild Duck (2006 Critics’ Circle Award for Best Director), Grand Hotel – The Musical (2005 Olivier Award for Outstanding Musical Production and 2004 Evening Standard Award for Best Director), After Miss Julie and Caligula (2004 Olivier Award for Best Director); for the West End: Evita and Guys and Dolls (2006 Olivier Award for Outstanding Musical Production); as Artistic Director of the Sheffield Theatres: Don Carlos (2005 Evening Standard Award and TMA for Best Director), Suddenly Last Summer and As You Like It (2000 Critics’ Circle and Evening Standard Awards for Best Director).

Christopher Oram, Designer
Recent work includes, for the Donmar: Othello, Parade, Don Juan in Soho, Frost/Nixon (also Gielgud and Broadway), Grand Hotel – The Musical, Henry IV, World Music and Caligula (2003 Evening Standard Award for Best Design); other theatre: King Lear/The Seagull (RSC), Evita (Adelphi), Guys and Dolls (Piccadilly), Macbeth, The Jew of Malta and The Embalmer (Almeida), Oleanna (Gielgud), Loyal Women and Fucking Games (Royal Court), Stuff Happens, Marriage Play/Finding the Sun, Summerfolk and Power (NT, 2004 Olivier Award for Best Costume Design).

Paule Constable, Lighting Designer
Recent work includes, for the Donmar: The Chalk Garden, The Man Who Had All the Luck, Othello, Absurdia, The Cut, Little Foxes, Proof, Bondagers; other theatre: War Horse, St Joan, Some Trace of Her, His Dark Materials (NT, 2005 Olivier Award for Best Lighting), The City (Royal Court), Good Soul of Szechuan (Young Vic), Evita (Adelphi). In addition to extensive work in opera and dance, Paule recently won the 2006 Olivier Award for Best Lighting Design for Don Carlos, the 1999 LA Critics’ Award for Amadeus and the Hospital Award for Contribution to Theatre 2006.
Adam Cork, Composer and Sound Designer

Recent work includes, for the Donmar: The Chalk Garden, Othello, John Gabriel Borkman, Don Juan in Soho, Frost/Nixon (also Gielgud, Broadway and USA tour, 2007 Drama Desk Award nomination), Caligula, Henry IV, The Wild Duck and The Cut; other theatre: No Man’s Land (Duke of York’s), Macbeth (Broadway and Gielgud, 2008 Tony nomination), Don Carlos (Gielgud), Suddenly Last Summer (Albery), On the Third Day (New Ambassadors), Speaking Like Magpies and The Tempest (RSC), Five Gold Rings and The Late Henry Moss (Almeida).
An introduction to Anton Chekhov and his work

Biography

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was born on 29 January, 1860 in Taganrog, a port on the Sea of Azov in southern Russia. The son of a former serf, he went on to become one of the world’s most celebrated playwrights. ‘Chekhov is frequently linked with Shakespeare in terms of importance, constant reinterpretation and frequency of performance,’ comment the editors of The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov.1

With Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), Chekhov is often credited with introducing a newfound realism to the turn of the twentieth-century stage. In their view of British theatre over the last hundred years, Changing Stages, Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright link the two among a small group of writers who have most significantly transformed the stage. ‘Chekhov performed alchemy on the leaden minutiae of daily life in the Russian provinces, while Ibsen demonstrated that theatre could concern itself with social issues at the same time as anatomising individual pain.’2 Both have been referred to as the fathers of modern drama.

For Chekhov, daily life in the Russian provinces meant a childhood spent in a small town typical of Russian provincial towns of the time: wastelands, taverns and coffee shops (‘Not a single sign without a spelling mistake’).3 His recollections of his birthplace are full of references to puddles and unpaved sidewalks, ‘Dirty and dull, with deserted streets and a lazy, ignorant population.’4 Taganrog, a southern port near the borders of the Northern Caucasus, was a staging post for the supply of provisions to the whole Azov region. The second floor of Chekhov’s family home overlooked the harbour, crammed at the height of summer with ships from as far afield as Turkey, Greece, Italy and Spain. Below was his father’s shop, a small grocery store selling everything from tobacco and buttons to shoe polish and herrings.

Pavel Chekhov and his wife Yevghenia had six children in total: one girl and five boys, of which Anton was the third eldest. Their upbringing was harsh. Pavel’s preference for the arts, teaching himself to paint and play the violin, made him neglect his business and subject his family to unnecessary physical privations. This was to have a lasting effect on Anton. ‘He learned to protect himself at an early age,’ comments Nicholas Wright in his book Ninety-Nine Plays. ‘His father tyrannised the family and beat the children. Two of the sons became hopeless drunks. Anton became the opposite: affable, temperate, remote.’5 Scenes of churlish behaviour on Pavel’s part towards his family, particularly his wife, left Anton with bitter memories, to which he later referred in a letter to his older brother Alexander, dated 1889: ‘Despotism and lies so spoiled our childhood, that it frightens and sickens me to think of it even now.’6

From childhood he and his brothers were exposed to the full force of the Slavonic church through Bible studies and religious rituals at home. Pavel’s passion for religious music prompted him to teach his sons to sing in church before they were even old enough to go to school. They often had to get up before dawn to make the journey, in all weathers, to the nearest place of worship. ‘As my brothers and I sang a trio in church, people gazed at us admiringly and appeared to envy our parents,’ recalled Anton in 1892, ‘but we children felt like small convicts doing a term of hard labour.’7
One of the few pleasures for the Chekhov children was spending their summer holidays on Countess Platova’s country estate, of which Anton’s grandfather was steward. Before the emancipation of serfs in 1861, Yegor Chekhov bought his freedom from his owner, including that of his sons, among them Anton’s father. Years later Anton described his grandfather as the ‘protagonist of serfdom’ and commented, ‘there is peasant blood in me.’ At night, Anton and his brothers would camp out on the Steppe, a vast wilderness stretching from the Black Sea in the north to as far east as the Caspian Sea. This landscape left an indelible impression on the young writer, providing a backdrop to many of his short stories.

Despite his own preferences and straightened circumstances, Pavel Chekhov recognised the importance of education and sent all his sons to school. In 1868 Anton joined the local gymnasium, a traditional grammar school which placed particular emphasis on the study of classical languages. He spent eleven years there, having to repeat the third and fifth. Despite being a hard-working student, conditions at home weren’t entirely favourable to study and Anton was hindered by having to help his father in the shop after school, until late at night. While hampering his studies, the academic Alexander Chudakov suggests the experience may have benefited the young writer in other ways:

‘A shop in the provinces was a kind of club where people went, not only to buy things, but also to drink a glass of vodka or wine. It was frequented by cooks, shop assistants, the wives of officials, policemen, cab-drivers, fishermen, teachers, school students, and sailors. They all talked, so from his early childhood Anton listened to the language of people of the most varied occupations.’

The repetition and monotony of Anton’s day-to-day household duties – shopping, cleaning, fetching water – coupled with his father’s tyrannical nature instilled in the writer, suggests the translator Elisaveta Fen, ‘the intense loathing of the petty-bourgeois domestic routine which inspires the subject-matter of many of [his] short stories, and is often expressed by characters in his plays.’ Alexander Chudakov adds to this theory:

‘Chekhov would show later in his writing how anyone who lives only in the material world and lacks the ability to resist it becomes completely stifled by the everyday, and then the spiritual gives way completely to the material.’

In 1876, when Anton was just 16, his father went bankrupt and, facing prison, left Taganrog in secret, taking his wife and young children with him. They moved to Moscow to join their two elder sons, Alexander, who was studying at the university and Nikolai, who was studying at the arts’ school. Anton was left behind to finish his schooling. For three years he lived alone in Taganrog making a living as a tutor to younger students; he even managed to send money back to his parents. It was a time of solitude during which his character took shape. His studies improved considerably and he became editor of the school magazine The Stutterer, to which he contributed humorous sketches.

In 1879, aged 19, Anton joined his family in Moscow, entering the Faculty of Medicine at the University. What prompted this choice of career is uncertain. Chekhov himself later confessed he had only ‘the vaguest notion about university faculties’ and ‘did not remember what sort of considerations made him choose medicine.’ Some biographers suggest it was Chekhov’s contact with a school doctor, who treated him during an illness at the age of 15, that influenced his decision. Regardless of this, studying the natural sciences had a significant impact upon Chekhov, helping to shape his thinking. ‘There is no doubt that my study of medicine strongly affected my work in literature,’ he wrote in his autobiography in 1899.
On moving to Moscow, Anton took over the responsibilities of the head of the household. By this time Pavel only held a junior position within a general store, often working overnight. Any spare time Anton had from his studies was spent writing sketches and short stories for literary magazines, thereby earning enough money to support the family. His main publisher was the magazine *Fragments.*

Anton was prolific, producing literally hundreds of scenes, anecdotes and articles. In his final year at university, 1883, he wrote 120 short stories. The material was of varying quality and Chekhov himself was under no illusion as to its worth. ‘I’ve scratched off a mangy little thing…’ or ‘I’ve spun off a tale…’ are some of the ways in which he described his literary output at the time. It’s widely believed that Chekhov’s contribution to humorous magazines distracted him from more serious work but such publications offered freedom of form. Writers were able to write in any style, invent new techniques and experiment with different forms. (For a more detailed discussion of Chekhov’s development as a writer see the section *Chekhov – From page to stage*, p.13.)
The Chekhov family continued to live in near poverty in Moscow, occasionally all occupying one room. Meanwhile, Anton worked as a doctor in the city while continuing to write. ‘I feel somehow more alert and pleased with myself when I know that I have two occupations, and not one,’ he once commented. ‘Medicine is my legal spouse, while literature is my mistress. When I get tired of one, I go and sleep with the other.’

1886 marked a landmark in Chekhov’s literary career and was his most productive. His work began to be published in the highly respected newspaper Novoye Vremya (New Time), to which Chekhov continued to contribute into the early 1890s. The newspaper’s owner and editor, Alexey Suvorin, became both a loyal supporter and lifelong friend, the writer valuing his opinion highly. Between 1886 and 1903 the two wrote over 300 letters to one another and in 1891 and 1894 they travelled abroad together. Suvorin published many of Chekhov’s early collections of short stories and it was partly due to his enthusiastic support that At Dusk (1887) won the Pushkin Prize. That same year, Chekhov wrote his first full-length play, Ivanov, which was staged at the Korsh Theatre in Moscow. (See the section IVANOV, p21 for more information.) This period saw a blossoming of Chekhov’s talent, his work began to be recognised by eminent writers and critics in St Petersburg. His short one-act plays, or vaudevilles, such as The Bear (1888) and The Proposal (1888-89), were staged by amateur and professional theatre companies across Russia and, as a result, Chekhov’s fame grew. There were material benefits too. For instance, the money he received for the first story he contributed to Novoye Vremya was more than he could earn in a month from the magazine Fragments.

In 1890, at the height of his burgeoning success, both as a writer of short stories and as a dramatist, Chekhov made his well-documented trip to Sakhalin Island, a remote Russian penal colony – ‘a place of the most unbearable suffering that could ever befall a man, whether captive or free.’ The journey across Siberia was long and arduous, including over 4,000 kilometres by horse-drawn cart. Chekhov regarded the trip as essential for his personal and creative development, a characteristic of this self-taught writer. ‘There is much to learn and discover… Besides, I believe this trip, six months of uninterrupted physical and intellectual labour, is absolutely necessary for me, because my Ukrainian laziness has started to show of late. It’s high time for me to get back into training.’ Working alone, Chekhov completed a full census of the Sakhalin population, his experiences recorded in the book The Island of Sakhalin (1895) and reflected in many short stories.

Throughout his life Chekhov continued to participate in affairs outside the world of literature - practising as a doctor, providing relief for famine-stricken areas and even financing the construction of several schools. This activity increased after 1892 when he bought a small country estate in Melikhovo, near Moscow. He engaged fully with his local community, making no distinction between major and minor issues, whether fighting a cholera epidemic or opening a post office. ‘It would be great if each of us left behind a school, a well or something of that kind so that one’s life wouldn’t vanish into eternity without trace,’ he once commented.

Following the relative failure of his previous plays Ivanov and The Wood Demon (1889) – later much revised and revived as Uncle Vanya (1899) – Chekhov began work on a new play in 1895, The Seagull. It marked a departure from his earlier efforts, dispensing with many of the theatrical devices prevalent at the time,
which were often melodramatic in tone. Chekhov sought new effects, chiefly a more realistic representation of life on stage. ‘Everything must be simple… completely simple,’ Chekhov told the actors during rehearsals. ‘The main thing is not to be theatrical.’

Despite this, the production at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St Petersburg in 1896 was a failure. Chekhov was devastated. Afterwards, he commented to his old friend Suvorin, ‘Even if I live for another 700 years, I’ll still not offer a single play to the theatre… I’m a failure in this sphere.’

From 1897 Chekhov’s health began to deteriorate rapidly. The illness which he had concealed from his family, and to some extent himself, for several years was finally diagnosed as tuberculosis. He spent a few months in a clinic near Moscow before going to the south of France where he stayed throughout the winter, returning to Russia in 1898. As a doctor, Chekhov knew that his lifestyle had to change but he persisted with his punishing workload. His own doctors recommended he move to Yalta so he sold the Melikhovo estate and went to the Crimea, where he spent the last five years of his life.

The failure of The Seagull rankled with Chekhov for many years, and his confidence in his ability to write plays was severely shaken. But its lack of success lay in Chekhov’s innovative dramatic technique, which was not fully understood until 1898 and the creation of the ‘theatre of the new century’, the Moscow Arts Theatre (MAT). Founded by the actor-director Konstantin Stanislavsky and the writer Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, the theatre shared Chekhov’s ideals about dramatic art and staged a hugely successful revival of The Seagull that year, and subsequently all of Chekhov’s other plays. (For a more detailed discussion of Chekhov and the MAT see the section Chekhov and the Moscow Arts Theatre, p18).

1898 was a momentous year for Chekhov, both professionally and personally. It was during rehearsals for the MAT production of The Seagull that he met the actress Olga Knipper, who was playing Arkadina. He had seen her before as Irina in Leo Tolstoy’s play Tsar Fiodor Ivanovich, commenting in a letter to Suvorin: ‘Irina in my opinion is superb. Her voice, noble bearing, and sincerity are so good that it brought a lump to my throat… If I remained in Moscow I should fall in love with that Irina.’ They began a relationship shortly after, eventually marrying in 1901.

Little is known about Chekhov’s previous relations with women. He had his first sexual experience at the age of 14 with a Greek woman and his affair with an Indian girl is known about only because he wrote of it in one of his letters. His relationship with Yevdokia Efros lasted a year and a half, Chekhov even referring to her on occasion as his fiancée. Their liaison, suggests Alexander Chudakov, echoed Ivanov and Anna’s in Chekhov’s own play. Generally, though, Chekhov’s relationships were brief and frequently complicated. On his earlier trips from Melikhovo to Moscow he was often seen in the company of ladies from the latter’s artistic circles.

In Yalta, Chekhov bought a plot of land and built a house upon it where he was to write the three plays which are generally regarded as his masterpieces - Uncle Vanya (1899), Three Sisters (1901) and The Cherry Orchard (1904). Following the MAT productions, Chekhov’s fame spread. His plays were produced across Russia, each successive new piece a literary and theatrical event. From 1899 onwards articles about Chekhov and his work appeared in the Russian press almost every day. Books about him began to be published at home and abroad. Despite objecting to the clamour, Chekhov privately enjoyed his exalted position within Russian literature.
His exile in Yalta, by doctors’ orders, made him increasingly unhappy. He didn’t like the idle tourists and the house itself had a serious defect, particularly for a man in his condition – it was cold. Yalta’s winter climate was severe, the changes in weather affecting Chekhov’s mood. He missed Moscow, the literary milieu and most of all his wife. Although Chekhov’s illness and Olga’s commitment to work at the MAT kept them apart, theirs was ultimately a happy marriage despite the strain of frequent separations and the disappointment of not having children. Olga became pregnant in the second year of their marriage but miscarried and was ill for several months as a result. Chekhov spent many sleepless nights by her bedside, seriously jeopardising his own health.

When they were apart he would write to her, asking her to visit, a request echoed by friends: ‘Anton Pavlovich needs you. He is suffocating within his four walls,’ wrote the writer-director Leopold Sulerzhitsky to Olga. ‘You mustn’t forget that he not only belongs to you, but he is also a great writer and you should come and visit him, for you are the one person who can cheer him up and help restore his health which is vital for everybody, for Russian literature, for Russia.’

Despite such fame, he remained grounded: ‘He works regular hours, dresses fastidiously, loves the kind of light social occasion where you don’t have to involve yourself, relies heavily on his sister and adores pretty girls,’ observes Nicholas Wright. ‘Every so often he gives himself a treat: an excellent dinner, good sex, a trip abroad. It’s a very strategic existence.’
By 1903, when he was working on *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov's illness was far advanced and the writer was a very sick man. He wrote to Nemirovich-Danchenko, "I write about four lines a day, and even that costs me an intolerably painful effort." The opening night in January 1904 was planned as a celebration, an opportunity for the MAT and Russian audiences to honour its much-loved writer, but in reality it was a farewell. Exhausted, Chekhov was so ill he could barely stand to accept their applause. Concluding the ceremony, Nemirovich-Danchenko and his colleagues paid him tribute, "Our theatre is so much indebted to your talent, to your tender heart and pure soul, that you have every right to say, "This is my theatre"." Several months later, his health failing, Anton travelled with Olga to the spa town of Badenweiler in Germany for rest and recuperation. During the night of 15th July, feeling unwell, he called for a doctor who ordered ice to be placed on his heart. "You don't need to put ice on an empty heart," joked Anton before drinking a glass of champagne, commenting to his wife, "It's long since I last drank champagne!" Emptying his glass he leant back and died, his death as controlled as his life.

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**Chekhov – From page to stage**

‘Let the things that happen on the stage be as complex and yet just as simple as they are in life. For instance, people are having a meal at the table, just having a meal, but at the same time their happiness is being created, or their lives are being smashed up.’

With this simple yet striking example, Chekhov illustrated his thoughts on the principles of dramatic art. His development as a dramatist, as opposed to as a writer of short stories, made a break with tradition so complete he can be said to have caused a revolution within the theatre. This distinction between Chekhov as dramatist and short story writer is significant as today his reputation rests largely upon the four plays he wrote in the last ten years of his life. ‘In fact he was not really a natural dramatist,’ observes playwright and translator Michael Frayn. ‘The page, not the stage, was his element… His sporadic parallel career as a playwright followed a quite different pattern. For the greater part of his life it remained a source of frustration, anguish, and self-doubt. Again and again he renounced it; again and again he discovered that he was “absolutely not a dramatist”.’

Yet Frayn acknowledges that the transition from page to stage is a difficult one, a move that remarkably few writers have managed, and concedes that Chekhov’s ‘struggles to understand and master the recalcitrant medium of the theatre changed forever its nature and possibilities.’ Chekhov’s frequent collaborator at the Moscow Arts Theatre, the actor-director Konstantin Stanislavsky, offers a candid commentary on the dramatist’s work in his autobiography *My Life in Art* (1924):

‘The poetic power of Chekhov’s plays does not manifest itself at the first reading. After having read them, you say to yourself: This is good, but… it’s nothing special, nothing to stun you with admiration. Everything is as it should be. Familiar… truthful… nothing new… Not infrequently, the first reading of his plays is even disappointing. You feel you have nothing to say about them. The plot? The subject? You can explain them in a couple of words. Acting parts? Many are good, but none are striking enough to stimulate an ambitious actor. Yet, as you recollect some phrases and scenes, you feel you want to think about them more, think
about them longer. In your mind, you go over other phrases and scenes, over the whole of the play... You want to re-read it – and then you realize the depths hidden under the surface.'

This equal Mastery of both the internal and external truth of a situation or character, which set Chekhov apart from his predecessors and many of his contemporaries, had its earliest foundation in his short story writing. As noted earlier, many critics have suggested that Chekhov’s Contribution to various magazines and newspapers distracted him from more serious literary work, whereas in fact they offered a forum for this most innovative of writers to experiment with new styles and techniques.

‘Many of the artistic principles explored by Chekhov in his first five years as a writer remained constant for the rest of his career,’ comments Alexander Chudakov. ‘There were preliminary expositions of the situation, no excursions into the characters’ past or similar introductions to the narrative – it always began instantly. It is the characters who create the action and there is no explanation or, more accurately, exposition, as to the causes of these actions... The avoidance of extended authorial comment, as well as the famous Chekhovian evocation of landscape, are also traceable to his early work.’

Chekhov’s development as a dramatist – his struggle, as Michael Frayn puts it, with the ‘recalcitrant medium of the theatre’ – was a gradual one. The plays themselves chart his developing ideas and techniques. His first real attempt at drama, The Fatherless, dating from 1877 and condemned as ‘utterly false’ by his brother Alexander, was entirely in the dominant tradition of the day. Melodramatic in tone, it featured a succession of over-wrought love scenes. Chekhov tried again ten years later, in 1877, with Ivanov. While the play as a whole was more accomplished it still relied too heavily on old theatrical devices, with hysterical scenes and contrived suspense at the end of each act. (For a more detailed discussion see IVANOV p21.)

In The Wood Demon (1889) – later revived as Uncle Vanya – Chekhov tried to dispense with all such old-fashioned devices, surprising himself with the results. ‘The play is awfully strange,’ he wrote to his old friend Suvorin. ‘I wonder that such... things should come from my pen.’ It is evident that at this stage Chekhov was still unsure of himself as a dramatist and not fully in command of his new techniques.

He was more successful with The Seagull (1896) several years later. While conceding the play ‘represents something entirely new in the history of the theatre’, Michael Frayn observes, ‘there are still one or two elements which Chekhov has not completely succeeded in accommodating to his new aesthetic:’ chiefly, the soliloquies. ‘[They] have the air of survivals from an earlier convention. Elsewhere in the play we are left, as we are in life, to work out for ourselves what people are thinking and feeling from what they actually choose or happen to say to each other... The abandonment of soliloquy is part of Chekhov’s developing naturalism.’ Accordingly, the last two plays dispense with them altogether.

‘There is another, even more fundamental, development over the course of the plays,’ continues Frayn, ‘and that is the way they are resolved. All Chekhov’s previous full-length plays culminate in the shooting of the central character.’ This is true of Ivanov and The Wood Demon and the device even survives into The Seagull, but with Uncle Vanya Chekhov finally broke with the convention. ‘The tragedy in these last plays is not death but the continuation of life; the pain of losing the past, with all the happiness and wealth of possibilities it contained, will
always be compounded by the pain of facing the future in all its emptiness.'

As both Sonya and Nina observe, at the end of *Uncle Vanya* and *The Seagull* respectively, the courage to endure is perhaps the most important quality in life.

‘It has since become commonplace to describe Chekhov’s approach to drama by the word “realistic”,’ comments Elsaveta Fen. ‘He has said himself that he wanted to depict “real life” as it is lived by ordinary people… The means by which he achieved this lifelike effect have been described as “untheatrical”. In the plays of his mature period he avoids exciting, dramatic situations; the most important events in the lives of his characters are communicated indirectly, as if in passing… The characters usually converse in an inconsequent, illogical way as most people do in everyday life. Stock situations and stock characters are carefully excluded, while ordinary trivial happenings are given poignancy and significance by the suggestion of a contrast between the apparent simplicity of things and the underlying complexity of feeling and situation.’

Though Elsaveta Fen’s perspective on Chekhov’s plays dates from half a century ago, before many of the celebrated English productions with which he reached full prominence in this country, her commentary on the writer’s work remains illuminating, if a little old-fashioned. ‘His plays and the majority of his short stories, despite their flashes of humour, impress one as infinitely sad, full as they are of
frustration, disappointed hopes, and unfulfilled longings.' She identifies a mood of ‘spiritual discouragement’ in Chekhov’s mature work. ‘The characters in these plays behave and talk as if they have lost their way, lost faith in themselves and in their own future, but are trying to persuade themselves that, in some indirect and general sense, they still matter, and that at least their children, or grandchildren, will somehow profit by their suffering and sacrifices, will achieve happiness in their lifetime.’

In reflecting on the themes common to Chekhov’s last four plays, Michael Frayn agrees with Fen. ‘In all the plays... something is being lost. All attempts at forward motion – all the brave forays into the world of work and endeavour – are counterbalanced by the undertow of regret; there is some loss that will never be made good, even if all the bright prophecies of the optimists were to come true tomorrow.’

While cautious to link the sentiments of characters and author, Frayn speculates on Chekhov’s own hopes for the future. ‘I suspect that for once we do get some insight into Chekhov himself here – not into his beliefs or opinions, certainly, but into some much deeper and less coherent feeling, some similarly poignant yearning for a future whose unattainability he was just beginning to grasp. It is a common experience for people in early middle age, which is where Chekhov was when he wrote these plays, to come over the brow of the hill, as it were, and to see for the first time that their life will have an end.’

Though Chekhov is frequently described as a ‘realist’, as Elisaveta Fen observes above, Konstantin Stanislavsky is eager to enumerate his differing styles. ‘His dramatic effects are most varied and often unconsciously employed... At times he is an impressionist, at times a symbolist; he is a “realist” where it is necessary, and occasionally almost a “naturalist”.’ Frayn notes the departure Chekhov made with The Cherry Orchard. ‘It is more dependent upon mood and symbolism than the first three plays, and some of the symbols – notably the breaking string – remain unexplained and oblique in their significance.’ Nicholas Wright highlights sound as an integral part of the texture of Chekhov’s plays. ‘Words come last – Chekhov is only incidentally a writer of dialogue.’

A contentious issue with regard to the last four plays, which remains unresolved, is whether they are to be regarded as comedies or tragedies. Chekhov himself designates The Seagull and The Cherry Orchard ‘A Comedy in Four Acts,’ as he notes on the title page of each play. The problem is most acute with the latter, as the tone is more ambiguous. The interpretation of the play led to open disagreement between Chekhov and Stanislavsky. The writer was insistent from the outset that The Cherry Orchard was ‘not a drama but a comedy, in places even a farce... The whole play will be cheerful and frivolous.’ Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, however, wanted to present it as ‘a serious drama of Russian life’ after everyone had cried during the play’s readthrough at the Moscow Arts Theatre. ‘I wept like a woman. I tried to stop myself, but I couldn’t,’ Stanislavsky told Chekhov afterwards. ‘I can hear you saying, “Excuse me, but it is in fact a farce...” No, for the plain man it is a tragedy.’

The debate continues but in a recent interview for the Guardian, the playwright Tom Stoppard, who has written the English version of IVANOV for the Donmar’s production at Wyndham’s Theatre, offered his perspective on the issue as to whether the plays are ultimately comedies. ‘It suddenly became perfectly clear to me that you could answer with another question: “Is life?” So it stops being a puzzle.’
It’s common for readers and audiences alike to look for a message in a novel or play, to ask what was meant or intended, but many authors resist this. ‘Once Chekhov was established as a serious writer the main criticism levelled at him was his lack of a central idea, a clear-cut outlook, a unifying theme,’ comments Alexander Chudakov. ‘This criticism was best expressed by Mikhailovsky, who wrote in 1890: “Chekhov treats everything equally: a man and his shadow, a bluebell and a suicide”… Particularly annoying was the total absence of an authorial view.’

Michael Frayn regards this as Chekhov’s greatest asset. ‘What finally enabled [him] to succeed, where so many other writers have failed… is something that goes very deep in his character: his elusiveness. It is the loss of their authorial voice that so often bewilders writers who turn from books to plays… Chekhov’s strength was that he had no authorial voice to lose. Various critics have remarked upon the “colourlessness” of his language. It is colourless in the same way that glass is colourless; we look straight through it without ever noticing it. We find ourselves seeing not Chekhov’s world, but the world of his characters. We inhabit them, as they inhabit themselves, completely and without surprise… In Chekhov’s works, in fact, we find ourselves inside everyone except Chekhov.’

Reflecting on Chekhov’s last play, regarded by many as his masterpiece, Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright consider its position – and that of its author – within the theatre of the last hundred years. ‘In some ways Chekhov… was the most prescient writer of the twentieth century, even though he died in 1904,’ they write in their book Changing Stages. ‘In The Cherry Orchard he offers a model to any writer attempting to write about private lives and public ideas that is humane, spare, poetic, polemical, and unsentimental. It’s the best play of the century.’
Chekhov and the Moscow Arts Theatre

Konstantin  In my view the modern theatre is an anthology of stereotypes and received ideas. When the curtain goes up, and there, in a room with three walls lit by artificial lighting because it’s always evening, these great artists, these high priests in the temple of art, demonstrate how people eat and drink, how they love and walk about and wear their suits; when out of these banal scenes and trite words they attempt to extract a moral – some small and simple moral with a hundred household uses; when under a thousand different disguises they keep serving me up the same old thing, the same old thing, the same old thing – then I run and I don’t stop running…

Sorin  We couldn’t do without the theatre.

Konstantin  What we need are new artistic forms. And if we don’t get new forms it would be better if we had nothing at all.\textsuperscript{53}

In this exchange from Act One of \textit{The Seagull} (1896), the young would-be writer Konstantin prophesies the theatre of the future. It’s difficult not to interpret his ideas as an expression of Chekhov’s own, who was himself engaged in a struggle with the ‘recalcitrant medium’ in an endeavour to find new forms.

If the writer may have experienced some difficulty, his audience certainly did, and the opening night of the original production at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St Petersburg was a disaster. The trouble started in Act One when Konstantin’s own play, an example of his much anticipated new artistic forms, was met with derisive laughter. The audience misunderstood its humorous intention, took it to be genuine Chekhov, as opposed to his characteristic self-parody, and expressed their dislike. By the third act, when Konstantin appears with his head in bandages, the jeers and guffaws were so loud the actors could hardly hear themselves speak. ‘The reviewers struggled for superlatives to describe “the grandiose scale” of the play’s failure, the “scandalous” and “unprecedented” nature of “such a dizzying flop, such a stunning fiasco”,’ writes Michael Frayn.\textsuperscript{54}

Chekhov did not witness the scenes in the auditorium. He had left the theatre after Act Two and wandered the streets of St Petersburg in great distress till the early hours of the morning. On returning to his hotel he asked his friend Suvorin not to turn on the light. ‘I don’t want to see anyone,’\textsuperscript{55} he commented, vowing never to write for the stage again. It seemed his new play had been rejected with the same vehemence as \textit{The Wood Demon} several years before. In that instance, the critics accused Chekhov of merely reproducing on the stage a ‘slice of life’ which did not even have the interest of being original or exciting.

Following \textit{The Seagull}’s disastrous reception Chekhov wrote to an old friend, ‘After the performance people assured me that I had depicted mere idiots, that my play was scenically clumsy, that it was silly, unintelligible, and even senseless, and so on, and so forth. You can imagine my state of mind – it was a failure such as I had never dreamed of! I felt humiliated and vexed, and I left Petersburg full of doubts of all kinds.’\textsuperscript{56} And to Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko he conceded, ‘Yes, my \textit{Seagull} was a huge failure. The theatre breathed malice, the air was compressed with hatred, and in accordance with the law of physics, I was thrown out of Petersburg like a bomb.’\textsuperscript{57}
This last correspondent, however, was to have a key role in revitalising the fortune of both the play and Chekhov’s career. In 1897 the novelist and playwright Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko met the actor-director Konstantin Stanislavsky for lunch in a Moscow restaurant. They stayed until breakfast the next day and by dawn had drawn up a manifesto for a new theatre company. Its principles were: ‘Overall policy and organisation will be determined by the needs of the text and the actors; each production will have specially designed sets, props and costumes; the performance will be an artistic experience, not a social occasion (entrance and exit rounds will be discouraged)’.

The two men shared Chekhov’s ideas about dramatic art in general and the needs of Russian theatre in particular. They too rejected the dominant style of acting which was turning the theatre into a dead art. They wanted the overly theatrical style to be more natural and truthful, every production a unity. They were against the tradition which focused the attention on a few ‘stars’ while leaving the other actors in the background and planned to achieve their effects by frequent, careful rehearsals and devoted team work led by a director. And so, in 1898, the Moscow Arts Theatre was established.

Nemirovich-Danchenko had known Chekhov for several years and regarded the failure of The Seagull at the Alexandrinsky Theatre as another example of the inadequacy of the existing theatrical scene. He was eager to demonstrate that a fresh and intelligent approach could make a success of it and wanted to include it in the MAT’s first repertoire. First, though, he had to convince both Chekhov and Stanislavsky - the one anxious about the repetition of failure, the other not entirely convinced of the play’s qualities. Eventually both agreed and The Seagull went into rehearsal.

The play about which Chekhov and Stanislavsky felt so doubtful was to prove pivotal in the destiny of the MAT. Its opening productions had either failed or been banned and now the fate of the newly-founded theatre company depended solely upon the success of The Seagull. Chekhov’s sister Maria feared that another failure might have a serious effect on her brother’s health and the producers even considered abandoning the production. Nemirovich-Danchenko, however, took the decision to go ahead.

Stanislavsky describes what happened on the opening night, at the end of Act One: ‘We had evidently flopped. The curtain came down in the silence of a tomb. The actors huddled fearfully together and listened to the audience. It was as quiet as the grave. Heads emerged from the wings as the stage staff listened as well. Silence. Someone started to cry. Knipper [Chekhov’s wife-to-be, Olga, playing Arkadina] was holding back hysterical sobs. We went offstage in silence. At that moment the audience gave a kind of moan and burst into applause. We rushed to take a curtain.’

On the insistence of the audience a telegram was sent to Chekhov in Yalta congratulating him and assuring him of a great success. It now seemed that theatre audiences were ready to appreciate Chekhov’s new kind of play and the MAT’s new approach to presenting it. Recognising its debt to the writer and the decisive role The Seagull played in its destiny, the MAT adopted the bird as its permanent emblem. In the years that followed, the theatre became the chief exponent of Chekhov’s work, producing all his subsequent plays. Despite the occasional disagreement regarding aspects of their interpretation, a firm friendship developed between Chekhov and the MAT. When Nemirovich-Danchenko wrote to him in 1899 complaining about the demands of theatrical life, Chekhov replied, ‘Oh, do not get tired, do not cool off! The Art Theatre will provide
the best pages of the history – when it is written – of the modern Russian theatre. Your theatre should be your pride, and it is the only theatre I love.”

In his essay ‘Chekhov at the Moscow Arts Theatre’, the current Associate Artistic Director of the MAT, Anatoly Smeliansky, tells the tale of the writer’s relationship with the theatre company. ‘It is the story of how Chekhov’s theatre came into being and Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko’s struggle to master the poetics of his drama… It is the struggle of the deep divisions between theatre and dramatist involving the most fundamental questions concerning the art of theatre: the precise genre of Chekhov’s plays; his view of character and his attitude towards the whole historical development of Russia itself.’

Smeliansky highlights the lasting legacy of the collaboration. ‘The early MAT revitalised the art of acting, made a cult of the pause, the subtext and the constant interaction of characters. There emerged the concept of the ensemble and a psychological style of acting. The productions of Chekhov at the MAT gave birth to a new Russian audience, shaping its tastes and expectations.’
Written in 1887, *Ivanov* is Chekhov’s first full-length, and seriously intended, play. Rarely staged, it occupies an unusual place within the writer’s work and traditionally isn’t considered to be among his best. Chekhov wrote it, allegedly in ten days, following a suggestion by the owner of the Korsh Theatre in Moscow. The theatre specialised in light comedy and, according to Chekhov’s sister Maria, the manager made his proposal somewhat casually during a conversation in the foyer. Due to Chekhov’s reputation, he expected a comedy, but what Chekhov delivered was far from humorous - the story of a man in turmoil which ends in tragedy. Despite this, *Ivanov* was accepted, Chekhov paid a thousand roubles and the play went into rehearsals shortly after.

At the time, Chekhov was developing very definite ideas about what dramatic art ought to be. He told his friends and associates that the theatre should ‘show life and men as they are, and not as they would look if you put them on stilts’. He was no longer indifferent to the way in which his plays were produced and wanted *Ivanov* staged according to his own ideals. He found it virtually impossible, however, to convey his ideas to the cast. ‘The actors do not understand, talk nonsense, don’t take parts they should,’ he wrote to his brother Alexander. There were just four rehearsals instead of the promised ten and by the opening night only two of the cast knew their parts. The rest got through, according to Chekhov, ‘by prompter and inner conviction’.

The reviews were decidedly mixed. So were the reactions of the first night audience, with hissing, stamping and ‘absolute carnage’ up in the gallery. Chekhov, though, gives a contradictory - and extremely humorous - account of the
event in a long letter to Alexander. ‘I’ll describe it all in order,’ he wrote. ‘Act One. I am behind the scenes in a tiny box like a prisoner’s cell. Our family are trembling in a box on the pit-tier. Against all expectation, I am cool and feel no excitement. The actors are excited and tense, and cross themselves. The curtain goes up. Enter the actor bénéficiare. He is at once presented with a bouquet, and as he doesn’t know his part, I do not recognize his first remarks as my own. Kisseliovsky, on whom I placed great hopes, doesn’t say a single phrase correctly. Literally, not a single one. He speaks his own. In spite of this and of the producer’s blunders, the first act is a great success. Many calls.

‘Act Two. A crowd of people on the stage. Visitors. The actors don’t know their parts, they make a mess of the scene, talk nonsense. Every word cuts me like a knife in my back. But – O Muse! – this act is also a success. All the actors are called; I, too, am called twice. I am congratulated on the success.’ The letter, however, ends on a note of disappointment. ‘On the whole I feel fatigued and annoyed. Disgusted – although the play had a solid success.’
Once the initial excitement caused by Ivanov subsided, Chekhov was left with mixed feelings about the play and his own abilities. He was not a complacent writer, and self-doubt constantly beset him. As soon as he saw his work on stage he felt the urge to make alterations, so that the final version of Ivanov was very different to the one presented at the Korsh Theatre. The play was produced again at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St Petersburg in 1889 and was favourably reviewed, yet its success may have been due, in part, to those elements which Chekhov was soon to discard in favour of new techniques.

‘Ivanov shows the transition from a classical... dramaturgy to a new one, characterised by ellipsis, allusion and subtext,’ observes academic Patrice Pavis. ‘The old dramaturgy of the well-made play, the heir of classical theatre, is still solid and visible: the story can be read easily, the numerous characters are psychologically and socially characterised and the conflicts are well defined. The dramatic action, which is still very externalised and taut, climaxes at the end of every act, with a crescendo within each act and from one to the next, right up to the final conventional suicide.’

The play’s reliance on old theatrical devices coupled with its occasionally melodramatic tone and contrived suspense – the various coups de théâtre which punctuate the end of each act – have been discussed elsewhere, but taken as a precursor to the later plays, Ivanov is pivotal in Chekhov’s career. ‘If one considers the play as an open-cast quarry from which all his dramatic works will be extracted,’ comments Pavis, ‘one is amazed by the richness of this discovery: all the ingredients are offered up with complete openness.’

‘The famous thing about this play is that there are the four big Chekhov plays and then there’s Ivanov and that it’s somehow different,’ observes Ben Woolf, Associate Director of the Domar production of IVANOV at the Wyndhams. ‘One of Tom Stoppard’s concerns was to question that, to say, “Why has Ivanov been separated?” It’s seen as something that Chekhov wrote very quickly and the initial response wasn’t entirely positive. It’s a major play and I think for Tom the main thing is that he’s approached it with the seriousness of translating a mature piece. It’s a fleshed-out story, it works. He hasn’t tried to colour it in a way that maybe other translations of it have tended to. Tom doesn’t hold it to be different from the other Chekhov plays. He sees the thing absolutely as part of that writer’s work.’
Inside the Rehearsal Room

It’s early August 2008 and after two years in the planning the Donmar Warehouse is about to embark on its year-long West End season at Wyndham’s Theatre. Today is the first day of rehearsals for the inaugural production, Anton Chekhov’s IVANOV in a new version by Tom Stoppard, and the cast and creative team are joined in the rehearsal room by personnel from both the Donmar and Wyndham’s for the traditional ‘Meet and Greet’. Over thirty people gather inside the charged space, its atmosphere a mixture of anticipation and excitement.

Artistic Director Michael Grandage opens the proceedings by welcoming everyone and talking a little about the background to the forthcoming season. Producer Sir Cameron Mackintosh, owner of Wyndham’s, has fully refurbished the theatre and allowed the Donmar to bring to it their ‘very personal approach to programming plays and welcoming audiences’. Michael was keen for the Donmar to retain its identity at Wyndham’s and offer tickets at the same affordable prices. The season, he explains, has been made possible, in part, by the commitment made over a year ago by four remarkable actors: Kenneth Branagh, Derek Jacobi, Judi Dench and Jude Law.

Michael is also quick to praise the cast and creative team who have been assembled to mount this production, talking about them with pride and enthusiasm. ‘We’re also working with two of the greatest writers who’ve ever written for the stage,’ he adds, ‘one very dead, the other very much alive...’ Here he gestures towards Tom Stoppard standing on the far side of the room. Keen to get on, Michael explains he doesn’t intend to show everyone the model box today.
as there are too many people. Instead, they’ll be invited back over the coming weeks to visit rehearsals. And with that everyone, except the cast and creative team, is ushered out of the room.

Although today might be the first day of rehearsals, in reality the work on this production began many months before. A week ago the creative team, including Michael, gathered in the auditorium at the Donmar for the first of several production meetings which will continue throughout the rehearsal period. The meeting was chaired by Patrick Molony, the Production Manager, whose responsibility it is to ensure all elements of the production – from wardrobe to sound – run to schedule and within budget. Everyone introduces themselves and briefly outlines their roles and responsibilities.

The meeting begins with a discussion about ‘rehearsal needs’, in particular furniture. There is much debate about the dimensions of one item, the Ottoman, and the designer Christopher Oram – designing all four productions at Wyndham’s – explains that as this is a ‘make’ (something to be built) it can effectively be made to order. The ‘mark-up’ on the rehearsal room floor also needs to be done. This is essentially an outline of the set indicating entrances, exits and other permanent features using different coloured electrical tape. Michael also requests some flats (temporary walls) to help create a confined space in Act Three. In addition, he asks for a black cloth to be ‘rigged’ (hung) in the rehearsal room to separate the entrance from the acting space. Michael wants to have the model box in rehearsals for most of the first week before returning it to Christopher’s workshop. Referring to several A3 colour prints of the box he notes that the footprint of the Wyndham’s stage is roughly the same as the Donmar’s.

Intending to work from 10.30am till 6pm everyday, Michael then outlines his plans for the rehearsal period. He aims to block all four acts in the first week and wants a runthrough at the end of week five. Looking at the production schedule he would also like to ‘reserve the right’ to replace the fifth technical rehearsal at the Theatre with a dress run. He’ll need to liaise with Howard Jepson, the Company Manager who is responsible for the cast’s welfare, if he wants to call the actors for any additional rehearsals. The first week, though, Michael wants for himself. While appreciating the need to allow the ‘covers’ (understudies) to observe rehearsals, his policy is to have only the actors involved in a scene in the room.

The larger context in which this production exists, and indeed the Donmar’s entire West End season, is highlighted when the creative team is informed that Sir Cameron Mackintosh wants the ‘picture frame’ bordering the proscenium arch to remain in place. However, Michael wants a black ‘tab’ (cloth) to fly in and out at the front of the stage. There follows a lengthy discussion between various departments, particularly design and lighting, as to whether there is any space in the rig to accommodate this. Patrick offers a black border instead of a tab as one solution. Michael remains convinced, however, that a tab coming in is necessary to ‘button’ the end of an act – ‘When a light snap isn’t enough’.

This leads to a talk about the ‘iron’ (iron curtain) which, as the name suggests, is essentially a metal screen fitted in all proscenium arch theatres to prevent the spread of fire. Different councils have different rules and regulations regarding health and safety in theatres; the regulations governing Wyndham’s require the iron to lower in less than 30 seconds. Various questions follow: Is the iron in or out as the audience enter the auditorium? How fast does it lift? What energy does it create? If it’s in, comments Paule Constable, the Lighting Designer, ‘It’s quite consciously declaring the theatre mechanics.’ Michael agrees. ‘And our season’, he reflects.
Next, the design is discussed and whether the front row of seats might need to be removed to accommodate the set. This idea is quickly dismissed as it would drastically alter the auditorium’s seating capacity. The season is dependent upon every single ticket sale and, consequently, every single seat. The flown elements of the set are talked about next. Whether something has to be moved on stage affects every detail of its design, including the materials from which it is constructed. For example, as the windows have to fly in and out, they have to be made of polycarbonate instead of glass to prevent any risk of shattering. This leads to a practical question: who will work the hoists to bring in the flats? Theatre is all about teamwork and Greg Shimmin, the Stage Manager, dutifully volunteers.

Paule tells the team that the lighting plan is ‘ninety per cent ready’, which is unusual before the start of rehearsals. It doesn’t include any footlights but there will be several ‘pracs’ (practicals or working lights) on set plus naked flames. Every technical element must be considered within the overall design and Adam Cork, the Sound Designer, wonders where the speakers will be positioned? They need to have sufficient space around them in order for the sound to reverberate. This is something he and Christopher Oram will have to discuss. It is agreed, however, that the DSM (Deputy Stage Manager) will operate the sound desk.

There follows a brief discussion about wardrobe and wigs. Most of the cast require a hairpiece and some of the men will need to grow either a moustache or beard. The first costume fittings are scheduled to take place in the second week of rehearsals. Finally, a date is set for the next production meeting in a fortnight’s time.

Following the ‘Meet and Greet’, I first visit rehearsals towards the end of the second week. A table inside the rehearsal room is covered in books, maps and photographs relating to Russia and the world of the play. There are also CDs containing recordings of Russian pronunciations of both peoples’ and place names.

Today Michael is attempting to run the whole of Act Four with the entire company present. The scene takes place on Ivanov and Sasha’s wedding day and
requires everyone on stage. ‘Guests can be heard and seen coming and going in the background,’ read the opening stage directions (p.54). The company gathers upstage and begins to improvise general conversation. ‘No anachronistic comments,’ says Michael, ‘I think I just heard someone mention Marks and Spencer’s!’ The cast continues. ‘That’s a good level of chat,’ he observes, ‘animated and level enough.’

He focuses on the scene between Sasha and her father, Lebedev, where she confesses her concerns regarding her impending marriage. It’s a highly emotional exchange in which the characters reveal their innermost thoughts while trying not to be overheard by the inquisitive wedding guests. After a while Michael stops and addresses the company. ‘I’m going to get rid of you all for a minute to work on this scene.’ The cast are dispatched to other rooms nearby to rehearse and run lines while Andrea Riseborough and Kevin R. McNally, who play Sasha and Lebedev, remain behind.

Going back to the beginning of the scene, when Lebedev enters with Sasha and ejects Lvov and Kosykh from the room, Kevin suggests the guests upstage close the French windows so as not to overhear. ‘Is that because you think closing the door is wrong?’ asks Michael. ‘There’s something about the whole top of this scene where Lebedev doesn’t know how private to be,’ he reflects. ‘If you close the doors it might suggest you’re too much in control.’

Sitting Sasha down, Lebedev struggles to relay the information forced on him by his wife concerning their daughter’s dowry. Eventually Sasha pleads with her father to ‘get on with it’ (p.56). ‘He’s having trouble getting on with it,’ observes Michael, ‘you need to help him. I think there needs to be a level of inquisitiveness from Sasha here. This is an unusual situation.’ Occasionally, Michael adjusts the actors’ tone and emphasis – ‘Focus on the whole line… Just give it to him a little bit more’ – or sets a specific piece of blocking – ‘Stand up on that line and cross downstage left… That’s a good strong position on the diagonal.’ His chief concern at this point in rehearsals, however, is exploring the dynamics of the scene. ‘I’m not so worried about the staging. Let’s get the emotion right first.’

They continue, exploring Lebedev’s exasperation with both his wife and daughter. The stage direction describes him as ‘exploding with rage’ (p.56) as he launches into his tirade about being caught between the two. ‘What I need to do is come in here with my balls in tatters and say, “I don’t give a crap!”’ suggests Kevin. ‘The scene clearly divides into two parts,’ says Michael. ‘The only element I’m not quite getting tonally is Lebedev’s switch into, “But I don’t like what’s going on.” What does it come out of?’ After some discussion, he and Kevin agree that Sasha’s father objects to having to force his wife’s agenda on their daughter. Once that’s out of the way he can reveal his own agenda: he doesn’t agree with the wedding.

Lebedev’s confession is followed immediately by Sasha’s: ‘I’ve had the same feeling… that something isn’t right. It’s true, isn’t it? If only you knew how unhappy I am. It’s horrible’ (p.57). (The word ‘unhappy’ is a recent substitution made by Tom Stoppard, replacing the previous and anachronistic use of ‘depressed’.) Reflecting on this moment, Michael comments, ‘It’s getting to that beautiful place with Chekhov where Sasha says, “I don’t know what to do either!”’ However, by the end of the scene she wants to forget her fears: ‘I don’t want to talk about it. I told you something I didn’t even want to admit to myself. Please don’t tell anybody else’ (p.58). ‘Don’t play it as an exit line,’ Michael tells Andrea, ‘keep it alive till the end of the sentence.’ The question remains, where does Sasha go?
Just before the Count’s entrance, through which he breaks up the scene, Lebedev declares his utter confusion: ‘I’m lost. Either I’m getting stupid or everyone else is getting cleverer, but I’m damned if I understand anything anymore’ (p.58). ‘What’s the house style?’ asks Kevin with regard to this line. ‘Direct address?’ While saying yes, Michael has some misgivings. ‘It’s potentially damaging to have direct address here.’

It’s been a tiring but rewarding rehearsal and afterwards the rest of the company are called back into the room. Michael discusses the unscheduled break in rehearsals. ‘I realise I’m going to have to do more work out of sequence,’ he explains. ‘The nature of this play means I need the cast on standby most of the time. I need to do these small scenes first and then fill in the background, but I don’t want to do company scenes as an add-on because they’ll look like an add-on.’ Having said he doesn’t intend to put the acts together until the fifth week of rehearsals, Michael brings the day’s work to a close. ‘I feel in a positive place at the end of week two,’ he comments.
I return to rehearsals two weeks later during week four. Today the company is looking at Act Two, another large ensemble scene set at the Lebedevs – various guests gather for a party to celebrate Sasha’s birthday. When I arrive, Associate Director Ben Woolf is leading an informal rehearsal over lunch, teaching several of the actors how to play cards for the scene above. The game is organised in such a way as to ensure a certain outcome, a particular winner.

Back in the rehearsal room half an hour later, Michael picks up the act from Ivanov and the Count’s entrance. What was a dull and dreary social occasion – ‘a party that isn’t working’ read the opening stage directions (p.16) – is suddenly transformed by the energetic Count, excited to be out in public after many weeks of confinement. Again Michael highlights the important role played by the company in this scene, asking the actors to focus on their individual actions whilst being aware of – and reacting to – what’s going on around them. ‘I’d prefer for people to be totally engaged as the room hums a bit more,’ he says and notes the ‘Chekhovian spirit’ of the scene: ‘A group of actors in a naturalistic state, but every actor in the bones of the individual.’ He talks with great enthusiasm. ‘With all the other Chekhov plays there are a set of guidelines as to how to do them. But with the lesser known ones, like Ivanov, there aren’t any. That’s what excites me about this play. There’s a roomful of people on stage who aren’t just waiting for the next cue.’

When Lebedev starts to sing, with an impromptu accompaniment by Ivanov on guitar, the atmosphere of the scene changes. The mood lightens and the guests’ spirits lift. ‘The reaction should be more of a smattering,’ suggests Michael, ‘something vocal throughout the room.’ One line that has caused much debate is Ivanov’s confirmation, in response to Zinaida’s enquiries, of his wife’s deteriorating health: ‘The doctor told me today it’s definitely tuberculosis’ (p.25). It makes him appear rather unfeeling when, as an audience, we’re meant to have some sympathy for his situation. The act has already established that the other characters don’t particularly like Anna, suggests Ben, so how should they react? Do they hear this statement or is it a private moment between Ivanov and Zinaida? Are the guests distracted, engaged in conversation, while the pair play this downstage, or does everyone hear and react among themselves? Michael has decided the line should be delivered more to the room. ‘He just lets it out.’

The scene continues through the Count’s tirade against the absent Lvov, Michael noting they’ll add ‘colour and grace notes’ to these speeches later, to Borkin’s dramatic entrance which whips the crowd up into a near frenzy. Left alone afterwards, Zinaida comments to her husband: ‘That’s my kind of man – a young fellow who’s hardly here a minute and he’s cheered everyone up’ (p.28). Michael discusses the line with actress Sylvestra Le Touzel. ‘It can’t be played as, “Well, what do you think about that for a party?”’ he says, ‘you’re in the middle of it.’ Lebedev argues with his mean-spirited wife, insisting they feed their guests. ‘They’ve just gone outside,’ says Michael, ‘they’re imminent and dangerous. It heats your argument.’

He then focuses on the short scene between Ivanov and Sasha in which she finally reveals her true feelings for him: ‘You should be with someone who loves you and understands you. Only love can save you’ (p.29). ‘Land that last line on him,’ says Michael. Kenneth Branagh asks him if his response is the ‘right pitch’, questioning the amount of emphasis needed to establish the new idea of Ivanov being with Sasha. Michael likes his colouring of the speech – ‘What are you talking about, Sasha! A love affair is all I need, a bedraggled old crosspatch like me’ (p.29) – ‘You’re reasserting a paternal tone,’ he says to Kenneth.) Ivanov tries to
dissuade Sasha from her thoughts: ‘Your only hope is for some passing lieutenant or student to steal you and take you away’ (p.30). ‘You half want it, but there’s a sprinkling of you that doesn’t,’ observes Michael. ‘You want her to say, “I want you!” but she doesn’t get the chance.’ At this point Zinaida re-enters and Michael asks Andrea to look at Sylvestra so Ken can follow her eye line and move into the next scene.

Michael continues to work through the act till the end. He tidies up some stage business where Kosykh and Avdotya – still at odds over the recent card game – almost collide with one another. He notes with satisfaction that finding a solution to an earlier piece of staging, in this instance Avdotya’s last exit, resolves later ones. Next, Michael suggests that Anna and Lvov’s exchange ‘might be a nice moment of calm’, a brief interlude in an otherwise frenetic act. And finally when Borkin and the Count nearly succeed in wooing the widow Babakina, Michael asks Lorcan Cranitch, playing Borkin, to find an ‘1887 equivalent’ to a ‘thumbs up’ sign. He then attempts to run the act from Ivanov and the Count’s entrance to the end. ‘Try not to let too much catch you out,’ he tells the company, saying they need to know the ‘internal choreography’ of the play – what’s heard, what’s not. During the run it’s interesting for me to observe small details, from Kenneth Branagh and Andrea Riseborough marking their offstage interaction, to the fact that both Ken and Gina McKee, playing Anna, wear pads to protect their knees when collapsing
on stage. At the end of the runthrough Michael checks that the guests at the party know which lines are private and which are to the room. ‘That was a fantastic rehearsal; we conquered a lot,’ he tells everyone. ‘Now hold onto that and try and remember everything. That took an amazing stride forward.’

I return the following week, which is week five. There are more people in the rehearsal room now as fresh elements of the production begin to be added, in particular Adam Cork’s impressive sound design. The company, plus crew, are practising scene changes – from Act Three to Four – attempting to synchronise the movement with the music. Whenever there’s a break in rehearsals, Michael talks one-on-one with individual actors, giving them specific notes.

Stage management have reset and Michael then runs the act from the top, starting with Lvov’s entrance. ‘Do you not think you should look up there to tell the story?’ Michael asks actor Tom Hiddleston, in terms of orientating the audience. At the end of Lvov’s speech, in which he considers challenging Ivanov to a duel, Michael encourages Tom to continue to engage with the audience. ‘There’s no need to be in animated suspension.’

Next, Kosykh, played by James Tucker, enters and launches into yet another account of a disastrous card game. ‘Do that from the back on an upstage diagonal,’ says Michael with regard to his opening lines. ‘Where are you going to?’ he asks James. ‘You need to come on directionally in the way you’re going to go off.’ He reminds Kosykh to ‘make sure you have more to say’ before being interrupted by Lvov. Of Kosykh’s line – ‘They’re trying to talk sense into Zyuzyshka. She’s having a weeping fit’ (p.54) – Michael requests, ‘Just a flicker of scandal in there, if you please.’

When Babakina comes on, the stage directions read ‘Kosykh prods her waist with his finger and laughs out loud’ (p.55) before continuing to tease and flirt with her. ‘Why does he do that?’ asks James. ‘Has there been some level of intimacy between us?’ Michael considers this. ‘I want you to explore that,’ he says. ‘I think there’s something there we can definitely play: “Oh come on, Miss Hoity-Toity!”’

Lvov then asks Kosykh for his opinion of Ivanov: ‘Is he a good person?’ (p.55) ‘Don’t do that as a new thought,’ Michael says to Tom, before turning his attention to James: ‘This hasn’t happened before – Kosykh being asked his opinion. He has to take on a position of responsibility. I think it gives you a new colour to play with. I feel that’s the journey he’s on.’

There follows the scene between Lebedev and Sasha (see previous rehearsal) and afterwards Michael praises both Kevin and Andrea on their performances. He asks the company, as guests gather at the reception, to react more to Lebedev’s outburst, to give something for Sasha to act against later. Kevin is curious to know if the exchange between Lebedev and his daughter comes to an end before the Count enters or whether he should try and persevere.

On the Count’s entrance Michael directs actor Malcolm Sinclair to give his first line, ‘To hell with everybody’ (p.58), to Lebedev – ‘To help you pull focus.’ He looks at the sense of the following lines:

Shabelsky  To hell with everybody, me included. It’s an absolute disgrace.
Lebedev  What is?
Shabelsky  No, I mean it…

‘I can’t see what the journey is there,’ Michael says to the Count. ‘I think you just carry on.’ Having stopped, Malcolm reflects on the beginning of the scene – ‘I
I don’t know if I’m quite clear on what I’m doing.’ Michael pauses to consider this. ‘I think one of the things Chekhov’s trying to do with the Count is to show the decline of a man in a year,’ he replies. ‘For the first time in three acts he’s weary.’

Looking at the speech that follows, Michael encourages Malcolm to emphasise the line ‘I’m going to go ahead with it’ (p.58), meaning the Count’s intention to marry Babakina – ‘That’s a crucial line.’

The following scene, ending with five of the characters crying on stage, is a real challenge for the company who have to find the right balance of humour and pathos. Too much of either and the act could descend into farce or melodrama.

‘It’s a phenomenally difficult scene to do technically,’ concedes Michael. He encourages the actors to justify their actions. ‘Have you a reason why you burst into tears?’ he asks Andrea. Some of the actors discuss the techniques they use to help them cry, which include thinking of sad events from their own life.

When Babakina enters in search of the Count, Michael asks actress Lucy Briers to link the words ‘cavalier’ and ‘Count’ in her line, ‘Where’s my cavalier got to? Count, how could you leave me alone!’ (p.59) He suggests she sit on his lap at this point. Lucy thinks this a good idea – ‘It doubles her humiliation and rejection when the Count pushes her off.’ Michael asks her to move closer to the Count when crying to mirror Sasha and Zinaida in similar distress on the opposite side of the stage.

Afterwards Michael praises the cast on their performance, particularly the crying, although he warns them not to wail over one another’s lines. Again they must find a balance. ‘The note is modulate away but don’t lose the crying,’ he concludes. Reviewing the scene, he comments, ‘The only other thing I want to add is the guests peering at the windows.’
Michael moves on to Ivanov’s entrance. ‘I’d like you to tell the story of getting here and then taking in the room,’ he tells Ken. ‘That’s what the audience need – us watching a room full of people crying, then seeing you watch a room full of people crying.’ Michael encourages him to let the energy of his entrance drive the scene forward. ‘I don’t think you should go back into yourself as Ivanov.’ The despairing man implores Lebedev to be left alone with Sasha. ‘You’re entitled to any amount of improvisation you need,’ Michael tells Kevin as he begins ushering guests out of the room. ‘When those doors are closed,’ he explains to Ken and Andrea, ‘there will be a real sense that they are out there and you are alone in here.’ Michael turns his attention briefly to the company upstage. ‘Let the scene play out for about a page before you drift away.’ Later this changes to Lebedev shooing them off as he instructs them all to get to church.

Some blocking needs to be altered for practical reasons. Andrea’s concerned that she can see the gun when Ivanov takes it from his pocket. Kevin suggests he tap on the door to get Sasha’s attention, thereby distracting her. ‘Are you sure that’s helpful?’ asks Michael. Instead, he tells Andrea to bury her head in her hands which solves the problem.

The rehearsal ends with a discussion about the prevailing mood of Act Four. Is there the pressure of a clock ticking? Who exactly is waiting at the church? ‘What did Chekhov mean?’ asks Michael. ‘Ultimately, this is about us interpreting the script with what we know has to go on.’ Drawing the rehearsal to a close he talks a little about the runthroughs planned for later in the week. ‘A runthrough for me is another chance to rehearse the play; it’s a continuation of the rehearsal process.’ He encourages the actors not to waste each run but use it instead to progress and try new things, possibly something leftfield. ‘If there’s anything unconquered,’ he says, ‘this is the week to raise it.’ Michael wants the company to know the piece intimately. ‘I want you to feel the rhythm of the play in your blood, across all four acts.’

I return to rehearsals for the last time a few days later. It’s Friday afternoon and this is the company’s last runthrough before moving to the theatre next week for technical and dress rehearsals. There are about twenty people in the audience, including backstage crew and Donmar and Wyndham’s personnel. Again the atmosphere is charged as everyone prepares for this most intimate of performances. The company give their all and afterwards there is a stunned silence from the audience before they break into appreciative applause. For the past two and a half hours we have been completely transported, captivated by the story of a man whose inner turmoil affects the lives of those closest to him. All this is achieved by a cast of eighteen with rudimentary set, costumes and props under working lights. One can only imagine how powerful the production will be once all the other elements are added.

The following week I visit Wyndham’s to see the technical rehearsals in progress. Sitting at lighting and sound desks temporarily positioned in the auditorium are Paule Constable and Adam Cork, plus various technicians and members of stage management. They all communicate with one another via ‘cans’ (headphones) as they attempt to cue the lights, sound and black cloth to work in sync with one another. DSM Nicole Walker is responsible for ‘calling the show’ – the LX (lighting) and FX (sound) cues – and making sure everything happens on time. Seconds are discussed for light and sound fades or the timing of the cloth as it comes in and out – ‘Half a beat less,’ says Michael. Every last detail is considered.
Despite the focused activity of the technical departments there’s a slow, methodical pace to the proceedings. It’s meticulous work, requiring a lot of patience, as lights are ‘plotted’ (programmed into the lighting desk). When they’re not on stage or having costumes and wigs adjusted, the actors sit in the auditorium getting a feel for the space. It’s rather like being on a film set – a lot of waiting around.

Michael sits huddled at the back of the Stalls with Tom Stoppard, swapping notes. He gives the cast and crew instructions using a microphone. ‘And just hold it there for the lighting,’ he tells the actors on stage while lanterns are focused and plotted into the desk. ‘Thank you, here we go…’ indicates that they’re ready to continue. When giving the cast notes on their performance Michael goes up on stage and talks to them privately, recalling the intimacy of the rehearsal room. This is valuable time for the actors as they get used to the set and rehearse in situ.
Two days later and it’s the first preview, the company and production’s first time before a real audience. All the elements should be in place, although the previews are an opportunity for last-minute changes. Elements such as the script, blocking and lighting states may all be altered before the opening night a few days later when the press will be invited to review the production. Eight hundred people walk through Wyndham’s lavishly decorated foyer to take their seats in the auditorium. There is a definite air of anticipation. The Donmar and Wyndham’s personnel sit nervously, – having worked towards this moment for two years. The house lights dim and the black cloth rises to reveal an agitated Ivanov sitting alone on his country estate...

The performance is a success, testament to many weeks and months hard work, and passes with no apparent problems. I note some changes to the blocking, particularly during the final moments of the play, but the production has grown again since I saw it last in the rehearsal room. As the audience leaves they talk excitedly amongst themselves, praising the director and actors alike. With rumours of a sell-out run, IVANOV’s future looks promising. Afterwards, the tired but relieved-looking company gathers in the bar. ‘It’s so good to get the first performance under your belt,’ says Tom Hiddleston. In their relentless pursuit of perfection no doubt there’s more work over the coming days for this talented cast and crew, but for now they and the Donmar and Wyndham’s personnel can enjoy their achievement – tonight, IVANOV and the Donmar’s West End season finally became a reality.
An interview with Ben Woolf, Associate Director of IVANOV

The cast and creative team are now at the end of the second week of rehearsals; can you give me a brief outline of what’s happened so far?

Ben: Starting on day one, after the ‘Meet and Greet’, we had a session with the designer Christopher Oram. He showed us the model box of the set and talked a little about how he, Michael and Paule Constable, the Lighting Designer, conceived the design and what they hoped to achieve with it. He also showed us how the different scenes were formed and how various parts of the scenery flew in and out.

Then we had a very interesting talk from Tom Stoppard who explained why he’d chosen to translate the play and, without becoming too prescriptive, what was important about it. The famous thing about this play is that there are the four big Chekhov plays and then there’s Ivanov, which is treated as somehow different. One of Tom’s concerns was to question that, to say, ‘Why is it that this has been separated?’ It’s seen as something that Chekhov wrote very quickly and the initial response wasn’t entirely positive.

It’s a major play and I think for Tom the main thing is that he’s approached it with the seriousness of translating a mature piece. It’s a fleshed-out story; it works. He hasn’t tried to colour it in a way that maybe other translations of it have tended to. Tom doesn’t hold it to be different from the other Chekhov plays. He sees the thing absolutely as part of that writer’s work. Having talked about the play he then answered specific questions from the company. The discussion was very fluid in terms of people speaking and raising issues.

After that, and this is what’s remarkable about the way Michael works, we started rehearsing Act One, Scene One. So straight away we were up on our feet and cast who weren’t involved in the scene left and we started rehearsing from the top.

The idea was to sketch the journey through the play so that in a very literal, physical sense we started to get an idea of the shape of the play and the storytelling aspects to it. Through the first week we dealt with each act pretty much day by day, so that by the end of Friday we had actually touched on everything in the play. That meant this week we were free to go back and check that the shape of the play worked, given the discoveries we’d made later, and have much more intense, detailed conversations.

Having observed Michael in rehearsals before, I’ve noticed he is keen to get through the whole play in the first week of rehearsals, that must mean working at quite a pace. Is there much time for the actors to stop and question?

Ben: There’s absolutely time for that and we set this Wednesday aside for questioning. Obviously there’s always a schedule and you have to cover a certain amount of work in a week, everyone’s aware of that, but there is time for discussion. One of the things that’s remarkable about this company is their desire to question, to interrogate the script – ‘What’s going on in this scene? Why does the character say that specific line?’ – all the way down to – ‘Why do I stand up now? Why do I look over there? What is it that shifts the focus?’
One of the things we’ve discovered is that it’s really useful to flesh things out by talking about what informed the play, even in quite obtuse ways. I think we’ve realised that Anton Chekhov is a master of manipulating back story and we’re acknowledging the place that has in the plays he creates.

*Presumably, though, each of the actors has their own approach to character?*

**Ben:** Yes, and that’s part of Michael’s skill: to be able to bring together all those different types of talent, to find the right combination of people in the first place and then to create a space in which they can all work together without their varying approaches doing anything other than supporting one another, so that different people’s creative processes mesh in the right way and are given the space to breathe.

*What are some of the discoveries the company has made so far about the play?*

**Ben:** One of the wonderful things about the way this play has been rehearsed is that we haven’t approached it from an academic perspective. We haven’t said, ‘The notion of the aside is something that reflects a certain type of play, a melodrama….‘ Every moment of rehearsals has been about asking, ‘How does this problem best get solved?’ If your character suddenly turns to the audience, why are they turning to the audience? How does that not interfere with the reality of the moment they’re playing?
Something we still haven’t settled on is whether it’s an internalised thing, that they’re commenting on their own feelings, and how you can shade that for a contemporary audience in a way that doesn’t disrupt the drama. The way the company is approaching the play is very naturalistic, concentrating on the reality of their actions, and that could be undermined by breaking out to suddenly speak to the audience. The way we’re finding the asides is that they work better, and more in keeping with the tone of the production, when they’re said out of internalised feelings – when characters suddenly express emotions that they can’t hold inside.

Has the company agreed on an approach to the asides?

**Ben:** I think it’s something we’re still playing around with. The actors are really trying to find a way of making it work so there isn’t an uncomfortable moment where they say, ‘And now I’m going to talk to Row C.’ I have the feeling that certain asides could actually be things people say to themselves and others almost certainly have to be out to the audience. So probably some of the asides will be coloured one way and others another.

Is there anything else about this play that’s presented a particular challenge?

**Ben:** I think creating the world of the play was challenging. It’s set in late nineteenth-century Russia, which isn’t something any of us today have a really detailed knowledge of. So part of the process has been to find a place which exists between the two worlds, because it wants to be accessible to a modern audience. The play is for people coming to Wyndham’s Theatre in 2008, so depicting something that’s totally obscure would be a waste. What you want to show is how those two worlds come together. What’s the crossover?

But coming back to Michael’s working process, it doesn’t allow for too much navel gazing because you’re on your feet immediately. It’s practical. We might stop and talk for a while about why this character crosses himself here or what his connection to the church is, but because the company is on their feet it’s constantly about the story itself. So it’s not about abstract knowledge for the sake of it.

Today you’re working on Act Four. At times it reads almost like a farce, with characters bursting in on one another, sometimes even crying. How does Michael control the overall effect to achieve the right balance of humour and pathos?

**Ben:** I think in this production there’s a real willingness to let laughter and tragedy happen in the same beat. That balance is in the play itself. ‘Doom isn’t written across the front cloth’ when the story starts, says Michael. So if you play the story honestly – as in at the beginning of each scene where nobody knows that somebody is going to discover that their husband is having an affair or that Ivanov is going to kill himself – then it’s totally legitimate that you can find something deeply funny. That actually makes the tragedy all the more compelling and real, rather than just existing in a little theatrical world where scenes happen.

So this afternoon will Michael attempt to work through the whole act?

**Ben:** We’ve previously spent a day on a scene which will last maybe half an hour, so it’s not that it hasn’t been touched on, it just hasn’t been over-rehearsed. We’ve found the physical shape of it – ‘You stand over here, I’ll stand over there’ – and talked briefly about how the lines work and what’s happening. The actors have made discoveries. So this afternoon we’ll start at the beginning of the scene and work through it until someone has a question.
As Associate Director what’s your role within the creative team?

**Ben:** I think the role is best described by answering the question, ‘How can you best support the director and rehearsals?’ There are certain things that have to happen. For example, on this production a real priority for me has been making sure that all the necessary resources have been in the rehearsal room to help the company understand the world of the play.

**What sort of resources?**

**Ben:** A bit of everything really. There are lots of books and quite a few maps - the physical geography of Russia is very different and quite unknown. We also have CD recordings of all the Russian words used in the play. Last week Helen Rappaport, who did the literal translation, came in and went through each one. For example, Kolya, you could shade it entirely Russian and say ‘Ko-ol-yaa’ but it sounds very strange in an English sentence. So one of the things we tried to do as a company was arrive at an agreement as to how far to go between the two. I think consistency is the most important thing.

Another major function of my role is working with the understudies. As the production will run in the West End for three months we have a full understudy company of about six actors who will learn every single part. What’s lovely about this play is that they’ve all got on-stage roles as well. So there’s quite a lot of work to be done with them. Then once the production is open Michael will be off working on other plays, and although he’ll still have real contact with the company there needs to be someone who, on a more basic level, is able to come into the theatre twice a week and check that the show is running smoothly.
Would you give notes to the actors after revisiting the production?

Ben: It would depend. I think my role, more than anything, is to understand Michael’s vision of the play and to try and support that. So if, for example, a beat slips out so that an actor’s playing something slightly different to everybody else on stage you can just say, ‘Have you noticed that this is happening…?’ It’s not so much giving someone a note. I think it’s never good to be heavy-handed with anything like that; it’s always better to be straightforward so there’s no kind of issues attached to it because ultimately everyone should be going in the same direction.

An interview with actor Tom Hiddleston, playing Lvov

Can you tell me a little about your character and his place within the world of the play?

Tom: I play Doctor Yevgeny Lvov and he’s a young doctor. All you know about him is that he’s looking after Anna Petrovna, Ivanov’s wife, and at the beginning of the play he comes on and confirms to Ivanov what he may have already suspected from earlier in the morning: that she has tuberculosis. People are reluctant to believe Lvov. Shabelsky, the Count, certainly doesn’t. He thinks Lvov is a charlatan and a quack, and there’s an attitude towards the doctor that he’s from a different world. He’s over-educated, over-sensitive, over-honest and a little bit self-righteous.

What’s interesting about tuberculosis is that when the play was written, in 1887, it was only five years after a German physicist had discovered the bacteria that caused the condition. And in 1884 Chekhov himself qualified as a physician. So when he’s writing this play, tuberculosis is a new thing and inevitably people are going to have different responses to it. Some people are going to think, ‘Oh, my God! It’s a new killer.’ Like cancer or something. People had died of consumption but the word ‘tuberculosis’ was new. The Count’s attitude is rather as if Lvov’s walked in and said, ‘She’s dying of bird flu.’ Shabelsky would say, ‘Don’t be ridiculous! Bird flu?’ The idea that anyone could die of such a remote and absurd disease to people like him, from an older generation, is sheer quackery.

And the Count is suspicious of Lvov’s motives in general, along with a lot of other characters in the play. They have an attitude towards Lvov which is unfavourable because of how he is. People say he’s ‘uprightness in boots’, he’s a bore, a prig and generally what differentiates him from everybody else is that he’s unafraid of telling people what he really thinks of them. So he’ll say to Ivanov’s face, ‘Forgive me, I’m going to tell you plainly, I find you appalling. I find your behaviour appalling. It’s killing your wife. Please help me to think better of you. Show me that you’re a better man.’ He thinks in shades of black and white – no shades of grey.

It’s interesting for me playing him because I’m now at the stage in rehearsals where I can’t really divorce my current opinion of him from my first. When I go through a play I always look at what everybody else says about the character I’m playing, because it gives you a clue as to what people think of you. So you think outwardly, I have to present a certain mask which would allow people to say those things about me, but at the same time nobody on this planet thinks they’re intrinsically bad. There’s always a reason for their behaviour. So I’m trying to discover why he’s like that, or what he thinks he’s doing by being so honest.
Not many characters have anything favourable to say about Lvov.

**Tom:** Except Ivanov. He says, ‘He’s tiresome, but still, I quite like him, he’s completely sincere.’ He has, at least, a backbone. And the play takes place right out in the sticks, in the middle of nowhere. It’s days to Moscow on a horse, probably a week or two to St Petersburg. Civilisation is a long way away. And you’ve got the weather and the landscape to cope with every day. So the characters flip between self-determination, which allows them to say, ‘I can change my life, I can turn it all around’, to seconds later saying, ‘It’s pointless… Space and time are too vast for me to hope to battle against them.’

**And where’s Lvov in that?**

**Tom:** Ivanov says, ‘You only qualified a year ago.’ So I’ve imagined he’s just graduated from medical school in Moscow, very much like Chekhov did, and for his first job he’s been posted out here. Chekhov doesn’t tell you any of this, you have to supply the information. And true to the political trends of the time he’s of a generation of teachers, doctors and lawyers who are trying to modernise the ancient dinosaur that is nineteenth-century Russia. They’re trying to bring new ideas and new procedural methods to the whole country. And Ivanov himself is trying to modernise agriculture with the introduction of scientific farming and machinery.
So Lvov is of that generation; it’s his first posting and he finds himself a fish out of water among these people because he doesn’t understand them and they don’t understand him. And I think he’s been used to being around very bright, passionate idealists who are going to change the world, all of whom are reading Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy and are going to go off and be the men of the new century. And Lvov arrives in this district where people have been knocked around by life. They’ve made mistakes and bad things have happened to them. Some of them are very bitter and Lvov’s mental universe can’t really abide the idea of cynicism or hypocrisy because he’s at a stage in his life where he burns with ideological passion. I think it’s very truthful in terms of humanity. It’s a very youthful position to look at the world as you’re growing up and entering it and not be able to understand compromise.

**And is that what Lvov represents for you, the younger generation and a hope for the future?**

**Tom:** I think he thinks that way, but he could certainly be more sensitive in his way of going about it. I think if he was more mature and a little bit brighter, more emotionally intelligent, he would have a better bedside manner. He would see all the factors Ivanov is battling with: his debt, the fact that he doesn’t seem to love his wife anymore, and that the walls are closing in around him. The estate is going to wrack and ruin, Anna Petrovna has tuberculosis and now there’s this fifth prong to the all-sided attack which is Lvov reminding him of his flaws, saying, ‘You’re selfish and hypocritical.’

Lvov thinks Ivanov is two-faced as well. He believes, rather simplistically, that Ivanov only married Anna for her dowry and when he didn’t get any of it, because her parents disowned her for converting to the Russian Orthodox Church, he started looking for an out. And that’s why Ivanov gets involved with Sasha, because if he gets her dowry he can pay off his debt to her parents, which is a very cynical view from Lvov’s perspective.

I think Ivanov sees a younger version of himself in Lvov, in terms of his intelligence, idealism and respect for moral rectitude. But where they differ, I think, is Lvov has no sensitivity to the innate fallibility of human beings: that people make mistakes, that there are shades of grey, and that sometimes accidents happen or fortune will throw something in your lap that you weren’t expecting. Lvov just can’t see it like that. Ken and I were talking about it yesterday. It’s almost as if Ivanov is a question mark and Lvov is certainty, and those two things are battling it out. And eventually Lvov is one of the people that pushes Ivanov over the edge, because he persists in reminding him of his weakness and cowardice.

**You say your feelings towards Lvov have changed during rehearsals; what were your first thoughts about him on reading the play?**

**Tom:** I saw him as a mixture of prig and revolutionary. I thought that would be the balance I would have to make. He has to be believably what people say he is but I also knew I had to find the reason why he was like that. Now I think he’s more vulnerable than I’d first imagined him. Actually, it’s just I feel he’s more three dimensional. I think that’s developed through rehearsals with Ken and Gina McKee, who plays Anna. Your character has to go on a journey. I think there’s a friendship at the beginning of the play between Lvov and Ivanov that could have been fruitful and respectful and mutually beneficial. There has to be a hope that they could have got on and that they don’t start at the same level of combat as they end. Because by the end of the play they are really screaming at each other
and clearly don’t like each other very much. But at the beginning of the play I think the audience have to see that there might have been a chance that they could have got on.

**So for Lvov is there a sense of loss for that relationship?**

**Tom:** Yes, I think there’s disappointment. Ivanov could have been a mentor to him and because of the way he’s behaved, he’s let him down. There’s also another thing, which has come out of rehearsing with Gina, which is the relationship between Lvov and Anna Petrovna. I think it extends beyond a simple doctor-patient relationship. There’s something in Lvov that certainly recognises a kindred spirit in Anna, and possibly beyond that, he is in love with her.

There’s one scene between Lvov and Anna at the end of Act One where they really have a connection. Everyone else has run off to the Lebedev party and they’re just left alone together and he really listens to her as she says, ‘How long do you think my parents are going to go on hating me?’ and ‘Nikolai really did use to love me and I still love him and what if he stopped loving me forever?’ And Lvov really hears that and then he says to her: ‘Explain something to me – explain how a decent, honest, almost saintly woman like you could let herself be taken in for so long, and dragged into this miserable mare’s nest. Why are you here?... What is a woman like you doing in this dead-end among these no-hopers?’ And Lvov sees that she’s a very special person and he can’t understand what she is doing, this diamond in the rough.

**Where does Lvov end up? What’s going to happen to him?**

**Tom:** I think he goes a little bit mad, or he gets a kind of fire and brimstone within him. I think he alienates himself from the community with his judgement and with his lack of self-censorship and social finesse.

By the end of the play Anna Petrovna’s dead and there’s this wedding between Ivanov and Sasha which Lvov disapproves of and completely distrusts. He thinks
it’s all about money. He’s very angry. He feels so unloved, so mistrusted, so isolated, but he can’t see that he’s done that to himself. At the beginning of Act Four he says about the wedding, ‘Once I’ve torn away the mask and people see what kind of jackal he is, he’ll go from seventh heaven into the pit where all the powers of hell can’t drag him out. As an honest man, it’s my duty to say “Enough”’. He sort of gets possessed by this almost Old Testament fire and brimstone. In Chekhov’s short stories very moralistic characters are always given this religious rhetoric to talk with. There’s always talk of heaven, hell and fire. So, with all that in mind, he’s not in a good place.

Lvov eventually challenges Ivanov to a duel, finally managing to pluck up the courage. Ivanov has pushed him so far he sees it as the only way of resolving the moral turpitude. He says, ‘I hereby publically declare to your face that you are a swine.’ So he calls him out in front of the community. He sort of becomes an agent of divine retribution, which is some claim. So I think he’s definitely gone a little bit crazy and then what happens with Ivanov is going to put him into therapy for the rest of his life.

I think it is, in part, Lvov’s fault that Ivanov kills himself. It’s a lot to live with and I think he will probably see that in time. If you look at the events of the play, if Lvov had been more sensitive, more mature, more aware, he might have been able to help Ivanov and a lot of pain would have been avoided. You can’t help thinking if Lvov was living in the present day and had taken the module on clinical psychology at medical school he might have seen that maybe Ivanov was sick and needed help.

I don’t want to say ‘depression’ because that’s a word that’s being very carefully used in the rehearsal room. But whatever is going on with Ivanov, he’s not right in the head. By which I don’t mean he’s insane, he just needs help, and nobody can see that. And it’s so sad that the only doctor in the play can’t either. He just sees a lazy, selfish man who’s so concerned with his own happiness that he can’t acknowledge his wife is coughing her lungs up in bed upstairs. And so Lvov says, ‘Can’t you just put your own happiness aside and go and look after your wife?’ Rather than saying, ‘I understand that actually maybe all isn’t great with you so let’s work together and see if we can help everybody out.’ But unfortunately he just doesn’t have those colours, that awareness. As you grow up you become aware that people are fallible and frail; that inside every strong character there’s a soft core, and inside every seemingly weak one there’s a strength.

As an actor I imagine you approach each piece of work on its own merits, but is there something about Chekhov which demands a particular way of working?

Tom: You’re aware of his reputation in the same way you’re aware of Shakespeare’s, their classic status, but then you just dip into it again. You read some of the letters he wrote, or the short stories, or the plays, and it hits you anew every time – just how astonishingly real his characters are. There’s a breadth and depth to them which is quite unlike any other writer. What is it someone said? Chekhov is invisible in his plays because he doesn’t judge any of his characters; he just presents them. He doesn’t explain or justify or apologise. He just presents you with fully-rounded, psychologically complete characters, with all their inconsistencies and flaws, good sides and bad. You never feel like he’s explaining with false detail who these people are and when you read it you feel the depth.
There’s something very daring in a way about what he did. He’s so fearlessly human. There’s never a message in his plays, it’s just people talking. They’re not hysterical or frivolous. You read them and they remind you that, actually, people are heavy. People have weight, and experience will always carry its weight.

**What challenges does IVANOV present for a company of actors?**

**Tom:** It’s a real ensemble so you have to play your part in order for the play to sing. And it’s angry and unattractive and I think we have to be unafraid of that. Nobody comes off very well, there’s no redeeming hero. Every character is tainted with some kind of unpleasant colour and that is sometimes uncomfortable as an actor, because there’s a vanity instinct that you want to be liked, or you want an audience to see that there is at least a redemptive quality to the character you’re playing. We should be courageous about presenting that unpleasantness so that there’s nothing wistful or romantic and autumnal about the play, because that’s the tendency I think with the English tradition of performing Chekhov.

**You’re now in week four of rehearsals. What’s this stage like?**

**Tom:** We’re trying to sew it all together now. I think I know within myself who Lvov is. I know how he sounds, how he moves and I’m trying not to plan what I’m
going to do too much. I’m just trying to listen to other people and respond. That’s always the challenge, I think. If you want to keep something alive you take it from the other actor. You can’t just go on and deliver what you’ve decided to do. As long as you’ve got a basis and you know what the scene’s about you just have to be there. So I’m trying to get myself into a place where I am really there, and then it starts to come together. The writing’s so good it takes care of itself.

There’s an unconscious part of being an actor, an unconscious side to the work. You might have an idea and then forget about it, but it sort of sits in you working away at the back of your mind. That’s the way I work anyway. I’m not very good at talking about what I might do in a scene, I just have to try it a few times. Stuff will come to me as I’m doing it and I’ll try that. It might work or it might not. I’m quite instinctive about those things.

What would you say to a young person coming to see IVANOV?

Tom: If Chekhov had been a bad writer, his characters’ trials and tribulations would be boring, but he makes it funny. And the reason it’s funny is because it’s so recognisable. It’s not about action or plot, it’s about how people cope with life and bad decisions. If it was a piece of music it would be Bob Dylan or Nick Drake. It’s contemplative and beautiful.

An interview with actor Andrea Riseborough, playing Sasha

Can you tell me a little about your character and her place within the world of the play?

Andrea: When we meet Sasha in Act Two it’s her eighteenth birthday and, in a sense, her coming out into the world as a young woman. It’s the first time she’s really been presented at a party as a lady, and possibly an eligible one. Avdotya, a local matchmaker, is desperate to pair her with someone, while Zinaida, Sasha’s mother, is more concerned about where her generous dowry of fifteen thousand roubles will go.

At the top of the play there’s a real air of excitement and hope. The wonderful thing about Sasha is she’s not frilly or fussy. She’s true, she’s studious, she’s an intellect. At one point she’s referred to as another George Sand by her father. She’s the embodiment of hope. In terms of the piece as a whole, I suppose that’s what her role is.

She provides an opportunity to be reborn, not just for Ivanov, but for her whole family. Her father lives vicariously through her, through her youth and beauty and appreciation of everything around her. A love of literature is something that Sasha and Ivanov share, in a very student-mentor way, and perhaps they always have done ever since she was young. As that relationship becomes closer and she gets older and begins to understand things on a more emotional level, not just in terms of ideas, she discovers that what she feels for Ivanov is a lot stronger. Her childhood love, the admiration and doting, has turned into what she now believes to be real love and it’s a passion.
But she’s still very young, at 18, to be making such a big decision.

**Andrea:** I think the spirit of an 18-year-old in Russia in 1887 was a strange dichotomy really, particularly if you try and draw a parallel with an 18-year-old of today. In one sense Sasha’s going to be completely innocent and sheltered in a way perhaps the peasant women in the nearby town may not have been. In that sense she’s more like a 13 or 14 year-old, possibly even 12. But in terms of taking responsibility for her own ideas and, in a way, being the level-headed one within the Lebedev family she has quite a lot of responsibility. Her mother’s becoming increasingly concerned with money lending and it’s taking up more and more of her time. So Sasha has all sorts of grown-up responsibilities and feelings and possibly not the emotional maturity yet with which to fully own or deal with them.

The journey she goes on is huge. Tell me a little about that.

**Andrea:** She doesn’t appear in the first act. She’s in the second and third and by the time we return to her in Act Four she’s a young woman, still only nineteen, but a lot’s changed. She’s been kind of worn and beaten down by this relentless and insatiable relationship that is Sasha and Ivanov. It’s kind of simultaneously
fresh and totally dysfunctional. And so the relationship has already begun, in some strange way, to stagnate in its newness.

She wants to marry him for a whole host of reasons. Firstly, of course, because she loves him. Secondly, because Sasha sees marrying Ivanov as the key to helping him, because then she has legitimate control over his happiness and its attainment. The way I’m playing Sasha I think she’s aware on some level that her fifteen thousand roubles will be helpful to Ivanov because he’s in such dire financial straits. So as much as she’s not concerned about the dowry for herself, she knows that it will fix a lot of problems for him and hopefully make him happy. And that’s her mission: to make him happy.

As time goes on, I think she loses touch with how she feels about him. Although the notion of loving him hasn’t actually been realised any more than a year before, nonetheless she’s pressing on. She’s still hopeful for her future. It’s not until her father picks the scab off this particular wound that everything unravels on her wedding day, but then she immediately contains it again.

Sasha talked previously about active not passive love and it was very important at the time that women had something to focus their energy upon. That’s not to say they weren’t occupied day-to-day with incredibly arduous household tasks, or busy running the estate. All sorts of important jobs kept everything ticking over in society. But there was a lot of idleness. There was a huge amount of lethargy as well and, consequently, depression among the gentry was common.

Is Sasha aware that she is making a huge sacrifice for Ivanov?

**Andrea:** I think she’s aware that she’ll temporarily have to sacrifice her own happiness in order to get a hold on Ivanov so she can make him happy, which she knows will ultimately make her happy. That’s what she thinks. She is still only nineteen, remember, and this is her first relationship.

Will it be her last? Have you imagined what happens to Sasha next?

**Andrea:** I think Ivanov will always be the love of her life. I think she would go on to marry and possibly have quite a liberal marriage. I don’t mean sexually. I imagine her surrounding herself with as much as she could, a liberal set of friends, or perhaps moving to St Petersburg or Moscow.

And we’re close to the 1917 Revolution and politically Russia is going to be in turmoil very soon. Sasha would be on the periphery of that and it’s interesting to think how many deaths she would witness. The Communists were popping up everywhere at the time.

As an actor I’m sure you approach each piece on its own merits but is there something different about Chekhov, like Shakespeare, in terms of his status? What’s your mindset when you come to it?

**Andrea:** You read all sorts of things when you take on a role and look at lots of different material. I think when you’re researching you have to be pragmatic and as malleable as possible. Sometimes when you approach a character they scream out to you the way you’re going to meet them, and other times you have to tentatively beat around for a while with a stick.

I think each time it’s different. It’s about you, because you are your own tool. It depends how you’re feeling and what you need to get you there. There are some general ports of call. If I was playing a real person I’d go to the BFI and ITN
archives. I read various background literature and then kind of filter what I need. Read about Pushkin for five minutes and you suddenly think ‘Oh!’ and ‘Ah-ha!’ and then you build the landscape of a history or place and you imagine yourself inside it. You can even go on Wikipedia for a second and realise, ‘Oh, the Steppe... It’s not actually freezing cold all over, it’s vast.’ All of those things are hugely helpful. They sound practical and possibly mundane but they’re so useful in terms of what energy you’re going to bring to a scene, what you’re going to think about during it and the way you’re going to leave.

**A year elapses between the third and fourth acts; how as actors do you quickly mark that change?**

**Andrea:** It’s just getting yourself into a place of imagining. The best thing you can do is simply tell the story. You have to imagine exactly where you are in your life – where you’ve been, what’s been happening, what could potentially happen. What are you hoping for? What are you thinking? What are you feeling? Is it cold or hot? Part of me as Andrea is always switched on, but for the most part you’re just living out someone else’s life as instinctively and moment-to-moment as you possibly can without pre-empting what’s going to happen next. Of course the entire thing is orchestrated anyway because we’re in a play, but you completely forget about that.

You get to excavate a piece so much when you work in theatre. You get to approach it from so many different angles. You can be a couple of weeks into a run when you suddenly think, ‘Oh, my! I’ve never seen it that way before.’ That’s wonderful, what a brilliant job. One of the best things about it is that you continue to excavate throughout the whole process.

**You’re in the final week of rehearsals; where are you at in terms of where you need to be for the first preview and opening night? Are there certain stages you have to reach, rather like a long-distance runner?**

**Andrea:** I don’t think of it much in that way. I find it far more organic, and therefore fulfilling, to allow it to develop, particularly when you’re in the hands of a very good director. When I say allow it to develop, I don’t mean sitting back and letting it happen. There’s no such thing. It’s using the work that you’ve done. You bring it with you to consolidate, reassess, chip away, add and subtract. Those are the things I enjoy exploring in the rehearsal process.

When you get into the theatre, there’s a whole different thing going on. It’s very important that the technical team get the time and space they need because they have a huge job to do and they do it so quickly and efficiently. I enjoy technical rehearsals a lot because when you’re on stage you get to quietly gauge the space. Everyone’s looking to see whether that chair needs to be stage left or right, how we’re going to get to the back door, etc. Or is everyone going to see Ken when he speaks downstream left? Where does Paule want to light it? And so you can use that very precious time just to really absorb your surroundings and slowly explore the world in which you’re going to live. Every space is so different; some theatres are kind and some are cruel. Wyndham’s is notorious for being a very friendly space. It envelopes you.
The following extract is taken from the beginning of Act Four. A year has passed since the previous events of the play. Ivanov’s wife Anna has died and today is the day of his wedding to Sasha. The Lebedevs’ house is decorated for a party, musicians play in the background and guests gather inside the reception room and outside on the terrace.

Lebedev enters in a hurry with Sasha and urgently ejects a couple of guests from the room. He sits her down to talk seriously, father to daughter, about her dowry while trying to suppress his own misgivings about the impending wedding.

Working as a group, read through the extract and explore the staging of this scene. You may find it useful to refer to Section 3 - Inside the rehearsal room, in particular Michael Grandage’s notes to his actors, when working on this section.

As a director what atmosphere do you want to create? How would you direct the two actors playing Lebedev and Sasha in order to establish their relationship within the scene? You will need to think about their positioning, in particular their relationship to one another, very carefully. Consider the following: What has happened previously? Where are the characters emotionally? How does that affect your approach to pacing the scene?
A crucial element in this scene, as with so many others, is the role of the wedding guests (the company) to which you should pay particular attention. Michael Grandage himself commented, ‘I don’t want to do company scenes as an add-on because they’ll look like an add-on.’ How does their presence just outside on the terrace, peering inquisitively through the French windows, affect Lebedev and Sasha inside the reception room? ‘There’s something about the whole top of this scene where Lebedev doesn’t know how private to be,’ observed Michael during rehearsals.

You should also take into account the other elements of production. For example, what should the lighting be like? Is any specific sound required?

Once you have seen the Donmar’s production of IVANOV, consider how their staging of this scene compares with your own.

IVANOV by Anton Chekhov
A new version by Tom Stoppard
An extract from the beginning of Act Four

Lebedev enters with Sasha.

Lebedev
Come in here, Sasha, where we can talk. (To Lvov and Kosykh,) Go and join the ladies, you two, we need to talk in private.

Kosykh
(Going past Sasha, snaps his fingers admiringly.) Pretty as a picture card – she’s the queen of trumps!

Lebedev
On your way, you Neanderthal.

Lvov and Kosykh go out.

Sit down, Shurochka, that’s right… over here. (Sits down and looks round.) Now listen to me carefully and remember I’m your father. The fact is, your mother has asked me to tell you something. This is not me speaking, I’m just doing what your mother –

Sasha
Oh, please get on with it, Papa.

Lebedev
There’s fifteen thousand silver roubles put aside for your dowry. So let there be no argument about that later on. No, don’t interrupt – that’s not the whole story. There’s fifteen thousand which is yours, but seeing that Nikolay owes your mother nine thousand, it’s coming off your dowry. Not only that…

Sasha
Why are you telling me this?

Lebedev
Your mother said I had to.

Sasha
Well, leave me alone. If you had any respect for me, or yourself, you wouldn’t do this. I don’t want your dowry. I never asked for it, and I’m not asking now.

Lebedev
What have I done? If you think you’re so emancipated…

Sasha
I can’t understand why you have to insult my feelings with this penny-pinching arithmetic.

Lebedev
(Exploding with rage.) I give up! I’ll end up sticking a knife in my guts – or someone’s. If it’s not her out there raging non-stop, nagging me about every kopek, it’s her in here, the so-called intelligent, liberated one, God help us, feeling insulted because she can’t understand her own father. Well, let me tell you. I came in here to insult your feelings because out there I was being torn limb from limb and drawn and quartered! ‘Can’t understand!’ I feel dizzy, I’m losing my mind. So to hell with you. (Goes towards the door and stops.) But I don’t like what’s going on. I don’t like any of it.
Sasha  What don’t you like?
Lebedev All of it!
Sasha All of what?
Lebedev Do you think I’m going to sit you down and spill everything? I don’t like anything that’s going on… I mean, this wedding. *(Goes up to Sasha and speaks gently.)* I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Shurochka. Perhaps this marriage of yours is a good idea and honest-to-God, but there’s something about it that just isn’t made in heaven. It’s not like other marriages. You’re so young — as clean as a pane of glass, and so lovely. And he’s a widower, all patched up and threadbare… and I can’t make him out, God help him. *(Kisses his daughter.)* Perhaps this marriage of yours is a good idea and honest-to-God, but there’s something about it that just isn’t made in heaven. It’s not like other marriages. You’re so young — as clean as a pane of glass, and so lovely. And he’s a widower, all patched up and threadbare… and I can’t make him out, God help him. *(Kisses his daughter.)*

Lebedev *(Briskly.)* I’m talking like an old gossip. I’m an old woman in a crinoline. Don’t listen to me. Don’t listen to anybody. Listen to your heart.

Sasha No, I’ve had the same feeling… that something isn’t right. It’s true, isn’t it? If only you knew how unhappy I am. It’s horrible. I’m frightened to admit it. Dear darling Daddy, make me feel better, tell me what to do.

Lebedev What are you… What do you want me to say?
Sasha I’ve never been so scared. I feel I don’t know him, and never will. All the time we’ve been engaged, he’s never once smiled at me, or looked me in the face… complaining all the time, reproaching himself for this or that, dropping hints about some guilt he carries… his hands never stop shaking… I’m worn out with it. There are even times when I feel… that I don’t love him as much as I should… and when he comes to see us and talks to me, I find myself getting bored. What does it mean, Papa? I’m scared.

Lebedev My little dove, my only child – listen to your father. Give him up!
Sasha *(Alarmed.)* What are you saying?
Lebedev *(Briskly.)* It’s the right thing to do, Shurochka. There’ll be a fuss, tongues going like clappers in a churchbell for miles around — but better put up with a bit of scandal than ruin your whole life.

Sasha Don’t say it – don’t say that, Papa! I don’t want to hear it. I have to fight these gloomy thoughts. He’s a good, unhappy, misunderstood man. I’m going to love him, and put him back on his feet. It’s my duty, I’ll do it, and that’s all there is to be said.

Lebedev That’s not doing your duty, that’s obsession.
Sasha I don’t want to talk about it. I told you something I didn’t even want to admit to myself. Please don’t tell anybody else, just forget about it.

Lebedev I’m lost. Either I’m getting stupid or everyone else is getting cleverer, but I’m damned if I understand anything any more.
Questions on the production and further practical work

You may wish to work individually on completing these questions.

1 When you go to see the Donmar’s production of IVANOV consider the following:
   • With regard to the scene above, how does the company create individual characters for each of the wedding guests? Describe the characterisation of one of the guests whose performance you were particularly drawn to during the scene.
   • What is the level of energy created by the company during this sequence?
   • Elsewhere, what transformations take place within the main characters through the journey of the play? How do the actors embody these changes?
   • How does the design establish the world of the play, in terms of its location and atmosphere?

2 Once you have seen the production you could improvise new scenes exploring the background to the play, taking the material within this Study Guide as a starting point. The scenes could include Ivanov and Anna’s courtship, the events that took place in the year between Act Three and Four. What discoveries do you make? How do such improvisations inform your ideas about the play and characters?
Ideas for further study

**Reading and research**

To gain a fuller understanding of Anton Chekhov’s work you may want to read some of his other plays:

*Anton Chekhov – Plays*, ed. by Elisaveta Fen (Penguin, 1959)

*Anton Chekhov – Plays*, translated and introduced by Michael Frayn (Methuen, 1988)

The following books provide useful background information and criticism on Chekhov:


**Bibliography**


*Changing Stages – A View of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century* by Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright (Bloomsbury, 2000)

*Ninety-Nine Plays – Key Plays since The Oresteia* by Nicholas Wright (Methuen, 1992)

*Anton Chekhov – Plays*, ed. by Elisaveta Fen (Penguin, 1959)

*Anton Chekhov – Plays*, translated and introduced by Michael Frayn (Methuen, 1988)

**Endnotes**

5. *Ninety-Nine Plays – Key Plays since The Oresteia* by Nicholas Wright (Methuen, 1992), p.111
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p.11


13 Anton Chekhov quoted in the introduction to *Anton Chekhov – Plays*, ed. by Elisaveta Fen (Penguin, 1959), p.15


15 Anton Chekhov quoted in the introduction to *Anton Chekhov – Plays*, ed. by Elisaveta Fen (Penguin, 1959), p.16

16 Ibid., p.17


18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., p.11


22 Ibid.


26 Quoted in the introduction to *Anton Chekhov – Plays*, ed. by Elisaveta Fen (Penguin, 1959), p.30


28 *Ninety-Nine Plays – Key Plays since The Oresteia* by Nicholas Wright (Methuen, 1992), p.111


30 *Introduction to Anton Chekhov – Plays*, translated and introduced by Michael Frayn (Methuen, 1988), p.xi

31 Ibid.


34 *Introduction to Anton Chekhov – Plays*, ed. by Elisaveta Fen (Penguin, 1959), p.17

35 Anton Chekhov quoted in the introduction to *Anton Chekhov – Plays*, ed. by Elisaveta Fen (Penguin, 1959), p.31

36 *Introduction to Anton Chekhov – Plays*, translated and introduced by Michael Frayn (Methuen, 1988), pp.xxv-xxvi

37 Ibid., p.xxvii

38 *Introduction to Anton Chekhov – Plays*, ed. by Elisaveta Fen (Penguin, 1959), pp.31-32

39 Ibid., p.33

40 Ibid., p.9

41 *Introduction to Anton Chekhov – Plays*, translated and introduced by Michael Frayn (Methuen, 1988), p.xxv

42 Ibid., pp.xxvii-xxviii

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*Introduction to Anton Chekhov – Plays*, ed. by Elisaveta Fen (Penguin, 1959), p.29

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*Introduction to Anton Chekhov – Plays*, translated and introduced by Michael Frayn (Methuen, 1988), pp.xiii-xiv

*Changing Stages – A View of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century* by Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright (Bloomsbury, 2000), p.347


*Introduction to Anton Chekhov – Plays*, translated and introduced by Michael Frayn (Methuen, 1988), p.xxxv

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Ibid., p.30


Ibid.

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Ibid.

Anton Chekhov quoted in the introduction to *Anton Chekhov – Plays*, ed. by Elisaveta Fen (Penguin, 1959), pp.19-20


Ibid., p.70

Taken from an interview with the author, 15/08/08 (See Section 3 – Inside the rehearsal room)

IVANOV by Anton Chekhov (1887), English version by Tom Stoppard, from a literal translation by Helen Rappaport (2008)
The Donmar Warehouse is an intimate not for profit 250-seat theatre located in the heart of London’s West End. The theatre attracts almost 100,000 people to its productions a year. Under the Artistic Direction of Michael Grandage and his predecessor, Sam Mendes, the theatre has presented some of London’s most memorable theatrical experiences as well as garnered critical acclaim at home and abroad. With a diverse artistic policy that includes new writing, contemporary reappraising of European classics, British and American drama and music theatre, the Donmar has created a reputation for artistic excellence over the last 12 years and has won 30 Olivier Awards, 14 Critics’ Circle Awards, 15 Evening Standard Awards and 13 Tony Awards for Broadway transfers.

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