

DRAMATURGICAL PACKET FOR
KSU PRODUCTION OF THREE SISTERS

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"I have no particular desire to live. I do not wish to die, but feel rather bored with life."

Anton Chekhov, 1892

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WHO WAS ANTON CHEKHOV?

Marc Aldanov, a Russian writer and critic, explains that many scholars have commented that in his writings "nothing ever happens", however, that's Chekhov's unique style! "Chekhov has created his own peculiar form, his own rhythm, his own idiom." (Aldanov). He notes that Chekhov wasn't known outside of Russia during his life, yet when he died, he became a national treasure.

Chekhov was born January 29, 1860 in Taganrog, Russia. His father was a grocer with money problems. Once his business failed, he moved his family to Moscow without Chekhov, who was in school at the time, Once he finished, he followed his family to Moscow and attended medical school. Since his family was still struggling, he supported them with his freelance writing under the pen names. It is said he had around 40 names. The most common one he had was Man Without a Spleen, a nod to his medical training.

Chekhov started to publish his serious works of fiction under his own name. His work showed the influence of major Russian realists of the 19th century, such as, Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Chekhov developed his own style of writing. He is known for taking every situations and using them to discuss very deep ideas, "Who are we?" "Why are we here?" Tuberculosis ended Chekhov's time on July 15, 1904 when he was only 44 years old. Although he died young, his works are timeless.

(Skylar Resna Jackson)



Young Anton Chekhov in country clothes

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton_Chekhov

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PLAY

Written in 1900 and first produced in 1901, *Three Sisters* was Anton Chekhov's first specific commission for the Moscow Arts Theatre. His previous collaborations with the company (*The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya*) were commercial successes in contrast to his initial playwrighting ventures with other companies which ended in critical ridicule and commercial failure. The play has often been described as "the decline of the aristocratic and artistic elite coupled with the search for meaning in a modern world." But simply, Chekhov offers us three Prozorov sisters - Olga, Masha, and Irina and their brother Andrey - who are refined and cultured youth, raised in Moscow but living a small and "lifeless" provincial town for the past eleven years. With the recent death of their father Colonel Prozorov, they await a return to Moscow where the "good life" can begin again.

From its initial success to current productions, audiences have responded with enthusiasm to the collision of envisioned dreams and frustrated hopes as well as the vibrant characters of this family and their friends, lovers, and acquaintances that populate the stage. This is also a play where the "off stage: characters - a deceased father, a local politico and lover of Natasha - Protopopov, Vershinin's suicidal wife and children, and the children of Andre and Natasha - are some of the most important instigators of action and reaction. And Moscow itself remains one of the greatest characters. Identified with the family's growth and happiness, and with the perfect life, it is the elusive and unattainable aspiration.

Three Sisters begins with a new era in Russian history; an era shaped by political upheaval and marked change in society. In 1855, the war-mongering Tsar Nicholas I died and left his bankrupt and defeated nation to his son Alexander II. Instead of continuing his father's brutality, the new tsar attempted 'Great Reforms' including the emancipation of all the serfs in 1861. (Serfs were 23 million strong and a class of life-time indentured servants tied to the owners of the land they occupied.) While freedom from this indenture allowed some peasants to gain education and upward social mobility, many were still locked in a cycle of land abuse, debt, and servitude. Those who did rise through education, benefited from public assistance schemes and soon established an 'intelligentsia' who believed, as the Prozorovs do, that 'life was important, ideas were important, and that the world should and doubtless could be changed'" (historian Joel Carmichael).

The "intelligentsia" could gain some small amount of influence in the great cities of St. Petersburg and Moscow, but in the rural towns and provincial regions, little could or would change. With the rise of slums and industrialization in the turn of the 20th century, much of the idealism was suppressed by the drive for greater personal greed and international competition. This is the essence of this brilliant drama—a world somewhere between aspiration and rejection, between hope and despair—a modern world of Chekhov's unique understanding that reflected his sense of humanity where "he could never write villains, only buffoons."

(Excerpt from PCPA TheatreFest)

19TH CENTURY RUSSIA

Russian history is riddled with war, so—needless to say—it has shaped everything about Russian culture. However, at the time of the play, Russia is in a period of peace, between the Turkish war (ending in 1878) and the occupation of villages on the Amur River (between Russia and Northeastern China), as well as the Russification of Finland in 1900. There were plenty of domestic problems to keep Russia busy though. Serfs gained their freedom in 1861, but had little way of supporting themselves. Poverty, inequality, rampant censorship, and the lack of representative government caused tension and uprisings. Civil servants were introduced to keep citizens in check, but more on that later.

19th century Russia was a place of contradictions. To give some context—imagine how a socialite from Manhattan would describe America. Now, imagine how someone from rural Appalachia would describe America. This should give you some idea of the immense disparity between lifestyles of 19th century Russian people. While much of Russia was still rural, if not wild, the great cities were seeing rapid industrialization, including railways and the beginning of the Moscow Metro. In the countryside, former serfs were eking out a living with some home-grown crops, while the educated and noble were living lives of art, music, dances, and banquets.

(Excerpt from PCPA TheatreFest)



Cover of first edition, published in 1901

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Sisters_\(play\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Sisters_(play))