



# Chekhov for Children

Subtitle TK

SASHA WATERS FREYER

*Intro note on film tk [Following a world premiere in September, Chekhov For Children will have its New York premiere at the Film Society of Lincoln Center in October, with nationwide screenings to follow. For more information on screenings or to learn more about the project and the upcoming DVD, please visit [www.pieshake.com](http://www.pieshake.com) ]*

IT ARRIVED IN THE MAIL on a classically grim Iowa afternoon in February 2006; a small, lumpy package from the writer Phillip Lopate. “Oh riiiiight,” I thought to myself as I tore through the bubble wrap, “it’s the tape.” I was Lopate’s student at age ten, when he was a part-time poet at my New York City school as a member of Teachers & Writers Collaborative and I remembered him from that time in the late ’70s as long-haired and hectic, with a Zapata-like walrus moustache. The tape documented a crazily ambitious undertaking we’d tackled during his time at the school, and I wondered

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*Sasha Waters Freyer’s nonfiction films and video have broadcast and screened widely in the U.S. and internationally, including on the PBS series Independent Lens, the Sundance Channel, the Tribeca & Woodstock Film Festivals, the Ann Arbor Film Festival & Tour, the National Museum of Women in the Arts, L.A. Film Forum, Kasseler Dokumentarfilm Festival and Rencontres Internationales Paris/Berlin. Since 2000, Waters Freyer has taught film & video in the Department of Cinema & Comparative Literature at the University of Iowa, where she is an Associate Professor. She lives in a house with a big front porch in Iowa City with her husband, John D. Freyer, and their daughters Georgia and Ruby.*

what it would be like to revisit it. Thirty years is a long time, a fact underscored by a chance encounter I’d had at the University of Iowa a few months earlier with Lopate, now a distinguished gentleman of letters. There I was a professor myself, hob-knobbing with Phil Lopate and his writer pals on my very own campus, where I had been teaching college students filmmaking for six years. But I felt shy, the way you do re-acquainting in adulthood with someone who knew you only as a child. No way to account for, or adjust to, really, all that passage of time.

The tape had a single word, “Vanya,” inscribed upon its label. I was in my office with myriad mundane mid-semester tasks that demanded my flagging attention. I was busy, distracted, but felt compelled to watch just a few minutes, just for fun. The grainy black-and-white images hissed to life on the VHS deck. “Drink some tea, my boy.” The opening line of dialogue from Anton Chekhov’s melancholy play about broken adults reckoning with the disappointments and futility of their middle-aged lives, spoken by the 11-year-old Ayesha Wilson. “No thanks, I don’t feel much like it,” replies the rakish Doctor Astrov, performed by Slim (Slim! My major fifth-grade crush!). “Nurse, how long have you and I known each other?” he asks wearily. How long indeed? Nurse Ayesha muses that it’s been “11 years, maybe even more,” but seeing this footage I travel at warp speed

backwards three decades in time. I am watching a videotaped production of *Uncle Vanya*, staged by New York City fifth- and sixth-graders at PS 75 on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, under Phillip Lopate's patient direction and occasional coercion. On screen it is June of 1979, and the children, myself among them, traipse across the stage at Symphony Space Theater on Broadway and 96th Street for nearly two hours, "before an initially indulgent but skeptical audience," in Lopate's words. In a 1979 essay titled "Chekhov for Children," first published in *Teachers & Writers* magazine, Phillip writes, "Many who came to support the children in what they assumed would be an impossible undertaking were rather startled to find themselves pulled into the original drama as Chekhov had written it . . . and I was in a sense the most surprised, knowing from having directed the play how catastrophically it could have gone."

Anton Chekhov was 39 years old when *Uncle Vanya* was first staged at the turn of the last century in Moscow; Phillip was 37 when he directed the play on

the Upper West Side of Manhattan. When a few years ago I began work on *Chekhov for Children*, a feature documentary film, the children of the '70s who performed in Lopate's *Vanya* were between those two ages. Four years and several trips to New York, California and Paris later, the film *Chekhov for Children* draws on the footage of the original performance, plus rare, student-made Super 8 mm films and videos courtesy of Teachers & Writers Collaborative, to explore Lopate's *Uncle Vanya* in the context of a flourishing arts program at PS 75. Weaving together archival documentary and fiction film images with voice-over, Lopate's text, and interviews with the now-middle-aged children, it both revisits Phillip's essay and continues the tale he set in motion.

"A lot of these kids, they're never going to become artists. What do you see as the ongoing value of them spending this time and so much attention to drawing?" Teri Mack, a member of the Teachers & Writers team, queries a classroom teacher from behind the camera in a bit of impromptu footage, circa 1975. The



Lampstands auctioned off one cat. Obese mats telephoned five progressive



image is the creamy black-and-white of old Betamax—disappointed adversary in the consumer video wars of that decade in which VHS soon triumphed. The young teacher is

Ruth Lacey, today the principal of an alternative public high school on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Lacey answers, “The amount of time that they’re spending on drawing and looking is the same approach I would use with any subject matter. I mean they’re so bombarded with visual stimuli that it seems to me that you have to take something out of their environment and make them focus on it so that they look. So, the whole approach is to make them observe, and be keen observers so that they can translate that into something of their own.”

The mid-1970s was a time not unlike our own—turmoil in the Middle East, a sagging economy, public schools under siege—and entirely unlike our own. The idea that children were “bombarded” by visual stimuli in 1975—before home computers, video games, cell phones, surveillance cameras, and aggressive ‘tween marketing—is today both comic and bittersweet. However, the question “what is the value?”—of drawing, looking, and by extension of art education itself—remains one of great urgency. *Chekhov for Children* considers the impact of a patently absurd, insanely difficult yet wildly creative undertaking with kids. Its story is timely because there was nothing especially distinctive about PS 75. It was not a charter or a magnet school, but an exceptionally well-integrated urban public school with “a mix of children of people on welfare and children of Columbia professors,” as Lopate says in the film. PS 75 squatted just south of what was considered the edge of Harlem in those days, in a city on the brink of total economic collapse. Yet throughout that turbulent decade, student-made documentaries, animated films, radio dramas (broadcast on the legendary WBAI), magazines and anthologies of poetry were created under the aegis of the energetic young artists and writers affiliated

One silly aardvark gossips partly cleverly, however the mostly irascible elephant tickled one angst-ridden cat, yet irascible subways gossips, even though five bourgeois sheep fights fountains.

with the Teachers & Writers Collaborative. It was within this heady mix that Phillip had the freedom and flexibility to introduce Chekhov to children.

“To no one’s surprise, Chekhov is hardly a staple in the elementary school repertory,” Lopate opines in his essay. “With Chekhov, it is not a matter of risqué material—too much sexuality or violence, since the playwright is very moderate in these respects—but of a perspective so wholly, darkly adult in its awareness of time running out that some would argue it is unfair to subject children in their innocence to such gloomy prospects.” In our own era, too, of standardized testing fanaticism, it is difficult to imagine elementary students performing Chekhov—though not for reasons of guarding their virtue. With no metrics, no way to measure outcomes or create program assessments, how could any teacher justify an endeavor so time-consuming and labor intensive, so arguably useless by today’s educational standards?

“Poetry makes nothing happen,” cautioned W.H. Auden. But statistics reveal that students who are involved in the arts are four times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement, to participate in youth groups, and to perform community service.<sup>1</sup> As linguistic anthropologist Shirley Bryce Heath reports, “The support of like-minded risk-takers [i.e., other young artists] builds confidence in one’s ability to take on challenges, solve problems and follow through on plans.” This begs the question: what happened to those children who spent the 1970s under desks drawing comic books, writing poems, making videos, or even playing Dungeons & Dragons (only on Fridays!) in the classroom? The children involved in Phillip’s *Uncle Vanya* are today a public defender-turned-Newbery Award-winning author; a Paris-based hip-hop performer; a tenured professor of filmmaking in the Midwest (this is me); an historian; a community

One putrid orifice very annoyingly untangles five progressive Klingons. One ticket abused umpteen mats, but dogs auctioned off two dwarves. The quite silly bureau tastes umpteen partly purple wart hogs.

activist; a photographer; a family therapist; an entertainment industry consultant, and the highest-ranking black woman in the New York state Attorney General's office. All of us work in creative or public service fields, or both. The data is superficial; qualifiable, not quantifiable. And yet, as Picasso declared decades ago, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up."

Current trends in U.S. educational philosophy suggest a worrying lack of interest in the artist "once he grows up." President George H.W. Bush's late-1980s push for National Goals for Education and standardized tests were, by 2001, cemented into place by Bush no. 2's No Child Left Behind Act. President Obama may be staying the course. His administration's re-branding of a modest federal grant program into an *American Idol*-style popularity contest called "Race to the Top" signals a continued shift away from "resources and innovation and collaboration," in the words of Randi Weingarten of the American Federation of Teachers, towards narrowly targeted "test-score improvement." For example, "In Delaware [winner of a \$100 million award in the first round of Race to the Top], no teacher now will be rated 'effective' who does not meet targets connected to student test-score improvement . . . over the school year, and teachers could be removed if they are rated 'ineffective' or 'needs improvement' two years in a row."<sup>2</sup>

By what targets might Phillip Lopate have evaluated the effectiveness of our months of rehearsal, our painstaking memorization of dialogue, our total immersion in the subtle adult passions unfolding in the Russian countryside that Chekhov so eloquently evokes? Lopate's essay "Chekhov for Children" provides few hard answers. He writes, "I think it is a very

good thing for children to see what adult futility looks like (they see it anyway whether we want them to or not), and to get an insight into the mistakes and paralyzes that hinder many grownups, so that they will not squander their own

opportunities." I am reminded again of Auden: "The commonest ivory tower is that of the average man, the state of passivity towards experience."

I fear we have traded the passions of students and teachers inspired by vigorous public arts education for shabbier prospects: narrow goals and assessment rubrics that breed quiet resignation. Angus Johnston, who played the role of *Uncle Vanya*, says of his own recent years of teaching at Brooklyn College, "I have had the experience over and over again, of students feeling like they have no opportunity to change things." He recounts young adults who perceive the world as directed by a small, elite group of people who are not responsive to them and to whom they will never be granted access. "I don't think I ever felt that way," Angus reflects. "I grew up feeling like stuff was possible." Perhaps Angus' students, largely from a non-white, non-elite part of New York City, feel disenfranchised by race, or by economic or social background. But what Angus describes rings the bell of my own bewilderment at my students in Iowa, who are vastly white, hailing from both church-centered rural towns and the leafy, well-to-do Chicago suburbs. Ten years of teaching on this campus, almost all of it during wartime; a decade of rising tuition and severe statewide cuts to education, and I have yet to witness serious, widespread student self-advocacy—except against a city ordinance that would prohibit under-21-year-olds from patronizing downtown bars. As Eula Biss writes of teaching Iowa undergraduates, "These were students just out of high school, where they had been taught that the world was benign and that hard work and obedience would inevitably be rewarded with prosperity. Their complacency in maintaining

that myth was willful, but it was also somewhat necessary to the lives they were expected to lead.”<sup>3</sup> Resigned complacency in New York City is on its surface identical, it seems, to willful complacency in Iowa. Is there a causal link between ten years of national obsession with test scores and education policy that marginalizes the cultivation of students’ creative voices on the one hand, and students’ disinclination to use those voices on the other? There are no metrics. But Jamal Mitchell, the musician Telegin in Lopate’s *Vanya* who is today a hip-hop artist, makes the case succinctly: “We’re living in a world where people are conditioned to think that they can’t do things and no one is trying to give away the secrets about how to get paid off being creative, and doing what you want to do. So we try to break down those barriers.”

As teachers, parents and mentors we need to do all we can to break down those barriers. Because as Phillip Lopate says, “We’re twelve years old and we are already who we are going to be. It’s like a photograph being developed, it just becomes clearer and clearer.” His *Vanya* videotape sparked a curiosity and renewed sense of engagement in this former 10-year-old; the result is, I hope, a documentary that is more than a quirky time capsule of a vanishing era in public arts education. The final message of *Chekhov for Children* (the essay as well as the film) is that childhood remains a specter that both haunts and animates our adult lives. It is through the arts that we all connect to this living childhood within us. 🍷