



Uncle Vanya

by Anton Chekhov

Naturalism has become so predominant in our theatre that we barely notice or acknowledge the fact that it is a system that marked a radical change in the way acting and directing reshaped the experience of drama. Gone were the declamatory performances, the repertoire of stock characters and an actor's set pieces to a spectator and instead audiences were invited to share in real and tangible representations of lives. Central to this upheaval was the work of the playwright Anton Chekhov and the practitioner, Constantin Stanislavski. The play, UNCLE VANYA, is a wonderful example of a naturalistic text; there are no heroes, heroines or villains but a cast of characters who are three-dimensional. They are endlessly contradictory, valiant but flawed, admirable and frustrating, tragic and funny. Their lives are not directed by the will of fate or the hand of God, but lived out in their own struggle to make sense of what happens and to try and shape their happiness or to deal with their sense of desolation. These people are not Kings and Queens, aristocrats or rulers, but ordinary beings like ourselves.

Greg Hersov, the director of this production, suggests that this naturalism makes it a play ideally suited to the Royal Exchange Theatre because we are amongst the action, the exits and entrances coming through the audience, binding us into the idea that these are real lives rather than a spectacle that we look down on or in upon as we might in an end-on production or through the frame of a proscenium arch.

In working with the designer, Greg wanted to capture the sense of disruption on the estate where the play is set. This takes many forms; Serebryakov and Yelena's arrival from the city to live on the estate; the dislocated routine of the day where meals are taken at odd hours and the samovar of tea goes cold in the waiting; dark, stormy nights where people are still awake; the inertia of Vanya who has stopped working; Vanya's attraction for Yelena; Sonya's unrequited love for Astrov; Astrov's fascination for Yelena. And so it goes on, sometimes just below the surface, at other times rupturing the composure of the

household. This is achieved in the setting by using fragments of rooms at the ends of the performance space, like an oddly framed photograph. It does not break with the naturalism for the furnishings are all of the period and the place, distressed by age and a lack of care. The arrangement is a metaphor for the way we suddenly see things in quite another way when our lives are interrupted by drama or distress.

Activity

- *Look for moments in the script that you empathise with. It might be something that has happened to you, a snatch of conversation that reminds you of a discussion yesterday or a situation that you understand in some way. Try writing a diary account in the first person for each of the characters in this scene. What are they thinking and feeling? This might help you to explore what Stanislavski thinks of as inner motive forces, the way in which the words and actions of a character are made into your own in performance.*
- *Plan a setting for this play in a different space, perhaps end-on or a thrust stage, and see whether you can achieve your own metaphor in the design to capture the idea of disruption and dislocation. Try and stay within the conventions of naturalism and look for the reality of time and place in the spaces you invent.*

In preparing to mount this production, Greg Hersov read the play nine times; each time from the point of view of one character. His aim here was to see the event through the particular eyes of the chosen role. This offers the opportunity to examine each and every instant and to think about what Stanislavski terms the units and objectives for moments of the action, and the super-objective of the character within the life of the play. Thus we might begin to understand the minor motives for a character at any given moment but also how these objectives converge to offer the over-arching purpose, the super-objective, for the play. Vanya wants to make his feelings for Yelena apparent at various stages during the action, he also wants to make sense of

the fact that he has served the Professor all his life and now feels disenchanted. These are objectives we can marry to certain units of action. Remember that our understanding of a character lies not just with what she or he says and does; it is also what is said and done to her or him that shapes our perceptions.

Activity

- You might like to consider this approach to preparing a role for performance. Choose one character from the script of *UNCLE VANYA* and read the text from this point-of-view. Make notes on what you learn about the character. Choose a short scene and explore how performing the sequence is influenced by your insights.
- Think about the super-objective for Vanya. If you have seen the play, you could identify this production's super-objective for the character. Is it the same as the decision you make after reading the script? Why do you have a different interpretation or why do you agree?

Greg Hersov talks about the very modern sensibility of this play. Some of this is bound up in the issues that are addressed and it is interesting to remember that issues about ecology, about women's emancipation and about healthcare and living conditions, are not something that we have invented. The references in this play, set possibly in 1896, could well be ideas expressed and explored today. But this sense of *UNCLE VANYA* being contemporary is more centrally about the self-absorption of the characters, that they are largely bound up in their own concerns and interests and communicate clumsily with one another because there is little sense of a common purpose or a shared project. They are isolated in their self-interest. Some people have argued that this is to do with living in an era of change and of our being uncertain about the direction and focus of our lives. Others have argued that it is to do with the ending of a century and the awareness of a changing era but that the transformation is unpredictable and unidentifiable; this is sometimes referred to as *fin de siècle* - the end of a cycle. The Professor is bound up with his old age and his health and is self-pitying. Vanya is consumed with his love for Yelena, is deeply attached to the memory of his mother and his love for his sister. He is consumed with regret at lost or missed opportunities, of not wanting to go into the world and not being able to function in the world as it is. You will be able to identify many more issues for each of the characters.

Activity

- Using a copy of the script and having chosen a character, see how many movements you can find in the play where the communication between your selected role and the other characters seems not to quite connect. What is the real focus of what Stanislavski would call

your character's communion? Is it a state of mind or feeling or other events in the action of the play rather than the person with whom you are in conversation? Try and bring this insight to a practical performance of a scene.

- With a partner read through the short sequence from Act 2 between Vanya and Helena that begins with Yelena's speech: **'You're an intelligent, educated man.'** And ends with her speech: **'Leave me alone. It really is becoming offensive.'**

This is a moment where Vanya reveals his desire for Yelena. Explore this in practical performance and spend some time discussing the reactions you think the characters have to one another's contribution to the dialogue. What is being heard? What is being communicated? Are they one and the same thing? What is being felt by Yelena and what is felt by Vanya? How is this apparent for your audience?

This play is rich in moods. Some of it is in the time and place of the action. A hot midday in the garden; a storm in the dark, small hours of the night; the move from summer to autumn; the shift from a high sun to a September light. It is also about the moods of the people and something to do with their emotional state rather than particularly to do with events that happen to them. Often this is painful but it is not without warmth and humour in places. Chekhov said that his plays were comedies but, as Greg Hersov observes, to realise this play entirely as comedy would mean that we would not connect with the feelings and predicaments that we share. He sees this play as being an opportunity to plumb the depths, to uncover the ugliness and the beauty in people and find elements of surprise for us as an audience.

Activity

- Identify moments where you think humour arises for the characters. How might you stage these so that it does not overwhelm the deeper meanings of the action and make the mood seem trivial or absurd?
- Explore the scene between Astrov and Vanya in Act 4 where the suicide attempt is spoken about. Here Vanya observes himself to be such a fool, though: **'shoot twice and miss myself both times! That's something I shall never forgive myself.'** This is a scene that could become farcical if it was not treated with sensitivity. How would you direct this to reveal the pain for Vanya and acknowledge his own recognition that he has to go on living and that he wishes that he could somehow live the rest of his life differently?
- Design and plot a lighting sequence for each of the Acts of the play that recognises and enhances the moods of the action. Make notes about how the atmosphere underpins our sense of the turmoil, crisis or pain in the characters' lives.

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