



The Maccbetha State Theatre Company from Moscow in Andrei Konchalovsky's revival of *Uncle Vanya* visiting London for a season from April 23.
Photo: Mossovet Theatre

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

John Freedman profiles Andrei Konchalovsky whose productions of Chekov's *Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vanya* come to the London West End Wyndham's Theatre for a season, from April 23.

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.

Barbara Hershey won Best Actress at Cannes in 1987 for Konchalovsky's *Shy People*. Glenn Close

won a Golden Globe for her star turn in Konchalovsky's TV miniseries *The Lion in Winter* in 2005. Other top actors pulling down major awards or nominations for working with Konchalovsky include Jon Voight (*Runaway Train*, 1985), Julie Andrews (*Duet for One*, 1987), Armand Assante (*The Odyssey*, 1997), the great Russian actress Inna Churikova (*Ryaba, My Chicken*, 1994) and Konchalovsky's current wife, his fifth, Yulia Vysotskaya (*Gloss*, 2007).

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'Odéon 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

turf and terms. How else do you really get to the bottom of Chekhov's art unless you take him on in that very space that he changed forever over 100 years ago?

In 2004, also at the Mossovet, Konchalovsky staged a beautiful, funny, larger-than-life version of *The Seagull*. He followed it with *Uncle Vanya* in 2009 and *Three Sisters* in 2013, the two shows coming to Wyndham's. So far rumours of a production of *The Cherry Orchard* are amorphous but insistent.

Konchalovsky's Chekhov is funny — *Three Sisters*, especially, is full of clowns — but he is also harsh and tragic. I hesitate to go too far describing what London spectators still have to experience for themselves, but one beautiful, heartbreaking and ludicrous scene from *Uncle Vanya* seems so central to this director's vision that I risk drawing the curtain back on it just a bit. Dear, doomed Sonya loses her head one night as the drunken Astrov clumsily brushes against her while confiding in her or accidentally stroking her arm while draping his coat over her shoulders. Her feverish romantic delusions crash rudely against the stone wall of the doctor's complete and total disinterest, although she, of course, doesn't see that at all.

Astrov, not incidentally, is the fulcrum on which *Vanya* turns. As performed by Alexander Domogarov, he is rude and cultured, a drunk with manners and brains, a bit of a lecher with a conscience. He is a man with an enormous, imposing personality living a life of obscurity and increasing futility.

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.'



Yulia Vysotskaya, Larisa Kuznetsova and Galina Bob in *Three Sisters*. Photo: Mossovet Theatre.

Konchalovsky spat out these hard, probing words about Chekhov almost as though they were 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 wonderfully crude and inexact art of theatre. Yet he also revels in the theatre's gawkiness, its sense of being cobbled together with hammers and nails and splintery wood and sweat and thick makeup.

His *Uncle Vanya* starts with overt references to

both theatre and film. On a huge screen we watch a film of a contemporary street scene. At the same time, a busy stage manager bustles about, verifying one last time that everything is in place. She returns again before Act Two, supervising stage hands, getting actors into place and, finally, when all is ready, signaling to the lighting man to dim the house and get the show rolling.

That is not all Konchalovsky does to bare backstage mechanisms, however. At either side of the stage set — designed by the director himself — stand rows of chairs. These are for actors who are waiting to come on stage, or who have finished their scene and would like to rest before heading backstage. Their presence has the effect of concentrating attention and energy on the small, raised wooden platform at centre stage where all of the action takes place.

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.



Alexander Domogarov as Astrov and Yulia Vysotskaya as Sonia in Andrei Konchalovsky's production of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* for the Macbeth State Theatre visiting London for a season at Wyndham's Theatre from April 23. Photo: Mossovet Theatre.

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