An Actor's Experience
Playing the Role of Natasha in
Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*

An Honors Thesis (HONORS 499)

By

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by Anton Chekhov

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An Actors Studio Production
October 7-9 at 8pm
October 10 at 2:30pm
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Preface
This thesis was made possible by the Ball State Department of Theatre and Dance, and Dr. Kathy Biesinger. I was given the opportunity of playing the role of Natasha in Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* last fall in Strother Theatre (October 7-9, 11-14). It was an enormous learning experience for me as a senior Musical Theatre major. Under Dr. Biesinger's outstanding direction, the cast was able to delve deeply into the troubled lives of a Russian family. Dr. Biesinger helped the cast connect emotionally to people and places that initially seemed remote. I would like to thank Kathy, as my director and thesis advisor, for her limitless passion, insight, and theatrical vision. She is truly an inspiration.

This thesis explores the world of Anton Chekhov and arguably his greatest work, *Three Sisters*. The majority of my work went to preparing and performing the role of Natasha, for which I was awarded an Irene Ryan nominee by the American College Theatre Festival and Dr. Biesinger. The Irene Ryan nominee gave me the opportunity of competing at the American College Theatre Festival in Milwaukee this past January. I have included a rehearsal journal, which chronicles my daily work in developing the role. In addition to my performance, I have also done research into the causes and effects of extramarital affairs. An extramarital affair is one of the key elements in the life of the character of Natasha. Based on my research, I have also proposed possible reasons for Natasha’s affair. Finally, I have included newspaper reviews of our production of *Three Sisters*, and the written adjudication from the American College Theatre Festival.
Biography of Anton Chekhov
Anton Chekhov was born of Russian peasant stock on January 17, 1860, in Tagonrog, an old port near the Sea of Azov. He died of tuberculosis in 1904, at the age of 44. His tragically short life left behind a wealth of dramatic work, and his insight into the subtleties of the human condition remains his legacy. Chekhov lived a life of exemplary moral behavior and psychological good health, despite the many hardships he faced (Gilman 3).

His grandfather was a self-educated man who bought his own freedom, and his family’s, from serfdom. Anton’s father was riddled with debt from an unsuccessful grocery and was forced to move his family to Moscow. Anton stayed behind to finish his schooling. His poverty was so severe he was forced to earn money by doing other student’s homework. In 1880, Anton entered the University of Moscow to study medicine. He wrote short stories under the pen name Antosha Chekhonte to support himself and his family while attending school (Young xi-xiii).

Despite the challenges he faced growing up, Chekhov remained a dutiful son, and affectionate sibling to his four brothers and one sister. He was often forced to be the economic and emotional mainstay of his large, and often unappreciative, family, but he never complained. Complaining did not seem to be in Chekhov’s nature, even when faced with harsh literary criticism and the debilitating disease that would eventually take his young life (Gilman 4). This unflappable mindset became evident in many of Chekhov’s greatest plays, particularly *The Three Sisters*. Chekhov deeply understood the ability of the human spirit to triumph when faced with adversity.
Upon completing school, Chekhov became a practicing physician for several years, but his writing began to occupy more and more of his time. He often referred to medicine as his “lawful” of “legal” wife, and to literature as his “mistress” (Gilman x). He eventually gave himself over to writing, and only practiced medicine during epidemics. By 1888 he had published over 300 stories.

Chekhov began writing for the stage in the 1880’s, and wrote his first full-length play in 1887. *Ivanov* was a bitter failure, as was his following play, *The Wood Demon* (which would later become the celebrated *Uncle Vanya*). He became discouraged, and didn’t write another full-length play until *The Seagull* in 1896. *The Seagull* was literally laughed off the stage when it opened in St. Petersburg.

*The Seagull* was a major departure from the popular theatre of the time: melodramatic thrillers. Audiences and alike weren’t prepared for Chekhov’s low-key realism and subtlety. The actors were accustomed to an overboard, melodramatic acting style, which clashed ridiculously with Chekhov’s script. The actors were only given nine days to rehearse, which wasn’t enough time for them to adjust to this new style of writing. The result was disastrous, and Chekhov vowed to never write another play (Field et al. 87).

Chekhov allowed *The Seagull* to be printed in a literary magazine, where it caught the attention of two wealthy, young men: Constantin Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. The two men joined theatrical forces in 1898 to form the Moscow Art Theater. Their goal was to develop a new style of realistic, understated acting. Chekhov’s new style of writing attracted their attention, and they closed their opening season with a revival of *The Seagull*. This production turned out to be the
making of Anton Chekhov, and the Moscow Art Theater, a collaboration that would remain for the entirety of Chekhov's life. The Art Theater went on to produce Chekhov's next and final three plays: *Uncle Vanya*, in 1899, *The Three Sisters* in 1901, and *The Cherry Orchard* in 1904 (Gilman et al. 88-89). Chekhov died of tuberculosis in 1904, shortly after completing *Uncle Vanya* (Field et al. 88-89).

Chekhov's plays are often described as action-less, and their success is attributed to a Chekhovian “atmosphere” or “mood”. These descriptions are ill fitting; Chekhov's plays are hardly action-less. They may lack physical activity, but they are filled with psychological and emotional activity. Chekhov revolutionized theatre by changing the concept of dramatic action. Most plays follow a format of physical action and external events from exposition, to plot development, to denouement, and ending with some sort of change or resolution. Chekhov discarded this clean-cut external format in favor of internal action with no steady progression of events, and no definitive change or resolution. He introduced the world of psychological drama, where the drama of the play results from pressures, painful inner recognitions, and internal conflict (Gilman 145-147).

Anton Chekhov changed the face of theatre in every capacity. His revolutionary style of writing, and the subsequent realistic style of acting it required, is directly responsible for the world of film and theatre we experience today. His collaboration with Stanislavski catapulted the theatrical world into modernity. He delved into a hitherto unexplored world of the human psyche, and brought all of the subtleties and subtext of realistic human life to the stage.

Chekhov was well into the final stages of tuberculosis when he began writing *The Three Sisters*, and died less than four years later. *The Three Sisters* is his longest play (a
third longer than *Uncle Vanya* and *The Cherry Orchard*). The play covers the longest span of time of any of his works, with the four acts spanning four years. The cast of fourteen is also his largest cast of characters (Gilman 143).

Chekhov speaks of love: “Love. Either it is something degenerating, something which had once been immense, or it is a particle of what will in the future develop into something immense, but at the present it is unsatisfying, it gives much less than one expects.” This dissatisfaction is at the heart of *The Three Sisters*. The characters are overcome with love and emotion for people and places that can’t be satisfied. The sisters yearn to return to Moscow, Masha is torn by her forbidden love for Vershinin, the Baron is eventually killed in honor of his adoring and unrequited love for Irina, Irina longs for a dream lover who doesn’t exist, Olga privately adores Kulygin, her sister’s scorned husband.

Although the preceding description paints a bleak portrait, the result is a remarkably hopeful and uplifting play. The sisters persevere and discover the true depth of the human spirit and its ability to cope with misfortune. The play ends with the sisters bravely proclaiming, “We must go on living.” The audience leaves filled with hope and joy, not despair. Richard Gilman, a professor of dramatic literature at Yale University’s School of Drama, states: “While it[*The Three Sisters*] may not be the greatest drama ever written, it would be hard to establish that it isn’t.”
Works Cited


Synopsis of
Three Sisters
The action of the play revolves around the Prozorov household, and four siblings: Andrey and his three sisters, Olga, Masha, and Irina. The four live on a substantial military pension left behind by their father, who passed away a year prior to the opening of the play. The play opens on Irina’s birthday, with the sister’s reminiscing about their father and daydreaming about returning to their childhood home: Moscow.

The idea of Moscow is the dream that drives the play, a longing for something more. To the girls, Moscow represents a time when things were easier, and life was happier. Olga has grown into a tired, unmarried schoolteacher. Masha married young to a man she can now hardly tolerate, a bumbling schoolteacher named Kulygin. Irina is pursued by many suitors, but is unfulfilled with her life and decides to go to work in search of satisfaction. Andrey struggles with his own longing for artistry and poetry in life, and the pressures of being the only man in the house and the need to succeed in society.

In Act 1 we are introduced to all the characters. The Prozorov household is a continuous bustle of soldiers and friends. The gentlemanly Baron Tuzenbach and wisecracking Solyony compete for Irina’s affections, and argue constantly. The gentle Dr. Chebutykin serves as the grandfatherly figure to the siblings, offering advice, while longing for their affections in return. Kulygin is the adoring husband of the melancholy Masha. Natasha is the local girl who wins Andrey’s heart, and hand in marriage. Colonel Vershinin is the mysterious friend of their fathers, who returns meet the now-grown up sisters. On the fringe are the two soldiers, Fedotik and Rohde; and the maid and janitor, the elderly Anfisa, and the stuttering Fedotik. Act 1 is a birthday celebration, and Andrey
has invited Natasha, whom the girls tease mercilessly. Natasha is mocked at the dinner table and leaves in a fit of embarrassment. Andrey pursues her and proposes.

Act 2 is a year later, and we discover that there is quite a bit more to sweet little Natasha. We see her slowly begin to take control of the household, and its inhabitants. She and Andrey have had their first child, Bobik. Natasha brandishes her children like a weapon, and uses them to cover up her manipulations. She has drained much of the passion and life out of Andrey, and he has grown increasingly numb towards her.

The household is preparing for a carnival party that night, and Natasha doesn’t approve and sets out to destroy the evening. She tries to convince Andrey to call off the party, but she eventually uses “Bobik’s not feeling well” as her excuse for canceling the party.

Other plot lines have developed by now...Masha and Vershinin have begun their passionate affair. Tuzebach has continued his diligent courting of Irina, who is now an employee at the telegraph office. Natasha has begun an affair with Protopopov, the head of the county council. Solyony confesses his desire for Irina, and she refuses his affections. Olga comes in and tells Irina that Andrey has lost a lot of money gambling. The act ends with Natasha easing Irina out of her own room so that Bobik can have a nicer room. Irina completely breaks down and cries out for Moscow.

Act 3 opens on the household, two years later, which has been converted into a makeshift shelter for fire victims. It is the middle of the night, and fire has ravaged a neighborhood. The house and its occupants are in chaos, and Olga is attempting to attend to everyone. She is helping the elderly Anfisa when Natasha storms in and demands that
the “old woman” be fired. Olga responds that she has been with the family for thirty
years, and Natasha responds with, “But she can’t do any work anymore!”

The doctor has been sinking deeper into alcoholism every time we see him. He
confesses his own emotional emptiness in a lonely conversation with a picture of the love
of his life, the siblings’ dead mother. Irina breaks down to her sisters about the lack of
meaning and satisfaction in her life, and Olga urges her to marry the Baron. Masha
confesses her true love for Vershinin, and Olga responds with anger. Andrey accuses his
sisters of hating Natasha, and informs them that he has mortgaged the house without
asking their permission. The act ends with Irina promising Olga that she will marry the
Baron if they can return to Moscow.

Act 4 opens with a farewell celebration. The soldier’s brigade is leaving town,
and everything is changing. Irina is leaving to marry the Baron, and become a
schoolteacher. Olga, against her wishes, has become headmistress at the school.
Vershinin is leaving, and Masha is faced with returning to her marriage. Natasha’s
takeover is now complete. She has successfully worked each of the sisters’ out of the
house, and is moving Andrey into his own room. She has a second child, Sophie, who
could possibly be the daughter of Protopopov, not Andrey.

The soldiers say their good-byes, and Masha finally breaks down. Kulygin begs
her to forget all that has happened, and to come back to their marriage, and the way life
used to be. Masha, broken, agrees. Solyony has challenged Tuzenbach to a duel over a
meaningless argument. Tuzenbach, knowing that Irina doesn’t truly love him, agrees to
the duel. The play ends with Tuzenbach being killed in the duel, and the sister’s faced
with overwhelming loss. In their grief, the sister’s realize that they must persevere, and
somehow make sense out of their suffering. Faced with such tragedy, they nobly unite: "

My dears, my dear sisters, life isn’t over yet. We’ll go on living.”
The Cast and Crew
Cast Credits

Amy Shepard...........................................................................Olga
Meghan Fleming.................................................................Masha
Jennifer Biesinger............................................................Irina
Hannegan Beardsley............................................................Natasha
Amanda Randall.................................................................Natasha
David Benhardt.................................................................Andrey
Bradford Coolidge.............................................................Andrey
Ryan Woodle.........................................................................Tuzenbach
Alan Craig............................................................................Chebutykin
Kevin James Thornton......................................................Vershinin
Anthony D. Lewellen..........................................................Kulygin
Matthew McNear...............................................................Ferapont
Christie Grissmer................................................................Anfisa
Jeremy Babcock.................................................................Fedotik
Phillip M. Brooks................................................................Rohde
Christopher Bush..............................................................Protopopov
Erin Lengkeek......................................................................Understudy

Artistic Staff Credits

Director.................................................................Kathy Biesinger
Technical Director..........................................................Greg Lund
Lighting Designer............................................................Doug Noble
Set/ Costume Designer....................................................Wendi Johnson
Stage Manager...............................................................Les Jahnke
Makeup Designer.............................................................Ryan Steffen
Sound Designer..............................................................Corey Mitchell
Archive Photographs
Act 1

Irina's birthday party (front)

Natasha and Andrey caught in an embrace (back)
Act 2

Natasha and Andrey
Act 2

Natasha and Olga
Act 3

Andrey and Ferapont (front)

Irina, Kulygin, and the soldiers (back)
Act 3

Olga, Masha, Irina, and Kulygin mock Natasha
Act 3

Olga, Irina, Masha, Andrey, and Chebutykin
Rehearsal Journal
The cast lists just went up! After a grueling weekend of auditions and callback auditions, I have just been cast as Natasha in the theatre department’s production of Anton Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters*. I feel so overwhelmed and excited! I am a musical theatre major, and this is my first non-musical role. What a role to start with! Chekhov! I get to work with Kathy Biesinger as director, and she is amazing. I also get to perform in the intimate Studio theatre, Strother Theatre, which is always a thrill. I already feel myself getting intimidated being the musical theatre person among the “actors”, but this was a goal for my senior year. I know I can do it.

We read-through the first half of the show tonight. This show is amazing! I feel like we’re doing Shakespeare because Chekhov is so heavy and complex, and the style feels so foreign at first glance. However, hearing it out loud and brought to life by actors was mind-blowing. There are so many layers to delve into; I can already tell this show is going to take me places I’ve always been scared to go as an actor. I feel so ready to go there now; I am so lucky to have this opportunity. I wish I didn’t have classes! I feel like I need to devote my life to this!

Tonight we finished reading through the script, and starting delving into the layers and complexities of the show. It is going to be a long journey. This show is fascinating, in
that much of the "action" of the play takes place offstage. The adulteries, the fire, the duel...all are implied and discussed, but not seen. This leaves the actors with an enormous task, because more often then not, the characters appear to be talking about nothing of significance. It is up to the actors to create the rich subtextual life that is bubbling under the surface, and to fill in the blanks left by Chekhov.

This show is going to require an enormous amount of actor risk-taking, and trust among the cast. Kathy decided we needed to build that trust right away! We took turns falling backwards off an upright piano into the arms of our castmates! What an exhilarating experience, a good lesson in harnessing fear.

8/30/99 Monday, 7:00-11:00pm

I feel so overwhelmed! We are working through Act 1, and there are so many decisions to be made. How knowing is Natasha? How naïve and innocent? Where is the balance between knowledge and naivete? I have to determine where she mentally begins the play in order to follow her transformation throughout the show. She becomes so powerful and controlling and manipulative, are these seeds already planted when the play begins and continue to grow as the story progresses? Does she become corrupt and drunken with the power of her new status as Andrey's wife? I know it's only day one of rehearsal, but I'm such a perfectionist. I want everything to be perfect immediately. I also feel so excited by the limitless possibilities that lie ahead in these rehearsals. I need to be fearless!

8/31/99 Tuesday, 7:00-11:00pm
Wow...my head is spinning right now. We met to work the Natasha/Andrey scene that kicks off Act 2, but we never even got to it. We ended up talking for an hour and getting deeper with things. Then we reworked the proposal scene (end of Act 1). I am double-cast with Amanda Randall, and the Andrey’s are also double-cast (David Biesinger and Brad Coolidge). Dave’s gone all week, so Amanda and I both worked with Brad. It’s fun to play scenes opposite 2 different men, it changes everything in the scene; a good acting exercise!

I need to get memorized!

9/1/99 Wednesday, 6:30-11:00pm

Wow, again...I’ve only been here a half an hour, and I can already tell it’s going to be a great night. We got here early to work the opening of Act 2, and we’re already in deep. I’m excited to work Act 3 and 4 tonight. The scene made a lot more sense tonight, as did the characters. I’m starting to see how much hurt Natasha is feeling. Her relationship with Andrey is heartbreaking. It’s passionate, but emotionally empty. Sex is the only level they can still connect on, and it’s a lonely world for both characters.

We’ve just finished Act 4, meaning we’ve worked our way through the entire show! I feel worn-out, but invigorated. I’m starting to realize my dynamics with each sister. I am in awe of Olga. She’s the oldest, she’s powerful, maternal, smart, respectable, and a teacher. She is also the biggest threat to me as the head of the house. I feel threatened and inferior to her, yet at the same time, she inspires me. If I could be like any woman, she would be my model. I’m still searching a bit for my feelings towards Masha. She has very little to do with me, and I resent her for it. I try to control her a bit, but she always
wins. As for Irina, she is my favorite, and my only friend among the sisters. I genuinely care for her, and try to mother her, which often seems condescending to her.

9/2/99 Thursday, 7:00-11:00pm
Tonight we’re just trying to get the flow of the entire show. The goal is to run it without stops two times. Amanda’s up first, and I already feel exhausted! I haven’t even been onstage yet! Thursday’s are generally my low-energy days, but I’m going to give it my all tonight. There are still entire scenes I’ve never run.
Well, it’s 9:00, and we just started the second half of the show, so I don’t think I’ll be onstage tonight! That’s actually fine with me, because I feel like I’m learning a lot just sitting back and watching without worrying about my next entrance. Everyone’s being kind of goofy tonight, but it’s actually helping. It’s getting us out of “tortured-actor land”, and getting us to lighten up a bit. Our biggest obstacle in the show is finding the joy, and finding something besides angst to dwell in.

9/6/99 Monday, 7:00-11:00pm
The night is off to a good start. I had a nice, long, and much needed break this Labor Day weekend. I was having a hard time getting back into rehearsal mode, but we’ve spent the last half-hour working on Meisner exercises (acting exercises). We started with repeating exercises (person A to person B, repeating back and forth, sitting facing each other in chairs, feet flat on the ground, relax....."You have brown eyes." “I have brown eyes?”, or any physical observation). We then moved onto a more personal observation ("You are
nice.”, “I am nice?”). Then we repeated the exercise, but halfway through person B switches to a new phrase. After a while, person A starts one last phrase.

It's an amazing concentration exercise, because you start to lose your focus and lose what you are saying; your own voice and the other person’s eyes hypnotize you. The goal is to stay with it, to concentrate, and to stay in the moment. It really got my mind working, and helped me to let down my guard and open up. Finally, we mingled as our characters, and had exchanges with every character we encountered. It was helpful because it made me realize that I (as Natasha) do have a very strong opinion about each character, even characters I never have scenes with.

Well, after all of that warming up, I only got onstage for about ten minutes. We were running late. Oh well, that's theatre!

9/7/99 Tuesday, 7:00-11:00pm

I’m on break for an hour. We just finished working the beginning of Act 2, and it was good. I feel like progress was made. I’m beginning to understand where the significant moments and changes are in the scene. I was working with Dave today, and it was great to work off of someone new. It keeps me on my toes!

I’m feeling antsy because I’ve only read through most of the scenes once, and there are a handful that I’ve never run (including my huge fight scene in Act 3 with Olga!). I know we’ll get caught up, I just feel anxious to get everything up on its feet. I’m ready to work!

9/8/99 Wednesday, 7:00-10:00pm
Tonight I worked the Olga fight scene. It was exhilarating. It’s been very freeing this week to be off book (memorized), but it makes the first run of a scene a bit nerve-wracking: am I going to remember? Where’s my security blanket (the script)? It’s an interesting exposed moment, and a thrilling one. Amy (Olga) and I brawled and I felt like we were going to fist fight. Then Kathy had us fight to keep our anger in check, because Natasha and Olga are too lady-like to really let anger fly. It was even more enraging to try and hold back the anger!

Natasha is so fascinatingly needy. She’s naturally obsessive-compulsive, power hungry, and a control freak. At the same time, she really wants to curl up on a lap and have someone love and take care of her… is it Andrey, my distant husband? Is it Protopopov, my lover? Is it Olga, the maternal figure of the household? Fascinating…

9/9/99 Thursday, 9:00-11:00pm

I got to come in late tonight, and it was weird! I sat at home feeling like I was skipping class!

I got to run the Act 4 scene where I reprimand Andrey for talking to loud. We’re also adding in some background scenes with Protopopov throughout Act 4. It should produce a chilling effect: Andrey talking about his unhappy marriage, and me traipsing around the house with my lover.

It’s been a long, productive week.

9/12/99 Sunday, 6:45-11:30pm
We just finished our “costume parade”, meaning we all brought in our entire wardrobes from home and our costume designer picked what she liked. It felt pretty weird picking clothes out of my closet, but the Strother budget got cut this year, meaning you make do with costumes!

We’re doing a run-through tonight just for continuity, without stopping. Hopefully we’ll pick up the pace, a bit. Our last run clocked in at four hours!

I feel horrid tonight, I woke up with a hideous head cold. I feel completely exhausted and swollen, so I will be lucky to get through this tonight.

9/13/99 Monday, 7:00-11:00pm

We only got halfway through the run last night, so we’re starting with Act 3 tonight.

However, my only scene is the Olga fight scene, and Amy is sick at home right now. So, I’m not really sure what’s happening tonight! And I’m still sick, so my brain isn’t functioning in top form right now.

Amy arrived, and we just worked the Olga fight scene, and it felt pretty good. Kathy talked to me about how needy I need to be in this scene, and how much attention I am craving. The fight escalated pretty naturally once we established what the stakes were.

Kathy also led me to another realization tonight. The entrance of Kulygin (Tony Lewellen) interrupts the Olga fight scene. Kulygin and Olga comfort each other and it is such a knife in my (Natasha’s) heart. All I’ve ever wanted is comfort, a hug, and support. It comes so easily for Olga and Kulygin, but I keep choosing control over comfort or love. I feel like that is a key to my character: choosing control over love.
9/14/99      Tuesday, 9:00-11:00pm

We’re finding more places in the show to take a peak into the pain that Natasha is feeling, which I like, because it makes me more dimensional.

I just worked the end monologue in Act 4, and I felt braindead tonight. I don’t know what my problem is! I understand what I am supposed to be doing, but I just couldn’t get physically engaged. My limbs felt like logs! I’m so frustrated with myself. I have so much information in my brain, I think maybe I’m losing focus.

9/15/99      Wednesday, 7:00-11:00pm

Tonight we’re working Act 1 and 2, which is good because I haven’t worked them in over a week. Dave and I have been officially paired for the run, and we’ll be opening the run of the show, which is exciting! Brad and Amanda will be alternating nights with us. Dave and I have a very compatible energy, and opening night will be exciting.

I’ve been letting myself get overwhelmed lately. I’m thinking too hard, and I’m not just trusting in myself to get the point across. I’m second-guessing everything I do. It’s just so important to me to be a clear, specific performer. Unfortunately, I’m trying so hard to be specific, that I’m overanalyzing everything. I need to relax and trust my instincts.

Well, so much for trusting my instincts! I waited for 2 ½ hours to go onstage, and then I ran the proposal scene, got halfway through it, and promptly burst into tears. I was having what Kathy called a “Chekhovian moment” (getting wrapped up in the emotional state of the show, and having an uncontrollable outburst because of it!). I got so mad at myself because I had been focusing all night long, and then I got onstage and completely blew it.

It was like I had never stepped foot onstage in my life!
We moved onto the Act 2 scene, and I really burst into tears this time! I got hysterical because Dave and I had only run the scene together once, and that was ten days ago, so it felt foreign. Then, I thought I was doing all of these subtle, clean, subtextual things. Apparently, I was only doing these things in my head, because the note I got was to stop playing all text, and to find the subtext. I freaked out and cried, and that was it for the night for me. I don’t know what’s wrong with me this week, I can’t do anything right. Maybe, I need some sleep.

9/16/99 Thursday, 7:00-11:00pm
Tonight is a run for the technical designer, without stops. Dave and I are doing Acts 2 and 4, which are my major problem spots. I’m glad to run them, but I wish we didn’t have an audience! I’m going to try to relax tonight, and stop obsessing. I’m going to have fun, and just let things happen. If I mess up, who cares? Well, last night's problem scene (beginning of Act 2) went a lot better tonight. Dave and I tried it with him resisting me more, and me pursuing, and it felt much better. There are still things that need work, but the cat-and-mouse essence was there tonight. The rest of the run went pretty well. There are a lot of problem spots that need work, but instead of beating myself up and bursting into tears, I just made a list and forgave myself. That’s a much healthier way of doing things!

9/20/99 Monday, 7:00-11:00pm
I was a zombie again tonight. During the proposal scene, I just stood there staring at Dave like a Barbie Doll: no reaction, stand there and look pretty! What is wrong with me????!!!
9/21/99    Tuesday, 7:00-11:00pm
Tonight is the first really productive rehearsal I’ve had in over a week. Finally!! I feel like a huge weight has been lifted off me tonight. Amanda, Brad (the other Natasha and Andrey), and I all got into a hysterical laughing fit that lasted for an hour! We laughed, we talked, and I felt like a new person! I feel happier then I’ve felt in a while; laughing so hard made me regain some perspective on things. I take everything so seriously, and I put myself under so much pressure, that I can barely function! Tonight I feel like I took some of that pressure off of my shoulders. I even felt better onstage, because I feel like I’ve reconnected with the world, instead of being a zombie at rehearsals.

Be a rich, alive person and suddenly acting feels a lot easier.

9/23/99    Thursday, 7:00-11:00pm
We just worked the Olga fight scene, and it went pretty well. It’s my favorite scene right now, because the intentions are so clear to me. If only I could clarify the rest of my scenes!

9/24/99    Friday, 5:00-9:00pm
We’re doing a run-through tonight without stops. Dave and I ran the proposal scene and the beginning of Act 2. The proposal was bad again, because I was a passive zombie again. Kathy came up to Dave and I after the Act 2 scene and told us to go and work on our own. We were so confused, because we had felt good about it! We got discouraged,
but we went to find a space to work on our own. I couldn’t believe the difference it made! When you take away the audience element (director, castmates, etc.), your nerves disappear and you can actually concentrate! I felt truly focused because my nerves had disappeared. We also figured out what was wrong with the scene: we had been playing all subtext, without the “cover-up” layer of their comfortable, physical relationship. It felt great to experiment and forget about pressures and nerves. Kathy knows what she’s doing!

We also talked about our nerves at rehearsal, because we’ve only rehearsed half the amount of the rest of the cast, and other insecurities we have. It felt good to know that I’m not the only one who felt like that.

Tonight’s been another discovery rehearsal, I’m excited to go back and take another look at the rest of my scenes now. I wish we didn’t have two nights off, I don’t want to lose my momentum!

9/27/99 Monday, 6:00-11:00pm
This is the week it needs to start happening, we open in 1 ½ weeks! I feel pretty weird and uncertain. Friday was a breakthrough night for me, so I hope I can rediscover those feelings this week! I need to just be confident and have fun!

9/30/99 Thursday
We’ve had a long, weird week, and I don’t feel any more secure than last week, which is not a great feeling. We open a week from tonight, and I feel massively under-rehearsed. It couldn’t be helped, it’s such an enormous cast, and such a lengthy show, we can’t run
everything twice. This is the only time when I've felt like the double casting has
drawbacks. It's been a great experience, but when you get close to the show, you just
want to run it every night, which obviously, we won't get to do. Dave and I have been
working our scenes on our own, but I still don't feel secure with the overall picture of the
show. We're working problem spots tonight, which is definitely good. I feel very tired,
and I'm getting bronchitis.

10/3/99    Sunday of Tech Week (we open in four days!)

We're getting there...I'm feeling very nervous about my lack of run-throughs. The
double-cast situation has given us only two runs each, which is tough. However, Amanda
was very ill tonight (we all are!), and I had to jump in and run the show with Brad! It was
a great way to freshen up my scenes, and to make me refocus and break my habits and
patterns.

10/4/99    Monday, 6:00-12:00am

Well, tonight is my last full run-through before we open on Thursday, which is very odd.
I have never had a night off before opening, much less two nights off! We had no choice,
we aren't allowed to rehearse on Wednesday because the Bolshoi Ballet is coming to
Emens. I feel like I've settled and gotten a bit too comfortable with my scenes, I need to
get my focus and my listening skills turned back on. I'm also on codeine for bronchitis,
and suffering from complete physical and emotional exhaustion. I need to get my edge
back and my confidence up!
10/5/99      Tuesday, 6:00-12:00am

I'm watching the show tonight, and it is absolutely beautiful. Everyone is doing a wonderful job. This is a fantasy come true! I've always wanted to step out of a show I'm in and come see it from the audience's perspective; the plus side of double casting!

Last night's run felt really good and fresh. Hopefully, I can get that energy and focus on opening night!

10/7/99      Thursday

We just opened the show!!! I can't believe we finally did it, I've been focusing on this night since the first week of school! The show went great, I can't believe the affect the intimate, Strother audience has on a show. The audience told me things about my character that I wasn't aware of. They won't laugh when you think they will, and the burst out laughing at what you think is a very serious scene. That is the thrill of live theatre, and the motivation we all live for.

10/13/99     Wednesday

Well, I just finished my final performance, and am awaiting our ACTF adjudication. I feel such an odd combination of sadness, loss, relief, exhaustion, and a tinge of joy and accomplishment. I have never worked so hard on a show before, and with such dedicated and gifted performers. This feeling of pride at what we have accomplished with this show is going to stay with me for a very long time. It's been an exhilarating ride.
Research on the Causes and Effects of Extramarital Affairs
In the year 2000, 50% of all marriages will end in divorce. Extramarital affairs are rampant today, with men and women partaking equally. Why do affairs start? When does harmless flirting become infidelity? There are many socially approved forms of extramarital flirting: dancing, parties, any type of social gathering. The line that stands between flirting and an affair is a very thin line to cross, but carries with it enormous consequences for all involved. This paper will explore the many possible causes for affairs and the effects of affairs on the rejected partner.

There is no predictable pattern for when in a marriage affairs start, they can strike virtually at any time. However, psychologists have identified times of sensitivity in marriage, when partners may be more vulnerable to the temptations of an affair. The early years of raising children often leave the woman overwhelmed with the demands of home and work. She will often have little time left over for her husband, leaving him feeling abandoned. The second period of sensitivity occurs around age 40, when the children have grown. The woman is often ready to try out a new career, right when the man feels ready to start relaxing. The divergence of interests and goals can potentially lead to straying (Starr 165-170).

Countless factors can be said to potentially lead to affairs. Many psychologists blame the idea of “romantic love”. Despite the soaring divorce rate, today’s society still idealizes the idea of “romantic love” along the lines of Romeo and Juliet. Unfortunately, this idea of “romantic love” is a complete contradiction to the every day familiarity of married life. As Herbert Strean summarizes “Romeo never saw Juliet in curlers, and
Juliet didn’t see Romeo putting out the garbage” (Strean 9). Couples who dream of this type of romance are sowing the seeds for their own marital destruction. Once the “honeymoon” stage of romantic love is over, the reality of every day life asserts itself. This often leads to disillusionment and resentment when a couple fails to adjust.

Many couples enter marriage with an impossible set of expectations. These expectations set a standard that is very difficult to achieve, leaving spouses feeling resentful and needy. The idea that marriage is a perpetual honeymoon is an impossible dream. When a couple lives together year after year a certain level of familiarity and loss of excitement is inevitable. The idea that two people in love will want to be with each other as much as possible will also lead to problems. If one partner becomes upset when their spouse has other interests or relationships, resentment is unavoidable. Finally, the realization that physical attractiveness plays a very small role, if any, in determining the fate of a marriage is often a shock to couples and can lead to disillusionment (Strean 12-15).

Psychologists have analyzed the possible causes of affairs and have come up with many psychological factors that can contribute. All people have a goal, often subconsciously, to find what psychologists call the “cohesive self”. The cohesive self is a personality that is whole, integrated, and functioning on a high level. It is a self that allows an individual to use their talents to their fullest capabilities. For many, marriage is a road that can lead to finding one’s cohesive self. However, when marriage becomes an impediment rather than an aid to self-realization, the dissatisfied partner may be tempted to look elsewhere for fulfillment (Starr 11-13).
All people have two basic psychological needs that begin development in childhood: mirroring and idealization. These needs form the underlying factors that effect all interpersonal relationships (Starr 12). Mirroring refers to the need of all people for approval, affirmation, acceptance, and reassurance. People want to see their own feelings of self-worth "mirrored" in the eyes of those they love and trust. The degree of mirroring needs varies between people. For example, a person who lacked a positive mirror (parent) as a child may become obsessively needy as an adult. They will seek constant approval and reassurance from their mirror (the partner). The partner may eventually become frustrated with their needy spouse. When two partners mirroring needs are well matched, a happy union is the result (Starr 15-30).

Idealization is the idea that a person internalizes the qualities of those they idealize in childhood and shape their behavior using those qualities as standards. These standards become the standards used in mate selection. As in mirroring, the degree of idealization varies from person to person. Idealization becomes a problem when a person lacked a positive idealized figure as child. As an adult, the person will seek the "ideal" person they lacked in childhood. This often results in expecting perfection from their spouse. When the impossible standard is not met, the ideal-seeker may look elsewhere (Starr 31-47).

Mate selection is also subject to strong unconscious determinants. "Mate choice is never an accident" (Strean 46). When a marriage struggles, it is often because the couple is ignorant of the unconscious factors that matched them up to begin with. Freud identified two types of marital choice: narcissistic choice, and anaclitic choice. Narcissistic choice refers to choosing a mate patterned after oneself, or falling in love
with someone like them. Anaclitic choice means love for a substitute mother, or someone who can be depended upon for nurturing and support. Men tend toward anaclitic choices, and women narcissistic (Strean 46-48). Other factors that can lead to mate selection: choosing a mate to conceal one’s own feelings of inadequacy (to cover a weak self-image), and unconscious revenge (marrying to hurt a family member, etc., using your spouse as a weapon). Awareness of the unconscious factors that initially attracted a couple to one another can help solve many marital conflicts.

Aside from psychological factors, the ever-increasing demands of marital roles have become exhausting. Spouses want marriage to be an equal partnership, and they want their needs met: for appreciation, for career, for self-fulfillment, for recognition as a co-partner, and for sexual fulfillment (Starr 7). When needs are not met, men and women may seek fulfillment outside of the marriage. A spouse is expected to provide loyalty, caring, companionship, sexual satisfaction, and support in resolving problems. However, it is difficult to fulfill such varied roles. It is demanding being a best friend, favored bed companion, and “counselor” simultaneously, especially through “sickness and health, for richer or poorer, for better or worse.” As Herbert Strean puts it: “Stability, loyalty, and dependability are qualities which do not easily coexist with stimulation, excitement, and variety” (Strean 14).

Considering the demands of modern marriage, it is no surprise that many men and women seek the escape and excitement of an extramarital affair. Affairs bring passion, lust, and exhilaration. Affairs are empowering and self-affirming, and can make life exciting and energetic again. Sex is not the only factor in an affair, communication and being with someone who is a trusted friend are important to many (Starr 4-7). However,
the tremendous pain and disillusionment that result when an affair is discovered far outweigh any “positive” life-affirming effects of affairs.

Emotions swing wildly when an affair is discovered, with the rejected partner feeling alternately surprise, disgust, anger, depression, feelings of failure and loss. Although the rejected spouse is the victim in the scenario, not the perpetrator, they are the most likely to feel shame, and a feeling of failure to live up to one’s idea of self. The betrayal robs the rejected spouse of their self-esteem and their ability to trust. They are forced to cope with feeling deemed “unworthy”. The tragedy of the situation is the “victim” is forced to cope with their emotions alone. The cheating partner at least has, or had, their “other” to turn to for support. The rejected partner has to repair the psychological damage of shame and humiliation alone, then rebuild the courage to trust and love again (Starr 180-205).

Affairs additionally impact the emotions of the children involved. The psyche of children is more vulnerable and less elastic than that of adults. When an affair is revealed, a child will tend to side with the deserted parent, and harbor resentment towards the “offending” parent. A child will often develop overwhelming fears of desertion as a result of a parent’s affair. This will have a lasting traumatic impact on the child’s adult relationships (Starr 195-200).

While every marriage is unique, there are many common factors that can be identified as possibly leading to extramarital affairs. These factors range from marital dissatisfaction and disillusionment, to psychological factors, and finally, the increasing demands of marital roles. Affairs provide a break from the demands of married life, and provide excitement and affirmation for the straying partner. However, the havoc an affair
wreaks on the psyche of the rejected partner and children involved trivializes any possible excitement an affair may provide.
Works Cited


Conclusions on the Causes of Natasha’s Extramarital Affair
Upon conclusion of my research into the causes of extramarital affairs, I have new insight into the causes for Natasha’s affair with Protopopov. Andrey is subconsciously initially attracted to Natasha as an act of rebellion against his overbearing sisters. They detest Natasha’s lower middle class sensibilities, which makes her all the more enticing to Andrey. Natasha is attracted to the attention that Andrey lavishes on her. Natasha lacked a positive “mirror” in childhood and grew into an obsessively needy adult. She needs constant reassurance and affirmation, which Andrey is all too thrilled to provide, initially. Natasha’s neediness will eventually lead to her affair.

After a year of marriage, Natasha is still insatiable. She needs constant attention and employs varying tactics to ensure that she gets the attention she needs. Andrey becomes increasingly numb to her neediness, and Natasha’s tactics are no longer getting the desired results. Over the years, she becomes disillusioned and resentful towards Andrey. Furthermore, she becomes increasingly attention-starved. She finds fulfillment and the attention she craves in the arms of another man, Protopopov. Protopopov makes her feel special and beautiful and exciting, the feelings Andrey no longer provides for her.

Unfortunately, the fulfillment and excitement of Natasha’s affair is short-lived. Natasha desires attention and approval and achieves the opposite. The sister’s shun her even more adamantly, and Andrey becomes increasingly distant. Natasha refuses to accept the coldness of the family, and continues to push shamelessly for their approval. Chekhov uses the affair to flesh out the character of Natasha. She is a needy, manipulative woman, lacking a keen sense of judgement.
Reviews of

Three Sisters
American College Theatre Festival (ACTF) Adjudication
Response to *The Three Sisters* at Ball State University, October 1999

prepared by Jim Stark, Chair, Dept. of Theatre, Hanover College for the Kennedy Center/American College Theatre Festival

Irene Ryan nominees from this production: Hannegan S. Beardsley, Anthony D. Lewellen, Matthew McNear. Ms. Beardsley’s performance of the role of Natasha was an energetic, surprising, love-to-hate-her sort of thing. Mr. Lewellen’s Kulygin was funny, touching and very sympathetic. Matthew McNear developed a powerfully moving interpretation of Ferapont which was distinguished by a deep sense of the actor’s compassion for this unfortunate character. These three nominees were supported by the fine work of many colleagues on stage and off.

This fine production began with an excellent choice of material—a modern classic which offers the audience an interesting evening while it challenges the actors to reach for new depths of commitment and expressive resources. The director, Kathy Benhardt Biesinger, delivered a production which served the script well by clarifying the story and its relevance to contemporary issues. While the performance on the evening of October 13 showed some problems common to undergraduate theatre productions, it had many more strengths than weaknesses and deserves hearty approbation.

Ms. Biesinger found a strong cast for her show, and placed the actors well and appropriately. Her work in shaping the production showed perception and a depth of humanity which is very welcome. There were beautiful stage pictures and expressive patterns of movement which supported the subtextual content of the script in a very entertaining style. The setting of the play was shifted from pre-revolutionary Russia to a fictional, contemporary, Westernized Russia on the verge of political upheaval. This shift was very successful in emphasizing the accessible, timeless humanity of Chekhov’s characters, and avoided the danger of distracting the audience with unnecessary leaps of the imagination common to concept-heavy productions of classics.

The first act of the script contains some awkward exposition, and Amy Shepard as Olga was especially adept at making this dialogue vital and spontaneous. David Benhardt made Andrey’s naive, youthful infatuation (with Natasha) very appealing in this act with a nice balance of genuine emotion and silliness. Scenic choices were particularly helpful during this act as the spectators found their way into this unique world, and designer Wendi Johnson paved the way with clear and specific markers on the path. Furniture and housewares were especially expressive, helping to establish the characters as real and familiar people. These items helped establish a kind of genteel shabbiness for the household which was very effective in supporting the mood of the play.

The action of Act II, just before the intermission, established the cultural bridges between Chekhov’s world, the world of the play, and our own world with the depiction of a series of self-destructive, desperate choices made in response to the insatiable human longing for something better. The contributions of Alan Craig as Dr. Chebutykin, Jennifer Biesinger as Irina and Kevin James Thornton as Vershinin were particularly strong during this act, as each played a variation on this theme of unfulfilled potential. The soldier-actors, Phillip M. Brooks, Jeremy T. Babcock and especially Michael J. Taylor as Solyony, developed nicely differentiated personalities and contributed very telling details to this depiction of the human condition. Ryan Woodle’s passionate, sympathetic performance of Baron Tuzenbach had one of its high points here in the drunk scene. This actor also led the cast in maintaining the play’s forward motion throughout the evening. Christopher M. Bush, as Protopopov, developed this nonspeaking role into important presence in the lives of the
other characters and gave the role a distinctive personality. The show was full of acting.

Act III brought a subtle shift toward expressionism, with the fire onstage blowing its human debris onto the set. Meghan Fleming as Masha was especially good in this act when she unfolded the character's inner life for the spectators. There was very good chemistry between Ms. Fleming and Mr. Thornton in this act as well, especially as Vershinin's self-assurance began to burn away. Some of the production's weaknesses showed in this act, as actors too often made choices which slowed the play's progress without offering anything in return. This is a very common problem for young actors who have so much to offer that they are in danger of giving unproductive touches to a performance: a multitude of tiny pauses adding up to several extra minutes in each act, which do not really serve the action of the play. There is also the simple issue of polish to the ensemble, which shows in smooth, seamless passing of energy and focus from one actor to another. When this is achieved, even a long script seems shorter because the action is unbroken. In this production, a long script sometimes seemed even longer because this important, challenging element of polish was incomplete.

The fourth act was troubled with some of these halts in the progress of the play when actors let the momentum of the performance begin to erode, but succeeded nevertheless in offering the spectators a gentle return to the real world. The acting was admirably restrained in some treacherous moments, and the overall effect of the evening was made very positive. Cristie Grissmer as Anfisa was a tender avenging angel as she counted her meager blessings into great ones. This moment was a final example of strong directorial work throughout the play in helping the actors present the playwright's moral and philosophical statements a very pleasant, theatrical manner which avoided didacticism.

Douglas E. Noble's lighting design supported all the action very well, and was particularly powerful in Acts III and IV, when color choices more boldly reinforced the emotional content of the scenes. The cool, relaxed outdoor look for Act IV was especially effective in moving the play forward and interpreting the action. Makeup artist Ryan Steffen worked with the actors to develop some very effective personal touches, Solyony's scars were very convincing and age makeup was subtle enough to work in a very intimate theatre. Music was well chosen, evoking instinctive cultural responses which served the play very well. There were some details in the execution of the design work which deserved more attention, however. Since most of the actors wore their own shoes, the shoes often contradicted the style of the rest of the costume. The set included some fragmented columns, cut from cardboard forms. While this is a perfectly good way to make a column, these forms need extra care so that the ragged, fluffy edges of any cuts are cleaned up before painting. These and other minor blemishes added up to a substantial uneasiness with the level of support for this studio series, which is a new venture for the department. It may take some time for the organization to find ways to live within its means in this area, while upholding artistic standards.

It is clear that the production was successful in serving those who worked on it and those who experienced it as observers. It was a powerful learning experience for the emerging artists who were involved, and it was a touching and enlightening theatrical event for the audience. Having served these two important functions, the production was a success. Perhaps the next step in the organization's process might be to find ways to develop in its actors more judgement in matters of pace and texture, and even greater ensemble skills--of course, these are among the objectives of all training programs. More support for the details of the design work would be a worthy goal as well. Taken as a whole, however, this production was a credit to the category of undergraduate theatre.