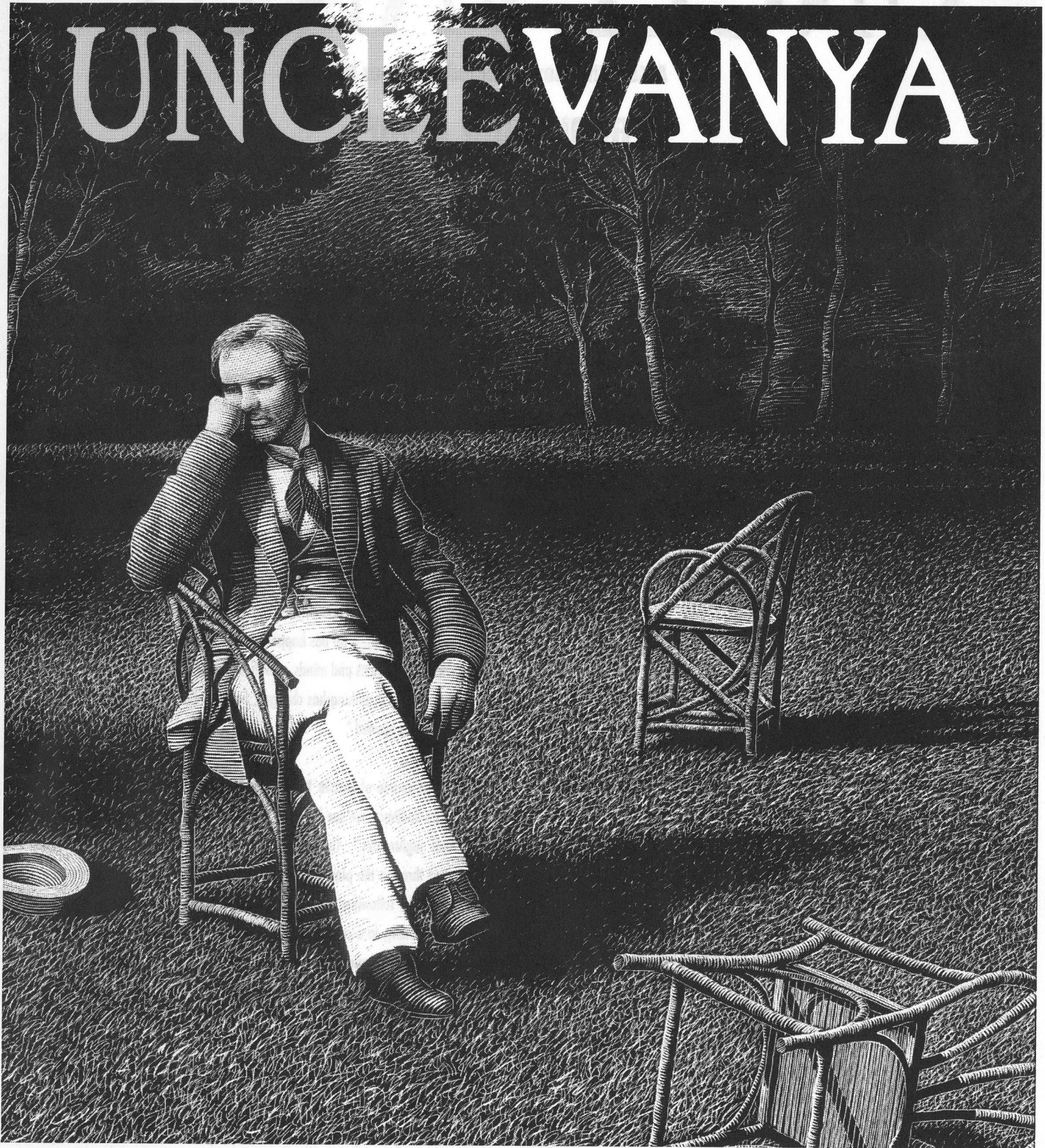


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UNCLEVANYA



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UNCLE VANYA

by Anton Chekhov directed by Roger Rees

PRODUCTION GUIDE

WHAT IS THE PLAY ABOUT?

It's a play of such mystery. There are no answers given by Chekhov, not only to the characters' fates after the play ends (as everyone always remarks), but even before it begins.

- Director Michael Mayer

Anton Chekhov's **Uncle Vanya** has been described as the first modern play. With this play, written in 1899, the author avoided the trappings of nineteenth century melodrama, such as sudden plot twists, clearly delineated villains and heroes, and separate comic and serious elements. With this play, which portrays family life on a Russian country estate, Chekhov focused not on the external changes and developments of characters in extreme situations, but concentrated on the characters' inner lives and the psychological changes they experience. Put simply, **Uncle Vanya** is a story of one family's separate yet interconnected emotional journeys.

As indicated in the above quotation, director Michael Mayer sees this play as less concerned with providing answers and more concerned with asking questions. For Roundabout's production, Mayer was inspired by Richard Gilman's essay "How It Is," and he developed four themes that correspond roughly with the play's four acts. Taken together, these themes provide a lens for audiences to follow the developments in Chekhov's characters.

The first of Mayer's themes is "How Things Have Changed." This statement refers to disruptions the characters are experiencing at the start of the play. Serebryakov, the professor, has recently moved from his long-time home in a major Russian city to the country estate where his mother, his daughter, and his brother-in-law live. This change has a strong impact not only on the professor and his young wife, Yelena, but on the rest of the family. Other members of the family remark that their meal times and sleep schedules are not what they used to be, as a way of reflecting their unease and discomfort of the new situation.

The second important theme the characters explore is "How Things Might Be." Mayer uses this phrase to describe the characters' state of mind as they contemplate the future, discussing their hopes and plans of what may happen in the days and years to come. By

utilizing this theme, Chekhov explores the ideas of possibility and his character's appetites for something more. Some of the characters, like Astrov, express concern for the environment and the health of the earth, while others, like Vanya and Sonya, are more involved with questions of financial security for their home and estate. All three see hope in the prospect of love.

In the third phase of their journey, the characters face disappointment and disillusion, which Mayer entitles "How Things Won't Be." At this point, Chekhov's characters recognize the failures and short-comings in their lives. Vanya, Astrov, and Sonya all come to painful realizations about their attraction to other characters.

Finally, as the play concludes, the characters are brought to the idea of, "How It Is." In this section, the members of the household come to terms with the painful commonness of their lives and begin the process to set their lives back on course. As Mayer describes it, "A lot has happened and nothing has changed. Except in these characters' hearts and minds, a lot has changed: Vanya and Sonya choose to go on living as if nothing has changed, but they have the knowledge. Their eyes have been opened."

Through the course of **Uncle Vanya**, Chekhov's characters are turned inside out. As the audience, we see firsthand their hopes and their fears, their dreams and their nightmares. This exploration of the characters' inner selves is reinforced through the play's staging. The first act occurs outside the country house, and the following scenes are set in the dining room, then the drawing room, and finally, in a corner in Vanya's room. Michael Mayer compares this progression to a cinematic "tracking shot," and points out that it parallels the ideas Chekhov explores in the play. As the play evolves, the audience is drawn deeper and deeper into Vanya's world, both psychologically and scenically.

Though **Uncle Vanya** was written over 100 years ago, Michael Mayer's staging provides thematic and visual connections that 21st century audiences can relate to in a meaningful way. As the audience, we experience the breadth and depth of its characters' emotional journeys and by experiencing this process, we gain a clearer vision of what it truly means to be human.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Uncle Vanya (played by Derek Jacobi) manages the country estate on which the play takes place.

Sonya (played by Amy Ryan) is Vanya's unmarried niece. She works tirelessly with him to keep the estate in running order.

Serebryakov (played by Brian Murray) is Sonya's father, a retired professor who has relocated to the country. The estate belonged to his first wife, Vanya's sister.

Yelena (played by Laura Linney) is Serebryakov's second wife.

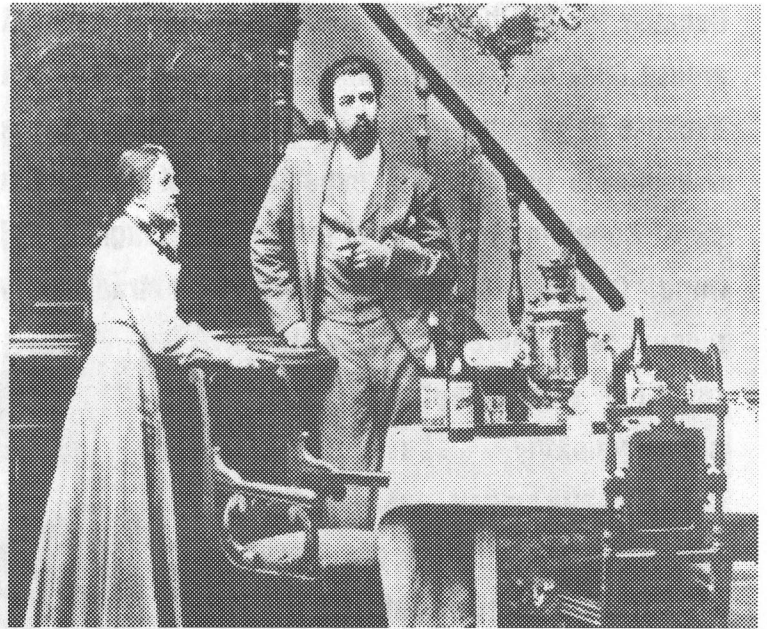
Astrov (played by Roger Rees) is a country doctor who treated Vanya's dying sister and who has become a regular visitor to the estate.

Maria Vasilyevna (played by Rita Gam) is Vanya's mother and Sonya's grandmother.

Telegin (played by David Patrick Kelly) is a bankrupt landowner who now lives on the estate.

Marina (played by Anne Pitoniak) is the family's old nurse.

Yefim (played by James Coyle) is the estate's night watchman.



Konstantin Stanislavsky and his wife, M. P. Lilina, in a scene from **Uncle Vanya**.

Principal Works of Anton Chekhov

Plantanov, 1881 (unfinished play)

The Tales of Melomene, 1884

On the Highway, 1885 (play)

Motley Stories, 1886

In the Twilight, 1887 (stories)

The Kiss, 1887 (story)

Ianov, 1887 (play)

The Steppe, 1888 (short novel)

The Name-Day Party, 1888 (short novel)

The Bear, 1888 (play)

The Proposal, 1889 (play)

Ward Six, 1892 (short novel)

Sakhalin Island, 1893 (story)

The Black Monk, 1894 (story)

The Seagull, 1896 (play)

Peasants, 1897 (short novel)

Uncle Vanya, 1899 (play)

Three Sisters, 1901 (play)

The Betrothed, 1903 (story)

The Cherry Orchard, 1904 (play)

Check out these websites related to Anton Chekhov and Uncle Vanya:

<http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Bluffs/7745/chekhov.htm1>

Quotes by Chekhov, a biography and a time line of his life.

<http://endeavor.med.nyu.edu/iit-med/iit-med-db/webdocs/webdescrips/chekhov822-des-.html>

A summary and commentary on *Uncle Vanya*

<http://mockingbird.creighton.edu/NCW/chekleg.htm>

Excerpts from essays about Chekhov.

<http://mockingbird.creighton.edu/NCW/chekwrit.htm>

Quotes by Chekhov on writing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANTON CHEKHOV (1860 - 1904)

Because of his hatred of untruth, Chekhov will not arouse false hopes about the future of mankind — but because he is humane to the marrow of his bones, he manages to increase our expectations of the human race. Coupling sweetness of temper with toughness of mind, Chekhov makes his work an extraordinary compound of morality and reality, rebellion and acceptance, irony and sympathy — evoking a singular affirmation even in the darkest despair. There are more powerful — playwrights in the modern theatre artists with greater range, wider variety, more intellectual power — but there are none more warm and generous, and none who bring the drama to a higher realization of its human role.

- Robert Brustein

Anton Chekhov is widely recognized as one of the world's foremost short-story writers as well as being Russia's greatest playwright. He was acclaimed as a great dramatic innovator and contributed to the development of modern drama through the use of prose and realism in his plays.

Chekhov was born in southern Russia, the son of a grocer and grandson of a former serf. From an early age, Chekhov enjoyed the theatre. He also enjoyed inventing amusing stories, for the great Russian tradition for satire was in his blood. With the aid of a scholarship, Chekhov entered the University of Moscow to study medicine. To help with the family finances, he started publishing his stories, anecdotes and articles. By the time he became a doctor in 1884, writing had become his major preoccupation.

Ivanov, the first of Chekhov's full length plays to be produced, was first presented in 1888 at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg. However, the unique demands of

his writing proved too much for the actors trained in the old traditions, and the play was poorly received. Chekhov's work may never have survived this early misrepresentation if not for his collaboration with Konstantine Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovitch-Dantchenko. Stanislavsky and Nemirovitch-Dantchenko had founded the Moscow Art Theatre as rebellion against the declamatory style of the conventional Russian theatre, and what became known as the "Stanislavsky system" was admirably suited to Chekhov's subdued style. There

were no conventional histrionics; each actor was made aware of the importance of pauses, slight changes in tone and complete naturalness. The success of the Moscow Art Theatre's production of **The Seagull** in 1898 established it as the leading theatre of Russia and Chekhov as Russia's prime playwright. The wings of the seagull remain the emblem of the Moscow Art Theatre to this day.

In all, Chekhov wrote 18 plays. His early plays were one-act comedies strongly influenced by the farces he had seen in his youth. Some are very funny and are still produced to this day. However, he is most known for his four major works -- **The Seagull**, **Uncle Vanya**, **Three Sisters**, and **The Cherry Orchard**. The subject matter for these major plays comes from the life of Russian society in Chekhov's time. The plays paint a stark picture of the wasted energy and talent of the idle Russian upper classes under the social conditions of Old Russia, and they forecast the aristocracy's inevitable sweeping away in the revolution that occurred in the early twentieth century.



Chekhov in 1904 in front of his Yalta villa.

Chekhov died of tuberculosis in 1904, less than six months after the thundering success of **The Cherry Orchard**. For all of his life, he was driven mostly by the wish to amuse others, and even his darkest plays cannot resist a sprinkling of ironic humor. One legend claims that on the night he lay dying, Chekhov improvised a humorous story simply to make his despondent wife laugh.

SCENES FROM A COUNTRY LIFE

The people in **Uncle Vanya** (as well as Chekhov's three other major plays) come from a generation struggling to hold on to a disintegrating inheritance. The country estate in the play is similar to many others in Russia, originally built during a period when country estates could achieve palatial proportions. A French doctor described one Russian estate as "decorated with marble statues and historical paintings, . . . I counted more than a hundred rooms. . . Practically everywhere there were paintings by the best masters; their worth is estimated at a hundred thousand rubles."

As few estates were able to produce a significant income, much of this extravagance was paid for by mortgaging the property or the indentured servants, known as serfs. As a consequence, huge debts almost became a status symbol to the Russian landowner. By the early - to mid -19th century, the habit of living on credit became so wide spread that 60 to 70 percent of privately owned serfs were mortgaged to state credit institutions. From the moment of the emancipation of serfs in 1861, the process of the landed gentry losing their land seemed inevitable. Compensation paid by the government for the releasing of serfs was squandered at European resorts, and the habit of dividing up the estate among all the heirs further dissipated the wealth. As the 19th century came to a close, young impoverished nobles fled to the cities and towns in search of other sources of income. Estates that were not destroyed by vandals were left to rot or were bought up by middle class merchants and intellectuals.



Chekhov's villa in Yalta.

In Chekhov's play, the character of Uncle Vanya says that the estate he manages was bought for his sister's dowry for 95,000 rubles, of which 25,000 was mortgaged. On top of that, Vanya had to relinquish his own inheritance to make the sale possible. "After ten years of working like a slave," Vanya explains, he has managed to pay off the mortgage and can produce an income to support his brother-in-law's professorial career. Although it was an overwhelming



Chekhov owned this country estate in Melikhovo..

phenomenon for landowners to squander their wealth, as we see in this case, not all estates were managed badly. There were those like Vanya who struggled to make their estate profitable. References in the play to a working factory on the estate tell us that Vanya, like many of his compatriots, is trying to keep in step with the march of progress, employing new agricultural methods and income producing enterprises. Even so, it is a struggle for him to keep his head above water.

It is perhaps revealing that Chekhov wrote **Uncle Vanya** while living on and managing a country estate of his own. In 1892, building on his success as a short story writer Chekhov purchased the small estate of Melikhovo and began to experience firsthand, not only the beauty of the Russian countryside, but the realities of country living. His work as a doctor gave him the opportunity to observe the lives of his neighbors up close, while the need to pay off his own mortgage gave him a deeper and more personal understanding of forces working against them. By the end of the 19th century, gentry still in possession of land were a breed on the verge of extinction. And yet, the hold of their way of life on the Russian people's imagination remained strong. When Chekhov said, "I passionately love anything that is called an estate in Russia. This word has still not lost its poetic sound," he was referring not only to the land, but also to scenes of country life that transpire on such land. Because these estates contained such meaning for the great Russian dramatist, theatergoers for over a century have been entranced by Chekhov's consoling stories of characters striving for answers.

CHEKHOVIAN DRAMA

ANTON CHEKHOV (1860-1904)



Chekhov (center) with the company of the Moscow Arts Theater, reading *The Seagull*.

What is so wonderful about Chekhov's play is not what is transmitted by the words, but what is hidden under them, in the pauses, in the glances of the actors, in the emanation of their inmost feelings.

- Konstantin Stanislavsky

Many critics have tried to pinpoint Chekhov's unique ability as a playwright. It has been said that his plays have no plot, no dramatic climax, and what little action exists takes place off-stage. But a deeper look reveals his deep sense of tragic human destiny. His plays tell their stories through an obscured plot, and the dramatic tension is created through subtext and silences that are rich with meaning. Thus, while the dialogue seems to wander aimlessly, it performs a great number of essential dramatic functions: it reveals character, furthers the action, uncovers the theme, evokes mood, and diverts attention from the melodramatic events that are erupting under the surface of life.

Chekhov aimed to make his plays a more realistic reflection of life than the theatre that had come before him. With his plays, Chekhov creates an atmosphere of futility and aimlessness that has the effect of real, unplanned events. Through his innovative style, he brings out the inner psychological reactions of the characters and shifts the focus from the external events to the impact they have on his characters. New techniques, such as experiments with the empty stage, the injection of farcical business into emotionally intense scenes, and innovative uses of sound (to create mood, to illuminate the condition of a character, or to enlarge the area of our perception), were all used to make his subtext especially compelling.

It is traditionally thought that Chekhov's texts read poorly but play beautifully. The plays are like a jigsaw puzzle: the submerged life of the text, little silences and tensions, pacing and lyricism of the action coming together to create a picture of life only on the stage. Chekhov used a series of devices to gain his intended effect, some of which include:

Indirect Action: In a Chekhov play melodramatic events, violent acts, and emotional climaxes all happen offstage or between acts, while on stage, the characters go about the petty business of every day life.

Irony and Satire: Chekhov uses humor to create atypical villains and heroes and to suspend our sympathy for them. In Chekhov's plays, villains act while victims suffer, but the villainous acts are de-emphasized and our judgment is suspended.

Mood: Chekhov's plays are a complex and emotional world full of ambiguous symbols, stray sounds, literary quotations, non-appearing characters, disconnected conversations, random remarks, nonsense words full of significance, gestures or small actions, and above all, pauses.

In real life people don't spend every minute shooting each other, hanging them-selves, or making declarations of love. They don't dedicate their time to saying intelligent things. They spend much more of it eating, drinking, flirting and saying foolish things - and that is what should happen on the stage. Someone should write a play in which people come and go, eat, talk about the weather, and play cards. Life should be exactly as it is, and people should be exactly as complicated and at the same time exactly as simple as they are in life. People eat a meal, and at the same time their happiness is made or their lives are being ruined.

- Anton Chekhov

PRODUCTION GUIDE FOR UNCLE VANYA

Margaret Salvante, Education Director
Philip A. Alexander, Education Associate
Malanna Carey, Marketing Assistant

ACTIVITIES

Before the Play:

Choose one of the organizing themes Michael Mayer has applied to **Uncle Vanya** ("How Have Things Changed," "How Things Could Be," "How Things Won't Be," or "How It Is") and apply it to your own life. Create a piece of art (a drawing, a poem, a collage, a monologue, etc.) that demonstrates this view of your life. Here are some questions that might help you:

- How have things changed in your life recently? How has this change affected you and members of your family?
- What are your dreams and hopes? Are these dreams for yourself, or for a larger community, such as your school or your city?
- What are some of the disappointments you've faced in your life? How did you feel when you realized you wouldn't have something you hoped for?
- What are the inescapable realities of daily life for you? What is it like to face the same things day after day?
- How can you communicate these thoughts and feelings to an audience or a spectator in an interesting way? What art form would work best to depict the psychological and emotional ideas you want to convey?

During the Play:

As you watch the play, try to follow the characters' emotional journeys. Perhaps you'd like to select one character, such as Vanya or Sonya. As that character interacts with the other characters, look for changes in his or her emotional state. Watch for how the character displays her or his feelings through words and physical actions. Be sure not to ignore the pauses and silences, since what a character doesn't say or doesn't do can often indicate their feelings as strongly as dialogue and specific gestures. Look to see if you can map the character's emotional journey based on the four themes established by Michael Mayer. Some thoughts to keep in mind as you watch the play are:

- What is the character's emotional state at the beginning of the play?
- Can you tell if the character is hopeful or pessimistic? Does the character talk about his or her dreams and desires? What about the character's fears?
- How does the character express her or his disappointments?
- What is the character's emotional state at the end of the play, and how is this different from her or his condition at the play's start?

After the Play:

Create another piece of art (again, it can be piece of visual art or a form of writing) that explores a character's emotional life through one of Michael Mayer's four themes. This time you should depict the life of a fictional character. This could be based on someone you know (but altered in an important way), or a character drawn from **Uncle Vanya**, or a completely original character that you develop.

- What are the key problems your character is facing?
- What are your character's hopes and dreams? What are the barriers preventing your character from achieving his or her desires?
- How does your character interact with other characters?
- How does your character communicate her or his emotional feelings with others?

When you're finished, send your completed work to Roundabout, and we'll share it with the people who worked on *Uncle Vanya*! (We may even post it on our website!) Send it to the attention of: **Margaret Salvante**, Education Director, Roundabout Theatre Company, 231 West 39th Street, Suite 1200, New York, NY 10018 or send an E-Mail to: Margies@roundabouttheatre.org.

SOURCES:

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J.L. Styan, **Chekhov in Performance**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971.

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www.roundabouttheatre.org

Be sure to check out Roundabout's website for more information on this production, the rest of our season and all of Roundabout's activities.

WHEN YOU GET TO THE THEATRE

What To Look For

The Brooks Atkinson Theatre has a several resources for your convenience. Restrooms are located on the mezzanine (upper) level. Also on the mezzanine is a refreshment counter where you can buy soda or a snack, but please remember that you will not be permitted to take these items into the theatre with you.

Ticket Policy

As a student participant in **Page To Stage or Theatre Access**, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

Audience Etiquette

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.

**Thank You For Your Cooperation
Enjoy The Show!**

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