

CHEKHOV'S "SISTERS"

CHEKHOV is a much-maligned playwright, whose works have gained the reputation of being about melancholy gentlefolk ineffectually attempting to keep boredom away. He himself insisted upon the importance of plot and action, and objected strenuously to works without these essentials. Accordingly his plays are filled with incident; enough happens in *Three Sisters* to furnish the plots of several long-run plays.

"Life must be exactly as it is and the people as they are, not on stilts," Chekhov said. "Let everything on the stage be just as complicated and at the same time just as simple as it is in life." At the same time he was not content just to report life. He wanted "to show people the emptiness of their lives, to make them strive for something better." The theme of regeneration through work runs through his later plays, with perhaps its strongest expression in *Three Sisters*.

This play, according to the translator for the BBC production, Elisaveta Fen, "could be regarded as a portrayal of the universal human predicament: it shows that unless you are exceptionally gifted, or fortunate, or ruthless—perhaps even all these things at the same time—and unless you take your decisions exactly at the right moment, 'life' or 'circumstances' are apt to take charge, and you find yourself doing a job you do not really like, marrying someone you soon discover to be incompatible, and cherishing a wish or dream which is not likely to be fulfilled in your lifetime . . . Chekhov knew that 'full' lives were achieved by comparatively few, and that it required courage and humility to live an ordinary, incomplete kind of life."

He showed three sisters with this courage and humility. They each have their own story and group of characters centred round them. Maria (Masha) is unhappily married, but finding solace with the commander of the troops stationed in their small provincial town. Irina, the youngest, accepts her situation and decides to marry the ugly but kind and devoted suitor, who is then killed in a duel with a jealous rival. Olga, the eldest, has no love story, but unwillingly shoulders the responsibility of becoming headmistress at the school where she teaches. The play begins on a spring day that is Irina's name-day, and ends equally symbolically in the autumn when the geese are flying and the troops, who have provided all the social life of the town, are marching away, Maria's lover with them.

With all their hopes shattered, the sisters reject self-pity for a passionate hope that at least life may be made better for the future generations, and they decide to work for that end.

Three Sisters, a BBC World Theatre production by Peter Watts, will be heard from the YCs on Friday, October 30.

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