Giving Myself Permission: An Account of the Performance of the Role of Masha in *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov

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GIVING MYSELF PERMISSION:

AN ACCOUNT OF THE PREPARATION AND PERFORMANCE OF
THE ROLE OF MASHA IN THREE SISTERS BY ANTON CHEKHOV

By

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A THESIS

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This thesis is a documentation of my rehearsal and performance process in the University of Nebraska’s 1999 production of *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov. The document is composed of six parts: introduction, research, rehearsal and performance journal, responses, conclusion and appendix. The introduction gives a general overview of my thoughts on acting and how this project was chosen. The research portion focuses on how the life and times of Chekhov pertain to my vision of Masha. The journal focuses on my character progression as Masha. The response section offers outside feedback on my performance. The conclusion sums up my thoughts and feelings about the whole experience. The appendix include copies of the reviews, publicity information, Kennedy Center/American College Theatre Festival Commendations and pictures used for character development.
INTRODUCTION

While poring through my research books, I've been analyzing and re-working my ideas about family, friendship, love and work. (Perhaps this is because these are all themes in Chekhov's work. Hmm.) Anyway, I have never been in such conflict about life as I have been in graduate school; for the past two years I've questioned every big and little choice I've made in my life. I know it sounds deep but these decisions have affected my acting life tremendously. I think it has a lot to do with the solitary existence that is graduate school. My studies became my one and only focus; needless to say, I spent the overwhelming majority of my time with myself which made me vulnerable to everything.

As a child I had no problem making myself look the fool when it came to school and theatre (the centers of my universe for as long as I can remember). As a child my director told me to act with "spirit"; learn my lines, songs, and blocking but then infuse what I'm saying and doing with spirit and the part will come alive. I took what she said seriously and as a result I always felt like what I did came from the heart. My characterizations may have been perfectly vile and way off; I can't remember; but as raw as it was, it was still real.

The phrase my high school director used was, "throw yourself in." That's exactly what I did. I committed myself to everything and somehow it all worked out. What I remember most about this time though, was the great fun I had; I never wanted to leave the theatre because I was experiencing so much joy.

I excelled in college. I did well in my classes and played some great roles. What was different about acting in college though was that I was getting 'trained.' There was little to no talk of things concerning my 'spirit' and if there was it was overshadowed by the 'training.' The setting was wonderfully conducive to doing work
and exploring what it was to have a craft. I think I got so involved in the technical side of getting the craft ‘right’ and incorporating all the feedback into my work that I lost what was most important to what I was doing - myself. I left college thinking that I needed more training because I wasn’t ‘perfect’ yet. Obtaining an MFA was in the near future.

So here I am - in the last year of my MFA program and I’m absolutely thrilled to be working on this project; I’ve wanted to do Chekhov for a long time. The discussion about it began last spring. My fellow grads and I wanted to do some kind of group project; whether or not it turned out to be our thesis was something to be determined. Virginia suggested Three Sisters with her directing. (I couldn’t believe it! Masha was one of my dream roles.) We were all in agreement about it – a great playwright, great roles, lots of writing potential.

Virginia spent the next month talking to us here and there about the characters, certain moments we should look at, what we were thinking about the script and what she was thinking about casting. I reread the play a few times and felt drawn to Masha and Irina though I was getting a new perspective on Natasha as well. Virginia seemed to be leaning towards Natasha for me. She told me to reread it again thinking about Natasha as the life force of the play. I kept thinking about how much I wanted to do Masha but I really trusted Virginia’s opinion; if she thought Natasha was the best route for me then so be it.

Imagine my surprise when Virginia made her final decision about casting – I was to play Masha. She said her decision had a lot to do with the breakthroughs I was making on a scene in dialects class. I was just beside myself; not only because Masha was a dream but also because I really felt like I earned it. This decision began to lift my shaky confidence because I had a really good feeling about taking this on. And for the
first time in a long time I was ready to "throw myself in."

Well, the time has now come. Ready, set, go!
PART ONE: THE RESEARCH

I. Connections to Chekhov

All my hope is pinned to the future. I am only twenty-six. Perhaps I shall succeed in achieving something, though time flies fast.

(Chekhov to Grigorovich, 1886
The Portable Chekhov)

When Chekhov wrote this letter to the renowned Russian writer he was on the brink of fame. He was gradually moving away from the comic escapades in his "Chekhonte" works to stories and plays with more depth. Two years later he received the Pushkin Prize for distinguished literary achievement and he was still to go on to greater success with the publication of his finest short stories and his four great dramatic works - The Seagull, Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters, and The Cherry Orchard.

I am only twenty-six as well. Now more than any other time in my life do I feel the future in my hands and now more than any other time in my life do I feel how fast the time is flying. No, I probably won't go down in the annals of history as Chekhov has but I would like to think that someday I might make a difference. Since the first time I read Three Sisters I have felt a connection with Masha and now having read all this information about Chekhov I feel a connection to him as well. He is a kindred spirit. After just reading a couple of books I was reluctant to continue reading because the similarities scared me. I felt like all the information was being directed right to me. I started to think about the song "Virginia Woolf" by the Indigo Girls. Singer/songwriter Emily Saliers felt a connection to Virginia Woolf and wrote the following in tribute. It captures everything I feel about Chekhov:

you published your diary
and that's how i got to know you
a key to the room of your own and a mind without end
and here's a young girl
on a kind of a telephone line through time
and the voice at the other end comes like a long lost friend
so i know i'm all right
life will come and life will go
still i feel it's all right
cause i just got a letter to my soul
and when my whole life is on the tip of my tongue
empty pages for the no longer young
the apathy of time laughs in my face
you say "each life has its place"
the hatches were battened
the thunderclouds rolled and the critics stormed
and battle surrounded the white flag of your youth
if you need to know that you weathered the storm
of cruel mortality
a hundred years later, i'm sitting here living proof
so you'll know you're all right
life will come and life will go
still you'll feel it's all right
someone'll get a letter to your soul
when your whole life is on the tip of your tongue
empty pages for the no longer young
the apathy of time laughed in your face
did you hear me say, "each life has its place"?
the place where you hold me
dark in a pocket of truth
the moon had swallowed the sun and the light of the earth
and so it was for you
when the river eclipsed your life
and sent your soul like a message in a bottle to me
and it was my rebirth
so we know we're all right...

Connections

- “Despite having published 'a couple of hundredweight of stories,' Chekhov
still claimed not to know where his strength and weakness lay” (Hingley, 120). I
often feel this way. I guess it comes from wanting to do so much.

- Ronald Hingley says of Chekhov, "That human personality is ultimately an
enigma this enigmatic genius has demonstrated again and again in his works. Is there
any reason why we should expect him to have contravened his own norm in his own
life?” (1) Exactly. Chekhov was hypocritical and flawed just like the rest of the
world. He could frolic and schmooze with the best of them but then could just as easily
get lost in his own world - to collect his thoughts or find a moment of silence and then reveal what he really felt to only those he trusted. That's what humans do. We change our minds, we grow, we evolve. That enigmatic nature is the greatest gift Chekhov gave his characters. What actor wouldn't want to pull the pieces apart and then try to put them back together?

- Chekhov loved to travel but got bored easily. He disliked the extravagance. I like to travel but I can be known to get anxious and I definitely dislike snooty extravagance.
- Much of the time Chekhov felt like an outside “insider.” He never really felt part of the social set. Certainly there were people he preferred to others but it’s that sense of wanting to be somewhere else even though you can function normally within other groups of people.
- Perfectionism, artistic creativity and asceticism. These were ideals for Chekhov. They are for me as well. He was also highly critical of himself and his work. He says more than several times that he’ll never write again. I don’t know how many times I’ve said I’ll never act again. We are our own worst critics - constantly scrutinizing and questioning but then also driven by the need to keep working.
- Inner conflict - wanting to be successful yet disgusted by fame at the same time. Chekhov also had a love hate relationship with his careers. He started writing as a way to support his family. Medicine was going to be his career. Although writing seemed to rule he felt guilty when he wasn’t practicing. He never really went a long period of time without practicing though. I always think I should be pursuing something more practical.
- Politically, Chekhov was noncommittal. He took no interest and didn’t
hold any specific views. What he did believe in though was man fulfilling his destiny. He understood the hardships of those less fortunate and helped others live through the struggle of day to day life. He built schools for peasants, cared for their sick and supported women’s education. He sometimes may have resented it and found it tedious but he did it because he knew it was right. I couldn’t agree more.

- Chekhov said, “My flame burns low and steady without flaring and crackling. That’s why I never dash off fifty or sixty pages in a night, or get so absorbed in work as not to go to bed when tired” (Hingley, 121). Nothing is so important that you should go without sleep. I simply cannot function without it; I fall into delirium.

- Chekhov said of his early writing, “columnar journalism was like probing a chronic anal stricture or making a pharmaceutical preparation from a flea’s sex organs...” (Hingley, 48). What a fabulously sick sense of humor. I love it.

- Chekhov also said, “evil passions are just as much a part of life as are good ones” (Hingley, 86). If a person can’t get a grip on this they’re in for a lifetime of heartache.

- His writing matures because he matures. He starts to see the “big picture.” Seeing life for what it really is - the gray areas of life. Perhaps looking back on his early career and seeing that little of it came from the heart. He gets older, he looks at the escapades of his older brothers, his trip to Sakhalin. Nothing is black and white. (He goes through a time when influenced by Tolstoy’s morality and the stories reflect this.) But he snaps out of it. Once he gets to the plays he does not moralize, he does not judge. Let the audience decide.

I am sure in my teens and early twenties I was much more priggish than I’d like to believe. I know I tried not to force my own morals onto others but I set such high standards for myself some of it must have seeped out in my relations to other people.
The last few years have given me great opportunity for intensive self-study and
now I see how precarious life can be no matter how much I try to control it; and the
more you open your mind and heart to every possible glitch and change the better off
you’ll be. It’s the insecurities and imperfections I appreciate the most. You gain more
compassion for your fellow man, a greater appreciation for the complexities of just
living day to day, and a finely tuned sense of humor. If you take yourself too seriously
you’ll end up with a broken heart.

II. Chekhov and Women

The most puzzling contradiction of Chekhov’s personality is his attitude
towards women. Chekhov certainly paints unflattering pictures of women in his stories
and in some of his correspondence. On more than one occasion Chekhov said women
“rob men of their youth.” Most of the female characters in his stories are either weak
and sappy or bitchy and overbearing. Chekhov’s later writings reveal more mature
characterizations of women. In Three Sisters alone he gives us four fabulously
complex women.

I think Chekhov’s misogynistic view of women was a sign of his experience
and influences. He was immature, young, had little experience with women and had a
father and two older brothers who didn’t have the best relationships with women. We
also have to remember that he was writing for an audience that didn’t hold a very high
opinion of women. Chekhov was also very preoccupied with his writing and medical
practices. What he sounds like is a contemporary man (and contemporary woman)
who wants to have his own life first. He’s right when he says women “rob men of
their youth.” Men do the same thing to women. (Although at this point in Russian
history women’s rights were still a point of contention).
Aside from some “off” comments made in correspondence Chekhov thought highly of the women with whom he kept company. However, the women in his life were very different from the women in his stories. Chekhov enjoyed women who were his equals. They were intelligent, self-sufficient, passionate, opinionated, fearless and witty. He believed in the woman’s right to fulfill her potential and supported his sister and a few other women through their education. De Maegd-Soep adds, “…Chekhov, with his strong faith in the power of education, stressed the fact that woman’s condition could be improved mainly by better upbringing” (93).

When it came to love Chekhov had very specific ideas. He said in an 1897 letter to Suvorin, “friendship is above love […] even in marriage friendship is to be preferred to love” (De Maegd-Soep, 57) I believe he held love in such high regard that he didn’t want to waste it. Chekhov did have relations with women. The most famous of these were the three Lydias. The intricacies of the relations are vague and critics continue to speculate but through Chekhov’s correspondence with these women it can be seen that they were each in some way special to him. Chekhov eventually finds his ideal love - in Olga Knipper.

III. Olga Knipper

Olga Knipper was one of the first members of the Moscow Art Theatre and the wife of Chekhov.

Knipper’s desire to pursue the arts was squelched as a young girl because it wasn’t ladylike, the other people in her social circle wouldn’t approve, her place was in the home; she experienced the same prejudices as other females did. However, as a result of her father’s death she was able to break free. Money was tight after her father’s death so Knipper and her mother (a gifted singer and pianist) gave music lessons. As a result of this and other events Knipper went on to study the arts at the
Philharmonic under the tutelage of Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. Knipper did so well at the Philharmonic that when Nemirovich started the Moscow Art Theatre with Stanislavski he invited her to be one of the company members.

Chekhov met Knipper in 1898 - the beginning of his tenure as one of the major playwrights for the Moscow Art Theatre. He was taken by her performance in Tsar Fyodor and the rest, pardon the cliche, is history. It is with Knipper that Chekhov finds his ideal love. Sure, they have their differences and the relationship is far from perfect but the love is there; the kind of love based on friendship and appreciation for the other as human being. Olga was everything Chekhov looked for in a woman. Most important of all Olga’s attractive traits was love of her art. Here she was Chekhov’s complete equal. Her life was the theatre and as much as she loved Chekhov she couldn’t give up her work. Chekhov appreciated this and admired it.

Chekhov started their relationship through correspondence and though they did eventually fall in love and marry (1901), the bulk of their short-lived relationship (Chekhov dies in 1904) is played out through correspondence (Knipper was in Moscow working and Chekhov was in Yalta for the tuberculosis). This love affair through letters is one of the most passionate relationships ever documented. In their correspondence they share laughs, tears, frustrations, pet names, insecurities, passionate innuendoes; all the things that you would expect lovers to feel and think about each other. There is a palpable urgency to the correspondence that I think comes from the fact that they spent little time in each other’s company. The most poignant are those written by Knipper to Chekhov after his death. The depth of pain revealed is extraordinary.

What is also significant about Knipper is the role of Masha was written specifically for her (not necessarily based on her but most definitely written for her).
As a matter of fact, Chekhov wrote *Three Sisters* with actors of Moscow Art Theatre specifically in mind. Masha turns out to be the most challenging and the most famous role of Knipper's career. Some critics speculate that this was probably because her relationship with Chekhov was much like Masha's with Vershinin. I would have to agree because here too I have a personal connection.

I have struggled with work and personal life and being separated from the one I love. It can oftentimes produce a fierce battle with your emotions of unparalleled intensity.

**Letters**

Many letters between Chekhov and Knipper give hints about Masha; they are listed in quotations and are taken from Benedetti's *Dear Writer, Dear Actress*. I comment when necessary but I think they speak for themselves.

"I heard Uncle Sasha's confession: his dissatisfaction, his sense his life's been stupid, his debauchery, his drinking bouts, his morbid soul-searching to see if he can find one speck of purity, humanity, remorse, his desire to make reparation, and all of it delivered in a dull monotone by the light of a single candle... He is a pitiful sight, he is talking of shooting himself, but of course he won't. He kept asking if I had faith in him, if I believed he had improved after a life in a military camp. I'm sorry I wasn't kinder to him, but I really am disgusted by some of the things he has done this summer. I just listened in silence and made no answer. He felt it." (Knipper to Chekhov, 16 August 1900.)

Many critics think this was used as a model for the relationship between Masha and Chebutykin.

"I've found the walk and I talk in low, chest tones, which, you know, you find in these aristocratic women who have a kind of elegant abruptness. But don't worry, I'm not overdoing it." (Knipper to Chekhov, 12 December 1900)

"You write that Masha spends the whole of Act 4 in black, or can it be in a grey or white blouse?" (Knipper to Chekhov, 1 January 1901)

Chekhov never comments on this. De Maegd-Soep says the black is reminiscent of *The Seagull's* Masha wearing black for mourning (323). I like the idea of Masha
mourning her life. It's very dramatic but not overstated. Masha can be subtle when
she wants to be.

"And look here, don't put on a gloomy face, not in one single act. Angry, yes; gloomy, no. People who are used to being sad inside just whistle and are often lost in thought. You often become pensive on stage when people are talking. Understand?" (Chekhov to Knipper, 2 January 1901)

So the task challenge lies in figuring out what I'm thinking about, what’s going on inside me, what keeps me going.

"Today we set Act 4. You've given me a lot, dearest, but it's difficult to play. But I love the role. Concerning Act 3, Stanislavski said I'm like Carmen, I need to be more dreamy, more restrained." (Knipper to Chekhov, 9 January 1901)

What would I be dreaming about? What would I need to restrain?

"Stanislavski created tremendous commotion on stage [Act 3] with everyone running about and getting excited, Nemirovich, on the other hand, suggested creating a lot of noise off-stage and a feeling of emptiness on stage, with a measured pace, which will be much stronger. Everyone has the right tone and we have reason to hope the play will go well. [...] I've to spend time on the role. Act 4, you know!" (Knipper to Chekhov, 11 January 1901)

Where does the emptiness and pace come from? I wonder if Act 4 will be as challenging for me as it seems to have been for Knipper? I don’t like to anticipate problems so I'll just say it will something to which I need to pay special attention.

"The tram-tram [the signal between Masha and Vershinin] is causing a problem. Nemirovich thinks we should sing out these signals like bugle calls, with mimed actions, of course. If we just speak them, they'll come out as crude or incomprehensible. [...] Uncle Sasha read Sisters and says it's the best thing you've written." (Knipper to Chekhov, 13 January 1901)

"Yesterday we had a dress run of Act 2. [...] There's nothing to say about the play, people watch it with enormous interest, oh great master. The interpretation, they say, is concert-like. [...] I had a long discussion with Nemirovich yesterday about Masha. Stanislavski says I'm over-dramatizing it. The role hasn't come to the boil yet, you see. The point of disagreement with Nemirovich is Masha's confession in Act 3. I want to do the act in a state of nerves, in fits and starts, that means the confession is strong, dramatic, i.e. the darkness of the
situation gains the upper hand over the joy of love. Nemirovich wants this joy of love, so that, despite everything, she is full of this love and doesn’t confess to it as a crime. The second act is full of this love. For Nemirovich, Act 4 is the climax; for me, it’s Act 3. What’s your response? Nemirovich suggests we do it this way: Masha asks for a continuation of Vershinin’s motif, i.e. humming quietly, of course with an eloquent face. The staging here is very important and I’m not sure Stanislavski has got it right, we’ll probably have to change it. He asks once more: Masha asks him (not humming) without looking at him, face out front, embarrassed, as it were, by this declaration. In a word we must make sure the audience understands. We’ll try it many different ways.” (Knipper to Chekhov, 15 January 1901)

In reference to the “confession” I agree with Nemirovich. I don’t think it’s a grave situation. The happiness of experiencing the kind of love of which I have been dreaming overrides anything else I might be thinking or feeling. I haven’t started thinking deeply about Acts 3 or 4 yet. That remains to be seen.

“This evening Nemirovich and I did good work on Masha, I understood everything, consolidated it, and I do love this role so terribly. It plays itself, really, doesn’t it? I won’t play the confession in a loud voice but with strong inner drive and feeling and a glimmer of happiness if I can so express it. There is almost no movement, the eyes... [...] In the second act, Nemirovich insists that Vershinin and Masha shouldn’t be lonely but that there should be the impression they have discovered one another and feel the joy of love. [...] In the third act I’m not comfortable with the fact that Stanisl. has Masha take care of Irina, who is sobbing hysterically and, on Andrei’s entrance, has the sisters take her behind the screen because she doesn’t want to see him. [...] Does it matter if I make a tiny cut in my last speech? If I find it difficult to deliver? Does it matter? I really like the shaping of Masha in the last act. The whole role is a marvel. If I ruin it, I’ll give myself up as a bad job.” (Knipper to Chekhov, 18 January 1901)

I find it very funny that Knipper asks to cut lines. I’ve always been taught “the playwright must have put it in there for a reason;” so for me the idea of cutting has been a moot point. Of course, I’ve never had a role written for me or had an intimate relationship with a playwright.

“Judging by your letters you’re all spreading utter and complete nonsense. Noise in Act III? Why noise? There’s only noise in the
distance, offstage, muffled, confused but on the stage itself everyone is drowsy, half-asleep. If you ruin Act III, the whole play goes for nothing and, in the twilight of my years, I shall be hissed off the stage. [...] Vershinin delivers tram-tram-tram as a question and you as an answer and to you this is such an original joke that you speak this 'tram-tram' with a smile. She says 'tram-tram' and laughs, not loudly, just a very little. We don't need a character as in Uncle Vanya here, but someone younger and livelier. Remember you are easily amused and easily angered. Well, my hopes are in you, sweetheart, you're a good actress. [...] If the play flops, then I'll go to Monte Carlo and gamble and drink myself silly.” (Chekhov to Knipper, 20 January 1901)

Where did Chekhov come up with ‘tram?’ I guess it's just a nonsense word. Although the ‘Monte Carlo’ line is humorous I think it very telling about Chekhov’s insecurity.

“I hear from you that in Act III you lead Irina by the hand. Why? Is that in keeping with your mood? You shouldn't move from the sofa. Doesn't Irina come to you? Honestly!” (Chekhov to Knipper, 24 January 1901).

I nearly fell over when I read this! When I read the play I never saw Masha move from the couch until she goes to see Vershinin. This makes me feel good about my instincts because once I start second guessing myself I'm in trouble.

“I've decided that by 'tram-tram' (in your version she calls, he answers), is saying that she loves him i.e. the admission he has been seeking for so long. [...] If this is all done with a smile, it can't be vulgar, seeing it's a mere rendez-vous. Because up to that night their relationship has been pure, yes? (Knipper to Chekhov, 26 January 1901)

This is definitely something to think about. Even if I agree that their relationship has been pure I still need to decide when the relationship actually started and what “pure” means.

“Dearest, Masha's confession in Act 3 isn't one, it's just a frank conversation. Play it highly-strung but not desperate, and don't raise your voice, smile from time to time and above all play it so that one can feel the exhaustion of the night. And so one can feel that you are more clever than your sisters, or at least, that you think you are. As regards tram-tram-tram, do it your way. You are my interpreter.” (Chekhov
to Knipper, 28 January 1901).

I guess I’ll just wait and see how the ‘tram-tram-tram’ plays out for me.

“I play Masha with such delight. You see, she has been of great use to me. I’ve found out what kind of actress I am. I’ve understood myself.”

(Knipper to Chekhov at the end of the Moscow season, 12 February 1901)

I steered clear of critical interpretations and reviews because I didn’t want to be influenced by what other people thought. I chose to include these insights because they come right from the playwright and the original actress. No, I can’t say that in rehearsal I won’t think it but I’m not going to look back at this and use it as a direct reference. What this information gives me is a sense of what Chekhov intended at certain parts of the play and the challenges that lie ahead. I still have to figure out all the details.

IV. Reflections of Masha

Anna Karenina

I chose to read Anna Karenina because in the first research book I read, The Chekhov Play, Harvey Pitcher refers to Tolstoy in discussing the emotional world of the women of Three Sisters. He says, “Tolstoy’s heroines are never pursued by the restlessness of their thoughts in the way that his heroes are; on the contrary, their lives, like that of Anna Karenina, are centered exclusively on their emotions.” Later in the book Pitcher also makes some comparisons between Anna and the middle sister Masha. As I continued my research I discovered many other critics recognized the similarities as well. Chekhov himself though was the one that finally convinced me I should read the novel. In an 1887 letter to his sister Chekhov writes, “Dear sweet Anna was my only consolation during the train journey from Moscow to St. Petersburg.” Tolstoy himself is mentioned in many of Chekhov’s other letters. So not only did I
plunge into the 811 page masterpiece I also read up on the nature of Chekhov's personal relationship with Tolstoy. I was wonder-struck by how much I enjoyed it and how much I learned. I didn’t just find information I could use as Masha. I received a crash course in Russian history and I was thrown right in the middle of 1870s Russia: aristocratic balls, officers' races, country life, the daily work of peasants, the function of women in the home, the function of servants and even the pain of death from tuberculosis. I also discovered a wealth of other insights and images that relate to *Three Sisters* (morality, family, and the personal relationship between Tolstoy and Chekhov). This piece however, will focus on character insights.

In the course of reading Anna Karenina I certainly saw the similarities between Anna and Masha; they are both highly emotional, charismatic, intelligent, talented, and stuck in an unhappy marriage which makes them vulnerable to the affairs in which they get involved. I also took note of Anna being dressed in black, which is the signature color of Masha. Tolstoy, through Kitty’s (Anna’s friend) point of view, describes Anna’s appearance at a society ball:

> Anna was not in lilac, the colour Kitty was so sure she ought to have worn, but in a low-necked black velvet dress which exposed her full shoulder and bosom that seemed carved out of old ivory, and her rounded arms with the very small hands. Her dress was richly trimmed with Venetian lace. In her black hair, all her own, she wore a little garland of pansies, and in her girdle, among the lace, a bunch of the same flowers. Her coiffure was very unobtrusive. The only noticeable things about it were the willful ringlets that always escaped at her temples and on the nape of her neck and added to her beauty. Round her finely chiseled neck she wore a string of pearls. [...] She now realized that Anna could not have worn lilac, and that her charm lay precisely in the fact that her personality always stood out from her dress, that her dress was never conspicuous on her. And her black velvet with rich lace was not at all conspicuous, but served only as a frame; she alone was noticeable-simple, natural, elegant and at the same time merry and animated.
I think this passage really captures Anna’s essence; and although I believe Masha wears black to mourn her wasted life this passage aptly describes part of my vision of Masha as well.

What I found most important though was that as detailed as Tolstoy is in his description of Anna and her various states of being I find Masha much more complex. It seems so obvious but when I made the discovery it was startling. When you’re reading a novel you are privy to all the thoughts going on in the characters’ heads which makes comprehension much easier. In a play you see the action that comes from the thought. Hopefully you see the actor having thoughts but you don’t know exactly what they are and therein lies part of what makes theatre magical. It gives the actor much more opportunity to create a range of thoughts and emotions. I really began to grasp the big picture of how specific my thought patterns would have to be to convey Masha’s dramatic shifts of emotion.

I was surprised to find other critics who had some issue with Anna. Peter Kropotkin says in his book *Ideas and Realities of Russian Literature*, “I don’t think that Anna Karenina herself is as deep, as psychologically complete, and as living a creation as she might have been.” I then went back to Pitcher’s book; his statement goes into more detail:

*We know far more about Anna than we do Masha, and yet of the two women Masha would perhaps be the easier to recognize. This is because Masha is seen in the way in which we do normally see people in life—that is to say, we see her from the outside[...] everything about Anna becomes very public; and on looking back at the novel one may feel as if one had been present at a totally absorbing ritual demonstration of what will happen to a woman like that. Chekhov does not make us live through every stage of Masha’s feelings, yet on looking back at the play one is more persuaded than with Tolstoy that ‘this is the way such things do happen.’*
I still think Anna’s situation is sad and moving and beautiful. The following passage is just one account of her loneliness and desperation. Speaking of the relationship with her husband Anna says:

They say he's a religious, moral, honest, and wise man, but they do not see what I have seen. They do not know how for eight years he has been smothering my life, smothering everything that was alive in me, that he never once thought I was a live woman, in need of love. They do not know how at every step he hurt me and remained self-satisfied. Have I not tried, tried with all my might, to find a purpose in my life? Have I not tried to love him, tried to love my son when I could no longer love my husband? But the time came when I understood that I could no longer deceive myself, that I am alive, and cannot be blamed because God made me so, that I want to love and to live.

Like Anna, Masha is smothered by an unimpassioned husband as well. Kulygin has no sense of Masha’s passion for thought provoking dialogue, her magnificent sense of the ridiculous or even her genius for piano playing. (Maybe he does know this and chooses not to or is too scared to support it since women of that time weren’t necessarily encouraged to stray beyond the roles of wife and mother.) Chekhov does not give Masha much to say about Kulygin himself but the pain and frustration is there.

It is also important to note the years of their marriages and the number of children. Anna and Karenin are married eight years at the beginning of the novel and have one child; Masha and Kulygin are married seven at the beginning of Three Sisters and have no children. At that time to not have a brood of children was a rarity so the reasons for the couples’ limited offspring must run deep.

Karenin and Kulygin may be a source of great anguish for their wives but they are not monsters. They have little vision beyond duty to family and career; this prevents them from seeing their wives for who they really are. They are both very cerebral, orderly, and well aware of their place in society and their professions and they expect others to know theirs.
Vershinin (Masha’s lover) parallels Vronsky (Anna’s lover). They’re both in the army. They’re both very charming and smooth with the ladies. Unlike Vershinin, Vronsky does not have the unhappy marriage and crazy home-life, though he does share the same deep passion for Anna that Vershinin has for Masha. Kitty recounts the moment Anna and Vronsky meet:

 [...] Anna was intoxicated by the rapture she had produced. She saw the quivering light flashing in her eyes, the smile of happiness and elation that involuntarily curled her lips, and the graceful precision, the exactitude and lightness, of her movements. [...] What she saw so distinctly in the mirror of Anna’s face she saw in him. Every time he turned toward Anna he slightly bowed his head as if he wished to fall down before her.

Although the initial meeting of Masha and Vershinin is not electric they do notice a chemistry. Moments of their passion are played out later in the play.

I see a lot of Irina (the youngest sister) in Kitty. She’s wide-eyed and innocent in the beginning but once she gets a taste of real life she matures and gains a new, more realistic, even painful view of life. This “taste of real life” for Kitty is discovering that Vronsky is in love with Anna and not her; for Irina, among other things, it’s disillusionment with her jobs and realizing that her only marriage prospect is with a man she does not love (Tusenbach). Kitty’s life improves though when she realizes that she really loves Levin. They marry and create a life together. Irina finally accepts Tusenbach’s proposal but is no closer to being in love with him than she was before. What’s worse is that all her hopes are completely dashed when Tusenbach is killed at the end of the play.

Glimpses of Olga and sister-in-law Natasha can be seen in Dolly. Dolly is Kitty’s older sister and is married to Anna’s brother, Oblonsky. Olga is the eldest in Three Sisters. Dolly and Olga are generous almost to a fault and they supervise the household. Natasha shares the latter as well. They are also ruled by their maternal
instincts. Unlike the aristocratic upbringings of Dolly and Olga, Natasha was raised in the merchant class; and Olga does not share the common bond of wife and mother. She is a schoolteacher. Noteworthy as well is Dolly’s moving realization towards the end of the novel. She begins to question the course her life has taken:

And when I am pregnant become hideous, I know. Travail, suffering, monstrous suffering, and that final moment...then nursing, sleepless nights, and that awful pain! [...] And what is it all for? What will come of it? [...] Everybody lives, everybody enjoys living, and I released as from a prison, from the world that is killing me with its worries, have only now collected my thoughts for a moment. [...] And they are all down on Anna! What for? [...] In what is she to blame? She wishes to live. God has implanted that need in our souls. It is quite possible I might have done the same.

It is a moving realization but also a fleeting one. Once she sees how pathetic Anna has become Dolly reconsiders her former judgement to see that what she thought to be a waste was actually a blessing.

The character of Oblonsky, Dolly’s husband, is not really reflected in Three Sisters. He bears some resemblance to Andrei, the brother of the sisters. They both take little interest in their children and squander away their money. But that’s where it ends. Andrei is not extroverted or content with his life like Oblonsky. (Sure, Andrei takes little action to improve the quality of his life but he’s definitely not content.) Tusenbach, Irina’s love interest, is perhaps closer to Oblonsky in terms of extroversion. Tusenbach’s joie de vivre though, is more naive and pure compared to the extravagance of Oblonsky’s.

Levin, the last main character to discuss, shares his idealistic view of work with Irina and Tusenbach. Levin lives in the country and makes his living as a farmer. He is wealthy but chooses to follow a frugal path. His expenses become greater after
marrying Kitty (she is more accustomed to finer things) but it never reaches outrageous proportions. Tusenbach and Irina have been raised not to work. The desire for all three is motivated by a need to share in the humanity of man. All three show little interest in politics and where Tusenbach and Irina have a strong faith in God, Levin only returns to Christianity after years of non-belief.

Levin elicits much poignancy because it is clear that Tolstoy is speaking through Levin. You never lose sight of the fact that Levin is a “creation” but it is unmistakable that the frustrating and illuminating soul-searching that Levin does is a reflection of Tolstoy battling with his own inner demons; because Anna Karenina marks a great change. As he was finishing the novel and for some time after Tolstoy went through a period of disillusionment. He turned his spiritual world upside down in order to find meaning in his life.

The morality of Anna Karenina and Three Sisters is noteworthy as well. The belief systems of each author greatly affected their work and their personal relationships with each other. Chekhov was a great admirer of Tolstoy and vice versa. Until Tolstoy became ultra-conservative he and Chekhov shared similar views on work and life. Chekhov includes morality into Three Sisters in the tradition of the Tolstoy of Anna Karenina. You see all sides of the story and the audience is left to make their own judgement, as opposed to the playwright preaching through his characters.

No evidence exists as to whether Chekhov consciously used Anna Karenina as any kind of basis for Three Sisters. Just by looking at the characters though, there is no doubt Chekhov was influenced by Tolstoy’s ability to create fascinating, flawed characters that reflect the joy and pain of everyday life.
"The Lady with the Dog"

The story was written in 1899. At this time Chekhov had already started correspondence with Knipper and was soon to start work on Three Sisters. Comparisons have also been made between Masha and the Anna S. of this story.

The three women (Anna K., Anna S., Masha) are all roughly the same age, mid 20s to mid 30s. They are all strong, intelligent, talented women (exactly the kind Chekhov liked). They are all married to men much older with whom they are not in love. They each happen upon a relationship with a military man with whom they find true love. The specific nuances of each woman differ slightly and each of their endings are different. The connection between the three stories though is almost uncanny.

V. The Beginnings of Character

My creation of Masha's background is based on what is given in the text and fleshed out from research and from my own imagination as well. The following questions about Masha and play came to me during research. I didn’t want to get ahead of myself in trying to answer them because I need to explore them through my Image Bank and the rehearsal process. (In order for me to make connections I need to think of and prepare Masha as an extension of myself rather than as a separate entity. So, the pronoun “I” is used in the following rather than the proper name).

Who Am I?

- What are my dreams? As passionate and intelligent as I am I have to have dreams and aspirations. What are they and why don’t I pursue them?
- What am I so afraid of?
- Why don’t I play the piano anymore? Could I have been a great pianist?
  What about a translator? A teacher? A doctor?
• What does Moscow mean to me?
• I am paralyzed. WHY????
• What do I do to make myself active?
• What on earth do I do all day? I'm well educated but don't work. I dislike my husband, and I don't have any children. I can't even imagine how I keep from shooting myself.
• Speaking of children, why don't I have any?

Where Am I?

• How far do Kulygin and I live from father's estate?
• What city are we in? Chekhov describes the people of Taganrog (his hometown) as:

  [...] devilish apathetic. They were musical, they were endowed with imagination and wit, they were highly-strung and sensitive, but all those virtues went for nothing: there were no patriots, no men of action, no poets; there were not even any decent bakers (Hingley, 77).

Sounds like the town in which we're stuck.
• How far are we from Moscow?

Relationships

• How do I really feel about Olga and Irina and Andrei?
• Why did I make Kulygin my life? Was it pressure from father? But then why did he have us educated?
• When did mother die? What was my relationship to her?
• What made me wake up and see Kulygin for the ninny that he is? Did he do something big or was it little things that kept building up?
• Why do I stay with Kulygin? Why don’t I leave him? Would I rather be with someone I don’t love than be alone? What would I have done with my life if I hadn’t married?

• Do I let Kulygin stop me from fulfilling my potential or does he set limits for me?

• I wonder if Kulygin hits me. I don’t really know about this but it popped into my head one day so I guess I should give it some thought.

• What is it about Vershinin that fires me up? He’s similar to Kulygin in that he’s older than me and he has lofty ideals. So why am I smitten?

• Natasha and I don’t have any dialogue together. She talks to me a couple of times but I never say anything back. Why? Does it have something to do with our common bond of infidelity? Maybe not. I don’t say anything to her in the first act when I’m not involved with Vershinin.

• Thinking of Moscow as a state of mind - Do I mention Moscow after I get involved with Vershinin? I need to look that up.
PART TWO: THE JOURNAL

Throughout this creative process I never went back and read my journal entries. I used them to purge feelings and character concerns. I thought if I read them I would begin to “think” too much about the process rather than trusting that my mind and body would take what it needed for Masha. I’m glad I did that because I really felt that in this show, for the first time, I was a completely open vessel and channel for my imagination and impulses. My mind was aware but not dictating. Going back to the journal post-production has proved very amusing. Most, if not all, of the entries seem like random scribbling of a crazy person. That’s because my daily thoughts were about character, plot and relationships and all information kept overlapping.

A clarity note: I wrote in first person as myself and as Masha. Hopefully you’ll be able to tell the difference.

October 4

First day of rehearsal!!!! Energy was high. The first day of anything always reminds me that you get to start with a clean slate and so many possibilities are ahead of you. Virginia began by saying she views this play as a teaching project as opposed to ACTF being the ultimate goal. She then posed some questions about how we approach the process. "How do you measure the success of this project?" "How do we express it?" "How do I work as a creative artist?" (I absorb something and it comes out this way and vice versa.) How do I respond to information? Do I need the director to give me certain directions in a different way? Visually? Kinesthetically? Aurally? Some of the cast members talked about wanting trust, fun, reliability and getting experience on mainstage.

Virginia really knows how to set the tone. She’s thoughtful about what she says and how she says it. She takes the time to make sure everyone is on the same page. She gives information step by step but never in a condescending manner.
We then moved on to a warm-up game called "Milling and Seething." You walk from one part of the room to another and when you do you pass through an "energy field." You take notice of yourself and others. After a few minutes of that you stop and face the person closest to you but stand about four feet away. Take them in. Breathe through your mouth and take in his/her image as if you were going to paint a picture of them. Then close your eyes and beam the image into your middle and sigh the image back out to them. Continue to "mill and seethe."

Every once in a while we would stop at a partner (doesn't matter if it's someone we've met before.) Each time we were to imagine that person at a certain age or event: as a baby, seven year old, 14 year old, at her first dance, the first time you fell in love, or the other person's anger, sadness, humor, and then looking at yourself at these ages. Then we would beam the image into our middles and sigh the image back to them.

This was eye opening experience. I met Jude as a baby, John Elsener as a seven year old, Sasha at 14 and again at first love, Aaron DuPree at his first dance, as an adult, at his anger, sadness and humor. The images of them were crystal clear. I saw Jude in a cowboy outfit with chubby baby fat and a piece of black hair standing straight up. I saw John in a makeshift superman outfit with his hair all messed up as it usually is. I saw me in my "underoos" (an old brand of underwear in the style of superheroes). What I really saw was how much fun Andrei and Masha had as children. We were fierce playmates. Sasha had long hair and a flowing dress being very much a "drama queen" (snooty and throwing temper tantrums). When I pictured being in love for the first time I saw Doug and I felt like I could just jump out of my skin the emotion was so intense. I could see the intensity of emotion in Sasha as well. We both started crying. I felt so beautiful, sexy, needed, alive. I felt so
connected to Aaron we could have been inside each other’s skin. The emotion was even more intense with him. I just wanted to throw my arms around him. Why didn’t I? His anger and sadness completely consumed me. It was a gift to be able to share the tears and smiles with him. As we finished the game we continued to mill and seethe but when we stopped we introduced ourselves. As I met Kris he wiped away a tear. That one simple gesture spoke volumes.

The comments afterwards were very moving. Age 14 seemed to be the hardest for most. I don’t remember that age being very painful for me. As a matter of fact it was a good year. Virginia talked about how the eye contact breaks down social barriers. I felt like we were breathing a little of each other’s souls.

*The First Reading*

- Virginia asked us to make eye contact with each other but just read for sense, DON'T ACT!
- (Note to self - Ask Virginia if I can change the line in Act One to "Oh, damn this life. It's the absolute limit.") Made several notes in script about looking up some words and ideas that are still unclear (for example, "landed gentry").
- I am amazed how funny this play is! And everyone got into that during the read. There was no pressure to do or be anything so no one was afraid to laugh - at themselves or each other. It was delightful. Everyone unleashed completely uncensored responses to each other.

*October 5*

- Table work. Virginia asked about the moral sensibility of the play. That got me thinking about the relationship between Tolstoy and Chekhov. Tolstoy’s later work took on a Christian sense of moral superiority whereas Chekhov left the audience to judge.
Symphony, counterpoint and theme came up in discussion. I can't remember the specifics. I think it had to do with the different stories intertwining. Some of the ideas of Vakhtangov, Michael Chekhov and Strasberg were mentioned as well. I think in reference to certain exercises we might use. All I remember is NO STRASBERG.

We continued with the first reading. Continued along in the same fashion as last night. Virginia wants us to cross out all the stage directions so we can be free to make our own choices about movement.

Virginia started talking about the Greeks and their emotional spectrum. I wish I had taken better notes because this is all I remember. She then said that we'll be using Jeremy Whelan's Tape Technique to develop an emotional spectrum. I've read Whelan's book New Acting School. He covers how to use the technique in it. We dabbled in it with our Chekhov scenes in Acting class earlier this semester. It's about getting to the emotional root of the text. You tape record the scene and then get up and move to what the tape gives you. Then you go back and tape the scene again fed by the emotional discoveries made by the movement. You do this several times. It allows you to explore movement and emotion without letting the words get in the way.

Virginia also talked about how we'll be bombarded with music over the next few weeks. She and Tim seem to have some eclectic ideas about what is going to be used. They don't want it to be all somber and melodramatic. They want to use the music of the time – what Chekhov and his contemporaries would have played.

While walking home I wondered how the Olga-Kulygin-Masha love triangle played out before Kulygin and I got married. Kris said that all the love triangles in the play consist of two men and a woman. I'm not sure if I need to read into that but it's something to think about.
Virginia and I discussed how we think Masha still plays the piano even though the script says she doesn’t. She wants me to learn the famous Swan Lake piece because she wants to find a spot in the show when I can play it. Scary! She also said not to worry about the humming and whistling; she wants me to find my own idiosyncrasies.

I have such a good feeling about this process. Everyone seems excited and focused. Virginia has really set a standard. She expects professionalism but she takes the time to teach it because some of these people have never been in a show of this level.

October 6

No rehearsal but Kris, Sasha, Amy and myself went to see the Don Cossacks of Rostov at the Lied Center. What a show! An exciting display of Russian spirit. The ensemble was quite large: 20-30 dancers (male and female), 20 female singers, and 5-8 male musicians.

The dances and songs are traditional pieces that tell stories of Russian life. They were passionate and lively. The performers were built like athletes – which is not surprising since the choreography is so aerobic and strenuous. The men were always in a sort of squatting position because their legs took most of the work and the women kept spinning and spinning. They all looked like they were having a marvelous time and their energy never lagged. They just kept smiling and sending the energy flying over the apron. The costumes were magnificent in their rich, bold colors and patterns. The singer held handkerchiefs throughout the show; I wonder what the significance is. The most impressive part of the show were the balalaika players; I’ve never seen fingers move so fast. What a joyous and masterful piece.

October 7

I was flipping through an acting book and there was a chapter on “beginnings” of plays. It used the beginning of Three Sisters as the example. It mentions how much of the
expository information (the fact that they left Moscow 11 years ago, etc.) is given in Olga’s opening speech. It made me wonder about the real reason they left Moscow. Did it just have to do with father’s transfer or did it have something to do with mother’s death? When did she die?

**Second Reading**

- This reading focused on the conflict of the play and getting the grammar of the lines straight. We stopped at each french scene to discuss what just occurred, who is talking to whom, and how it fits together. A lot of deeper stuff about relationships came to light.

- These are the questions and observations that struck me tonight. (I feel like the wheels are always turning and questions about relationships, the past, etc. strike me at the oddest times.) If our social world was dependent on father and now he’s gone - how does that make us feel and how have we been coping? What’s been going on that day before the play starts? I think me and Dad were so alike in personality that we clashed all the time. (Virginia said she thinks I look like our father and Olga and Irina look like our mother.) I think I went up to bat for Andrei all the time as well. He’s the only boy so father was probably always on his case and because I was “mouthy” and could stick up for myself I always took care of him. The talk of Moscow in the first scene drives me crazy because I already know I’m not going! So, what am I doing at the beginning of the play if I don’t like Olga and Irina talking about Moscow? And God. How do I feel about God? I don’t think I’m crazy about him. I think I take little stock in religion.

- Dana (the doctor) said he thought Irina might be his daughter - that he and our mother might have had an affair and Irina was the product. Hmm…

- Chekhov believing in the “Other” he creates and that piece takes a life of its own. I don’t remember why we were talking about it or what it means.
If I get caught up in the “How” of things (the qualities) then I won’t see the “What.” The put-downs between Tusenbach, Irina, Solyony, Olga and myself on pages 4-10. It’s not just pleasant conversation. It’s not uncritical. There is stuff going on! Virginia said Sasha was judging the put-down and she shouldn’t because “how” it’s delivered will come later.

We used the terms Forward Actor, Counter Actor and Catalyst to describe some of the characters. Masha and Vershinin are Forward. Natasha is a Counter and Tchebutykin and Solyony are Catalysts. Virginia said we should figure out where our characters fit in.

My relationship to Tusenbach is still fuzzy. I know I’m not too fond of Solyony.

Think about how Olga, Irina and myself handle feelings, how we express them and how and what we tolerate and do not tolerate. (For example, Olga cries, I dress in black.)

Virginia asked about the “curved shore” poem. I said “Good question!” I haven’t figured it out yet.

I (Masha) am a mass of contradictions. I am the one that feels things the deepest yet I do everything to fight it.

Jude was talking about Vershinin using his wife and kids as a pick up line. Or rather that’s how I took it. Is Vershinin that shallow? Jude also said that Vershinin’s escapades with women are nothing new. Maybe that’s why I took it as a pick up? This is a big discovery.

The Prozorov’s are military migrants. The four children have been equally trained but the expectations are different. Andrei is expected to do something with it and for the girls it’s optional.
Tchebutykin, Tusenbach, and Vershinin each have a distinct philosophy. By whom are they influenced? Virginia said that’s one of the toughest nuts to crack in the play because all of the characters have different belief systems.

Kulygin was my teacher. Did I latch on to him because of mother’s death?

Mom died when Irina was nine. That was about a year before we left Moscow. What does this mean?

October 8

We continued reading the script focusing on conflict and grammar.

I don’t want to go to the schoolmaster’s party with Kulygin but I feel I have no choice. What are the gatherings like?

Tchebutykin and drinking. We’ve probably helped him get off it. He gets tedious really fast. What did he do that makes us so watchful of this habit?

Virginia mentioned the Power of the Matriarchy. I think in reference to Natasha and Olga and their competition. Virginia said feminists would disagree, there is no competition; but at this time the women did run the show.

Big discovery...Before I was thinking that I wasn’t crazy about Tusenbach because Irina wasn’t in love with him and I don’t want her to end up like me. Is that because I’m jealous? Oh, I don’t know.

Virginia seems to think the “curved shore” poem is from Gogol. And why Gogol as opposed to someone else? I think it’s because his humor is so twisted and sick. It’s just like Masha’s. I pick the strangest time to use the lines though. Why?

Virginia said she gets the impression that my Masha is making herself heard! I agree. She is an ACTIVE participant in the action rather than simpy and passive. I just get her!!
Need to look at Gogol’s “Diary of a Madman,” find out where that blasted poem comes from and the Gogol line, “Life on this earth, gentlemen, is a bore.”

Big class difference between the Prozorov’s and Natasha. No one supports her baby. In our family the nyanya and servants took care of us. In Natasha’s family (the merchant class) the family took care of the baby.

The love scene between myself and Vershinin. The sexual energy has been converted into mental energy. A good and bad thing. Need to have both at the same time.

By Act II Natasha has started to take over the decorating, the eating schedule, etc. I don’t live in the house anymore but I’m there all the time. What do I think about it and how does it affect me? How do Kulygin and I live?

The exchange between Tusenbach, Irina, Vershinin and me in Act II is a kind of seduction. The men are using their ideas and words to arouse us.

October 9

No rehearsal.

October 10

“Puppet/Puppeteer” was our warm-up. The activity requires two people. ‘A’ stands close behind ‘B’ and gently holds A’s wrists. They close their eyes and take a few moments to concentrate on breathing with each other. A then acts as the Puppeteer as B gives in to A leading a series of movements. After a few minutes, A stops the movement by making B a “living statue.” Amy J and I were partners. I felt so close to her and so tuned to the movement that I actually heard music playing even though it wasn’t. Our mutual trust was a great benefit here because we breathed and moved as if we were one.

Before we started reading again Virginia made a comment about “getting things right.” It has nothing to do with the Imagination. We should give ourselves permission to just come
up with things so we can free ourselves. We also had to write down three affirmations for
the day because too often we don’t give ourselves credit for the good work we do. (I made
those affirmations in my other journal.)

The Reading

➢ How do I function in the social structure of the house? How do I contribute? Do I
undercut people and situations? What’s the nature of my thread?

➢ How am I involved in conversations? Do I just not pay attention or do I know what’s
going on and choose to respond differently?

➢ If I could live my life the way I wanted what would I do?

➢ The first time I talk about being happy is when I mention Moscow. Vershinin is allowing
me to dream, to think about things I usually shut off? There is a huge attitude shift from
Act I to Act II. This is because of Vershinin.

➢ Do I realize Vershinin is as flawed as he is?

➢ The Act II scene with Vershinin shows one of my greatest contradictions. I talk about
being prim and proper but what I really do is let it all hang out.

➢ The Complexities of Human Relationships and The Universality of Emotion. These issues
are basic to everyone – no matter the time or place. Much of the time in Three Sisters they
are revealed indirectly.

➢ Kulygin and I probably don’t have a sexual relationship anymore. When did it stop?
Why? Is that the reason we don’t have kids or is it because of something else? My life
seems to be all about supporting his career. I am expected to entertain and charm when I
COULD REALLY CARE LESS! Kulygin is very demanding and rigid. I think we have
this secret life that is kept even from my family.
Act III. Andrei has mortgaged the house. How do I feel about it since I don’t live there anymore? Yes, it’s all there in the script but I need to get more specific.

Many references to alcohol in the play. Virginia said alcohol releases Tchebutykin’s feeling life.

An existential Masha? She has been stomping on her feeling life. Virginia said those that feel most deeply usually use the intellect to negate the feelings. My feeling life seeps out more and more in Acts II and III.

What is my secret world? Tusenbach says of Masha, “to be able to play so superbly and to know that nobody understands you.” I think I try to catch moments alone in my sisters’ house. When I play I release all that pent up passion or momentarily revive what Kulygin killed. Kris and I think he (Tusenbach) has overheard me playing

Act III. Because of the fire we are all talking to each other differently. Olga’s room represents our last bastion of secrecy from Natasha.

My relationship with Vershinin has changed. There is an ease and sense of knowing each other that wasn’t there before. We’ve probably slept together by this point. When Virginia was asking about the nature of our relationship at this point I started to think about Olga Knipper asking Chekhov about this. She thinks Masha and Vershinin have been pure up to this point. So I then thought about Chekhov’s idea of love and his sex life. For me, that is one of the pitfalls of research. I “think” things to death. The fact of the matter is Masha is still a creation with a life of her own and open to interpretation. Chekhov even tells Knipper, “You are my interpreter.”

October 11
I dreamt about the play last night. I didn’t write it down immediately so I’ve forgotten most of it. I do remember lots of dancing and although I don’t remember what they were, I know I kept saying three words over and over.

For our warm-up we turned on the music for the show and played Follow the Leader to it. No profound discoveries but it did get me connected to everyone and boosted my energy.

Act III is the reversal – the major shift in the play. The fire acts as a catalyst because we all come out with some major news; we all break down in some way. This plays an important part in shaping the rhythm of the act.

Act IV is when we finally engage each other because everyone is leaving! It’s like when someone is dying or leaving forever and you know you’ll never see them again – you take the risk, the chance to say everything because before you always thought, “there’ll always be tomorrow.”

Virginia told me to look at the end of *Antony and Cleopatra*. She covers a complete range of emotions in a very short amount of time – just like Masha in Act IV.

I wrote, “Give myself to the comedy and then take it back to the tragedy.” I’m not sure what that means. Maybe it has something to do with my breakdown at the end.

October 12

Finally found the Pushkin poem! We had been thinking it was Gogol but I was leaning more towards Pushkin. A very nice professor from the Russian department told me whose it was and that it’s from the epic fairy tale poem, *Ruslan and Ludmilla*.

Amy J. gave her dramaturgy presentation on the Russian concept of work. She covered the views of males, the Russian Orthodox church, Chekhov, Tolstoy, and the class system. It gave us a clearer idea about Tusenbach and Irina’s work speeches. What do I think about work?
Virginia mentioned how Chekhov’s time with the Moscow Art Theatre was an idyllic time because art and artists were politically correct. We know now though that that was just a phase.

Did a rhythm warm-up. Everyone stands in a circle. Someone starts a vocal or physical pattern and each person adds on. Make it small then gradually make it bigger. It was great fun!

First night away from the table. We explored emotion and movement in the dining room scene at the end of Act I. We used the Whelan Tape Technique. 1) Pick a key emotion or energy the character has in this section. Read the lines with that feeling. I picked blasé. Tried to engage text but wasn’t on voice. 2) Take a physical gesture into the atmosphere. 3) We went into the dining room and created a light atmosphere – like a party should be. 4) Take emotion we liked best and brought it into the atmosphere while reading the text. 5) Same as 4 but without text. I switched the emotion this time. Big discovery – I got really jealous when Andrei focused his attention on Natasha. 6) Same as 5 but back to using the text. This time the words diminished what was going on between us. What is the status relationship to every person? The poem was funky. I don’t know in what way but it didn’t seem to even be in the ball-park.

October 13

Class

The imagination work in acting class seems to be taking my classmates and I to our Three Sisters characters rather than our other Chekhov characters. Virginia thinks it would be beneficial if we just concentrate on Three Sisters in class. That’s fine by me! So, I’ll be adding class activities to my journal entries. We did some Michael Chekhov work today. We took a walk around the room focusing on Will; the Will comes from the legs. My
walk is stubborn, like I’m fighting something. I felt very needy for attention, just like a middle child. That’s funny because Masha is the middle child. Up to this point I never thought about the birth order. This is good for me as an actress as well because I am an oldest child and I act very much like it. We then went on to Center/Image/Quality. I felt trapped the whole time. I was smothered. I saw this image of Kulygin trying to get me into a straightjacket.

Rehearsal

➢ Kris gave his dramaturgy presentation on the military. It gave me a much clearer idea of how prevalent soldiers were in the daily life of 19th century Russia. My generation hasn’t really felt the presence of the military like the others. Living under the umbrella of democracy also has its privileges.

➢ We did Whelan Tape Technique with the “introduction of Andrei and Vershinin” in Act I and the “dancing sequence” in Act II. The first time we read through it I felt needy again but after we moved around and came back to read I began to let go of that because I really heard what Andrei was saying. I completely sympathized and forgot myself. My line “in this town to know three languages...” came out of that sympathy. I was sticking up for him. It made me so sad because no one seemed to understand but the two of us. Vershinin’s speech was compelling enough for me to stay. Each time we did it the feelings became stronger. The last time we did Repel, Impel, Compel, John (Andrei) and I were impelled to each other and compelled to stay. It was like we were in our own little world with this amazing connection that no one could break.

October 14

➢ Moira gave her dramaturgy presentation on the rise of the merchant class. I think I was in a Masha mood already so I kept thinking, “What does this have to do with me?” I certainly
thought it was informative - especially when she ran down the order of the class system and mentioned that the merchants supported the arts more than anyone else - but I think mostly I was just preoccupied with myself.

➢ We did the Whelan Tape Technique with the middle of Act II (the seduction section up to the Solyony/Tusenbach section). The first time sucked! There’s no other word for it. The energy was just sucked out of us and the whole thing was flat. The second time we made a little more headway but not much. I could feel the emotion starting to bubble but everything I did physically was too literal. The third time was much better. Vershinin and I were almost inseparable. Our movements were like a dance. Virginia talked about how the Mind, Mouth and Middle should work together. I have to affect them with my words!

➢ We did the Whelan Tape Technique with the last half of Act III. The emotional stuff from earlier in the night bled into this section because the minute Amy J started reading she couldn’t control herself. The tears kept coming and coming. Irina was really losing her mind. The same thing happened with John. He got so worked up in his speech he started to hyperventilate. We only did this scene once. The emotion was so intense we didn’t need to take it further tonight. I was blown away. I’ve never witnessed anything like it.

➢ Virginia is so tuned into people. Before we started Act III Virginia had us stand in a circle, shake out all the feeling and connect to each other as ourselves. Once we step out of the circle we are out of the world of the play. She said we all need this but those who play unlikable characters really need it. They shouldn’t take all those bad feelings home.

October 15

Class

➢ More Michael Chekhov and some animal work. I found a very percussive energy. Everything I touched or grabbed became a tool for the rhythm going on inside me. I think
it’s a manifestation of the need to play piano. It wants to burst out of me but because I know no one will care what I play I keep it inside and the let my banging and tapping annoy them.

➢ The animal work was strange at first. I kept having orangutan impulses but my head kept saying, “No, that can’t be right.” I finally just gave into it and I’m glad I did. My orangutan was curious and perceptive. I couldn’t stop moving. Everything made sense once we added a line of text. I used “a golden chain” from the Pushkin lines, “By the curved shore a green oak stands/A golden chain hangs on that tree/And on that chain a wise tom-cat circles and circles endlessly.” As the orangutan I was looking for the golden chain. I think that’s what Masha is doing! She’s searching, yearning but stuck in a vicious circle. This is the first real breakthrough I’ve had with the poem.

Rehearsal

➢ I gave my dramaturgy presentation on Tolstoy and Anna Karenina. I’m not sure if anyone was able to get any valuable information for their character. I think it helped in that it gave them another picture of Russian aristocracy. I talked about the similarities between the characters in Anna Karenina and Three Sisters but since none of my cast-mates have read the novel I don’t think the similarities will resonate.

➢ Used the Whelan Tape Technique with several scenes again. I didn’t realize we were doing the very last scene until it was time to do it. As I walked into the theatre I thought to myself, “There’s no way I’m going to hit this tonight.” But something happened to me. As I sat down at the table Masha said to me, “It’s okay.” Then I said to myself, “Just open yourself up to it.” And that was it. The second Jude started speaking I lost it; I couldn’t stop crying. When we got up to move I kept on crying. We did the scene three or four
times and I never stopped. The pain and sadness was very acute. It’s one of the most extraordinary experiences I’ve had.

**October 16-19**

No rehearsal due to Fall Break.

**October 20**

*Class*

- David Wiles (Guest Artist for *The Lion in Winter*) sat in on class. He talked about the actor/audience relationship. We didn’t work on *Three Sisters* directly but the questions he asked should be in the back of my head during rehearsals. What’s happening to me? What’s happening to me in public? What is it like to be seen? What is it like for the audience? Who am I speaking for? What is the experience like for the audience? (Be aware who your speech is being said in front of. You have to take that into the experience.) David gave his experience in *The Lion in Winter* as an example. He said you can’t think about demographics. What’s deeper? In this case he imagines that there are people in the audience who’ve had a May-December romance.

*Rehearsal*

- Sasha gave her dramaturgy presentation on women and teaching. As it was one of the very few professions open to women I started to think how Masha could have gotten stuck doing that if she hadn’t married Kulygin. Yet she’s miserable with Kulygin. So I then I thought she would probably welcome it if only to get away from her husband.

- The key to why I am the way I am is Kulygin. Why was the marriage arranged? Did he have me as a student? Why me before Olga? Did she not have him as a teacher?

- Virginia asked us to do part of our warm-up out in the house so we sense the circle of energy.
We did an exercise on giving and taking focus. We started in a circle working on focus individually. Then we moved into small groups. It was harder than I thought. I usually don’t have a problem giving focus. I think it was hard because we didn’t have a script. There was no “cue” to let me know I have to give or take. We had to pay attention, listen and feel it. Big discovery – I found out what Vershinin’s wife and daughters look like. It just came to me. And I could hear her annoying, nasal voice yelling “Sheenin! Sheenin!” (short for Vershinin).

We worked on Act I and II. We didn’t use the script but concentrated on (in character) how we converge and re-converge in the space and in relation to each other. We set up the furniture and props and dove into Act I. I found that I really connected to Tusenbach playing the piano. I liked Solyony better than my own husband. I was drinking all the time! I don’t know if I want to go there yet. Overall, I felt more like Amy than Masha. Maybe Masha just feels so natural in me. I don’t know but I do know that I didn’t have the same inner drive that I had last week.

I need to go back and look at Irina’s again. Much of what she says gives clues to the way I used to be.

In Act II Virginia yelled to me that I must change the atmosphere immediately after Vershinin leaves. At the end of rehearsal I realized exactly how fast my emotional state turns. I am a fast moving roller coaster.

I found a book called The Actor’s Chekhov. It contains interviews with actors discussing their work on the Chekhov plays directed by Williamstown Theatre Festival Artistic Director Nikos Psacharopulous. I haven’t gotten very far but it seems that their experiences with Chekhov were very special.
October 21

I was flipping through a National Geographic at the Health Center waiting room and I found a Winslow Homer painting that looks exactly like Masha! I couldn’t believe it! It’s a painting of a woman in a BLACK 19th century dress on a settee (all of Masha’s costumes are black). Her legs are up on the settee and she’s slouched over looking at a book. She’s very sad. There’s a single rose on the floor a few feet from the settee. The scene speaks volumes about sadness, loneliness, longing, pain. It’s exquisite.

Rehearsal

I showed the picture to Virginia and she asked if I thought Masha was manic-depressive. I said it’s very possible. Her mood swings are so frequent and intense. I’m going to look into it. She reminds me a lot of Pozzo – all that pain bubbling up inside. Also, I mentioned that yesterday I was really attracted to the liquor but was unsure if that’s what I should do. She said don’t censor it yet if that’s what’s happening right now. Is that why I nag Tchebutykin about his drinking?

We worked on shaping the movement of Act I. We don’t really refer to it as blocking because we let it evolve organically. And although we’re shaping it doesn’t mean we still can’t try new things if they come up.

Tusenbach was not playing the piano well tonight. It was annoying because I was with him until he’d pause or miss a key. I felt like a metronome trying to keep time for him. I wonder if we can get one? I’ll ask Jen. That would be a fabulously annoying toy.

What’s my deeper relationship with Natasha? I know the class thing has something to do with it but what else? Jealousy? She’s a perfect match for me so I don’t want to give her the satisfaction?

I have to remember that it’s Irina’s birthday and I’m the one who ruins it.
Virginia said to look out for invisible force fields. We have to recognize and pay attention to the actor frustrations. She also told us to block out the other character's lines. Just keep my lines and my cues. This way we really have to listen to each other.

Start to pay attention to what emerges on-stage concerning objectives and feelings.

October 22

Class

We did my scene with Vershinin in Act II and the beginning of Act III. The most important thing to remember right now is – what is going on underneath?

Rehearsal

We worked on shaping Act II. I feel like I have no idea what's going on, like everything we did with the Whelan Tape Technique is lost. I know it's not but everything was so off that it's put me into a funk. I felt emotionally cut off, relationships were weak and I was listening too hard to compensate.

October 23

No rehearsal.

October 24

Our first run. No, we weren't brilliant but I felt like we were having a good time. I did. I felt free to just throw it all out there. So some things may have been sloppy but it was exciting to see how it all fits together.

For next time – Virginia told us think about what is it that we say in the text that has to get across to the audience. What are the ideas?

October 25

Our warm-up focused on "longing." Virginia played the show music and asked us to place ourselves at a dance. How do we move? With whom do we dance? We eventually had to
find a partner. We were to let ourselves fall in love and then the men were asked to leave. How do we deal with that loss? Each of us were to find a corner or spot and register that loss. We did the same thing with a place; imagine ourselves in a place we love and then register the loss when we move away. The sense of loss with father and Moscow was very deep and strong. I also saw my sisters and I when we were very young. This warm-up put me in the exact emotional place I needed to be for Act IV. Walked through Act IV and then ran it. I was a big faucet - the tears kept coming and coming. However, Virginia side-coached us through it so my focus was split. We kept stopping and starting and I wasn’t sure how much I could take. I wanted to her to give me the note afterwards and then run it. I know I was short with her but I felt like we were pouring salt on the wound and I couldn’t help but say, “OUCH!”

October 26

➢ Worked Act I. The parties we’ve had in the last year have been dull. We’ve only had Tusenbach, Solyony, Rode, Fedotik and of course, Tchebutykin. How exciting is that? Not very since I know Tusenbach is there to see Irina, Solyony is a freak and Rode and Fedotik are babies. We used to have swarms of people – people that challenged me, excited me. I had an outlet for my energy because people inspired me! It’s really a time of transition (Vershinin makes the change) and I just don’t know it.

October 27

Class

➢ Worked Jude’s monologues because he won’t be at rehearsal.

➢ Worked the Tusenbach/Vershinin/Masha philosophizing section in Act II concentrating on the inner action vs. outer action. I asked that if I do an inner action will I get lost? (I’ve had a tendency to pull into myself too much at dramatic moments.) Virginia said if I choose to
pull the energy in it will radiate. The difference is making the choice to do so. I’m really glad we picked apart the scene because I was losing sight of what exactly we were saying. I knew my speech was motivated by my life situation but in the big scheme of things I couldn’t quite grasp it. I couldn’t even understand Tusenbach and Vershinin. I did my speech a few different ways and discovered that it’s an outer action and I stop because I reveal too much. So, I choose to pull it back into myself with the Gogol quote. Virginia told us to think about “the power of thought to transform.”

- Virginia reminded us that it’s about Imagination, Inspiration and Intuition. She wants us to be able to say with confidence, “This is a totally wrong moment. I have to do this.” We need to go through the script and read the lines out loud to discover whether they’re outer or inner. Go one way with it and then go the complete opposite way.

Rehearsal

- Individual work. I was only there for a small part of Act II.

October 28

- Worked the beginning of Act III. So where are we at the beginning? Everyone knows about the affair. What’s the relationship like at this point? Vershinin and I have consummated the relationship and Kulygin knows. Kulygin and I probably sleep in separate beds. In this first part Olga is very sensitive. I wish she would just sit down and say screw it! But she can be very passive towards me. It’s obvious to me how she feels but she’s very good at holding it in. Sometimes I wish she’d just burst. Natasha drives me almost to the brink. Anfisa is family and Natasha has no right to speak to her like she does. I’m tired and frustrated. Vershinin’s wife is in the house and I haven’t even seen him yet. Am I really sleeping or am I faking it? I think I’m trying to sleep but I can’t because of Olga carrying on and Natasha’s rude interruption.
Virginia wanted to work Andrei’s speech at the end of the act so I left early!

October 29

Class

We worked on a few of Moira’s moments and Virginia “dropped in” Irina’s breakdown and Masha’s confession with me and Amy J. and then added Sasha for her speech at the top of the play. It was very moving. We found a greater connection to each other which makes the relationships and conflict deeper. We were seeing clearer pictures of how we affect each other – in good and bad ways. I settled in more to the confession. I felt like I was really listening to Amy. She really moved me to need to give the confession – so it was totally natural and from the heart.

Rehearsal

Worked my scene with Vershinin. I can use the formal period movement to hide that I want him. The more I resist the more he tries to undercut. I may want a soulmate but I have to deal with the passion. Make the stakes high! Jude and I have a strong chemistry already but that doesn’t mean things don’t need shaping.

Worked the dancing section. I got this impulse to run out in the middle of the room and do a little waltz when I sing “the baron is drunk.” I felt like a little kid. Virginia liked it so it’s a keeper. I just blew up at everyone because of Vershinin leaving but I really am excited about the Masquers so this dancing actually makes me feel better. I wonder if this part is always going to be a little sloppy. Virginia seems to want to keep it very organic.

October 31

Virginia dropped in the Act I and III moments between me and Eric (Kulygin). Many, many discoveries. His line “it’s not important, I just wrote it” really struck me. I wanted him to stand up for himself. Our relationship became more defined. He always does that!
He's really proud of something but if he gets a negative vibe from someone he dismisses himself rather than promote himself. He does that with me too. If he senses the least bit of tension he just drops it or deals with it in a passive way. I pity him. He won't even stand up to me. He keeps everything repressed. Our relationship is so distant that we let any feeling we have die. He's not a monster. He's just pathetic. For the first time I could really see the sadness in him. I know he loves me in the best way he can but it's not the kind of love I want or need.

Act III. I felt even more resentment and frustration towards Kulygin. I began to think about how much more compatible he would be with Olga. Why does he keep trying so hard with me? As I got into the "utterly, utterly bored" section I felt it was directed towards him more than it ever has; but it was getting to a very heightened point and I saved it by transferring the feeling to what was going on with Andrei. The exchange about Andrei revealed more walls and incompatibility. We're both trying to communicate but we keep missing each other. All this feeling builds up but then we let it go because it would be a waste of time to deal with it. He just doesn't get it and it zaps my energy. It leaves us with so many unresolved issues and feelings.

Feelings and thoughts about why we don't have children came up. I could see how much he wanted them. And I just don't. I started to think though that something was physically wrong with one of us and because we couldn't resolve it we distanced ourselves further. I believe our relationship was good when we got married but I had no idea what I was doing. Mother was dead by this time so I had no help. I think Fyodor thought I would grow up and turn into a quiet, obedient wife. I didn't know or think I had to change so his demands and disapproval disturbed and frustrated me.
John, Sasha and Amy J came in and we dropped in Andrei’s entrance in Act I and his breakdown at the end of Act III. I’m not on stage for the breakdown so I pulled out after the Act I section. That section was really playful but I could feel Andrei’s pain underneath. I had all kinds of visions of what the four of us were like as children. Olga was always with mother, Andrei and I were making mischief or trying to impress our father and Irina was following Andrei, being my toy or Olga’s baby. We had great fun together.

We then continued with more converging and re-converging exercises. Virginia used more visualization with it and no dialogue. Act IV was so painful today. I just couldn’t pull myself away from Vershinin. My heart was almost literally breaking. I was a blubbering mess.

I think I need some run-throughs. I feel confident about delving into Masha’s emotional state but knowing how fast it’s going to have to change during the course of the show scares me. I need to build my stamina.

November 1

Class

Worked with more visualization/center/emotion exercises. Silly, peaceful, and angry were very strong in me. I felt silly with Andrei in Act I, peaceful with my sisters during the confession of Act III, and angry after Vershinin’s exit in Act II. I also definitely confirmed for myself that I am at odds with the party atmosphere in Act I.

Rehearsal

We did a full run. Act I: I went back and forth between feeling on and off. Some blocking was weird and it took me out of the moment. I couldn’t tell if my energy was carrying over the apron. Was I playing at being sad? Andrei and Kulygin were off. What am I doing until I get up to leave? Does Kulygin have to be near me to make me say “do
leave me alone" or does his mere presence make me crazy? Energy overall was scattered. I guess Acts II and III were halfway decent. Virginia said my energy for my first entrance in Act IV was right. My agitation was so great I could barely keep still.

November 2

- We finally set the movement for Act I. I feel good about it. Little nuances can still be added but I think it has a strong shape. My only concern is the couch and dining room table. We can barely fit on the dining room platform. Someone almost always falls off. When people sit on the couch I don’t know if people on the dining room platform can be seen. I know I can’t really worry about it but if I can make adjustments to clear sight-lines then maybe I need to take note.

- The rhythm was better but I think we got ahead of ourselves. Some were tripping over lines but I think that’s because we were remembering old movement choices instead of trusting that what we’ve finalized is right.

November 3

Class

- Virginia asked us to think about the gifts we are offered in the play. Most of the gifts offered are rejected. She wants us to think about what each of us is offered and why we reject. This came out of what happens in the Tusenbach/Irina scene in Act IV. He gives her the tree. That scene today was so simple and quiet yet so full of pain and beauty. We were all crying.

- Virginia then talked to us one-on-one. She told me that I was right on with Masha but that I just need to let myself go there completely. She said my confidence and presence are comforting but that I’m taking care of the other people on stage. I need to keep Masha’s struggle going and not worry about making my fellow actors feel okay. Don’t become the
rock. Don’t get derailed worrying about everyone else. When I see people flailing don’t save it. They have to figure it out themselves. I need to do what I have to do and let the others deal with it. She also gave me a few notes. I need to use the negative energy I’m creating to get what I need from the others. Take the time to see the opposing forces and arguments and conflicting thoughts. Let my thoughts just come out – don’t force them. The feet tapping at the top of the show should start later and in Act I we need to physically control Andrei like a puppet - not a maypole.

Rehearsal

- Learned the Russian song for the dancing section in Act II. It’s actually in Russian! I hope we get this down because we have only a week. We also set some of the dancing. I’m a little unsure of this as well. A few of the men don’t dance very well but I’m sure we’ll work it out.

- Utter frustration. We set the movement for Act II. My scene with Vershinin was a joke. Virginia had us start over about four times. We just couldn’t get it. It was forced and there was no connection. We seemed to just be marking it. It was not for lack of trying though. The vibes weren’t clicking and we didn’t know what to do about it. Jude and I connect really well. I think we’re just second guessing ourselves. So we skipped the scene and kept going. Nothing got much better. Virginia was side-coaching us and she said something to me on the couch about being mad at Vershinin and it really confused me. I thought I was looking to Vershinin for comfort. Being confused made me mad so by the time Vershinin left my explosion at the others was overflowing with feeling. I don’t know what to say. I need to think about all this.
November 4

➤ Set the movement for Act III. I felt much better tonight – much more relaxed and confident about what was happening between all of us. I think everyone felt similar. The rhythm set in and everything clicked. My thought process for the confession was clear and I was starting to get the energy I think it needs. Virginia side-coached again. She stopped Jude and I on the “tram-tram” section. (We don’t really say “tram-tram.” That’s how it’s written in the script. We want to use a piece from La Traviata but Virginia thinks we should stick to Eugene Onegin.) Anyway, I let her know that we wanted to try it a certain way because that was our impulse. She was so great because she could tell what we were trying to do but she knew how to clean it and make it clearer.

November 5

Class

➤ Virginia worked with Kris and Amy J. Jude and I worked our scene in the grad office. We turned off the lights and lit some candles. We did the whole scene by candlelight. We finally found the tension the scene needs. Having the desks as obstacles helped in creating the physical tension and the dim light naturally made the space romantic and private. It’s a very fragile scene.

Rehearsal

➤ Set the movement for Act IV. It was a long night. This is the act we’ve worked the least and I can understand why. Everyone’s emotional state is very fragile so we have to tread lightly. You don’t want to work it too much because it needs to be the result of the previous acts. The movement and placement of certain moments needs to be set though. Everything took much longer with this act. I don’t come on for awhile so I stuck myself backstage where I could be by myself and focus. I also knew I needed to able to drop into
that agitated state for my first entrance. Well, I "focused" backstage for three hours. That's how long it took just to get to page nine. I thought I was going to burst! So, I enter my scene with the doctor completely agitated. By this time there was no need to drop into it. I was there! Anyway, I'm not out there but a few seconds and Virginia tells me I need to bottle up the agitation so that it takes all my effort to move and speak. I got confused again because I thought about the last time we did this act and how Virginia said she liked the agitation. I did what she asked but I was so annoyed and exhausted by this point I just wanted to go home. We ran out of time so we stopped at the end of our scene. I see now what Virginia was asking for. She wants the agitation but I have to fight it. I have to keep it together. I can't blow it all in that scene because I need it to fuel my breakdown at the end.

➢ I need a run!

**November 6**

No rehearsal.

**November 7**

➢ Tech run. Everything went surprisingly well. Virginia surprised us by letting us have an actual run. We didn't think we were going to get it until Monday. I think the surprise lifted everyone's confidence because we were pretty much on top of things. It wasn't brilliant but considering it's been a week since we've done a run I'd say we're in good shape.

➢ Act IV went pretty well. I don't know how I do it – I leave it up to the good Lord really – but every time we get to the end it's like I just press a button and the tears flow. It's quite a blessing. I keep myself in the world of the play backstage but I think my body just knows
what’s coming. Everything opens up and it all comes out. Need to think about the bird section though.

Act III is the strongest act. I don’t really know why but it’s consistently the strongest one. It is quite lovely.

We need to work the Masha/Vershinin scene again. It was almost there – something small but significant is missing but I’m not sure what.

Acts I and II are almost there. It was scary and exciting. I really need to be on top of what’s going on or else the emotional moments will sneak up on me, I won’t be ready and it’ll be lost.

The set and furniture are so beautiful! I can’t wait for my costumes!

November 8

Class

Masha/Vershinin scene went well. We needed to solidify why we move at each moment because each moment speaks volumes. We also worked on how I use my upper body. In the first act I’m very upright. Vershinin changes me though and it has to be reflected in the body by Act II. I need to soften up and open up the chest area. Sitting in a curved position should work well. Masha knows how to sit like a lady but she usually chooses to break the rules. In this scene though she should let her femininity come out. The kiss is important as well. The kissing of the neck is much more erotic.

We solidified what happens during Irina’s breakdown in Act 3. Lately we’ve been getting stuck between the beds and Irina’s been upstaging herself. The changes reflect the silent battle between the sisters’ belief system and how they affect each other. I really felt left out until Irina looked to me for help as well. I also discovered from where the confession really comes. Olga has made her case for marrying Tusenbach. I don’t agree so I want my
case heard. That's the confession. It's there for Irina's benefit. I think this whole section is going to be really lovely.

Rehearsal

- First dress. Overall it was pretty good. My costumes are amazing. The more runs I get the better I do. That's when everything really comes together and gels. I'm getting a greater sense of continuity and flow. I don't think I hit my stride tonight until Act 3. The confession struck me in a way it never has. I was almost overwhelmed with emotion. I felt Vershinin's love with every fiber of my being. Lots of notes from Virginia—mostly small technical things.

- I guess it's safe to say I'm not going to play the piano. That's fine with me. I'm glad I've practiced it because the music is a part of me now. It's one more desire for Masha that isn't fulfilled. Virginia changed a bit of movement and asked me to move to the piano in Act II. It's subtle but if the audience notices me there then when Tusenbach talks about my playing in Act III they will see the connection. Virginia didn't tell me this but I know that's what she wants me to think. She's so sneaky.

- Virginia used a word tonight to describe the Masha/Vershinin scene that's she's never used before—MAGIC. That's what it's about. Jude and I have that we just need to keep it in the back of our minds.

November 9

- Second dress. Act I was great because I reread it earlier today and made a huge discovery! I always knew that Vershinin's entrance is a big deal because it sets everything in motion. I understood it on an intellectual level. I now understand it from an emotional level. As upset as I am that I won't be going to Moscow I am thrilled to see Vershinin because he
really knows what our life was like there. This completely changed my energy and focus in that section tonight. His arrival meant so much more to me.

November 10

Class

➢ We worked with our skirts. Virginia wanted to make sure we weren't going to trip. We drilled sitting, standing and walking. I, of course, break all the rules with the way I carry myself so I was being sassy.

Rehearsal

➢ Final dress. I am so ready to do this. Bring them on!

➢ Virginia said Jude and I aren't sharing the love scene with the audience. So, in warm-ups we need to visualize the audience looking at us in a sexual way. It's a mental energy thing. If we do it in warm-ups it will be there for the scene.

➢ Every moment with Vershinin is a stolen moment. Our time together is precious and few. That urgency needs to underscore every moment we have together.

November 11

➢ Student Preview. I felt good. It went surprisingly well. I know we have a good show but you never know how it's going to fly. The audience was quiet but I felt them with us the whole way. They were very respectful.

November 12

➢ Opening night. I was nervous but it was more like an excited nervousness. We used the rhythm warm-up to get us connected to each other. I think we'll be using that every night. The audience was great! They lifted my energy to another level. I really felt fueled by it because they were getting everything! They laughed at Olga's, "I know he's not good
looking.” They laughed when Vershinin kisses me and I say, “And yet I don’t mind if you do.” And they laughed when I say to Olga, “At first I just thought he was odd.”

- My sister came in from Ohio to see it. She absolutely loved it!

November 13
No show due to the football game.

November 14
- Small, quiet audience but they were with us. I had a weird energy today. Nothing that took me out of the play but it was there. Maybe because Masha was very sad today. I can’t explain why I just felt like crying throughout the whole show.

- Act IV was particularly strange. Again, nothing so big that anyone else would notice. The tears were a little stuck. They came in time for the scene but for some reason my body was resisting. Was I distracted backstage? Was I too aware of the audience? I don’t know. I don’t want to alarm myself but it was scary. Ah, the magic of live theatre.

- Virginia said it went well. Quiet but moving.

- Mom and Bill came. She called me a slut and Bill called me a bitch. Mom said she could feel my pain and just wanted to run up and give me a big hug.

November 15

Class

- Virginia talked about the reviews and our relationship to the audience. She didn’t say anything specific about the reviews but just the mention of the word makes me crazy. I haven’t read them yet but I just get a funny feeling inside when people mention them. She said she just wants to take them with a grain of salt. We know the quality of work we’ve done and we should be proud of that. She also said the better the work, the harsher the criticism. When the work is good people want to find fault with it.
She said my relationship with audience and fellow actors is pretty even. She’s never seen me so comfortable.

No performance tonight. Dark theatre.

November 16

Decided to watch Sense and Sensibility to put me in the mood. I think some of the characters and relationships are very similar to Three Sisters. The Dashwood Family has three daughters and one son. The son is married to a less-than-pleasant woman very much like Natasha. Elinor and Marianne resemble Olga and Masha.

Virginia said my work was really lovely. I keep developing more nuances.

November 17

Felt good about the show. Kris asks me every night how feel and I usually feel the same way about it. Sure, I notice some subtle differences but overall it’s pretty consistent. I don’t want to analyze things too much. I just want to go out there each night and let the Lord pass his creativity through me. That doesn’t mean all my work is done and things can’t be improved. The work is more about just keeping the world of the play with me and opening myself up to the impulses and exchanging the energy that the audience and fellow actors give.

I always feel like crying after the show. I cry so much as Masha I guess I need to cry for her. I’ve never actually done it before but tonight I did. I just broke down. I was so sad for her. I was crying as much as I did onstage. This play is so powerful. The girls were great - we “shook it all out” and I was fine. As Irina says, “I’m not crying anymore. I’ve had my cry.”

November 18

Virginia mentioned the nuance thing again. That’s nice to hear.
November 19

➢ The audiences have been fabulous. Each night they understand more and more of it. And the humor – they really get the humor. It amazes me every night how much they laugh.

➢ I love doing that love scene with Jude. It’s so electric.

➢ The run is coming to a close. I’m sad that it’s going to end but I really think we’re going to go to ACTF.

November 20

➢ The Last Performance. The first scene was very different for me tonight. It was like I heard Olga’s speech for the first time. I was surprised, annoyed and saddened by it in a much deeper way; it really touched my core.

➢ Once again, I felt like crying after the show. I didn’t though because I really believe we’re going to do it again.

➢ Dad and Nancy were really moved. Dad was basically speechless.

➢ Harry Parker - from Emporia State University - was the ACTF (American College Theatre Festival) respondent. He seemed pretty impressed. I think he liked my Masha. He commented on the passion with Vershinin in Act II. He said I was a very angry Masha but could see how Vershinin changed me so that the anger became anguish in Act IV. I have a really good feeling about going to Sioux Falls. It would be a wonderful tribute to Virginia. I really believe it’s worthy and we’re so proud of it.

Post-Mortem Notes

➢ “I’m utterly, utterly bored.” I seemed confused by this moment more often than not.

   Maybe that’s because Masha was confused. I don’t know; it’s something to think about though.
Go back and think about the extremes that Chekhov shows us.

Heavy romantic music. I have no idea what this means.

Let the passion and the feeling life fill the space. The more expressive we are the truer we are to the piece.

**December 10**

The show’s been chosen to go to ACTF! Virginia gave us a copy of the standard 20-minute Linklater warm-up to keep us going through Christmas break as well as some things to daydream about that will keep us within the world of the show.

**January 3**

Over the past couple of weeks I flipped through Brian Friel’s and David Mamet’s translations of *Three Sisters* – just to see if they might illuminate anything. I didn’t find anything earth-shattering but there were a few moments that caught my attention.

*Brian Friel*

- Act III – the “perfectly, perfectly content/utterly, utterly bored” exchange. When Masha says, “I’ve got something to tell you,” Friel adds for Kulygin, “Masha, if it’s something to do with you and – “ and then Masha cuts him off. This really changes the air. I think Friel is maybe making too specific a choice for what’s going on there but it does give Masha and Kulygin a chance to reveal an aspect of the relationship that otherwise may be too vague or completely lost.

- Friel adds a line for Masha in Act III. Speaking about Natasha she says, “Lady Macbeth walks again.” I thought I read somewhere about Natasha looking like Lady M. in this scene because she’s dressed for bed and carrying a candle. I’m not sure what the context was but again, Friel seems to be prescribing for the actor.
The most noticeable thing about the text is how the slang and phrasing gives it a distinct Irish flavor. Also, interpretation of certain lines changes due to phrasing. His description of the nonverbal moments though are quite moving.

David Mamet

Just how Friel’s translation is distinctly Irish, Mamet’s is distinctly Mamet. The short stichomythia and characters cutting each other off created the fast-paced rhythm we associate with Mamet. For example, during Olga’s opening speech Mamet gives Masha some short responses like, “Um, uh-huh, and Oh, yes” which indicate a patronizing, dismissive tone. Like Friel, it leans towards prescribing what Masha is doing. All of the other translations I’ve seen or read have Masha saying nothing until the Pushkin poem (which is a several pages into the text). By adding lines Mamet helps you because it gives you clues to what’s going on but I believe part of the fun and challenge is to figure out why Chekhov has Masha on stage but waits to have her speak.

January 12

We’re back to rehearse for ACTF. Virginia took us through a long, very detailed vocal warm-up. It felt so good! A big concern for her is the vocal challenges of playing in a space that is 3-4 times as big as Howell.

Read through Act I and new stuff came up about Vershinin. The connection to my father was so strong and my images and memories of him so vivid that when Vershinin came in I thought I saw my father. That’s why I fall for him – he’s just like my father! I don’t know why I haven’t made that connection sooner. Sure, I knew his presence strengthened the memories of father but it just never hit me that he was like him.

Read Act I again putting together Mind, Mouth and Middle. Virginia said the first read was sloppy. We have to be passionate about the ideas we present and make what we’re saying
very clear; use the words as actions. I thought the first read went well for me because my emotional life was really connected. Perhaps my thoughts and actions were getting lost in the emotion. I just need to be aware of it.

**January 13**

- Another deep vocal warm-up. I liked walking around during the “ba-da-ba-da/pa-ta-pa-ta” and moving to the beat while making big gestures; it was very freeing.

- Read through Act II. It was just okay. I felt like I was making sense of the words but was a little emotionally detached.

- Virginia said the language begins to crack us open so the way we read this act is different from Act I.

- Acts III and IV were much better emotionally. I wasn’t as surprised that I was able to drop into the breakdown as I was at how much focus I had. I felt a little scattered earlier in the evening but I stuck to it and it paid off. Had some trouble with lines during the breakdown – not alarming but noticeable. I had that problem when we first got off script. I didn’t want to think about it too much so I didn’t spend a lot of time drilling them.

- Virginia talked to us about the flow of the language. We need to make some of the periods into commas because we tend to let the periods stop the flow and the lines then sound stilted. I need to look at how this affects me in Act IV with the doctor. How do I make it flow without losing the pain of getting it out?

- Virginia also talked about reinvesting ourselves into the piece. This piece is ours now and we have to take control and run with it. It takes immense focus and concentration but reinvesting deepens our professionalism. I’m glad she said that because even though we slipped back into things with relative ease, some may have forgotten the discipline needed to get through the whole piece.
I felt like crying again after we finished. The image of Vershinin as my father put me right over the edge.

Need to remember that with my last paragraph I am desperate to hold onto something.

January 14

We did an emotion warm-up. This was very effective and something I need to do every night.

Run through. A few new discoveries. When I finally remembered Vershinin I laughed so hard because I got this vivid picture of him as a young lovesick major. Missing father was painfully strong tonight; I ached for him. Tusenbach came and sat in between Vershinin and I on his, "Oh well, what of it" in Act II. What a bold choice and a big surprise! Vershinin and I got the strong feeling that Tusenbach knew what we were up to.

Overall I felt really good until Act III. I lost focus during intermission because I was talking to people outside. As a result, I pushed the emotions rather than letting it settle and be what it was going to be. It’s all about the magic again. Let the wonder of it all touch me more.

I changed my response to Solyony in Act I by walking to him. Wrong choice because he isn’t worth it to Masha.

Lost the magic with Jude. We’re so comfortable with each other that sometimes it becomes flat or too easy. Each touch in that scene is important. The air has to be charged. The space has to be charged. It’s new, exciting and we have butterflies in our stomachs. The section about Kulygin is special, intimate info I choose to share with Vershinin.

Virginia said something really important to Amy J; “When you get emotionally connected don’t let it overwhelm you. Let the emotion make the words come alive.” I think it’s so
easy to say, “Well, I’m emotionally connected so it must be good.” Or, “I’m having too many feelings. I can’t possibly go on.” Have to remember that.

January 16

➤ We found the magic!!!

January 17

➤ We worked on expanding the space (primary and secondary focus). Virginia said I don’t need to work on that too much; just keep listening to the others.

January 24

➤ The ACTF performance was unbelievable. The response from the audience was overwhelming. They were with us from the top and never left. And they laughed at everything! I mean, I would just walk to the liquor stand and they would laugh. People stopped me the next day to say how much they loved it. Maybe some people will give Chekhov another chance now. The response committee loved it as well. I think they were anticipating something awful but we surprised them. They really enjoyed the passion between Masha and Vershinin. Michael Lupu, Senior Dramaturg at the Guthrie, seemed just plain tickled by the whole thing. He enjoyed me stopping the top in Act I. Catherine Weidner, from the Folger in D.C., had a good note about Act IV. She thought my voice got a little too high during the breakdown. They all loved my costumes. Thank you Janice! Our first year movement instructor Paul Steger and former grad student Robb Hurst were there. Their responses were very favorable (Paul couldn’t get over my Act II costume. He went on and on about how it’s everything Masha is and wants to be.) And Bill. My dear friend Bill Jenkins got to see it and he said I was amazing. He hasn’t seen me do anything since undergrad so his presence and response meant a lot. What an
emotionally charged day it was. It would be wonderful if we could go to the Kennedy Center.
PART THREE: THE RESPONSE

This section focuses on critiques and reviews. I asked University of Nebraska-Lincoln faculty members Dr. Shirley Carr Mason, Harris Smith and Ken McCulough for their thoughts on my performance. The following is a transcription of tape recorded interviews. Also included in this section is my response to the Journal Star and Daily Nebraskan reviews. (See Appendix for copies of reviews.)

Interviews

Dr. Shirley Carr Mason is Head of the Acting Program at UNL. She was my First Year Voice instructor, Second Year Acting instructor and directed me in productions of Arcadia and Waiting for Godot.

AR: Maybe you can start with improvements I've made or how this performance compares to others.

SM: I think you had much greater freedom in this role. You gave yourself permission to let things happen. You gave permission yourself to be in the moment—now. It was a fully professional Masha. The comparison between this and Midsummer is not really a fair one because it was a difficult show... one way or another. (laugh)

AR: (laugh) Yeah.

SM: And was Godot was too. And I thought you were very successful in Godot. It took a while for you to find that. And believe in it. It was a good year in some ways but in another way everything seemed to be hard for you. [Referring to Masha] It was very moving, very nice. And I liked the eccentricity. You had no preconceived notions of other Mashas.

AR: I didn’t do... When we came back to rehearse for ACTF... It wasn’t like I was trying completely new things but because we didn’t have props I was just using what was there so I wasn’t doing that chess piece thing. And Virginia said, “You can’t cut the chess piece. You have to do the chess piece, you have to. And I said, “Oh I will, I will. It wasn’t there so I wasn’t going to fake it.” She said, “Okay, I just wanted to make sure because it really just sets you in a different world.”
AR: I felt like in the second year I got stuck in the rules. As opposed to accepting that they’re there and then either seeing how I can break the rules or finding my freedom within them.

SM: What do you mean by “the rules?”

AR: Well I think with Shakespeare it’s because I’m not used, because I don’t do it often. And I feel like people… others’ vision of me is not Shakespeare, they don’t see me in Shakespeare. So I don’t believe then that I can do it and then I get caught up in the rules because I think, “I must not be getting the verse right or…” Rather than looking at it as another character I was taking on the ways people think it’s hard.

SM: And finding it hard.

AR: And getting caught up in that. As opposed to accepting this is the language, this is the character and this is what the character is saying. And with Midsummer it was even more difficult because I was trying to apply the work we had done in class but being in a situation where it didn’t even matter, I was even more confused. And I think I became more worried about what other people were doing as well. That was one thing Virginia said about this show. She said don’t try to carry the show. Just do your thing and other people will have to rise to what you do or fumble all over themselves; but don’t try to make it better for other people. Which I’m not conscious that I do. But when she said that I was like okay I’m not going to worry about them. And for a moment I felt really selfish. But then I said, “Well, that’s the direction my director has given me so I’m going to do it.” But I also, from the beginning, I felt connected to Masha more than I felt connected to anything else, and I’m sure that makes a difference.

SM: Yes, it does.

AR: I just knew I had it me. Whereas I never really let myself with anything else go, “I really know I have this in me.” And I would get scared by the challenges rather than embrace them and I didn’t do that with this show.

SM: I think a point about being selfish… You can’t really help other people except by being so strongly yourself because then they know what they’re working with and who they’re working with. And you don’t know what they’ll do but it will give you a clear sense of how you can react off of them.

(Pause.)

AR: Not that I didn’t enjoy… Godot… because I do think after all the frustration I felt like it clicked. And I enjoyed Look Back in Anger and Arcadia. And I felt I did good enough work I could do at that point.
SM: I thought you were lovely in *Arcadia*. It troubled me... I didn't know how to help you more in *Godot* and it came to a point where you had to work through it yourself. Eventually you did, eventually you did. It's such a stretch that character. That situation. But I saw something in Lady Croom that I thought would be good for Pozzo – that arrogance.

AR: Again I was getting caught up in the play and the words and what does it have to be about. Rather than taking that kernel of arrogance in me or confidence in me, I was thinking, “Here’s Pozzo [indicating one direction] and I have to plop it on me [indicating another direction] Yeah, when it finally did click it was because I found it in me and it opened up. I don’t know... that second year those preconceived notions of whatever garbage that I picked up from wherever affected me and maybe so did my own notion of what people that do Shakespeare should look like and what others have said to me.

SM: You astonish me.

AR: Why?

SM: Why would you think you couldn’t do it?

AR: I think it has more to do with a look. People say, “Oh you don’t look like you can do it.”

(Shirley said something very funny here. But because we were both laughing so loud it got lost underneath.)

AR: It used to be that way with singing too. People have said, “With your voice I can’t imagine you could sing.

SM: Why do people do that?

AR: But I’m much more confident in my singing. When they heard me they said, “Oh, of course you can sing.” Now, I see people blaze through it and the thing is I’m not that way with other aspects of my work. I think it happens when I have a little doubt. I let a comment from someone reinforce it. If I don’t have any doubt then what they say has no effect on me.

SM: I never would have guessed. I didn’t know that.

AR: I don’t know if I would let myself think about it so much in class because I was trying so hard just to do it. Regardless of whatever doubt I had during the second year I still got so much out of it and I think I can take much more with me now.

SM: That’s good because you could take that into Masha
And I felt really...I felt like I had really earned it. Because originally Virginia wasn't thinking of me as Masha. She was looking at me for Natasha. When she changed her mind I felt like the work I was doing in class was good and that lifted my confidence.

And the freedom...Not only in the emotional life.

Yeah, I don’t think there’s anyway I could have done this role my first year.

No, I don’t think you could have.

Or else it would have been very different. So I think I needed to struggle with those other things but then knowing that I have to give myself permission. We talk all the time in class about I should have done this or why didn’t I do that. Because if it’s bad or wrong you someone will chime in so you might as well do it.

And look at it as searching process. And then you stumble onto things. You couldn’t have preconceived the thing with the chess piece.

It wasn’t until I had it on my head that I noticed what I was doing. I heard people laughing so I thought, “That must work. I’ll keep it.” And what else was freeing was to know that the stage directions were not important. Here I’m thinking I’ve got to learn how to whistle. And Virginia says don’t worry about it you’ll find your thing. And I’m glad I’m doing Fiddler now because it’s a totally different experience. It’s nice because he [the director] knows how to talk to actors but it’s a lot more prescriptive. And so I just have to say to myself, “Don’t freak out. Just find a way to find my freedom within that.”

Harris Smith is new to the Department of Theatre Arts this year. He was my Film/TV instructor last semester and is currently my Movement/Combat instructor.

What I look at is the through-line of the character and how your character relates to the others/relationships. We know for sure that Masha wants to get out of the situation she’s in. That’s the impression that I got. She wants to escape physically from her surroundings or escape emotionally. Then Vershinin comes on, speaking of relationships. I thought that was very clear - the passion and the sense of frustration in public that you can’t express your feeling for this man, there’s only so much you can do. And the natural of telling your sisters, to the final scene, that you can’t take it any longer and how that applies to modern times as well.

Things I would think about I would say, if you did it again. And I don’t even know if it can be seen on stage. Exploring the guilt you may or may not feel and how that affects your relationship with
Vershinin or the guilt and the sense of vulnerability with Kulygin. And I don’t know if that’s there or not. That sense of desperation was clear. Everything else was great. Your relationship with the sisters was clear, the sense of family, with Andrei, with Natasha. Your rank in the family was clear - that you’re the strong one.

Going back to the through-line... The progression that there’s the sense of hope or lack of hope at the beginning. Vershinin comes in - the light at the end of the tunnel and then it’s shut off. This was your chance! Do you think if Vershinin told he was leaving his wife and asked you to go, would you?

AR: I think so. There’s a part of me that thinks so. There’s another part of me that thinks I wouldn’t; but that’s always what was going on in my head in the last scene. He’s going to ask me to leave. We’re going to leave. I’m not sure I ever made a decision about whether I would go but I always thought he would ask me.

HS: Your relationship with Kulygin was clear. The whole past history in Moscow was clear.

My last note is... everyone did such a wonderful job of giving a sense of hope to the end of the play which I’ve never seen before. And I think that made the difference in it going to ACTF. Kudos to Virginia as well. You were going to go on - which is a true reflection of the Russian spirit. You were making sacrifices for the next generation and you really believed it was going to happen but there wasn’t that gloom and doom. And hey, you may even fall in love with your husband. You have any questions?

AR: No, I don’t thinks so.

HS: Now this is just an observation. There always seem to be a sense of mystery about Masha. There’s a part of herself she doesn’t show to anyone. I don’t know where that comes from. I guess that’s another reason why Vershinin is attracted to you.

(Pause.)

HS: Amy J asked about physicality. If there was anything that I noticed I would have written it down. It only becomes an issue when it brings attention to itself. Vocally, no problems. This is the quality of work I would expect from graduating MFA’s.
Ken McCulough is a visiting professor in directing and acting from Jacksonville Community College, Jacksonville, Florida. He is currently my Audition instructor.

KMc: This was a great role for you – a great thesis role because I think it captured a lot of your personal and normal strengths and brassy-ness that you have as a person which also requires you to think about certain vulnerable, weaker issues for the journey that character takes. The role goes through so many moods and extremes it’s really a tour de force role more than any of the other female characters and I think you captured those extremes honestly and powerfully without going over the top or being melodramatic. It was all very connected and believable and carefully handled with a certain amount of nuance and still tied you in with the style of the play and the other characters. And I think that’s hard to do with Masha because she’s more extreme or high-strung than some of the other characters and it can be very easy for it to flip over to being in a different kind of play or style and I was glad to see that that was handled once again - integrated within the world of that production and still doing justice to the character when she was frustrated and claustrophobic and angry. You still honored that and explored that. You didn’t pull back from that or shy away from those moments. A lot of times you may be afraid to go to those extreme choices so you make a no-choice or go halfway because you don’t want to stick out. But then you don’t have the dynamics to really define the character; you just flat-line everything in that Chekhov stereotype of everything is talk, talk, talk, and nothing’s really happening, everything’s under the surface. That’s the danger of bad Chekhov productions - no dynamics, nothing happening, people afraid to honor the character’s journey.

(Pause.)

And even when I saw you that night in rehearsal for Act IV. It was very, very moving even then – heartbreaking. That’s probably the best moment of that scene that I’ve ever seen. The most honest and connected, heartbreaking and fully committed. Very, very nice.

AR: Okay, thanks. I’ve never seen – for as much as I love this play – I’ve never seen a production of it done; which I think was good for me because I love Masha so much. I mean, you try not to be influenced by things but sometimes it’s floating in the back of your head. I was really glad I didn’t have any preconceived notions.

KMc: That’s fortunate for it to be a new, fresh, organic experience for you - especially with a thesis role. It was nice to see the idea of the frustration and claustrophobia in the beginning so defined and then the relief when Vershinin when comes into your life that sense of release that comes out of what happens to Sometimes the breakdown just stays there puts Masha into a brooding until the end of the play. You guys seemed to
release some of that with Kulygin’s joke. So you get the sense that maybe she could have some kind of life with this man.

AR: At one point in the rehearsal process Virginia asked us what we thought happened after the play and we got into a discussion about the men. We agreed that all the men affect us in such a way that we can’t go back to the way things were. That got us thinking beyond what was in the script (Olya is just headmistress, Irina just goes to the brick-works, I go home and sulk). I think it informed and then opened up the last moment was for us.

KMc: Oh yeah. It suggests that whatever you do at the end of play it tells you something about what might happen afterwards - not necessarily literal. At the end of *The Glass Menagerie* there’s a very strong feeling about what happens them. For example, Laura maybe brushing Amanda’s hair. If so, then maybe she’s found some strength in herself and then takes care of Amanda. I think in this one [Three Sisters] there’s a sense of hope rather than the sense of doom, that this was the greatest moment of their lives and everything is downhill.

AR: And who wants to see that? I mean moments of that certainly, but...

KMc: Some people believe that though. It’s a tragedy and you have to go there.

AR: Well, I don’t believe Chekhov believed that.

KMc: I don’t either. Maybe it had something to do with Stanislavski making them darker thus starting a whole tradition of how we view his plays.

AR: And even Chekhov didn’t really agree with Stanislavski. He thought Stanislavski ruined his plays.

KMc: Stanislavski was a great tragedian and maybe was trying to elevate Chekhov to the level of the Greeks. You do need to incorporate some sense of it but you want to have some hope as well.

And I loved your Act II costume. It was killer. You and Jude had great chemistry and played off each other really well - real sense of trust, confidence, ease with the intimacy. Physicality, the strides gave a great sense of strength. And then affected the way you ran in Act IV. The runs had power.

Reviews

As far as the reviews are concerned, what can I say? I’m flattered. First of all, I normally don’t read reviews. I’d like to say they wouldn’t affect but I know they
would be swimming around in the back of my head. I waited until after ACTF to read these and I'm glad I did; I was really surprised at the positive comments. I don't mean to sound ungrateful but they were almost gushing over Jude and I. And I think the critics were a little hard on Sasha and Amy. And Kris! Neither one said anything about Kris. I can't believe it because I thought his performance was so sweet and moving. His work in Act IV just broke my heart.
CONCLUSION

Putting together the research proved to be a chaotic experience. What I tried to do was write about the information that served as the foundation for the details I created in my Image Bank (a term Virginia uses for what we create with our imagination) and the rehearsal process. As I tried to make sense of the notes and the thoughts I was comforted by something Chekhov once said; “It’s only fools and charlatans who know everything and understand everything” (Hingley, 120). How true. How true.

What I have come to realize though through much trial and error, but most importantly through this project is that I wasn’t trusting myself enough. In my desire to “get things right” I would question all my thoughts and actions rather than saying to myself, “Okay. This is what I think. Trust my instinct and go from there.” I’m not saying it’s not good to questions things; but instead of letting that help me I let it get me down which then kills my confidence. When I lose confidence I get confused, my work becomes more chaotic and I become apathetic. Shirley said to me last year that perhaps there needs to be some kind of chaos in everything I do. I’ve been thinking about that ever since.

I decided to embrace the chaos to see what it would do for me. Well, it couldn’t have come at a better time because Virginia set up rehearsals in such a way that made it easy for me. It was all about exploration. Nothing was set until the week before the show. She kept reinforcing the idea of giving yourself permission and empowering yourself to trust the impulses. And so my attitude has changed. Artistic endeavors are precarious in so many ways that if I don’t believe in my abilities, who will?
I now incorporate these ideas into my teaching so that I'm constantly reinforcing the ideas for myself. This doesn’t mean I’m no longer a perfectionist. I still have high expectations for the kind of work in which I want to participate and create; but I haven’t been beating myself up about getting stuck. And you know what? I actually have more ideas because of it. Even though you may be working like a dog negative feelings will work against you. So, as long as I make the commitment and do the work and open myself to whatever comes, art will manifest itself when the time is right.

This whole experience completely changed my outlook on acting and how I fit into that world. I couldn’t have asked for a better thesis project.
WORKS CITED


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APPENDIX
Some successes found in demanding Chekhov play

BY LARRY L. KUBERT
For the Lincoln Journal Star

In Anton Chekhov's "Three Sisters," set in a turn-of-the-century small, provincial Russian town, the Prozoroff sisters fight an oppressive, stifling existence with only the dream of escape to the lights of Moscow to sustain them.

The four-act play is not an optimistic piece, and in fact, from the beginning, little hope is withheld for the sisters' flight. Enamored in family obligations and ties, they struggle, but all in futility.

And that's the message that Chekhov communicates, over and over again throughout the play — individuals caught up in situations that they have no power to control or alter.

On many levels, the drama requires a mature and inured cast. Which makes the UNL Howell Theatre production of it an ambitious undertaking — even for educational purposes.

The 24-hour Virginia Ness Ray-directed production certainly displays some failings — especially in some of the supporting and minor roles. But it also exhibits some decided successes.

Principal of these are the driving performances of Amy Rafa as Masha and Jude Thadeus Hickey as Vershinin. The pair pour life and spirit into their portrayals, resulting in performances that sparkle and breathe, making the inevitable failure all that more distressing.

But while the two command the stage, their every nuance in performance adds to the effective communication of emotion.

Amy J. Johnson as Irina and Sasha Dolson as Olga — the other Prozoroff sisters — don't hit their dramatic stride until the play's third and fourth acts, but when they do, they deliver.

A respectable, strong performance is also generated by Molra Mangiannelli as the rustic Natasha, who weds the sisters' brother, turning into a blooded harp.

The production's scenic design by

Robert Copely Jr. strongly supports Chekhov's suffocating and gloomy mood through an omnipresent backdrop of gaunt, bare birch trees, fading away to an ashen, colorless oblivion representative of the nothingness ensnaring the Prozoroffs.
‘Sisters’ fails in displaying character growth

By Shelly Akra

Though the play was not a hit, the characters and plot did not develop. The story was disjointed, and the characters were not well-defined. The director, however, did a good job of integrating the different plot lines. Overall, the play was well-acted but fell short of being a strong theatrical production.

The play was set in a small town in the Midwest, and it follows the lives of two sisters, one of whom is a professional actress and the other a housewife. The actress is struggling to make ends meet, while the housewife is content with her life. The plot lines are intertwined, with the actress's career influencing her family life and vice versa.

The performances were strong, with a particular standout being the actress, who was able to convey a range of emotions from happiness to despair. However, the dialogue was often clunky and the plot was confusing. The ending was particularly weak, with the characters' motivations not fully explored.

Overall, the play failed to capture the audience's attention and left them feeling unsatisfied. While the performances were commendable, the disjointed plot and weak conclusion made it difficult to follow the story. The play could have used a stronger focus on character development and a clearer sense of direction.

References:

The Graduate Acting class, performing in "Three Sisters," includes (top row, l-r) Kristopher Gordon King, Amy Rafa and Sasha Dobson, (bottom row, l-r) Moira Mangiameli and Amy Johnson.
CHEKHOV'S
THREE
SISTERS
OPENS NOV. 11

Anton Chekhov's Three Sisters, a classic of the modern theatre, opens Nov. 11 in Howell Theatre. The play is the thesis project for all five of the actors in the UNL Professional Actor Training Program leading to their Master of Fine Arts in Acting.

The production previews for students only at 7:30 p.m. on Nov. 11, and opens to the general public Nov. 12. A performance has been added for 3 p.m. Nov. 14 and the Nov. 13 performance cancelled to avoid conflicts with the NU vs. KSU football game. Additional performances begin at 7:30 p.m. Nov. 16-20. Tickets may be purchased by contacting the box office at 472-2073.

Three Sisters is a poignant story of character and relationships, exploring the gap between hope and fulfillment in the existence of three provincial sisters, Olga, Masha and Irina, and their brother Andrei, and the complex individuals who people their lives. Chekhov does not reveal the provincial town where the Prozorovs live, but its spiritual identity seems to be "Exile."

Playing Olga, Masha and Irina are M.F.A. actors Sasha Dobson, Amy Rafa, and Amy Johnson, respectively. Moira Mangiameli plays Natasha, the wife of brother Andrei, and Kristopher Gordon Kling is Lieutenant the Baron Tusenbach, also both members of the M.F.A. acting class. These graduate actors perform the roles in the production in partial fulfillment of their graduate degrees in acting. Besides the usual preparation that an actor goes through prior to a performance, the actors are required to do extensive research into the time period, the playwright, other productions of the play, and other topics assigned by advisers. A written thesis is required that journals the acting process and includes the extensive research.
'Three Sisters' opens Friday at UNL

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Department of Theatre Arts will stage Anton Chekov's classic play, "Three Sisters," under Virginia Ness Ray's direction.

The show will open at 7:30 p.m. Friday. Additional performances are at 3 p.m. next Sunday and 7:30 p.m. Nov. 16-20.

Chekhov's play explores the gap between hope and fulfillment in the existence of three provincial sisters, Olga, Masha and Irina, and their brother Andrei.

Sasha Dobson, Amy Rafa and Amy Johnson are the three sisters and John Elsener is Andrei.

Other cast members are Moria Mangiameli, Kristopher Gordon Kling, Nathan Brandt, Kaitlin Byrd, Ryan Drabota, Aaron DuPree, Jude Thaddeus Ilickey, Eric Lauritzen, Michael Semrad and Dana Wheatley.

Dobson, Rafa, Johnson, Mangiameli and Kling are doing the play to partially fulfill their graduate degrees in acting.

Production crew members are Robert E. Copley (set), Ed Johnson (lights), Timothy Croshaw (sound), Janice Stauffer (costumes) and Jennifer Day (stage manager).

Tickets are $10; $9 for UNL faculty, staff and senior citizens and $6 for students. Student preview show is 7:30 p.m. Thursday and tickets are $5. For reservations, call 472-2073.

At UNL: "Three Sisters" cast members include (clockwise from back left) Kristopher Gordon Kling, Amy Rafa, Sasha Dobson, Amy Johnson and Moira Mangiameli.
ENTERTAINMENT

Russian drama similar to "Seinfeld"

Chekhov's "Three Sisters" Ends UNL's Fall Theatre Programming

by Pam Thompson-Kirk
November 13, 1999

LINCOLN - Moira Mangiameli, who plays Natasha in Anton Chekhov's classic 1901 play Three Sisters, said the drama is "very much like a Seinfeld episode where the action is about nothing and everything at the same time."

Like "Seinfeld," the drama concerns character and relationships between family and friends. Unlike the long-running television comedy, the play takes place in pre-Revolutionary Russia rather than the streets and apartments of contemporary New York City.

Considered a classic in modern theatre, Three Sisters is the final main stage production and thesis project for five of the actors in the UNL Professional Actor Training Program. The program leads to a Master of Fine Arts in Acting. The two-hour and forty-five minute production opens tonight at the Howell Theatre, and will run for eight performances through Saturday, Nov. 16.

The play explores the gap between hope and fulfillment in the existence of three provincial sisters, Olga (Sasha Dobson), Masha (Amy Rafa), and Irina (Amy Johnson), and their brother Andrei Prozorov (John Elsener).

Exile, a pervasive theme in Russian literature, is at work here. The Prozorovs, who live in a dull, wintry northern Russian town, always dream of hopeful, spring-like Moscow. And they are exiles in time, too. The sisters look wistfully back towards their childhood rather than toward the future.

Members of the MFA acting class include Dobson, Rafa, Johnson, Mangiameli and Kristopher Gordon-Kling as Lieutenant the Baron Tusenbach. Besides preparing for the performance, the actors are required to do extensive research into the time period, the playwright, and other topics assigned by advisors. To fully understand the drama, one must consider the times in which Chekhov was living. At the turn of the century, Tolstoy, Gorki and Chekhov, all friends, were documenting in literature and theatre the social upheaval and desire for change in the Russian political system.

Virginia Ness Ray, who directed the play, writes in her director's notes that the challenge was to encourage her company to search for the relevance of this play in our time.

Other members of the cast include undergraduates Nathan Branda, Rode, Kentin Byrd as Antisa, Ryan Drahota as Fedotik, Aaron DuPree as Stolyony, Jude Thaddeus Hickey as Vershinin, Eric Lautzen as Kulygin, Michael Semrad as Ferapont, and Dana Wheatley as Tchebutykin.
Department of Theatre Arts garners awards at Region V ACTF

The Department of Theatre Arts' production of Anton Chekhov's "Three Sisters," which participated in the Region V Kennedy Center/American College Theater Festival Jan. 18-23, in Sioux Falls, S.D., has been "held" for potential future nomination as a participant in the national American College Theater Festival in April.

Region V includes Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota. NU's production was one of seven selected from a field of 63 productions to perform at the Region V Festival. The other production from the region held for potential consideration was How I Learned to Drive by Paula Vogel from the University of North Dakota.

The KC/ACTF National Committee forms a National Selection Team that travels to all eight of the regional festivals. Members of the National Selection Team select productions for the national festival at John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts April 17-27 in Washington, D.C. An announcement of participants in the national festival will be made during the first week of March.

Individual theatre students selected to participate in the Irene Ryan Scholarship Competition Jan. 18 and 19 were Moira Mangiameli (partner: Michael Rothmayer), Kyle Johnston (partner: Stephanie Dodd), Amy Raž (partner: Kris Kling), Heather Harrison (partner: Jenny D'Agosta), Karen Kumm (partner: Steve Barth), Matt Bross (partner: Carmen Bailey), Jude Hickey (partner: Kerry Gallagher), Katie Byrd (partner: Greg Peters), Amy Johnson (partner: Aaron DuFrea), and Sasha Dobson (partner: Kris Kling), Mangiameli, Johnston, Raž, Harrison, Kumm, Bross, Hickey, and Byrd and their respective partners were all selected to participate in the semi-finals. Five NU teams (Raf’s, Byrd, Mangiameli, Johnston, and Harrison and their partners) made it to the finals round. Only 16 teams advance to the finals. Kyle Johnston won the competition, so he and his partner Stephanie Dodd will attend the national festival.

Johnston was selected to participate in the festival because of his work in "The Lion in Winter," performed at NU in October. Kris Kling was named "Best Partner" in the regional competition.

Design Awards are as follows:

- Robert Copley won the Regional Graduate Scene Design Competition, and Shawn DeCou won the Regional Undergraduate Costume Design Competition. Citations of merit were bestowed on the following: Robert Copley for scene design and Janice Stauter for costume design — "Three Sisters"; Jenny Kenyon for costume design; Leone Eckof for props design; Jeffrey Stander for scene design; Anne Sturtevant for lighting design; and April Scott for sound design — "The Lion in Winter"; Jeru Fabian for costume design and Laura Banks for mask design — "A Midsummer Night's Dream"; the cast of "Unidentified Human Remains" and the "True Nature of Love" received a citation of merit for Ensemble Acting along with Karen Libman for the direction of "...direction."
Announcement

March 3, 2000

TO: All colleges and universities that participated in the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival XXXII

FR: The KC/ACTF National Selection Team: Bob Buseick, Kathryn Gagnon, Gary Garrison, and Mark Kunz
Jay Edelman, National Chair
Catherine Norgren, National Vice-Chair
Susan Shaffer, KC/ACTF, Co-manager-Administration
Derek E. Gordon, Vice President, Education

The Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival’s 2000 National Selection Team has completed its tour of the eight regional festivals and has selected five productions for the National Festival in Washington, DC April 17-25. On behalf of Lawrence J. Wilker, President of the Kennedy Center, Derek E. Gordon, Vice President, Education, the KC/ACTF National Committee, and the Playwriting Awards Committee, our sincere thanks to everyone involved in the more than 1000 productions entered in this year’s festival. We look forward to your continued involvement with KC/ACTF in Festival XXXII.

REGION V (Festival Site: Augustana College, Sioux Falls, SD)

BUT DUST AND ASH, Wichita State University (Student Written)

HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE, University of North Dakota
Outstanding performance Joan Lauchner
Outstanding performance Darin Kerr

THREE SISTERS, University of Nebraska
Outstanding performance Amy Rafa
Outstanding performance Michael Semrad, Jr.
Outstanding performance Moira Maniameli
Outstanding performance Jude Thaddeus Hicke
Costume design Janice Stauffer

BEREFT, English Alternative Theatre at the University of Kansas (Student Written)

THE WOMAN IN BLACK, Simpson College
Outstanding performance Matt Robbins
Stage manager Paula Williams
Lighting design Heather Layman
Sound design Edwin Brand
Director Thomas Woldt

ON THE VERGE, Colorado College
Composer Ryan Banagale

HELLO AGAIN, University of Missouri-Columbia
Outstanding performance B.J. Jones
Outstanding performance Lindsay Alley
from Chekhov's Leading Lady
Caught in a pensive moment, Helena de Kay, a socially prominent friend from Homer's New York days, seems to brood over a closed book. Symbol of lost love? "Since it's Winslow Homer we're talking about," says Nicolai Gikovsky, Jr., a leading biographer, "we'll never know for certain." But romantic disappointment may have sent Homer fleeing New York to remain a bachelor the rest of his days.
postcard of *The Stroll* by Gertrude Abercrombie

postcard by Michael Sowa
from *Russia in Original Photographs*

from *Russia in Original Photographs*