



## Chekhov speaks to us

## Čehov nam govori

To the Editor:

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860–1904) was a medical doctor and writer. Celebrations commemorating Chekhov's centennial were organized in 2004 from Russia to Germany, France, and England, all the way to the United States and Canada and other countries. Colby College in Waterville, Maine was one of the sites in the USA that hosted a Chekhov festival. As a physician and author, I was invited to make a presentation at the Chekhov Centenary Conference at the Colby College. In addition, there was a symposium "Chekhov the Immigrant: Translating a Cultural Icon", and performances of film versions of Chekhov's works, as well as his plays (*The Seagull*, *Three Sisters*). The festival lasted for three weeks. That people in the USA promoted this rich program comes as no surprise, as Chekhov's plays are frequently performed here. (Only Shakespeare is performed in the USA more often than Chekhov).

Chekhov graduated from medical school in 1884 and started working as a physician in a suburban Moscow hospital. Eight years later, he purchased the rundown Melikhovo estate south of Moscow. He lived there until his health declined due to lung tuberculosis and forced him to move to the milder climate of Yalta.

In Melikhovo, where Chekhov lived with his parents and sister, he saw hundreds of patients, made more than a thousand house calls, and daily fought cholera and illiteracy among his patients. He was not a wealthy man, but he did not charge his patients; he even bought medicines to give to the poorest ones. At night, he wrote literary gems: his stories and two magnificent plays, "*The Seagull*" and "*Uncle Vanya*". His publisher, who was also his friend, advised him to give up medicine and concentrate on writing. Chekhov's response was:

*You advise me not to chase after two hares at once and to forget about practicing medicine. Well, I don't see what's so impossible about chasing two hares at once ... Medicine is my lawful wife, literature my mistress. When I tire of the one, I spend the night with the other... This is somewhat disorganized, but then again it's not boring, and anyway, neither loses anything by my duplicity.*

Through his writing, Chekhov showed how the symbiosis of the muse and Æsculapius can work. The doctor-writer

situation may seem to some to be an apparent contradiction, yet it also describes Chekhov, the man. His artist role differed-but did not contradict-his role as a physician. As a doctor, he was a man of action. He founded schools and clinics for the peasants in the Melikhovo region, donated books to libraries and pursued humanitarian causes. In contrast, many of the protagonists in his stories and plays are passive. Chekhov realized that scientific rationalism cannot provide answers to important questions, such as what is the meaning of life; hence, he often presents man as a victim in an absurd world. Regarding the ideological shortcomings of his characters, Chekhov often treated them as a joke. In 1888, he wrote to a friend:

*I still lack a political, religious and philosophical view. I change it every month, and so I'll have to limit myself to descriptions of how my heroes love, marry, give birth, die, and how they speak.*

Despite his self-depreciation, Chekhov remains a singularly talented author. Thanks to his literary talent and approach to life, he elevated both the modern story and the modern play. It is difficult to decide if he accomplished more as a dramatist or as a story teller. Through his association with his so-called mistress, Chekhov created hundreds of characters who often show weakness and ineffectiveness. His people were not the heroes or monumental personalities, like those described by Dostoevsky or Tolstoy. They lived in capital cities and provinces, villages and new industrial zones. They came from European Russia, Siberia and the Far East. They included officials, nobleman, priests, doctors, children, students, prisoners, hunters in the field, ladies, peasant women, old men, the sane, and the mad. With these diverse characters, Chekhov created a new kind of story. He was an author-observer who avoided ideological excess and moral judgments. His characters lived their lives fully. Like us, they are citizens of a world that does not always make sense. Tolstoy was struck by Chekhov's originality.

*Chekhov is an artist of life...[he] has created new forms of writing, completely new, in my opinion, to the whole world, the like of which I have not encountered anywhere...Chekhov has his own special form, like impressionists.*

Unlike the endless and eternal sky above the vast steppes that so deeply impressed Chekhov, we have but diminutive role in a life that is too short. Recognition of this

fact frequently leads us to isolation and disappointment. Unfulfilled desires prompt us to ask the big questions: How do we manage life? Are we but pawns in an absurd world?

Although Chekhov's life span was a short 44 years, he was in good company; Pushkin, Byron, Lermontov, Njegoš, Mayakovsky, Blok, Lorca, Vallejo, Orwell, and many other prominent writers also had short lives. Like these masters, Chekhov's innovative and prolific literary output secured him a place among the greatest men of letters. His works still strongly appeal to readers and theater lovers all over the world, and they speak deeply to our moral and philosophical selves.

Chekhov's numerous characters also include more than 30 medical doctors. For the greater part, these characters are people burdened with obligations to their patients, who are hindered by various life problems and poor working conditions. Some, like Dr. Ragin in the story, "Ward No 6", succumb to mental illness. Others are blinded by one-sided medical observation and neglect the patient, like poor Anyuta, who deserves at least a little human attention. Dr. Ragin is in charge of a district provincial hospital for twenty years. Initially, he was energetic physician, but time erodes his enthusiasm, and he concludes that his efforts made no difference. The hospital is very poorly equipped, and the socioeconomic state of his patients is beyond his control. Despite his efforts, mortality does not decrease in his town. Dr. Ragin meets the brilliant but paranoid, Gromov, who is confined for proclaiming that truth and justice must triumph one day. Ragin becomes obsessed with Gromov and becomes even more dysfunctional. His superiors trap him in his own ward, where he dies after a beating by a nurse. When the novelist Nikolay Leskov read this story, he said "Ward No 6 is Russia."

Chekhov was faithful to his family and his friends. [He was less faithful to the women who fell in love with him. One exception was a young actress in the Moscow Art Theater, Olga Knipper, who he married in 1901.] His devotion to his friends was commendable. For example, when in 1902 Maxim Gorky was elected as a member of the Russian Academy, Czar Nicolas II annulated this election. In protest, Chekhov resigned from the Academy. Only one other member of the Academy, Vladimir Korolenko, joined in his protest. [According to Stefan Zweig, both Russia and whole Europe were fascinated by Gorky's unique literary voice that

appeared from the bottom strata of society. Gorky was an advocate of Russian social and cultural changes, a man who publically opposed the czarist regime.]

In 1890, Chekhov traveled across Siberia to Sakhalin Island, off the far eastern coast of Russia to study conditions in the site where Russian convicts were kept and to take a census of the population. The hardships of that journey (the railway was not yet built) and his 3-month sojourn on the island were frightful. His report to the medical society and general public in the documentary book *Sakhalin Island* (1893), made a huge impression on the Russian public. He described in details the brutal beatings of the prisoners that he witnessed first hand. Thanks to the influence of the medical doctors that followed Chekhov's report, the Czar abolished corporal punishment for women in 1897 and for men in 1904, and he also introduced reforms for prison administrations.

Even today, torture and brutal treatment of prisoners occurs frequently in many prisons. Torture has been reported in the Guantanamo Bay detainment camp, secret prisons in several European countries, as well as in regular prisons all over the world. We do not need Chekhov to tell us that prisoners in these places are often mistreated. Media reports clearly show the brutality. For serious crimes, death or life imprisonment may be necessary, but ongoing cruelty is not. Many of us remain ignorant of the inhumane behavior of prison guards. And, shockingly, some of the brutality is accomplished with the help of staff physicians.

Unfortunately, many of our top current physicians, scientists, artists, and other influential people rarely rise their voices against such atrocities. They seem loath to provoke a public outcry sufficient to enlist governments and politicians, as Chekhov did when his report forced the Czar's decree more than a century ago. Anton Pavlovich Chekhov has told us to be bold and to speak loudly when we recognize problems. The solution will come afterwards. Thus, from time to time, we hear bold voices that help us create more humane societies. We must make sure that they are heard.

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