Moscow’s Mossovet Theatre, a distinguished house that is currently in the midst of its 91st season, brings its interpretations of Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vanya* to Wyndham’s Theatre from 23 April to 3 May. Both productions are the work of director Andrei Konchalovsky. Andrei Konchalovsky? You mean the film director? Well, yes, I do mean the Andrei Konchalovsky who began in the 1960s by co-writing screenplays with the great Andrei Tarkovsky (have you ever seen *Andrei Rublyov*?), spent about ten years working with A-list actors in Hollywood in the 1980s, and has split his time ever since between Hollywood and Moscow. Yes, I do mean the Andrei Konchalovsky whose films have been magnets for acting accolades over the decades.


Vysotskaya stars in both *Vanya* and *Three Sisters*, playing very different kinds of defeated women, the hapless Sonya in the former and the tragic Masha in the latter. So, how did theatre enter the life of one of Russia’s greatest film directors? For our purposes, at least, it began when Konchalovsky made one of his deepest, most moving films – a low-key, though intense rendition of *Uncle Vanya*. This was in 1970. Find it. Watch it.

Still, it took another 18 years before the director switched from his native cinema to the more alien forms of the stage. It was in Paris at the Théâtre de l’Odeon that he made his theatre debut in 1988 with *The Seagull*, Juliette Binoche doing starring honors as the ingenue Nina. By now a pattern had begun to emerge, one that Konchalovsky, who is now 76, once confirmed to me during an interview. Chekhov is his ‘God’, he said. Therefore it was no surprise when he declared in the early 2000s that he intended to stage ‘all the Chekhov plays’.

I don’t think the reason for that was so much that Konchalovsky had become fascinated with theatre as an art form. It surely was not because he had exhausted his potential in cinema — his film *Gloss*, released in 2007, was a brilliant and wickedly bitter satire of Putin-era mores. No, the turn to theatre was more the case of a perfectionist wishing to embrace Chekhov on the writer’s own
Alexander Domogarov as Astrov and Yulia Vysotskaya as Sonia in Andrei Konchalovsky’s production of Chekov’s Uncle Vanya for the Maccbeta State Theatre visiting London for a season at Wyndham’s Theatre from April 23. Photo: Mossovet Theatre.

Konchalovsky spat out these hard, probing words about Chekhov almost as though they were a flow of poetry. He hit his consonants and drew out his vowels in such a way as to capture the rhythm of what it is to be cruel, cynical and unhappy. Chekhov, he said, was his God. And as he spoke I could see him testing himself against the great writer and working to make me understand why that was important. Why? Because, the director seems to suggest, Chekhov is a universe that every self-respecting artist must dare to traverse.

In his theatrical interpretations of the great writer, Konchalovsky challenges himself to reveal the depths and the limits of his cinematic sensibilities. His productions are fine-tuned to a seamless degree that one rarely finds in the vast space that he changed forever over 100 years ago.

There is in these characters a deep well of bitterness and tumultuous wisdom that one suspects entered their blood stream through their mother’s milk and the land that supports them. Chekhov, Konchalovsky once told me in fluent, forceful English, was anything but the wistful, genteel, melancholic soul that he is often portrayed to be. The writer, Konchalovsky explained with conviction and a perceptible amount of admiring awe, was very often perceived to be weak, modest, shy, and compassionate. It’s not (true) at all. He was a womaniser. He was terrible with women — and with men. Very cruel. He was cynical and he was not happy because of that.

That mid-sized platform, which reappears in Three Sisters, makes every performer step onto a stage twice before he or she performs. It is a quiet but constant reminder that we are in a theatre watching a carefully calculated performance, not a cinematic slice of life.

In Three Sisters the director leans particularly heavily on cinematic devices to pull us out of the usual theatrical mindset. Some scene transitions are accompanied by real-life interviews with the actors projected on a huge screen over the stage. The monologues include serious thoughts about the actors’ characters, as well as a good deal of tomfoolery.

Konchalovsky in his theatre work beautifully merges a hyper-traditional style with clear and quirky elements of innovation. His is a subtle, but powerful approach that deeply satisfies the traditionalist in you while heartily engaging that part of you that wants artists to take chances. The result is a strange and affecting stew of styles capable of cranking up the humour even as it appeals to our sense of empathy.