

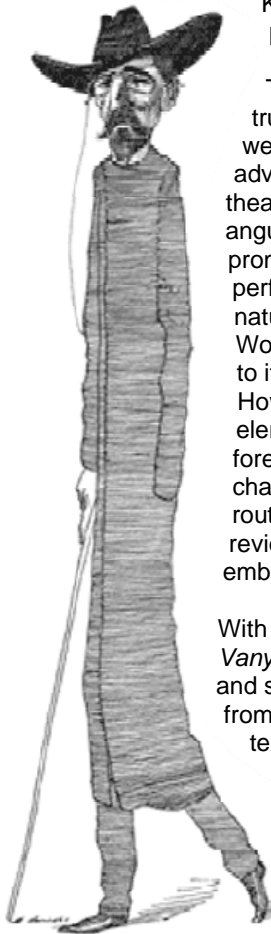
RIVKA BOREK

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Theater

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A full-length play deconstructing Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*

I have actively read, loved and seen Anton Chekhov's dramatic works ever since I first encountered his play *Three Sisters* in a high school acting class. I travelled to Russia during the fall semester of my junior year to somehow get closer to a playwright that I felt both compelled by and mystified over. I saw so much in Chekhov's work—so much more than the words he supplied on the page, and yet it was those words that allowed me to gauge a larger picture, it was with his words, *by his words*, that I was able to imagine past them. So it was odd when I traveled to Russia that I saw such a uniformity in how his works were performed, and even later, when I was guided by my acting teachers in a very specific way in how to perform them myself. I recognized that this was not a pattern particular to Russia, but now I was at the source of it.



Konstantin Stanislavsky, the Russian director and actor who left his legacy through a still practiced system of acting, can perhaps be pinpointed as the originator of this stylistic reflex when it comes to approaching Chekhov's text. Stanislavsky saw his Moscow Art Theater and Chekhov's work sharing an ideal in achieving "artistic simplicity and truthfulness on stage."¹ The Moscow Art Theater, which Stanislavsky co-founded and ran, went on to premier three of Chekhov's major plays and took the playwright on as their own, advertising both themselves and the writer as revolutionaries united for a new type of theater. His was a theater laden with subtext, long pauses and exhaustive emotional anguish, creating "a cult of the pause."² The elegiac quality that Stanislavsky found and promoted in Chekhov's canon has left us with an automatic style when it comes to performing his works, and although many artists have briefly branched from the detailed naturalism Stanislavsky presented, such as Meyerhold and Vakhtangov in Russia and the Wooster Group and Andrei Serban in America, the first impulse has always been to return to it. In this way, Chekhov's body of work has been bound into a theatrical straitjacket. However, as I look at Chekhov's dramatic works with fresh eyes, I find a number of elements that point to the ludicrous nature of his characters and their situations and that foreshadow the notion labeled theater of the absurd. In an almost mechanical way, characters shift from discussing their darkest fears and most intense emotions to daily routines and right back again. Indeed, Chekhov's plays could be seen as a tragicomic review of the absurd extremes to which human beings will go to make up for their embarrassments.

With all this in mind, I propose to write a full-length play deconstructing Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* with a highly modern, absurdist twist. By expanding and elevating prevalent themes and structures in *Uncle Vanya*, I am hoping to create my own original piece. This work stems from a deep love of Chekhov, but I hope to not be tied down to what I have discovered in his text, and instead use it as a springboard to employ my own creative ideas.

Courses taken both at Simon's Rock and during my junior year away have prepared me for this project. While at Simon's Rock I took numerous theater classes. However, it wasn't until I was at the National Theater Institute during my junior year abroad that I took my first playwriting class, an intense introduction to the discipline. There I found myself writing new scenes every week and watching them performed in front of me. By the end of the semester I had completed a one-act play, which was given a staged reading. This experience inspired me to tackle a full-length play. By using *Uncle Vanya*'s basic story line and characters as a jumping off point, I hope to expand my work to a longer length and by the end of the process have created a piece that is distinctly my own and separate from Chekhov's work. This semester I am continuing to take playwriting, further contributing to my development as a playwright. It is with all this in mind that I am confident in my ability to write for the stage.

I do not anticipate taking the finished script to full production while at Simon's Rock. Theater is a collaborative effort and the vision of the director or the actors can quickly dominate that of the playwright. Instead, I hope to utilize cold readings with actors throughout the writing process, culminating with an informal reading of the final draft to showcase the play.

¹ Allen, David, *Performing Chekhov* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 11.

² Smeliansky, Anatoly, "Chekhov at the Moscow Art Theater," *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, ed. Vera Gottlieb and Paul Allain (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), p. 30.

