Breath by Breath

by Peta Tait & Matra Robertson

for asylum seekers everywhere

© Copyright Adrift 2000

"Love, friendship, respect do not unite people as much as common hatred for something."
Background

*Breath by Breath* seeks to frame the persecutions of a minority group as emotionally compelling, as intruding on day-to-day living subliminally, and as theatre about emotions and more than conflicts of belief. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, as we look back to comparable transitions, what remains are not the promises of ideologies, but intangibles: the joy and pain of life’s circumstances, hope in the future, nostalgic respect for culture’s icons, and horror at the continuing violence, wars and ‘ethnic cleansing’ in the twentieth century.

*Breath by Breath* is set in the Crimea towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. This setting is not to obscure Australia’s history, but to emphasise the worldwide patterns of racial persecution and dislocation in recent decades. From the mid-1880s, the Crimean region faced an upsurge in immigrants seeking work and asylum. It is estimated that there were 200 pogroms during this period in the region of Southern Russia/Crimea alone, which led to one of the largest mass migrations at that time and set precedents for the twentieth century.

The play depicts some of the biographical details of Anton Chekhov’s life to frame the complex dilemmas and interconnections between artistic responsibilities, politics and emotional responses. Chekhov campaigned against injustice in his personal life, and he defended the rights of Jewish individuals when he could. In Chekhov’s plays the characters express hope and despair, but not political opinions. Chekhov briefly visited the Crimea in 1888 and, some six years later, in 1894, Tsar Alexander III ordered the expulsion of all Jews from the region. Chekhov settled in the Crimea in 1898.

Synopsis

Anton Chekhov is falling in love with Olga Knipper, who is visiting Yalta with Chekhov’s friends - including Alexander Vishnevski and Vladimir Nemiróvich-Danchenko, suggesting the Moscow Art Theatre’s 1900 tour. As a modern relationship of independent, working partners, Chekhov and Knipper live apart for much of the year. In contrast, Chekhov’s unseen constant companion, Malak, moves between imagined worlds of the past and the play’s imagined present.

Malak tells the story of the play-within-a-play involving Natalyia and her father Alexi Novitski, who is resisting the efforts of Peter Drenteln to drive out asylum seekers, including Alexi’s driver Itzek Dubnow and granddaughter Gessia. While Alexi confides his concerns to Dr Aksakov, Natalyia meets and falls in love with Malak. Gradually, Malak reveals the tragic events that marked the abrupt departure of the asylum seekers. Malak disappears, while Gessia haunts Chekhov in her effort to mark their quarry grave.

**Note:** 10% of the writers’ earnings from this play will go to Amnesty International
Characters.

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov -
The popular Russian writer in the latter years of his life, dying of tuberculosis. He was a doctor who worked on behalf of the powerless and poor throughout his life, but his writing did not champion specific political ideologies or causes.

Olga Knipper -
One of the leading actresses in the Moscow Art Theatre, she was renowned for her intelligence, wit, vitality and charm. In her personal life, she faced the dilemmas of modern women artists.

Malak -
An ethereal character, part muse, who is the inspiration for the love stories. S/he is youthful. Perhaps Malak could be played by a woman dressed as a man, and can be cast across race.

Theatre Group:
Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko -
Playwright, director and founder of the Moscow Art Theatre; long-time friend of Chekhov’s as well as an admirer of his work. Olga’s acting teacher and intimate.

Alexander Vishnevski -
An actor in the Moscow Art Theatre, a life-long loyal friend to Chekhov, and Olga’s friend.

Actor
Actress

Characters in the play-within-a-play:
Itzek Dubnow - an asylum seeker who is old, hard working and employed by Novitski as his driver.

Gessia Dubnow - Itzek’s granddaughter is strong willed, older than she looks, and determined to educate herself.

Alexi Novitski – good-hearted widower with one daughter, Natalyia.

Natalyia Novitski - a young woman seeking love.

Nicholas Aksakov - a local doctor interested in palaeontology.

Peter Drenteln - a family man and ambitious mayor, who engineers the expulsion of the newcomers.

Mrs Drenteln - overly protective with her children and concerned with the family's status.

Cossack Commander – a nationalist who is determined to protect his region from the perceived effects of the asylum seekers.

Doubling of the characters is possible as indicated below.
1. Chekhov - Dr. Aksakov
2. Olga - Mrs Drenteln
4. Gessia - Natalyia - Actress
5. Itzek Dubnow, Jewish Grandfather - Vishnevski
6. Alexi Novitski, landowner - Nemirovich-Danchenko - Cossack Commander
7. Peter Drenteln - Actor
Quotes
Scene 1 quote from *Uncle Vanya*, Translator Ronald Hingley.
Scene 6 quote from *Uncle Vanya*.
Bible quote in Scene 8 from Deuteronomy 7. 2, 3.
Scene 9 quote from *Three Sisters*.
Quotes from Vladimir Nemirovitch-Dantchenko’s *My Life in Theatre*.

Scenes take place in the Crimea, in and near the seaside resort town of Yalta. Scenes with Chekhov up to scene 13 are in the summer of 1900, and from scene 14 are in the winter of 1903. The Moscow Art Theatre toured to Yalta in 1900.

The transitions between the different scenes should flow together smoothly without separations or scene breaks in the production. The actors may remain on stage unless otherwise indicated in the text, providing the director feels they do not detract from the action.

The complete set should be both an interior study and an exterior environment at the same time. Snow should fall in the study in scene 17.

Suggested stage setting. Upstage, a large yellow-tinted window with a desk and chair in front of a couch. The study could be suggested with fragments of dark gold wallpaper and a pair of Egyptian candlestick holders. Down-stage right, a stile, and down-stage left, a well and bench.

*Breath by Breath* was first performed at the Carlton Courthouse, La Mama Theatre, 24 April to 10 May 2003, directed by Meredith Rogers. Original music was composed and played by Tim Humphrey and Madeline Flynn.

Cast:
Neil Pigot - Anton Chekhov and Dr Aksakov
Anastasia Malinoff - Olga Knipper and Mrs Drenteln
Robert Jordan - Malak
T’Mara Buckmaster - Natalya Novitski, Actress and Gessia Dubnow
Bob Pavlich - Vladimir Nemiróvich-Danchenko, Cossack Commander and Alexi Novitski
Bruce Kerr - Alexander Vishnevski and Itzek Dubnow
Adrian Mulraney - Peter Drenteln and Actor
Production team: Shoshannah Orenstein, Gideon James, Samatha E. Arnuli, Dean Mather, Browyn Pringle.
ACT 1 Scene 1: Visitors

The Promenade, Yalta in April of 1900. Sound of the sea. Olga is looking out as Chekhov enters and comes up behind her. He looks around quickly. He goes to embrace her but changes his mind. He stands very closely behind her. They do not speak for a moment. It is peaceful.

Chekhov Did you walk the dog down here to the sea?

Olga I walked myself. *Turning slightly.* I need this sunshine, since I must rehearse inside that freezing theatre all day.

Chekhov *Moving closer to Olga.* Are you alone?

Olga *Laughs.* Not by choice Anton. *She looks at him.* I feel close to heaven here, when the light comes and makes the water shimmer.

Chekhov *Teasingly.* I am told the climate in heaven is not very hot, but we no longer have to worry about feeling the cold.

Olga Then all the more reason why I should feel the sun on my skin before I have to leave here.

Chekhov *Playfully.* Olga, how can you talk of leaving and distress me? You’ve only been here a few days.

Olga I shall miss the water very much.

Chekhov And I thought you came all the way from Moscow to visit me. *He moves as if to kiss her.*

Olga *She steps aside.* Any thoughts I had of days alone with you, Anton, disappeared when I saw the constant flow of visitors through your house.

Chekhov *Taking her hand.* Then tomorrow you and I will stroll all day in the garden and inspect my roses. I have treated the stems with sulphur.


Chekhov I’ll show you how it’s done with love.

Olga *Laughs playfully.* Like you show every actress while you promise her the lead role?

Chekhov Some are better actresses than others.

Olga Some are better writers.
Then the best actress and the best writer should be together.

Mock sigh. How can that be? I am on the stage in Moscow, you are three days away in Yalta.

Since we are together at this very moment, we should spend the day pause walking in a shady forest up there, looking down on this world.

Chekhov tries to control a coughing fit. Olga turns away. Malak enters. Olga does not see Malak.

If I say yes and run away from our rehearsal, then you will not believe that I am fully committed to it. You will doubt that I am a passionate artist. If I say no, your feelings will be hurt and you may not give me a second chance.

I know you love your work and ... the independence it brings ...

Resolutely. Anton, love's promise is more than words. I will tell our visiting actors that you are here.

Olga exits. Malak is watching with amusement.

It might interest your friend to know some of the history of the forests, the dark places.

Annoyed and watching Olga exit. I don't think she came here for the forests.

You should take her there.

I've been trying. Irritated. Are you following me?

It's all the same.

I'm busy, Malak.

Seeking inspiration from another?

Can't you wait until I'm alone in my study? I help whoever comes to me, don't I? I give money and use my name to write letters on their behalf. What more can I do?

For some, the work of writing is a pleasure.

What few pleasures do I have in this Siberia with sun?
Malak  Our winters come too soon.

Chekhov  You are so insistent; what can I do here?

Malak  I always give you what you need, you poor old donkey.

Chekhov  I do my own listening; those interminable silences between the drips from the samovar tap.

Malak  I can't be silenced.

Chekhov  *Sighs.* These days everyone, even you, only wants to talk to me about theatre and writing.

*Olga returns. She does not see Malak.*

Olga  *Playfully.* We wait Maestro, ready to perform at a moment's notice.

Chekhov  As I feared. The worst ordeal, a ceremonial occasion.

*The actors enter noisily and put together the drawing room set as if they are preparing for their next scene at rehearsal. Malak stands to one side. They do not see him.*

Actress  He's here, everyone. The great writer is here to witness our efforts.

*Chekhov greets everyone shyly, except the Actress. They stand awkwardly for a moment.*

Chekhov  If the playwright cannot come to the theatre, the theatre must come to him. Isn't that so, Danchenko?

Danchenko  How are you, old friend, feeling any better?

Actor  *Said reverentially.* Doctor Chekhov, I would value your advice on my character.

Chekhov  I'm told, you think I've come only to inspect the actresses.

*They laugh.*

Vishnevski  *Looking longingly at Olga.* What does Chekhov's seductive Helena say?

Olga  "In Russia a brilliant man can't exactly be a saint."
Chekhov: These days, Vishnevski, as you well know, it benefits a writer’s reputation to be an immoral devil, so he can keep company with actresses.

Vishnevski: Did we dream as schoolboys in Taganrog that we would be working together? The two of us have made the journey to this point, my friend.

Chekhov: Getting to Yalta is easy. It’s getting out that presents the problem. Since you are here by invitation, and I am here by exhortation, you will find it easier than I to leave.

Malak moves forward, seen only by Chekhov.

Danchenko: Your writing travels easily.

Actress: To Chekhov and Danchenko. People rush to see real life in plays by you both.

Danchenko: They’re attracted by Chekhov’s name.


Danchenko: You have promised us more plays, and new plays from your friends.

Malak: Ironic aside to Chekhov. Do they want life’s truths in theatre now? You should have told me.

Chekhov throws Malak a look of exasperation as he moves off-stage. Malak moves to the side.

Scene 2: Family life.

The actors make the transition into the play-within-a-play. The Actress becomes Natalyia, Vishnevski becomes Itzek Dubnow, the Actor becomes Peter Drenteln, Olga becomes Mrs Drenteln, Nemirovich-Danchenko becomes Alexi Novitski.

Natalyia: Gushingly. The birds do sing in the morning
Love is sweet
Summer is a breath away ...
Speaking. See how everything is alive again as if winter never happened.

Alexi: You bring a breath of summer with you, my love, all year round. I seem to have forgotten my pocket watch again. Where do you think I left it?
Natalyia  It makes me so sad to see everything around me so happy, and I don't know why. At least in winter I'm not filled with false promise.

Alexi  Patience, my dear.

Natalyia  But Dr Aksakov does not speak. Father, you must talk to him again.

Alexi  Is he good enough for my only daughter?

Natalyia  He pleases me. I can tell he has a sensitive soul.

Alexi  I can tell nothing from his face. Often I suspect that he wants to hurry back to his fossil collecting. I give him an opening in the conversation every time we meet. He is very slow to make his marriage proposal.

Natalyia  I feel this emptiness inside.

Alexi  You are too pale.

Natalyia  It's hopeless.

Alexi  Natalyia, you need to meet some more suitable men. Given the opportunity any man will fall instantly in love with you.

Natalyia  What is love? How does it happen? How did you and Mother fall in love?

Alexi  Sighs. That was so long ago, before you were born. I can't seem to remember.

*They remain on stage as Drenteln and Mrs Drenteln take over the action.*

Mrs Drenteln  Indignantly. Gregori must have inherited his physical deformity from you. The fault is not on my side.

Drenteln  Annoyed. I come from good breeding stock. We have a strong boy.

Mrs Drenteln  Even the doctor says he has been slow to get a tooth. I was so worried that no teeth have come through his gums, I called the doctor to examine him. He says it's a matter of time, but Sonya had several of her teeth at his age. She takes after her mother.

Drenteln  I thought that church service would never end.

Mrs Drenteln  You are not listening to me.
Drenteln: My ears are all yours, my dear.

Mrs Drenteln: It's your teeth I want to know about, not your ears. Saints forbid, I married a man who was slow to get his teeth.

Drenteln: Be thankful, Mrs Drenteln, I've still got my own teeth and bite.

Mrs Drenteln: I should have asked your mother before I married you at what age you got your first tooth.

Drenteln: Am I a horse or a husband? I would have forbidden my mother to tell you. Here comes that fool Alexi with his daughter. They weren't at church again. It is his misfortune to have produced such a moonstruck offspring. Bad blood somewhere in that family.

Mrs Drenteln: Poor man, a widower so young.

Drenteln: Morning, Alexi.


Natalyia: Bon jour. Comment allez-vous?

Mrs Drenteln: Ah … Oui, yes.

Alexi: How is your family today?

Mrs Drenteln: I left my daughter Sonya singing like an angel.

Alexi: Children are so adorable.

Mrs Drenteln: Au contraire. Not all children are as beautiful and as lovable as my two.

Malak has moved across the stage to stand by the stile. Alexi, Drenteln and Mrs Drenteln do not see him. Natalyia sees Malak. She stops and stares at him. Malak straightens his clothing to look more presentable.

Drenteln: Yes, it's family life that matters. We men need to set a moral example. I was only saying as much to the priest at church this morning.

Mrs Drenteln: The doctor wasn't in church this morning either.

Alexi: He was probably out seeking fossils elsewhere.
Alexi, I want to draw your attention to this matter of the new arrivals. He hesitates, searching for the words.

The doctor is hardly a newcomer. Lived here for years. I forget how many.

When he looked at baby Gregori’s gums, he said he’d see us today.

Is Gregori teething at long last?

Shortly. Any day now. I want a word about these new arrivals; a matter of grave concern.

You take your responsibilities as mayor too far.

Every day I have more people knocking on my door complaining to me about foreigners taking our land. They demand we take action.

Natalyia has moved towards Malak. She calls out. Father, who is that young man?

Who?

Alexi glances over his shoulder. Drenteln and Mrs Drenteln turn quickly. They cannot see Malak.

How rude she is.

The young man by the gate?

Malak waves. Natalyia hesitates and waves back. Alexi is looking around.

I can’t see anyone.

I’m not putting up with this.

My family has lived in this area for generations and these foreigners have arrived like dogs, running away from trouble. Every village sends them on. Why should they remain in our district? Why here?

If you will excuse me, I must see to my children. Au revoir.

Alexi bows to Mrs Drenteln. She walks off.

Au revoir, Madame. To Drenteln. Oui, les réfugiés! Ah well, they are good workers. Look at this coat. You
couldn't get better anywhere, certainly not at this price. Pause. Besides, where can they go?

Drenteln
They undercut the wages of our local trades people.

Alexi
They bring new skills to our region. I would have thought there were benefits for the likes of you and me.

*Natalyia follows Malak off-stage.*

Drenteln
They steal. Last week I was robbed of my apples before they had even left my property.

Alexi
Did you see the thief?

Drenteln
Do you think I'm a fool? If I had seen the thief I would have stopped him, you can be sure of that.

Alexi
*Trying to remain polite.* How can you prove it was the newcomers then?

Drenteln
There is no question of who the robbers are. I intend to raise this matter of the thieving interlopers at the next council meeting.

*Izdek Dubnow moves into Drenteln's sight.*

I think you were ill advised to offer that one a job and shelter.

Alexi
*Looking towards Izdek.* He's a good man.

Drenteln
They'll never move on if you give them work.

Alexi
*Quietly.* Even our ancestors had to settle somewhere.

Drenteln
My family have lived here for generations. The council must make a firm decision on this matter. We must take action. Good day, Alexi.

**Scene 3: Rehearsal break.**

*The actors step out of character as if resuming their conversation. The Actress enters.*

Olga
Our audiences won't come for a debate. They want to feel, and to ... love.

Danchenko
"... when you see this vast discrepancy between the moods on one side of the curtain and those on the other, you stand amazed at the colossal, miracle-working, beautiful, brilliant *lie*, woven by stage art."
Actress *Indignantly.* I always weep if my character must die, as everyone expects.

Olga I try to feel my characters and their feelings, rather than analysing them.

Actor Audiences will pay for romance and noble deaths.

Danchenko Some years ago Chekhov and I were in a carriage that collided with a tram and we almost died. He was not romantic at that moment. *To Olga.* He was much more troubled by the lack of anyone who might give us a decent funeral oration. *He laughs. Olga looks away.*

Vishnevski Never get into a carriage harnessed to a white horse. It's unlucky.

*They all look at Vishnevski in surprise.*

Danchenko But there wasn't a white horse on that occasion.

Actor It was a street scene, not a French Symbolist tragedy.

Actress I've performed as a princess with a white horse.

Actor And the horse upstaged you completely.

*They laugh as the Actress exits. The actors resume their characters in the play-within-a-play.*

**Scene 4: Warnings**

*Danchenko becomes Alexi watching Itzek approach.*

Alexi Ah, Itzek Dubnow. It must have been you that Natalyia saw. Oh what it is to be a daughter's father. A suitable match must be found before she starts imagining old men have become young.

Itzek As you please, sir.

Alexi What joy and trouble these young girls cause us.

Itzek I ask that God will be kind to me and preserve me long enough to see my granddaughter married.

Alexi You're robust. You will live to see her wed.

Itzek She does not dream of marriage.

Alexi What girl doesn't look for love? You make your children work too hard.
Itzek looks away.

Itzek
Will you be needing the cart, sir?

Gessia enters carrying a canister of food for Itzek. She is barefoot, a shawl covering her head.

Alexi
Not today. He goes to leave. A word of warning. These are dangerous times. Watch your Gessia. You are newcomers. There are men in this village who would seduce her, catch her as she brings your meals without a thought as to her honour.

Alexi moves away. Itzek watches him go.

Itzek
Mumbling. Making our children work. What would he know? Crossly to Gessia. Where have you been?

Gessia
Looking for you.

Itzek
I've warned you about wandering all over the countryside without your brothers. You should have come straight here.

Gessia
Sorry, Grandfather. The time slips away.

Itzek
Only when you’re wasting it reading. Grumbling. For what end? You’ll go blind.

Gessia
I don’t want the blindness of not knowing what is happening. It’s the stitching that makes my eyes hurt.

Itzek
Reading does not bring in food for you and your brothers. Hunger will make you dizzy so you can’t read.

Gessia
This is the dawning of a new era, Grandfather. Even we will get an education.

Itzek
I must find you a protector, but where without a matchmaker ...

Gessia
If we had stayed in the other place I might have had a tutor.

Itzek
We had to leave.

Gessia
In this book I’m reading, Mysteries of Paris, the world is different and beautiful.
Itzek

Fanciful dreams. Girls should not read. Those stories fill you with false hope. *Pause.* It’s my fault. I’m not strict enough. *Sighs.* If your mother and father were alive, it would be different. At least those cracks in your feet will heal with the summer sun.

Gessia

Grandfather, could you ask Dr Aksakov if he knows a teacher who would help me?

Itzek

We have no money to pay a teacher! I cannot approach the doctor.

Gessia

He speaks to us.

Itzek

He attends the town council. I do not want to draw attention to us. No. You must forget about books.

*Itzek and Gessia exit.*

Drenteln and Alexi are at a meeting of the town council.

Drenteln

Addressing the audience. Fellow Councillors. I want to raise this matter of the ... newcomers. My family have lived in this area for generations. *Looking at Alexi.* This gives me the authority as your mayor to speak on behalf of the inhabitants of this region who oppose allowing these people to stay.

Alexi

*Interjecting.* They are industrious.

Drenteln

*Looking around.* They are certainly quick to set up vodka stills.

Alexi

I’ve never known you refuse a drink, Drenteln.

Drenteln

They don’t steal from you.

Alexi

*Looking around knowingly.* That apple thief was too quick for you.

Drenteln

I am warning you all. We must take action before they poison our community. They refuse to follow our ways, our church. *To Alexi.* Already they divide neighbours. Why here? Why not some other village?

Alexi

This council meeting should not consider rumour as valid grounds for action. We are sensible men and should hold our judgements until we have proof. Crime has been with us since I can remember. Why suddenly blame all our problems on the newcomers? He winks and looks around. For all we know, your apples
were diseased and you were ashamed to take stunted fruit to market so you claim they were stolen.

Drenteln *He is angry but speaks quietly.* I will bring proof of what I say. *Loudly.* The holy Church tells us we must preserve the old values, and not let newcomers pollute our society and suck us dry. It's time to remember our pure and glorious past.

*Sound of clapping.* Drenteln and Alexi move to the side.

**Scene 5: Natalyia and Malak**

*Natalyia enters and moves centre stage looking out for Malak.*

Natalyia The birds do sing in the morning.

Love is sweet.

Summer is a breath away.

With its sweet promise ...

Malak sees her and moves across to stand on the other side of the stile leaning against it. Natalyia pauses, watching him.

Malak Such a gentle song.

Natalyia *Shyly.* I'm Natalyia Novitski.

Malak Call me Malak.

Natalyia *Laughing.* I feel I know you, but we've never met before. Why have we never met?

Malak I come and go.

Natalyia From Yalta to Sevastopol or the village to father's gate?

Malak More the places in between. The countries that interest me are surrounded by the fragile boundaries of the heart. You sing for the birds?

Natalyia They listen ...

Malak Do they answer your wistful melody?

Natalyia They fly off and leave me behind.

Malak You could follow them.

Natalyia *Laughs.* But I am in a cage. If someone could unlock the door ...
Malak  Would you fly off after them?
Natalyia  Where do they go? Leaning forward.
Malak  If I were to show you ...
Natalyia  Pulling back. It will take more than long glances to prise open the lock.
Malak  Smiling. How about soft words and sweet promises ...
Natalyia  Laughing. What kind of locksmith would that make you?
Malak  Be sure you know where to go ...
Natalyia  I will follow you.

Natalyia leans forward touches her own chest with her hand and then puts her hand on Malak’s chest. Malak pulls back suddenly. Forgive me. I thought I was dreaming. You’re real! But you’re not like any man I’ve ever met. Malak smiles. I’m glad you’ve come. My life is so tiresome in this place.

Malak  He sighs. Here, men cast about for someone or something to hate, and look to the young men to carry out their plans. Pause. You must not be seen with me. Please go now.

Natalyia  What harm can come of this? I’m the daughter of Alexi Novitski. I will please myself.

Malak  Take care, sweet songbird. Even angels cannot fly away from a whirlwind. Moving away.

Natalyia  Following him. Will you be here tomorrow?

Malak  Do you want me to come?

Natalyia  nods. Malak exits.

Scene 6: The shawl.
Chekhov and the actors resume the action on the balcony of Chekhov’s villa in Autka Yalta. It is afternoon. The atmosphere is relaxed and the light is bright. Faint sound of birds. Olga is serving food. Vishnevski follows her around, trying to catch her attention and flirt with her, but she is avoiding him.

Danchenko
Standing. Ah, an idyllic spot to set a house. A man could live to be seven hundred years old in these peaceful surroundings, providing Danchenko looks to catch Olga’s attention he has the right mistress.

Chekhov
Seated on the bench. He would surely die of boredom before he passed forty-one listening to the conversations of local schoolmistresses.

Danchenko
The gossip in Moscow claims that you hide out in the provinces scribbling down the words of your visitors and your secret guests. Danchenko continues looking at Olga till she looks away.

Chekhov
As my visitor on many occasions, have you ever been quoted in my plays?

Danchenko
No. But I would welcome you as a guest character in one of my plays. Smiling. I can almost hear the critics.

The Actress enters.

Vishnevski
Approaching Chekhov and Danchenko. "And what does he understand about art? Nothing. For twenty-five years, he’s been chewing over other people’s ideas on realism, naturalism and every other kind of tomfoolery." Does our theatre understand Chekhov’s poetic realism?

Chekhov
Mildly. The critics say people talk, but nothing happens in my plays. They are meant to amuse said slowly and to distract us from life.

Olga
Glancing at Chekhov and quickly changing the subject. This wonderful sunlight bleaches the colour from the rocks so they really don’t need to whitewash the walls of the houses.

Actress
The Actress moves forward. To Olga. You should not swim so long in the sun. Your skin will become dark like the peasants round here. The Actress moves away.

Danchenko
We know intimately the kinds of fools that Chekhov creates, since we are forever in their company.
They laugh and move towards the study as if they are going inside. The light fades down.

Actress
Has anyone seen my new shawl? The shawl is on the chair. The Actor has his hand on it without realising.

Chekhov
To Danchenko. The simplest things can be so mysterious. Love for example. How can we communicate that feeling?

Actress
I thought it was here.

Olga
Let me help you look.

Vishnevski
Eagerly. I will help. He follows Olga around.

Actress
I'm sure I wore it when I came.

Olga
I seem to remember ...

Vishnevski
You took it off here.

Chekhov
We can lend you another. Masha would not mind. I'll call her.

Actress
Perhaps that will be best, for now.

Olga
I will get her one of mine. You can come and get your shawl tomorrow. Olga exits.

Chekhov
Be careful on the pathway. It is a steep descent. But the view of the sea is tremendous.

Olga returns with another shawl. Malak enters, seen only by Chekhov who nods to him.

Malak
It might interest your visitors to know the history of events surrounding this region.

Malak sits on the couch. The actress is putting on the shawl admiringly.

Actor
Goodbye.

Vishnevski
Until tomorrow. He kisses Olga on the cheek. Tomorrow.

Chekhov
Farewell.

Olga farewells Vishnevski perfunctorily.

Actress
Calling back. Thank you, Anton. Chekhov is preoccupied watching Malak.
Danchenko joins Olga and puts a hand on her shoulder in an intimate gesture. They watch Vishnevski, the Actor and the Actress leave.

Chekhov

To himself. I pride myself on my precision. Perhaps my writing is a realism of deceit because I know that words create life and ... whole other worlds. This dear friend by my side whispers his words into my ear. I've not spoken about his long black eyelashes, nor his soft touch. Jealously, I keep him to myself. Chekhov and Malak smile at each other.

Danchenko and Olga laugh together and come across to Chekhov.

Danchenko

Vishnevski's worried about being cast as an old Jewish man rather than playing opposite the leading actress.

Chekhov

Said ironically looking at Olga. What other man could compete with such ... an aspiration.

Danchenko

Look, her shawl was here all the time.

Olga

What dreadful taste. Who would be seen dead wearing this even in Yalta? Look at this embroidery design. Better to freeze than wear something so quaint, like a peasant would wear.

Danchenko

How clever. She walked away with a much more tasteful shawl.

Malak

The history of this region is noteworthy and many of the circumstances ... 

Danchenko

Spoken simultaneously with Malak’s lines. I must be off. My wife ...

Olga

Cuttingly. Ah, our theatre's mascot ...

Danchenko

... will be wondering where I am.

Malak

... surrounding the movement out of this region to the far corners of the world ...

Olga

She will be wondering who you are with at this hour.

Malak

... are disturbing to say the least.

Danchenko

Pause. Good health.

Danchenko exits.
Olga I feel so carefree here. I shall be sorry to leave you. Will you miss me? *Olga puts her hand on Chekhov’s shoulder. He puts his hand on hers and looks away listening to Malak. Come with me.*

Malak ... A group of families fleeing from barbarity in other areas, came towards the coastal regions hoping that the attitudes in this area would be different.

Chekhov The bacilli in my lungs are ideal gaolers.

Olga A holiday would improve your health.

Chekhov *Quietly.* There are travellers in this town from all over and many not by choice.

Olga *Kneeling.* You could see a new doctor. We could be alone ... 

Chekhov *Spoken to Malak.* When I was seventeen, I contracted peritonitis while travelling. It was agonising. A Hebrew doctor spent the night applying mustard plasters and compresses.

*Olga is annoyed that Chekhov does not reply to her suggestion. She picks up and folds the shawl.*

Malak How deeply hatreds continue sometimes under the guise of religious differences. *Malak moves away.*

As Olga goes to walk away, Chekhov puts his arms around her. She evades him and drops the shawl.

Chekhov *Picking up the shawl.* Look at this painstaking stitching. It’s like the way my peasant ancestors painted their icons. Stroke by stroke, stitch by stitch, word by word, the whole design emerges. A familiar old pattern, yet every detail is special. Did St Michael with his wings and spear appear to those anonymous shawl makers?

Olga You don’t like devout believers. You don’t like women who embroider to pass the time. You don’t like women who say what they desire.

Chekhov Our time together is precious. I want you to myself. *He strokes her cheek and kisses her, but stops, coughing.*

Olga *Olga is concerned.* It’s the dusty air.

Chekhov We need rain.
Olga  
Adamantly. You’re getting better.  
_Chekhov and Olga embrace passionately._  
Follow me.  
_Olga is undoing her clothing as she exits, blowing Chekhov kisses._  
Come now.  

*Malak turns and smiles. He imitates Olga blowing kisses.*

Chekhov  
Smiling at the joke. You stand behind me, your soft wings touch my cheek, unfathomable. You see everything that I cannot, in these troubled times.  

_Chekhov moves off-stage following Olga, and Malak remains on stage._

**Scene 7: Night and Day.**

_The stage darkens as if a storm is approaching. It is late afternoon. Natalyia runs on stage searching for Malak._

Natalyia  
You’re here. Thank God. I was afraid the storm would stop you coming.

Malak  
Have I ever disappointed you?

Natalyia  
Not for a moment. Everything has changed since you came.

Malak  
_Looking around._ It looks like nothing will ever disturb the tranquillity here, then all of a sudden the heavens explode.

Natalyia  
I cannot bear the waiting to see you. Then our time together is over so quickly. Why must I live in such agony?

Malak  
Torrents pass on. Tell me, Natalyia, does day follow night or night, day?  
_Malak extends his hand to Natalyia._  
Do you want to stand with me at the point between night and day?  
_Natalyia leans her head on his shoulder._

Natalyia  
I can still see you in the twilight.  
*She looks to him and he kisses her. He puts his arms around her._

Malak  
Yes, the darkness, the Sittrachra.
Natalyia  Let’s stay here until light comes.

Malak  *Musing.* The black whirlwinds before dawn’s soft light.

*Malak moves out of the embrace as Itzek Dubnow enters. Natalyia turns round. Malak moves off-stage quickly so that he is not visible when Natalyia looks back.*

Natalyia  He's gone. Itzek Dubnow. How could you? You've scared him off. How will I find him again?

Itzek  Sorry, Miss. *Pause.* You should avoid trouble.

Natalyia  What insolence.

Itzek  You must come home. Your father wants you.

Natalyia  You cannot tell me what to do.

Itzek  That one is not for you.

Natalyia  What are you saying?

Itzek  You must go with your own people.

Natalyia  I decide who I can meet. You are my father's driver. How dare you.

Itzek  Your town council wants to evict us from the village. All of us.

Natalyia  You are not like the others. You will not have to go.

Itzek  We are together.

Natalyia  I've seen the newcomers.

Itzek  *Pointedly.* All of us?

Natalyia  *Slowly.* Yes, all of ... 

Itzek  *Shakes his head.* Mixed marriages never work.

Natalyia  *Slowly.* He is one of your kind? Oh, dear God. He is with you. What shall I do? Tell me what to do? I cannot live without him now. *Itzek starts to leave. Natalyia runs after Itzek calling out.*

*Where has he gone? Where can I find him? Take me there.*

*Itzek and Natalyia exit.*
Scene 8: The Council Meeting.

Night time. Drenteln, Alexi and Dr Aksakov take over the action. Drenteln is delivering a speech.

Drenteln
Listen to me. If we do not take action we will be overrun. These people have arrived like animals running away from trouble. Every village sends them on. They are not the sort of people we want here.

Alexi
Blatant lies.

Drenteln
Dirty dogs. They give themselves airs. Their girls are whores. Their homes are filthy and they steal.

Sound of men’s voices in agreement.

Alexi
This is foul abuse. Where is the voice of reason? Let the doctor speak.

Drenteln
You are a sinner against the will of God. Doesn't the Bible show us...
"... the Lord thy God shall deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them and utterly destroy them ... You shall not make marriages with them, giving your daughters to their sons ...

Aksakov
Said to Alexi. You should not waste your time arguing. He just repeats himself until you've run out of breath.

Alexi
Drenteln, you are an ass. Sound of a crowd. Look at them. To Aksakov. They listen to the hate he talks.

Drenteln
Loudly. Look at our universities full of young trouble-makers.

Alexi
To Aksakov. How would he know? Could he be in league with the secret police?

Drenteln
I know what the scriptures say.

Alexi
Loudly. How can I confess in church alongside you?

Drenteln
I don't see you in church, Novitski. You should confess that you are too greedy to pay decent wages to our kind.

Alexi
The doctor doesn't hire anyone. He will support what I say.

Drenteln
These people denied our Lord. They are not innocent. Mumble of agreement.
Alexi  You can't drive them out just because they talk differently. The doctor has a different accent.

Aksakov  It's true as a rational man of science, I stand apart.

Drenteln  You should follow God's law.
The meeting has ended and Drenteln goes to leave.
To Alexi. You could do well to watch your Natalyia. There is a rumour that she is friendly with one of their men. If she cannot find a husband among us, lock her up.

Drenteln leaves. Alexi is furious.

Alexi  How dare he insult Natalyia to attack me.

Aksakov  It is a shame he can't keep order in his household the same way he runs the council. Mrs Drenteln calls me in every time either of those children fart.

Alexi  You are right. I should not argue. The meetings could be over in half an hour and we could go for a drink and listen to Natalyia playing piano.

Aksakov  I just happen to have a small nip with me for medical emergencies. The locals will be sorry if they drive their distiller away. He hands Alexi a flask.

Alexi  Pause. The seasons have been generous. I can easily afford Natalyia's wedding. Pause. She is my widower's good luck charm. She would bring the same luck to a husband.

Aksakov  I have pondered the way crustaceans reproduce over generations with such a single-minded preference for their own species. Some of the sea fossils I am finding in the old quarry must be thousands of years old, but they still resemble the living specimens anyone can find on the seashore today. Drenteln and the local council wouldn't recognise the peoples from biblical times, who lived on the old seashore.

Alexi  Annoyed. A fossil survives by looking for a mate rather than worrying about dead remains.

Aksakov  Natalyia must be besieged by eligible young men.

Alexi  Wryly. I believe not many of them describe their fossil collection with such passion.

Aksakov  A poor doctor could not hope to keep her in comfort.
Alexi Calling to Itzek abruptly. Where’s that cart? Why isn’t it here?
Itzek moves forward.
To Aksakov. Good night, Doctor.
Watching Aksakov move away. Itzek. We must hurry home.
Alexi remains standing still as if he is seeing Itzek for the first time. Itzek, what do you aspire to?
Itzek shrugs.
There is a rumour that your families are moving on. I hope not, Itzek. I do not want to lose a loyal worker.
Alexi moves away.

Scene 9: The dance band
Night time. The band is playing. Gessia runs across the stage giggling excitedly. She is wearing an embroidered top and an eye mask. She stops embarrassed as Itzek approaches her and she takes off the mask quickly, hiding it behind her back.

Itzek What’s this nonsense? Why are you dressed like that?
Gessia Excitedly. Grandfather …
Itzek I told you before not to wander.
Gessia I couldn’t find you.
Itzek It’s not my fault he kept me waiting here all night.
Gessia It’s beautiful outside.
Itzek At least you haven’t used up a candle reading.
Gessia There’s a band playing music down the road. Itzik is silent.
A whole band! Everyone we know is going for Purim. They are all dressed up. She giggles. I couldn’t recognise anyone.
Itzek That’s one of our orchestras.
Gessia I wanted to ask if I could go …
Itzek I haven’t heard real music in years.
Gessia … but I couldn’t find you, so it doesn’t matter. Maybe I could go next year.
Itzek All our young men will be there. You should go. You can go with your brothers.

Gessia They've left.

Itzek You must go quickly.

Gessia Can I really go?

Itzek Yes, yes, hurry. This is what we need. A chance for the young men to see you. If I was younger I would run with you.

Gessia exits running. Itzek is grumbling. Hanging around at his pleasure. He dawdles all evening, then suddenly he's in a hurry. He'll make me whip the horse till it's covered in sweat and muddied. Then I'll be up all night brushing it down. What for I ask you? What's his hurry? He asks what do I aspire to? That my granddaughter might meet a husband. And with blessings, it won't rain and I can stay dry so my bones won't ache. Itzek moves away.

Sound of music from a Jewish band. Natalyia dances in with Malak. She carries some flowers. At first the mood is joyous. They are out of breath from dancing and Malak has loosened his clothing.

Natalyia Sweet. So sweet. They embrace. They kiss.

Malak The moonlight shines on your hair. It is so light around you.

Natalyia Your lips are cold. They kiss again.

Malak Listen. They move over to the well and Malak drops a pebble into the well. They listen to a faint echo of a pebble hitting the water. The day or the darkness; which comes first? The darkness or the dawn?

Natalyia Smiling. I want the night to last forever.

Malak The darkness is here all the time, my beloved, to hide us as we dance, as we kiss, to hide secrets.

Natalyia Touching her lips with her hand. It feels like my face is bleeding from your kiss. They embrace and Natalyia is pressed against Malak’s chest. She pulls back then touches Malak’s shirt and begins to undo the buttons. I cannot see you clearly.
Malak I can see you under the stars, those lights reflecting on the wings of God.

Natalyia Hesitantly. Are you man or ... woman?

Malak The darkness or the dawn, which comes first? Natalyia turns away then turns back.

Natalyia Please stay close. Clasps his hand. Malak, I must warn you, but I am afraid for us if I tell you. Some people here have poison in their hearts towards you.

Malak We are travellers passing through the dark times. He sings. Summer is a breath away, my beloved.

Natalyia Listen to me. They say your people cause trouble and they mean to drive you away. That everything is your fault, but I don’t believe them. Yet sometimes when I dream of you, of us, I see nightmares, our land barren without harvests, people broken. Why is this? You are so beautiful, Malak. You’ve shown me such love but ... such terror? Is all love like this? I’m afraid.

Malak Even our love could be drowned out if hope is lost.

Natalyia What can we do?

Malak Optimistically. "I think everything on earth is bound to change bit by bit, in fact already is changing before our very eyes. Two or three hundred years, or a thousand years if you like—it doesn’t really matter how long—will bring in a new and happy life."

Natalyia How?

Malak Those who know love can always start to sing again.

Natalyia I shall sing as we dance.

Malak In resignation. Innocence cannot grow in a poisoned sour place ... He touches Natalyia’s hair lovingly.

Natalyia When I’m with you I feel triumphant.

Malak Come, beloved. If love is as strong in memory as hatred, it crosses all borders. They dance off with Natalyia singing.
Scene 10: Garden.

*Day time. Olga and Chekhov enter arm in arm. A dog barks twice in the distance.*

Chekhov

When I first came here there was only white dust and thistles. Now there are peaches, pears, apricots, almonds and cherries.

Olga

And you have clipped the grey wings of two cranes so they can't leave your garden. *Chekhov coughs.*

Clip my wings, darling.

Chekhov

You’ll forget the Author when you leave.

Olga

The Actress never forgets the Author for a minute. *Olga sings a line of Glinka’s song: “Don't tempt me in vain ...”*

Chekhov

The Author likes to tell the Actress what he thinks of her ... nightly performances. *Chekhov leans over and whispers in her ear. Olga laughs.*

He is a mirror to her true feeling.

Olga

Quickly. Perhaps he is her destiny but she will decide what is true for herself.

Chekhov

Danchenko is visiting later with the others.

Olga

Will you show him your garden or your writing?

Chekhov

He shows me his writing. *Irritably.* They all send me their stories.

Olga

*Urgently.* Show me what you feel.

They look at each other.

Chekhov

The Actress does that best.

Olga

*Turning away disappointed.* Your sister and mother must know everything.

Chekhov

We are very discreet.

Olga

The stairs creak and echo like trees falling.

Chekhov

I never hear it.

Olga

I have to go past your mother’s room and the door is always open.
Chekhov  She will think it is angels going up and down the stairs in the night.

Olga  Your sister will be upset. Pause. She is my friend. She may not speak to me again.

Chekhov  They sleep soundly.

Olga  Sharply. Shall I continue to be just another woman who creeps secretly into your bed? This Actress wants a happy ending.

Chekhov  The Author wants to show her his carnations and chrysanthemums.

Olga and Chekhov are at the stile. Vishnevski enters and waves to them.

Oh no, who told him we were here?

Vishnevski  There you are, good friends. Vishnevski gives Olga a carnation. Your sister was telling me your house was built on top of the bones of dead Tartars who used to live here.

Danchenko approaches.

Chekhov  The old cemetery is down there over our stone wall. Go and have a look for yourself.

Vishnevski  Looking at Olga. I suppose a walk through the cemetery might impress our director as character study.

Olga passes the carnation to Danchenko flirtatiously.

Danchenko  But you’re on holiday now, Vishnevski.

They laugh. Malak enters seen only by Chekhov.

Chekhov  Come and let us get a drink from the well before lunch.

They all move across to the well. Olga stands between Vishnevski and Danchenko, their backs to the well and the audience. Chekhov stands apart with Malak but glances back at Olga.

Malak  It might interest your visitors to know the history of the stone walls in this region.

Chekhov  They’re not interested in architecture. They’ve come for the food and perhaps the conversation.
Malak    I like company.

Chekhov You would frighten them away, if they could see you.

Malak    I've been listening and turning the samovar tap on and off.

Chekhov  *Smiling.* I've never seen you drink anything.

Malak    That makes me a very inexpensive house guest. *Playfully.* Can't I have secrets too? *Pause.* The construction of this house is unique.

Chekhov  I had it specially designed for this rational scientific new century when life will improve.

Malak    Hah. You wanted a house without a past, without ghosts, but where to put the foundations?

Chekhov  I had it built so someone as beautiful as you would come to stay with me.

Malak    Would you clip my wings too?

Chekhov  Only with my pen.

Malak    You built new walls out of old stone.

Chekhov  Where is all this talk about walls leading?

Malak    I want you to come to the stone quarry in the forest with me.

Chekhov  I have guests.

Malak    It won't take long.

Chekhov  My house is finished. I don't need to look at more stone.

Malak    Your walls will outlast the bones of their inhabitants.

Chekhov  I found the skeleton of a sea fossil in one of the stones they put in my walls.

Malak    What if a snowflake or a kiss could be frozen in stone?

Malak remains on stage on the other side of Chekhov. Olga, Vishnevski and Danchenko move away.
Scene 11: Departures.

*Itzek and Gessia enter. Itzek tries to hurry across the stage with Gessia walking to his pace.*

Gessia  
You should hear what they are saying about us ...

Itzek  
I don't need to know.

Gessia  
You must listen.

Itzek  
I can guess.

Gessia  
They are calling us dogs.

Itzek  
They always call us names.

Gessia  
They are saying we poison the land.

Itzek  
We aren't allowed on their precious property.

Gessia  
They say we are filthy.

Itzek  
It's always the same.

Gessia  
This is different. I'm scared for us. Something is going to happen.

Itzek  
*He stops.* Will they ever stop?

Gessia  
They are saying that we girls ... that we are whores.

Itzek  
Hold your tongue. Get on home and stop walking out without my permission so you hear these lies. *Gessia and Itzek exit.*

Dusk. Olga turns singing. Malak stands apart.

Olga  
"Don't tempt me in vain ..."

*Chekhov kisses Olga.*

Chekhov  
My sweet pony.

Olga  
I miss you.

Chekhov  
*Teasingly.* Like any schoolgirl in love.

Olga  
*Seriously.* I really must leave tomorrow.

Chekhov  
Shall I announce our marriage?
Olga  *Quickly.* Your sister, mother, your friends would never forgive me for moving into this household. *Pause.* Anyway, how can I act and also be a wife and mother to our child as you wish? A marriage by letter? *Pause, softly.* Will you come to me in Moscow soon?

Chekhov  September, when I’ve finished my play.

Olga  I shall give up acting to look after you.

Chekhov  I do not need a nurse.

Olga  *Pause.* Or a wife.

Chekhov  I live in exile amongst the poor unwanted sick who are forced here by government decrees. You know the doctors think this climate might help me live for a few more years. But what kind of life is it, when we are separated, when I am dying of boredom?

*Malak moves forward. Olga shivers as she senses Malak’s presence, but she cannot see him when she looks around.*

Olga  Your solitariness makes you exaggerate. *Olga moves away. She is upset but resolute.*

Chekhov  *Looking at Malak.* Only the company of angels in this place.

Olga  Talk to your mother about angels. *Olga exits.*

Malak  If you insist on going to the city, to her, I can find you there.

Chekhov  Haven’t you got someone better to visit? Tolstoy for example?

Malak  Why can’t you be grateful like the others when your muse appears.

Chekhov  I would be if she was a polite female who waited to be asked. Why are you forcing me to listen to your story about the quarry?

Malak  Can a scream be frozen in stone, like a snowflake? *Malak kisses Chekhov on the cheek. Malak exits.*

*Blackout.*
ACT 2 Scene 12: Trouble.

Natalyia enters and runs to the stile looking around desperately. She looks dishevelled. She climbs up higher and looks around. She is distraught.

Natalyia Malak! Malak, where are you? Malak.

Alexi enters. Natalyia is trying to regain her composure. She runs over to the well and stares down. Aksakov joins Alexi.

Alexi Doctor Aksakov, Aksakov. What's happening? Alexi is watching Natalyia.

Aksakov Aksakov moves to the well and looks down. This well is a unique design. Enthusiastically. The people of this region can be proud of their ingenuity, even if it is a remote place.

Natalyia I can't see my reflection.

Alexi What can we do?

Natalyia Leaning over. It's very deep.

Aksakov These look like stones from the quarry.

Alexi To Natalyia. Come away from there!

Natalyia Will I ever see him again? She moves to one side scooping up pebbles. She begins to hum sadly the tune that the band played in Act 1, and dances by herself.

Aksakov To Natalyia. I will measure the depth of the well by dropping something down it, and recording the time it takes to hit the bottom.

Alexi Foolish girl. He is embarrassed. To Aksakov. She has not been the same since ... since ... Drenteln attacked me. I suspect someone told her. Grabbing Aksakov. She hardly eats. I am at my wit's end. Looking at Natalyia.

Aksakov Perhaps she is in love.

Alexi Shortly. Cure her then.

Natalyia has three pebbles and drops them slowly, one by one, into the well. Aksakov is listening.

Natalyia Souls should fly up like feathers, but without love they drop, drop like stones. Pause. I will wait.
Alexi  *Patting her on the back.* Enough melancholy, young lady.

Aksakov  When I study fossils in the quarry, I lose track of whether it's day or night.

*Natalyia is faint, and grabs the side of the well.*

Alexi  What's the matter?

Aksakov  She is feverish.

*They help her away from the well, to lie on the couch. Natalyia turns away from them. Aksakov exits. Natalyia and Alexi remain upstage.*

Drenteln and Mrs Drenteln take over the action downstage.

Mrs Drenteln  I don't feel safe going out alone any more.

Drenteln  Well don't go out.

Mrs Drenteln  I had to go out and call Dr Aksakov to look at Gregori's new tooth yesterday. He was quite feverish.

Drenteln  Rest assured, my love. I am making it safe for you to walk out once more.

Mrs Drenteln  You've been preoccupied with this campaign for months. How much longer is it going to take?

Drenteln  It's my duty to my father's father. We've got them running scared now.

Mrs Drenteln  Yes. But where will it end?

Drenteln  When these scum have gone. I'm not having my wife afraid in her own village.

Mrs Drenteln  Peter, I don't want any trouble. We have two young children.

Drenteln  No one dare challenge me now. Even the priest. God is in heaven and the tsar far away! Proudly, I'd say nearly all of the Council have come round to my way of thinking.

Mrs Drenteln  Their respect is a sham.
Drenteln  Even the governor knows my name.
Mrs Drenteln  Our children will never disgrace our name like Natalyia has Novitski.
Drenteln  Stupid fool Novitski. She was seduced right under his own nose.
Mrs Drenteln  They say the young man was very good looking ...
Drenteln looks at her sharply ... for an interloper.
Drenteln  Self-righteously. I warned him.
Mrs Drenteln  Have they gone away?
Drenteln  It's his own fault.
Mrs Drenteln  Pause. Don't you think I should take Sonya and Gregori away for a little while?
Drenteln  We can't afford a holiday.
Mrs Drenteln  Surely someone will lend you the money now you have become so important in the region. If anything should happen to the children ...?
Drenteln  Sighs. I'll think about it.

Drenteln and Mrs Drenteln move away.

Aksakov enters. Alexi is up-stage. Natalyia rises suddenly.

Natalyia  Disappointed. Oh, it's only you.

Alexi and Aksakov turn away from Nalayia, but she gets up so she can hear them.

Aksakov  How's the patient today?
Alexi  She is up. When Natalyia is better I will go to the Council meetings again.

Aksakov  The tide is turning, Alexi. The Council meeting pause voted to bar any member known to employ newcomers from attending. Pause. The mood is very hostile.

Alexi  I will employ whom I choose on my own land.
Aksakov  Mrs Drenteln called me to look at Gregori's new tooth again today. She let slip that I wouldn't be
needed for a while because she and the children are going away.

Alexi  Where would Drenteln get the money to send them away? Perhaps he is being paid by the secret police.

Aksakov  He must think there's going to be trouble. I would suggest you and Natalyia should go on a trip as soon as she can travel. For her sake.

*Alexi and Aksakov turn to look at Natalyia.*

Aksakov  My treatment seems to have worked.

Natalyia  Time. It is all a matter of time. You said so yourself.

Aksakov  I am pleased that you listen to your doctor.

Natalyia  Doctors cannot cure the sickness here.

Aksakov  I advise you to have a holiday as part of your cure.

Natalyia  *Natalyia rises and walks forward looking towards the well.* I’m not leaving.

Aksakov  How ungrateful. Women are always so unappreciative of what we do for them.

Natalyia  I can see who comes up the path from here ... It will be winter soon. I must not forget. I must remember.

Aksakov  She is well enough to travel. You should leave as soon as possible.

Alexi  Perhaps it’s unnecessary ...

Aksakov  Drenteln and his supporters invited Cossacks to attend the last meeting. They will force the newcomers out.

Natalyia  *Natalyia exits, calling back urgently.* Father, if the newcomers are leaving, we will go with them.

Alexi  Why should we bow to them?

Aksakov  They dream of a glorious past and they are armed.

Alexi  *Indignantly.* Why can't we live peacefully?

Natalyia  *Quietly.* I must not forget. I must remember.
Aksakov

There are plenty amongst Drenteln's supporters who have no bread on their tables. They look for someone to blame.

Alexi

How long have we got before the trouble starts?

Aksakov

Maybe a few days. Drenteln has accused anyone associated with the newcomers of betraying the faith and the nation.

Alexi

Pause. Why must I leave like an exile? How has this happened?

Blackout. They exit.

Scene 13: Massacre.

Gessia is on stage on the bench. Itzek enters. Gessia is sewing, but stops to read. Itzek stands looking at Gessia for a moment.

Gessia

Looking up surprised, trying to hide her book. You're here. It's the middle of the morning. But I've not prepared your meal yet.

Itzek

Novitski sent me home.

Gessia

For today?

Itzek

He is taking his daughter away.

Gessia

How will we live?

Itzek

I don't know.

Gessia

Standing and wrapping her threadbare shawl over her head. I can go looking for work.

Itzek

You cannot go anywhere by yourself. There are soldiers around. It is a strange time of year to be collecting taxes.

Gessia

Their horses sprayed mud all over us when they galloped through the village.

Itzek

What were you doing in the village? You disobeyed me.

Gessia

They were riding up and down. The crowd was silent. Their leaders have been locked up in meetings with the Council for hours.
Itzek: I told you to stay here. Stay here with your books.

Gessia: They're saying it is not safe, even inside, any more.

Itzek: The landowners will grumble about new taxes and hold endless meetings, and the drivers will wait in the cold.

Gessia: We must go. The people in the street abuse us.

Itzek: Names ... Names. I changed my name. A name does not mean anything.

Gessia: It means they hate us.

Itzek: We are all children of the master of the universe.

Gessia: How long can we stay?

Itzek: I am too old for this.

Gessia: These men are not tax collectors. They are soldiers with long swords.

Itzek: No matter where we go. We cannot escape that. If it's not soldiers, it's people. For myself, I wish only to die in peace.

Itzek and Gessia see Drenteln enter and exit quickly, looking over their shoulders. He waits for the Cossack Commander to arrive.

The Commander enters wearing a long tunic, breeches and a gun in a pouch on his belt.

Commander: We had to ride for fourteen miles through the storm to get here. A cold winter approaching, that's for certain. My mother and her aching bones warned me about this winter.

Drenteln: Looking up at the sky. We should begin as soon as possible.

Commander: We will stay till the work is finished, even if the snow comes.

Drenteln: These people—though to call them that would be a weakness—their very presence in this area is the reason why this season is so poor. It is against God that they are here. I made it clear that they should leave.
Commander: These people don’t change?

Drenteln: Do dogs smell differently if they call themselves cats?

Commander: They rarely convert.

Drenteln: Yes, they tend to congregate together like mongrels, sniff each other out. It is the Council’s unanimous decision that you proceed with our plan.

Commander: We should find them easily enough. Leave it to us.

Drenteln: I want it done as soon as possible, so I can bring my wife and children home.

Commander: My father greeted them and my mother gave the scum food and drink. The good will of such women is a weakness in our country mimicking a woman’s voice, “Please come and get water and shelter.” Doesn’t she know it’s dangerous to show pity to evil.

Drenteln: My wife has more sense. Your mother will come to regret her charity.

Commander: She could not be told. Stupid woman. They steal things. Incredulously. It’s like putting cheese out and no trap.

Drenteln: It proves the urgency of our business.

Commander: He adopts a formal posture. The operation is not one in which we calculate to suffer any losses, though it seems inevitable that with this sortie, even with the help of the locals, there might be some minor injuries.

Drenteln: Now if we could settle the matter of money ...

Commander: It’s costly for us to be away from our homes.

Drenteln: We are unable to pay you sufficiently to control the whole problem, so it is my specific request that you deal with the men.

Commander: Pause. We need at least three hundred.

Drenteln: That’s reasonable. We will assist you discreetly and show you where the resisters meet. What will you do?
Commander: Drive them out.

Drenteln: Yes. Put them on the road out of town. Make them the problem of some other region.

Drenteln exits.

Commander: He thinks we’re mercenaries. Money doesn’t matter to us. You have to control them or they multiply like vermin. Kill them or they take the food. Call themselves men. Pathetic. They don’t even put up a real fight. I’ve got my fifteen men. This is our duty to this land. They don’t want these people here. Now we spring our trap. It will close without warning.

The Commander exits.

Blackout.

Loud sound of galloping horses. Light on Gessia. Gessia crying and pleading.

Gessia: Please have pity! Someone, hear me! Stop them! They are taking our men and boys through the square and across the fields, herding them like animals. They have whips and they are forcing them on. They hit Grandfather with a sword. What can I do? Please God, no! Pushing them with their swords. No! No! Not this. My grandfather is old. Leave him! They march the men across the fields to the forest. Pause. The backs of my brothers disappearing amongst the trees. Help me! Is there no one who will listen? Why are people so cruel? Even behind your locked doors and windows you know what’s happening. Why can’t you stop this? Gessia breaks into a run across the stage then drops and crawls. I’m frightened. What can I do by myself? It’s muddy. They’re pushing them deeper into the forest. Making them run. The cover of the forest means no one will see them except me. The forest is so thick. It absorbs all sound. All cries. Pause. They have slowed down. They are on the track, the path which leads to the quarry. It does not go anywhere else. Long pause. They must run to hug the boulders like Mama’s breast and hide there to get away ... No. No. Grandfather. Gessia covers her face then looks back. They’re being forced to take off their clothes ... their trousers? Their trousers, their manhood hacked away ... she screams in terror and stares ahead ... their bodies ... she sinks down.
Malak enters and gestures to Gessia to leave with him. Gessia looks up as Drenteln enters dazed and he sees her. He stops as she recognises him.

Drenteln
What's happened?

Gessia
Murderer. My family ... My family ...

Suggested sequence of action. Drenteln tries to grab Gessia. They struggle. He picks her up and staggers and drops her.

Malak stumbles back, falling, on the ground watching. The action from Drenteln's entry and the struggle is repeated silently; this time Drenteln tries to attack Gessia with a knife before he drops her.

The Commander enters. The struggle is repeated for a third time with the Commander raping Gessia before he picks up her body and throws it down the well. Silence.

Malak
Rising and speaking softly. The blood that pumps through laced veins will spill on to the land. Rivers of blood will flow again into the soil. Countries' names are lost, people's names are lost, the nations they fight for, the names they cling to, all lost, but such acts haunt us. Hatred outlasts its reason; its contagion returns like the ghosts of its victims. Malak exits unsteadily.

Drenteln walks forward, looking around as if he is lost. The Commander moves towards Drenteln.

Commander
I respectfully submit that for the record there was a severe miscalculation. Drenteln puts his head on his hands. My own personal opinion is that the seeds of these people will never grow again in this place. Pause. It was never our intention to take them to the quarry. It was a diversion due to the impassable nature of the road at that point. Drenteln nods slowly. But I guarantee you that there will not be any record of the operation in this particular region.

Drenteln relaxes. He puts his hand down onto his leg and he realises that his leg is bleeding. He raises his hand looking at his blood.

Blackout.
Scene 14: Outside

*Yalta, winter 1903. It is snowing lightly. Chekhov is dozing in a chair, covered in a blanket with a broken wall clock on his knee. Olga enters. She stands looking at Chekhov. He wakes.*

**Olga**

How delightful. The first flakes of snow. Let’s get our coats and go up to the forest.

*Chekhov grunts. He is tired and uninterested but tries to rise, then coughs and falls back.*

We won’t be out long. It is so beautiful in the forest, when the first snow falls.

*Chekhov sinks further into his chair. Olga speaks playfully.* Be my snowdrop for a short time.

*Chekhov looks up and smiles.* Once you begged me to ride up into the forest. Do you remember? Three years ago, before we married? Pretend you are an obedient husband to your wife, at least for an hour.

**Chekhov**

If the mechanics of time can be manipulated like the cogs behind this clock-face, then science has been duped.

**Olga**

I insist that you ride out with me.

**Chekhov**

We may not be moving forward in this new century.

**Olga**

Fix that when we come back.

**Chekhov**

I’ve nearly finished. It distracts me.

**Olga**

*Teasingly.* Let me distract you in the precious little time we have left, before I go back to work in Moscow?

**Chekhov**

What good is a husband in my condition?

**Olga**

*Brightly.* You are better today. Come outside.

**Chekhov**

Everything out there looks peaceful and silent. Inside, my bleeding hidden.

**Olga**

At least come out of this study. Please, Anton.

**Chekhov**

Where is justice? This hidden persecuting disease that is ready to erupt in some part of my body ... *said ironically* to stop my peasant’s heart.

*Gessia’s ghost enters outside and Chekhov starts up when he sees her.*
Olga Why do you insist on reducing the world to your body?

Chekhov *Looking at Gessia.* What do you see, Olga?

Olga I see my darling.

Chekhov I feel obscene.

Olga You’re my joy.

Chekhov You’re keeping me alive. Do you know that?

Olga *Bitterly.* Some of your friends say I’m doing the opposite ...

Chekhov Who says that? Who?

Olga My dearest darling, last year when I miscarried our baby you were determined to lift my spirits. Now, it’s my turn. Mend that clock if you must and then we can go for our ride. *Olga moves away.*

Gessia walks behind the window and stands backlit looking in. *Chekhov watches her.* She removes the shawl from her head.

Gessia When will the grave of my family be marked? In one day, one month, one year?

Chekhov Grave? Are your family in the cemetery next door?

Gessia They took our men from us. They forced themselves on the women ... *She chokes.* I cannot forget.

Chekhov Who are you? Why are you here? What do you want?

Gessia The burial of the dead must be marked in the proper way. The stones carved like in Beltsy, with lions on guard, a deer turning, God’s hand plucking a flower, a bird looking backwards ... *Gessia is upset and cannot continue.*

Chekhov I’m a writer, not a stonemason. I make my living writing about ordinary life. *Pause.* I suppose Malak has sent you. Why does he not come himself any more? Where has he gone? Has he left me? Does that mean my life is ... Why does he send such a young, thin woman with eyes full of sorrow?
Gessia  The snow will cover everything again.

Chekhov  My dear, that shawl will not keep you warm this cold winter.

Gessia  When I embroider a shawl, I always hold the whole design in my mind but it's hard to sew it, one stitch at a time.

Chekhov  These days, I take one breath at a time.

Gessia  Watch me. I'll show you.

Chekhov  *Mumbling.* Stroke by stroke, breath by breath.

Gessia  I stretch the fabric tight, I pierce the skin. See. How tightly must my people's skin be stretched until it blazes into fire?

Chekhov  I can't see your design. *Chekhov holds out his hand for the shawl.*

Gessia  Your body is not cold.

Chekhov  I feel chilled.

Gessia  What happened to us stays in the dark crevices.

Chekhov  *To himself.* Will my imaginary worlds haunt others as she haunts me?

Gessia  *Pause.* When they ask us for our passes, names go, families go, but the terror remains.

Chekhov  People can be educated to have restraint ... 

Gessia  Forget words. Books! Pages of words. Too many words. They disappear like the smoke from fires. We must mark the burial with pain and sorrow. We must mark the ground with our grief. This is why we tell the story over and over and over.

Chekhov  What do you want me to do? Make myself into a monument? I've always defended people coming to me for help. *Pause.* When I was younger, I wanted to marry a girl who was Jewish ... I don't say you're different. *Sadly.* Why come to me now? I've raised money for asylums. How, at this time can you accuse me of not helping? You're too late.
Gessia: How do I bury my grandfather?
Chekhov: My sick body drains away my breath.

Gessia: I must create their monument, pile up the stones.
Chekhov: Then everywhere you look would be marked with sorrow.

Gessia: These were murders. You cannot argue me away. It could have been your family, the wife you love. She feels love and pain.
Chekhov: Don’t bring her into this. We have so little time.

Gessia: How will they mark your grave?

Scene 15: Moral deeds

Gessia moves away. Chekhov slumps forward and drifts into the memory of a meeting. There is the sound of street noises as if coming through an open window. Chekhov springs up as Vishnevski and Danchenko enter. Vishnevski carefully and laboriously unrolls some papers. Danchenko silently indicates for Chekhov to watch Vishnevski. They exchange knowing looks and smiles behind Vishnevski’s back.

Vishnevski: After I met with the sanatorium appeal committee, I went over the records as you requested. They are worried that the building will be too small before it is finished.

Chekhov paces up and down.

Chekhov: Every day, more homeless consumptives arrive.

Danchenko: Vishnevski, your talent for settling accounts must be put to work repairing our theatre.

Vishnevski: Our theatre needs much more than someone to supervise the building; never enough money, artistic wars between you and Stanislavski, audiences rejecting our plays.

Chekhov: Wearily sinking back in his chair. It’s much easier to build a sanatorium than a theatre, don’t you think, Vishnevski?
Vishnevski The people on the committee are devoted to your good name, but perhaps they are not so judicious with the funds.

Danchenko To Chekhov. You have been extremely generous as always, dear friend, giving your time to the poor and your art to our theatre.

Chekhov Mockingly. The great Chekhov is seen as a moral man when he funds schools and fills Taganrog public library shelves with books autographed by his friends. Bitterly. Those moral bigots ignored embezzled famine relief funds, and the Moscow syphilis clinic is failing.

Danchenko It’s a bottomless well. Looking at Vishnevski.

Vishnevski Are you referring to the sanatorium or the theatre?

Chekhov What use are my plays about the torments of intimacy?

Danchenko How can we answer the critics who want our theatre to probe the soul and the ones who demand a rhetorical call to action?

Chekhov They all want pieces of me. Publishers disputing rights; theatres arguing over my plays. Translators making Olga intercede on their behalf. Why would any foreigner even want to read my plays? They are about Russia.

Danchenko moves towards Chekhov and takes a folded piece of paper out of his pocket. He indicates for Chekhov to read it with him.

Danchenko I saved this dialogue you wrote for posterity. Reading. "Listen!"

Chekhov Hesitantly. What?

Danchenko Native?

Chekhov Chekhov laughs. Who?

Danchenko You.

Chekhov I?

Danchenko Yes.

Chekhov No.
Danchenko  Pity.
Chekhov  Hm!"

*Chekhov and Danchenko laugh together.*

Vishnevski  What's the joke?
Danchenko  Getting paid by the line.
Chekhov  Less for more.

*Danchenko and Vishnevski exit.*

Scene 16: Past and present.

*Gessia appears on the far side of the window. Olga enters the study. Chekhov is still in the past.*

Chekhov  Vladimir Nemiróvich, would you be so kind as to take Olga out. She wishes to go out and I need to look at these accounts with Vishnevski.

Olga  *To herself.* He talks to himself all day.

Chekhov  *Chekhov looks at Olga.* The safety and shelter of this room, this roof. There is no shelter in the forest beneath that first snowfall. When is the time to remember? When is the time to be silent?

Olga  It's time to go out. *Olga goes to get Chekhov’s coat.*

Chekhov  *Chekhov is frustrated.* We are comfortable in our home. *Pause.* But I cannot keep the blood in my body.

*Olga returns with Chekhov’s coat.*

What does she want from me? I don’t make speeches. These days I can hardly move.

Olga  Let’s plan a holiday. Have you forgotten how you love travelling …

Chekhov  I do remember: Ceylon and *bitterly* Sakhilin. I wrote the report on that remote island prison. I tried to help in my way.

Olga  We could go to Paris or Germany.

Chekhov  My soul is here in this room, this drawing room. Windows, benches, table and somewhere ... my muse.
Olga    Must you talk on and on about your muse?
Chekhov Was it a trap to live in this place, with these stone walls? Was her story waiting here, in this place, for me to walk through?
Olga    Which story?
Chekhov *Looking around.* The story is in this place.
Olga    *In panic.* What story, Anton?
Chekhov You think me ... maudlin?
Olga    This is intolerable. We are going out now. *Olga turns away, then pauses listening.*

Chekhov *To himself.* Malak? Where are you?
Olga    I don't know this man I love. I don't know him.
Chekhov Everything happens in the room; the drawing room. It's a device, wouldn't you say so? A stage device. I want to open it out, have the wounds outside, clean the pus. I want the room inside out. Why does my beloved desert me at this time? I'm immobilised. For her the snow falls, for me, nothing.

*Olga goes to help Chekhov put on his long coat and help him stand.*
Olga    I'm here beside you, darling.

Chekhov *He regains his self-control.* What is the point, at the turn of the century, to remember the blood soaked into the soil?

Olga    We survive great loss *pause* somehow. Who can predict the crushing power of events and governments? We must find our joy, now, in this moment. We must.

*Chekhov moves slowly forward with his stick.*

Chekhov *Looking around the room.* What is our present? Where does it begin? *He begins to cough blood. He waves Olga away as he spits into a paper cone.*

Olga    *Turning away.* To herself. He's not like this in Moscow. I thought that we would be so happy together for this time, even with his mother here.
My heart drops going into that room. He’s living like a hermit, a captive even. Sometimes, it’s like he’s talking to another lover. When has he ever spoken to me openly about his fears?

*Olga sees Gessia looking in the window and she is startled. She goes back to Chekhov, upset.*

What’s that girl doing here? Is that the girl from Issac Sinani’s bookshop? Why does she stand outside the window? Tell the servant to send her away. She might steal something ...

Chekhov

It’s not what you think. She is trying to steal my conversation.

Olga

Give her some bread if that’s what she wants. Or a shawl. Here she can have mine if she goes away. I’ve told the maid to keep children away from the house. They remind me that we lost our baby. Did you ask her to come? *Olga is crying.*

*Chekhov comes slowly across and embraces her.*

Chekhov

I would not do anything to upset you. She is not a child. She is older than she looks.

Olga

Send her away.

Chekhov

She has nowhere to go.

*Chekhov is stooped and catching his breath.*

Olga

Anton, why doesn’t it happen? *Pause.* Am I only to act the mother’s role in your plays from now on?

Chekhov

How would you manage if I was ... if I should ... get sicker?

Olga

I won’t listen to this. I will love you to good health.

*Chekhov sits again, Olga sits beside him and embraces him. She rises and takes a small cake from her bag, goes outside behind the window, and gives the cake to Gessia. They smile shyly at each other. Gessia stuffs the cake into her pocket as she walks away. She might be backlit to make her appear ghostly. Olga remains to the side watching. Gessia exits. Chekhov remains in his study.*
Scene 17: Malak returns.

Snow should fall down the centre of the stage so it is both an interior and exterior space. Malak enters. Chekhov and Malak look at each other. Chekhov smiles and tries to rise, then sinks back into his chair.

Chekhov    At last! Where have you been?
Malak     I went to Moscow ...
Chekhov    To Moscow?
Malak     I was finding my way ... which way ... this way, that way ...
Chekhov    You deserted me. Looking away.
Malak     Let’s walk a little, as far as the forest.
Chekhov    Not you too. It’s snowing. You are used to moving through snow, I can scarcely walk today.
Malak     Snow will fall over the bodies once more. She has brought your coat.
Chekhov    I cannot go. Disease doesn’t touch you. You parade out through the snow drifts. You parade out free, deathless, across continents pause, across time ...
Malak     Playfully. What do you know about time?
Chekhov    You would have me walk out and tear myself open and expose the wounds within?
Malak     Not now.
Chekhov    Cut myself open? I prided myself on my precision, my scalpel’s incision, my words. The pen is mine, the sword is yours.

Speaking together.

Malak     Come to the forest, Anton.
Chekhov    You want to show me that you can walk into the snow ...
Malak     I will help you through the snow.
Chekhov    ... as the fire of your wings burns through the snowdrift in my mind.
They cease speaking together.

Chekhov
Barbarians would say that perhaps only creative lust touches you. Do you lust after my Olga?

Malak
Laughs. Only when she plays Masha to my Vershinin.

Chekhov
Softly. You would have me believe that my words are nothing without your meaning, your touch. I write the life that I see happening around me, word by word.

Malak
Writers need to witness the unseen, what lies beneath the drifts of snow.

Chekhov
Am I always to be at the mercy of what other people want?

Malak
Ghosts will speak out till they are heard.

Chekhov
Accusingly. So you did send that young woman to me.

Malak
Too many years I have been coming to you now. I grow weary too. Malak slides down to the ground. Rest. Rest. Even immortals must rest.

Chekhov coughs. He slumps down.

Chekhov
What I do makes no difference. I'm getting sicker and the morphine weaker. Chekhov is forceful. Passion should be mannered, altered, restrained. I kept it stylised. Master of my own style. I couldn't contrive you to be one person. Anyway what did that girl from long ago have to do with me? Why send her to me now? I can't breathe. Where is your pity? You ask me for pity. Where is your love for me?

Snow begins to fall in the drawing room.

Malak
Speaking about the snow. This is perfection. Malak stands.

Chekhov
Chekhov looks up at him. You are perfection. But you couldn't stop these things happening. How can the scribbles of this insignificant man compete with perfection? Who can prevent bloodshed, wars, hatred?
Malak  In the blackness where the stars form, I must reach for the coins for your eyes.

Chekhov  *Leans over.* I know I must die, but not here, and so soon?

Malak  That starry night is now yours.

Chekhov  But I couldn't write the broad sweep. I couldn't trap you, write you, put you in the drawing room.

*Malak walks across and puts his hand through a mound of snow.*

Malak  See how snow falls. The snow continues to fall. Gessia appears at the window. Chekhov looks up at Gessia who is about to move away.

Our lives fall. How is it when the snow melts into the earth … Gessia stops and listens. … the hatred remains? How short the lifetime for this snowflake, till it falls down and weeps into the muddy earth.

*Chekhov is perturbed. Gessia looks at Chekhov.*

Chekhov  Gessia, I don't write for a cause. I don't write about beliefs. I don't write a message. I write for love, about love. I write out of love.

*Gessia turns and walks to him. She nods silently and smiles sadly for a moment. Gessia moves off-stage.*

**Scene 18: The forest**

*Olga moves across the stage to Chekhov.*

Olga  Do you think I stride on stage? *She smiles.* I’m going out in the cart to see the first snow. *She turns and moves across the stage.*

*Malak moves across to Chekhov.*

Malak  She’ll go near that place in the forest and return not knowingly. Unless …

Chekhov  How will I know where to go?

Malak  Follow the stars. *Malak picks up Chekhov.*
Gently. Across the diaspora the stars. These are lights reflecting on the wings of God.

Chekhov: Whose god? I do not know the way.

Malak: Does the earth need thought to rotate?

Chekhov: How would I know? Haven’t I always told you the truth?

Malak carries him across the stage. Malak stops holding Chekhov. Malak places Chekhov on the bench as if he is putting him in the cart.

Malak: Breathe gently now, dear Anton. Our planet’s breath is truth and it will show you.

Chekhov: To Olga. I’m ready.

Olga approaches Chekhov, smiling, and bends down to kiss him.

Lights dim. Chekhov stands slowly using his stick. They move forward, standing in the forest.

Olga: It’s beautiful in this forest air.

Chekhov: You will melt the snow with your radiance.

Olga: What fun it is at this time of year.

Chekhov: It might interest you to know some of the history of this region.

Olga: Olga’s mood is buoyant. A ride into the past? And I thought we were visiting the forest.

Chekhov: Will you go where I take you?

Olga: As long as I know where I’m going.

Chekhov: Past the track that leads to the quarry.

Olga: If you want to.

Chekhov: Even across the ice.

Olga: The ice is strong enough to skate over. Taking his hand.

Chekhov: Laughing. We might get lost and not get back until after dark. Chekhov is unsteady on his feet.
Quickly. We shouldn’t overdo it, Anton. Pause.

Before, when we were driving away from the house, I turned back to look. I thought I saw you behind us. I could see your figure with a stick, but transparent, now close to me, then far away, walking without touching the ground, against the bluish haze of the hills.

I am here.

Through tears. I wish we had more time.

Malak walks across to the well and leans over dropping three pebbles, one by one, down the well. Olga stops. She is listening.

Olga and Chekhov stand listening to the pebbles falling down the well.

She looks slowly at Chekhov. He is watching her carefully.

What is it?

Do you hear that?

A distant sound, like an echo.

Or a pulse beat.

Or tears falling like stones. Malak is backlit.

Chekhov looks ahead. He cannot look at the forest or at Olga.

Ahh.

To Olga. Are you ill?

Olga looks fixedly ahead.

Hesitantly. No, we must go on. It’s strange. I’m listening; I feel sad. It’s like a sharp pain.

We’ll go back.

Olga walks forward. Where is it? Do I hear it or do I feel it? Is it outside or is it inside me?

I think we’re witnesses. These feelings mark a grave.
Olga    Is that possible? That I can feel it?

_Chekhov moves behind Olga so they stand together as they did at the beginning of the play._

Olga    I see your breath in the cold air.

Chekhov  Your words are soft snowflakes falling on me.

_THE END_