

CHEKHOV, Anton Pavlovich (1860-1904)

Russian physician and playwright who wrote short stories and one act farces and plays including PLATONOV (1887-1881), ON THE HARMFULNESS OF TOBACCO (1886-1902), THE BEAR (1888), and THE PROPOSAL (1889). His great major full-length plays are: IVANOV (1887), THE SEA GULL (1896-1898), UNCLE VANYA (1899), THREE SISTERS (1901), and THE CHERRY ORCHARD (1904). In these plays Chekhov develops a strong sense of atmosphere and subtext actions which gave rise to an entirely new concept of acting and playwriting, coincident with the founding of the Moscow Art Theatre (qv) in 1898 by Stanislavsky (qv) and Nemirovich-Danchenko. Chekhov's actress wife Olga was also associated with the Moscow Art Theatre.

Chekhov was a shrewd observer of social roles and attitudes, especially as they revealed the breakdown of Czarist society towards the end of the 19th century. His intellectuals embody the tragedy of the modern world -- in a phrase of Thucydides, they are "unlucky lovers of distant and unobtainable things." They talk a lot about their idealism, and they have unbearable aspirations for a better life, but they are impotent to do anything about it. They are quite simply trapped by their circumstances.

Chekhov gave some insight into his own view of the human condition, in writing about his play IVANOV to A. S. Souvorin in 1888:

*To exhaustion, boredom, and the feeling of guilt, add one more enemy: loneliness.*

Chekhov's plays do not offer any easy answers, nor do they labor any obvious moral; instead, they seem to suspend judgment on all the characters and actions that take place. Chekhov refers to this absence of any neat emotional conclusions, in writing about his story, THE HORSE-THIEVES:

*You scold me for my objectivity, calling it indifference to good and evil, lack of ideas, and so on. When I describe horse-thieves you would have me say: 'stealing horses is evil.' But that was known long ago without me.*

A handwritten signature in cursive script, likely of Anton Chekhov, written in dark ink on a light background. The signature is fluid and somewhat stylized, with a long horizontal stroke extending from the bottom of the main signature.