

SYDNEY  
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EDUCATION

SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS  
**THE PRESENT**  
AFTER ANTON CHEKHOV'S PLATONOV  
BY ANDREW UPTON



**ON CUE**

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Compiled by Hannah Brown.

The activities and resources contained in this document are designed for educators as the starting point for developing more comprehensive lessons for this production. Hannah Brown is the Education Projects Officers for the Sydney Theatre Company. You can contact Hannah on

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# ABOUT *ON CUE* AND STC

## ABOUT ON CUE

STC Ed has a suite of resources located on our website to enrich and strengthen teaching and learning surrounding the plays in the STC season. Each show will be accompanied by an On Cue e-publication which will feature all the essential information for teachers and students, such as curriculum links, information about the playwright, synopsis, character analysis, thematic analysis and suggested learning experiences. For more in-depth digital resources surrounding the **ELEMENTS OF DRAMA, DRAMATIC FORMS, STYLES, CONVENTIONS and TECHNIQUES**, visit the STC Ed page on our website.

### Such resources include:

- videos
- design sketchbooks
- worksheets
- posters

## ABOUT SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY

In 1980, STC's first Artistic Director Richard Wherrett defined STC's mission as to provide "first class theatrical entertainment for the people of Sydney – theatre that is grand, vulgar, intelligent, challenging and fun."

Almost 35 years later, under the leadership of Artistic Director Andrew Upton, that ethos still rings true.

STC offers a diverse program of distinctive theatre of vision and scale at its harbourside home venue, The Wharf; Sydney Theatre at Walsh Bay; and Sydney Opera House, as its resident theatre company.

STC has a proud heritage as a creative hub and incubator for Australian theatre and theatre makers, developing and producing eclectic Australian works, interpretations of classic repertoire and great international writing. STC strives to create theatre experiences that reflect Sydney's distinctive personality and engage audiences.

Strongly committed to engagement in the community, STC's Education and Communities programs aim to inspire theatre appreciation and participation not only in theatres but also in schools, community halls; wherever people get together. STC offers an innovative School Drama™ program; partners with groups in metropolitan Sydney, regional centres and rural

areas; and reaches beyond NSW with touring productions throughout Australia. Through these partnerships and initiatives, STC plays a part in ensuring a creative, forward-thinking and sociable future by engaging with young people, students and teachers.

The theatre careers of many of Australia's internationally renowned artists have been launched and fostered at STC, including Mel Gibson, Judy Davis, Hugo Weaving, Geoffrey Rush, Toni Collette, Rose Byrne, Benedict Andrews and Cate Blanchett.

STC often collaborates with international artists and companies and, in recent years, the company's international profile has grown significantly with productions touring extensively to great acclaim.

STC is assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body, and by the New South Wales Government through Arts NSW.

[sydneytheatre.com.au](http://sydneytheatre.com.au)

# CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

## SUITABLE FOR

Students in Years 11 and 12

## SUBJECTS

- English
- Drama

## DRAMA STAGE 6 (HSC PRELIMINARY)

Outcome P3.1

Outcome P3.2

Outcome P3.3

Outcome P3.4

## DRAMA STAGE 6 (HSC)

Outcome H3.1

Outcome H3.2

Outcome H3.3

Outcome H3.4

Outcome H3.5



Toby Schmitz, Richard Roxburgh and Chris Ryan in Sydney Theatre Company's *The Present*, 2015. Image: Lisa Tomasetti. ©

SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY AND UBS PRESENT

# THE PRESENT

AFTER ANTON CHEKHOV'S PLATONOV  
BY ANDREW UPTON

MARIA  
ANNA BAMFORD

ANNA  
CATE BLANCHETT

OSIP  
ANDREW BUCHANAN

YEGOR  
DAVID DOWNER

KIRILL  
EAMON FARREN

ALEXEI  
MARTIN JACOBS

DIMITRI  
BRANDON MCCLELLAND

SOPHIA  
JACQUELINE MCKENZIE

IVAN  
MARSHALL NAPIER

SASHA  
SUSAN PRIOR

MIKHAIL  
RICHARD ROXBURGH

SERGEI  
CHRIS RYAN

NIKOLAI  
TOBY SCHMITZ

DIRECTOR  
JOHN CROWLEY

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR  
SARAH GOODES

DESIGNER  
ALICE BABIDGE

LIGHTING DESIGNER  
NICK SCHLIEPER

COMPOSER & SOUND DESIGNER  
STEFAN GREGORY

VOICE & TEXT COACH  
CHARMIAN GRADWELL

PRODUCTION MANAGER  
JOHN COLVIN

STAGE MANAGER  
GEORGIA GILBERT

DEPUTY STAGE MANAGER  
MINKA STEVENS

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER  
TODD EICHORN

WIG, MAKE-UP & WARDROBE SUPERVISOR  
LAUREN A. PROIETTI

HEAD MECHANIST  
STEVE MASON

HEAD FLY OPERATOR  
KANE MOTT

DEPUTY HEAD FLY OPERATOR  
CHRIS FLEMING

FLOOR MECHANISTS  
TERRY HULME  
JACK MURPHY

HEAD ELECTRICIAN  
ANDREW TOMPKINS

FLOOR ELECTRICIAN  
HARRY CLEGG

HEAD SOUND  
KEVIN WHITE

FOH SOUND OPERATOR  
BEN LIGHTOWLERS

RADIO MIC TECHNICIAN  
LAUREN PETERS

REHEARSAL/PRODUCTION  
PHOTOGRAPHER  
LISA TOMASETTI

3 HOURS, INCLUDING INTERVAL THIS PRODUCTION PREMIERED AT ROSLYN PACKER THEATRE ON 8 AUGUST 2015

PRODUCTION PATRONS

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# FROM THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR AND PLAYWRIGHT ANDREW UPTON

Over the last eight years, I have been leading an artistic double life. Whilst all my attention has been on Sydney Theatre Company, some of it has also gone on making adaptations for the National Theatre of Great Britain in a wonderful collaboration with director Howard Davies. That collaboration has been all about pre-revolutionary Russian drama; I adapted two Gorkys, a Chekhov and a Bulgakov.

As part of that swag of work, I was introduced to this untitled play by the young Anton Chekhov. The literal translation arrived on my desk at nearly 300 pages in length, about twice as long as all the others I have done. Fortunately, the National's commission did not go ahead and so I was able to revamp the play specifically for STC, to which end I had in mind most of this fabulous cast and indeed John Crowley as director. I believe an adaptation should be tailor-made to the production because, although the play itself will stand the test of time, most adaptations are only useful in relation to their specific production outing.

I have brought the play up-to-date (kind of) and set it in Russia in about 1995, with the rise of the oligarchs, post-perestroika. This has given me a lot of freedom with the play, so I have cut and shifted quite a bit from the original. Remaining at its centre, however, are Mikhail Platonov, Anna Petrovna, Sergei, Nikolai and Sophia, for the dynamic that Chekhov concocted between these five characters triggers such fabulous drama. We are very fortunate to have a magnificent cast assembled by John, with Richard Roxburgh, Cate Blanchett, Chris Ryan, Toby Schmitz and Jacqueline McKenzie occupying the central handful (and what a handful). They are joined by Anna Bamford, Andrew Buchanan, David Downer, Eamon Farren, Martin Jacobs, Brandon McClelland, Marshall Napier and Susan Prior. What a great cast. John saw *The Maids* in New York last year and loved the work of Alice Babidge and Nick Schlieper and invited them to join as the design team, to which he added the wonderful ears and compositional talents of Stefan Gregory. I write this not having seen anything in the rehearsal room, but as I list all these fantastic theatre makers, I get the feeling that it should be okay.

I hope you have a good night.

Andrew Upton



# ANDREW UPTON'S ADAPTATION

## FROM *PLATONOV* TO *THE PRESENT*

### A LONG PLAY WITHOUT A TITLE

*The Present* after Anton Chekhov's *Platonov* by Andrew Upton, is based on Chekhov's first play that was described by Chekhov's sister as "a long play without a title." His sister Maria discovered the manuscript amongst her brother's papers in Yalta in 1914, ten years after Chekhov's death. The manuscript was then moved to a safe deposit box in a Moscow bank, where the contents were confiscated during the Russian civil war (STC Program, 2015).

It is believed the play was written around 1878 when Chekhov was 18 years old. The play was dismissed thanks to its excessive length and stylistic inconsistency. In 1933 the play was published by the Soviet State Publishing House for Literature under the title *Fatherlessness*. The first production of the play was performed in Germany in 1928 with the title *That Worthless Man Platonov*. From then on it remained largely untouched until 1954 on the 50th anniversary of Chekhov's death when the play was performed with the title *Poor Don Juan* at Stockholm's Royal Dramatic Theatre.

### A PLAY WITH MANY TITLES

In the 1960's the play underwent several different edits or adaptations. In 1960 a cut down and edited version of the play entitled *Platonov* (the name it is most commonly known by today) was performed at the Royal Court Theatre. This production thrust the play into the theatrical spotlight in the English speaking world. In 1984 playwright Michael Frayn reworked the play into his own adaptation entitled *Wild Honey*.

### A NEW TITLE AND ADAPTATION

Andrew Upton is a seasoned adaptor of Russian classics, including many Chekhov plays. Upton has previously adapted *The Cherry Orchard* and *Uncle Vanya*, as well as Maxim Gorky's *Children of the Sun* and Mikhail Bulgakov's *The White Guard*.

STC's *The Present* is Andrew Upton's reworking of the Chekhov text. Removed from its original era of 19th century Russia, the play is set in 1995 and is as much 'an Upton' as it is 'a Chekhov.' Upton's version of *Platonov* incorporates tropes found in Chekhov texts while also having identifiable traits of Upton's own writing style that are apparent across his adaptations.

Director John Crowley describes *The Present* as being in a "classic Chekhovian place, hovering just above action, not quite in the moment, not quite in the past, just a few feet above reality" (STC Program, 2015). Other Chekhovian conventions found in the play include the "gun on the stage" convention. Typically in a Chekhov play, if a gun is present, it must go off in the second or third act. Dominant themes and ideas in plays in Chekhov's body of work also operate within the world of *The Present*. These include disenchantment with life, love and tangled relationships and time. For more on these concepts see the

Themes and Ideas section of this On Cue.

Andrew Upton's writing is described by Crowley as a bit like Harold Pinter or Samuel Beckett in its language use. When adapting *Uncle Vanya*, Upton revisited the original Russian text and found that it had a strong staccato rhythm with short clauses, phrases and sentences. Upton's writing mirrors this rhythmic choice by being economical and precise.

Yegor: I do things in person.

Anna: Yes.

Yegor: Old School.

Anna: Yes. I know. I understand. (pg. 102)

Crowley goes on to say that "if you lean on the full stops, the text's disjointed nature comes through and it is as if the characters are making statements and letting them hover in the air - an effect similar to the way Pinter's dialogue produces a crackle in the air." (STC Program, 2015)

Another trademark of Upton's writing is his use of simultaneous and overlapping dialogue which captures the rhythms and of everyday conversation. In Upton's texts this is signaled with a /. The overlapping dialogue shows the way that people don't listen or hear each other and the way we jostle for our place within a conversation and sometimes even shut others down.

Nikolai: Why did you ask/ him?

Anna: I asked all/ my friends.

Alexei: I was telling Sergei. We were looking out across the lake.

Sergei: Talking about the good old days.

Nikolai: /Can you believe it...? (pg. 7-8)

Upton has given his version the name of *The Present*, as opposed to the name of one of the characters such as *Platonov* or *Anna*. This is because the action does not just centre around one character. Instead, *The Present* alludes to the fact it is Anna's 40th birthday. The present she received for her birthday is a gun from Sergei which once belonged to his father and Anna's late husband – the General.



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# CONTEXT

Maria: I think Russia is at a crossroads.  
Mikhail: I think it is.  
Maria: I think it can go one way or the other.  
Mikhail: It can't have its cake and eat it. (pg. 73)

In 1995, Russian society was continuing a large period of reformation which gave the Russian people greater freedom and increased government transparency to both Russians and the outside world. In the 1980's under President Gorbachev, perestroika (meaning "restructuring") was instigated with the aim of reforming Soviet political and economic systems within the Communist party. This was followed by glasnost (meaning "openness") which aimed to increase government transparency, civil liberties and instigating economic reforms for Russia.

In 1991 the dissolution of the USSR had occurred, making Russia an independent country along with surrounding Soviet states such as Estonia, Latvia and the Ukraine. At the same time, the Iron Curtain fell which signaled the official end of the Cold War era.

In 1991 Boris Yeltsin became President of Russia having campaigned for the dissolution of the USSR which forced President Gorbachev to resign. President Yeltsin planned to completely disband communism and implement a capitalist economy. Yeltsin privatized state assets which were bought by a handful of Russian businessmen who became known as oligarchs (meaning "business magnate").

The characters in *The Present* live in a nation still in a state of flux, following all of this change. Characters such as Anna would have been part of the Russian gentry and now with the General dead, her place in society is uncertain as "...the end of the gentry is intertwined with the end of a whole age" (Braun, 2000, pg. 47). Yegor has benefited from Russian privatization and can be considered an "oligarch". Osip is an ex KGB member and represents the morally corrupt USSR Communist regime which the older characters admire and the younger characters abhor. The younger birthday party attendees including Mikhail, Sergei and Nikolai are part of a generation of Russians who were supposed to embrace societal change, but instead, fast economic growth has been favoured and wealthy oligarchs have gained power.



Richard Roxburgh, Jacqueline McKenzie, Chris Ryan, Eamon Farren, Brandon McClelland, Martin Jacobs and Cate Blanchett in Sydney Theatre Company's *The Present*, 2015. Image: Lisa Tomasetti. ©



# ABOUT THE PLAY

## LOVE WILL TEAR US APART

Anton Chekhov's first play was a sprawling, unstructured epic but it marked out the style and themes he would return to in his later masterworks from *The Seagull* to *The Cherry Orchard*. It remains a mysterious, unpolished gem.

The manuscript, left unpublished until almost two decades after Chekhov's death, lacked a title. Over the years it has inspired various adaptations – *Wild Honey*, *Fatherlessness*, *The Disinherited* – but it is most commonly referred to as *Platonov*, the name of the man at its centre. And yet, the play has always contained another extraordinarily rich and complex character – that of Anna Petrovna.

Taking on these roles are the fearsome talents of Cate Blanchett and Richard Roxburgh. Irish director John Crowley, renowned for his work on the West End and Broadway, brings his lean and precise theatrical vision. And, as with his 2010 adaptation of *Uncle Vanya*, Andrew Upton lends his distinctive voice, brimming with vitality, to this tale of yearning, vodka and shattered dreams.



Richard Roxburgh, Chris Ryan, Cate Blanchett and Susan Prior in Sydney Theatre Company's *The Present*, 2015. Image: Lisa Tomasetti. ©

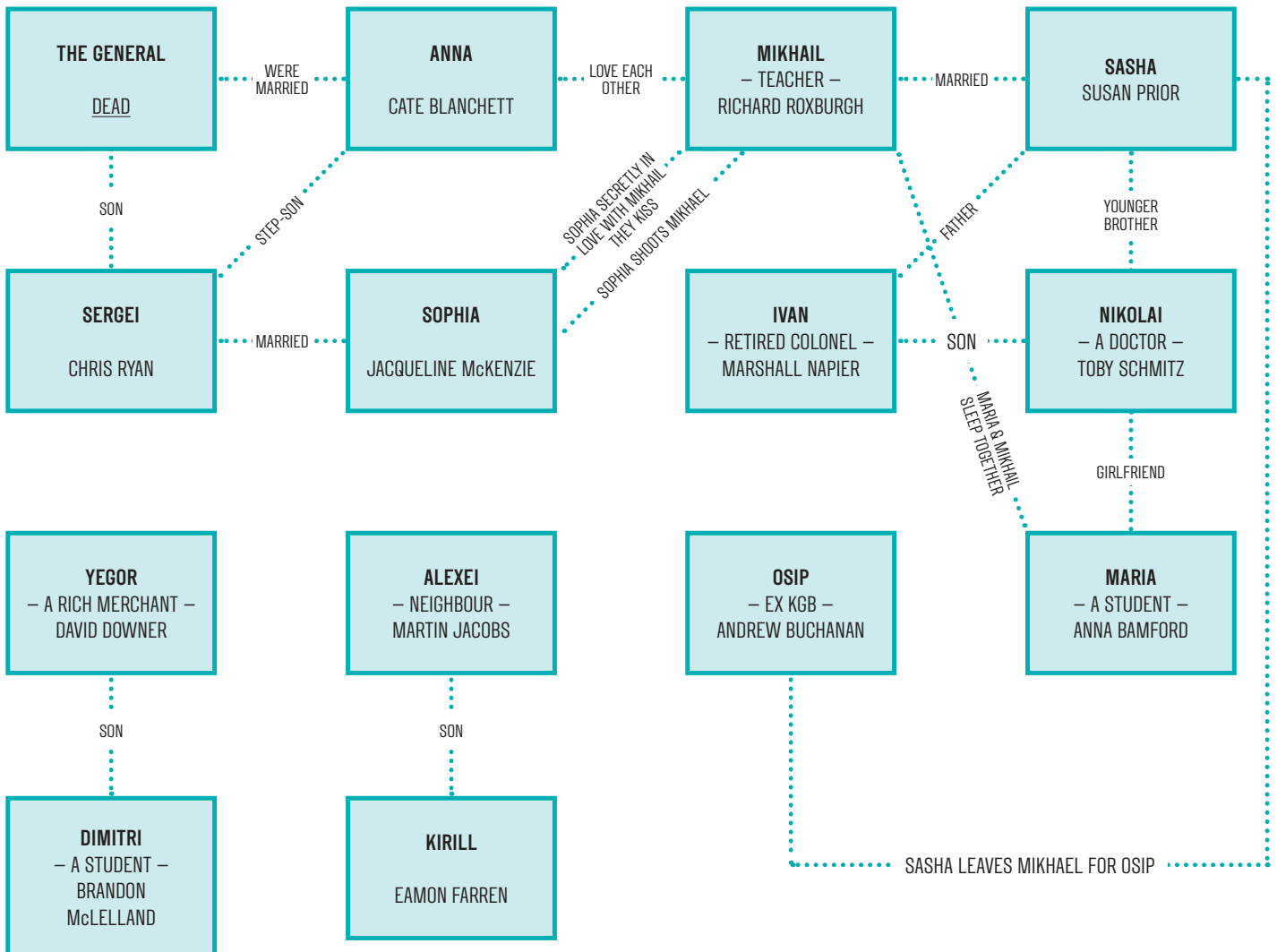


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ESSENTIAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE SHOW

# SYNOPSIS

The plot of a Chekhov play typically involves a theme unfolding across the course of the play, rather than an overt plot with a series of elaborate events. This concept of an unfolding theme could result in a static plot; however this is avoided through the intricate character relationships that drive the dramatic tension of the play. These form an intricate web that is outlined below.

## THE PRESENT



# CHARACTER ANALYSIS

## CHEKHOV'S WOMEN

Chekhov wrote at a time when Melodrama was the predominant theatrical style. Like many playwrights, he wrote in reaction to this style and consequently contributed to the emergence of Naturalism. Melodrama presented a stereotypical view of women and Chekhov challenged this stereotype in characters such as Anna Petrovna in *The Present*, Arkadina in *The Cherry Orchard* and Masha in *The Seagull* (Marsh, 2000). Chekhov's women were hard working, intelligent and assertive.

Andrew Upton is particularly interested in Chekhov's women and recently wrote an article for *The Sydney Morning Herald* outlining his own thoughts on the topic and how *The Present* highlights Chekhov's female characters. He writes, "I've always been fascinated by Chekhov's female characters. There, among his many creations, are such magnificent women, charged with a life force that their male counterparts can barely comprehend or accommodate." Upton describes the women in *The Present* as "...agents of life, change and chance. [...] the women are striving to make something work, while most of the men have fallen into a torpor of despair at their inability to affect the world. It is the women who are full of drive and ambition" (Upton, 2015, pg. 9)



Chris Ryan and Jacqueline McKenzie in Sydney Theatre Company's *The Present*, 2015. Image: Lisa Tomasetti. ©



Richard Roxburgh, Eaman Farren, Cate Blanchett and Martin Jacobs in Sydney Theatre Company's *The Present*, 2015. Image: Lisa Tomasetti. ©

# CHARACTER ANALYSIS (CONT.)

## ANNA PETROVNA

Anna is a “...surprising character to find in a nineteenth-century play [...] who is permitted to express such shining physical desire, and to remain [...] essentially unhumiliated?” (Frayn in Braun, 2000, pg. 49) The play is set around the characters gathering for Anna’s 40th birthday at a Dasha (Russian country estate) once owned by her late husband the General. Anna has invited a collection of both family and friends to her party and in doing so (perhaps knowingly for her own amusement) incites anarchy amongst some of her guests who have passionate feelings for one another.

In the opening of the play Anna is playing chess with Nikolai. The game of chess is symbolic to the way Anna manipulates her birthday party guests. The guests are the chess pieces who she moves around the “board” by speaking her mind, offering them advice or encouraging their feelings for one another. In the end, checkmate is called when Sophia kills Mikhail. Mikhail can be considered the King chess piece as he is the object of many of the women’s desires. In the end, his death marks checkmate in Anna’s game. Nikolai sees that Anna is doing this in the final moments of the play saying, “You treat people like toys. Chess pieces – and you are not particularly good at the game so there’s/ a lot of damage” (pg. 104). Anna is a strong woman and a free spirit. Ivan describes her as being “...more like a man.” (pg. 22) As her relentless demeanor is akin to the goddess Dianna who is the Roman goddess of the hunt – “You can smell the gunpowder on her. She could dominate the Romans... conquer the world.” (pg.22)

Anna has a destructive, daring and dangerous side, which she uses to combat the boredom and disappointment of her life. This is seen when she provokes a game of truth or dare to press the trigger to detonate the summer house, leaving the other characters stunned – “What a woman. Dianna, eat your heart out. She’s like the whole avenging mob of furies rolled into one” (pg. 55). Anna blows up the summer house she lovingly restored twenty years ago as a way of letting go of the past and showing her contempt for a wasted past she resents. Anna’s propensity for violence is established in the very first moment of the play when she is playing with the gun and fires it at Nikolai. This same gun is then used in the final moment of the play to kill Mikhail.

Anna and Mikhail are in love. Anna says she would marry Mikhail and Mikhail confesses Anna is everything to him. However, their love is hopeless. Mikhail is unable to commit to making a choice and admits that he “whispers in every girl’s ear. I want Maria. I want Sophia again. I still want Sasha.” (pg. 63) Anna also knows that she is too destructive of her own happiness and the happiness of others for their relationship to work.

## MARIA

Maria is Nikolai’s girlfriend, although they are indifferent to each other and both admit they don’t intend to continue their relationship. She is a chemistry student with a serious personality and finds the men around her immature and silly.

Maria is on the cusp of womanhood and admits to feeling unfulfilled. She is excited by the new Russia which she believes is waiting for her powerful and capable self. She wants these feelings to be complemented by the man in her life and Anna encourages her to fulfill this desire by pursuing Mikhail – “if you want him you should take him. [...] he is the only man among them” (pg. 59).

## SOPHIA

Sophia has recently returned from her honeymoon with Sergei. Sophia is a doctor and has lived and worked in Africa before marrying Sergei. When she arrives at the estate, she is surprised to find Mikhail who she has known for a long time and whom she still loves passionately.

Mikhail describes Sophia as being scared of having the freedom to do what she desires and the courage to love, which is why their past relationship did not continue. Mikhail believes that Sophia ran away to Africa to hide and keep busy. Mikhail correctly observes that Sophia has consequently married Sergei to numb herself. He describes her marriage as “...an induced, emotional coma” (pg. 66).

Sophia finds the courage to break free when she has a brief dalliance with Mikhail at the party and decides to leave Sergei and go to Africa with Mikhail the next day. She tells her husband this and then awaits the arrival of Mikhail who leaves her waiting. When Mikhail finally does arrive, he confesses to loving Anna. Sophia becomes distraught saying “I haven’t waited my whole life for this. How dare you? How could you? Who do you think you are? No. To take it away from me? No. For a second time? No. No. That’s not happening” (pg. 106) and with that, she shoots Mikhail point blank in the chest.

# CHARACTER ANALYSIS (CONT.)

## SASHA

Sasha is Mikhail's wife and mother to their baby boy. She is aware of her husband's inability to be with just one woman and accepts this. She says to him "I married you and knew that you are troubled and cannot, and do not know how to settle for just one person" (pg. 68) Despite this knowledge, she loves Mikhail and he is everything to her. She strongly believes in the family unit and the principles of marriage and would rather die than see these bonds broken by Mikhail leaving her. Which is why she enters the summer house knowing it was going to detonate after seeing Mikhail kissing Sophia – "I love my husband and I don't care what he does. I love him and I would rather die" (pg. 68). However, she is saved by Osip who jumps out the window with her in his arms. Osip provides Sasha with the love and safety she desires and at the end of the play has left Mikhail for Osip. However, there is a sense of doubt as to whether ex-KGB officer Osip actually could offer Sasha what she needs.



Susan Prior, Richard Roxburgh, Cate Blanchett and Martin Jacobs in Sydney Theatre Company's *The Present*, 2015. Image: Lisa Tomasetti. ©

# CHARACTER ANALYSIS (CONT.)

## MALE CHARACTERS IN *THE PRESENT*

### MIKHAIL PLATONOV

Mikhail Platonov is the character for which the original play is named after - *Platonov*. Mikhail is disenchanted with his life and choices. Highly intelligent, he was once expected to do great things at a time of great change and opportunity in Russia. However, this did not eventuate. Mikhail describes this disappointment in saying "...Fate. Has played a joke on me and rather than being the great writer I had hoped. Rather than everything. Everything I had thought. Hoped would. Thought, when we...I was younger...I am a school teacher" (pg. 29). A schoolmaster would ordinarily be "...regarded as an exemplary individual, the servant of what was good and true. In the schoolmaster Platonov there is nothing at all schoolmasterly" (Braun, 2000, pg. 47).

His disenchantment has consequently turned to self-loathing and self-pity and yet the women in the play are drawn to Mikhail, and each engage in a romantic dalliance with him at Anna's party - only his long-suffering wife, Sasha, is neglected. The reason for the women's attraction to Mikhail is described as "...the charmlessness of all other available partners and the absurdity of the world they live in" (Braun, 2000, pg. 48.) Or perhaps these women throw themselves at Mikhail because he offers them something they need. For Sophie it is freedom and truth and for Maria it is the opportunity to be what Anna describes to her as "a real man." And for Sasha it is the family unit.

The male characters in the play view Mikhail as hopeless. Towards the beginning of the play Yegor asks Nikolai what the difference between a virus and a bacterial infection is. Nikolai says a virus creates an opportunity for infection and the bacteria are attracted to the infection. This dialogue is symbolic of Mikhail and the female characters where Mikhail is the virus and the women who want him are bacteria drawn towards him.

At the end of the play Mikhail returns to the estate with a series of epiphanies. He confesses to being a hopeless, unfaithful husband who has been neither fully available to Sasha nor dead to her. He says, "I feel like that husband that just keeps coming to the surface and won't fucking drown" (pg. 105). He then goes on to say that it is not fair that he should simply have a new life after making a "shit soufflé out of the old one" (pg. 106). These confessions show Mikhail as having some conviction, however to Sophie he is worthless which is her final line to him before she shoots him.

### SERGEI

Sergei is Anna's step-son and son of the General. He grew up together with Mikhail and Nikolai. Recently married to Sophie, Sergei is a romantic and deeply in love with Sophie. He speaks of cuddling and watching videos on the sofa and his honeymoon in Paris with great affection. He is devastated when Sophie confesses to leaving with Mikhail and desperately tries to get her back.

### NIKOLAI

Nikolai is a doctor and has recently started dating Maria who he admits to being not particularly interested in. He is brother to Sasha and the son of Ivan. He is intelligent although comes across as shallow and immature as described by Anna - "Most of the time you come across as shallow, but occasionally you try and get the philosophy on, and I realise it is a permanent condition for you - being inconsequential..." (pg. 5)

### ALEXEI

Alexei is a neighbouring landowner in his 60s who has a strong connection and love of the past and the "old" Russia. He suffers a heart attack while dancing with Anna. When he recovers his perspective on life is changed and he takes off in a helicopter to Paris with his DJ son, Kirill, with a mission to live his life to the fullest.

### YEGOR

Yegor is a rich merchant in his 60s; a Russian oligarch. He has a romantic interest in Anna and knows that she needs his financial guidance and money. Anna is also aware that someone like Yegor has the ability to benefit her future. Yegor speaks to Anna at the end of the play and offers her his romantic companionship and monetary benefits, however Anna is not interested. Yegor then says he will look in to the gas mines on the estate which will provide her with some income.

### IVAN

Ivan is Sasha and Nikolai's father who enjoys a drink. A Colonel himself, he was also a friend and colleague of the late General.

### DIMITRI

Yegor's son. After bearing witness to Mikhail's ranting in Act 1, he refuses to shake Mikhail's hand and expresses his blunt opinion of his behaviour to the guests.

### OSIP

Osip is ex KGB. The KGB were the main security agency for the Soviet Union until it dissolved in 1991. The job of the KGB was to spy on public and private opinions of everyone living under the USSR Communist regime and to monitor any possible revolutionary plots. Osip is described by Yegor as an example of "loyalty, integrity and strength" in their homeland. Yegor's view reflects his allegiance to the USSR and previous communist regime. However, the younger generations such as Mikhail who know of the KGB's immoral activities, describe Osip as "completely devoid of moral compunction" (pg. 37). Osip helps Anna lace the summer house with dynamite in order to blow it up. Osip saves Sasha from the explosion of the summer house and then runs away with her at the end of the play.

### KIRILL

Kirill is Alexei's son who is a DJ in Paris. His DJ name is AKA 26C.

# THEMES AND IDEAS

## THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

In *The Present* the past, the present and the future all collide when the characters assemble for Anna's birthday party. This is symbolised by the furniture found in the Dacha as described by Upton in his stage directions at the beginning of the play.

*In the room in Act 4 there is evidence of prerevolutionary Russia (mostly architectural) and Stalin's Russia in some of the renovations. There is also a sense of the late 70s in some décor (wall paper perhaps?) and even the 1990's in newer furnishings. Essentially it is a smear of 20th century history with a strong sense of recent stasis and neglect.* (pg. 3)

The characters struggle to exist in the present, always looking to the future or the past. Nikolai at the beginning of the play sums up the difficulty of the 'now' when he says "The eternal, infinite, unfathomable 'NOW'" (pg. 5). The character's inability to focus on the present time is the result of two major factors. The first is their tangled web of love and relationships and the second is the social and political change in Russia.

Mikhail is part of what was supposed to be a golden generation of young Russians who were going to lead great change after the dissolution of the USSR and fall of the Iron Curtain in 1991. However, they have receded and become observers of their country's swing to the right and subsequent ruling by oligarchs (rich Russian businessmen with strong political influences). The uncertainty surrounding their role and purpose in a changing country further contributes to their inability to accept the circumstances of the present.

Many of the characters spend the course of the play reoccupied with matters of the heart with the belief it will benefit their future. For example, Sophie reignites her love for Mikhail so she can run away to Africa with him and be free from her stagnant marriage to Sergei.

The older characters – Alexei, Ivan and Yegor have a strong allegiance to the past and the former USSR. The younger characters such as Mikhail, Nikolai and Sergei resent this. The past versus the present and the future creates intergenerational conflict amongst the characters. "The entire younger generation treats the depravity and materialism of their elders with feelings that range from embarrassment to outrage" (Braun, 2000, pg. 47). This is seen when Nikolai says, "All my life, listening to how great everything was once, before I got here – and I am exasperated in trying to find the proof. The proof Alexei" (pg. 10).

However, the younger characters fail to do anything in the present time to make their future and the future of Russia better – they talk about and contemplate acting on the future, but their muddled existence in the present prevents them from doing anything. "...But you would break our necks looking backwards. What about now? What about the present/ Here?" (pg. 12).

# THEMES AND IDEAS (CONT.)

## DISENCHANTMENT AND THE BANALITY OF LIFE

Chekhov's plays are frequently populated with characters who are disenchanted with life, who grieve for lost opportunities and time.

The character's disenchantment with life in the present moment and nostalgic views of the past, pull them into states of melancholy. Mikhail is dissatisfied as he did not live up to the expectations of both himself and others and is now a teacher. While character's such as Alexei and Yegor are dissatisfied with the present as they believe the past was a better place.

Anna describes herself as "bored and disappointed" (pg. 53) she is widowed at 40, after marrying the much older General at just 19. She is resentful that life has not turned out as she hoped and eventually everything has fallen apart. "Everything looks great in the catalogue. Everything looks fabulous and wonderful until you get it home and take it out of the package. And the fingerprints, and the scratched and the chips and the dents and the slow betrayal of time" (pg. 54). The summer house is a symbol of how time has betrayed Anna. After putting so much love and time into the summer house when she built it 20 years ago she allowed time and neglect to ravage it and now it too is run down. Anna resentfully blows it up, as she can see the importance of being in the present in order to move on into the future. This is seen when she says to Mikhail, "Don't judge yourself and others and keep seeing the problem or stewing on your failures or your missed opportunities or your stupidity of which there seems to be an endless supply. But live. Go and embrace life and go where it takes you. Forward. Upward. Onward." (pg. 79)



Toby Schmitz and Cate Blanchett in Sydney Theatre Company's *The Present*, 2015. Image: Lisa Tomasetti. ©



# THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

## CHARACTER

Characterisation is the process of developing from a role to build a complex personality and background for a particular character. Intention, status and attitude are integral ingredients for a character's motivation and belief. Complexity in character can be developed through interaction and relationship with others.

## PLACE

All dramatic action occurs at a time and place. Different settings dictate other characters that might be introduced, certain settings will intensify the action, multiple locations can enable us to explore many aspects of the situation, while the use of contrasting settings can help build the dramatic tension.

## TENSION

Tension is the force which drives all drama. It creates a powerful and complex form of energy on stage which, in turn, generates a level of excitement in the audience. Tension strengthens audience engagement as it motivates the audience to continue watching while influencing them to question the ideas in the play.

### TAKE YOUR CUE

- How would you describe the character of Anna? How has Cate Blanchett used voice, movement including body language, in the creation of Anna?
- How would you describe the character of Mikhail? How has Richard Roxburgh used voice, movement and facial expressions to create Mikhail?
- Do the female characters have higher status than the male characters at the end of the play? Explain your reasoning. Why?

### TAKE YOUR CUE

- Director John Crowley talks about the design having an element of illusion to it. Where the house looks real and simultaneously unreal. How has this been achieved through Alice Babidge's design?
- How does the house being like an illusion link to the fact that the characters struggle to live in the present time?
- In his stage directions, Andrew Upton talks about the decor of the interior of the house being a smear of 20th century history with a strong sense of recent stasis or neglect. How has this been realised by Alice Babidge?

### TAKE YOUR CUE

- What is the main Dramatic Tension driving the play?
- Is the Dramatic Tension resolved at the end of the play? Why?
- How do place and time contribute to Dramatic Tension in *The Present*?

# THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA (CONT.)

## MOMENT

Moments in the drama are fundamental to the pacing of the dramatic action. The tempo which refers to the management of time in a broad sense, is often punctuated by the moment. The control and manipulation of key moments affects the audience's engagement and understanding of the performance.

## DRAMATIC MEANING

Dramatic Meaning is created through the manipulation of the elements of drama which are interrelated and interdependent. Dramatic Meaning is what is communicated between the performers and the audience to create an actor-audience relationship.



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ALSO AVAILABLE TO DOWNLOAD ONLINE!

### TAKE YOUR CUE

- There are moments of surprise in *The Present*, where something unexpected happens. Can you outline one of these moments and how it makes the tension more complex in the play?
- In which moment in the play do the audience get a strong sense that the characters struggle to exist in the present time?
- In the summer house Anna is playing a game of truth or dare in a bid to blow it up. What is the mood like in this moment? How is this mood created?

### TAKE YOUR CUE

- Read the Themes and Ideas section of this On Cue. Devise what you believe to be the Dramatic Meaning of *The Present*.
- Does setting the play in 1995 change the Dramatic Meaning by comparison to setting to the year it was written in 1878?
- Adaptations of *The Present* have been given the title *Platonov* after Mikhail Platonov. Who or whom do you believe the protagonist of *The Present* is? Why?

# STYLE

## A REVOLUTIONARY – CHEKHOV'S NATURALISM

Traditionally Chekhov is depicted as a conventional playwright of Naturalism – a founding father of Modernism who moved away from the dominant style of Melodrama. While this is indeed the case, a closer look at his writing reveals a departure from the expected linear structure of a Naturalistic play. This meant the abandonment of “...the usual linear movement of a play – from starting point to exposition and development – which usually meant the thickening of a plot. Instead he worked toward the filling in of a dramatic field, an artistic space” (Gilman, 2002). The dramatic field is filled by Chekhov, and now Upton, through the evolution of a theme or idea that affects each of the characters across the course of the play (Gilman, 2002). In *The Present* this theme or idea is the present and how each of the characters struggle to exist in the present time.

In *The Present*, Andrew Upton has kept with Chekhov's move away from “thickening a plot” and has incorporated a satirical reference to Chekhov's narrative structure.

Mikhail: You've got fat.

Sergei: Thickening. It's a.../Middle age...

Mikhail: Like the plot? (pg. 15)

He continues his cheeky reference when past lovers Sophie and Mikhail meet each other again and Anna passes comment.

Sophia: Mikhail...?

Sergei: Vassilyevich.../Platonov

Mikhail: You recognize me?

Sophia: I might not have.

Anna: Sergei? The plot thickens. (pg. 25)



Cate Blanchett and Richard Roxburgh in Sydney Theatre Company's *The Present*, 2015. Image: Lisa Tomasetti. ©

# STYLE (CONT.)

## COMEDY

Chekhov's plays are often misinterpreted as Tragedies. However, Chekhov did not describe all his plays as Tragedies. *Ivanov* and *The Three Sisters* are labeled Dramas, while *The Seagull* and *The Cherry Orchard* are Comedies and *Uncle Vanya* is described by Chekhov as "scenes from a country life" (Gottlieb, 2000).

Chekhov, a doctor, believed that laughter was the best medicine and by writing Comedies "hope is kept alive, salvation is possible" (Gottlieb, 2000). He also believed that there was comedy to be found in everyday life, in particular the "disparity between aspiration and reality or between desire and fulfillment." This is seen in the characters of *The Present* whose desires for their future and the future of Russia are hampered by their inability to deal with the reality of their situation in the present. As their relationships become more and more tangled and their frustrations with life grow the play becomes "subjectively painful and objectively comic" (Gottlieb, 2000).

Chekhov's writing has a dry sense of sarcasm, cynicism and pessimism that creates the Comedy. Andrew Upton describes Chekhov's reputation as "...as much about boredom and languor as it is about joyous sparkling wit" (Upton, 2015, pg. 9). Upton incorporates his own unique Australian sense of humour into Chekhov's text with references to Bonds underwear and kangaroos. These indefinable aspects of Australian culture bring *The Present* closer to contemporary Australian audiences.



Toby Schmitz in Sydney Theatre Company's *The Present*, 2015. Image: Lisa Tomasetti. ©



Richard Roxburgh in Sydney Theatre Company's *The Present*, 2015. Image: Lisa Tomasetti. ©

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# OTHER RESOURCES

- [Learning experiences for secondary Drama classes in our worksheet](#)
- [Pre-Show In-the-Know handout for fast facts and what to look for in the performance](#)
- [Classroom poster and handout about symbols and motifs in \*The Present\*](#)