

**How (Not?) To Adapt Chekhov: Adventures in  
Dramaturgy**

**By**

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## "How (Not?) To Adapt Chekhov: Adventures in Dramaturgy."

Despite rapid growth of adaptation theory in the last two decades, there is a gap in the field. Books like Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) and Julie Sanders' *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006) approach adaptations from an audience's perspective, describing the effects of the adaptation process and providing a robust taxonomy, identifying all of different forms that adaptation might take. They do not, however, describe the details of the process of adaptation itself, even though they often refer to the need for a process-oriented account of adaptation. Existing adaptation manuals focus on screen-writing, leaving someone with an interest in the specifics of adapting a play nowhere to turn. This paper begins to address this gap in the available knowledge by documenting the adaptation process involved in the creation of four new adaptations of Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, targeted at a New Zealand audience.

The experiments presented here confirm what is suggested by a survey of the reception of English-language adaptations of Chekhov: there is no single correct method for adapting a play. An adapter's greatest challenge can be identifying which strategy is appropriate for the conditions they face. This project experiments with different adaptive methods and strategies, developed by looking at other English-language Chekhov adaptations, including techniques of approximating the setting, language and themes to a target audience. I attempt to identify which methodologies will achieve the desired results, revealing a variety of different challenges, advantages and weaknesses inherent to each approach. Moreover, both the research and the experiments suggest how the success or failure of an adaptation depends on a variety of contextual factors, including the target audience's relationship with the adapted work, the dramaturgical characteristics of that work, and the abilities of the adapter.

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## 1. Introduction

Adaptation theory, when compared with many of the other fields of research that occupy theatre scholars, is a new field. Its roots lie in Gérard Genette's 1982 book *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, a work which describes a theory of intertextuality under the metaphor of the palimpsest. A palimpsest is "a manuscript in which later writing has been superimposed on earlier (effaced) writing" ("palimpsest" OED Online) meaning that multiple texts exist simultaneously in the same place. This idea of the interrelation of texts forms the core of Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), the book which is now the "go to" resource for adaptation theory. In *A Theory of Adaptation* Hutcheon describes a robust taxonomy of adaptation, attempting to identify all of the different forms that adaptation might take. Her definition of adaptation as "repetition without replication" (7) is indicative of her overall stance that adaptations are a legitimate form of expression rather than the derivative form they are frequently treated as. Julie Sander's *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006) continued to extend the field of research. A number of texts now exist addressing the adaptation of specific playwrights, including many about Shakespeare as well as the recent volume of essays *Adapting Chekhov* (2013).

However, despite this field's ever growing library of resources, there is a gap in the knowledge provided by the field's scholars to date. Books like *A Theory of Adaptation* and *Adaptation and Appropriation* approach adaptations from an audience's perspective, describing the effect that the adaptation process has had on the "original" work and its subsequent reception by audiences. Linda Hutcheon's call for us to "deal with adaptations as *adaptations*" (Hutcheon 6, emphasis in source) reminds us that adaptation is a relationship between two (or more) texts rather than an artistic process used to create a new work. Elsewhere, while adaptation manuals do exist (such as Linda Seger's *The Art of Adaptation* (1992)), these are focused on screenwriting, leaving someone with an interest in the specifics of adapting a play nowhere to turn.

This paper will begin to address this knowledge gap by documenting my experience of the adaptation process. The aim of this study is not to try to identify

which characteristics make a good adaptation (at best a rather nebulous concept), but instead to provide a demonstration of some of the techniques of adaptation from the perspective of the playwright. The intention here is not to create a “good” adaptation but rather to allow various techniques of adaptation to be played out and then to investigate the kinds of works they produce. The adaptations I produce will be targeted specifically for a New Zealand audience as that is my creative context.

## 2. The Chekhovian Environment

Anton Chekhov is dead. So is the audience that he wrote for and the actors that spoke his words. To put this death in its full perspective: Chekhov died chronologically closer to the first European settlement in New Zealand than he did to the present day and was dead for nearly a quarter century by the time my grandparents were born. The dense social commentary of his plays now describes a Russia separated from us by two revolutions, two world wars, half a century of brutal Stalinist government and an East versus West conflict that very nearly resulted in the end of the world as we know it. All that said, Chekhov has shown, along with many other artists, that death does not necessarily have to hinder your success. In fact it wasn't until after Chekhov died that his works spread across the globe, making him, in Chekhov scholar Lawrence Senelick's words, "second only to Shakespeare in reputation and in frequency of production" (1).

It would be unsurprising that in New Zealand we seem to have no significant interest in his body of work if it were not for the fact that Chekhov plays such an important role in the global canon. If anything, outside of New Zealand Chekhov is more important now than he ever has been. In the United Kingdom he is second only to Shakespeare in terms of his cultural importance and frequency of performance. Ian McKellen has performed in so much Chekhov that, once again, it is only his experience with Shakespeare that trumps it. Chekhov is frequently staged in the United States, Canada, South Africa and across Europe. Chekhov's plays are the tenth most frequently staged plays in Japan, have a keen following in India and appear to be ingrained in Australia's cultural canon.

### Chekhov in English

This is not to say that Chekhov's plays transitioned easily into English language performance. In *The Chekhov Theatre: A Century of the Plays in Performance*, Lawrence Senelick opens his chapter on early Chekhov in the United Kingdom by suggesting that "[m]isapprehensions of Chekhov had an early start in the anglophone world" (131). The early opinion of his plays was that they were "decipherable only by Russians" (133). Significant cultural differences stood in the way of an English audience

readily grasping the plays and this led to many labelling the Russian characters' eccentricities as mental illness (131).

The translators' reaction to this situation was to tweak characters in order to bring them in line with English expectations. Senelick describes Constance Garnett's widely read translations as being "suffused with a literary gentility which turned [Chekhov's] characters into proper Edwardians" (140). Lauren Leighton in her essay on English translation of Chekhov, outlines the way that these translation strategies appeared in Chekhov's short stories:

[...] Chekhov's landowners in "The Kiss" become "local country gentlemen" who are served "biscuits" by "footmen," while his army officers are obliged to wear "mufti" and exclaim "I like his cheek!" [...] "Women" features "country gentlemen" again, servants who address their masters as "your honour," and peasants who drop in at the local "drink shop." [...] A character in "The Bet" loses his "last farthing" and in "A Dreary Story" we find such British realia as "navvy," "knight," and " 'satis' " (a student's grade). British expressions like "Fire away!" "high class," and "a nice lot" abound in this translation (Leighton 292-293)

From this it is apparent that the translators attempted to make Chekhov's characters talk as though they were native English speakers rather than Russians being translated into English. Whether or not their techniques produced accurate results is debatable, but they did achieve a more "English" aesthetic to Chekhov's language.

While such extremes are less likely in a more modern translation, Chekhov in English has been thoroughly "Anglicised". This is evidenced by a number of significant translations/adaptations which strive to reaffirm the value of Chekhov's plays to audiences alienated by their foreign nature. In some post-colonial cultures Chekhov has been seen as just another aspect of the English cultural hegemony. Mustapha Matura when he created *Trinidad Sisters* (a version of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* reframed to focus on matters specific to the West Indies) was not intending to make "rewritings in the sense that they would give voice to the voiceless, reveal the other side of a canonical European work and undermine its master-narrative", nor was he

aiming to “fragment the classic text to intersperse it with new material and reverse its ending” (Döring 82). Rather, *Trinidad Sisters* and Matura's other adaptation of the Western canon, *Playboy of the West Indies*, are “best analyzed as cultural translations which carefully construct analogies and search for workable Trinidadian equivalents of their Anglo-Irish and Russian models” (Döring 82). The play that Matura wrote was not a challenge to *Three Sisters* but rather a tool for bringing Chekhov's story to an audience that might struggle with its usual setting and the rarefied English mode of speech into which it is regularly translated.

Irish playwright and another Chekhov adaptor, Brian Friel neatly sums up why British English outside of the context of Britain can be problematic to audiences: “We have all been educated in an English system, we are brought up in school reading Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats.... there is a foreignness in this literature; it is the literature of a different race” (Krause 643). Note here that Friel's use of the term “foreignness” mirrors early English sentiments towards Chekhov's plays. In one quote presented by Lawrence Senelick, A. B. Walkley remarks in response to an early English production of *The Cherry Orchard* that “Russians are foreigners” (Senelick 133). Friel reminds us here that to the Irish as well as to New Zealanders, Australians, Canadians, South Africans and those other inhabitants of the English speaking world outside of England, the English are foreigners. Cultures finding ways to make Chekhov their own has been an important part of that author's success around the world. J Douglas Clayton indicates, for example, that John Murrell's translation of *Uncle Vanya* was a landmark event in the Canadian theatre; a point where they took over ownership of a piece of the Western canon. As Clayton puts it, Murrell's version “took away the Russian writer's 'foreign accent' and focussed on the theatrical values of his play” (161). This reframing of the play in a Canadian voice represented “another step in the long and arduous process of creating a Canadian national theatre, free of its British and American colonial past” (Clayton 162). This is a revelation that does not appear to have occurred in New Zealand: Canada and elsewhere made Chekhov their own in a way that New Zealand never did.

There does not appear to have been anything approaching regular



performance of his plays in New Zealand until the late 1950s<sup>1</sup> and after decades of highs and lows they have disappeared almost entirely from our stages. Lawrence Senelick suggests that a “spate of translations”, beginning in 1915, made Chekhov’s work more accessible to a reading public (140). Translator Julius West remarked at the time that “[t]he last few years have seen a large and generally unsystematic mass of translations from the Russian flung at the heads and hearts of English readers. The ready acceptance of Chekhov has been one of the few successful features of this irresponsible output” (West). New Zealand was not immune to this inundation of English translations of Chekhov’s body of work that occurred after his death. Chekhov was not only available in New Zealand but also read widely. In a newspaper article from 1927 one critic dismantles a new translation of *The Shooting Party*, one of Chekhov’s early novels, noting that it “was not included in Chekhov’s personal collection and, can be of interest only to students of his gradual development” (“Chekhov in English”). This suggests that in New Zealand there was some interest in reading Chekhov’s works and a reasonable understanding as to who he was. A 1922 article introduces the Russian as simply “Chekhov”, assuming an audience familiar enough to recognise him from surname alone (“Literary Notes”).

There is only one thorough account of Chekhov’s plays in New Zealand, Stuart Young’s two-part paper *Russian Plays on the New Zealand Stage* (2001, 2003). It is an excellent account of Chekhov’s development on the New Zealand stage which goes some way to plugging the gap that Lawrence Senelick’s *The Chekhov Theatre* left in its account of colonial Chekhov performance. Young’s account shows that, despite the absence of Russian theatre in New Zealand, as Chekhov’s “plays became firmly established in the British repertoire” (“First Instalment” 157), they did eventually catch on with Theatre Aotearoa showing regular performance beginning in the 1960s and show a steady increase in the rate of performance as the twentieth century progressed.

After 1984 both *Uncle Vanya* and *Three Sisters* disappear from the stage until the 1990s according to the Theatre Aotearoa database. It is fair to categorise performance of Chekhov as having gone through a lull for these six years when

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Theatre Aotearoa database. This is a curated database and contains a record of over 13,280 theatre productions in New Zealand, making it a reliable source for production histories.

compared directly to what came before and after. This lull comes in the aftermath of a rash of performances of *Foreskin's Lament* (1981), signifying the beginning of the nationalist movement in the New Zealand theatre. Young notes that 1982 marks an end to the active championing of Russian culture in New Zealand, attributing this to "the growing professionalism of New Zealand theatre during the 1960s and 1970s" bringing an end to many of the "progressive drama societies and university groups", an increased interest in local playwrights and the decline of the Soviet Union ("Recent Developments" 217).

When Chekhov eventually did return to our stage in the 1990s, it was along with what Young terms "a rediscovery of some of the wider Russian repertoire" ("Recent Developments" 217). What is unclear is whether audiences at this time were rediscovering Chekhov's works as interesting in their own right or if the plays were simply riding the coattails of a wider trend. Either way Chekhov's popularity has again waned; the Theatre Aotearoa database shows no productions of any of his plays since 2008. As one final nail in the coffin of Chekhov performance in New Zealand, one of the last major performances of a Chekhov play seen in New Zealand was a touring Royal Shakespeare Company version of *The Seagull* in 2007, solidifying the concept to Kiwi audiences that this is a body of work that belongs elsewhere.

Anton Chekhov's body of work represents a fortuitous combination of circumstances. He is a playwright of obvious significance whose works have, for quite understandable reasons, disappeared from my immediate creative context. What is more, outside of New Zealand there exists a strong and varied culture of adapting Chekhov. This has been especially brought to the fore by the recent publication of *Adapting Chekhov: The Text and its Mutations*, a collection of essays on the practices of adapting Chekhov's body of work. Therefore it has been well established that it is possible to adapt Chekhov and this study can move away from identifying *whether* Chekhov's plays can be adapted and instead focus on *how* they can be adapted. This focus upon the "hows" of adaptation influenced my choice of case studies for identifying adaptive methodologies. They are all (with just one exception) adaptations of Chekhov plays, meaning that their techniques are established means for adapting Chekhov. Again this moves my investigation away from *if* these techniques can be applied to Chekhov and towards *how* they can be applied.

As such, Chekhov makes a good field for experimenting with adaptations in New Zealand. It is a convenient alignment of factors that Chekhov's works are largely absent from New Zealand while both occupying an important place in the global canon and having been subject to a large number of adaptations elsewhere in the world. In other words, Chekhov's plays are culturally significant on the global stage and suitable for adaptation. The fact that no far reaching movement towards the adaptation of Chekhov exists in New Zealand means that there does not already exist a roadmap towards adaptation here, making this a viable environment for experimenting with new techniques. The play I have opted to adapt is *Uncle Vanya*, often subtitled "Scenes from Country Life" (Chekhov 143), which Chekhov set in a rural estate. It is well suited to a Kiwi adaptation for a number of reasons. Firstly, its characters, all fundamentally bored with their situation, become increasingly caught up in petty jealousies and pet hates or causes, these characterisations being still representative of sections of modern society. Specifically the character Doctor Astrov levels criticism at the apathy of the Russian people towards their country's environmental degradation, sentiments that are relevant in New Zealand today. Especially resonant is Astrov's sense of belonging to and need to look after the land that has shaped his culture's character. With much of New Zealand's national identity tied up in our local flora and fauna, our distinctive landscapes and our "clean and green" image, this sentiment has a very specific relevance for New Zealanders. Secondly, the play's overwhelming sense of isolation suits New Zealand's island culture. Finally, compared to a play like *The Cherry Orchard* or *The Seagull*, it is less tied to major Russian social events and structures. The plot does not rely on an audience's understanding of the liberation of the serfs or the culture of Moscow's great theatres, thus there is less that needs stripping away or major reworking in order to make sense to a Kiwi audience.

### **Chekhov and the Fidelity Criticism**

Chekhov wrote in the Russian language for a Russian audience in Russia. As such, it is inevitable that any version of Chekhov's plays appearing outside of Russia must go through some form of mediation. This has led to the creation of a wide range of translations each with different goals and methodologies. Victoria University of

Wellington's library, for example, contains ten different English versions of *Uncle Vanya*. Translations, however, rarely raise the same level of ire amongst critics as adaptations do, possibly due to the fact that translations rarely frame themselves in terms of "originality" or maybe even because of the necessity of translation in order for texts to propagate beyond the countries in which they were created. In fact the prevalence of translations of Chekhov can be quite staggering; with modern productions of the plays frequently boasting that they are premiering a fresh new translation. It is now, in fact, so common a practice to produce new translations of Chekhov that many of the playwrights responsible no longer directly refer back to the Russian source, being unable to speak the language themselves (Zatlin 26-27). Chekhov is increasingly second-hand, passing through various writers' hands before making it to the stage. However, as Linda Hutcheon puts it, "to be second is not to be secondary or inferior; likewise, to be first is not to be originary or authoritative" (Hutcheon xv). Chekhov's plays have become the conceptual nucleus of a whole series of texts and performances, versions and revisions that exist "laterally, not vertically" (Hutcheon xv). In the English language this lateral array of texts is surprisingly wide and representative of a variety of different approaches, tactics and intents. Inevitably the intercultural appropriation of works provokes a reaction from certain quarters, and as widespread as the "tampering" of Chekhov may be, it can still fall foul of the "fidelity criticism".

Hutcheon terms the "fidelity criticism" as "the critical orthodoxy in adaptations studies" (Hutcheon 6-7) and it has produced its fair share of papers critical of adaptors taking liberties with canonical works. One such paper, David Krause's *Friel's Ballybeggared Version of Chekhov*, frames the fidelity criticism in terms of Chekhov adaptation. Krause's attack on Friel's version of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* is therefore a useful frame for discussing whether it is acceptable to adapt Chekhov.

The subject of Krause's paper is Brian Friel's 1981 translation/adaptation of *Three Sisters* and he opens almost immediately by demanding "[w]hy did [Friel] fail to realize that a translation that was most faithful to the Russian text would be preferable to the intrusion of either British or Irish voices?" (634). Krause is concerned over what gave Friel the right to alter Chekhov's works. He proceeds to present evidence suggesting that Friel's attack on British English is motivated by a desire for "racial purity" (636) and that Friel has allowed his "anti-British" sentiments and "cultural war

with England” (635) to drive his creative endeavour. In his criticism of Friel’s changes Krause asserts that “changes of ‘queer’ to ‘quare’ and ‘fellow’ to ‘buck’ have stage-Irish echoes, and it is not entirely convincing to hear an old Russian character suddenly assume an Irish voice” (637). However, the style of alterations that Krause picks out are not unique to Friel. Kelly Younger recounts the 1925 staging of Chekhov’s *The Proposal* at The Abbey Theatre, noting that in the playscript “that the characters’ names are crossed out and retitled”, “the Russian place names are altered” and “certain expressions are deleted entirely while “[o]ther distinctly Irish expressions are added” (Younger 293-294). In the resulting script “‘Voltchanetsky’ becomes ‘Padraic Murphy’ and ‘Marushkin’ becomes the Dublin suburb ‘Ballsbridge’” while “‘Swallow tail’ becomes evening clothes, ‘dress coat’ becomes ‘Sunday clothes’ or ‘Sunday-go-to-meals-suits,’ ‘three hundred roubles’ becomes ‘30 pounds,’” and the entire resulting script has been what Younger labels as “Irished” or “Hibernicised” (Younger 293-294).

Younger rejects Krause’s claim that Friel (and by extension anyone who follows similar practices) ends up “patronizing Irish audiences with the claim that they could appreciate Chekhov only if his universally accessible plays were rendered in localized Irish versions” (Krause 634), instead suggesting that:

[...] by altering the British translations of Chekhov that dominated the English stage, [The Abbey Theatre version] boldly rejects the inherited language of genteel England. As Joseph Long comments: “Chekhov, in a sense, has to be reappropriated and presented as something other than a product of British theatrical practice and tradition”. He continues: “In modern English versions of Chekhov, the speech is almost invariably cast in a neutered register of English gentility ‘as if the plays were set somewhere in the Home Counties.’ [...] (Younger 294)

Friel’s concern in creating this version of *Three Sisters* was to react against the standard translations’ “very strong English cadences and rhythms” because he still felt that “in some way [the Irish] are constantly overshadowed by the sound of the English language, as well as by the printed word” (Krause 635).

Krause’s criticisms of Friel’s play are rooted in some consistent core

misapprehensions. At the beginning of the paper he states that it is “valid for Friel to protest against the use of affected Edwardian or Bloomsbury speech rhythms for Chekhov's play” (Krause 634); however, he later repeatedly refers to these speech rhythms as “standard English” (634, 636, 637, 642, 643, 647) going as far as to claim that: “localized and trivialized speech can be demeaning to the intelligence of provincial Irish audiences, as well as demeaning to the art of Chekhov” (642-643). This particular perception of the varieties of English may find its root in Krause's frequent assertions about Chekhov's “universality”. He talks of Chekhov's “universal theme of denied expectations” (Krause 634), Chekhov's plays as “universally accessible” (634) with *Three Sisters* in particular being “universally acclaimed” (635), Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats as “universally accepted English Romantic poets” (636) and suggesting Friel's desire to preserve Irish language as being in opposition to the reality of us all belonging to “one universal race, the human race”, dismissing centuries of cultural colonialism as a “belief” (636).

Krause's attack is in many ways characteristic of the fidelity criticism. His assumption about the existence of a “standard English”, a version of the language devoid of cultural bias which any English speaker can understand and relate to is at best suspect and at worst oppressive. Furthermore, Krause takes significant exception to the idea of anyone who does not speak Russian rewriting Chekhov's texts (635). All of this ties to a puritanical approach to the idea of the “original”. To Krause's mind there is a single correct way to approach Chekhov which has been dictated by tradition and challenges to that interpretation must be stamped out. This puritanism is reinforced by his description of *Three Sisters* as “flawless” (Krause 634). Krause takes offence at Friel's “pervasive incongruities of language and distortions of character” (642). In the ultimate illustration of this Krause cannot bring himself to describe Friel's versions of the plays as Irish translations and, instead, every time that he uses that word he places it in quotation marks so that no one will make the mistake of believing that he views these versions of the texts as legitimate. To him the established mode of Chekhov is beyond reproach and Friel, in challenging this mode, is displaying hubris in the extreme.

Krause mistakenly adheres to an “assumption that adaptors aim simply to reproduce the adapted text” (Hutcheon 7) ignoring the “manifestly many different

possible intentions behind the act of adaptation” (Hutcheon 7). He ignores that Friel clearly sees *Three Sisters* as worthy of being a part of Irish performance culture and is acting to ensure its relevance to Irish audiences. Hutcheon talks of the desire to “preserve stories that are worth knowing but will not necessarily speak to a new audience without creative ‘reanimation’” (8) suggesting the word “salvaging” as being fit for such an idea. I would suggest that in New Zealand Chekhov has languished to such a state that his works are an appropriate target of such salvaging.

What follows is divided into three parts. The first part is a study of the techniques of adaptation and how other cultures have approached making Chekhov’s plays their own. This is followed by an investigation of my four adaptations of *Uncle Vanya*, looking at how I applied the techniques I identified. The final section will look at the results of these adaptive strategies and what I learned from the creative process.

### 3. A Study of Technique – Chekhov and Adaptation

As Kelly Younger's example proves, adaptation of Chekhov's plays has been going on for a long time. Drawing on this long history by looking to other adaptors for guidance could provide assistance in identifying which adaptive methodologies will achieve the results desired of the adaptation. I set out to look at a wide range of adaptations encompassing a variety of different styles and techniques. This survey identified three major techniques of adaptation: approximation of language, approximation of setting and approximation of themes, as well as some more general guidelines about the representation of culture and the effect that the personal convictions of the adaptor can have on the work. Presented here in detail are the five adaptations which I found to be the most relevant for an adaptor working with Chekhov in New Zealand, four of Chekhov and one of Shakespeare, displaying a variety of approaches to adaptation. Brian Friel's *Three Sisters* (1981), Jason Sherman's *After the Orchard* (2005), Floyd Favel Starr's *House of Sonya* (1998), Tennessee Williams's *The Notebook of Trigorin* (first premiered 1981, final version premiered posthumously 1996) and a film adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *Forbidden Planet* (1956). Also included is a brief discussion of Tom Wood's *Vanya* (2005) and Roger Hall's *Dream of Sussex Downs* (1986). As a result of this investigation I found myself with a broad selection of techniques I could use to guide my own attempts at adapting *Uncle Vanya*.

#### Approximating Language – Brian Friel's *Three Sisters*

As mentioned earlier, language can pose a significant obstacle to an audience's reception of a work (in the case of New Zealand this would be due to Chekhov's frequent "Anglicisation" in translation clashing with our own natural mode of speech). Adaptation has the potential to allow a playwright to update the language of a play to better reflect their cultural context. This is apparent in the adaptive techniques used in Brian Friel's *Three Sisters*.

Friel's approach to adapting Chekhov is given credence due to his longstanding association with Chekhov's works. In addition to many of Friel's plays possessing what Martine Pelletier calls "Chekhovian motifs" and Friel himself being called by Richard Pine "the Irish Chekhov" (Pelletier 180), Friel has produced four adaptations of



Chekhov: the aforementioned *Three Sisters* (1981), *Uncle Vanya* (1998) and *The Yalta Game* (2001), a stage adaptation of Chekhov's short story "The Lady With the Little Dog", and *The Bear* (2002). Over several decades, Friel has engaged in a campaign to take possession of Chekhov's works bringing "the issues of language" to the foreground while giving Chekhov "a distinctly Irish and even Northern Irish idiom as part of a typically post-colonial strategy of appropriation of the classics" (Pelletier 181).

In this case the de-Anglicisation of Chekhov was motivated by the belief that Chekhov was "best sensed" (Pelletier 187) as opposed to consciously deconstructed. Pelletier points out Friel's claim in his programme notes that: "[n]o other writer of drama offers us such imaginative space as Chekhov does. We refuse it at great spiritual cost to ourselves" (Pelletier 180). As such he became convinced that the "available English translations of *Three Sisters* did not offer the right music for Irish ears and voices" (Pelletier 187). The conventions of English translation were an unnecessary layer between text and audience:

Part of [the] project can be construed as the transformation of a language imposed from outside into a language that sits easily on the Irish tongue and sounds natural to the Irish ear. This, Friel was convinced, would benefit everybody, but first and foremost the actors too often forced to inhabit an unlikely and ridiculous linguistic space when playing foreign classics like Chekhov "What has happened up to this is that Irish actors have to assume English accents, so you end up with being an Irishman pretending you're an Englishman, pretending you're a Russian!" (Pelletier 188)

Approximating Chekhov's language challenges our assumptions about the way his plays are "supposed" to sound and read. This concern neatly lines up with the New Zealand context where historically it was not uncommon for actors to be trained out of speaking in their natural accents in favour of Received Pronunciation as late as the 1980s.

David Krause provides a textual comparison, first of Chekhov in English translation and then of Friel's specific version:

I feel so ashamed - I don't know what's the matter with me, and they're all laughing at me. It's awful of me to leave the table like that, but I couldn't help it - I just couldn't.

What the hell did I do that for - making an eegit of myself before everybody. Because they made fun of me all the time - that's the why! I know it was shocking bad manners - I know that! - but I couldn't help myself, Andrey. Honest to God I just couldn't - I couldn't - I couldn't. (Krause 638)

The revised words capture the thrust of the adapted dialogue, maintaining similar structures and clearly conveying the same information. Contrasting this, however, is the insertion of Irish idioms and a much more speakable rhythm to the text.

In the case of this particular adaptation, Brian Friel did not read Russian (Pelletier 188), so he approached the text via the English translations that he had a problem with (Krause 635) and perhaps due to this Friel's approach to the text is surprisingly traditional. He pointedly "chose to retain the original Russian setting and characters but to concentrate on altering the language" (Pelletier 189). The play's titles, settings or character names all remain as they were. This is the reason that this version is frequently labelled as a translation rather than an adaptation; it does not seek to alter the play's narrative, retell its characters or challenge its dramaturgy. Friel has opted to challenge the conventions regarding style of language of translation rather than the dramaturgy of the translated text.

The critical reception of this particular version of *Three Sisters* was mixed (Pelletier 190). Pelletier attributes this to an inherent conservatism in the critical circles, stating that "several critics felt that moving away from English-English [...] somehow diminished the universal appeal of Chekhov's masterpiece, unwittingly confirming the very Anglo-centrism Friel [...] [was] determined to challenge" (Pelletier 190). As the years have proceeded, however, critical opinion of these works has generally improved, a fact which Krause notes with some ire:

Why have so many critics, in their high praise of Friel's work during the almost twenty years since he wrote his version of *Three Sisters*, generalized about or ignored the unsuccessful treatment of language in this play? (Krause 641)

The fact that Friel's adaptations are still being discussed (in the case of *Three Sisters*, decades after its writing) suggests that he was successful in challenging our assumptions about the standard form of Chekhov's drama.

### **Approximating Setting – Jason Sherman's *After the Orchard***

While Brian Friel was content to update the language of *Three Sisters* to better reflect his culture, this is an approach that many adaptors spurn in favour of also updating the setting of the adapted work. These adaptations, rather than merely approximating the way that the play's plot is communicated, bring the adapted work fully into the target audience's context, allowing them to more directly relate the events of the play to the world around them.

The Canadian relocation of *The Cherry Orchard* in Jason Sherman's *After the Orchard* retains remarkable closeness to the Russian source while being distinctly its own play. In Sherman's work "[t]he given circumstances are different, but the plot and dramatic structure are almost identical, the dialogue corresponds closely to Chekhov's, and the conclusion is essentially the same" (McKinnon, "Dramaturgy of Appropriation" 76) making it a useful study in to how a playwright can faithfully transfer the essentials of a play into a new context.

The appropriation of elements of modern Canada helps the audience's understanding of the of the characters' plights. One especially good example of this is the family's refusal to sway from tradition and their old, established ways by continuing to return to a local burger bar year after year despite knowing it is past its prime:

**ROSE**

We just ate.

**LEN**

You call that a meal? David, we stopped at that little burger place -- and it was packed, like always!

**CAROLINE**

Sash.

**LEN**

Half an hour I stood in line.

**CAROLINE**

Sash, the kids are standing on the dock without life jackets.

**SASHA**

So tell em to put em on.

**LEN**

Ah, they're fine, they're fine. Those burgers were terrible. Not the way they used to be, but still people stood there, and it was hot, too, and the line-up went right outside, almost to the highway. (Sherman 9)

This approach to adaptation approximates Chekhov's text not by updating it to be more relevant, but rather "uses the dramatic structure of a Chekhov play as a framework for exploring issues and themes specific to contemporary, middle-class, Canadian – and specifically *Jewish* Canadian – life" (McKinnon, "Dramaturgy of Appropriation" 76-77).

In a similar vein to the rethinking of the setting, this mode of adaptation incorporates a freestyle rewriting of Chekhov's characters; significantly reworking them and their interrelationships so as to better suit a modern telling of this tale. Jack, this play's version of Lopakhin, is more villainous a character than Chekhov's interpretation. While Lopakhin is socially inept, Jack seems more openly devious and only rounds out as a character at the play's conclusion with his concession to sentimentality in the form of the garden:

**JACK**

Yes. Well, this is where the house is now ... and you see how the garden would become part of the grounds, a sort of focal point -- that's what my architect called it, anyway. We'd have to do some work on it, of course, it's a bit of a mess, frankly -- but essentially we'd keep it the same. A sort of ... what ... a sort of monument to what used to be here ... to Sid, if you will. -- We could even -- tell you what, this just came to me, we could even put a plaque there,

explaining the history of the grounds. Now what do you think about that?  
(Sherman 98)

By contrast, Lopakhin's focus on business appears to be a way of masking his inability to connect with people and his sense of not belonging due to his ancestry. The ultimate expression of his social inability is his failure to propose to Varya in Act IV (Chekhov 341-343). This action, however, in *After the Orchard* is offloaded from Jack, a version of it instead playing out between Trish and Jeremy (Sherman 90-91), thus his earlier social transgressions appear less acceptable. We are never really given a reason to sympathise with Jack (who acts as an emblem for the unfeeling capitalist system) and his differences from Lopakhin seem to streamline the play's dramaturgy, encouraging us to sympathise with the family. This moves towards a clear focus for the play's message, attaching Chekhov's concern over "the dangers of reckless and thoughtless change" (Rayfield 62) to the specificities of commercially driven change.

Language is the most visible and dramatic change made to the play. This version is, obviously, in English and features modern Canadian idioms. It has, in fact, totally eschewed the "Victorianisms" that are prevalent in many Chekhov translations and in their place we find dialogue that is convincingly realistic to a modern ear, keeping the spirit of Chekhov's work:

**DAVID**

I think it's terrific what you're doing. I always wanted to travel to distant places.  
Give of myself.

**TRISH**

Is it too late?

**DAVID**

Fraid so. I'm in my Disappointed Years. That's where no matter what you do, everybody's disappointed. Apparently I'm due for a turnaround. A friend of mine says that when the dog star circles the hunter ... or the fish, or ... well, when something circles something else, all will be well.

**TRISH**

I don't understand. You're like this incredibly successful guy.

**DAVID**

(laughs)

Now you sound like a teenager.

**TRISH**

It's true. (Sherman 44)

There is an inventive approach to some of the more specific language challenges presented by Chekhov's play. Gayev, in this version "Len", features a distinct linguistic tick in Chekhov's play, where when embarrassed or stressed he talks about billiards:

**GAYEV**

Yes ... It is something ... [*Feeling the cupboard.*] Dear, revered cupboard! I salute your existence which for more than a hundred years now has been directed towards the shining ideals of good and justice; your silent call to fruitful labour has not faltered in the course of a hundred years, preserving [*with tears in his eyes*] in generation of our family a good spirit, faith in a better future and fostering in us ideals of the good and of social consciousness.

[*A pause.*]

**LOPAKHIN**

Yes...

**LYUBOV ANDREYEVNA**

You're still just the same, Lyonya.

**GAYEV**

[*a little embarrassed*]: Off the ball, right, into the corner! I'm aiming for the middle pocket! (Chekhov 294)

This reference seems outdated by modern standards and in *After the Orchard* has, in all but one instance (Sherman 82), been replaced with Len's repeated singing of "Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here" an American song sung to a Gilbert and Sullivan tune (25, 100), capturing a similar notion of absent minded self-distraction.

The style of *After the Orchard* is markedly different from Friel's approach to adaptation, not attempting to preserve any of the paratextual frontage of the adapted

play. Whereas Friel opted to preserve Chekhov's character names, settings and even the plays' titles, *After the Orchard* almost actively distances itself from Chekhov's plays. James McKinnon writes:

It is easy to see how Marti Maraden<sup>2</sup> could claim that *After the Orchard* is more of a subtle homage than an extensive adaptation: the [...] allusion to Chekhov's orchard in the title is clear only to those who already know it is there; the setting, at a lakeside cottage in Ontario in 1999, is distinctly *not* —Chekhovian in any geographical, national, cultural, or historic sense; and the *dramatis personae* comprise three generations of a middle-class Toronto Jewish family, their neighbours, and a real estate agent, details that obscure, rather than reinforce, any link to Chekhov. (McKinnon 77-78)

Shifting the action to contemporary Canada means that Sherman had to find new issues and conflicts for the play to centre on. Gone is Chekhov's complex commentary on class politics, which was very much rooted in the particular social condition of his time of writing, and in its place is a struggle between generations (McKinnon, "Dramaturgy of Appropriation" 79-80). Also present is a clash between an entrenched (though hypocritical) ideal of localism, along with an appeal to a long since lost pioneering, do-it-yourself spirit and the encroachment of capitalist market forces. These characters, much like *The Cherry Orchard's* Ranevsky family, are stuck thinking in terms of past realities rather than present ones (in the case of the Ranevsky family this is evident in their failure to see that the orchard is no longer sustainable). *After the Orchard* successfully captures the spirit of *The Cherry Orchard's* "old ways versus new ways" theme but updates it in such a way as to make it relatable to a modern audience. Despite this, it is more complex than a mere update of imagery and McKinnon argues that "the absence of a clear 1:1 correlation between the characters of the two plays discourages reading *After the Orchard* simply as a modernized translation of Chekhov"

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<sup>2</sup> The Director of Canada's National Arts Centre from 1997 to 2006 and *After the Orchard's* director. Opted to advertise the play as a Sherman rather than a Chekhov (McKinnon, "Dramaturgy of Appropriation" 74) and insisted to audiences that it "was not an adaptation at all, and discouraged potential spectators from reading it as such" (McKinnon, "Dramaturgy of Appropriation" 77).

(McKinnon, "Dramaturgy of Appropriation" 79).

### **Writing for Specific Cultures – Floyd Favel Starr's *House of Sonya***

Established playwrights like Jason Sherman and Brian Friel, each with long histories of portraying Irish and Canadian voices and culture on stage, already possess the requisite skills to accurately adapt Chekhov's plays to their cultures. For those of us who are not amongst the most famous playwrights in the world it is useful to have a model of adaptation that aids the development of a cultural awareness and provides a roadmap beyond Friel's just sitting down and writing approach. Aboriginal Canadian playwright, Floyd Favel Starr, and his *Uncle Vanya* adaptation, *House of Sonya* may provide an appropriate philosophy to this end.

*House of Sonya* follows an unusual model of adaptation, retaining Chekhov's realistic style of dialogue and many Russian elements while also localising the setting and the play's social issues. In his essay on the play Canadian theatre expert Rob Appleford describes this combination as mingling "Russian and Aboriginal Canadian, often with bewildering results" (250).

Appleford summarises the core ideas of Starr's adaptive methodology:

In rehearsal, Favel Starr asked his cast to consider the play *Uncle Vanya* as if it were a year that had just ended. Just as Plains Indian elders would confer in the winter season and agree upon the key image to encapsulate that past year, the cast broke down the units of the text into specific images. These images included "Vanya in the garden" and "Yelena in the thunderstorm at night" (253)

As a part of this process actors would then pick images that carried a personal resonance and then link the events of the play into their own personal experiences (Appleford 253). These would serve as the foundation for new improvisations or new ways of staging scenes (Appleford 253). Thanks to Starr's rehearsal techniques drawing upon his cast's personal experiences, the resulting play was approximated to his target audience. Appleford wrote that the result is "Western theatre [...] cited by Aboriginal playwrights" (247).



Starr himself lays out his working methodology in his essay *The Artificial Tree*. Starr describes his process as reducing “Native songs and dances to bare essentials, a process that links us to, and leads us from, the sources of this country, our life, and the ancestors” (Starr, “Artificial” 69). Starr claims that through this “reductionism” he was “able to isolate the basic building blocks of the song and dance, and these become the starting points for a creative and vital action” (“Artificial” 69-70).

Starr’s process involves finding the rhythms of traditional dance and ritual and then allowing those rhythms to influence performance. Starr outlines using this to incorporate the “Plains Cree Round Dance” into a work:

The rhythm of the dancing and singing [is] the image/action of “a duck bobbing in the lake water.” This image [...] is the basic DNA of the dance step, the voice, the drumming. [...] Through practice one searched for this rhythm, this Round Dance spirit. [...] Through precision and firm precise guidelines, the performer can then approach the mysterious aspects of his/herself in the relationship to an image, a classical or contemporary text, or a memory. [...] It is from this awakened, tender and volatile place in the body that the performer meets the text, the music, the dance, the literature, from any cultural source. (Starr, “Artificial” 70)

It should not be taken from this that Starr believes rituals should appear on stage in this mode of adaptation, in fact he is pointedly opposed to this, believing that “[b]y reducing the dance to its essentials we move away from attempting to put rituals on stage” (“Artificial” 71). The intent of Starr’s method is to “preserve the heart of ceremonial life, by never revealing or showing it, yet be revitalized and transformed by it” (“Artificial” 71).

While this is an approach that is specific to Starr and his culture, he frames it in such a way that should someone who is not Cree wish to adapt a version of it for use in their culture they would be able to. In New Zealand, while employing aspects of Māori culture could be a logical approach, it is possible that they would not be broadly representational enough of kiwi culture to actually achieve the desired effect. One approach might be to appropriate childhood games. Bullrush is a particularly nostalgic

example of this, strengthened by its fading from play. Alternatively this ethos might be applied to the overall structure of rehearsal. Opening each one with something approximating a “kiwi” afternoon tea for example could help to instil actors with a sense of the rhythm of life in New Zealand.

Starr’s method of essentialising involves taking rituals from native cultures and using them as provocations for improvisation. Starr describes this process:

For example, there is this Inuit song sung and drummed to a specific rhythm. The singer/dancer/drummer tells a story about a Raven who is flying and flying over a vast ocean. This raven begins to get tired and begins to sink into the water. The water reaches the Raven’s feet, knees, waist, chest, neck, then the Raven drowns.

We transformed this traditional act into a creative exercise for the performer by:

1. Having the group sing the melody, and someone keep the drumming rhythm on a drum
2. A single actor then does the Raven’s role
3. With his/her voice and personal internal body process, they must communicate the trials and process of the Raven
4. They communicate this, by improvising a melody line above the base melody of the group
5. The movement and voice is anchored in the specific Inuit song and dance.

(Starr, “Artificial” 73)

This allows actors to carry an awareness of their culture into their work as well as creating a direct link between what happens on stage and the literal rhythm of aboriginal tradition.

This is the reverse of the approach that might normally be taken in performing Chekhov. While directing a production of *The Bear* in 2012 I was focused on getting my actors into a mind-set that emulated that of a turn of the century Russian (or at least the popular imagining of that mind-set). We had strict rules of behaviour that our

characters had to follow in order to maintain propriety. The aim was to break the social conditioning of our modern New Zealand lives and the behaviours that went with it. The methodology that Starr advocates is the polar opposite of this.

Starr's pledge against placing rituals on stage might find resonance with the criticism of two Chekhov adaptations. Tom Wood's Canadian adaptation, *Vanya* (2005), and Roger Hall's New Zealand adaptation, *Dream of Sussex Downs* (1986) both suffer challenges to their "authenticity". Wood and Hall, both established playwrights, wrote adaptations of *Uncle Vanya* and *Three Sisters* respectively, shifting the action to their countries and bringing the time period forward, though importantly not to the present day. Wood opted for *Vanya* to take place in 1920s Alberta while Hall's *Dream* takes place in Wellington (specifically Thorndon) in the 1950s. James McKinnon's description of *Vanya* nicely sums up both plays:

Wood removes distracting archaic Anglicisms and references to *fin de siècle* Russian society, but he replaces them with an archaic dialect and references to another world that spectators have neither direct access to nor memories of [...] The historical setting and dialect invoke a nostalgic reception [...] Inviting spectators to wax nostalgic is very different from representing characters that are themselves held captive by the past, as Chekhov does. ("Canadian Chekhovs" 221-222)

In the case of *Vanya* critical opinion fixated on a fidelity discourse not attached to Wood's faithfulness to Chekhov (a faithfulness which he actively strove for) but rather how his depiction of the historical period lined up with critics' image of what that period was like (McKinnon "Canadian Chekhovs" 222). Hall's play appears to have triggered a similar response, with one critic accusing Hall of introducing blatant anachronisms to the work (suggesting that anyone with so much as a passing knowledge of Wellington at the time would know better) and accusing the work of being "self-conscious" (Neill 43). This focus upon the adaptations' settings by both sets of critics suggests that, rather than approximate Chekhov's work to local audiences, these adaptations only served to emphasise the gap. McKinnon's summation is that "Canadian spectators watching Chekhov's *Vanya* might discover, on their own,

surprising parallels between their vision of the past and the lives of Chekhov's characters; but Wood's attempt to lead them by the nose backfired, causing spectators to attribute those parallels to unfaithful interventions by a clueless adaptor" ("Canadian Chekhovs" 223).

Starr's suggestion that "[p]utting the generic physical activity and ritual objects of a ritual on stage [...] is a misguided attempt at developing a native aesthetic and only trivializes traditional actions" seems motivated by a desire to avoid his culture being (unintentionally) parodied by a crude stage representation. Hall and Wood's versions of their respective nation's histories, full of specific and often clever transpositions from Chekhov's Russia, rather than capturing the general shape and spirit of those societies, risk straying into the silly. Hall's version of historical Wellington is absurdly backwater. One especially glaring scene sees the native Wellingtonians fawning over the presence of a tin of *Nescafé* (Hall "Dream" 21) while Kate Taylor calls into question the plausibility of "the notion that Albertan farmers would be sending remittances to an Ontario university professor" (McKinnon "Canadian Chekhovs" 223).

The response to this, which could be appropriated from Starr's methodology, could be to attempt to essentialise New Zealand culture, rather than attempt to depict it in detail as Hall did or as Wood did for Canada. Drawing only loose parallels with Chekhov's text rather than delving into specifics may result in a better response to the adaptation. A New Zealand adaptor could attempt to essentialise what it is to be a New Zealander and put that on stage, rather than attempt to show our "rituals" overtly. This is, in part, what is problematic about *Dream of Sussex Downs*; it attempts to put the rituals of New Zealand life directly on the stage, creating a pantomime of Kiwi culture, rather than simply depicting the rhythms and general feeling of life in New Zealand.

### **Making Things Personal - Tennessee Williams's *The Notebook of Trigorin***

During the adaptation process playwrights tend to impart a personal touch to the adapted work. The potential issues that arise from this are evident in Tennessee Williams's *The Notebook of Trigorin*, an adaptation of *The Seagull*, demonstrating the

problems that bringing a strong personal conviction to the interpretation of another person's work can create. Williams's shaping of the play was heavily influenced by his perspective as a gay man and the clash between his queering of the play and his attempts to remain "faithful" to the text may have resulted in the play's lukewarm reception. In this case, at least, it seems that the author's personal politics and perspective hindered the adaptation either by generating conflicting dramaturgy or by prejudicing critics against the changes made.

Williams's version of Chekhov's play had a troubled history. The playwright had long desired to create his own version of *The Seagull*, claiming that the play had been stuck in the "confines of the translation straightjacket" (Ross 250). Unfortunately it seems that Williams had difficulty in gaining support for writing his interpretation of the play and even after he found a theatre to commission him the early productions of the script proved problematic (Ross 250-251). In fact *The Notebook of Trigorin's* production history seems characterised by mixed reviews. The play's 1996 Cincinnati production prompted some critics to be "enraged that Williams did not faithfully replicate the Chekhovian narrative" (Ross 252) while *The Guardian* critic Michael Billington wrote in response to one 2010 production that "[o]ne almost wishes that Williams had gone the whole hog and totally rewritten and updated Chekhov's original" labelling its current state as "a bizarre hybrid" and "an odd mish-mash" (Billington). Billington perhaps hits the nail on the head when he suggests that the play is "chiefly of interest for what it tells us about the state of Tennessee" calling it an "egotistical act of homage" on William's part. There is a great deal of Williams in this work, critic Charles Isherwood describing the now bisexual Trigorin as bearing "distinct traces of Williams's own artistic persona" (Isherwood). Zackary Ross suggests that:

While Williams's own sensibilities as a gay man, and more importantly as a gay writer, are clearly at work in this matter, I propose that his alterations to the character of Trigorin are motivated [End Page 259] by significant external forces. His awareness of Soviet policies regarding homosexuality, in addition to his frustrations regarding the treatment of homosexuals in the United States, led him to rewrite Trigorin as a bisexual character and that the alterations to his sexuality mark an intentional act of defiance, on Williams's behalf, against

the oppressive nature of both political systems. (Ross 259-260)

The troubled reception of *The Notebook of Trigorin* is representative of a conflict between claims of fidelity and the adaptor's significant personal influence on the text.

The fact that Williams inserts his own personality and politics into the text is not necessarily an issue in itself. Maria Ignatieva notes that "[w]hile working on *The Seagull*, Chekhov infused the play with his own life experiences" (58), so personal perspectives are a key part of the Chekhovian style of writing. Where Williams's play runs into problems is in his failure to consistently implement his own vision. Williams described the adaptation as utilising his "quite different qualities as a playwright to bring him [Chekhov] more closely, more audibly to you [the spectator] than I have seen him brought to you in any American production" (Ignatieva 60). His own framing of the play claims to access truths about the play hitherto inaccessible to an American audience. This stated goal, however, clashes violently with his approach to the script via his personal experience and agenda. In other words, Williams promises Chekhov but instead delivers himself and the play ultimately "suffers from the multiple objectives with which Williams loaded it" (Ignatieva 66).

The problem grows even greater when we consider that Williams stripped away much of Chekhov's writing style from the play. Ross states that "Williams's play takes Chekhov's *The Seagull* as a starting point, but quickly and deftly heightens the dramatic conflict and focuses the action" (253), but what Ignatieva describes is Williams having "desymbolized the text", taking the seagull from the play and replacing it simply with a "dead bird" (63) and later using "nonpoetical" language to further deconstruct Chekhov's central piece of symbolism (64), as well as going about the "eradication of subtext" from the play, replacing it with "hints of hidden secrets" and "the gradual or not-so-gradual unearthing of them" (64). Isherwood describes the new style of the play thus: "Williams gently alters the tenor of the relationships among the characters in ways that tend to scrape away the play's subtlety" (Isherwood).

What a new adaptor can take from this is that adaptations should have a focused set of objectives. It is also possible that by misrepresenting the goals of an adaptation the author may prejudice the work's audience against it. Williams held *The Seagull* in high regard; Ignatieva notes that "*The Seagull* was Williams's passion since

he was in his early twenties” (57). It appears that as a result he wanted to write a version of the play that would appeal more to an American audience. This would have been fine if it were not for the fact that he simultaneously attempted to pursue a political goal with the work. Williams’s changes to the plays dramaturgy do not necessarily support his stated goal, but rather further the political statement he had hoped to make.

### **Approximating Ideas – *Forbidden Planet* and the Science (Fiction) of Adaptation**

Simone Caroti describes *Forbidden Planet* (1956) as a “strange blend of Shakespeare and 1950s science fiction” (2). Caroti describes the intentions behind the work as:

Scriptwriter Hume and director Fred McLeod Wilcox want to make a film based on *The Tempest* that can preserve the play's sense of wonder, together with a few other themes the two happen to be keen on. What better way of doing so than placing Prospero's island in outer space and enlarging it a little bit? (Caroti 7)

*Forbidden Planet* moves the action of Shakespeare’s play off Earth, instead setting it on Altair IV, a far flung planet with a lost human colony. The film opts to shed Shakespeare’s dialogue and rethink the play’s characters and the precise unfolding of events while remaining recognisably the same story. Caroti sees the adaptation as bringing together “the sense of wonder which is the cornerstone of all good science fiction” (2) with the “ancient tradition” of “the tale of wonder” represented by Shakespeare’s play (3).

Caroti asks how we can “reconcile a form of fiction expressing the variables and problems of today's scientific and technological society with the works of a writer like Shakespeare” (3). He notes that “[t]he Bard lived and wrote at a time during which at least ninety-five percent of the world's population still believed that the sun traveled around the earth” and where “Science as we know it today did not exist, and its first great representatives were persecuted for trying to take away from us our earth-

centered cosmos" (3). Unlike Shakespeare, Chekhov was writing from a time when scientific advance was a prominent force and, as such, there is less reason to doubt his appropriateness for adaptation into science fiction. What's more, science fiction's focus on depicting speculative worlds based on scientific theories and principles, extrapolating situations and stories from observation of evidence, is not dissimilar to Chekhov's close observations of character and society.

Caroti's preferred definition of science fiction comes from Darko Suvin in 1979. In this definition Suvin states that science fiction is a literary genre "whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative alternative to the author's empirical experience" (Caroti 8). Caroti explains that "estrangement is an imaginative agent that excites the reader's sense of wonder by presenting him with a reality set that is radically different from the one he or she is used to" while *cognition* is "frequently the main subject of [science fiction]: the investigation, for instance, of possible social systems or new forms of science" (Caroti 8). This resonates well with Vladimir Kataev's claim that "Chekhov puts various members of very different social groups in the same situation" and allows them all to come to "become conscious of the real world and their place in it" (18).

While it is true that Chekhov's plays only possessed one of these characteristics upon their writing, that of cognition, the century of time between then and now has gone some way to imbuing them with the others. Modern New Zealand is culturally very distant from Chekhov's Russia, a society which is, in fact, now rather alien to us. It seems then that his plays do now possess the characteristic of "estrangement". What's more, these two characteristics do indeed interact. Ralph Fisher Jr. observes that one of the challenges of the works to a modern audience can be that it is difficult to view them without an ironic awareness of the impending collapse of the tsarist system, this tending to "colour" our perception of Chekhov's era (Fisher 5). A play like *The Cherry Orchard*, for example, now plays on our knowledge of twentieth century history, allowing us to rationalise what will eventually happen to the alien society that Chekhov shows us. This resembles what Caroti describes as "[t]he act of cognition, of rationally making sense of – and coming to terms with – the estranging elements" which he identifies as the root of an audience's enjoyment in science fiction (Caroti 8).



Finally, addressing Suvin's "imaginative alternative to the author's empirical experience", it is necessary for all those involved in directing, performing or even translating Chekhov today to actively imagine what life in Chekhov's Russia was like, as we no longer have access to it. The act of placing ourselves in a foreign country over one hundred years ago is a significant imaginative feat and, although it is not a characteristic that Chekhov intended for his work, it is the reality of working with Chekhov today.

Chekhov's plays carry thematic links to certain science fiction genres. Science fiction genres are frequently rooted in the past; that is, how did the world become the way it is? This characteristic is widespread and is evident in the genre's greats. Arthur C Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* (1972) devotes its opening to a potted history of its future society, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) features a grand reveal at its midpoint where the true history of society is explained to the protagonist and the film adaptation of *Planet of the Apes* (1968) where the plot's climax is built on the discovery of the titular planet's historical origins. This resonates with Chekhov's style of writing. In J. L. Styan's words:

Yet even these caricatures [referring to the comic characters from Chekhov's short plays] enjoy a three-dimensional quality that would satisfy many realists. Chekhov makes a point of creating every character, major or minor, with a complete life history. No two are alike, so that every line of dialogue contributes to the imagined whole, although the final character is unpredictable until we have pieced it together at the end of the play. (Styan 109-110)

Chekhov's characters are products of their history, carrying with them the events that shaped their personalities and their present circumstances.

Furthermore, Chekhov frequently seeks to compare the way things were with the way things are now. In *Uncle Vanya*, Voynitsky laments the changes that Serebryakov's arrival has brought (Chekhov 147) and later laments the loss of his youth (Chekhov 151-152) while Telegin speaks of his decayed state of affairs (Chekhov 150) and Astrov expresses regret at having aged (Chekhov 145-146). This emphasises the

idea that both people and society undergo change when viewed across a large timescale and that this is a challenge both to the character's place in the world and their view of their own worth. It is *The Cherry Orchard* which most prominently demonstrates these ideas. In that play society changes, remnants try desperately to cling to the past and said remnants are "destroyed" either literally or metaphorically.

Given that Chekhov's plays arguably mirror the defining characteristics of science fiction, shifting them into a science fiction setting seems a logical direction for an experiment in adaptation. The adaptation process is a simple shift of the play's estrangement from a historical setting to an entirely fictional one. This subsequently places less demand on the audience as the expectation is that they have no experience of the setting and the genre expectations of science fiction encourage audiences to imaginatively engage with the play in a way the historical setting does not. Sarah Wayne Callies suggests that modern pop-culture can provide a frame in order to attract new audiences and then to cushion their reading of classic plays (Callies "Chekhov and Zombies"). Both the steampunk and cyberpunk genres have undergone a recent swell in popularity making them fertile territory for exploitation. This, combined with a demonstrable sharing of ideas between science fiction and Chekhov's plays means that it could be a useful area of adaptation to experiment in.

Chekhov's works were written for an audience intimately familiar with his setting (as they lived in it). Any adaptor confronting this fact can choose to attempt to bring the work closer to an audience's own personal experiences, as was the goal of *House of Sonya* or *Dream of Sussex Downs*, or choose to emphasise the plays' otherness, thus making it a deliberate (and controlled) feature of the work rather than a by-product of time and distance (alternatively the adaptor could take the entirely legitimate approach of ignoring it and pushing ahead anyway, much as Tennessee Williams does with *The Notebook of Trigorin*). The former seems similar to the approach taken to *Three Sisters: A Black Opera*. While that adaptation localises and contemporises *Three Sister's* setting, its queer elements as well as its profound grotesqueness serve to emphasise the play's sense of alienation and "the other" while also controlling it. The use of song and music, an established device for achieving *Verfremdungseffekt*, continues to reinforce the play's othering of itself while the screening of pornography midway through the play (Nutting 15) deliberately

challenges the theatrical space in two ways. This is both because audio-visual is, again, an established method for achieving *Verfremdungseffekt* and because pornography differs significantly from the cultural expectations placed on a theatre. McKinnon describes the effect of the play as a “carnavalesque debasement of high culture” (‘Canadian Chekhovs’ 230).

Science fiction adaptations, much like *Three Sisters: A Black Opera*, have the potential to take control over a play’s “otherness” (in the case of Chekhov this is represented by the repeated identification of his plays’ “foreignness” over the years) and presenting it as a deliberate feature of the work. The work becomes a “familiar other”, a term used by David Johnston to describe Friel’s *Three Sisters* (15).

#### 4. Applying the Methodologies – Four Versions of Uncle Vanya

With a selection of adaptive techniques and strategies in hand I was able to start writing adaptations. Presented here in full along with accounts of their creation are four adaptations of *Uncle Vanya*. Rather than writing a single, full adaptation of the play I opted to focus on the first Act and to produce multiple versions. This allowed me to better showcase a variety of different styles of adaptation. As such, these four versions of the play represent my attempts to employ the different strategies identified in the last section in a way that fits both the play I am adapting and the cultural context in which I am doing so. The first three adaptations, titled *Uncle Vanya*, *Appropriation* and *Move Over Microbe!*, draw influence from specific adaptations (Friel's *Three Sisters*, Sherman's *After the Orchard* and the film *Forbidden Planet* respectively) and attempt to develop version of their methodologies that will work in the context of New Zealand. The final adaptation, again titled *Uncle Vanya*, attempts to form a new methodology by hybridising my experiences from the former three.

It should be noted that not all of these adaptations successfully achieved the goals I had intended for them. Rather than correct these “failures” I opted to keep them as demonstrations of potential limitations in the adaptation process. Failure can be an important part of artistic development (it should be noted that Chekhov’s career contained multiple “failed” works and that *Uncle Vanya* is a reworking of one of his earlier, less successful play, *The Wood Demon* (1889)) and as such it seemed both dishonest and unprogressive to represent these works as being anything other than interestingly flawed.

##### What's in a Name? - Adaptations, Titles and Paratexts

The naming of adaptations is a perennial problem for adaptors. It is a significant piece of posturing that can have a profound influence on the reception of an adaptation. The reception of *Dream of Sussex Downs* was altered by its lack of paratextual<sup>3</sup> association with Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. In addition to the play having

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<sup>3</sup> “paratextuality, refers to the relationship between the text proper and all the titles, prefaces, postfaces, epigraphs, dedications, and so forth, that come to surround the text and ... become virtually indistinguishable from it” (McKinnon, “Dramaturgy of

shed any reference to its Chekhovian heritage in its title, promotional materials leading up to its premiere presented it as “a Roger Hall comedy” (Hall “Bums on Seats” 197).

The titles of each of my four adaptations has behind them a deliberate strategy. *Acclimatisation* is intended as a title to generate a subtle link to the environmental themes of the play, to Serebryakov's refusal to fit in with the rhythms of life in his new home, as well as to acclimatisation societies that existed in New Zealand during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and were, at one time, responsible for trying to mould New Zealand's environment into something resembling the British Isles. It is also a distinct statement that this adaptation is deliberately distancing itself from Chekhov's text. *Move Over Microbe!* seeks to achieve similar results, demarcating a dramatic shift in setting and genre for the adaptation. My first and fourth adaptations retain the original title of Chekhov's play in attempt to affirm their links to the adapted work.

**Uncle Vayna**

*Adapted by Nathaniel Ridley*

*Early evening. A bach somewhere in New Zealand. MARINA sits on the deck next to both a large plunger of coffee and a pot of tea, part of what was clearly supposed to be a large afternoon tea that nobody has turned up to. ASTROV comes out of the bach looking harassed.*

**MARINA**

*[brandishing a cup of coffee at the passing Astrov]* Ah, Mikhail! Coffee?

**ASTROV**

*[taking the coffee out of politeness]* I suppose I could have some.

**MARINA**

I could get you something stronger if you'd like...

**ASTROV**

No, no. I'll be fine with this.

*A Pause*

We know each other pretty well now, don't we, Marina?

**MARINA**

Gosh yes. It must be going on eleven years now.

**ASTROV**

Have I changed much?

**MARINA**

*[Appraising him]* Well you've not gotten any younger...

**ASTROV**

[*Laughing coldly*] Yeah, well, that's what this job does to you. Ten years of reassuring hypochondriacs that they're not dying would break anyone's spirit. And then there's the people who actually are sick. It's never ending. [*pause*] I think I've driven myself insane. It's the only way to cope.

*ASTROV looks ruefully at the coffee before taking out a hip flask and pouring a measure into the cup.*

**MARINA**

Would you like something to eat?

**ASTROV**

Yeah... no. You know, last year I volunteered at an understaffed community clinic. It was just as the winter was beginning to hit and there were a dozen different diseases doing the rounds. You stood looking into the waiting room and it was just a catalogue of human misery. Grey, unhappy faces everywhere. I couldn't even rest at night in case I got a call to come and help someone with hypothermia or an asthma attack. I really started to feel it then. How could it be like this in a first world nation? How could a civilised society be leaving these people behind? Letting them suffer like this? After a week of it, as I was leaving to go home, I just sat in my car and thought: we're trying so hard to build a better future, but nobody will remember our efforts. The rich will still be rich and the poor will still suffer and everything will be just as bad as it ever was.

**MARINA**

Does that make the struggle less worthwhile?

**ASTROV**

No... Nicely put.

*VOYNITSKY joins them, looking ruffled from having a post-lunch nap.*

**VOYNITSKY**

Yes...

*A Pause*

Yes...

**ASTROV**

Did you sleep well?

**VOYNITSKY**

Yes... [*Yawns*] You know, ever since Aleksandr decided to come here my whole bloody routine's gone to hell. There's things to be done but all I do is eat expensive food, drink expensive wine and sleep during the day. Meanwhile Sonya's taken on the job that used to be full time for the two of us!

**MARINA**

I honestly cannot fathom how that man does it. Getting up at noon, having meals at all sorts of ridiculous hours, staying up all night reading and writing. And then, inevitably, at three in the morning he'll decide he wants a mug of tea or coffee and starts banging around the kitchen, boiling kettles and rattling biscuit tins... Honestly!

**ASTROV**

How long is he planning on staying?

**VOYNITSKY**

[*With an exasperated hand gesture*] Forever. "The Professor" has decided to retire out here.

**MARINA**

And they've done it now. Swanning off for a walk two hours ago without so much as a word. I was going to bake scones for afternoon tea, but how am I supposed to know when to start if I don't know when they're coming back?!



**VOYNITSKY**

They're coming, they're coming... take a deep breath or you'll give yourself an aneurysm.

*Voices are heard; SEREBRYAKOV, YELENA, SONYA and TELEGIN enter, returning from a long beach walk.*

**SEREBRYAKOV**

...yes. Wonderful views.

**TELEGIN**

Truly exceptional.

**SONYA**

We can drive up to see the forestry station tomorrow, Dad. Would you like that?

**VOYNITSKY**

Afternoon tea, everybody?

**SEREBRYAKOV**

Do you think you could bring me some coffee in my office? I still have things to do today.

**SONYA**

You'll like the forest.

*SEREBRYAKOV, YELENA and SONYA go inside; TELEGIN finds a seat.*

**VOYNITSKY**

It's stinking hot and our great scholar is dressed up as though it's the middle of winter.

**ASTROV**

At his age you have to look after yourself.

**VOYNITSKY**

She is wonderful though, absolutely wonderful. In all my life I've never seen anyone so beautiful.

**TELEGIN**

You know, Marina, no matter what it is I am doing here: walking on the beach, breathing in the fresh air, sitting here on the deck, I feel too happy for words. It's a gorgeous summer, the fantails are flitting about and we're all living in peace and harmony... [*Stretching back into the chair and accepting a cup of coffee from MARINA*]  
Ta. What more could anyone want?

**VOYNITSKY**

[*Dreamily*] ...and those eyes. Heaven.

**ASTROV**

Ivan, how are things with you?

**VOYNITSKY**

[*Feebly*] What would you like to know?

**ASTROV**

Oh, whatever really.

**VOYNITSKY**

Well, everything's still the same, only worse. I do bugger all other than complain and then hate myself for it. Mum's still convinced she can change the world in her old age, if she could just find the magic word to do it.

**ASTROV**

And the Professor?

**VOYNITSKY**

Oh, he just sits in his office day and night "he settles himself at the desk, body straight, shoulders relaxed, pen held lightly but firmly in the right hand, he dips the pen in the ink... And he's off! It's the first word, but it's not a word, oh no it's a doodle way up on the top of the left hand margin, it's a piece of meaningless scribble..." I tell you he'll wear through the desk before he writes anything worth reading. He should write the movie of his life! What a story that would make! This washed up academic, his body finally failing him after years of inactivity, shifts into his dead first wife's bach because he can no longer afford to live in the city. Spends all his time whinging and moaning about his misfortunes, even though you'd be hard pressed to find a luckier bastard in these parts! First in his family to even finish high school and he finds himself with academic degrees, a professorship, The Order of New Zealand, the son-in-law of a PM, and so on, and so on. But none of that counts for anything, apparently. He spends twenty-five years spouting ever more outdated theories about genetics and rubbishing the work of better minds, never driving the field forwards. Twenty-five years of hammering square pegs into round holes. And yet he still thinks he's the greatest thing since sliced bread. So he finally retires, after a quarter of a century in a job that he didn't deserve, totally unheard of, and he still struts about as if he's a national bloody hero!

**ASTROV**

I doubt anyone would go see it. Not relatable enough. You know, I think that there's a small chance that you might be envious.

**VOYNITSKY**

Of course I am! The fact that he's so successful with women makes it even worse. My sister, his first wife, just a wonderful person, generous and tolerant to a fault. She could have had any man she chose, and yet she loved him with the kind of love you think only exists in movies. His mother-in-law, my mother, still worships him, treats him as though he could do no wrong. His second wife, who just came past with him, young enough to be his daughter. In all her youthful beauty and freedom, the bright

future all laid out ahead of her, she gave herself to this old man. For what? Why?

**MARINA**

Well, I'm going to go and do that baking.

*MARINA exits into the back.*

**ASTROV**

Is she faithful to him?

**VOYNITSKY**

Unfortunately, yes.

**ASTROV**

Why unfortunately?

**VOYNITSKY**

Because the whole idea of 'fidelity' makes no sense in this situation. It would be morally wrong for her to cheat on the old man whom she cannot stand, but totally fine for her to squander her youth on him?

**TELEGIN**

Ivan, you shouldn't say things like that. You're only encouraging the decay of standards in our society. The next thing you know the whole institution of marriage will have no mea...

**VOYNITSKY**

*[Crossly cutting him off]* Waffles, so help me...

**TELEGIN**

Well I'm sorry, but my wife left me for the man she loved more than me, and I remained faithful. I even beggared myself supporting her children with that man. I may

have lost my happiness but I kept my pride. And now she is old and the man she loved is dead... What's left for her?

*Sonya and Yelena enter, followed later by Mariya, who sits with a pamphlet and is served and drinks tea without looking at it.*

**ASTROV**

[*To Yelena*] Ah, I actually came to see your husband after you emailed me about his health, but he looks pretty fit to me.

**YELENA**

He was depressed yesterday, and was complaining about pains in his legs, but today he's fine.

**ASTROV**

And to think I rushed out here from town. Ah well, it's hardly the end of the world. I'll stay here tonight rather than killing myself on the road home.

**SONYA**

Great! We hardly ever see you these days. You'll be able to have dinner with us.

[*Drinks*] It's a shame there's nothing to eat with this tea.

**TELEGIN**

I would not say that in Marina's earshot.

**YELENA**

Why not?

**ASTROV**

It's become a thing. Don't worry about it.

**YELENA**

[*To TELEGIN*] Well, thank you for the warning, Ivan.

**TELEGIN**

Oh! No! I'm not Ivan, I'm Ilya Ilyich; but everyone calls me Waffles on account of the pockmarks [*gesturing to his face*]. Sonya's my goddaughter and I'm a good friend of your husband's.

**SONYA**

TELEGIN is our right hand man. [*Tenderly*] Let me pour you some more, godfather.

**MARIYA**

Oh!

**SONYA**

What is it, Grandma?

**MARIYA**

I forgot to tell Aleksandr... I must be losing my memory... I got an email from Pavel Alekseyevich... his new pamphlet...

**ASTROV**

Is it interesting?

**MARIYA**

Yes, but a bit odd. He's now arguing against a position that he was very much in favour of seven years ago. It's a bit shocking really.

**VOYNITSKY**

There's nothing shocking about it. Drink your tea, mum.

**MARIYA**

But I want to talk!

**VOYNITSKY**

That's what you've been doing for the past fifty years, talking and reading pamphlets.  
Time to give it a rest.

**MARIYA**

So you don't like it when I talk now? Ivan, you used to have such ideals, such conviction... but now...

**VOYNITSKY**

Oh yes! For all the good that my ideals did me!

*Pause*

I'm forty-seven now. Up until last year I let my ideals and your clever talk shield me from the reality... and to make it worse, I managed to kid myself that I was actually fixing the world! Thanks to that I can't sleep at night. I'm too angry. Every quiet moment reminds me of how I wasted my golden years and that now I'm too old to do anything about it.

**SONYA**

*[reproachfully]* Uncle...

**MARIYA**

*[To VOYNITSKY]* You're trying to blame your past beliefs for your present problems, but it's your fault your life's this way. You never acted on your beliefs, you just sat around waiting for the force of your conviction to change the world. Your conviction was an empty gesture... what you needed was action.

**VOYNITSKY**

Action? Well I'm afraid we can't all be constantly banging away at a keyboard like 'the Professor'.

**MARIYA**

What's that supposed to mean?

**SONYA**

*[Pleading]* Granny! Uncle! Please...

**VOYNITSKY**

I'll shut up. I'll shut up and apologize.

*A pause*

**YELENA**

Isn't the weather great today...nice and hot...

*Pause*

**VOYNITSKY**

Great weather for hanging yourself...

*TELEGIN tunes his GUITAR. MARINA walks nearby, calling the chickens.*

**MARINA**

Here chick, chick, chick, chick...

**SONYA**

Which one are you calling?

**MARINA**

The speckled one's disappeared with her chicks... I'm worried that somebody's dog might get at them.

*TELEGIN strums a recognisable tune; they all listen in silence; ASTROV's cellphone rings.*



**ASTROV**

Hello?... Yes... When?... Okay, I'll be there as soon as I can.

*Hangs up and starts looking around for his things.*

Bugger. Right, apparently nobody can manage without me, so I'm off. Bunch of bloody amateurs.

**SONYA**

That sucks. Will you be able to come back for dinner?

**ASTROV**

No, I'll be late. Where on earth... And I was looking forward to having a drink too. No chance of that now. Where on earth... *[Finds what he is looking for]* Right, well, no rest for the wicked. I shall see you all around. *[To YELENA]* It would be great if you and Sonya were to come and visit me some time. I only have a little block of land, but it has a nice garden and is next to some conservation land. What with the cut backs at DOC, I pretty much look after it myself these days.

**YELENA**

Yes, I've been told that you love forests. But doesn't that get in the way of you being a doctor? Isn't that more important?

**ASTROV**

I think sometimes you have to let your gut tell you which fights are the most important.

**YELENA**

And is conservation interesting?

**ASTROV**

Yes, very interesting.

**VOYNITSKY**

*[Sarcastically]* Absolutely enthralling.

**YELENA**

[*To ASTROV*] But you're still young. You must still be in your mid-thirties. It can't be that interesting. I mean, it's just trees. Lots of trees. It must be so boring.

**SONYA**

No, it really is fascinating. Every year Mikhail clears out the stands of Buddleia and makes sure that the fresh native growth gets a chance to flourish. He's always campaigning about the importance of conservation land and preserving the country's biological heritage. If you listen to him about it, you will agree. He says that the forests are an important part of the land's character and they teach us to appreciate nature's complexity and beauty. They make him want to be a better person. They soften countries, make them better to live in. People from places where it's just concrete walled cities and industrialised farmland are harsh and cold. They value each other less. They're quick to anger and even quicker to dismiss new ideas. Without the forests we would all be dull eyed, dull minded, philandering, racist, misogynistic zombies.

**VOYNITSKY**

[*laughing*] Well that's a lovely idea, but unconvincing, so, [*to ASTROV*], you must allow me to continue to invest in timber and mines.

**ASTROV**

[*Sarcastically*] Yeah, because we're living in the nineteenth century. I mean, it's not as if there aren't more sustainable industries you could try to profit from. Every year our native forests shrink or decay and our conservation land is slowly chipped away at in the name of 'the economy'. More and more of our species creep towards extinction as we destroy their homes. Did know that when the Endeavour first came here you barely hear yourself think over the sound of the birds? Well, I can't remember the last time I saw a Bellbird or a Woodpigeon. We've dried up our rivers in the quest for cheap electricity and scarred our landscapes irrevocably in digging for coal. Coal of all things! If ever you needed a more potent symbol of our being stuck in the past, that's it. [*To YELENA*] I'm right, aren't I. It would take a kind of primitive savagery to allow such

beauty to be destroyed in service to a worldview that belongs a century ago. As a species we're defined by our intelligence and our potential towards creativity, our ability to take what we are given and to increase it exponentially, but all we ever seem to do is consume and destroy. There are fewer and fewer forests... Rivers are drying up, birds are becoming extinct, the climate is damaged and every day the earth is becoming poorer and uglier. *[To VOYNITSKY]* You've got that ironic bloody look on your face again you reckon that what I'm saying isn't serious, and... and maybe this really is just me being crazy, but when I walk past the beech trees I helped grow and the saplings that are thriving because I ripped out the weeds that would have strangled or out-competed them, feel the hum of their life and of the birds that live in them, I know the climate is a little in my control that if in a thousand years people are happy, the for that will in a small way be mine. I can watch a tree that I planted sprout leaves, sway in the wind, my heart fills with pride and... *[ASTROV's phone buzzes obnoxiously]* But... I to need go. It probably is just me being crazy, after all. I'll see you all later! *[Goes towards house]*

**SONYA**

*[Taking his arm and walking with him]* When will you be back again?

**ASTROV**

I'm not sure.

**SONYA**

Sometime next week?...

*ASTROV and SONYA go into the house; MARIYA and TELEGIN stay put while YELENA and VOYNITSKY distance themselves so as to talk.*

**YELENA**

Ivan, you're behaving like a child again. You just had to annoy your mother, didn't you. Making the Professor sound like one of those infinite monkeys, hammering away at a typewriter hoping to produce Hamlet. And fighting with Aleksandr again at lunch. How

old are you?

**VOYNITSKY**

What if I hate him?

**YELENA**

Well, you really have no good reason to hate Aleksandr. He's just like everyone else.  
No worse than you.

**VOYNITSKY**

If only you could see yourself. How static your life has become.

**YELENA**

Oh yes, static and boring. Everyone criticises my husband and pities me: "Oh the poor girl, her husband is so old". Like I don't know what that sympathy is worth. It's just like Doctor Astrov was saying, you're mindlessly destroying the environment and the forests and soon there'll be nothing left on earth. You act just as mindlessly with people, and soon thanks to you there won't be any loyalty or purity or self-sacrifice left in the world. Jesus, why can't you just look at a woman neutrally if she isn't yours? Because – that doctor is right - in all of you there's a monster, just consuming and destroying everything. You have no pity for the forest or the birds or each other.

**VOYNITSKY**

I don't like this philosophising.

*A pause.*

**YELENA**

The Doctor has a nervous, exhausted face. An interesting face. It's pretty obvious that Sonya's attracted to him; she's in love with him and I totally get it. He's been here three times since I arrived, but I'm shy and haven't talked to him enough, I've not been especially nice to him. He thinks I'm bad tempered. You know, the two of us are

probably such good friends because we're both static, boring people! Static! Don't look at me like that, I don't like it.

**VOYNITSKY**

How else am I supposed to look at you, if I love you? You're my happiness and my life and my youth. I know chances are you'll never feel the same, but I don't need anything, just let me look at you and hear your voice.

**YELENA**

Shut up, somebody might hear you!

*They go into the house.*

**VOYNITSKY**

[*Following her*] No, let me tell you how much I love you, don't push me away. That's all I need to be happy...

**YELENA**

This is torture...

*TELEGIN idly plays his guitar; MARIYA makes some notes in the margins of her pamphlet.*

### A “Kiwi” *Uncle Vanya*: Looking at Language

The strategy used by Brain Friel when adapting *Three Sisters* may well be a suitable approach to adapting a Russian play to the cultural context of New Zealand. This centres on a set of goals aimed at approximating and de-Anglicising Chekhov. The writer clearly saw a distinct value in keeping Chekhov’s plays both accessible and interesting to a local audience (Pelletier 180, 187) and thus strove to bring their language closer to that of the Irish audience. As such, employing a version of his technique in a New Zealand context appeared to be a potentially productive route to follow.

The rules that I outlined for creating a version of *Uncle Vanya* along Friel’s lines were as follows:

1. Stick to Chekhov’s dramaturgical structure as closely as possible (for example: closely follow the number of lines, the general sentence structure and who speaks when).
2. Where Chekhov features culturally specific references (Chekhov’s plays are loaded with obscure Russian literary quotes and idioms, for example) replace them with local approximations.

This second rule differed significantly from Friel’s approach and this decision not to retain the original Russian setting, but rather to shift the action to present day New Zealand, was influenced by the criticism of Tom Wood’s *Vanya* and Roger Hall’s *Dream of Sussex Downs* and the playwrights’ decisions to keep the settings of their adaptations distant from present day. Keeping the Russian setting, to my mind at the time of writing, would undermine the endeavour, while my objections to a historical New Zealand setting can be summed up in Zola’s question: “is there one historical play that could be performed before the society it claims to portray?” (Zola 905). Societies, when presented with their own image on stage, are inclined to critique minor details of realism and accuracy. This idea is apparent in the reception of Wood’s *Vanya* and Hall’s *Dream of Sussex Downs*.

I did little to alter Chekhov’s plot, focusing instead on transforming Russian

idioms and locales into New Zealand ones. Much like Friel's adaptations, any given section of text closely resembles a traditional translation of Chekhov's play. Here is Peter Carson's translation of the play<sup>4</sup>:

**VOYNITSKY**

They're coming, they're coming ... Don't work yourself up.

*[Voices are heard; SEREBRYAKOV, YELENA, SONYA and TELEGIN enter from the depths of the garden, returning from their walk.]*

**SEREBRYAKOV**

Lovely, lovely ... Wonderful views.

**TELEGIN**

Exceptional, Your Excellency

**SONYA**

Tomorrow, Papa, we'll drive you to the forestry station. Would you like that?

**VOYNITSKY**

Tea, ladies and gentlemen!

**SEREBRYAKOV**

My friends, would you be so kind as to send my tea over to my study? I've still got things to do today.

**SONYA**

You'll really like the forest...

*[YELENA ANDRETEVNA, SEREBRYAKOV and SONYA go into the house.*

*TELEGIN goes to the table and sits down by Marina.] (Chekhov 148-149)*

Compared with my adaptation:

**VANYA**

They're coming, they're coming... take a deep breath or you'll give yourself an aneurysm.

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<sup>4</sup> This is my favoured translation of the play (thanks in part to Carson's useful translation notes) and I will rely on it from here on for comparisons. Readers wishing to familiarise themselves with the play in its entirety should be warned that the only open source version of this play to be readily found online is the Marion Fell translation, an antiquated and (rightly or wrongly) generally ill-favoured version of the play.

*Voices are heard; SEREBRYAKOV, YELENA, SONYA and TELEGIN enter, returning from a long beach walk*

**SEREBRYAKOV**

...yes. Wonderful views.

**TELEGIN**

Truly exceptional.

**SONYA**

We can drive up to see the forestry station tomorrow, Dad. Would you like that?

**VANYA**

Afternoon tea, everybody?

**SEREBRYAKOV**

Do you think you could bring me some coffee in my office? I still have things to do today.

**SONYA**

You'll like the forest.

*SEREBRYAKOV, YELENA and SONYA go inside; TELEGIN finds a seat.*

*("Uncle Vanya" 36-37)*

Like Friel, I worked from existing translations, a process which Friel describes:

What I did was simply put six texts in front of me and tackle each line at a time, to see first of all what was the meaning of it, then what was the tone and then eventually what was the sound. (Pelletier 188)

A pointed difference between my results and Friel's was that, while Friel tends to "expand lines rather than contract them" (Pelletier 190), I found the opposite to be necessary. In fact my biggest liberties with Chekhov's structure came during the play's monologues, where I made substantial changes for the dual purpose of updating the issues depicted by the play to make them more relevant to a local audience and condensing the long (by modern standards of "realism") chunks of text:

**ASTROV**



Yes ... In ten years I've become another person. And why? I've worn myself out, Nyanya. From morning to night I'm on my feet, I 'don't know the meaning of rest, and at night I lie under my blanket afraid of being called out to a patient. Over the whole time we've known each other I haven't had one day off. How am I not going to age? Yes, and this life itself is boring, stupid, dirty ... It drags one down. You're surrounded by eccentrics, nothing but eccentrics, and you live with them two or three years and you gradually become one yourself without noticing. An unavoidable fate. [*Twiddling his long moustaches.*] What a huge moustache I've grown ... Stupid moustache. I've become an eccentric, Nyanya ... I haven't yet become soft in the head, thank the Lord, my brain is in the right place, but my feelings have somehow got blunted. I don't want anything, I don't need anything, I don't love anyone ... But I do love you. [*Kisses her on the head.*] As a child I had a *nyanya* like you." (Chekhov 145 -146)

Compared with the sharply truncated version from my adaptation:

#### **ASTROV**

[*Laughing coldly*] Yeah, well, that's what this job does to you. Ten years of reassuring hypochondriacs that they're not dying would break anyone's spirit. And then there's the people who actually **are** sick. It's never ending. [*pause*] I think I've driven myself insane. It's the only way to cope. ("*Uncle Vanya*" 34)

While my take on the passage is significantly shorter than Chekhov's (more than one hundred words, in fact) it still manages to hit the key notes of the longer text. The idea of Astrov's dissatisfaction with his life is clear while the root cause (difficult patients) is established without recourse to the term "eccentrics", a description that feels more rooted in the 1930s than the 21st century.

After working with Chekhov's text, it becomes apparent just how dense Chekhov's dramaturgy is. Every component of the play is complexly interwoven and highly interdependent. Making even slight changes can have a ripple effect which can force dramaturgical alterations to be made throughout the adaptation. One example of this is the family's samovar in *Uncle Vanya*. This seemingly incidental item has been

so expertly woven into the text by Chekhov that removing it is near impossible. Although Chekhov is often labelled as the quintessential realist, his plays are in fact loaded with symbolism and metaphors. The samovar in *Uncle Vanya* implies a kind of stately, lumbering Russian tradition that does not take well to change. Marina complains about how Serebryakov's arrival has been disruptive:

**MARINA**

[*shaking her head*]: What a way to live! The Professor gets up at noon, and the samovar has been going all morning, waiting for him. Before they came we always had dinner before one o'clock, like people everywhere else, but with them here it's after six. At night the Professor reads and writes, and suddenly he rings after one in the morning ... I ask you, gentlemen. For tea! Wake the servants for him, put on the samovar ... What a way to live! (Chekhov 147)

The samovar is, above all else, communal and Serebryakov's demands are disruptive due to their purely selfish nature, not taking into account the needs of the community. This traditional method of preparing tea functions well only if all of the members of the household are up and about, drinking tea at roughly the same time.

Beyond this core metaphorical function it also serves practical dramaturgical roles. The very first thing that happens in the play is Marina offering Astrov a cup of tea, which he takes and reluctantly drinks (Chekhov 145). Astrov, as someone who tries to keep in mind the social good, drinks the tea as a symbol of belonging (quite the opposite of Serebryakov). Marina picks up on his reluctance and offers him vodka, which it is obvious he desires even if he refuses it at the time. This action early in the play allows the audience to begin to perceive his growing alcoholism. So, in just the first few pages of the play we can see what an intricate symbolic and dramaturgical function the samovar fulfils. Ultimately, my decision to try and keep as close as possible to the notion of the samovar, in this version a plunger of coffee that takes time to brew and quickly cools, was motivated by Floyd Favel Starr's example in his adaptation of *Uncle Vanya*, *House of Sonya*. Starr, recognising the essential nature of the set piece, opted to retain the samovar as is, despite his updating of the Russian setting (Appleford 253). My update ultimately proved somewhat clunky and ineffectual,

missing the overt theatricality of Starr's approach, in many ways vindicating his decision.

The samovar in *Uncle Vanya* is a product of Chekhov's close study of Russian culture. While I picked *Uncle Vanya* to adapt because its narrative is relatively independent of its cultural elements (as opposed, for example, to *The Cherry Orchard*, where the thrust of the narrative is intrinsically linked to the decline of the tsarist system and the rise of the emancipated serfs) those elements still form a fundamental part of the world Chekhov has constructed. Finding rough cultural equivalents proved one of the greatest challenges of writing this version of the play. The Russian social hierarchy, for example, had been standardised in Peter the Great's "Table of Ranks" in 1722 (Chekhov 351). As a result of this, Serebryakov, as a retired Professor, had the right to be addressed as "Your Excellency" (Chekhov 352), a fact which partly motivates Voynitsky's dislike of him and colours some other social interactions. Here Voynitsky recounts Serebryakov's accolades, compared with my revised take on the same passage (note that I have made Serebryakov in this version a professor of genetics rather than one of art, a response to the fact that New Zealand tends hold the sciences in higher regard than the arts):

Just think what luck! The seminarist son of a humble sexton, he's got academic degrees and a chair, has become His Excellency, the son-in-law of a senator, et cetera, et cetera. However, none of that is of any consequence. But think of this now. For exactly twenty-five years a man reads and writes about art, understanding precisely nothing about art. (Chekhov 148-149)

First in his family to even finish high school and he finds himself with academic degrees, a professorship, The Order of New Zealand, the son-in-law of a PM, and so on, and so on. But none of that counts for anything, apparently. He spends twenty-five years spouting ever more outdated theories about genetics and rubbishing the work of better minds, never driving the field forwards. (*"Uncle Vanya"* 38-39)

This is an area where I feel this adaptation is somewhat ineffective. By keeping the

narrative close to Chekhov's while stripping out the Russian social commentary, the resulting text is tonally contradictory of itself. Voynitsky's anger towards Serebryakov seems slightly misplaced when forced into the context of New Zealand society which (rightly or wrongly) perceives itself as classless.

A challenge that I was presented with while tackling *Uncle Vanya* is that Russia prides itself as a nation of great readers (Smorodinskaya 74). This is visible in Chekhov's plays, which are packed with literary references. Problematically for a New Zealand audience (or indeed for any non-Russian audience), the Russian literary culture of the time seems to have been very self-contained and in *Uncle Vanya* Chekhov makes reference exclusively to other Russian writers. These references are sufficiently obscure to be inaccessible to a modern audience and, as such, retaining them would have been a futile gesture. Here is one example of my substitution:

The Professor sits in his study as before, from morning to late at night, and writes. 'With straining mind, with wrinkled brow we write our odes interminably. They get no plaudits nor do we.' I feel sorry for the paper! (Chekhov 148)

Oh, he just sits in his office day and night "he settles himself at the desk, body straight, shoulders relaxed, pen held lightly but firmly in the right hand, he dips the pen in the ink... And he's off! It's the first word, but it's not a word, oh no it's a doodle way up on the top of the left hand margin, it's a piece of meaningless scribble..." I tell you he'll wear out that laptop of his before he writes anything worth reading. ("*Uncle Vanya*" 38)

A Monty Python quote here replaces a literary reference, attempting to capture both the sardonic tone of Chekhov's line and to demonstrating a similar awareness of the "classics" (Jason Sherman's Monty Python quotation in *After the Orchard* (Sherman 32) was a happy coincidence that I discovered later and I feel that it vindicates my logic).

### *How This Version “Failed”*

Despite the need for significant dramaturgical intervention when adapting Chekhov, in the aftermath of this adaptation I feel that my approach was flawed. My attempt to improve upon Friel’s methodology did not achieve the desired results. In fact the conflicting systems within the adaptation (language and dramaturgical structure still very close to a traditional English translation of the play but overlaid on an entirely new and modern setting) lead to textual oddities, rendering the play difficult to perform and resembling the clashing objectives of Williams’s *Notebook of Trigorin*.

In addition to this, I do not feel that my choices for updating the play’s setting worked especially well. For example, while failing to emulate Floyd Favel Starr’s decision to retain the samovar in his version of the play seemed like a good idea at the time, the actual results do not support my logic. In Starr’s play, the retained samovar serves to heighten the work’s symbolism; here my half-hearted replacement fall short, turning a poetic piece of imagery into a mundane piece of stage clutter. In later adaptations my renewed approach to replacing the samovar brought significant challenges, but I deemed it essential based on my experiences with this adaptation.

Further updates present their own difficulties. While I will argue that the substitutions I made are an accurate equivalent to the elements of Chekhov’s play that make no sense to a New Zealand audience (Russian literary quotes, social hierarchy, etc.), it is possible that the way I went about crafting substitutions was not necessarily in the best interests of the play or its audience. Rather it was an opportunity for me, as an adaptor, to demonstrate how clever I was by finding smart substitutions and showing my cultural awareness. It is a problem that plagued prior adaptations. Finding (or, for that matter, manufacturing) clever equivalences can become all consuming; Roger Hall’s replacement of *Three Sisters*’s fire with a Wellington storm in his *Dream of Sussex Downs* is a striking example of a writer attempting to be too clever (Hall “Dream” 34)<sup>5</sup> and ultimately harming the dramaturgy of the adaptation.

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<sup>5</sup> I suggest this because Chekhov’s fire would have functioned just as well in Hall’s 1950s Wellington setting. As such, Hall’s storm is a change that exists only to

**Acclimatisation**

*By Nathaniel Ridley*

*The deck of a bach in a small bay in the Marlborough sounds. SAM, a GP in his thirties comes outside, shading his eyes from the sun.*

*A native bird, perhaps a bellbird or a tui, calls nearby and SAM, suddenly excited, looks around hoping to spot it.*

**MARY**

*[From Inside]* Would you like a coffee, Sam?!

**SAM**

*[Still hoping to catch a glimpse of the bird]* Sorry?

*MARY sticks her head outside. She is in her late fifties or early sixties and is dressed for gardening.*

**MARY**

Coffee. Would you like one?

**SAM**

Oh. Yes actually, that would be great.

*MARY disappears back inside. SAM gives up trying to spot the bird and sits down in a deckchair.*

**SAM**

---

demonstrate the cleverness of shifting the setting to a city with as wild a climate as Wellington. The alteration is ultimately double percussive, Wellington is notoriously windy therefore the storm is a (needless) restatement that the setting is indeed Wellington.

I managed to miss having one this morning so I'm all jittery.

*A pause. SAM relaxes into the sounds of the surrounding bush only to be jolted from his revelry by the sudden noise of a speedboat passing.*

*MARY enters carrying two mugs of coffee. SAM makes as though to stand up but MARY gestures him back down into the chair.*

**MARY**

Sit. Sit! Now that we've dragged you all the way out here you may as well relax.

*She hands him a mug and finds another deckchair.*

**SAM**

Thanks, Mary.

**MARY**

You know there's really no need for you to make house calls out here. Franky's more than capable of making it in to the practice.

*SAM rummages in a pocket.*

**SAM**

Where've they got to? Honestly, Mary, I like the excuse to get away. AH!

*He finds what he is looking for, a small bottle of pills, and proceeds to take two, washing them down with the coffee.*

**SAM**

It's all these bloody baby boomers, you see. *[Pause]* No offence. They're finally hitting that age where they're really conscious that things are only going to get worse from here... health wise, that is. Actually, "conscious" might be a little too generous a term.

"Paranoid" is a better fit.

**MARY**

Getting old is scary.

**SAM**

Yes, but that doesn't mean you can't be rational about it. The number of times I have to deal with: "I feel a bit run down but I'm taking all sorts of vitamins and I only eat organic, so it must a tumour!"... It's enough to drive a man to drink.

*SAM considers taking another pill before thinking better of it and returning the bottle to his pocket.*

**MARY**

[*At a loss as to what to say*] Yes... [*A pause*] Biscuit?

**SAM**

No, I'm watching my sugar intake.

*MARY disappears inside briefly and returns with a biscuit tin from which she selects something chocolate coated and definitely not organic.*

**SAM**

That's the problem with medicine. You can't really affect any positive, long term change on the world. After I got my degree I spent a couple of years in Africa treating malaria and things. I was meant to stay longer, but it broke me. One day I was looking at this sick kid and I thought to myself: what's the point in me saving you? You'll be alive, but your life will still be shit. Wouldn't I be doing you a favour just to let you die? (*Pause*) After that I knew I couldn't do it anymore. I came back to New Zealand. But it's the same here, I'm not bettering the world just prolonging the misery.

**MARY**



[*With utmost sincerity*] At least you're giving them the opportunity to be miserable. An even chance. Isn't that's what's important?

**SAM**

Well put. Why can't my patients be as sensible as you?

**MARY**

Because then how would you know that you're miserable?

*Both laugh.*

*JOHN enters, somewhat dazzled by the sunlight as he has been asleep. He is a run-down looking man in his forties with a few remnants of his best years still showing.*

**JOHN**

Oh, hello Sam. How are you?

**SAM**

Oh, you know, miserable.

*SAM and MARY are now verging on hysterics.*

**JOHN**

I'm sorry I asked.

**MARY**

[*Regaining some control*] Would you like some coffee?

**JOHN**

Oh, yes please.

*MARY goes inside.*

**SAM**

And how are you John? Enjoying your holiday?

**JOHN**

*(Laughs bitterly)* No, not exactly. I'm afraid that running a business doesn't really stop just because you're out of the office. I just wish that that was something Frank appreciated.

**SAM**

I take it he's relaxed then?

**JOHN**

Nope, actually the opposite. The thing is, though, Frank has always seen himself as a "big ideas" man. He's always brainstorming ridiculous business propositions without really understanding the hard, boring work that actually goes into keeping a business afloat.

**SAM**

So... he looks busy but doesn't actually produce anything of use?

**JOHN**

Right! And the problem is he can't turn it off. He looks at every situation as something he can profit from.

*MARY returns with another mug, this time bringing the whole plunger of coffee.*

**JOHN**

He never turns his phone off. I don't think he's given me his full attention the whole time he's been here, always texting or on Facebook "networking".

**MARY**

Oh you're not on this again are you?

**SAM**

Sorry, I shouldn't have...

**MARY**

No no. You just asked a question. John's the one who brought it back to his vendetta against Franky.

**JOHN**

Can you honestly blame me? He insists that we all come out here and then isn't really present himself.

**MARY**

You can't exactly blame him for that. The business doesn't just stop running while you're all out here.

*SAM finds this hugely funny but cannot show it.*

*JOHN does not find this funny. At all.*

**JOHN**

Oh my God! I can't take this anymore. Mum, if you don't understand something could you please, just, stay out of it?

**MARY**

*[Firmly]* I am allowed to have an opinion.

**JOHN**

And all you've done for the past thirty years is force your opinion down other people's throats.

*SAM, feeling acutely embarrassed, casts around for something to distract himself.*

**MARY**

You know your problem, John? You think that everything that's wrong with your life is someone else's fault. Sometimes you just have to man up and accept that you are where you are because of the decisions that you made. Isn't that right, Sam.

**SAM**

Oh... well... I guess the thing is...

*SAM's hand goes to the pocket with the pill bottle and starts fiddling with it.*

**SAM**

...I mean...

**JOHN**

[*Cutting SAM off*] Frank has breezed through life thanks to the help of people like me.

**MARY**

Oh, here we go again with the deflecting of your problems onto...

*JOHN keeps talking over MARY's interruption.*

**JOHN**

For him it's all just conferences, networking and games to pass the time. The worst part is that he manages to convince people that he actually does something useful. And then there was the whole business with Anne...

**MARY**

Jesus, John!

*MARY is visibly upset.*

**SAM**

Sorry, but, who's Anne?

**JOHN**

[*Briefly taken aback*] Oh, did you not know this? So, the reason that we're so "close" to Frank as a family is that he was married to my sister, Anne.

**SAM**

Right. I never realised.

**JOHN**

God knows why she did it. She was far too good for him.

*MARY takes the plunger and cups inside to avoid this conversation.*

**SAM**

So, Sonia's your niece?

**JOHN**

Yup. Anne died five years ago. I'm surprised you never asked Sonia about her mum.

**SAM**

I deal with enough awkward conversations at work. I try to avoid them in the real world.

**JOHN**

Fair enough. So now he's gone and married out of his league again, Helen, who I don't think you've met?

**SAM**

No, not yet.

**JOHN**

Well that's Frank summed up, I reckon. No real talent, has failed to contribute anything truly useful to the world and yet has everyone, including my own mother, flinging praise at him. Young women, who could do much better, fling themselves at him. And here I am, having worked my arse off for my whole life, single, in my forties and playing second fiddle to that waste of space. There's no justice.

*MARY re-enters looking determined. She speaks immediately upon entering.*

**MARY**

You know, John, it's not just that you've never taken responsibility for your life. It's that you feel compelled to blame those people around you who haven't made a mess of things. You used to blame me for it, but as you got older that stopped making sense, so you found someone else and carried on as though nothing had changed. You've never acted on your convictions even once, and yet you wonder why you've never gotten anywhere!

*MARY storms back inside before JOHN can say anything. There is a protracted, stunned silence.*

*Eventually the silence is broken by the sounds of a boat arriving in the bay.*

**JOHN**

Ah, they're back.

**SAM**

Who's boat?

**JOHN**

Well, technically it's Frank's, but in reality it's Sonia who looks after it.

*Voices can be heard approaching before FRANK, SONIA, HELEN and HAROLD enter.*

**HAROLD**

...Well we certainly picked a lovely day for it. It's definitely the best weather we've had this summer.

**SONIA**

Tomorrow we could visit Ship Cove. Would you like that, Dad?

*FRANK is checking his emails on his phone.*

**FRANK**

Hmmmm... *(glancing up he notices SAM)* Ah! The Great Doctor! *(strides over and shakes SAM's hand firmly)*

**SAM**

How are you, Mr Campbell?

**FRANK**

Oh, great! Great! Keeping myself busy!

*MARY re-enters.*

**MARY**

Ah, you're back. I'm just making some more coffee, would you all like some?

*There is a general expression of acquiescence from everybody, but it is cut short and almost drowned out by FRANK's reply.*

**FRANK**

Do you reckon you could bring me some in the office, Maisey? I need to Skype some people.

**MARY**

Sure. I'll bring some in when it's brewed.

**FRANK**

Thanks, darl.

**SONIA**

I think you'll really like Ship Cove.

*FRANK, HELEN and SONIA go inside.*

**SAM**

I have to say, Frank seems fine to me... Ah well, it's a day out I guess. How are you, Mr Gregg?

*HAROLD has spent this time eyeing SAM as if he is the harbinger of death, but this question finally allows him to relax.*

**HAROLD**

I am alright, Doctor. I have to admit: I am not the best with boats.

**SAM**

Well, I'm sure the fresh air made it worthwhile.

**HAROLD**

Hmm. Yes.

*The conversation awkwardly peters out. There is a protracted pause.*

**JOHN**

She's great, isn't she?



**SAM**

Who is?

**JOHN**

Helen. I think she might be the best looking woman I have ever met. She's smart too, all the potential there to be a high-flyer, but she's squandering it on him.

**SAM**

[*Sheepishly*] I take it she is totally committed, right? I mean, it's not just for... well... for profit?

**JOHN**

No, unfortunately I think she genuinely has thrown herself fully into it.

**SAM**

I'm not sure it's fair to anyone to call that "unfortunate".

**JOHN**

It's unfortunate because if it's true she has chosen to squander herself on him in the most pointless way imaginable. It's a shocking waste of youth and potential, and yet we would vilify her for trying to escape.

**HAROLD**

Most of our society's problems can be traced back to how we have started to treat relationships like... cellphones or whatever. Cheap disposable toys, made to be thrown away. Nice while they last, but at the first sign of trouble it's off to the tip.

**JOHN**

Shut up, Pox.

**HAROLD**

No. I'm sorry, but no. This matters to me. When I married my one true love, I committed to that relationship, come what may. And when she ran off the next day with some guy she met at the wedding reception I stayed committed. And when he died and left her with three kids to look after I bankrupted myself to make sure that they were taken care of. Now we're both older and I can be proud that I stuck to my principles. And what does she have now that her looks and her charms are gone? Nothing!

*SONIA and HELEN enter carrying a fresh plunger of coffee and mugs. MARY follows a little later with a plate of biscuits and proceeds to bury herself in a book.*

**SONIA**

Right, who's having coffee?

SONIA proceeds to serve the coffee around.

**SAM**

Ah Mrs Campbell, I came out to see your husband, but he seems a little too busy. Mary told me you were worried about his health? I have to say, he seems fine to me.

**HELEN**

Oh! Yes. Yesterday he seemed so worn out and depressed, but today quite the opposite. I'm sorry, I didn't realise that Mary had called someone about it.

**SAM**

Yes... Well, not to worry, I guess. I'm here now. Not much we can do about that at this stage.

**SONIA**

You should stay for dinner, Sam. We're having a roast so there's plenty to go around.

**SAM**

[*Checking his watch*] Well, the day's pretty much a write-off at this point, so yeah, what the hell.

**SONIA**

Great! We haven't had a proper chance to catch up in ages.

*There is a contented silence as they all relax and drink coffee. HAROLD absent-mindedly picks at a guitar.*

*The silence is suddenly broken by a cellphone ringing. SAM very nearly spills coffee on himself.*

**SAM**

Shit!

*He starts to rummage through his pockets.*

**SAM**

Bugger, bugger, bugger...

*He finds his phone, checks who is calling and visibly deflates.*

**SAM**

Hello?... Yeah... No, I'm still out in the Sounds, I... Yeah?... Well why has she done that?...Jesus...Okay, no... no, I'll be back shortly... Yup, okay, bye.

*He hangs up.*

**SAM**

Right, well, so much for dinner. It seems like they need me back at the office because, apparently, nobody can do anything right unless I'm there to supervise. (*gathering himself together to leave*) Thank you all for a pleasant afternoon and the coffee. I'm

sorry Sonia, we'll have to catch up some other time.

**SONIA**

Yes, we must.

**SAM**

Actually, you should come and visit me in town. The garden is looking great at the moment. You should come too Mrs Campbell. I have a half-acre block backing on to native bush, which I have taken upon myself to look after. Right now it is packed with Tui and Bellbirds and everything. It's great.

**HELEN**

Sonia had mentioned that you were a bit of an amateur botanist as well. Doesn't all that get in the way of being a doctor? Isn't it a bit frivolous?

**SAM**

Frivolity is in the eye of the beholder.

**HELEN**

Do you enjoy looking after it?

**SAM**

Immensely.

*JOHN snorts derisively.*

**HELEN**

It's just... you're still quite young. I suppose I always saw conservation as an older person's fight.

**SAM**

If I wait until I'm older there won't be anything left to fight for.

**SONIA**

Yes, Sam once took me out to see how far the bush has receded due to forestry in the Sounds. You would be shocked.

**SAM**

Can you imagine New Zealand without the bush? Without the birds? It's so ingrained in our national psyche that if we lose it it will fundamentally alter who we are, and not for the better.

**JOHN**

It's a very nice sentiment, Sam, but we have to think about whether it's worthwhile in the long run.

**SAM**

See, it's the people who try and rationalise the senseless destruction that irritate me the most. There were these amazing, intricate systems that were ticking along for billions of years producing the most incredible diversity and a steady, constant change. And then humanity comes along and decides: nope, fuck that, we want a golf course. I marvel less these days at the beauty of nature and more at how determined we are to destroy it. I mean, yes, people feel a little middle-class guilt when we don't recycle or when the news shows us a picture of a pretty landscape or a cute animal tells us "this will all soon be gone", but you never actually do anything about it. You don't go and plant trees or scrape oil off birds. You don't stop driving everywhere or demanding bigger roads, bigger malls, fewer trees, more SUVs! I think what makes it worse is that we then treat the people who actually do do something about it as heroes. There's nothing heroic about just having the common decency to look after the world we live in. There's nothing I do that shouldn't just be a part of everybody's day to day lives. It's like congratulating everyone who doesn't steal from shops or murder their neighbours. If we keep going the way we have been, all of the good will be stripped from the world, and I for one am not going to stand for that. You know, if it were up to me...

*SAM has been fiddling with his pockets this whole time and now comes across his pill bottle. He takes one.*

**SAM**

Still, maybe I'm just being crazy. I really do need to get back to town now, so I will see you all around.

**SONIA**

I'll walk you out.

*SAM and SONIA exit.*

*JOHN and HELEN break away.*

**HELEN**

You know, you can really be quite insufferable. Why do you have to pick fights all the time? You ruined lunch today by arguing with Frank, you attacked the doctor for no good reason, you upset your mother. What is your problem?

**JOHN**

I hate him.

**HELEN**

Who? Frank? You've got no reason to hate him. He's no worse than anyone else, including you, I might add.

**JOHN**

If you could just see how you're wasting your life...

**HELEN**

Oh, yes! Poor Helen! Stuck in a dull, loveless marriage! I wonder what I can do to help her escape. The doctor was right. I hate it when people try to rationalise the awful

things they do. You'll believe whatever it takes to think you have a chance with me.

**JOHN**

Think what you want.

*A Pause*

**HELEN**

I don't think he likes me. I'm not sure I did myself any favours there either. He looks almost broken and I kept pushing him. I get what Sonia sees in him, though. She's clearly smitten. Stop looking at me like that, will you?

**JOHN**

How else can I look at you? I love you. You're all that I want in the world. It doesn't matter if you don't feel the same, just being near you is enough.

**HELEN**

Jesus, John!

*HELEN goes inside. JOHN follows her.*

**JOHN**

You can't expect me to just bury this...

*HAROLD plucks something vaguely tuneful on the guitar. MARY sits contemplating her coffee.*

### Shaping *Uncle Vanya* to the Environment: *Acclimatisation*

Confronting the issues that my approach to my first adaptation created drove me towards thinking that more significant changes needed to be made to Chekhov's play. My Kiwi *Uncle Vanya's* biggest failing was the clash between my updated, modern New Zealand setting and the elements that remained from Chekhov's Russia. Rather than being a slave to the precise events that Chekhov laid out, I needed to be able to mould the play's dramaturgy into a more modern form.

Jason Sherman's *After the Orchard* is striking in its approach to adaptation because, while remaining very faithful to Chekhov's play, it takes far more aggressive approach to its changes than Friel's translations. *After the Orchard* happily rearranges events, changes characters' genders or outright omits some characters and situations.

In my attempt to apply Sherman's methodology, entitled *Acclimatisation*, some characters disappeared (Chekhov's "Workman" is gone entirely while the nurse, Marina, has been amalgamated with Voynitsky's mother, Mariya) and some events are played out in a different order than before, more in line with modern conventions of plotting (specifically, not needing to parade the play's characters as early as possible). In this approach I was freer to pick modern targets for Chekhov's harsh social criticism and less bound to finding strict equivalency for elements of Chekhov's world. *Acclimatisation* is still fundamentally the same play as *Uncle Vanya*, still about a group of people wishing they had not wasted their lives, the same events occur, the same arguments unfold, but what occurs is no longer confined by Chekhov's more outmoded conventions.

#### *A New Dramaturgy*

The most drastic change I made in *Acclimatisation* is arguably the resequencing of events. The rough shape of Chekhov's Act I is as follows:



The arrival of Sonya et al. early in the act comes across as a slightly jarring



dramaturgical oddity. It is essentially a promenade of characters, serving to establish their visual identity early in the piece. *Acclimatisation* moves this event further into the Act, allowing more time for the scene to be set before it is flooded with characters. Elements from the second two chevrons of the above diagram were moved into the first, meaning that the arrival of the other characters does not occur until roughly half way through the Act and the time between Sonya/Sonia and Yelena/Helen going inside and then returning is significantly shortened.

My ability to do this was aided by the decision to compound Marina and Mariya into a single character. The idea of a “nurse” or “nanny” in a New Zealand household seemed out of place and shifting her down-to-earth attitude and hands-on attitude onto Mariya (here “Mary”) serves to emphasise that character as a matriarch, more in line with this country’s expectations of that figure.

Astrov (here Sam), rather than being an alcoholic, is in this version addicted to prescription drugs. This change had a dual purpose behind it. Firstly, alcohol abuse seemed a played out trope in this country and the idea that Sam could quietly slip into alcoholism, effectively with the acquiescence of those around him did not seem convincing to me in the current cultural climate. Secondly, Sam’s abuse of prescription drugs emphasises his low opinion of the work that he does.

The social issues explored by this adaptation build on the underlying ideas of Chekhov’s play. Astrov’s plea in defence of the environment remains but is updated to represent the current state of the environment (and environmentalism) in New Zealand. Vanya’s dislike of Serebryakov is, at its core, about charlatanism; Vanya perceives him as having achieved undeserved success despite his apparent lack of talent. While this core idea is still relevant, New Zealand society, as mentioned earlier, does not hold literary scholars in as high a regard as Russians did. *Acclimatisation*’s version of Serebryakov, Frank, is a post-yuppie businessman, seen by John (Vanya) as having achieved success through nothing more than playing at business while others do the real work:

**SAM**

I take it he’s relaxed then?

**JOHN**

Nope, actually the opposite. The thing is, though, Frank has always seen himself as a "big ideas" man. He's always brainstorming ridiculous business propositions without really understanding the hard, boring work that actually goes into keeping a business running.

**SAM**

So... he looks busy but doesn't actually produce anything of use?

**JOHN**

Right! And the problem is he can't turn it off. He looks at every situation as something he can profit from.

*MARY returns with another mug, this time bringing the whole plunger of coffee.*

**JOHN**

He never turns his phone off. I don't think he's given me his full attention the whole time he's been here, always texting or on Facebook "networking".  
(“Acclimatisation” 60- 61)

This change also acknowledged the advancement of the capitalist system in the century or so since Chekhov wrote this play, mirroring Sherman’s approach and situating the play in a much more understandable social context.

Much like the previous adaptation, *Acclimatisation* seeks to condense dialogue down so as to more accurately represent modern expectations of “realism” (shorter sentence structure, colloquialisms, etc.). In order to escape the problems that closely following prior translations had caused in my first adaptation, I wrote this script mostly based off my memory of the play (a technique I would repeat with all my subsequent adaptations) only referring to a translation when I was stuck or during editing to make sure that the core shape and ideas of Chekhov’s work were still in this version.

#### *How This Version “Failed”*

My attempts to mimic Chekhov’s methodologies met with limited success. Perhaps foolishly, I used my own subjective experiences and observations as the basis for the adaptation’s setting and characters. While I do feel this led to well-rounded,

truthful characters, I am unable to deny that they failed to resonate with others. Specifically it was suggested to me that the characters' behaviours did not line up with people's expectations of the social dynamics in a Kiwi bach. One fact that a number of people latched on to was the absence of drinking. The general opinion was that a group of New Zealanders sitting around on a deck at a bach would, without question, be drinking beer. While I had considered this approach I dismissed it as it did not line up with my own experiences. This is, again, a parallel with the issues generated by Tennessee Williams's mixed objectives in *Notebook of Trigorin*

One problem with setting plays in New Zealand is that we have a militant attitude towards our national identity, reacting with hostility to ideas that we perceive as not in line with who we are (the violent reaction against the proposed "Wellywood" sign in Wellington provides a striking example of this). We are quick to label things as being Kiwi (or conversely: not). Critiques of New Zealand works frequently lament that they are either not Kiwi enough (they could take place anywhere) or too Kiwi (inducing our cultural cringe). In the case of *Dream of Sussex Downs* the adaptation was described as "self-conscious" (Neill 43) and Hall's reinforcing of the New Zealand setting with references to "Oriental Bay" (Hall, "Dream" 6) and other overtly Wellington locations nudged it into the "too Kiwi" camp. Furthermore, its overtly "Kiwi" setting managed to misrepresent New Zealanders, the scene in which characters fawn over imported *Nescafé* drew particular criticism, with one reviewer questioning the play's historical accuracy (Neill 43-44). Setting that issue aside, it is certainly an unflattering depiction of our national culture, making us seem like sheltered "country folk". It would be unsurprising if this was a contributing factor in the adaptation's poor reception.

This example illustrates a very fine line, easily crossed, between delineating a setting as "being in New Zealand" and virtual tourism. Virtual tourism occurs when a play's setting does not function to serve the play's narrative but rather as a piece of Aristotelian spectacle, a visual element that is disconnected from the narrative of the piece. Early New Zealand play *The Land of the Moa* (1895) features a scene set in New Plymouth (Leitch 159) and during the eruption of Tarawera (Leitch 154-155), not because it serves a narrative purpose, but rather, because it allowed a performance to showcase a spectacular painted backdrop of Mount Taranaki (then Mount Egmont)

and the specially devised eruption effects (O'Donnell). Similarly, the setting of *The Cape* (2008), a road trip from Wellington to North Cape, directly serves the narrative; the pieces of “Kiwiana”, such as characters pointedly drinking a tin of condensed milk (Plumb 73) or a scene taking place in a wendy house (Plumb 18), do not<sup>6</sup>. This is contrary to Floyd Favel Starr’s suggestion that only essentialised versions of culture should be put on stage. Rather than pastiching our culture we should find ways to represent the spirit of it.

One reason that using tea and coffee over beer in *Acclimatisation* was a good idea is that it minimised the risk of it becoming “tourism”. The hot drinks can just appear and be familiar to an audience without needing to appeal to specific brands or cultural tropes. In using beer, any production is immediately faced with the question: “What kind of beer?” The level of specificity required will almost invariably trigger either an alienation of the audience (being set in the South Island it would be logical for them to be drinking Speight’s, something that would likely generate a dissonance for a North Island audience) and invoke the cringe (the other logical choices, Tui or Heineken, would likely provoke eye rolls in the case of the former and rabid nationalism in opposition to the latter).

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6 While they may serve towards developing characterisation, this is secondary to their function as pieces of Kiwiana to crudely remind the audience of where the play is taking place.

***Move Over Microbe!****By Nathaniel Ridley*

"[I]t is essential to maintain the categorical distinction between killing individual microorganisms and extinguishing an entire alternative system of life. There is no logical argument against killing microorganisms per se, either for research, medical, sanitary, or even casual reasons. However... it does not logically follow that destroying or displacing the first example of life beyond Earth is acceptable if the only examples of that life are microscopic." - Christopher McKay

*A garden. The future. This is not Earth. In the background is a two-story house made by stacking two prefab units, common in the colonies, on top of one another. It has been decorated to appear more "homely". Chairs and a table have been set up in the garden to take advantage of the weather. There is a swing hanging near the table and a guitar rests on a bench.*

*MICHAEL ASTROV the local doctor is seated in one of the chairs while MARINA, an aging model Domestic Service Android, stands nearby.*

**MARINA**

*[Pouring a cup]* Would you like some tea, Dear?

**MICHAEL**

*[Reluctantly taking the cup from her]* I don't really want it.

**MARINA**

Perhaps a vodka instead? In the past it has been your preferred drink.

*MARINA's movements are smooth and comforting but overly precise, clearly the result of programming rather than experience.*

**MICHAEL**

I don't drink it every day. Would you sit down... please. I'm not going to keep talking to you if you're going to act like you're a piece of furniture.

*MARINA sits, somewhat unnaturally.*

**MICHAEL**

How long have we known each other?

**MARINA**

Ten years, nine months, three days, nineteen hours and thirteen minutes.  
Approximately.

**MICHAEL**

Approximately? Really?

**MARINA**

When you first arrived on Medeina: Vera Petrovna, Sonya's mother, was still alive. You visited us for two winters, thus...

**MICHAEL**

Okay, okay... I believe you. I just didn't think it was quite that long.

*A pause*

**MICHAEL**

You know, you can drop the whole "tea dispensing calculator" act. You don't have to prove that you're still at the top of your game to me, I certainly wouldn't want to see you replaced. Those new model domestics, all chrome and abstract limbs, give me the

creeps.

*MARINA's posture, mannerisms and speech relax and become more naturalistic.*

**MARINA**

It is a harsh world we live in Michael and one that does not favour antiquity. In the eyes of many, change is a universally good thing.

**MICHAEL**

And have I changed much since we first met, Marina?

**MARINA**

Yes. You were young and handsome then, now you are older. And you like your vodka.

**MICHAEL**

A decade out here has made me a different person. How could it not? I blame the stress. Every day there's some new medical horror for me to deal with. I lie awake at night terrified that I might be called out to a patient. And the sort of people who came out here doesn't help much. It's as if someone specified that colonists must have personalities like sledgehammers. The worst thing is that I've become like them. What's that Nietzsche quote? The one about monsters. Ah, it doesn't matter. Jesus, I'm trying to quote Nietzsche, things must be bad. I've become emotionally stunted. I don't want anything, I don't need anything, I don't love anyone...

**MARINA**

Would you like something to eat?

**MICHAEL**

No. You know, I was at Laima during that alien virus outbreak. I'll never forget when the government called it quits and nuked the surface from orbit. They were so terrified of the virus spreading they just destroyed an entire life-supporting planet. I watched it happen from orbit. It was overwhelming. I remember thinking: "Why are we out here?"

Is this really the future of our species?" We had just destroyed an entire planet, an entire new kind of life, out of fear. Do we even deserve a future?

**MARINA**

Maybe it's because you keep asking that question that you do.

**MICHAEL**

Hmmm. Perhaps you're right. Ah! Here comes John.

*JOHN comes out from the house looking bleary-eyed, as though he has just woken up.*

*MARINA returns to her more rigid behaviour.*

**JOHN**

Yes... Yes...

**MICHAEL**

Have you had a good sleep?

**JOHN**

Yes... Ever since the Professor arrived here my whole schedule has fallen apart. I'm going to bed after midnight, I'm getting up at nearly noon. He spent a fortune bringing all of this food with him from Earth, stuff I've not eaten in years. My stomach's not up to it. The cane sugar is the worst. Too many cakes. And the wine. I never thought I would say this, but thank God Medeina's climate spares us from vintners. The worst thing is that if I'm not working, then Sonya's working twice as hard.

**MICHAEL**

I did notice you had real tea.

**JOHN**

Hmm? Oh. Yes. Coffee too. All my old vices back at once. Aleksandr Vladimirovich insists. It's like Christmas only without the joy or goodwill.



**MICHAEL**

He's not really using that ridiculous antiquated patronym is he?

**JOHN**

Oh, don't get me started. Him and that Waffles bloke, both. It's like they're stuck in the nineteenth century or something.

**MARINA**

The Professor's habits are somewhat... obtrusive. He has insisted on remaining on Earth time, relative to his colleagues in Moscow. He has been calling for meals at one in the morning and refuses to rise before midday.

**MICHAEL**

How does that work? Medeina has twenty-six hour days.

**JOHN**

I think that he's in denial about that. He won't bend, no matter how much the climate demands it.

**MICHAEL**

Well, he's not going to be staying forever, is he?

**JOHN**

Actually, he's apparently decided to settle here. This is me after two weeks, can you imagine the mess I'll be after however many years it takes for him to die? Still, you don't want to hear me complaining. What are you doing here, anyway?

**MICHAEL**

Actually, I'm here about the Professor, funnily enough. Sonya called yesterday. Apparently his wife's concerned about his health. They're worried that it might have been the portal trip out.

**JOHN**

It would serve him right if it was, travelling all the way out here at his age.

**MICHAEL**

It's probably not...

**JOHN**

Ah well. You win some, you lose some.

*Voices can be heard. SEREBRYAKOV, HELENA, SONYA and TELEGIN enter from the depths of the garden, returning from their walk.*

**SEREBRYAKOV**

A beautiful day. Nearly as good as any you'd find on Earth.

**TELEGIN**

Oh, absolutely. Without a doubt.

**SONYA**

Tomorrow we could take you up to see the terraforming station. Would you like that Dad?

**MARINA**

Tea, ladies and gentlemen!

**SEREBRYAKOV**

My friends, if you could excuse me, I must go and make some calls to Earth. Would you mind bringing me some tea in the study?

**SONYA**

I think you'll really like seeing the terraformer.

*SEREBRYAKOV, SONYA and HELENA go inside, while TELEGIN finds a seat.*

**MICHAEL**

That was the Professor I take it?

**JOHN**

She's wonderful, isn't she?

*MICHAEL is confused by this.*

**MICHAEL**

Who?

**JOHN**

Helena. The Professor's wife. Wasn't that what we were talking about?

**MICHAEL**

No.

**JOHN**

Oh.

*An awkward pause.*

**JOHN**

Gorgeous day like this and our Professor is wandering around in arctic survival gear.

**TELEGIN**

Marina, no matter how I spend my days here, be it driving through the fields or wandering through the garden or even just sitting here, I am just too happy for words. The air is so clean here and the weather so lovely. Peace, order and tranquillity; what

more could we want? [*Accepting a cup of tea*] You're too kind.

**JOHN**

[*Dreamily*] She is wonderful though... Taken to Medeina as though she were born here.

**MICHAEL**

So, fill us in, Ivan Petrovich.

**JOHN**

[*Feebly*] Fill you in?

**MICHAEL**

What's new? What's been happening?

**JOHN**

Nothing. Nothing at all. Everything is exactly as it has always been since I came here. Maybe a little worse now that I've grown lazy and bad-tempered. My mother's still rabbiting on about rights for synthetics, still, I guess we all have to have something to distract us while we wait to die.

**MICHAEL**

And the Professor?

**JOHN**

The Professor still spends all his time proselytizing the cult of expansion and acclimatisation. Took him bloody long enough to get out here though, didn't it? Waited until Earth had totally broken his health before he even considered portaling out here. I feel sorry for all the poor buggers that are forced to have to listen to him: "The colonies are not only humanity's future, but our only chance of a future". And all the while you couldn't get him out here until he literally had no other choice. He's still firing off his little propaganda pieces, though. The hypocrisy of it is staggering. He's lucky that his first wife, my sister, had the good sense to actually buy land out here.

Now he's reaping the benefits. He still has to complain though. Did you hear him just before? "A beautiful day. Nearly as good as any you'd find on Earth". Well, from what I hear, the sun hasn't broken through the smog on Earth for well over a decade now. It would be forgivable if his preaching was actually doing some good, but it isn't. This is still a frontier. We need tough people to break it in, hard workers, and instead the Professor has flooded us with urbanite pen-pushers chasing the sun. And for all his hypocrisy, for all the damage he's done out here with his self-serving, egomaniacal propaganda, he gets treated as some kind of visionary hero!

**MICHAEL**

You know, you're beginning to sound envious.

**JOHN**

Of course I envy him! What makes everything so much worse is that he has such success with women! I've not seen anything else like it my whole life. They practically throw themselves at him. My sister, the loveliest person you could ever have hoped to meet, a woman with more admirers than he has cultists, married him and loved him more intensely than he could ever have reciprocated. His mother-in-law, my mother, still treats him as if he's some kind of god, against all reason. His new wife, who is both beautiful and intelligent, married him when he was already an old man. She tossed away her youth, her freedom, her brightness, and for what? Why?

**MICHAEL**

People do strange things, Ivan Petrovich; things that deep down only they will ever understand. Is she faithful to him? She would have to be to follow him all the way out here.

**JOHN**

Yes, unfortunately she is.

**MICHAEL**

Unfortunately?

**JOHN**

"Fidelity" makes no sense. The logic behind it broken. We would praise her for wasting her youth on a man she doesn't love, but vilify her for pursuing what she truly wants. It smacks of the same kind of hypocrisy that the Professor built a career on.

**TELEGIN**

[*Meekly*] No, Vanya. I hate it when you say that sort of thing. Someone who would betray their spouse might very well betray the ideals of our colony.

**JOHN**

Shut up, Waffles.

**TELEGIN**

No! I will not! When my wife left me I saw for the first time what a cesspool of decay and corruption Earth had become. People and emotions were just as disposable as everything else in our society. I was cast aside as you would an outmoded machine. So I gave her everything, all my earthly wealth, and I walked away, my head held high. I came here, far away from the filth and smoke, to try and build something new. And what is it that she has? A life of comfort on a dead world.

*SONYA and HELENA enter; a little later MARIA follows with a reading device; she sits down and reads; she is served tea which she drinks without looking.*

**SONYA**

[*Hurriedly to MARINA*] Marina, some men from the agricultural-commune are here. Would you go and see what they want, and I'll do the tea... [*Pours tea*]

*MARINA goes out. HELENA takes her cup and drinks while sitting on the swing.*

**MICHAEL**

[*To HELENA*] I was actually here to see your husband. Sonya called me yesterday to

say that you were concerned, but I have to say, he seems to be perfectly fine.

**HELENA**

Oh. This is embarrassing. Yes, he seemed sluggish and depressed yesterday and he was complaining about stomach pains, but he seems to be fine today.

**MICHAEL**

Right. You know, Medeina's gravity is slightly greater than Earth's and it can take a little while for your body to adjust. It sounds like that's what's been affecting your husband. It's really nothing to worry about... I guess I didn't need to rush out then. Ah well.

**SONYA**

You should stay here for the night rather than trying to rush home.

**MICHAEL**

Yes. Yes, that's probably a good idea. It would do me good.

**SONYA**

Great! We hardly ever have you to stay anymore. You won't have had dinner?

**MICHAEL**

No, not yet.

**SONYA**

Then you'll eat with us. We don't have it until quite late these days. [*Drinks*] Ugh, the tea's cold!

**TELEGIN**

It has been sitting around for a while now.

**HELENA**

It's fine. We will drink it cold Ivan Ivanych.

**TELEGIN**

Oh, no, excuse me... Not Ivan Ivanych. It's Ilya Ilyich... Ilya Ilyich Telegin. [*TELEGIN pauses, waiting for recognition and JOHN rolls his eyes. With each subsequent pause TELEGIN grows more and more irritated*] Some people call me Waffles because of my face. [*Pause*] Sonya is my goddaughter and your husband knows me very well. [*Pause*] You may have noticed that I dine with you every day.

**SONYA**

Ilya Ilyich helps us out around the place. [*With tenderness*] Let me pour you some more, godfather.

**MARIA**

Oh!

**SONYA**

What is it, Grandma?

**MARIA**

I forgot to tell Aleksandr... my memory must be going... today I got a message from Paul over on Mimir. He's started a new website.

**SONYA**

Is it interesting?

**MARIA**

Yes, but also a bit strange. It reads as though he's retracting his position from seven years ago, that synthetic life must be granted full equality immediately. It's actually rather disgraceful.

**JOHN**



There's nothing disgraceful about it whatsoever. The man's just accepting reality. Now, drink your tea.

**MARIA**

But I want to talk.

**JOHN**

All you've been doing for fifty years is talk. Talking and reading pamphlets and blogs. Just give it up.

**MARIA**

Am I really that unpleasant to listen to? You've changed so much in the last year, Jean. It's as though I don't know you anymore. What happened to your convictions, your ideals? You were a man of enlightenment...

**JOHN**

Oh yes! A man of enlightenment, forever obscured by clouds...

*A Pause*

**JOHN**

I was a man of enlightenment... What a joke. I'm forty-seven now. Right up until last year I hid behind fancy talk, trying to avoid the real world, real life. I was convinced that I was doing right. I can't sleep because of the waste of it all. My best years are gone, along with my chance to enjoy them. I came out here to build a new frontier for humanity, and now it turns out that it was just for the Professor.

**SONYA**

Uncle, you really must let this rest.

**MARIA**

[*To JOHN*] You're blaming your former beliefs for everything... but they're not to

blame, you are. Beliefs are nothing! Empty ideas... You needed action!

**JOHN**

Action?! I suppose you mean like your Professor's wanton self-serving!

**MARIA**

What's that supposed to mean?!

**SONYA**

*[Pleading]* Grandma! Uncle! Please don't do this.

**JOHN**

Alright! Alright. I'll shut up and apologise.

*An awkward silence reigns.*

**HELENA**

Such great weather today, so mild... not at all muggy...

*More silence.*

**JOHN**

Great weather for killing yourself...

*TELEGIN tunes the guitar. Marina walks near the house calling the chickens. Her mouth moves in a bizarre mockery of speech as she perfectly mimics the birds' calls.*

**SONYA**

Marina, what did the men want?...

**MARINA**

The same thing about the waste land again.

*MARINA repeats the bird noise. JOHN appears to find it disturbing.*

**SONYA**

Which one are you looking for?

**MARINA**

The speckled one. She has gone off with her chicks... I'm worried that she'll stray into the way of the magnesium seeders...

*MARINA exits.*

*TELEGIN plays an inappropriately jaunty tune; they all listen in silence. A workman enters.*

**WORKMAN**

Is the doctor here? [To MICHAEL] Please Doctor Astrov, they've come for you.

**MICHAEL**

Where from?

**WORKMAN**

The lichen farm.

**MICHAEL**

[Crossly] Damn. Well, it looks like I won't be staying for dinner after all. [Searching around for his things] It makes me so bloody angry.

**SONYA**

You'll come back later though?

**MICHAEL**

No, it'll be late. Where on earth... [*To the WORKMAN*] Do you think you could get me a glass of vodka? [*The WORKMAN goes out*] Where on earth... [*He manages gather all of his things*] Well, my friends, goodbye... [*To HELENA*] It would be wonderful if you and Sonia were to come and visit me some time. I have a little place, just about half an acre, but if you're interested I built a biodome for preserving a piece of the natural climate. I think it's the only piece left on the planet. It's quite something.

**HELENA**

I had been told that you took an interest in that. I imagine that it must distract you somewhat from your doctoring, though. Isn't that your true calling?

**MICHAEL**

I'm not sure what "true calling" actually means. It's something that's worth preserving, so that's enough.

**HELENA**

It just seems to me that philosophising over the climate is something for the old. You still seem quite young. Is it interesting?

**MICHAEL**

Oh, definitely.

**JOHN**

[*Sarcastically*] Definitely.

**SONYA**

[*To HELENA*] It actually really is very interesting. Mikhail Lvovich is campaigning to stop any further terraforming in the colonies. If you listen to him you'll find you'll agree completely. He says that living in diverse climates strengthens our species and encourages diversity amongst us. We've become too preoccupied with judging climates as harsh or mild, good or bad. We assign all of these labels to justify our interference and so that we can ignore the consequences.

**JOHN**

[*Laughing*] Bravo, bravo!... All of this wonderful rhetoric is totally unconvincing, so [*To MICHAEL*], my friend, you must let us carry on with our task of making this world fit for habitation.

**MICHAEL**

There we go. There it is. That word: habitation. You forgot the one that belongs before it: human. People always love to say that we're just making these worlds fit for life. It's an argument that conveniently ignores that we're actually just making them fit for our particular model of life. "We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors. We don't know what to do with other worlds. One world is enough, even there we feel stifled". We're surprisingly disinterested in making any planets better for life that doesn't conform to our terracentric standards. Did you know that Mediena had a small population of micro-organisms when people first arrived here? They didn't last especially long. Their demands on the environment clashed rather violently with ours, so we decided that there was no place for them here. We've slowly figured that the "greater good" and the "good of humanity" are one and the same. Ruining one planet wasn't enough for us, now we're determined to ruin every other planet in the universe. We won't stop destroying until we've made every world ours. [*To HELENA*] I'm right, aren't I? Humanity has been gifted with great intelligence and reason, and we've opted to use it to justify our inexorable march across space. Our great endeavour is not to witness its wonders, but to make it all just like that broken little lump of rock that spawned us. [*To JOHN*] You look skeptical, Ivan Petrovich, as if you doubt my convictions. Well, maybe this is all just silliness, but when I think about the near infinite possibilities that this universe affords, the supreme complexity of its systems, it gives me great hope for the future. To that end, I will oppose humanity's campaign of destruction to my dying breath. When I look out at the stars I can't help but feel... [*Seeing the WORKMAN who has returned with a glass of vodka*] However... [*drinking*] This probably is all just craziness, after all. I bid you farewell.

**SONYA**

*[Taking his arm and walking with him]* When will you visit again?

**MICHAEL**

I'm not sure.

**SONYA**

In another month's time?...

*MICHAEL and SONYA go into the house; MARIA and TELEGIN remain by the table:  
HELENA and JOHN go towards the terrace.*

**HELENA**

Why are you always picking fights, Ivan Petrovich? You just had to go and annoy your mother by badmouthing Aleksandr. You were fighting with him at lunch again. You can be so petty sometimes.

**JOHN**

What if I hate him?

**HELENA**

Well, there's really no reason for you to hate Aleksandr, he's just the same as everyone else. No worse than you.

**JOHN**

If only you could see yourself: your face, your movements... What apathy you have towards life.

**HELENA**

Oh, yes! What apathy! What boredom! Everyone criticises my husband and pities me: oh the poor girl, she's married such an old man! As if I can't see right through that "sympathy". It's exactly like Michael said just now, all of you will continue your campaign of destruction until you make everything yours. Well, what gives you the

right? You were talking before about Aleksandr being self-serving: how are you any different? To you I'm just another world to be terraformed, made fit for you to live on, and the first order of business is to wipe out the indigenous life, my husband. Move over, microbe! If this is the future of humanity, God help us.

**JOHN**

I don't like this philosophy!

*A pause.*

**JOHN**

I love you.

**HELENA**

Oh! Just grow up!

*HELENA storms into the house followed by JOHN; TELIGIN plucks absentmindedly at the guitar; MARIA reads.*

### **Chekhov in Space - Borrowing the Dramaturgy of *Forbidden Planet* in *Move Over Microbe!***

Whereas the focus of *Acclimatisation* was on character development, attempting to make Chekhov's characters fit better with the sorts of people found in New Zealand, *Move Over Microbe!* was an attempt to rework Chekhov's themes while leaving the characters much as they were. This required contrasting methodologies between the two adaptations. While writing *Acclimatisation* my primary concern was with connecting Chekhov's characters with people that I knew in real life. I then attempted to write realistic dialogue based on my own personal experiences. The narrative's themes and issues emerged naturally from this process, supporting the characters' actions (for example, Serebryakov/Frank's hypocritical business practices are drawn from the real-life details of the person I analogised Chekhov's character with).

In approaching *Move Over Microbe!* I sought for the characters to be supporting instruments for the themes and issues of the play. So rather than appropriating characters from the real world first and then using their characteristics to inform the details of the play with *Move Over Microbe!* I identified ideas and themes from the play which I wanted to emphasise then I fitted the details of the setting around them before slotting Chekhov's characters (or versions thereof) into the world.

This approach mirrors that taken by the creators of *Forbidden Planet*. That film opted to enhance *The Tempest*'s themes as well as linking them in to modern science (Caroti 9) only loosely adapting the details of character and dialogue. Caroti, quoting Virginia and Alden Vaughan, points out that "Caliban as 'id' became a palpable thread in twentieth-century psychoanalytic interpretations of *The Tempest*, a notion more dramatically presented in the 1956 science-fiction film, *Forbidden Planet*" (Caroti 2). *Forbidden Planet* uses a science fiction setting to link Shakespeare's themes directly to the (then) modern psychological theories of Sigmund Freud.

*Uncle Vanya* contains a critique of Russian attitudes towards their environment and a plea for them to take up a more sustainable way of living. Astrov in his Act One monologue outlines this:



You can burn peat in your stoves and build your sheds of stone. Well I grant you can cut down forests out of need, but why destroy them? The forests of Russia are being wiped out by the axe [...] and all because lazy man hasn't the sense to bend down to pick up fuel from the ground. (Chekhov 154)

Chekhov's environmental concerns are clear, however, the term environmentalism did not exist until circa 1922 ("Environmentalism" Merriam-Webster Online) and in the century since Chekhov wrote the play the concepts and science of environmentalism have advanced significantly. *Move Over Microbe!* aimed to mimic *Forbidden Planet* by using science fiction to link a more modern understanding of environmentalism to Chekhov's play while attempting to bypass the issues of fidelity and authenticity generated by adaptations like *Vanya* and *Dream of Sussex Downs*.

In choosing a futuristic analogue for environmentalism I latched on to the ethics of terraforming (the act of transforming hostile worlds towards more Earth-like conditions). This framework also allowed echoes of Russian colonialism, that nation's expansion in order to secure resources being an issue contemporary to Chekhov. Having pinpointed and opted to focus on this issue I was able to weave environmental themes more thoroughly through this version of the play than in the others I produced. For example, in *Uncle Vanya* Serebryakov is villainised by Voynitsky for his hypocrisy as well as the disruption his presence causes. Taking these ideas, in *Move Over Microbe!* I sought to tie them together under the overarching theme of environmentalism. John identifies Serebryakov's hypocrisy as being rooted in his being a prominent campaigner for off-world colonisation but refusing to leave Earth until it was an unavoidable necessity:

#### **JOHN**

The Professor still spends all his time proselytizing the cult of expansion and acclimatisation. Took him bloody long enough to get out here though, didn't it? Waited until Earth had totally broken his health he even considered portaling out here. I feel sorry all the poor buggers that are forced to have to listen to him: "The colonies are not only humanity's future, but our only chance of a

future". And all the while you couldn't get him out here until he literally had no other choice. He's still firing off his little propaganda pieces, though. The hypocrisy of it is staggering. ("Microbe Over Microbe!" 85)

However, John's own hypocrisy is thrown into relief by his insistence that the cause of the disruption triggered by Serebryakov's arrival is the Professor's failure to bend to suit his new environment:

**MARINA**

The Professor's habits are somewhat... obtrusive. He has insisted on remaining on Earth time, relative to his colleagues Moscow. He has been calling for meals at one in the morning and refuses to rise before midday.

**MICHAEL**

How does that work? Medeina has twenty-six hour days.

**JOHN**

I think that he's in denial about that. He won't bend, no matter how much the climate demands it. ("Move Over Microbe!" 81-82)

This clashes with John's own defence of the transformation of the planet's environment to better suit humans ("Move Over Microbe!" 86, 94).

Telegin is a warning for those who do not bend to face the challenges of their environment. Both in this version and in Chekhov's he dogmatically sticks to his principles even in face of the fact that doing so has left him penniless, dependent upon the help of others:

**TELEGIN**

No! I will not! When my wife left me I saw for the first time what a cesspool of decay and corruption Earth had become. People and emotions were just as disposable as everything else in our society. I was cast aside as you would an outmoded machine. So I gave her everything, all my earthly wealth, and I walked away, my head held high. I came here, far away from the filth and smoke, to try and build something new. And what is it that she has? A life of

comfort on a dead world. (“Move Over Microbe!” 88)

The piece overall was rooted in scientific reality by quotations from the real-world debate over the ethics of terraforming, opening with one of the key positioning statements from the conflict and alluding, both in dialogue and the title, to Richard L. S. Taylor’s catch cry for the pro-terraforming movement: “move over microbe”. These allusions are intended to hark back to Chekhov’s literary quotations, without attempting to directly emulate them (a more direct allusion to this comes from Astrov’s reference to iconic Russian science fiction novel *Solaris* (1961), “We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors. We don’t know what to do with other worlds. One world is enough, even there we feel stifled.” (“Move Over Microbe 94)). Furthermore, the “reality” of the world is anchored by multiple appeals to genuine scientific principles: hypothetical terraforming processes, such as magnesium seeding, root the colonists’ practices in scientific reality; Astrov’s plea for the rights of single cell organisms draws from the “Rare Earth” hypothesis (a scientific theory that posits complex life, as found on Earth, is likely to be an uncommon, if not unique, phenomenon in the universe); unusual sleep patterns both acknowledge and challenge the “Universal Universe Time” trope (“Universal Universe Time” [tvtropes.org](http://tvtropes.org)), the convenient narrative hand-waving which means Captain Kirk never has an awkward eight hour wait for the inhabitants of a planet to wake up before he can talk to them.

The science fiction framing of this adaptation also had some advantages in terms of reception. The fictional nature of the setting removed any concern over the authenticity of the depiction. The frame also lessens the likelihood of issues stemming from the fidelity criticism. Adaptations whose general premise openly distances them from the source text are generally less prone to criticism. *Forbidden Planet*, for example, is less subject to criticism over how much it deviates from Shakespeare’s text because its space setting, radical rethink of characters, totally new dialogue and lack of direct allusion to *The Tempest* signify a deliberate distancing from its source. This is similar to *The Turducken* (2008), *Uncle Vanya and Zombies* (2012) and *Three Sisters: A Black Opera* (2005), radical revisions of Chekhov plays aimed more at writing back to Chekhov than faithfully retelling his stories to a modern audience. Because these plays are openly not aiming for fidelity to Chekhov’s works they are not subject to the

fidelity criticism.

***Uncle Vanya (Condensed)***

*Adapted by Nathaniel Ridley*

*The patio of a house. Outdoor furniture. Summer.*

*JOHN and MICHAEL step out of the house.*

**MICHAEL**

Ah. I see what you mean. [*looking around*] Actually, you know what, you've not done too bad a job of it.

**JOHN**

Yeah. Thanks. It took me about a week.

**MICHAEL**

It's great.

**JOHN**

I followed one of those online tutorial things... It looked easier than it was.

**MICHAEL**

Well, those things always do. I once tried to build a fence...

*A pause.*

**JOHN**

Anyway... would you like something to drink? Tea? Coffee? Beer?

**MICHAEL**

I am capable of functioning without alcohol you know. Coffee will do fine. Seeing as I've dragged you out of bed you could probably use the caffeine.

**JOHN**

Ha bloody ha!

*JOHN goes inside to get the coffee. They continue their conversation at a slightly louder volume.*

**MICHAEL**

Why were you sleeping?

*A pause.*

**MICHAEL**

If you don't mind me asking...

**JOHN**

No. It's fine. I'm just exhausted from having Alex here. He has a bad habit of keeping me up late.

**MICHAEL**

Right.

**JOHN**

It's actually really bad. I've become unproductive and that ends up putting a burden on Sonia.

*JOHN returns with the coffee.*

**JOHN**

Anyway, none of that is particularly interesting. How's work?

**MICHAEL**

Oh, same old same old. I still spend half my time reassuring hypochondriacs that they're not dying of the current fashionable illness. This year everyone's been convinced that even the slightest stomach upset is a sign that they've caught a super bug. This one woman started screaming at me because I refused to prescribe her antibiotics for a stomach virus. I told her, if it really was a super bug there's nothing antibiotics could have done for her and she should consider making peace with her loved ones.

*MICHAEL laughs at this before realising that it was probably in bad taste.*

**MICHAEL**

She was fine.

**JOHN**

Ah. Good.

**MICHAEL**

I actually don't know why I keep going. I hate my patients. It's not even as though I'm doing much good. The whole thing is so bloody futile.

**JOHN**

I'm sure that it makes all of the difference from the patients' perspective.

**MICHAEL**

I guess you're right... [A Pause] Where is Alex anyway? Given that I'm here to see him I figured he would actually be around for it.

**JOHN**

Just a heads up, I wouldn't count on Alex actually being aware that you've been "summoned". Who was it that called you?

**MICHAEL**

Well... it was Sonia

**JOHN**

Yeah, most likely on Helen's behalf. I would be amazed if Alex was even aware that he's "sick".

**MICHAEL**

Oh...

**JOHN**

Anyway, they've gone out on a walk.

**MICHAEL**

Right...

**JOHN**

They should be back soon.

**MICHAEL**

Ah... good...

*An awkward silence.*

**MICHAEL**

How's it been? Having him to stay, I mean.

**JOHN**

Fucking horrible. I hate having him around. It's a constant reminder as to how unfair life is.

**MICHAEL**



Jesus! Okay. Clearly hit a nerve there.

**JOHN**

It's just kinda frustrating, you know? Life's just sort of gone his way. He's not particularly good at anything but he still manages to just... succeed.

**MICHAEL**

I guess some people are just naturally lucky. I know that's not an especially scientific view, but it does seem to hold true.

**JOHN**

Yeah... and it's balanced out by the fact that I can't seem to catch a break. Nothing in my life has ever gone smoothly. Something has always gotten in the way. My life is a catalogue of missed opportunities.

**MICHAEL**

Well, I don't really know him well enough to comment.

**JOHN**

You don't need to know him! Just look at his history with women! I mean, he married my sister and she was way out of his league. God, my own mother still hero worships him, even after the divorce. And now he's ensnared Helen.

**MICHAEL**

What exactly is she doing with him?

**JOHN**

God knows! I think...

**SONIA**

*[From inside the house]* Hello?!

**JOHN**

Ah. I think they're back.

*SONIA sticks her head through the door.*

**SONIA**

There you are. Oh, hello Michael. Hang on, we'll be out in a bit.

*SONIA returns inside.*

**JOHN**

Brace yourself. Alex will be with them and probably Waffles.

**MICHAEL**

Waffles?

**JOHN**

The Russian bloke.

**MICHAEL**

Oh, right. Ilya Ilych, or whatever. He's still about?

**JOHN**

Yeah. Sonia feels bad for him, so we've pretty much taken him in for good.

**MICHAEL**

Why? What happened to him?

**JOHN**

Oh, he's just had a rough life. A bit like me I guess. He's basically gone bankrupt providing for his ex-wife and her kids.

*SONIA and HELEN enter.*

**SONIA**

Right. Here we are.

**JOHN**

Where are the others?

**SONIA**

Ilya Ilych is taking a nap in the living room and Dad's gone to work in the study.

**JOHN**

Really? Again? What is it this time? Another urgent Facebook post? Or does he need to upload smug video to Youtube?

**SONIA**

Oh don't go starting this again. I'm sure Michael doesn't need to hear it. *[To Michael]*

How are you, anyway?

**MICHAEL**

Oh, not too bad. Keeping busy. And yourself?

**SONIA**

I'm fine, thanks. Busy with Dad here.

**MICHAEL**

Ah yes, about that, *[To Helen]* I was here to see your husband Mrs Carter. Sonia said he was unwell?

**HELEN**

*[Shooting a look at SONIA]* Oh! Yes. No, he's picked up a bit since the other day. He

just seemed a little depressed so I mentioned it to Sonia...

**SONIA**

Well, I just thought it couldn't hurt to have the doctor come and look at him.

*A brief but awkward silence.*

**MICHAEL**

So... shall I pop in and see him or...

**HELEN**

No, no I wouldn't worry about it. As I said, he seems fine now and I don't want to interrupt his work.

*JOHN snorts derisively. HELEN briefly glares at him.*

**MICHAEL**

Okay. I needn't have rushed out then. Ah well.

**HELEN**

I'm really sorry. I didn't realise that...

**MICHAEL**

*[Interrupting her]* Really, it's fine. Don't worry about it.

**SONIA**

Well, seeing as you're here now, you should stay for dinner.

**MICHAEL**

Well, I'm not going to get any more work done today, so sure, why not?

**SONIA**

Great! In that case I should go and get something going. Would you like to help, Michael? That way we can catch up.

**MICHAEL**

Uh, yeah. Okay.

*SONIA and MICHAEL exit.*

*A pause.*

**HELEN**

You just have to make scenes, don't you?

**JOHN**

What?

**HELEN**

That dig at Alex. Was it really necessary? It was embarrassing.

**JOHN**

I can't help that he's a hypocrite and I hate him. Forty years as a writer and he's yet to produce something worth reading. Forty years of flitting about the globe, leaving a trail of destruction behind him for other people to clean up. People like me and Sonia. His own daughter, for God's sake. She's why I stick around when I would be well within my rights to just leave and never come back. It wouldn't be fair to her.

**HELEN**

Don't try and paint yourself as some heroic martyr, John! You get off on feeling hard done by.

*MICHAEL enters on his cellphone. SONIA follows shortly after him.*

**MICHAEL**

Yeah, no, I'll be along shortly... No, really, it's fine... Okay, bye. [*Hanging up*] Right, well it looks like I won't be staying for dinner. Duty calls.

**HELEN**

Oh. That's a shame.

**MICHAEL**

Yes. [*A pause*] You know, you and Sonia should come to this gala we're holding to raise funds for Forest and Bird.

**HELEN**

Oh. I didn't realise you were into that sort of thing.

**SONIA**

Oh yes! Michael's always been a really vocal activist for preserving the environment. Isn't that right?

**MICHAEL**

[*Embarrassed*] Uh, yeah. Well, it seems worthwhile.

**HELEN**

I guess I just figured you'd be more than busy enough with doctoring. Doesn't this get in the way.

**MICHAEL**

If I'm honest, at this point I almost feel as though being a doctor is getting in the way of saving the environment. This just seems more important.

**HELEN**

Really?

**MICHAEL**

It's something that existed long before humans and should continue to exist long after we've disappeared.

*JOHN makes a derisive sound.*

**SONIA**

Michael's always said that it's a good idea to look after your backyard

**JOHN**

It's all a bit detached from reality, though, isn't it? I mean, it's not as if all of this effort on your part is actually going to change anything.

**MICHAEL**

See, I hate it when people say things like that. Like there's no point in trying to make things better. You can't possibly be that cynical, John.

**JOHN**

I know a lost cause when I see one.

**MICHAEL**

God! You take such pleasure from playing the nihilist. Stop trying to be provocative and actually think about what you're saying. Even if there was so much as a grain of truth in it, would you really be prepared to just give up? Think about how vested our national identity is in our environment. We can't just let go of that without a fight.

**JOHN**

We can and have! People have been systematically stripping this land of its natural resources since we arrived here.

**MICHAEL**

And that makes it okay for us to just carry on with it? That's insane. I think it's just

laziness. You've decided that you're not interested in saving the environment and now you'll just say anything to justify that decision.

**JOHN**

Don't lecture me on what I think!

**MICHAEL**

Why not? You clearly need it. Can you really believe that we should just give up? That we should deny future generations the opportunity to enjoy all of these things just because it might require a little effort to save them? It might be the most important thing that... [*his cellphone buzzes irritatingly*] ...Actually, I have to take this. I'll see you all later.

**SONIA**

I'll walk you out.

*MICHAEL and SONIA exit. JOHN and HELEN sit in silence.*

**HELEN**

I don't think he likes me very much.

**JOHN**

Well, it's not surprising really. Dragging him all the way out here only to reveal that he's not needed after all.

**HELEN**

Don't pin that on me! It was all Sonia's doing.

*A pause.*

**HELEN**

She could do with being a little subtler about how much she fancies him. And you



should be more considerate of her feelings. Harassing him like that was totally uncalled for.

**JOHN**

Listen, I...

**HELEN**

No! I don't want to hear your justification. The doctor was right, you'll say anything to justify your position, whether it's true or not. Just like you'll say anything to convince yourself that I'm unhappy with my marriage, just so you can swoop in and be the rescuing hero. Well, I don't need it! I don't want it!

**JOHN**

I can't help that I love you!

**HELEN**

Jesus Christ! What is wrong with you?!

*HELEN storms out. JOHN sits in silence for a while before deciding to pursue her.*

### Essentialising *Uncle Vanya*

In attempting to organise readings of my existing scripts I was confronted with a major issue of Chekhov's dramaturgy. Put simply, the sheer number of characters in this play is prohibitive when it comes to staging. While each has a distinct dramaturgical function, when it comes to casting this play today it is difficult to pull together sufficient cast. *Uncle Vayna*, for example, has nine characters. One of these, Marina the nurse, plays a fairly ancillary role to the story while another, the worker, has only one line and serves solely to give Astrov a reason to leave. Even Telegin, who is dramaturgically important to the play, spends the majority of any performance either absent or silent. We can see this as being similar to Shakespeare's plays (which are now rarely subject to professional productions in New Zealand, instead favouring volunteer or student casts) and the works of other historic playwrights. Chekhov's casts are too large to be economically staged and the emergence of some Chekhovian equivalent to New Zealand's 'Summer Shakespeare' seems unlikely. This suggests that what is needed as a response to these economic difficulties is a far less ambitious version of Chekhov, one that is more in line with the realities of staging a play in New Zealand.

Looking at *Uncle Vanya* it is apparent that although all of the characters serve a purpose in the play's dramaturgy some are more important than others. The two previously mentioned characters, Marina and the worker, are easily removed (and have been in some of my prior adaptations) but it is not necessary to stop there. Telegin, despite being an entertaining character, can easily be removed from the action, as can Mariya. This editing out of characters need not erase them from the story of the play, simply from the plot. Thus, the Professor, whose onstage actions are limited, could be edited down to mentions in the dialogue of other characters.

In my attempt to create a more streamlined version of *Uncle Vanya* that also implemented what I had learnt about approximating the play to a New Zealand audience from my previous adaptations, I focused on finding the characters that are essential to the play and whose absence would significantly alter the work. This is important as the aim of this project has been to approximate *Uncle Vanya* to a target audience rather than to challenge Chekhov's dramaturgy. While making major

alterations to the play's structure might be tempting (and adaptations such as *There There* (2012) by Kristen Kosmas demonstrate that, at least in the case of *Three Sisters*, it can be successfully done) those works are more appropriations than adaptations and are not, as Linda Hutcheon puts it, “repetition without replication” (Hutcheon 7). Adaptations for a New Zealand audience cannot trade explicitly on the “novelty” of retelling Chekhov in a new way thanks to his cultural relegation in this country. Instead they need to focus on confronting the elements of Chekhov's canon which have rendered him undesirable, minimising these but attempting to convey the core dramaturgy relatively unaltered. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with attempting to make an adaptation which does not do this (for example: one which depends on an audience already familiar with the story), simply that doing so would likely be futile.

Looking at the characters in *Uncle Vanya* we can begin to identify those which are crucial to the play. The workman, Marina, Telegin, Mariya and Serebryakov are all sufficiently ancillary to the actual action of the play that they can be done without. In fact, it would be possible to tell the play's story without reference to any of these characters except Serebryakov. The four characters who are indispensable to the Chekhov's plot are Voynitsky, Sonya, Yelena and Astrov. These characters carry most of the play's dialogue and feature the most important character relationships (Voynitsky and Astrov both love Yelena while Sonya loves Astrov). Almost all of the play's important dialogue can be distributed between these characters. For example, Marina's exchange with Astrov at the beginning of the play can occur between Astrov and Voynitsky instead:

**JOHN**

Anyway, none of that is particularly interesting. How's work?

**MICHAEL**

Oh, same old same old. I still spend half my time reassuring hypochondriacs that they're not dying of the current fashionable illness. This year everyone's been convinced that even the slightest stomach upset is a sign that they've caught a super bug. This one woman started screaming at me because I refused to prescribe her antibiotics for a stomach virus. I told her, if it really was a super

bug there's nothing antibiotics could have done for her and she should consider making peace with her loved ones.

*MICHAEL laughs at this before realising that it was probably in bad taste.*

**MICHAEL**

She was fine.

**JOHN**

Ah. Good.

**MICHAEL**

I actually don't know why I keep going. I hate my patients. It's not even as though I'm doing much good. The whole thing is so bloody futile.

**JOHN**

I'm sure that it makes all of the difference from the patients' perspective.

**MICHAEL**

I guess you're right... ("Uncle Vanya (Condensed)" 102-103)

While there is a shift of tone in the interaction from the source text's version, the fundamental components are all present. Similarly elements of Voynitsky's argument with Mariya (Chekhov 151-152) are now had with Yelena ("Uncle Vanya (Condensed)" 109).

The absence of Serebryakov presented a potential problem in terms of the play's plot as the dramatic highpoint comes when he announces his intention to sell the estate (Chekhov 182-188). It is not implausible to have this action occur off-stage however, as the crux of the scene lies with the characters' reactions. The essence of this scene can still be captured by showing the four characters reacting to the fallout of the announcement. Other than this scene, Serebryakov's impact on the action of the play is minimal and his removal was straightforward.

Overall the dialogue (as a reaction to the response to my earlier adaptations) was significantly shortened in order to bring it in line with more modern standards of realistic text. Chekhov's monologues were either heavily condensed, cut entirely or broken up into dialogue between two characters. Astrov's rant about Russian treatment of the forests here became an argument with Voynitsky:

**SONIA**

Michael 's always said that it's a good idea to look after your backyard

**JOHN**

It's all a bit detached from reality, though, isn't it? I mean, it's not as if all of this effort on your part is actually going to change anything.

**MICHAEL**

See, I hate it when people say things like that. Like there's no point in trying to make things better. You can't possibly be that cynical, John.

**JOHN**

I know a lost cause when I see one.

**MICHAEL**

God! You take such pleasure from playing a nihilist. Stop trying to be provocative and actually think about what you're saying. Even if there was so much as a grain of truth in what you're saying, would you really be prepared to just give up? Think about how vested our national identity is in our environment. We can't just let go of that without a fight.

**JOHN**

We can and have! People have been systematically stripping this land of its natural resources since we arrived here.

**MICHAEL**

And that makes it okay for us to just carry on with it? That's insane. I think it's just laziness. You've decided that you're not interested in saving the environment and now you'll just say anything to justify that decision.

**JOHN**

Don't lecture me on what I think!

**MICHAEL**

Why not? You clearly need it. Can you really believe that we should just give up? That we should deny future generations the opportunity to enjoy all of these things just because it might require a little effort to save them? It might be the most important thing that... *(his cellphone buzzes irritatingly)* ...Actually, I have to take this. I'll see you all later. (*"Uncle Vanya (Condensed)" 110-112*)

The result is a play that is more in line with the pace expected by a modern audience, less reliant on long speeches to convey ideas and which calls for a cast half the size of Chekhov's.

## 5. Results

While reflecting on the adaptations I created it is important to remember that the goal of this project is not to identify one “superior” model of adaptation which all adaptors should use. The simple reality is that different modes of adaptation will work depending on a variety of contextual factors. First and foremost of these is the work being adapted. Though it seems like a common sense statement, the adaptive strategy employed by an adaptor should suit the work being adapted. While creating an adaptation of *Uncle Vanya* about the rise of European fascism might sound intriguing it would not be a goal supported by Chekhov’s text.

After the needs of the play itself the cultural context of the adaptation should be considered. In the case of this project certain modes of adaptation were closed off to me due to Chekhov's current standing in New Zealand theatre culture. Adaptations like *Three Sisters: A Black Opera* and *The Turducken*, which set themselves deliberately against Chekhov's “high culture” status, are only viable in cultures where Chekhov is a prominent part of the canon (those plays originating from Canada and the United States respectively). Attempting to replicate them in New Zealand would likely elicit confusion rather than engagement. Similarly, plays like Kristen Kosmas's *There There*, less an adaptation of *Three Sisters* than it is an appropriation of the character of Captain Vasily Vasilevich Solony, exploring him in isolation, work only if presented in a culture which has some idea as to who that character is.

Conversely, some of the approaches I took could only work in New Zealand. Shifting the play's action to the Marlborough Sounds as was the case in *Acclimatisation* would not be a sound decision if it were made by an adaptor writing in Ireland (or any country other than New Zealand). Likewise, attempting to capture the idioms of the New Zealand dialect outside of the context of New Zealand would likely prove fruitless (the reverse of which explains why Brian Friel’s *Three Sisters* has never been produced in New Zealand). It is no coincidence that adaptation shares its name with a biological process. In science adaptation describes the evolutionary process that tailors an organism to its environment. In the arts an adaptation must respect the environment in which it exists or else it is defunct (why view an adaptation of a work which neither approximates it to the audience or shows them anything novel). In shaping my

adaptations to their context, the strategies I opted to employ deliberately did not challenge the structure or characters of Chekhov's play. This is due to the fact that an adaptation of Chekhov in New Zealand does not need to alter the general shape of the plays in order to be novel as Chekhov is largely absent from our stage. It is a paradox of the importance of context to an adaptation that an audience unfamiliar enough with Chekhov's plays to not invoke the fidelity criticism over dramaturgical changes is also unlikely to appreciate what they bring to an adapted work. As much as I can claim that my restructuring of events in *Acclimatisation* improves the play's logic when presented in a modern context, it is not a difference that would be noticed by anybody who was not relatively familiar with *Uncle Vanya* and must rest on being a good decision rather than a novel one.

Finally, the strategies must suit the sensibilities of the playwright. Even if there were potential value in writing a version of *Uncle Vanya* in verse rather than prose or setting it in the Everglades, these strategies call on skills (I am a poor poet) or experience (I have never been to Florida) that are beyond my particular set. Conversely, Brian Friel, despite being an experienced adaptor of Chekhov, is not necessarily as well equipped as I am, having been raised on the genre, to write a science fiction version of *Uncle Vanya*. Tailoring a style to the playwright's abilities is an important part of creating an adaptation.

Despite the absence of a single correct approach to act of adaptation, the strategic approach outlined here does offer some guidance. By seeing an adaptation well received in one cultural context and identifying that it faced and overcame challenges similar to those found in their own, an adaptor can generate a strategy for creating a new adaptation. This is a potential means for avoiding the pitfalls of the adaptive process.



## 6. Conclusion

There is no one correct way of adapting a classic work. Each methodology presents different challenges, different advantages and different weaknesses. This is complicated further by the varying characteristics of the receiving audiences. Techniques of adaptation that work in England or the United States do not necessarily work in New Zealand or Canada. That said, observing adaptations from other cultures can provide guidance to an adaptor when adaptations are attempting to overcome similar challenges.

Each of the plays produced by this project attempted to use identified strategies for adaptation to bring Anton Chekhov's plays closer to a New Zealand audience. While they all achieved this goal to some degree it is clear that some were more effective than others. My first adaptation fell into similar troubles to Tom Wood's *Vanya* or Roger Hall's *Dream of Sussex Downs*, failing to totally approximate the play to its target audience thus seeming jarring. My second adaptation, *Acclimatisation*, suffered from its attempt to realistically depict a modern New Zealand setting, generating a distraction within the target audience over whether it lined up with their own personal, subjective experience of life in this country. *Move Over Microbe!* lets go of the goal of approximation in favour of framing the play so that its "foreignness" and sense of the other is obvious, deliberate and framed in such a way as to be comprehensible. Finally, my essentialised "digest" of *Uncle Vanya* does a good job of approximating the play, but possibly challenges the adapted work's dramaturgy too much given the stated goal of proving Chekhov's continued relevance.

In adapting Chekhov specifically, it is challenging to identify what characteristics are essential to the works. Chekhov's plays are densely woven with meaning. Each character bears with them a complex and complete back story which influences their behaviour in the play. This back story is frequently rooted in the social conditions and conventions of the time that Chekhov was writing. Subsequently, unravelling these histories in order to make them relevant to the here and now is one of the core challenges faced by an adaptor. Beyond this, Chekhov's works are permeated with metaphor and symbolism, again frequently tied to social conditions and conventions, as well as a keen literary awareness. Taken as a whole Chekhov's

dramaturgy boasts an impressive internal connectivity, each and every part being complexly interrelated. For an adaptor this is both fuel for a broad range of possibilities (I remain happy with the fact that I was able to expand Chekhov's ideas about man's place in the environment to feature prominently throughout *Move Over Microbe!* and I ascribe this to the fact that the underlying idea was already present in the text) and a challenge to overcome (stripping characters from my essentialised version of *Uncle Vanya* proved challenging as I needed to come up with new ways to tease essential information out of characters and figure out how events in the plot would be triggered now that some of their key players had been removed).

Reworking Chekhov's dramaturgy also made apparent the play's short fallings. One of the initial appeals of *Uncle Vanya* (and indeed the entirety Chekhov's canon of full length plays) is its social realism. Chekhov's style of realism has been, to a certain degree, rendered irrelevant by the prevalence of film and television and shifting standards of realism on stage and elsewhere. Unfortunately, given the goals of the project, moving away from realism was not an option. Such a move away from realism would have been a direct challenge to Chekhov's dramaturgy and would have been ultimately pointless in face of an audience unfamiliar with Chekhov's conventions.

This project did succeed, however, in illustrating the process of adaptation. Each of these four adaptations represents a specific strategy of adaptation and the application of a variety of adaptive techniques. While it is difficult to gauge whether or not these adaptations succeeded in the general goal of approximating *Uncle Vanya* to a New Zealand audience, they do succeed in demonstrating what goes into the writing of an adaptation and some of the challenges that an adaptor might face. In the case of Chekhov in New Zealand, the "Anglicised" nature of much modern Chekhov was potentially an obstacle in the way of an audience appreciating these classic plays. *Acclimatisation*, *Move Over Microbe!* and the essentialised version of *Uncle Vanya* all demonstrate techniques that can distance Chekhov from the English tradition of performance and translation (I exclude my first adaptation from this as I don't believe that it distanced itself sufficiently from my source translations to be described as "de-Anglicised"). This has the potential to overcome Chekhov's "foreignness" to New Zealand, easing the plays' reception.

This project was not intended as a platform for making value judgements about

adaptations. This means that it is difficult to fully judge how each of these texts might have affected an audience. Were this research to be continued in the future one possible direction it could be taken would be to produce a full script using one of these adaptive methodologies and then produce it on stage in order to fully gauge the audience reaction to these techniques.

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