



## Acting 1 & 2 (Introductory Acting)

### *Chekhov & Realism*

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### **Learning Objective:**

The student will be introduced to Chekhov and Realism.

### **Bell Ringer:**

When you think of a realistic drama, what qualities does it have? How is theatre not realistic?

### **Lesson Steps:**

**Read the article below and take notes. You will take a quiz after you have read it.**

The father of modern Russian drama, Anton Chekhov had trouble convincing his producers that his plays were meant to be funny. Born in 1860 in a Russian seaport town, Chekhov, had a painful childhood, which nevertheless provided inspiration for his later writings. His father was a struggling grocer who had been born a serf, and the family teetered on the edge of poverty. After briefly attending a local primary school, Chekhov entered the town high school, where he remained for 10 years. He received a good education that enabled him, during his last three years there, to support himself by coaching younger boys.

By this time his father, having gone bankrupt, had moved the rest of the family to Moscow to make a fresh start. In 1879 Chekhov joined his family there, where he enrolled in medical school; he graduated as a doctor in 1884. While in medical school, Chekhov supported himself and much of his family by freelance journalism and humorous stories. Although much of his later writing focuses on human misery and despair, humor always remains an important element. Becoming a full-time writer, Chekhov soon became very well known producing a large number of sketches and short stories that made him popular with the "lowbrow" public. He was less successful with the critics, who took him to task for holding no firm political and social views and for refusing to pass judgment even on his most despicable

characters.

During the later 1880s, Chekhov also began experimenting as a playwright, ranging from the tragedy *Ivanov* (1887), which ends with the suicide of the main character, to a number of hilarious one-act farces. His first important play was *The Seagull*, a flop when first produced in 1896, but successful in its 1898 revival by the Moscow Art Theatre. The play helped establish Chekhov as a dramatist. Already ill with the tuberculosis that would eventually kill him, Chekhov moved to Yalta, a resort on the Black Sea. In 1901 he married Olga Knipper, a young actress who had appeared in his plays. Since she continued her acting career in Moscow, and Chekhov spent his winters in Yalta or on the French Riviera, they lived apart during most of the winter months.

Chekhov continued to write for the Moscow Art Theatre. *Uncle Vanya* (1899), *The Three Sisters* (1901), and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) were his last – and best – works. They are all poignant studies of the Russian landowning class in decline. But Chekhov was not completely satisfied with the way his plays were produced, repeatedly insisting that they were comedies rather than tragedies, despite the fact this his characters frequently complain about boredom and lack of meaning in their lives. Chekhov died in 1904, at a healthy resort in Germany. His influence on modern fiction and drama has been immense – even though he wrote comparatively few major plays. His works continue to be read, performed, and enjoyed around the world.

During most of the 1800s, the cultural movement known as Romanticism was a dominant influence on drama, poetry, painting, music, and the other arts. Romanticism in drama produced an emphasis on heroic and sentimental gestures and melodramatic stories set in exotic, far-off lands or distant times. Stage settings were elaborate, involving painted perspectives and such stage machinery as trapdoors, treadmills, flying rigs, and smoke and fire effects.

By the 1880s, many writers – including Chekhov – had started writing in a new style that came to be called realism. Realist playwrights focused on ordinary, contemporary people living more or less

everyday lives. Chekhov himself contributed to this sense of realism by developing a dramatic style that is both elusive and deceptively simple. Conversations seem to go nowhere in particular; thoughts and actions may not be concluded; what is left unsaid may be more important than what is said.

Realistic theatre featured the box set, a two or three walled set representing the interior of a room, with authentic props that would be handled. The emphasis on realism gave rise to the convention of the "fourth wall," that is, actors were supposed to be living their lives in real rooms, with the audience spying on them through an invisible fourth wall. Actors were never supposed to acknowledge the invisible wall or the audience.

Costumes were contemporary. For the women that meant dresses with long, full skirts worn over corsets with one or more petticoats and usually with high necks and long sleeves, except for formal evening wear. For the men it meant suits cut in a style close to our modern style, but with longer coats and differently shaped lapels. In public, men always wore white shirts with high, stiff collars and neckties. Movements were much more relaxed than in Moliere's plays, although like actors in Moliere's plays, the costumes as well as the manners of the day demanded that women and men could never relax so far as to slouch.

The movement toward realism reached its peak in 1898 with the founding of the Moscow Art Theatre. One of its co-founders, Konstantin Stanislavski, not only insisted on the new realistic acting techniques for his cast members but went on to develop his ideas about acting in three books on what became known as the Stanislavski method. Rejecting the use of overemphasized, declamatory vocal techniques and standardized gestures and poses, he claimed that acting must be based on inner "artistic truth." Stanislavski's methods spread to other countries and have had particular influence in the United States. Despite Stanislavski's reputation as an innovator of acting style, his productions were still never quite natural and non-declamatory enough for Chekhov. He felt that the productions given his plays were too heavy and serious, overemphasizing the characters' dissatisfactions and failures. Chekhov wanted to stress the comic elements by having actors perform with the lightest possible touch.

## Practice:

Take the quiz below to check your understanding of the article. Then, check your answers with the key.

Decide whether each item below was a characteristic of the realist movement or the Romantic movement in drama. Write “realism” if the item is characteristic of realism and write “Romanticism” if the item is characteristic of Romanticism.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. The box set
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Smoke and fire effects
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Relaxed movements
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. The “fourth” wall
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Melodramatic stories

Write the letter of the item that best completes each sentence in the blank provided.

\_\_\_\_\_ 6. The Stanislavski method included

- a) Standardized poses
- b) Acting based on an “inner truth”
- c) heroic gestures
- d) all of the above

\_\_\_\_\_ 7. Chekhov believed that Stanislavski’s approach

- a) Was too realistic
- b) Made the actors seem too natural
- c) made Chekhov’s plays seem too serious
- d) all of the above

\_\_\_\_\_ 8. The Moscow Art Theatre

- a) Was part of the realist movement
- b) Was co-founded by Stanislavski
- c) helped Chekhov gain recognition
- d) all of the above

\_\_\_\_\_ 9. In Chekhov’s plays, the costumes

- a) Matched current fashions
- b) Reflected a casual style of dress
- c) included doublets for male characters
- d) all of the above

**Answers:**

**1. Realism**

**2. Romanticism**

**3. Realism**

**4. Realism**

**5. Romanticism**

**6. B**

**7. D**

**8. D**

**9. A**