



RESOURCE EXTRA

THREE SISTERS by Anton Chekhov

Translated by Michael Frayn

Synopsis of THREE SISTERS

In the words of Sarah Frankcom, the Director of the Royal Exchange Theatre production, Chekhov's THREE SISTERS is "a play about life and how life changes. Life has some good bits and some not so good bits, and in order for the good bits to exist, we have to have the bad bits".

Its themes are very recognisable. I'm sure there are times when we've all been dissatisfied with our lot, frustrated by our hopes and aspirations. Chekhov writes about a family in exactly that situation. Written in 1900, the play tells us about an upper class family who are longing to return to the glamour, colour and power of big city Moscow. Even though the three sisters, Olga, Masha, and Irina were educated and brought up in Moscow, they have been living for many years in a small boring colourless town. Now that their father is dead, they long to return to Moscow and 'the good life'. They know many people but feel lonely. Their house always seems to be full, but they feel intellectually isolated. As the three sisters and their brother Andrei search for their happiness they find that relationships, time and the ordinary nature of life hold them back. We hope you enjoy finding out what happens to the Prozorov family and the brilliantly crafted characters that they encounter. It is considered one of Anton Chekhov's great plays. A Russian classic. Many millions have enjoyed it since it's first performance in 1901 - we hope you do too!

Interview with Director Sarah Frankcom

Many books have been written about this play and its many possible meanings, but what would you say the play is about?

I suppose it's about life and how life changes. The play celebrates the human capacity to endure great periods of pain and despair and celebrates our ability to make each other happy.

What drew you to this play? Why did you want to direct it?

When I first read it, many years ago as a student, I didn't really know a lot about theatre. I hadn't really read that many plays. The first time I read it I realised that even though it was quite a hard play to understand because there was so much going on, so many characters and complicated Russian names, underneath there seemed to be a lot of very real people. Very minutely observed people, going through very big things. It made me realise that at the end of the day a lot of great drama has real people at the centre of it, experiencing life. That's why audiences come to see it, and still want to see it so many years after it was first produced. Also, as someone who has gone on to work a lot with playwrights, I feel that Chekhov can't be compared to anyone else. It's also a play that I've

learnt so much from. I've learnt a lot about acting, sound design, directing and playwrighting from this play. It's a great resource for that. It's a play I keep coming back too. I've directed it many times over the years in Drama schools, but never for an audience, so it's quite weird to actually be doing it for real, here at the exchange.

You have worked successfully with the Designer Liz Ascroft many times. What makes this partnership so successful?

It's about sensibilities. I think that most important thing about the relationship with a designer that lasts over a number of productions is, that they look at the world in the same way as you to some extent, and yet still manage to challenge you and differ from you. When that balance is right it's great. I think that the great thing about Liz and I is that we start from the point of view that we just want to do the play. We want to serve the play and create a world that does that. We're not very interested in concepts or statements. It's just about doing the play. Of course Liz's attention to detail and understanding of how moments may work in performance is second to none.

Rehearsal Notes by Assistant Director, Rania Jumaily

FIVE WEEKS TO GO...

- The first week of THREE SISTERS rehearsals gets off to an exhilarating but exhausting and mind-boggling start: which was a definite sign of the way things would continue!
- The first day of any rehearsal process at the Exchange always follows a similar pattern. There is a 'meet and greet' in which the cast of the play and the staff of the Exchange all come together and the Director (Sarah Frankcom) talks us all through the coming process. The Designer (Liz Ascroft) then talks the assembled (very large) group through the design for the play by showing us the model box (a miniature version of the set).
- This is the first time the cast of actors see the set design and get a sense of the world they will be creating on stage; always a very exciting time! Almost all of the men in the play are soldiers of some sort so the costumes are also an exciting talking point as we have a look through Liz's costume drawings.
- In the afternoon, we do the 'read-through' where we all sit round a table and read the play aloud from start to finish. Again this is a thrilling experience and although of course the finished product will be miles away from this first read through, it is lovely to get a sense of the actors, their characters and the story they will be telling. The great thing about the THREE SISTERS read-through is that we all know that the play works (as it is such a famous and classic text), but of course this adds real pressure to get it right!
- The process kicks in on the Tuesday when the real work begins. The full acting company (14 altogether at this point) plus the Director, myself and the stage management team are all seated round a table for the entire first week, working through the play, page by page and making sense of it all.
- This work involves figuring out 'back stories' for all the characters; what their lives have been before the start of the play, so that they all have a past, present and future. In particular, we focus on discussing past events that directly affect the action of the play (the death of the Father is one example of this).
- For me, this is a big research period. As the period, place and time in which THREE SISTERS is set is so different from our own, there is a lot of research! During the first week I look into Russian superstitions, the meanings of the names, life expectancy at the time (which was only 31 in turn of the century Russia!) and the significance of different types of vodka to name but a few!
- We get to the end of the play by the end of the week which means we are on schedule (a very rare occurrence in rehearsals for anything!). The work has been incredibly detailed and thorough, but also daunting as I think we all start to realise how massive this play is and how much work it will need to really do it justice.

FOUR WEEKS TO GO...

- The beginning of week 2 marks a big change for our actors as they get up for the first time and act! We start work at the beginning of the play and work through chronologically. Each scene is read through sitting down and then the actors start moving the scene around the space.
- All this takes place in the rehearsal room which is 'marked up' by the stage management team to replicate the theatre and the position of the furniture / props as much as possible. Most of the props and furniture we are using are just for rehearsal purposes at this stage, but as the week goes on more and more of the actual objects we will be using in the production appear in the room as they are made, bought or finished.
- All the background work we did the week before really seems to pay off as we start to work through the play, as all the actors have a good and grounded sense of who their characters are and what their place is in the story.
- It quickly becomes clear that focus is going to be an essential element of the play for us to crack. In Act One particularly, the set consists of two rooms (the drawing room and the dining room) and action is often happening in both rooms simultaneously. Finding a balance between keeping a scene in one room alive without it distracting the audience and pulling focus from the other room is a consistent challenge this week.

THREE WEEKS TO GO...

- At the beginning of this week, we go right back to the beginning of the play and begin working through each scene for the second time. The focus of this week is to simplify and clarify everything that has been done previously, particularly in terms of the blocking (the movement around the stage).
- At this point in rehearsals, bits and pieces of people's costumes start to appear. Most of the cast have started to wear their shoes and boots everyday, as what you have on your feet can make a really huge difference to the way you move and thus to your character. Some of the girls also start to wear their corsets for the first time, just for short periods, to try and get used to the fact that their breathing will be heavily restricted throughout the show!
- We start having both music and dance calls this week. The composer of the show, Jamie Norton, comes in and does several sessions with the cast members who are required to sing or play an instrument, which surprisingly happens more than you would think in **THREE SISTERS!** We also have a choreographer who does one hour-long session with three of the men in the play who have to perform part of a traditional Russian dance. This causes great amusement and is a fantastic lift in the scene in which it occurs.

TWO WEEKS TO GO...

- This is a huge week for us as it marks our departure from the rehearsal room and our arrival on stage! We all move downstairs and rehearse for the whole week in the theatre itself (also called the module). This is a fantastic opportunity to see how and if the show, as we have rehearsed it, will work in the module, but also means that an awful lot is liable to change!
- We work through the whole play again from beginning to end in the first three days in the space, looking at entrances and exits (and sorting out the timing for these), and making adjustments to the placement of the actors. It is a big change for everyone and takes a while to get used to, particularly for those actors who haven't worked in this unique space before as it makes very different demands on them. However, by halfway through the week, the show is really working in the module and starting to come together.
- On the Thursday of this final rehearsal week, we do our first run through of the entire play. This is a very daunting experience for all concerned, as it is the first time the actors will get a sense of their character journey's throughout the whole play, and the first time the creative team will see the show in its entirety and be able to assess if it all works and hangs together.
- The first run is a success! Loads of work to do, but everyone feels very encouraged by the fact that the story all makes sense and the staging is both functional and beautiful in the space itself.
- At the tail-end of the final week we do two more runs, which are followed by big notes sessions with the actors, in which the Director talks through things that worked and things that can be improved.
- We finish the week on Saturday after our final run. All are unanimously exhausted but exhilarated and excited about the next step: 'production week', in which all the elements that create a show will be put together and then seen by a live audience on the following Wednesday night!

I am writing this just before the first of our two dress rehearsals for the show; it's looking gorgeous, the set and costumes are all done and we are all looking forward, with our fingers crossed, to the first preview tomorrow night!

