

*A Few Words
about Chekhov
(Texts)*



Olga and Anton, 1901

I. Duo (Olga Knipper)

We met in 1898 at one of the Moscow Art Theatre's early rehearsals of *The Sea-Gull*.

We actors were filled with immense excitement at this first meeting with Anton Pavlovich, the author beloved by us all.

How exhilarating it was to feel in that dark, empty theatre that he who was our 'soul' sat listening.

We did not know how to take his words- in jest or in earnest. He looked at us, sometimes with a smile, sometimes with the utmost gravity, pinching his beard, twirling his pince-nez by its cord.

(Anton Chekhov)

We met in 1898 at one of the Moscow Art Theatre's early rehearsals of *The Sea-Gull*.

An actor asked me to discuss the character of the author in *The Sea-Gull*. I replied, "Why, he wears check trousers!"

Another actor wanted to know what one was to make of a certain role. I answered, "The best you can."

Ah, but Olga Knipper, *she* was magnificent. Voice, dignity, earnestness – her acting was so good it brought a lump into my throat.

Had I stayed in Moscow, I should surely have asked her to marry me!

II. Solo (Olga)

On the 25th of May we were married.
From then on, we were constantly parting,
Always seeing each other off,
Always having to say 'goodbye.'
Though his heart was drawn to Moscow,
For his health we had to live in Yalta –
His 'warm Siberia,' he called it.

Through his efforts and great love
For everything the earth brings forth
He transformed a wilderness into a
Luxuriant, exquisite varied garden.

Still he always yearned to be in Moscow –
To be near the theatre among actors, to talk, to joke,
To be near life, to watch it, feel it, take part in it –
Even so, he took a simple, wise and beautiful attitude
To his bodily dissolution, saying it is because
'God has put a bacillus into me.'

III. Solo (Anton)

*It's the devil who has put this bacillus into me
and the love of art into you, Olga!*

Yalta November 12th

We are having glorious weather for November,
Although for the past few days it has been pouring down
incessantly.

It is so damp that toads and frisky young crocodiles
Are hopping about all over the garden.
The performing fleas continue to serve the sacred cause of
art. There is even an operetta at the theatre.

Oh, if only we could spend five years together, and
Then let old age catch us; then we should really have
Something to remember. But, what is the use of talking
About it?

And though the weather here is magnificent for
November, it would be far nicer in Moscow,
In Moscow, driving in a sledge with you.

God bless you, my little German. I love you, but you
Have known that for ages now.

I send you 1,013,212 kisses

continued next page

IV. Duo (Olga)

Chekhov as I knew him was the
 Chekhov of the last six years of his life—
 Slowly growing weaker in body but at
 The same time stronger in spirit,
 Stronger in mind.

The impression left by those six
 Years is one of anxiety, and of rushing
 From place to place—like a sea-gull,
 A sea-gull over the ocean,
 Not knowing where to alight:
 Endless trips between Moscow and Yalta;
 Dreams of traveling along northern
 Rivers, traveling to Sweden and Norway.
 And the
 Most cherished dream of all:

To travel through Italy which allured
 Him with its colors, its pulsing life, and
 Above all, its music and flowers.

(Anton)

My darling: the winter is so very
 Long, I am not well, no one has written to me
 for nearly a month—and I had
 Made up my mind that there was nothing left
 for me but to go abroad to someplace
 New, to a place where it is not so dull.

You are living, working, hoping,
 Drinking; you laugh when someone says
 something amusing. I am a different
 Matter, I am torn up by the roots,

I am not living a full life; I
 Don't drink, though I am fond of drinking;
 I love excitement and don't get it—

In fact I am like a transplanted
 Tree . . . hesitating whether to take root
 Or to wither.



Olga and Anton, 1901

V. Solo (Olga)

Our first performance of *The Cherry Orchard* was
 A triumphant occasion, but there was a feeling of anxiety,
 A sense of something ominous in the air. I do not know.

(Anton: When are you going to take me away?)

Chekhov listened very gravely, very attentively to
 All the speeches read in his honor, but from time to time he
 Threw up his head and it seemed as though he were taking
 A bird's-eye view of all that was going on, as though he
 Had no part in it, it was nothing to do with him . . .

(Anton: When are you going to take me away?)

. . . and characteristic lines appeared around his mouth, his
 Face lit up by a soft, twinkling smile. Still I could not escape
 The sense of something immense swooping down upon me. I
 Do not know.

VI. Solo (Anton)

There is a feeling of black melancholy about your
 letter, dear actress—'something immense swooping down
 upon me' and so on.

You must think about the future,
 Otherwise we shall never live, but go on
 Sipping life from a tablespoon, once an hour.

When are you going to take me away?

We shall go first to Vienna, stay a day or two,
 Then on to Switzerland, then to Venice (if it is not too hot)
 Then to Lake Como, where we shall take a villa
 And settle down properly.



Rehearsing for the 1996 premiere of
A Few Words About Chekhov
 Frederica von Stade, Håkan Hagegård,
 Martin Katz, Dominick Argento.

VII. Duo (Olga)

We went instead to Badenweiler, a
 Health resort in the Black Forest.

One night he woke up, and asked
 For the doctor to be fetched.
 The doctor came and ordered champagne.
 Chekhov sat up and said aloud to the
 Doctor:

Then he took the glass, turned to
 Me, and with his wonderful smile
 He said:

(Anton)

"Ich Sterbe . . ."

'It's been a long while since I
 Have drunk champagne.'

(Olga)

He calmly drank it to the last drop,
Quietly lay down and soon afterwards
Sank into silence forever.

A huge black moth burst in and
Dashed itself in terror against the
electric light. The doctor went away.

Gradually, it began to get light. I stood
Alone on the balcony and there in the
Stillness I looked at the rising sun.

Then I looked at the lovely, serene
Face of Anton Pavlovich, smiling as though
With the comprehension of
Something . . .

There had never been such
A moment in my life.

Nor, I suppose, will there ever
Be again.

(Anton)

You ask
What is life? That is just the same as asking
What is a carrot. A carrot is a carrot, and
Nothing more is known about it.



Olga in 1912

A Few Words about *A Few Words about Chekhov*:

A Few Words about Chekhov is part of a trilogy of cycles commissioned by The Schubert Club, the other two being *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf* and *The Andrée Expedition*. The first cycle was for mezzo, the second for baritone, and this one for mezzo and baritone. I seem to prefer mezzos to sopranos and baritones to tenors: the leading roles in most of my operas are for either of these voice types. Without intending it, I now notice that all three cycles share certain characteristics: they are person-orientated and exhibit a seriousness of purpose not present in their other siblings, and all three conclude with the protagonist's death. The greater weightiness of these cycles is a reflection of the commissioner they have in common and the specific audience that he has cultivated, perhaps the most discerning group of music lovers in this area.

—Dominick Argento, from *Catalogue Raisonné As Memoir*