

Translating Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya"

SEPTEMBER 19, 2018

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Arb Arts presents Anton Chekhov's
Uncle Vanya
Scenes from Country Life



A NEW TRANSLATION BY
JOHN FREEDMAN

DIRECTED BY
KATE MENDELOFF

7PM
SEPTEMBER 21 & 22 . 2018
KEENE THEATER
EAST QUADRANGLE
ANN ARBOR, MI
FREE ADMISSION

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Saturday. It will be revived at the Tennessee Williams Festival in Provincetown, MA, on Sept. 28 to 30. I was asked to write a translator's note for the program and, although I was swamped with work and had no time, and, thus, did my best to be short and sweet, I still probably wrote more than any program can accept. I presume just a few words will survive. So, for the record, here is the full piece. Hardly earth-shattering, but it does contain a few thoughts I hold dear.

Some Thoughts on Translating Uncle Vanya

By John Freedman

We know numerous playwrights so well that some of us might think their words resound in our heads. But on this score I think only Shakespeare can compete with Anton Chekhov. It's an interesting duo. I have always said there is no playwright more Russian than Shakespeare, and no playwright more in tune with the English-speaking world than Chekhov.

What I mean is that Shakespeare's characters and words and situations and themes fit the Russian literary canon, and the Russian sensibility, like a glove. Chekhov's fit the English-language world in a similar way. In Britain Chekhov is strikingly British. In the United States he seems uncannily American. It's because of those words and situations and themes, again. These two writers cross borders like few others do.

Having said that, I must admit we have not found the ideal Chekhov in English yet. That must be true for almost every new production of Chekhov these days comes with a new translation. Somebody – directors? actors? spectators? – is not entirely comfortable with the English words hundreds of translators have put into the mouths of Chekhov's characters. As a reader and translator of Russian (I've lived in Russia 30 years and translated some 80 Russian plays into English), I, too, am dissatisfied. So when Kate Mendeloff offered the chance, I jumped at the challenge of discovering the "real" *Uncle Vanya* in English.

When I read Chekhov in English, or watch him performed, I too often hear "translationese," a disease that comes from remaining a captive to the original Russian. I hear dictionaries speaking, not people. I hear the sound of "linguistic tradition" being

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I am not here to explain or defend my translation of *Uncle Vanya*. But I would like to say this: translation is choice. Any choice – especially in a translation – assumes loss and/or gain. Rare are the words in any language that correspond perfectly to their counterparts in another. Thus, one finds, as one moves forward in a translation, that one is engaging in an act of juggling, of balancing the loss of humor in degrees with the acquisition in increments of depth or detail, or vice versa. Your author resounds in your head, rather like Homer's Sirens, and you follow that call, cutting as short a path as the two languages allow, but always taking the necessary detour when one or the other language thrusts an obstacle in front of you.

Perhaps most important of all in the case at hand – I fear we sometimes forget that Chekhov's characters spoke freely, naturally, and in a style that was supremely contemporary. If Russian, like all languages, has moved on from the turn of the 19th/20th century and transformed into something else, something more "modern," that does not mean that today we should make Chekhov's characters speak like those who lived a century before us. Of all the arts, theatre is the one most immersed in the here-and-now, the living actor standing, perhaps trembling, before a living, breathing audience. Chekhov's characters were his own contemporaries, and were contemporaries of those audiences who witnessed the great writer's art come to life for the first time on stage. I believe Chekhov is, and must be, our contemporary, too. I believe that is the choice we make.

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