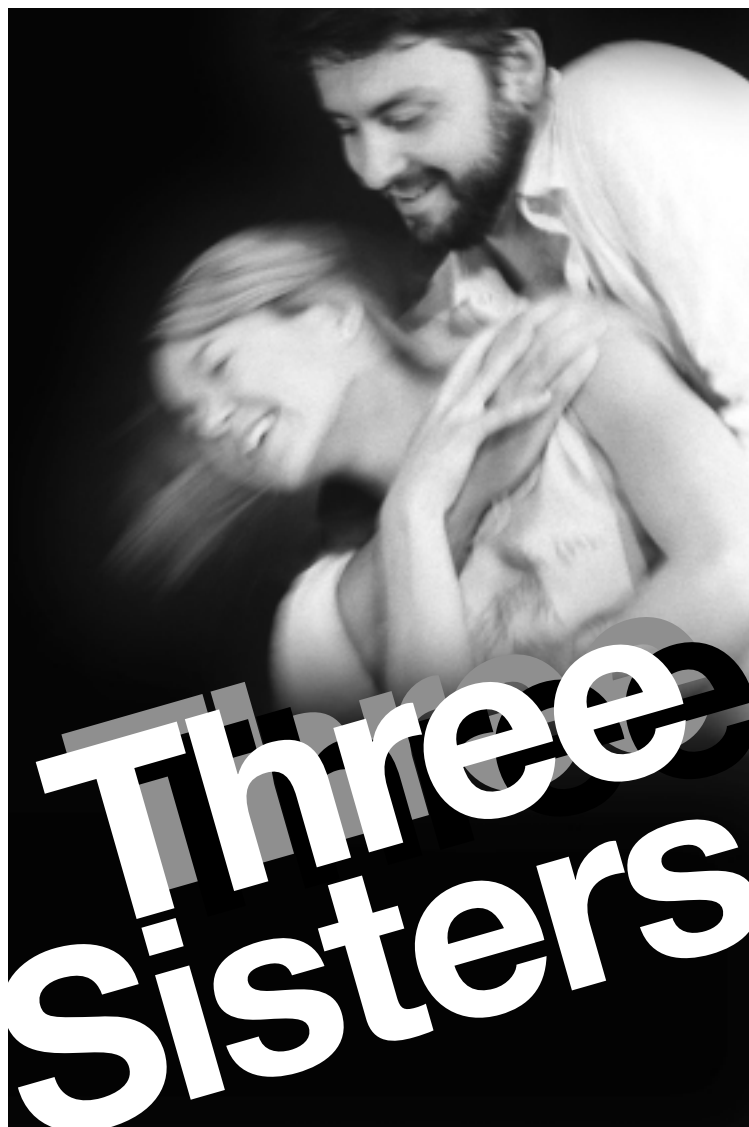


Three Sisters Workpack

Contents

The play	2
Interview	6
Katie Mitchell's rehearsal process	8
For discussion	9
Practical exercises	10
Written work and research	11
Related materials	12



Three Sisters
by Anton Chekhov

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www.nationaltheatre.org.uk

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The play

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

In *Uncle Vanya* and *Ivanov* Chekhov was concerned with the plight of the individual in his struggle against the complacent group. In *The Cherry Orchard* and *Three Sisters* something new has happened: it is not the liberating individual against the complacent group, it is that the desire for liberation has passed into the group as a whole.

For the three sisters, Olga, Masha, Irina, and for all those characters who orbit around the Prozorov household, there is a longing to make sense of life. There is a pressing need to have a sense of a future distinct from the stagnant and boring military-provincial society in which they live. Virtually everyone wants change; virtually no one believes it is possible. It is the sensibility of a generation which sits up all night talking about the need for revolution, and is too tired next morning to do anything at all, even about its own immediate problems. They fantasize about returning to Moscow; they talk about the need to work and yet they represent a generation whose whole energy is consumed in the very process of becoming conscious of its own inadequacy and impotence.

A synopsis of Katie Mitchell's 2003 National Theatre production

ACT 1: The play opens on Irina's twentieth birthday. Their father, Sergei Prozorov, died a year ago to the day and Olga, the eldest sister,

feels a responsibility to host a celebration. She has invited Baron Tuzenbach (Irina's suitor) and his friend Solyony, both military men. Also present are Masha, the middle sister, and Dr Chebutykin, the army doctor who knows the family from their Moscow days and has lived with them since Sergei's death.

Irina has had an epiphany that very morning and has decided that the key to life is work. She enthuses to Dr Chebutykin about her plans, but Olga wryly observes that although Irina used to rise at seven, she now lies in bed until nine each day. Masha is depressed and announces that she is going home. Chief Officer Protopopov has sent a vulgar cake, much to their hilarity. Baron Tuzenbach tells them to expect a visit from the army's new Battery Commander, Colonel Vershinin. They are thrilled when they hear he is from Moscow, the city in which they were born and to which they hope to return in the autumn. When Vershinin arrives, he says that he knew their father and regales them with memories of Moscow. At first the sisters don't remember who he is, but then Masha recollects talk of a love-sick major, a title to which Vershinin owns up. Masha decides to stay for lunch after all.

Masha's husband Kulygin gives his sister-in-law a book he has written on the history of the local school where he teaches. When Irina reminds him he gave her the same thing at her last birthday, he gives the book to Vershinin. Realising he has intruded on a birthday party, he makes to go, but Olga and Irina insist that he stay. Chebutykin, the alcoholic doctor, plans to indulge in a knees-up, but Masha warns him not to touch a drop. The sisters are desperate to impress the handsome Vershinin and introduce him with great pride to their brother Andrey: he's an academic in Moscow and speaks many foreign languages; he's good with his hands and an accomplished musician. The only blot in his copybook is that he has taken a fancy to a 'local' girl, Natasha, who the sisters consider to be beneath him.

Natasha arrives late for lunch, and Olga criticises the colour of her belt. Two young

The company
photo Ivan Kyncl



The play

military men Fedotik and Rode turn up, and Fedotik takes a couple of photographs of the group. They toast first Irina and then Natasha, with the hope that she find herself a suitable husband. (Masha has informed them earlier that she is after Chief Officer Protopopov.) Andrey runs after her as she tries to leave and proposes marriage. They kiss and Fedotik surreptitiously captures the moment on camera.

ACT TWO: It is twenty-one months later. Natasha and Andrey are married with a baby son, Bobik. Andrey has given up his academic career to become a civil servant in the district council. His boss is Chief Officer Protopopov. There is a party planned for that evening which Natasha hopes to cancel, but Andrey informs her that the visiting circus performance is a Prozorov family tradition and any such decision would have to be made by his sisters, since they run the house. Natasha tells Andrey that Bobik is unwell, his room is damp and they will have to put him on a special diet. She wants to move Bobik into Irina's room. She



Dominic Rowan and
Lucy Whybrow
photo Ivan Kyncl

has ordered her husband yoghurt for his supper as the doctor has told her it's the only way he will lose weight.

Ferapont comes in with council papers for Andrey to deal with, despite it being a bank holiday. Andrey is frustrated in both his marriage and his work, and because he is afraid his sisters would laugh at him, shares his unhappiness with the almost deaf Ferapont.

Masha and Vershinin find themselves alone in the drawing room. They are deeply attracted but are both (unhappily) married. Vershinin makes a pass at her. They are interrupted by Irina and Baron Tuzenbach. He has escorted her home from the telegraph office where she is now working. The Baron is smothering Irina with his affection. While they wait for tea, Vershinin is called away: his wife has tried to poison herself.

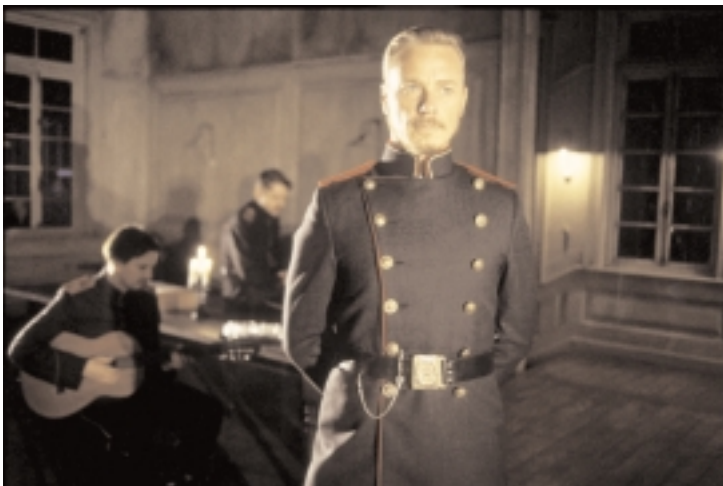
Tuzenbach and Solyony engage in a heart to heart. Solyony has been causing havoc by insulting Natasha, by eating all the sweets and by making bizarre chicken impersonations whenever Tuzenbach tries to speak. Tuzenbach has been in unrequited love with Irina for a couple of years. Solyony is also in love with Irina and he tries to talk to Tuzenbach about it, but instead argues with just about everyone in the room and storms out. It is approaching nine o'clock and the circus performers are due to arrive. While they are waiting, Irina and Andrey improvise a scene from *Swan Lake*. Their fun is interrupted by Natasha, who recruits Dr Chebutykin to break up the party. Her Bobik isn't well. Out of earshot, Masha calls Natasha a "small town bitch". Everyone leaves except Irina, to whom Solyony declares his love. She is horrified. The maid tells Natasha that Protopopov is waiting outside to take her for a sleigh ride and, despite everything, Natasha prepares to go. Olga, Kulygin and Vershinin arrive, expecting the party to be in full flow. Natasha dashes out to her assignation with Protopopov.

The play

ACT THREE: A devastating fire has wiped out a whole street in the town, and its victims have flocked to the Prozorov household where Olga is trying to organise clothing and shelter. Anfisa, the old nanny, begs Olga not to throw her out. She has been with the family for thirty years. Olga reassures her, but when Natasha comes in and finds Anfisa (a servant) sitting down, she orders her to get out. Olga and Natasha embark on a full-blown argument about who runs the house. Natasha wants to get rid of Anfisa because she is eighty years old and useless. Masha, who has been resting on the bed, leaves the room in disgust. Kulygin enters in search of Masha and tells Olga that if he hadn't married Masha he would have married her. The Doctor arrives, drunk and upset. He tells Olga that he has unwittingly killed one of his patients.

Irina brings Tuzenbach and Vershinin into the bedroom to discuss a benefit concert for the fire victims. Unnoticed, Dr Chebutykin has picked up a precious china clock which belonged to Mrs Prozorov and deliberately smashes it, much to Irina's horror, before leaving. Eventually, Kulygin, Tuzenbach and Irina sleep giving Vershinin and Masha the opportunity to connect romantically via a hummed tune. Vershinin is about to touch her when Kulygin suddenly wakes up.

Ben Daniels
photo Ivan Kyncl



Fedotik enters and performs a mad dance. He has lost everything in the fire, all his equipment and letters and photographs. Solyony arrives with coffee and Irina orders him out of the room. Solyony wonders why Baron Tuzenbach is allowed in and not him. Vershinin tells him that they were all about to leave. Masha gives them all bed linen to take downstairs. As they go, Vershinin and Masha hum their tune.

Kulygin, Irina and Masha remain in the bedroom. Masha tells Irina that their brother Andrey has mortgaged the house which belongs to all four of them. She believes that Natasha has got her hands on the money. Kulygin is upset that Masha has brought it up in front of Irina. He says that everyone knows that Andrey owes money all around the town. Masha and Kulygin get into a blazing row. Irina is inconsolable.

Andrey demands to know why his sisters are so upset with him. He admits that he has mortgaged the house and asks for their forgiveness. Vershinin whistles from the garden where he is waiting for Masha. Masha has told her sisters that she and Vershinin are in love. Olga is disgusted. It has been a devastating evening. Olga advises Irina to marry the Baron. Irina does not love him but agrees to marry him if Olga promises that they can still go to Moscow, which she does.

ACT FOUR: Outside the Prozorov house. Irina's bags are packed; she is leaving tomorrow to marry the Baron. They are moving to another town where the Baron has a job at the steelworks and Irina will begin work as a teacher. They will begin a new life of work. The Army have been stationed elsewhere and are leaving. Masha is waiting in the garden for Vershinin to say goodbye. Dr Chebutykin seems agitated; he has been recruited to be on hand for medical assistance at a duel between Solyony and Baron Tuzenbach.

Masha finds Chebutykin alone and asks him if he was really in love with their mother. He says that he was but can "no longer recall" if she was with him. Andrey arrives pushing a pram.

The play

He can't believe that everyone is leaving, even Chebutykin, and he'll be left alone. He now has two children with Natasha, who is inside the house with Protopopov tinkling on the piano. Andrey asks for Chebutykin's advice. He tells Andrey to get out and not look back. Andrey continues to be chased by Ferapont with more council papers to be signed.

Tuzenbach tells Irina he has an errand to run, but Irina knows something happened last night although Tuzenbach won't tell her what. He asks her to tell him she loves him and she tells him she can't and doesn't. He asks her to make coffee and goes off to the duel.

Vershinin arrives to say goodbye. He apologizes to Olga for any damage he has caused. When Masha arrives they kiss passionately. His departure leaves Masha devastated. Kulygin tries to entertain them with a comedic false beard and moustache, confiscated from one of his third form boys. Natasha arrives with champagne. She will finally have the house to herself. She is angered to find a fork on the bench and storms off to find out who left it there.

Chebutykin arrives back and tells Olga that Tuzenach has been killed in a duel. Olga breaks the news to Irina. She faints. Her sisters try to console her.

Anna Maxwell Martin
photo Ivan Kyncl



Interview

Angus Wright discusses playing Kulygin in *Three Sisters*

Why does Kulygin put up with his wife's infidelity?

The simple answer is that he loves her. His mantra of praise for Masha (wonderful and marvellous are the words he uses most often), shows that he loves her but is terrified of losing her. He sees other men as a threat because he knows how lucky he is to have married such an intelligent and attractive woman, and he knows that his provincial life doesn't quite offer everything she might want or need.

In Act Three, Chekhov shows us the night that Kulygin discovers Masha's infidelity and then three or four months later, in Act Four, he shows us the final hour before the departure of the army. What Kulygin appears to have learned in those intervening months is stoicism, an acceptance of whatever life throws at you, an understanding that "it's all in



Eve Best
photo Ivan Kyncl

the lap of fate". He resolves simply to wait for Vershinin to leave and then show Masha that he is there for her, that he will not reproach her, that he will never mention it again, not even a hint. It is the action of a remarkably strong and decent man. When the moment of Masha's deepest anguish arrives, Kulygin, the stuffy, Latin-spouting schoolteacher from Act One turns out to be the perfect, supportive husband. And it's important to remember that Masha could just walk out on her husband but she doesn't. There is hope for them as a couple.

Describe Katie Mitchell's rehearsal process.

Immersion in the very specific world of the play typified the work we did on Anski's *The Dybbuk* (RSC 1992). Inhabiting the world of nineteenth-century Hassidic Jews in a shtetl in the Ukraine required a certain amount of groundwork for a bunch of British twentieth-century actors, Jewish and non-Jewish. Chanting in Hebrew and singing in Yiddish, praying, dancing, blowing a ram's horn trumpet, imitating bird calls and observing the rituals of demonic exorcism require work and Katie Mitchell's remarkable rehearsal process provides a cast of actors with everything they need. Her great skill is to present work that recreates the reality of a particular time and place whilst also mining for the truth of individual emotional responses to that world. She ensures that the whole cast has a shared frame of reference and everyone inhabits the same world.

The *Three Sisters* rehearsal process was very different. We did do research into the world of late-nineteenth-century Russia which was helpful, but my strongest memory, certainly of the first three weeks of rehearsals, is of almost constant improvisation. It's a tough discipline and most actors have an instant gut-tightening response to the very mention of the word, but what it revealed about the play was extraordinary. We improvised scenes and events from the characters' pasts, going as far back as the birth of Irina (attended by Dr. Chebutykin), and charting different points in

Interview

the three sisters' and Andrey's upbringing in Moscow. There were improvisations about the tormenting of Tuzenbach at military academy for his German name, Vershinin's wife attempting suicide, the Prozorov's leaving Moscow for the provinces, Kulygin's proposal to Masha, the parties and dancing in the house during General Prozorov's time and, a year before the play begins, his death. When we eventually came to work through the start of Act One it felt much less like the beginning of the characters' lives and more a continuation of a life about which one already had a fair amount of information. We also improvised events from our own lives, personal experiences that related to the major themes of the play. All this work, combined with waltzing, the odd moment of military drilling and movement and voice sessions feeds into the work on the text itself.

Katie Mitchell has been less reverent than many directors are with Chekhov and has worked to find the parallels between Chekhov's time and ours. If many of us now have no concept of who Lermontov is and why Solyony compares himself to the poet, then change it to Byron so the reference has a similar effect on the listener as a reference to Lermontov would have done in Moscow in 1901.

Eve Best
photo Ivan Kyncl



In conclusion, Katie Mitchell's rehearsal process brings out the very best in actors: she is determined to get you to tell the truth, and nothing but the truth.

Why do you think Three Sisters was such a radical play in its day? Is it still radical?

The play was radical in its day for showing life as it is lived, in all its seemingly banal and humdrum detail, and from out of that banality revealing great truths about the human condition. Contemporary Russians began to talk about "calling in on the Prozorovs" when they went to see *Three Sisters*. Chekhov's break from tradition was a break from melodrama, in which the good end happily and the bad unhappily. Instead he crafted a world that did not allow for easy sentimental responses, where, as in life, no one has the answers. This unsettling quality is what makes it a radical play today. The depth of detail and characterisation allows for as many reactions to the play as there are audience members. It strikes us on a very personal and intimate level. There is still much debate about whether this or that Chekhov play was meant to be a comedy or drama, but the truth is that his plays are so brilliant they defy labels.

Katie Mitchell's rehearsal process

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Director Katie Mitchell was allotted a large room at the National and given eight weeks in which to rehearse for *Three Sisters*. The day would usually begin at 10:30am with a physical warm up led by Kate Flatt, the Movement Director or individually by each actor. Several times a week this would include a thorough vocal warm-up led by Voice Coach, Kate Godfrey. It is a vital beginning to the very intense method of rehearsals that is a hallmark of Katie Mitchell's work.

THE FIRST TWO WEEKS

The first two weeks focused on two key aspects. Firstly, the text. And secondly on improvisation. The whole company sat around a huge table and under Katie's inspired guidance, analysed the text, line by line. The text is the bible of the production. Every decision an actor makes about his character and motivation must have its foundation there. If an actor says, 'I think my character is really angry here', Katie would ask for proof from the text. How do you *know* he is angry? What evidence do you have?

Back history is everything that the characters have been through before the action of the play begins. Katie used constant improvisation to help the actors construct the panoply of relationships and events that shaped the characters lives. This work was extraordinary

Katie Mitchell
photo Ivan Kyncl



in its intensity, imagination and most importantly for the results it yielded. The company of actors were totally united in the world of the play. Katie Mitchell's work is about creating the conditions for great acting to happen. And she really puts her actors through their creative paces.

WEEKS THREE, FOUR and FIVE.

Armed with a rigorous understanding of the text and back history, Katie led the actors to explore the physical work of the play. The rehearsal room was turned into the actual Prozorov House. The layout of the house was marked up on the floor, even though on the stage we only ever get to see one or two rooms in each act. If a character comes from their bedroom before making an entrance into the drawing room, they were able to explore that journey for real in the rehearsal room. This helped the actors to inhabit their characters' physical, emotional and psychological landscape. Weeks three, four and five were about exploration, discovery and invention.

WEEKS SIX, SEVEN and EIGHT

These weeks were about harnessing the ideas that worked, abandoning ideas that were obsolete, and practising the play's sequence of events. For this purpose Katie broke down the play into units. Each unit is a passage of text leading up to an event and its aftermath. For example, in Act One Kulygin's entrance marks the beginning of a unit. Irina telling him that he gave her the same present last year would be the event. Kulygin's speech about the Sabbath would be the aftermath (his attempt to recover!) which would bring that unit to an end. Each unit was given a name and a structure and this is how Katie and the actors rehearsed sections of the play. Towards the end of this period, all these units were pieced together and the action of the play in its entirety began to emerge. Katie then began running whole Acts. And finally the company ran the whole play.

For discussion

1. CHARACTER

Chekhov introduces us to a panoply of characters. Olga is an overworked spinster who would love to be married. Chebutykin is a lonely alcoholic; unlovable and with no love to give. Tuzenbach is in love with a woman who doesn't love him. Solyony is in love with the same girl. Andrey has messed up his academic career and is unhappily married.

What is each of the characters dealing with? Which character do you most relate to and why? What would you advise these characters to do in order to get what they want from life?

2. THEMES

a) THE PASSAGE OF TIME.

Chekhov sets the story of *Three Sisters* over three and a half years. Why do you think he does this? How else does he explore the idea of time passing in the play? What symbols does he use to represent time in motion?

b) THWARTED DESIRES

Tuzenbach is in love with Irina who does not reciprocate his affections. How is each of the other characters thwarted?

c) DEATH AND ILLNESS

At the beginning of the play we are told that Sergei Prozorov died exactly a year ago to the day. The play closes with the death of Tuzenbach in a duel with Solyony. Sandwiched between these two deaths is a host of other instances in which Chekhov explores the themes of death and illness. It is interesting to note that Chekhov wrote this play a year before he died. How do you think that might have affected what he was writing about in *Three Sisters*? If you knew you had one year to live, what would you write about?

d) FAMILY

Even in the best of families there are disagreements. What state is the Prozorov family in? Is Andrey more sinned against than sinning? Why does Masha have an affair with Vershinin? What type of man is Kulygin? How has the family been affected by the death of their parents?

Anna Maxwell Martin
photo Ivan Kyncl



Practical exercises

1. IMPROVISATION

a) WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

Improvise what happens to each character at the end of the play. Decide who is going to play whom and then literally pick up where Chekhov leaves off at the end of ACT FOUR. What happens next?

b) ON THE COUCH

Assign each character a psychotherapist who will listen to their problems; try to advise them what to do.

c) THE SISTERS

Improvise a scene in which Masha asks her sisters' advice: should she stay with Kulygin or leave him for Vershinin?

d) ANDREY

Set up a scene where Andrey confronts his wife, Natasha, about her affair with Protopopov.

e) SOLYONY

Solyony was about to tell Tuzenbach about his feelings for Irina in ACT TWO, but in the end he decides against it. Create a scenario where Solyony confronts Tuzenbach about his feelings for Irina.

Eve Best and
Anna Maxwell Martin
photo Ivan Kyncl



Written work and research

1. REVOLUTION

Three Sisters spans the years from 1897–1900.

The play includes a lot of talk about the need to work. Indeed the ideas of Marx were taking hold in Russian society at the time. Research the years 1900–1917, the year of the revolution and trace how Marx's ideas influenced the transformation of Russian society.

2. STANISLAVSKI

Konstantin Stanislavski, the famous Russian actor and director who directed most of Chekhov's plays, had a major impact on how theatre was produced. Research the innovations he made to the art of theatre, in particular his impact on the art of acting.

Lorraine Ashbourne
photo Ivan Kyncl



Related materials

The Russian Century by Brian Moynahan
(Seven Dials, 2000)

Natasha's Dance by Orlando Figes
(Pimlico, 2003)

Stanislavski For Beginners by David Allen
(Writers and Readers, 1999)

Stanislavski: My Life In Art by Jean Benedetti
(Methuen, 1999)

Anna Maxwell Martin
photo Ivan Kyncl

