

# National Theatre Collection

## *The Cherry Orchard* – Rehearsal Insights

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## About

This learning pack supports the National Theatre's production of *The Cherry Orchard*, directed by Howard Davies, which opened on 18th May 2011 at the National's Olivier Theatre in London.

These insights were prepared during rehearsals by staff director James Bounds. They introduce the process of creating, rehearsing and staging this play.

## Andrew Upton's Version

### Andrew Upton's Version

Our version of the script has been adapted by Andrew Upton from a literal translation. The adaptation is a little freer than some other versions and Andrew has made a conscious decision to make use of a few contemporary phrases and words. This makes the language accessible and also flags up occasional resonances between early twentieth-century Russia and contemporary Britain. Simultaneously the adaptation successfully eschews the rather 'dainty' or poeticised tone than many translations and adaptations of Chekhov succumb to, which usually has the unfortunate (and unintended) effect of making Chekhov's plays sound as though they're set in Victorian Britain.

By avoiding language which is rarefied or artificially poetic, Andrew Upton has written dialogue that both captures the essence of realistic conversation and genuinely connects spoken words to the thoughts of the characters. Chekhov was innovative in trying to capture psychological realism in his characters, so it seems apt and appropriate that this adaptation pursues that same intention. Andrew also has a thorough and fierce understanding of the passionate and vigorous Russian psyche, and his adaptation works to create a spoken language and idiom for the characters that places the world of the play squarely in early twentieth-century rural Russia.



*Anton Chekhov*

## Howard Davies Interview

### Howard Davies Interview

**You've directed quite a few plays set in this period of Russian history. What is it about this period of history that so excites you as a director?**

I think it's about change. It's about a society going through immense change. That seems to be what's going on in Britain under the coalition government; we're going through this massive ideological change where the social fabric of the country is being reorganised, in my opinion to the worse. And to try to find something that chimed with our current sensibilities, I looked to Russia at the end of the nineteenth century when it was undergoing massive upheaval. Russia was trying to catch up with the industrialisation that had happened in the western world – Europe and America – and was trying to come to terms with this new commerce and commercialism and industry, while simultaneously trying to reconcile itself with the fact that it was still living in a system of cultural belief in and cultural reference to the Tsar, and a view that authority came from one person and one person alone. So in other words there was no democracy in Russia at the time, although it was trying to modernise itself. It was starting to fracture and change and alter in a way that made the society very uneasy with itself, with authority, and very aware of its newly discovered needs, which were, I suppose, a wishing to grow up and inherit a new world in a way that is articulate and self-determined. So this is a period that fascinates me, and when I look for plays that mean something to me, and hopefully mean something to the audience, I think there's a certain correlation between Russia at the end of the nineteenth century and the difficult times we're going through at the moment.

**The last Russian play you directed here was *The White Guard*. What are the connections, do you think, between *The White Guard* and *The Cherry Orchard*?**

They're both Russian, but Bulgakov is a very, very different kind of writer. He's writing in the Soviet period and, not being of that persuasion himself, he's trying to write what is essentially an anti-war play about a



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group of young people trying to inherit a world order which they don't necessarily belong to and don't necessarily agree with. So there is a similarity, although Bulgakov writes with a sense of very obvious absurdism. A lot of people talk about Bulgakov being a 'magic realist', and in fact in *The White Guard* he really does write about something which is daft and crazy – the rules are no longer meaningful to that group of students, and they find themselves trapped in a very cruel farce. They lose somebody that they regard highly (the senior brother in the family), one of them goes completely loopy and gets seriously damaged, and the society around them gets destroyed so that they end up inheriting an emotional and social wasteland. That sense of comic cruelty runs through his work, whereas I think there's something gentler and much more ironic and laconic about the way that Chekhov writes about people going through a seismic change.

***The Cherry Orchard* is the most performed of Chekhov's plays. Why do you think that is?**

I can only imagine it's because it's the most obviously political of his plays. It doesn't sit itself down inside a small house and deal with people's relationships only; it deals with a much bigger issue which is to

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do with the fact that the world in which they're living is up for grabs – in this case the very estate on which they're living is up for auction. In other words unless the family come to terms with the new world order and get themselves more financially adroit, or acquire a certain financial acumen, their lives will be literally up for sale. They will literally be bought and discarded, which is actually what happens. I think that political strand, that social strand, is much stronger than in his other works, and probably appeals to an English sensibility more strongly than the more personal plays that he wrote.

**Do you think that *The Cherry Orchard* is perhaps a harder play for a contemporary British audience to understand?**

As it is so much about a changing political and social world, an audience might not necessarily come to the play with the amount of factual information about that period of Russian history that they might need to appreciate the play fully. No, I think that the point of entry to other Chekhov plays is through a character that you like or empathise with, or find fascinating. Now, there are big juicy characters in this play but they're complex. Ranyevskaya for example is clearly a social magnet, everyone behaves like attracted iron filings around her, including the audience, but she's also deeply irresponsible.



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Everybody's conflicted in that way. Lopakhin is an energetic and extraordinary character – yes, he is something of a victim of the social order that used to exist in Russia, but he's also ambitious and ruthless. When he buys up the estate at the end he's going to destroy it; he's going to tear it down and just pull it to bits. He sees it as being obsolete and of having no particular value. So I think that we don't need to know the social background to the play. In the same way that when doing *The White Guard*, which is set in a civil war after a revolution – well, who on earth in the audience, or for that matter in the cast, or me, knew anything about it? In my case I addressed the play and thought about it and read about it. But the audience came not knowing a thing and still managed to appreciate the world of a family in crisis living in hostile times, and I think there's the same to be said of this play. You and I know – and the cast know – the social background of what was going in Russia at the time, about the emancipation of the serfs, the fact that the landed gentry had lost their labour force as a result of this emancipation and therefore were impoverished; we know that there were huge famines at the time (a bit like the state of farming in Zimbabwe now, which is a disaster) and causing terrible hardship. Likewise we know that the failure of the Tsar to address any of the current problems (again like Zimbabwe) resulted in increasing poverty and social unrest. All those things we know about in some detail. But I think the audience have a kind of residual memory that there were problems in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century. People coming to the National Theatre will probably have some sort of hazy sense that this is a troubled time. And the play doesn't specify in any great detail the social history of the immediate previous ten years, though it does refer to it in a way that makes it accessible to the audience. I think it works. I don't think we need to know, nor do the audience need to know, the social and political background in great detail. As long as we have an understanding that this is a changing time in Russian society I think that this is sufficient for us to be able to grab hold of the play and understand it.



## Howard Davies Interview

### **Can you comment on the role of Trofimov in the play?**

Well there are two characters who don't really belong to the family or the extended family: Lopakhin and Trofimov. And it is with incredible prescience that Chekhov creates these two characters, who both express a very strong attitude about what the future will hold. In Lopakhin's case he's clearly a capitalist; he's one of the new men with new money.



For him, it's about providing cheap homes – leisure and holiday places for a new working class who will need to be paid better and who will need holidays. So his vision is of benevolent capitalism. And Trofimov comes at it from a completely different point of view which is that he's very much representative of the students of that time, who were all very left wing – well, left wing to the point that they espoused Marxist doctrine and were determined to pursue agitation and revolution. In Russia at that time, if you said anyone was a student it would be clear that they would be left wing; there was no such thing as a right wing student. And Chekhov manages to put on stage these two characters. Trofimov is talking about the new world order that will come. Indeed we know with hindsight that the new world order as Trofimov spells it out would be



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attempted by the Russian revolution and what followed; the Stalinist approach to society and the social engineering that came about from that. And in fact we know now that that failed. But at the time, those idealistic young students believed that that was the new world order, that the dawn was coming, and Chekhov puts Trofimov onstage, sets him against Lopakhin, the new benevolent capitalist, and the family are caught between these two rival arguments. I think it's brilliant that Chekhov had that foresight to see that this was the debate that would occupy the spirit of the intelligentsia of Russia for the next fifty or more years.

### **Can you talk about what it is about the play's form that excites you?**

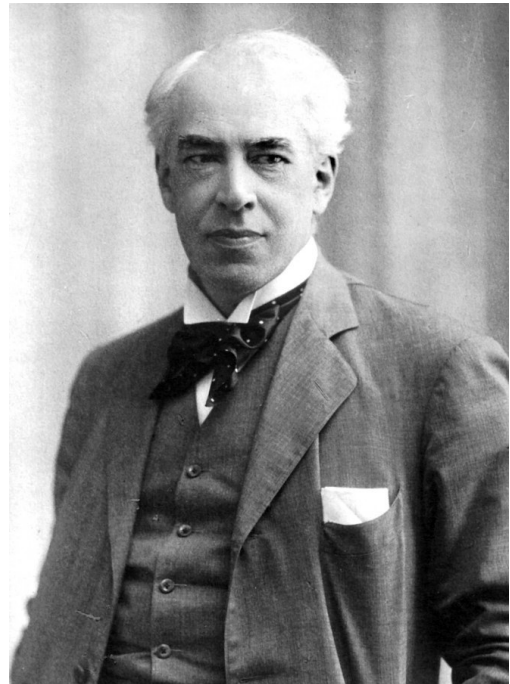
Well, the form of the play is epic. I find this play very big. There's a prodigal mother who returns at the beginning of the play – there's a big party atmosphere about her return, and yet we know there's something wrong, that there is a problem about the debts that these people have and about the money that needs to be paid. The house is under auction. And from then on in, the reckless behaviour of Ranyevskaya and her brother as they career blindly towards economic disaster has a kind of mad roller-coaster feeling to it; it does feel like something which is slightly out of control, so that the form of the play, as opposed to a “well made play”, feels raw and I think slightly inchoate. And I like it because it feels like a modern play; it feels like a twentieth-century play rather than a nineteenth-century piece of classicism. It feels like something that has the atonality and the dissonance of something that is new. And the chaotic nature of what goes on in this particular play is, I feel, very similar to the music of the time (by which I mean the discovery of atonal structures); it's the same as Impressionism; it's the same as the then new ability to use a camera to capture a snapshot. And there is something about the way that he frames the play where people drift in, drift out – you get snatches of their lives – and you know that their lives continue when they're out of sight and out of hearing, but there is this sense that what you're watching does not have a linear progressive narrative in the way that nineteenth century dramatists would have attempted. It doesn't have that Wagnerian through line; it's not composed in that way. He's absolutely espousing the idea that things are chaotic, formless, orderless, and accidental.

## The Influence of Stanislavski

### The Influence of Stanislavski

Stanislavski directed the first production of *The Cherry Orchard* in 1904. Chekhov's interest in creating psychologically rounded and nuanced characters, and Stanislavski's interest in ensuring that the performances of his actors were as emotionally truthful as possible, meant that the two artists were natural creative bedfellows.

Stanislavski's students introduced his philosophy and ideas about acting to the American theatre scene, and today the world-wide influence of Stanislavski, in terms of what we think of as 'good' and 'truthful' acting, as well as how actors 'create' a character, is huge.



In 2011, when we at the National Theatre are rehearsing *The Cherry Orchard*, many of the things that we are trying to achieve in the performances of the actors, and the production as a whole, are no doubt not dissimilar to what Stanislavski was trying to achieve over a hundred years ago when he directed the first production of the play. And yet he would almost certainly not recognise our rehearsal process as being directly influenced by his ideas, and we certainly made no reference or gesture to Stanislavski during our rehearsals.

And so how does the influence of Stanislavski manifest itself in the working practices of theatre professionals working today? Well, in diverse and subtle ways, which vary from project to project, and from artist to artist. So in this section, a number of different theatre professionals, experienced and emerging, traditional and avant-garde,

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outline the impact that Stanislavski has on their working practice. Many of them contradict each other, but acting is not a precise science, and so what works for one person may not work for another.

We also asked them to write about ‘the Method’. Method acting was first made popular in America by the Group Theatre in New York City in the 1930s and was subsequently advanced by Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio from the 1940s until his death in 1982. It was derived from the ‘System’ created by Stanislavski, who pioneered similar ideas in his quest for “theatrical truth.”

The lineage that goes from the System through to the Method has been hugely influential in forming contemporary understanding of what makes for naturalistic acting.



## The Influence of Stanislavski

### The Influence of Stanislavski (continued)

Staff Director James Bounds spoke to four actors in the National Theatre's production of *The Cherry Orchard*: Zoë Wanamaker, Mark Bonnar, Sarah Woodward and Kenneth Cranham, and the director, Howard Davies.



#### Zoë Wanamaker plays Ranveyskaya

"I'm fascinated by Stanislavski because I've never done it. I've never been schooled in it and I've never been trained in it, I've only picked up bits and pieces from opening his books when I was quite young. I don't have 'a Method' and I love it when a strong director is detailed with the work he does with you, because that helps focus me. I recently played Paula Strasberg [Lee Strasberg's wife] in a film, and I did some research into the Strasberg method, but unfortunately that wasn't very helpful because I realised that to learn his approach you have to be physically there – you have to be in the class – you can't do it from books.

But in fact my parents, who were both actors, were in Lee Strasberg's first class, which he started in his front room in the 1930s, and I learnt something called Sense Memory from my mother. It's very easy and is

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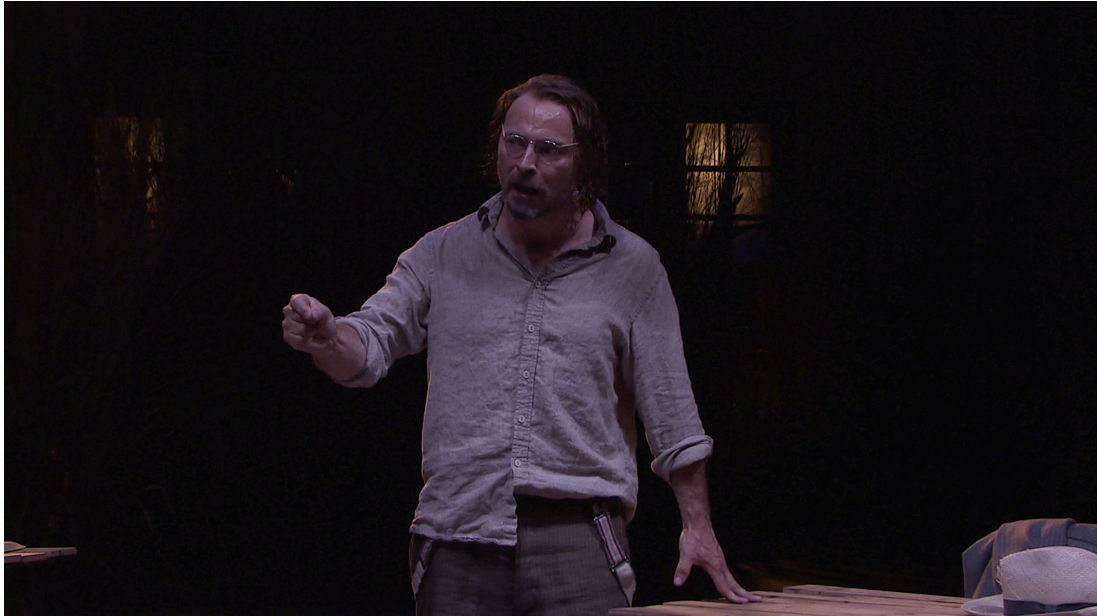
what we do automatically as actors, I think. We try and put ourselves in a situation that we can relate to the situation in the scene we're playing. And I use that a lot. I've done it many times for Ranyeyskaya. One example is the moment near the end of Act Three when Lopakhin says to me 'I bought it'. The sense memory I use is of seeing a car crash, and being completely horrified and numbed by it, and not being able to move. Just being so horrified you can't move. I saw something like that happen once – it was far away enough for me to not be able to do anything – and it's that sense of horror, of impotence, and of being suspended in time, as well as not being able to breathe. And this came to me in rehearsal, I think the fifth time we were running the scene, it came to me and it has stuck. Which is how I play the scene – I stand very still, as if I am paralysed. And so far, at every performance (we've done five now), I've thought of this Sense Memory – you just think it, and it comes automatically. It's horrific and you don't breathe and it's a paralysing experience.

Another Sense Memory I learnt from my mother is one that I use when a director asks you to speed it up. My mother said, 'You can't just go faster, but think of a taxi waiting outside – you can see the meter going up for every minute you delay – and if you think of the taxi waiting and your money going down, that will make you go a little bit faster!' And knowing that clock is ticking feeds into your psyche and you just speed it up. So when I get a note to go faster, I just think of a taxi waiting!

I've only once worked with objectives, and that was with a director called Max Stafford-Clark. I went along with it, and used it, and found it helpful at the time, but unless I keep working with that person I don't remember it. And to be honest I found that I was doing it instinctively anyway.

I love working with Howard [Davies] because he will pick up on something which I would never have thought of, or he pinpoints something and articulates it for me. He's very precise when he finds an intellectual or an emotional moment which he can absolutely articulate, and I rely very much on his judgement and taste”

## The Influence of Stanislavski



### Mark Bonnar plays Trofimov

“When playing a character, I don't delve into my past, at least not specifically. I – Mark – am an amalgamation of my life and as far as that is concerned with my work, I bring everything that I have experienced in my past, in my life, to what I do. When acting in an historical play, I like to do a lot of research because it is useful to immerse yourself in the world in which the play is set. I like to inform myself about what was going on at the time, historically, and then you can relate feelings or impulses that come up in the script via yourself, that is to say, via experiences I might have had. It's hard to break it down because so much of it is instinctive. I can't break it down in fact, because I don't know where it comes from.

That said, there are techniques I have (if I am having a problem with a particular passage and it's not coming instinctively) that I believe are Stanislavskian, which seem to work for me. I use something called ‘actioning’. An action is a word you can put between ‘I’ and ‘you’. I ‘do something’ to you. It's very freeing and it forces you to really think about everything you're saying. I've used ‘actioning’ a couple of times on *The Cherry Orchard*. There's a passage in Act Three, at the party, when I am speaking to Ranyevskaya. It goes:



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‘Whether the estate is sold or not is not the point. The point is more profound: you are at a crossroads. There is no turning back. The past is done. There is no turning back, you must move on. Dear, dear. Lovely. The lies are the confusing thing. Look it in the eye. The truth.’

That passage I found difficult in rehearsals for a while, so I started to think about what I am doing to her. So the list of words I wrote down for this were, although some of these have changed slightly: I stop you; I educate you; I shake you; I focus you; I slap you; I mollycoddle you; I belittle you; I smack you. So there's a lot of smacking and slapping going on! It's useful to think about it like that and then go back to rehearsal and try it out because of course there are many different ways to smack someone! I put actions on each sentence, but I know some actors who have a whole set of actions for their lines and a whole set, a subset, for their thoughts.”

## The Influence of Stanislavski



### **Sarah Woodward plays Charlotta**

“I was at RADA in the 80s; the Method was never mentioned and no-one talked about Stanislavski, Meisner, Strasberg or Adler. I have only recently heard of Meisner and any teacher of acting who uses the words ‘technique’ or ‘method’ just doesn't really relate to my experiences as an actor, and never has done. The job of acting – for me – comes from instinct, experience, confidence, understanding oneself and a character, and I do this through an internal process unique to me. Whenever I have dipped into Stanislavski, I have found it interesting but totally alien to the ‘job’ of an actor. I would be open to any director who wanted to use any technique – it would be fascinating; but I don’t believe that ultimately, in performance, it would make a blind bit of difference. I would revert to my own process.”

## The Influence of Stanislavski



### **Kenneth Cranham play *Firs***

“I don't really know what the Method is, or what Stanislavski's ideas about acting are, but what I am aware of is keeping a certain notebook on things that have happened to me in life. For example, when I spoke at my mother's funeral, which was a very overwhelming experience, I was amazed at how long it took me to say something because I had to wait for the emotions to settle down before I could say the next sentence, and even in the middle of these overwhelming feelings, I was thinking ‘I must remember this’. That is part of your make up, if you act for a living, trying to store these things for future recall. And I think that maybe that links up with the Method.

But it doesn't have to be about remembering something specific that has actually happened to you. For example, I played Aston in *The Caretaker* [by Harold Pinter], and I did 70 performances here [at the National Theatre]. Aston has this extraordinary speech about two-thirds of the way through, telling the story of how he was taken into a mental hospital where they decided they were going to give him shock treatment. But he knows that they can't do that to him without his mother's permission, so he thinks he's safe. However, he's taken into the governor's office, and



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the governor shows him the piece of paper that has his mother's signature on it. And he does this speech. And 68 times of the 70 times I performed it, when I got to that point, I found it so upsetting – it used to trigger something. And then these emotions would well up inside me, which I wouldn't allow to emerge, but I'd ride the emotions rather like a fairground ride, and they would inform how I said the rest of the speech. And actually the emotions would take the vocal delivery down ways that would surprise you, and you could be genuinely spontaneous. I could put myself in his situation because all of us – if we've had a loving mother – know what it is like to be a boy and to be protected by her, and to be in a hospital, and know that your mother is there making sure you're safe. But there is also something about the act of communicating, which has an emotional rawness to it – this is something I've observed in life. And sometimes a writer will give you such a piece of writing that – if you say it and just think it through – has power, and the emotions will come. Just from the words. For example, there's a little poem by Housman called 'The War Graves', it's only a few lines, and it is: 'Here dead lie we because we did not choose / To live and shame the land from which we sprung. / Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose; / But young men think it is, and we were young.' It is fantastic, it is so powerful, and there are writers who know how to do that, whatever 'that' is. It actually happens in the moment, as you say the lines, you don't need to create or find a back story, you just say those words, and emotions come. I always find if I've got a big part, I actually want to work on the nuts and bolts, I want to get my lines learnt and the moves and stuff like that. I find things like improvisations about events that have happened in the character's lives are a form of refinement, and I find them useful later on in the process. For example, I played Len in *Saved* [by Edward Bond], and we revised it for a tour, and the lines come back very quickly, and then the work you do is very rich, because you're not struggling for the lines, and you can do things like improvise scenes and so on, and that bit of acting is very enjoyable because you can mess about with it and toss it around. I was once playing the idiot in an American version of *The Idiot*, and I had to close the first half by having a fit. I was wondering how to do this fit. And before we started rehearsals, I was walking home one day, and suddenly on the opposite pavement

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was a man having an epileptic fit. There were people doing things, looking after him, making sure he was safe, and I watched, taking it all in! And then got complimented by a doctor in the audience on how good my fit was. But I wouldn't have been able to do it if I hadn't seen him!"

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### Howard Davies, Director

“I don't have any belief in anything called a Method at all. I'm very disinclined to solve things – whether its politics or acting – by arriving at something which is ‘this is the way we do things, this is the method’, and then slapping that method on top of whatever you come up against. I would far rather approach the way that we discover the right acting form for this play by being scientific, by being analytic, by understanding the nature of who says what to whom and why; who means what to whom; who listens and who doesn't; whether these words that are said by this character are heard by this person but misunderstood; whether that character, having misunderstood it, then bases their reaction on their prejudices or whether they base it on the person they're talking to. That is to say, the process is about trying to break the play down into almost molecular parts, trying to discover its molecular structure and how the play works on that level, before re-assembling it for an audience. So I don't come with ‘A Method’, and nor do I subscribe to what has become known as The Method. I'd far rather we took it all apart and rebuilt it in the hope that we're building something that is accurate and faithful to Chekhov's intentions.”

