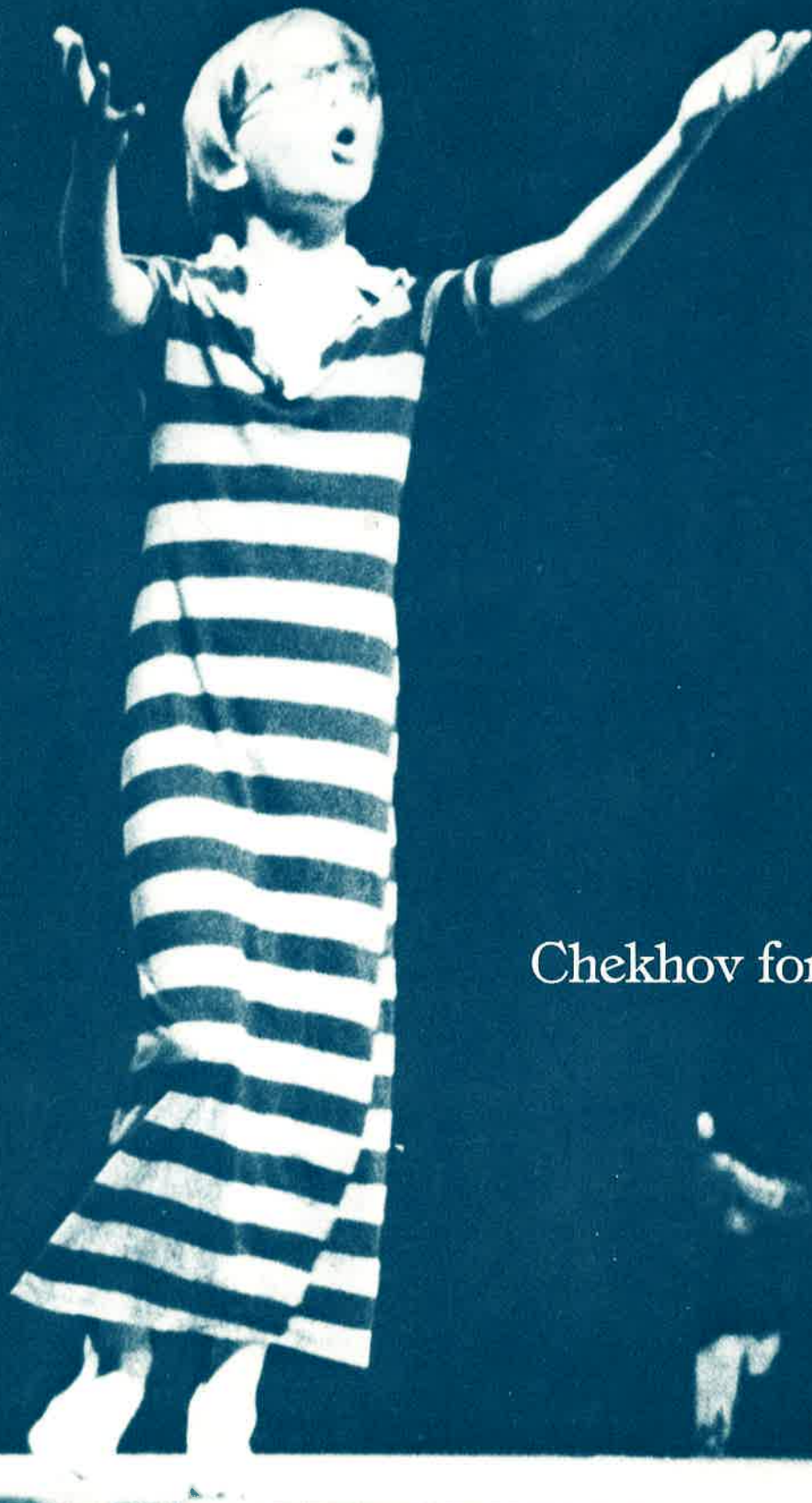


Teachers & Writers

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Volume 11, No. 2



Chekhov for Children?

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Children Perform the Classics

A transcription of two segments of the television program *Sunrise Semester*. Dr. Robert J. Landy interviews participants in the P.S. 75 *Uncle Vanya* project.

Photographs by Marie Forte

Cover: Angus Johnston as Uncle Vanya

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Chekhov for Children?

By Phillip Lopate

1.

"And life itself is boring, stupid, dirty... it strangles you, this life. You're surrounded by weird people, nothing but country bumpkins, and after living with them for two or three years, little by little you get to be weird yourself. (Twirling his long mustache) Look how I've grown this enormous mustache... it's a silly mustache. I've grown weird. Nurse... I haven't grown stupider; my brains are still in the right place, thank God, but my feelings have somehow gone numb. I don't want anybody, I don't need anything, I don't love anybody... except maybe you. (Kisses her head.) When I was little I had a nurse like you."

—Dr. Astrov to the Nanny, *Uncle Vanya*, Scene 1

The characters in Chekhov's plays are tormented by the thought that they are mispending their lives, and perhaps it is already too late. Their ambitions have led nowhere; they are stagnating; they reach for a romantic solution but they fall in love with the wrong person, someone who is also hopelessly in love with the wrong person; each thinks himself or herself the noble exception to a landscape of utterly monotonous banality. They can often be comic in their self-deluded, manic bitterness, and are capable of great animation in their talking jags, but invariably they lapse back into a state of passivity and remorse.

As Gorky wrote about Chekhov: "In front of that dreary, gray crowd of helpless people there passed a great, wise and observant man: he looked at all these dreary inhabitants of his country, and, with a sad smile, with a tone of gentle but deep reproach, with anguish in his face and in his heart, in a beautiful and sincere voice, he said to them: 'You live badly, my friends. It is shameful to live like that.'"

To no one's surprise, Chekhov is hardly a staple in the elementary school curriculum.* Many would question whether such a view of life, such tableaux, are suitable for children at all. With Chekhov, it is not so much a matter of risqué material, of too much sexuality or violence, since the playwright is very moderate in these respects, but of a

*Shakespeare perhaps more so. There is a long, honorable tradition of elementary school Shakespeare productions: some of the comedies like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* clearly have potential to charm younger children, and a good sword-clanging drama like *Macbeth* with witches and magic spells can also appeal to juvenile actors, if cleverly abridged. True, Shakespeare's vocabulary is difficult, but this courtly language itself can be an attraction, lending a distanced charm of dress-up and fairy tales to the enterprise. The drama of Chekhov, on the other hand, is neither distanced enough to conjure up an exotic world, nor contemporary enough to attract on the basis of glitter. The realistic situations, the ennui, the pauses, the lack of physical action and spectacle all help to explain why his plays are so rarely attempted at this level.

PHILLIP LOPATE's work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Paris Review*, *The American Review* and *The Best American Short Stories of 1974*. A book about his teaching experiences, *Being With Children* (Doubleday), is now available from Teachers & Writers. His most recent book is *Confessions of Summer*, a novel (Doubleday).

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.

I must say right off that 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 the paralyses that hinder many grownups. How else will children know that they must not squander their lives, that they must *seize their chances with both hands*? But to phrase the issue in larger terms, I think it good for children to gain a realistic view of life no matter what, and a harm for them to be "protected" from learning about the world as it is. I realize this is part of a very touchy debate among parents and educators, and that each person who deals with children draws the line at different places, whether it is at letting them go to a funeral or allowing them to see certain movies. In this debate I generally take the side of John Holt in *Escape From Childhood*, when he argues that we do no service to children by sheltering them in an artificial world of cuteness and weakness, cut off from productivity, and indeed, from truth. When Holt writes the following, I feel he could be speaking for me as well:

Most people who believe in the institution of childhood as we know it see it as a kind of walled garden in which children, being small and weak, are protected from the harshness of the world outside until they become strong and clever enough to cope with it. Some children experience childhood in just that way. I do not want to destroy their garden or kick them out of it. If they like it, by all means let them stay in it. But I believe that most young people, and at earlier and earlier ages, begin to experience childhood not as a garden but as a prison. What I want to do is put a gate, or gates, into the wall of the garden, so that those who find it no longer protective or helpful, can move out of it and for a while try living in a larger space.

This June a dozen ten- to twelve-year-olds put on a full-length version of Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, which was a gate to that larger world. They put it on before an audience that can only be described as initially indulgent but skeptical. 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. They were unexpectedly moved by the characters on stage. And I was in a sense the most surprised, knowing from having directed it how catastrophically it *could* have gone.

What fascinated me all along about the *Uncle Vanya* project was that it pushed to the limits certain assumptions about proper educational practice, and continually rubbed against some very powerful questions. First there were the larger philosophical and moral questions, already alluded to: What is the nature of childhood?* Are children radically different from adults, or subtly different? What is "appropriate" for children at different ages, both from a developmental-learning and from a responsibly ethical point of view? Then came certain technical questions: Could this thing even be done? What were the capacities for memorization of ten- to twelve-year-old schoolchildren

*In a way, this question recalls the old Rousseau-Hobbes-Locke debate about the character of man in a state of nature. Perhaps childhood can be seen as the last of the garden-of-Nature scenarios around which to debate the essential innocence, savagery, calculation, egoism or collective feeling of the human species.

who had had no previous theatrical training? Granted that children understand a lot: what would be above their heads? Was there *anything* that they could not be made to understand? Could children connect and empathize with issues they had never faced? What would be the difference between working on a play in which the children were highly motivated and familiar with the material beforehand (as with *West Side Story*, described in my book, *Being With Children*), and a play in which the teacher's lone enthusiasm for the material would have to overcome a good deal of indifference and skeptical ridicule? What part should a teacher's private obsessions and artistic tastes play in the educational process? Where does one draw the line between experimentation and self-indulgence?

I must say that I felt myself on much firmer ground in answering the charge that I was robbing children of their "innocence," than I did in silencing personal doubts that this was nothing but an extravagant out-of-control whim, in which I might be using these children to satisfy my own ambitions and need for excitement and escape. One thing is certain: I could have waited a million years before a group of sixth graders approached me and proposed that we do *Uncle Vanya*. No, the suggestion had to spring from me. It came about this way.

2

Autumn roses, beautiful, sad roses. . . .
—Vanya, Act III

I had been working on dialogue-writing with Mr. Tempel's fifth-sixth grade class. One thing I noticed was that, although this class functioned on a fairly high level in fiction and poetry writing, their dialogue scenes were much more rudimentary, being little more than trades of one-liners in which two characters drove each other to greater degrees of exasperation. It has often puzzled me that children, even the sophisticated writers among them, will so rarely take advantage of variations in speech-length which are a natural part of conversation, but instead go in for that ping-pong format when they start to write plays.

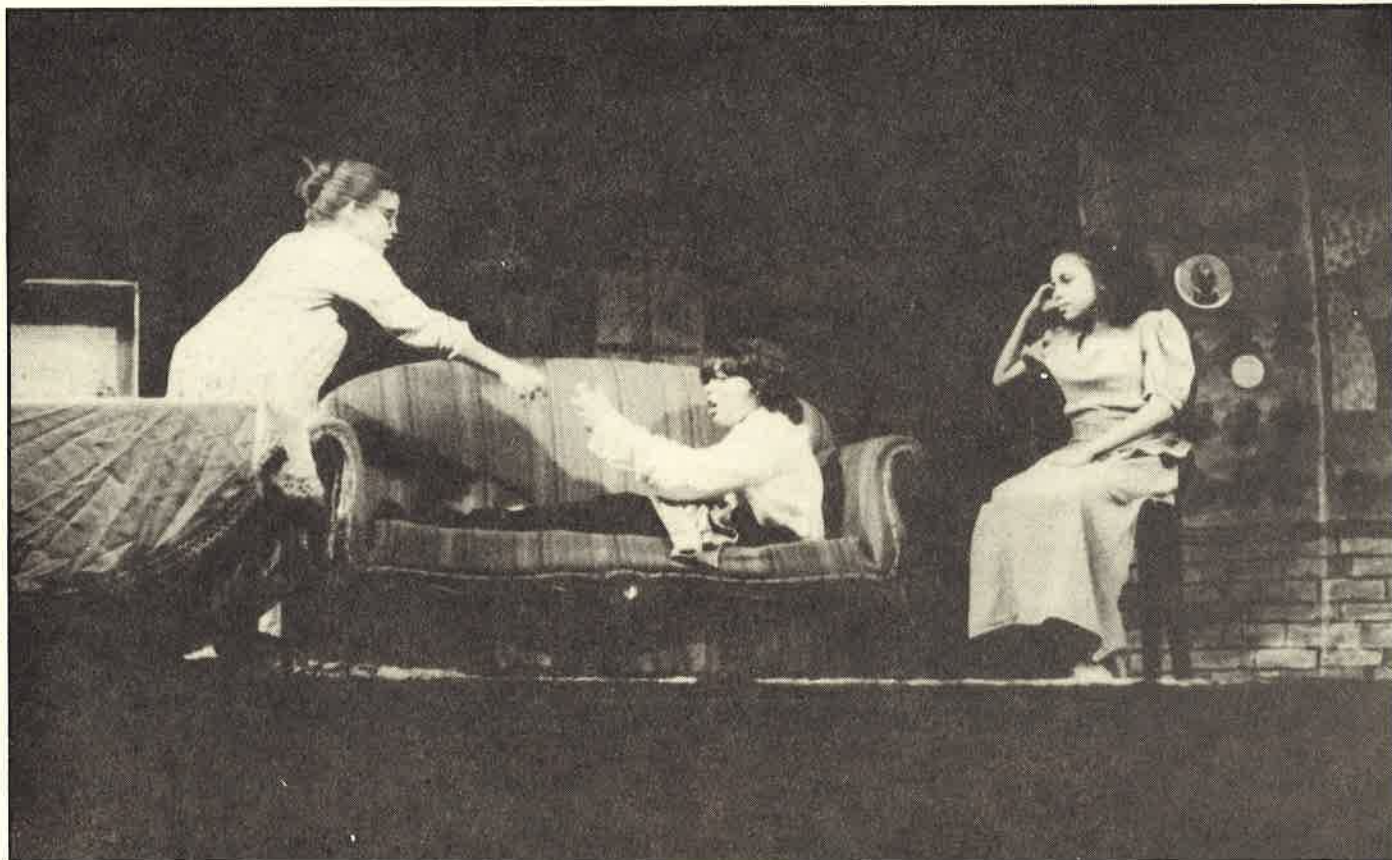
I thought I would also talk to the children about the fact that a conversation can exist on manifest and latent levels: what is ostensibly being said and what is really being said. A person may be hiding his or her true meaning, or may even be unconscious of it. Sometimes it happened in plays that the audience was conscious of a danger the character wasn't, which made for suspense; or the joke was that the audience saw one character coming to the truth of things while another was still in the dark (I was thinking of the famous scene of the husband under the table in *Tartuffe*). The more I considered it, the more I decided that a good deal of the dramatic interest in plays derived from the playwright's selective presentation and suppression of information. The audience was gradually put "in the know," and then experienced all the excruciating irony of each character's battle with self-delusions. When the "recognition" or "discovery" scene finally occurred, it had twice the force because of this buildup.

All this is very obvious to the average playgoer, but how to put ideas of such structural complexity in the children's minds? (Children love suspense, but it is precisely the kind of careful foreshadowing leading up to it which they as

writers are weakest at.) I decided to work with a long scene—and I thought of the sequence in *Uncle Vanya* when Sonia goes to Elena and tells her that she loves Dr. Astrov. Elena offers to sound out Astrov about his true feelings for Sonia. The problem is that Astrov is secretly in love with the beautiful Elena, and Elena—is a little taken with Astrov herself! After reassuring the homely Sonia that she will speak to Astrov in her behalf, Elena is left alone and delivers a monologue in which she makes it clear that she herself is tempted by Astrov. Astrov enters with some ecological charts (the ostensible pretext of this interview) and proceeds to expound at great windy length his observations on the demise of flora and fauna in the district—all of which obviously leaves Elena cold. She brings the subject around to Sonia's crush. Astrov admits he does not "admire" Sonia "as a woman." But now he turns the tables on Elena, and accuses her of toying with him. "You know why I come here every day," he cries. "And *who* I come to see. . . . All right? I'm conquered, you knew it even without the questioning. (Folds his arms and bows his head) I give up, here, eat me!" Elena protests, Astrov tries to trap her in an embrace and make an assignation, he declares his love in mumbled fragments, she is a picture of conflicted behavior, one moment saying go away, the next moment sinking her head on his shoulder. Vanya comes in while they are embracing. (Vanya too is in love with Elena.) He has seen it all.

A dizzying sequence of emotional transitions—friendship, love, ambivalence, contempt, loyalty, betrayal—all in a ten-page scene. When I looked for the episode in my copy of *Uncle Vanya*, I somehow got sucked into reading the whole play again. It struck me as such a wonderful piece of writing. Oh, to be able to teach such a play, to sink your teeth into something meaty! Even one day perhaps to put it on. . . . But that was getting ahead of myself. *That* was a dangerous thought! I doubted that the class would even sit still for the reading of the scene. It would probably bore them silly. I stalled for two weeks, meanwhile teaching other lessons. Then, finally, I went ahead, partly because I had already spent the money on xeroxing copies, but also because I had to get this damn Chekhov lesson out of my system.

Their rapt interest surprised me when I read it aloud. What I hadn't bargained for was that the situation of X intervening for Y to find out Z's romantic feelings was one they were going through at this particular stage of their boy-girl careers. No one had the nerve to ask someone out directly, so these matters were handled indirectly through a "best friend." I presented the scene formally to the class as an unrequited-love triangle: John loves Marsha, Marsha loves Fred, and Fred doesn't love anybody, etc. One good thing about unrequited love: it starts very early. Even second graders can relate to it. In any case, we went over the complexities of the action, and I asked them how each character felt about the others. The discussion was rich. Did they think Astrov really loved Elena? (Not sure.) What does Sonia mean by "Uncertainty is best"? Why does Elena say one thing and do another? They liked the scene because it was romantic and embarrassing—perfect for that age. They roared at Astrov's lovemaking ("Here, eat me!") Meanwhile, I was able to explain a few technical points about writing dialogue scenes. Mission accomplished. I might have left it at that.



"Not these!" Professor Serebriakoff berates his daughter Sonya for giving him the wrong pills while his new young wife, Elena, looks on, Act II.

But now I was thinking: what if I took a small group of interested students and started an Uncle Vanya study group. Just to read the play, mind you. ("And put it on! and put it on!" a maniac voice suggested.) No, I had to take this step-by-step. The project would be devised like a three-stage rocket, at each point preparing to self-destruct if one of the parts fizzled. First stage, part one, was the lesson. That had worked out well, so we could move on to the second stage: a reading group. We would approach *Uncle Vanya* as a piece of literature. Perhaps that was even a more advanced and satisfying educational idea than this vulgar notion that we should mount our own production. Far from it! We didn't have to put on a play, just because we read it! But if—only if—they were interested, if the idea came from them, then... we could consider... look into it... see if it was even feasible. Ah, but what a coup it would be! (Already I was in Dreamland.) What a march I would steal on all the other poets in the schools—forget the poets, even the drama people! Who ever heard of an artist-in-the-schools pulling off such a thing? We could get Channel Two News to cover it. I would be modest at interviews... Please—the children did it all, speak to them...

But there was another force working inside me. Let's face it, I was restless. After ten years of teaching writing lessons, bringing in model poems and choice prose fragments, the first sentence of this or that novel, I yearned to study a whole sustained piece of literature. One of the

frustrations with the structure that writers face in the schools is that we always seem to be teaching slivers of writing. Drips and drabs. But what made me fall in love with literature in the first place was novels—big books! I loved the repetitions of themes, the rise and fall, even the doldrums, the calms. *War and Peace*. *Middlemarch*. *Othello*. And you could only have a big payoff if the writer had built that meticulous architecture leading up to and around it. I felt like a fraud, because I was teaching children lyrical bursts of expression and pretending it was all there was to literature, while my own love was for the grand arch, the passage of time, the slow transformation of characters, the tedium itself! Here at last would be a chance to *dig in* and demonstrate how a great literary work was like music, with patterns and refrains and variations, and adagios as well as allegros...

Hadn't I paid my dues already with years of meeting children on their own cultural terms—helping them make superhero comic books and vampire movies? Let them come to me this time, I thought. I was tired of scaling everything down to miniature size. On the brink of one of those periodic crises of staleness endemic to the teaching profession, I decided the only way to cut through that jungle was by embarking on a project of deep selfishness. *Vanya* was a play I liked and was reasonably sure I would not tire of, over the long haul. Therefore, *Vanya* we would study.

*It's a long time since I've played.
I'll play and cry—cry like a fool.*
—Elena, Act II

I went to the Drama Bookshop and looked through all the translations. To my disappointment, none of them seemed exactly right. I rather liked the Stark Young Modern Library version, but it was a bit stodgy and Victorian, whereas the Tyrone Guthrie version was a little too slangy and slickly “modern.” Other versions were worse. In the end I settled for the Guthrie because it was a cheaper paperback and the bookstore had more copies.

Then I went to Mike Tempel, the classroom teacher, and we drew up a list of the children who would be involved, out of the pool of twenty or so who had volunteered. I should say in passing that Tempel is an extraordinary elementary school teacher, who himself is always doing projects of immense scope and technical difficulty. At the moment he was building a city with his kids in the back of the classroom. It was Tempel who had helped us so much with the nuts and bolts of the radio station the year before; we were friends and I knew that if things became strained at some point because of the intense time-demands of *Uncle Vanya* on his kids, he and I would be able to patch it up. I doubt very strongly if I would have attempted a project as farfetched as *Vanya* in any other teacher's class. The fact that Tempel was a lunatic like me who warmed to impossible schemes—he and I had once tried to build a waterfall in the Writing Room, a total fiasco, we still laughed about it—helped; he chuckled as he wrote in his Attendance Book, “Group for Uncle Vanya (*Uncle Vanya????!!*)”

These were the criteria for selection: a) we thought the chosen kid would be interested; b) my hunch that the kid would be good in a certain role—if we ever decided to put it on; c) racial balance; d) intellectual capacity and maturity (there were a few exceptions to this!); d) Tempel's desire to include one or two kids who needed something to be involved with, who had been walking around lost in space so far.

The class had perhaps an exceptional number of intelligent and competent children, many of whom I regretted having to leave out. But it also had peculiar limitations—namely, a shortage of eligible boys. I could have cast the female parts in the play twice over, whereas it was really a struggle to find enough mature, strong acting males. Whether it was a general rule at that age or just in that class, the boys were shorter and more babyish than the girls.

The core of the group I would work with was a clique that hung out together after school, frequented the same luncheonette and had its own pecking order. The clique included Lisa, Mylan, Slim, Jamal and Sasha—if you went up against any of them, you would have the others to face. The rest of the kids in the cast were outsiders, loners who had only one or two other friends in class (and these friends were not part of the *Uncle Vanya* group); they looked to me for support and fair play whenever the clique got too pushy. Here is a brief introduction to the kids:

Angus was, already in my mind, Uncle Vanya. A white fifth grader with large glasses and a thoughtful, deliberate

way of speaking; something of a genius perhaps—in any case, very bright, with an unusual, technical mind—given to speculations; disliked by many of his classmates, he was considered “flaky” and “weird.” He would sometimes raise his hand and then not remember what he had started to say in mid-sentence. His fourth grade teacher was shocked when she learned I had given him the longest part in the play: “He blanks out!” she said. “He'll stare into space and forget where he is.”

Mylan was tremendously popular, gracious, and gushing with perceptions and energy. A good writer, dancer, actress, pal. Half-black, half-white, child of divorced parents, she seemed to have an unusual amount of psychological insight for a sixth grader. And if a sixth grader can be said to possess glamor, she had it.

Jamal was a mischief-maker and prankster. He wore a cat-ate-the-canary grin at all times. Actually quite likable and sweet, with beautiful café-au-lait skin, he had the bad habit of pushing situations to the brink, and making sure you didn't come to depend on him too much. He was one of my favorites, though not many shared my taste. He seemed more comfortable with incurring fury than affection.

Slim, his best friend, was looked up to by the other children. Even-tempered, stolid, quiet, white, good-looking, with a shaggy dog haircut over his eyes, he seemed a little solemn and wooden to me. He was said to be good at science and sports.

Rebecca was a loner, bright, hyper-sensitive, upset by her parents' divorce; generally very cooperative. She had already trod the boards in a child-role in an Off-Off-Broadway play. A little plain of face, she would make an excellent Sonia.

Lisa was just a good kid to have around. The kind that teachers depend on to carry a new activity—capable, solidly intelligent, mature, a leader though still only a fifth-grader. The rap on her was that she was coasting a little, had never been challenged to her fullest. Still, she would be good for any of the roles: she read well and with expression.

David was another fifth-grader. He had cried on the first day of school because he missed his fourth-grade teacher. But lately he was showing definite signs of mental growth underneath his babyfat. Who would ever have guessed at the beginning of the year that this rosy-cheeked cherub would be perfect as the Professor, aged, sour, hypochondriac, intellectual?

Ayesha was highly theatrical; her mother is an actress. She had a powerful appearance, queenly, coal-black, flamboyant. She wrote beautifully, but she was also something of a bully, beating up on other children (especially boys!), explosive, leading mutinies and walkouts. She would get tired suddenly, refuse to work. I kept forgetting that this powerful-looking girl had a fragile constitution, and had been in and out of hospitals for her kidneys.

Kioka was very sweet, matronly, black and composed. A late transfer, she seemed never to have “joined” the class. She had no ambition to be seen by an audience and rather dreaded the idea. But Tempel thought it would be a good experience for her to be part of this group.

Sasha wanted to be in on everything, though she rarely initiated activity. Pint-sized, squeaky, she didn't have the charismatic presence of a principal lead but I thought she



"Yes, it's been a long time since we had any noodle soup." Waffles (Jamal) and Nurse (Ayesha), Act IV.

would make a good extra and backstage organizer.

Randi was shy, humorous and reliable. I pictured her as my assistant director.

It helped that I had worked with a number of these children (Angus, Sasha, Mylan, Lisa, Jamal) on little plays and films in the past years. I knew their potential and their quirks and they knew mine.

The reading of the play took up three afternoons. Lisa began, and there was magic in the room: the way she set the scene in her calm, mature, respectful voice sent shivers up my spine. Some of the other children, however, read so poorly that it unnerved me: I had assumed they were at grade level at least. This did not bode well for putting on a full production. I stopped and explained a word whenever anyone seemed in doubt, and discussed some of the unfamiliar Russian details. On the whole, the reading of the text was cause for cautious affirmation, if only because they were decently behaved. Maybe they simply wanted to get out of class, to be part of a privileged hand-picked group. I got the feeling the kids neither loved nor hated the play. They simply accepted it as it was and asked when we would start holding tryouts! I can't say that any passion for Chekhov was kindled in them. A few remarked that it was "boring" and "nothing really happens," but there was no great opposition either. They realized that I liked it and they were willing to do it.

4.

It's funny—if Uncle Vanya says something, or that old idiot, my mother-in-law, it's all right; everybody pays attention. But if I so much as utter a single word, everybody gets upset. The very sound of my voice disgusts them.

—Professor Serebriakoff, Act II

Tryouts were held in mid-January. I encouraged everyone to try out for as many parts as they wanted to. These readings were a lovely part of the process: they would divide up into groups of twos, threes or fours and go off into the stairwell or hallway to practice the scene of their choice—without my help. Then they would all come together and take turns performing the scenes for each other. I encouraged them to critique each scene afterwards, to get used to honest reactions. It was fascinating to see three different Vanyas or Sonias in the space of an hour.

After a few weeks, the obviousness of certain choices became clear to all. Despite the fact that all the boys wanted the starring role, and that Angus was by no means the most popular child in that group, everyone agreed that Angus was Vanya. Similarly, Mylan's flair for the part of Elena and David's surprising gift for recreating the invalidish, grumbling Professor were indisputable. Ayesha accepted with good grace that she made a wonderful old Nurse (her characterization was complete the moment she read for the part), in spite of her preference for the part of the beautiful Elena. Kioka was pressed into being Vanya's mother. Sasha (who had also wanted to be Elena) and Randi agreed to be workmen in walk-on parts, and also to take charge of props and scenery. There was virtually no disagreement about these decisions. Children may lie, but they have an amazing honesty when it comes to recognizing objectively the competences of their peers.

I still had a problem casting two key characters, Astrov and Sonia. Neither Jamal nor Slim was particularly impressive as Dr. Astrov, and both Rebecca and Lisa would have made convincing Sonias. I decided to sound out the cast with individual conferences, to get their opinions and also to discuss with each one the character he or she had been selected to play. My first conference was with Mylan. She confided in me that she had once gone out with Jamal, "last year," and that under no circumstances would she

play love scenes with him. "I mean, I like Jamal and all, he's nice in his way, but he's just too immature, and I would be embarrassed to death to play a love scene with him and I *know* neither Lisa or Rebecca will." With that word of advice, I cast Slim as Dr. Astrov. The whole cast breathed a sigh of relief. Jamal got the nice comic role of "Waffles" Telegin, the obsequious family hanger-on. Unfortunately, as I learned in our character conference, Slim seemed to have no rapport with the ironical Dr. Astrov. Slim was solemn when it came to jokes and absolutely without a sense of irony. Well, we would have to make him develop one. . . . In the meantime, I asked him please to hang around doctors' offices.

Each of the potential Sonias was excellent in a different way: Rebecca had the injured, long-suffering quality of someone who has judged herself, in Sonia's words, "not pretty," and she had had stage experience; but Lisa (who was, regrettably for the part, extremely pretty) had a gravity and a consoling adult quality that was also thrilling. Moreover, I dared not go against the power of the Clique by giving Lisa nothing. Finally I decided to let them both be Sonia, in separate performances. I reasoned that role-doubling happens all the time in opera repertory companies. It did lead to headaches, and both girls were able to rehearse only half as much as the other actors, but somehow it seemed and still seems to me to have been the only course.

I was discontented with the Guthrie translation. We needed our own version. I asked the kids to go through the scripts and suggest any cuts. Then I sat down at the typewriter with the Stark Young, Tyrone Guthrie and Marian Fell versions open to the same scene, and the kids' recommendations in my lap, and chose what seemed to me the best translation of each phrase, both in terms of literary power and "speakability" by the children. At times I made up my own wording. If the problem with doing a foreign language dramatic classic is that you are never sure you are dealing with the pure text, this could also be an opportunity. The children had more leeway to put things in their own words, without that guilty sense of violating the author's sacrosanct syllables. Had the text been in English — Shakespeare or Shaw — I would have been more hesitant about letting them alter the language.

As for cuts, I could not bring myself to part with very much of Chekhov's business, so that all I trimmed in the end were some of Astrov's/Slim's speeches. If we were going through the trouble of putting on *Uncle Vanya*, we might as well do the whole thing.

In our first rehearsals, we went much more slowly over the script. Many small points of meaning had to be cleared up. I discovered that, sophisticated as they were, the kids did not always know the meanings of words like *pompous*, *uncertainty*, *squabbling*, much less *samovar*. Sometimes we would rehearse a scene for weeks and the actor would have just the right intonation and expression; then I would learn that he hadn't the foggiest what he was saying — as when David, who had to repeat the line "to find yourself in this morgue!" finally turned to me and asked: "What is a 'morgue'?"

I also delivered a brief lecture on Russian history, with highpoints like the freeing of the serfs (contemporaneous with our Civil War), the assassination of the Tsar, the flowering of Russian literature, the mood of post-heroic

exhaustion and ennui around 1900 (the date of the play) — in a sense the "hour of sunset" for the landed gentry — and, seventeen years later, the Russian Revolution. I attempted to give a picture of the class situation, so that they would understand the economic position of the sort of people Chekhov was writing about, provincial landed gentry who were losing their wealth, and who were torn between living in the big cities or in the country. Actually, I had visions of making the play be the occasion for much more elaborate curriculum spinoffs: sending them to the library to do research reports, co-teaching with Tempel a unit on Russia, requiring the whole class to read other Chekhov plays and stories and works by major Russian writers, having them write analyses of their characters and rewrite the ending of *Uncle Vanya*, etc. Most of these schemes, educationally desirable as they were, never got done for the simple reason that there wasn't enough time because the damn rehearsals took up all our time! In fact the kids were in a panic already from having to memorize lengthy parts and do their regular homework every night. Some of the kids in the cast did go to the library to look up Russian costumes, and they rewrote the ending of *Vanya* and read some other Chekhov stories and plays from the books I donated to the class library. They confessed to me that *The Cherry Orchard* was "too difficult" — which confirmed me in my suspicion that *Uncle Vanya* was the sunniest, clearest and most "do-able" by grade-school children of Chekhov's four major plays.

So much for curriculum tie-ins. We always came back to the text, and a good seven-tenths of our rehearsal time was occupied in understanding and interpreting the written lines. I think that because my background is as a writer and not a theatre man (I have in fact no theatrical background — with adults), I stressed the literary. Rather than spending a good deal of time on stage business, *shtiks* and blocking, for which I have little training, I focused instead on the words of the play, the double messages, the psychology, the patterns. Sometimes the children would spot them first, as when they pointed out how each character complains that no one is listening to him. One day they noticed all the statements about the weather. Then we would try to figure out together the functions of these weather statements. Or, we would come to a line like, "I have no hope, none, none." Does Sonia really mean it? Not exactly. How come Sonia doesn't understand in Act II that the Doctor has rejected her? "Because she doesn't want to understand." Very good. Move on. I wish I could quote these discussions — I wish I had tapes that could verify just how much the children understood. Sometimes their insights were astonishing. I am convinced that they grasped all the rich undercurrents in Chekhov, that they were not merely child-puppets mouthing incomprehensible adult lines. But it took a while. And it took even longer before they acquired a taste for this delicacy.

5.

Old people are like children, they want people to feel sorry for them. But no one feels sorry for old people.

Nurse Marina, Act II

In the rehearsals, the children often struck, quite without their realizing it, I think, such a Chekhovian note

that it amazed me. One would wander off toward the window, another would be totally self-absorbed, a group would be atomized and looking in four different directions, quite without self-consciousness. It made me think that perhaps a strong tangential connection existed between Chekhov's world and the world of childhood: the lassitude, the petulance, the waiting.

One of the theories I was testing—a theory I had concocted after a disastrous showing of *Citizen Kane* to some fifth- and sixth-graders—was that children had a hard time relating to the theme of life dwindling away. They could take sudden death with aplomb; catastrophic tragedy found them willing and compassionate spectators; but the slow dribbling away of potential, the diminution of vital powers, the compromises of integrity which add up to a sense of adult failure, irked them. Or so it seemed to me. Now this assumption was being called into doubt: there were moments when they seemed to get closer to the Chekhov spirit than any professional production I had ever seen.

However, whole dimensions were still being missed. They played it too darkly, it was *too* gloomy, *too* severe. The kids tended to take at literal face value all the characters' pronouncements like "I'm so miserable," without understanding that there was a kind of Russian braggadocio in back of some of these. They also seemed to misunderstand half of the irony. Slim would say, "Thank you very kindly," in a friendly voice, without catching Dr. Astrov's sardonic intent, when a workman was pulling the doctor away from his pleasant surroundings to attend a patient. Broad sarcasm was understood a little better. But they had a hard time with *self-irony* (hard for any actor), as when a character like Vanya, even while ranting and carrying on selfishly, would be standing away from himself, ashamed of his behavior. Chekhov's characters, after all, are rather intelligent, conscious beings, for all their blindnesses: they have a good sense of how they "sound" to others. Elena is both a shallow flirt and a much deeper woman criticizing the shallow flirt. If you play her only the first way you get cardboard.

There was still another level of irony to be grasped: Chekhov's attitude toward his own characters. Could the kids be made to appreciate that double level, that the characters are all complaining about their miseries but Chekhov is also inviting us at times to laugh at them? Would they understand the play as a *comedy*? It is, after all, included in anthologies of great comedies. This was hard for the children to see, because there was very little comic stage business, except for the pistol-shooting at the end of Act III. The humor in Chekhov's *lines*, those dry mocking cackles of character observation which would cause the adult audience in the evening performance to burst into smiles and laughter again and again, was something the children still had to take my word for.

All this made me think a great deal about the acquisition of irony, from a developmental point of view. Has Piaget written anywhere about the development of the faculty of irony? I could see that, just within this cast of ten- to twelve-year-olds, there was enormous variation. Angus, among the youngest in the group, led the way, as he so often did, in grasping the dynamic of self-irony (the actor standing off from his character who is already standing off from himself — and then re-integrating all three). Slim

brought up the rear. The others straggled in between. In order to lay a firmer foundation for these concepts, I devoted several writing lessons in Tempel's class to irony. I read from Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, and got from them a list of things they hated, then asked them to select one and write an essay praising it. I felt a little funny teaching them to say the opposite of what they meant, to lie and tell the truth at the same time—but it's good practice for the years ahead. Those who understood it enjoyed doing it.

One way to lighten the tone of our production was to point out all of the text's humor and irony; another was to wean them from a uniform tone of hopelessness. I told them: "You must play Chekhov for hope. Otherwise it won't work, there won't be any tension or suspense! Sonia must think she *might* get Astrov, Vanya must be at least momentarily optimistic about Elena, even though you already know the ending, that it doesn't work out."

To help them see some of these points, I rented a 16mm. print of Sir Laurence Olivier's *Uncle Vanya*, with Olivier as Astrov, Michael Redgrave as Vanya, Joan Plowright as Sonia, Rosemary Murphy as Elena, and Max Adrian as the Professor. I had seen this performance many years ago on television—and loved it. I realized that I was taking a risk in showing them this polished production—an actor friend warned that it would "crush them"—but it seemed to me that the kids were far enough along in their own characterizations to benefit from seeing a superb model without being dominated by it.

Ha! Was I in for a surprise! Not only were they not overawed by the Olivier version but they despised it, and thought they could do *much* better. The English accents made the sound hard to hear for them, which partly explained their reaction, and the curiously disappointing set, so stodgy and limited, was another failing. But most of all they lit into the performances. Everyone thought the Sonia was ridiculously "over-acting" (a criticism I often hurled at them), with her quivering chin and wet eyes holding back the tears. Vanya/Redgrave was "weak." Most thought Astrov "all right," but Slim *loathed* Olivier. He took to leaving the room whenever Sir Laurence came on screen. And Mylan asked me afterwards, "How come *you* said that I was supposed to make Elena sympathetic as well as flighty, but *she* just did the flighty business, la-de-da and all that?" "Well, you're right, Mylan; maybe we can do better than them. There's a lot of possible ways to play *Uncle Vanya*."

The funny part was, I agreed with most of what they said. As I watched this production which I had been so moved by years before, it struck me this time as stiff and hollow, drab and glum, yet hysterically busy and theatrical. Of course, part of the problem was the transfer of production originally designed for stage to the film medium, so that gestures, like Olivier arching his brows, meant to be caught in the last row, tended to look ridiculously inflated onscreen.* Also, *Vanya* being such a delicate ensemble play, the strongest actor tends to smother it and tilt it too much in his or her direction. This Olivier-directed production might have been more aptly titled *Doctor Astrov*. I found the whole thing forced and

*Another film of *Vanya* does exist, a Russian version that I remember as really cinematic and soaring. I now think it might have been better to show that one, because it is much more

tedious. Was I seeing it too much through the kids' eyes?

No—the problem was that I had already started my own *Uncle Vanya*; its seeds were growing inside me, I and the kids had our own visions about the way to interpret the different scenes, and these ideas had little to do with their version. We declared it a counterfeit.

A few practical improvements, which Ayesha, more respectful of professional acting craft, picked up from the film and urged successfully on the others, were: a) that the characters laughed at each other's witty remarks and were not always in a dour humor; b) that they sometimes moved around when they were talking; we did not have to *sit* quite as much as we had been doing.

One result, for me, of screening the film was to realize how various and mountainous a world classic is, and how easy it is to fall short of it. If we should fail at *Uncle Vanya*, well, so had many others, actors of the highest calibre. It needs to be remembered that scarcely a production of Chekhov in the last twenty years has not been criticized for being forced, phony, trendy, overly neurotic or false to the spirit of Chekhov. In that sense, as much as in the more obvious sense that this was a children's production of a work rarely done by children, we were engaged in a task of infinite and near-impossible challenges.

6.

What still gets to me is beauty. I have an eye for beauty.
Astrov, Act II

The major struggle was with memorization. They had Act I and most of Act II down; but they bogged down in Act III, for what felt like months. It seemed that their heads could not hold any more. Angus and Slim had poor memories to begin with—and they had the biggest parts. Mylan discovered a method that worked for her: writing down speeches from memory and then comparing it with the script to catch her errors. Lisa invented a pictorial mnemonic devise, connecting picture-symbols with arrows so that her diagram for a speech resembled a treasure map. Sasha drilled the kids when I was not around. They went over to each other's houses and practiced. But it was never enough—no matter what they did, they *didn't know their parts*, and rehearsals could hardly get around to the nuances when they were still stumbling over their lines. Angus got everyone muddled with his mistakes, and would stare off in mid-passage, like Einstein picturing the Milky Way. I tried to get him to remember at least *the main idea* of a speech. We shared tips about ways to memorize, although the process worked differently for each person, and it was up to each to find what worked. I had never had to teach mnemonics *per se*, but I suspect that in the end, there is no substitute for the laborious, tedious over-and-over method.

Eventually I understood that it was not just a mechanical problem. This was their resistance to letting it take over their lives. Perhaps they had never yet known what it was like to be possessed by a task. There is a sickness, a

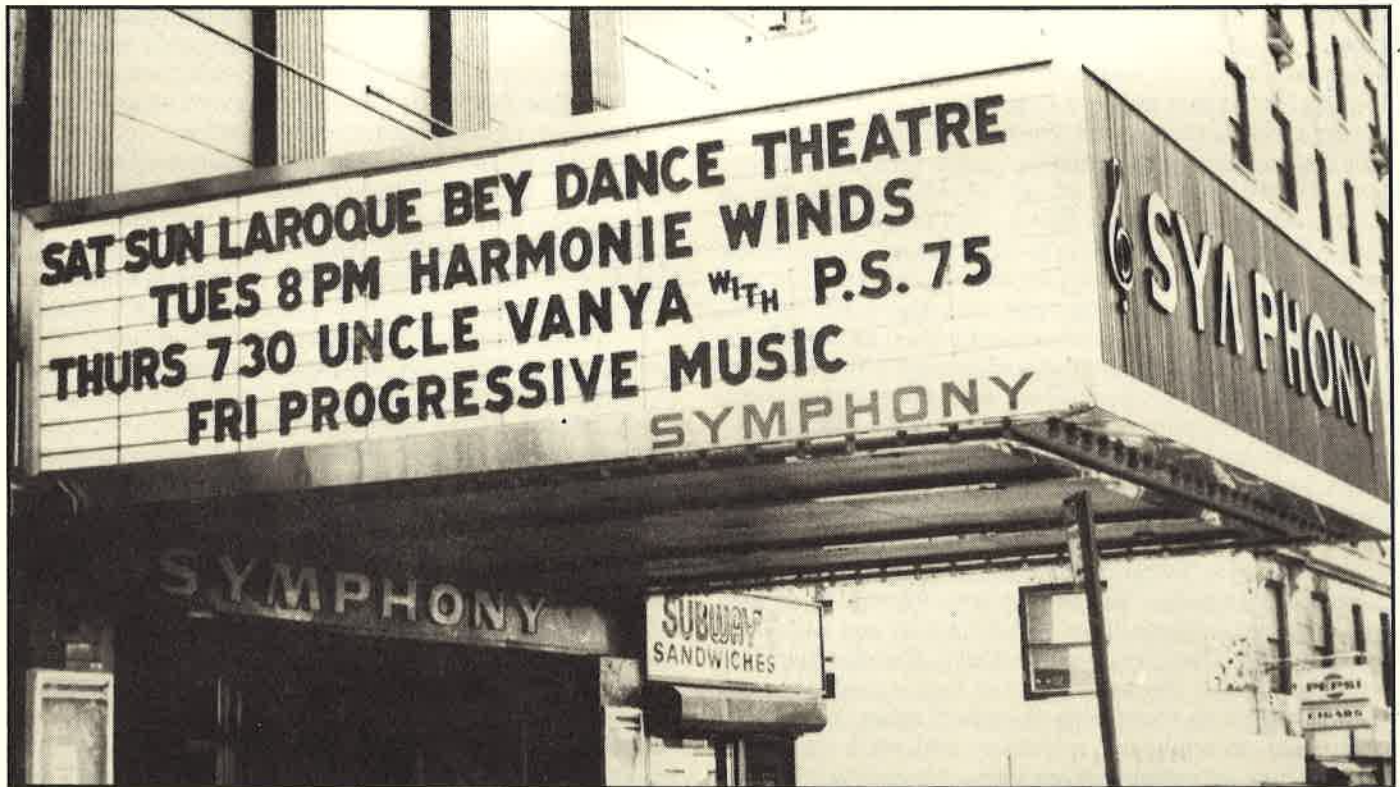
faithful to Chekhov's Russian-expansive roots than the English-repressed version of Olivier's. However, at the time I wanted them to hear line-readings in English and was afraid the subtitles might put them off.

queasy stomach that occurs just before the moment of going under. They were expressing that in their eyes, resenting the loss of independence. Ayesha raged that she had to rehearse so much. Slim would cry "Oh, no!" when I came to get him, whining that he had "no more time for math!" Scheduling tensions arose: another teacher wanted to use Mylan and Ayesha in a dance, the kids had to do their reports on the energy crisis. And not only was there competition from schoolwork: some of these children had a dizzying after-school agenda. Angus went to Boy Scouts, Stamp Club, Religious Instruction, Fencing, and who knows what else. He felt pulled in so many different directions between his parents' and his schoolteacher's and my pressures, no wonder he blanked out. But still I was angry that he—they—did not give *Uncle Vanya* a higher priority. "You're the STAR of the SHOW. When are you going to memorize it? JULY??" They had to understand, it seemed to me, that this was a unique experience in their lives, and eventually they had to put everything else behind them and everything they had into it if they wanted to get something good out of it.

As Tempel said: "The trouble with doing *Uncle Vanya* is that it has to reach a very high level of success before people will even begin to take it seriously—as opposed to other school activities kids usually engage in." Most elementary school activities are devised on the basis of minimizing the chances of failure in order to build up the child's self-confidence by stages. Here, I seemed to be moving in the opposite direction, making everyone go out on a limb with a project where the risk of failure was great and the probability of success slender.

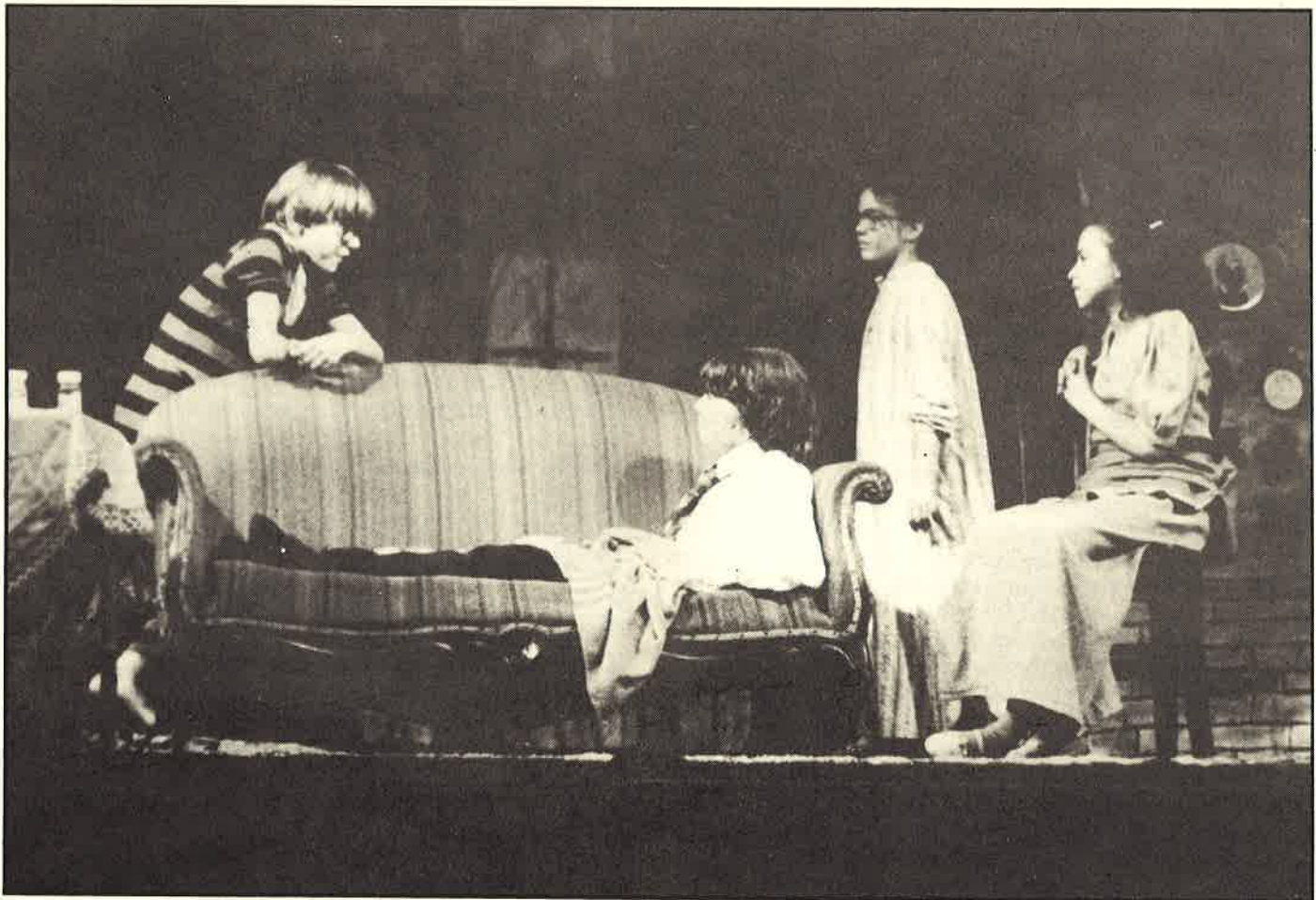
Strains develop everywhere, suddenly: Kioka "quits," saying she doesn't feel part of the group and is being picked on. I get down on my knees and beg/coax her to remain. Ayesha and Jamal have a fight, she beats him up and he cries. Jamal is forever slipping out of the room with Slim to do mischief. Rebecca thinks I'm neglecting her, that I'm rehearsing Lisa more. Lisa is coasting. Moreover, she has started, in her adult way, to probe and raise doubts: "Maybe this *is* too difficult for us." Or: "Phillip, why did you pick *Uncle Vanya* in the first place?" "I wanted you to know how people can throw their lives away so that you won't make the same mistake," I snarl. "You mean," says Slim quietly, "like throwing your life away doing a play?"

Sasha is both efficient and officious. Half the time she is my right-hand woman, an invaluable assistant; the other half she is planning months in advance for the cast party and considering whom to exclude. Angus is tense. And I myself am going through a sulk, because I have decided in an absurd way that the kids never show any "gratitude" to me. Suddenly I am obsessed with the fact that they never say thank you, never remark on how much extra time and money I am putting into this. Of course what I don't understand until much much later, when the gratitude erupts almost embarrassingly from all sides, is that they are so dependent on me at this stage—I being the only one with a plausible map, who has been there before—that their symbiosis surpasses such petty acknowledgements. Since it is my dream to begin with, and I who have gotten them into this mess, I should be much more grateful to them than the other way around. Nevertheless, I am tired and miffed. When they want to get my goat they complain



Fame on a Broadway marquee.

"Our past friendship! Past!" Vanya (Angus) goads the Professor (David) while Sonya (Lisa) and Elena (Mylan) listen, Act II.



that the play is “boring,” and I have no more answers for them. “It’s *about* boredom, it’s not the same as boring,” I counter. — “No, it’s *boring!*”

Only David, that angel of cooperation, and Mylan, are always there to support me. One day, when the rest of the cast leaves after a particularly turgid rehearsal, Mylan stays behind. She wants to talk about life with me, a serious adult conversation. So we talk about depressions—she is in the middle of one, to my surprise—and about moods and her parents’ divorce and the fact that she will have to spend the next few years with her father in Colorado. She will miss her little sister terribly, as well as her mother, of course. But she talks with humor and warmth: somehow, Mylan’s “depression” is as sparkling as most other people’s liveliness. I realize I am being—cheered up.

By now, both of us are in a good mood, and Mylan starts friskily imitating all the adults we know. I ask her to do one of me. She won’t. I ask her what the kids think of me, why they seem to get such pleasure in provoking my anger. She says, “Most of the kids consider you more as a friend than a teacher, and so they don’t always listen, the way they don’t always listen to each other, and then they get surprised when you become like a disciplinarian.” I strongly doubted she was right that they regarded me on the same level as their other friends; I never tried to be other than an adult and a teacher; and yet I could appreciate how they might see my stern, demanding behavior as an irrational contradiction to my looseness at other times. I guess what I wanted them to know was that I was not demanding they obey me because I was the Boss, the Adult Authority, but because the task demanded it. Meanwhile, I was placated.

7.

The weather is charming, the little birds sing, we all live in this world in harmony—what more could we have! (Accepting a glass of tea) Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

—Waffles, Act I

Whole cast rehearsals always risked discipline problems—a dozen kids to control. Duets and solos, on the other hand, were parts I could rehearse over and over: I’d pull a couple of kids out of class and we’d work on tiny details in a relaxed atmosphere. I particularly loved the beautiful two-women scenes, like the one in which Sonia and Elena make up and pledge their friendship. The feeling of comradeship in that scene, as Mylan and Rebecca or Lisa did it, was very strong and touching. I found myself having them do it time and again, to perfect some little moment here or there, but also just to see it again. Those girls could take direction. What a thrill to tell your actors to change their approach and then actually watch them execute according to your instructions! These small, closed rehearsals also gave an actor the chance to make mistakes and to experiment, without trying the group’s patience.

One day, Lisa started twirling around as she was saying her lines about Astrof to Mylan. She thought her twirling waltzing was a goof, and half-expected me to get annoyed, but I was enchanted, it gave such a nice lilting feeling to the scene. I encouraged them all to move whenever and

wherever the spirit took them. Rather than blocking their movements in advance, which I thought would make them too self-conscious, I urged them to pay attention to the impulses in their body that told them to stand up or sit down or carry out a verbal phrase with a gesture.

This opened up a whole new play for them. They began wandering, pacing, retreating when their character was embarrassed, and working off their nervous child-energy with spontaneous strolls. Angus showed genius at this, though sometimes he went too far, and one day while circling in his stockinged feet he made me seriously dizzy.

It was always a fine line between wanting them to be serious about rehearsing, and wanting to encourage them to “play” with the material, even if that was done in the spirit of sabotage. Some of these subversions were hilarious. There was the Robot Uncle Vanya, when they surprised me by moving and talking like mechanical men. Or Horsey Uncle Vanya—Mylan had perfected a neigh and delivered all her lines whinnying. David and Angus had got up a Donald Duck voice for the fight between Vanya and the Professor: “Quack quack you have quined my life!” They had also rewritten the ending to their satisfaction: Elena is shot, Sonia marries Astrof, the Professor marries the Nurse, and all go off to Africa. One, two, many Uncle Vanyas.

Perhaps the most satisfying rehearsals were the line readings, when I told them they didn’t have to “act” but merely recite the lines as a memory test. As they were saying their lines, Lisa would be bouncing a rubber ball against the wall, Slim stretched out on the floor, Mylan pacing and chewing her nails, Angus reading a comic book on the radiator. This was truly the Child’s Uncle Vanya. If only we could have put it on stage like that: I was tempted—we could have had one of the most true-to-life, natural performances of Chekhov in ages. But again, they had no idea how close they were to the play, they thought they were being naughty.

Slim’s cloddish Frankenstein portrayal of Astrof with stiff arm and leg movements was unfortunately not a parody. The problem was that when he got nervous his whole body stiffened up. I despaired of ever seeing any of the charming, raffish side of Astrof shine through him. Perhaps, it is easier to find cranky eccentrics like Vanya at the sixth-grade level than jaded roués like Astrof. But I could not resign myself to the thought of letting one of my major principals pull the whole production down before an audience. I began to fantasize getting a replacement from another class, like smooth-talking, debonair Robert Kowalski. As Easter approached, I even discussed with Mike Tempel the prospect of offering Slim the option of bowing out gracefully. Tempel talked it over with the boy, sounding him out tactfully as to whether the part was too much for him, and Slim answered with dignity that he thought he would like to stick with it. I’m very glad that he did.

The kids had been instructed to paraphrase if they forgot their lines. Angus was good at this, and sometimes he could invent whole passages of Vanya-esque rant, so close was he to the character. Occasionally, though, he would end up completely confusing himself and everyone else. It was necessary that he learn at least the beginning and ends of his speeches because they cued the other actors. His co-actors, realizing that he had the largest burden

of memorization, and by now rather tolerant of his idiosyncracies, adapted a jazzy flexibility in scenes with him. They would whisper key words to Angus when he forgot his lines, which usually set him on the right track again. But there was one speech that he always muddled—a speech which he would re-paraphrase each time, and each time it would come out differently. Finally I told him he just had to know it cold. “This is the only speech in the play that really gives me trouble,” Angus said.—“Let’s take a look at it.” Vanya is attacking, in Act I, Elena’s fidelity to her aged husband: “Because such fidelity is false from beginning to end. It has a fine sound to it but no logic. If a woman is unfaithful to an old husband whom she hates, that is considered immoral; but for a woman to silence in herself her poor youth and all her vital feelings—that is moral, I suppose.” The speech is difficult first because it calls for sarcasm and inverted meaning. But in talking it over, I realized that Angus was also having difficulty because Vanya is not exactly telling the truth. Vanya *is* a moral man and therefore insincere when he advocates unfaithfulness. Angus understood it this way: “He wants to do the wrong thing but he can’t because he knows what wrong is. So he tries to fool himself by being clever.”

Angus himself was changing through the experience of his starring role. For one thing, he had become more popular. For another he was less tightly controlled and premeditated, less likely to have to think over every word before saying it; and his sense of humor had grown, or else he was more willing to let it show. His mother, coming by for rehearsals, was stunned to see him scampering around and playing the clown: “This is a side of Angus I have never seen!” There was one wisecrack of his that neatly captured the paradox of our child-adult production. He was supposed to say of Elena: “Ten years ago, I used to meet her at my sister’s. She was seventeen then and I was thirty-seven. Why didn’t I fall in love with her and propose to her then?” Instead Angus gave the line as: “*Twenty* years ago I used to meet her at my sister’s. I was twenty-seven and she was seven. Why didn’t I fall in love and propose to her then? Goo-goo ba-ba. Hey, wanta get married?” Much as he might caricature a seven-year-old’s baby talk, I realized that he was saying something about his own age, which was a lot closer to seven than to mid-forties.

8.

There was a time when I thought that every person who was odd was crazy, abnormal, and now I’m of the opinion that the normal state of man is to be odd. So you’re completely normal.

—Astrov, Act IV

One of the oddities of working with this age group on *Uncle Vanya* was that the play began to sound more and more “childish” to me! Chekhov now seemed to me a rather juvenile writer with a limited, repetitious mind, whose melodramatic plots had a silly side. For instance, the Professor’s villainous attempt to sell the farm and boot its real owners out seemed too contrived. What had struck me at first as the well-made construction of the play now appeared to me labored craft. Of course, I suspected that I

had simply gotten too close to the play to see it fairly any more, and that the children’s behavior at rehearsals had infiltrated my perception of Chekhov. Still, for a week or two there I lost all feeling for *Uncle Vanya*. So did the kids, I imagine. I wonder how people put on ordinary plays for a living, if one can grow numb to such a treasure as the one we were working on.

They had still not gotten Act III down, and Act IV was nothing but a distant hope with three weeks to go. I pleaded, scolded, raged. The one thing I wouldn’t do was to praise them when they were only mediocre. Visitors who came by to watch rehearsals were sometimes very impressed, and a little surprised, I think, to find me so demanding and parsimonious with my praise. But it seemed to me that we had passed the point of supportive “stroking”; any enthusiastic response had to be genuine, or it would undermine the truth of future compliments. We were all co-workers now, and the mark of respect I paid them was to assume they could do the job.

One afternoon, the cast, as if playing a prank on me after having driven me crazy the day before, performed an Act II and Act III that was on such a high level that no one knew what to make of it. The actors not in the scene for once watched the actors who were, with a catlike absorption and dread of having the spell broken. We all learned something that day: mainly, that we could do it. I had seen bits and pieces of *Uncle Vanya* come alive, at different rehearsals, only to watch the cast nervously kick it away and destroy the mood with self-protective frivolity, as though unwilling to raise expectations in me or themselves that they were capable of sustained intensity. Now we knew better.

I might add that some of these magic moments in rehearsals were never equalled in performance (though no rehearsal as a whole came up to the two performances in consistency). The perverse part of the theatrical process is that one would in vain like to stitch together the best opening to Act II from one rehearsal with the best Act III soliloquy from another. Such an assemblage would have made up the ideal, the Platonic production of *Uncle Vanya* by our cast; but that version exists only in my head, and will never be seen by anybody else. In compensation for the loss of those perfect interpretative moments, the theatrical process gives us—especially in amateur productions—the kamikaze thrill of diving into pure, terrifying surprise with every live performance.

Refusing to waste the production on the school auditorium, with its horrible acoustics and its odor of old cheese sandwiches (it doubled as a lunchroom) straining the suspension of disbelief to the breaking-point, I looked around for other halls. I managed to secure, right around the block, the Symphony Space, a grand old movie palace which had been taken over by a non-profit organization for use by local musical, theatre and community groups. They waived their usual fee (since we had no money to pay them), asking only that they be given the whole box office gate for the evening performance. And they let us have four rehearsals on their stage—a generous amount, considering that every hour of stage use was fought over by different performing groups.

Most of the time we still rehearsed in the Writing Room (an ordinary-sized classroom), and occasionally, in the school auditorium. One had to readapt each time in mak-

ing the transition from one space to another. A tone of intimacy had been created in the Writing Room, which was then taken out and put on the large, barren school auditorium stage, then taken into the even larger Symphony proscenium, with its mysterious ropes and wires and teeming backstage passageways. The Symphony Space was in fact too big for us, it seated a thousand in the orchestra and balcony combined. I would have much preferred a little jewelbox theatre designed for chamber repertory and seating two hundred, all close enough so that the children would not have had to raise their voices; but there was no such facility in the neighborhood, it was pure fantasy, and we were lucky to be getting the Symphony. That made the whole production seem more serious to the kids. "We're going to be on Broadway!" bragged Randi, and in truth the Symphony was located on the Great White Way, only fifty blocks north of the legitimate-theatre district. It also raised the ante: we had to do well now. As one kid said, "I wouldn't be so nervous if it weren't going to be in a real theatre."

Now we had to concentrate a great deal on facing the audience and throwing one's voice. The small, cherished, naturalistic style of acting that had developed in the Writing Room seemed lost, at first, on the Symphony stage. It was pathetic; nothing was coming across. "Louder!" I kept calling. "Exaggerate more! Make it broader!" In fact, I hated to force them away from their quiet underplaying and into that strident incisiveness which is so irritating to me when I go to the theatre. I much prefer the more muted screen acting, where the audience seems almost to be eavesdropping; but the medium has its demands, and we had to bow our heads part-way to them. The kids had to be made at least minimally aware of the necessity to project *forward* or the audience simply would not hear them. This, in a play so dependent on dialogue, would be disaster. For a long time, I entertained the possibility of stringing a set of microphones above their heads, but in the end the technical difficulties and cost forced me to give up this idea. Besides, it would be cleaner with natural sound. But no matter how many times I told them to speak louder, they had a hard time accepting the fact that they had virtually to yell every line. Either that, or enunciate so clearly that articulation made up for volume.

They loved the feeling of the larger Symphony space; but in the beginning their wanderings always seemed to take them back, back into the sheltering regions where their voices were lost in the side-flats and against the rear wall. I knew that they were simply afraid of the stark confrontation with an audience (even a hypothetical audience) which arose from standing downstage. Poor kids! But they had to overcome it.

In the meantime, the rest of Tempel's class was getting the scenery ready. Sasha was in charge of scenery and props, and with the aid of an art teacher, Barbara di Novo, who started them off, she supervised the painting of several large backdrops. Sasha was everywhere, making lists of props, bossing around other children, throwing fits when something was out of whack. She had developed an enormous sense of responsibility for this production, one equal to mine, and I found myself leaning on her more and more as my lieutenant. I made her the prompter as well, which touched off an argument between us. One day she was in the wings and Jamal forgot his lines; the cast waited in si-

lence for more than a minute. "Where's the prompter?" I yelled from the pit. Sasha stuck her head out: "He knows his lines, he's just pretending not to." "Sasha, don't get psychological on me! If they don't say their lines, just prompt! PROMPT!" She ran into the pit and started weeping several rows behind me. "I quit!" she said; "I don't want to be prompter any more." All the children onstage were looking at me with solemn, accusative faces, as if to say, "You've gone too far this time." I knew I was partly wrong; in fact I had told Sasha once before that she shouldn't give them the lines too quickly, she should let them have a chance to figure them out; but I could not bring myself to apologize to her immediately, as I would have done with another kid. She and I had gotten so hooked to this production that we were as if wedded to each other, and had become an irritable married couple. At the end of the Act, I turned to her and begged her forgiveness. She accepted, but still refused to return to the prompting job.

9.

Such goings-on — shouting and yelling, shooting. . . Shameful, that's what it is, shameful. . . (Sighing) It's ages since I tasted any noodle soup.

—Nurse Marina, Act IV

By the first of June I had finished off all my other writing classes and was doing nothing but *Uncle Vanya*. I had decided to rehearse lightly in the last two weeks so as not to exhaust the kids. I was a little worried about the problem of their physical stamina, as we had never rehearsed all four acts together and it would probably come to more than two hours. On top of that, I didn't want to push them too hard because they had to have some emotion left for the performances. So I concentrated on getting some of the other parts of production ready. The scenery was going well, the kids had painted a large flowered wallpaper interior and then brown-washed it to make it look faded. There was also a pretty outdoor country scene, with birds and trees. We had gotten some old couches and a writing desk from Sasha's mother, and a real samovar from another parent. We had moved all the props and furniture to the Symphony, where we went through a stagehands' rehearsal. Three other kids from Tempel's class had worked out a pattern for the lighting. Joan Johnston, Angus's mother, was helping with the costumes: babushkas, evening dresses, nightshirts, vests and ties. We had printed up programs and flyers and sent children out to plaster the neighborhood with them. We were starting to collect a number of volunteer kids who wanted to be in on the glamor and excitement of the final days.

I remembered this momentum having happened as well with *West Side Story*, some six years before. But that earlier production had larger resonance: the whole school community had got turned on. Partly it was because more children were involved in it, partly because it was the first big theatrical at P.S. 75 (people were more jaded now); but also, more crucially, *West Side Story* was a popular vehicle, a musical that everybody loved, whereas *Uncle Vanya* seemed to be generating a lower order of curiosity, more like facing a cultural duty than an anticipated pleasure. I had to accept the fact that *Uncle Vanya* would probably be

over the heads of many children and even some of the adults. People were not jumping to see it in the same way as they had *West Side Story*. The Principal had already informed me that he would not be able to attend either performance, which hurt. I also had a more private, protective feeling toward *Uncle Vanya*, as though to an unsuccessful second novel, than I had had about *West Side Story*. It seemed to me now (how quickly we forget) that *West Side Story* had been easier to put on; no nuanced, sophisticated acting was necessary— just twenty seconds of dialogue, then a song number. I did not remember having been afraid so far along in the *West Side Story* process that it might not come off, but I was having nightmares and insomnia about *Uncle Vanya* right up to the last day. I had real fear of failure in the pit of my stomach about this show. In a sense I was competing with myself, with that earlier success. And coincidentally, the children themselves knew all about it: several of them had read the *West Side Story* section in my book, *Being With Children*. They even asked, “Are you going to write about us, Phil?” Certainly not, I said, and meant it. I didn’t even keep diary notes about *Uncle Vanya* because I thought that would jinx me.

We had scheduled two performances, one in the morning for all the upper grades of P.S. 75, and one in the evening for the parents and community. I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Slim seemed to be getting stronger as Astrov. No matter how you try to direct someone, the actor has to figure it out, off by himself, has to think long and hard about the character. And this Slim had done. I told him how good he sounded and he blushed and Lisa said, “That’s the first time you’ve complimented Slim in months!” They were keeping track of my compliments. One day Slim came in triumphantly and told me that he knew his entire part: his mother had been quizzing him every night and he had it down pat. It was true! Mylan I knew I could depend on to do a good job; she seemed the most consistently professional. Angus was getting there. The final dress rehearsal went brilliantly through all of Acts I and II. “Uh-oh,” said Sasha, conscious of the theatrical superstition. “It’s going too well—and it’s dress rehearsal!” Fortunately, perhaps, things fell apart in the second half: sloppy, slow, anarchic, dreadful.

The afternoon before the first performance, we had a quiet run-through of the still-uncertain Act IV. We also had a quiet discussion in which I listed the possible catastrophes that could occur and we considered the best ways to react to them. These ranged from stage fright and blank memory to falling scenery, tomatoes thrown from the audience, hoots and jeers. I reminded them that during the love-scene between Slim and Mylan they could certainly expect an uproar from the kiddie audience. It was also possible that some children might be bored, and that a teacher might decide to take her class away during intermission. Significant looks were exchanged; everyone knew the teacher I meant. They had already anticipated that the first performance, before their peers, would be the hardest. Jamal surprised me by saying, “That’s okay. They’re just childish little babies—they’re immature. It’s not our fault if this is too mature for them.” He had already acquired the professional artist’s advance defense-reaction for rejection by the public; it amazed me to see such attitudes being born.

*I’m just as unhappy as you are, maybe, but I don’t give up.
I bear it and I’ll go on bearing it till the end of my life.
Then you bear it too, Uncle!*

—Sonia, Act IV

At seven-thirty the next morning I was waiting with my bag of groceries (cheese, crackers and strawberry soda for the drinking scenes, and fresh roses) for the theatre manager, who arrived bleary-eyed and opened up the Symphony. The kids arrived moments later. They hung the scenery, set up props for Act I according to the list we had made, and put the caps in the cap pistol. Joan, Angus’s mother, took the nervous actors into the dressing room and applied their makeup.

The kids at the lighting-board set the lights for Act I. The classes started arriving a few minutes to nine: all the fifth and sixth grade classes would be attending, including the bi-lingual classes, and a few third-fourth grade teachers had managed to sneak their classes in at the last moment, on the pretext that someone had a brother or sister in the cast. I doubted if some of the youngest kids would get much out of it, but there was nothing I could do about that now. In fact there was nothing I could do about anything. The rest was in the hands of Allah.

When the time came to start I sat in the front row, ready to dart backstage if needed. Our two “old women,” Ayesha and Kioka, looked really wizened and grandmotherly. Lisa was the prompter, since it was Rebecca’s turn to be Sonia. Their joking rivalry had given a new twist to their encouragement of each other to “break a leg.”

Ayesha took her place onstage, sighing and knitting; the audience grew hushed; I signalled the lighting booth; the lights went dark in the pit; Slim had already made his entrance, and was pacing around, ready to respond to the first line in the play: “Have some tea, my boy.”

So the first performance began. It was quite a restrained opening, until Angus came onstage, setting the play spinning like a top. Angus knew his lines pretty well by heart, and moreover he was giving it that extra something, improvising gestures and motions I had never seen him do before. He seemed possessed. The other actors reacted gratefully to his powerful lead, at the same time appearing a little in awe of his demonic stage presence. All except Mylan, who came on with her own energy, determined to project and set the standard for the others of audibility and emphatic gestures. Her “Elena” had taken on a little Mae West and Sadie Thompson in response to the live audience. There were already rumours backstage that some of the children were not speaking loud enough, and Mylan was determined to be heard. She was practically *directing* the others while onstage, by the way she placed herself and extrovertedly delivered her lines. I was glad for her take-charge air, even if I regretted the coarsening effect, and would have preferred that she stay more in character.

When Act I ended I ran onstage to help move furniture. The children were excited that they had gotten through the first part— “so far so good!” But they knew that they would have to speak a great deal louder to reach the classes in the back rows.

Act II began with one of my favorite scenes in the play:



"What are you so unhappy about?" the drunken Doctor Astrov asks his friend Vanya, while Waffles sits by, Act III.

Slim (Astrov) brushes up for his ladies' man part.



the reproachful duet between husband and wife, the Professor and Elena. Mylan brought her tone down, and David made the hypochondriac egoist as sympathetic as I have ever seen him played. Rebecca was very touching as Sonia. I was already beginning to wish I had cast her for the evening performance; but perhaps it did make more sense to throw the more professional girl to the tougher audience. Slim's jerky interpretation of Astrov I had by now grown fond of as absolutely singular, but right somehow. He did a great drunk scene, which brought laughter from the kids. But he and Mylan back-pedaled away from each other like unicyclists during the love scene, disappointing the audience.

I was conscious of the audience's responses, super-sensitive to the whispers and footsteps of stagehands during scenes, but the play itself, *Uncle Vanya*, somehow—passed me by. I couldn't feel it. The drama seemed to hang fire. The kid's fright had constricted their voice-boxes, so that the words came out correctly but without the passion or real authority I knew they were capable of. Either that, or I was too numb from terror myself to notice how much was getting across.

Later, the kids were ebullient that they had pulled it off. "We did it!" they cried in the dressing room. "No one messed up his lines, Phillip. We did the whole thing perfect. Except for—" and now they bubbled forth with the anecdotes of catastrophes skirted that all actors must tell to rid themselves of adrenalin: of how Sasha almost couldn't find the gun, and Angus forgot his line so Mylan made a bridge to her next speech, wasn't that clever? I congratulated them heartily, disguising the truth that I felt a little let-down. Somehow, after all that work we put in, I had expected it to be better. I was down on myself for not being satisfied with the kids' best efforts. Teri Mack and

Sue Willis of Teachers & Writers had loved it; but they were artists who had worked for years with kids and could see the effort that had gone into the show and excuse the rough edges. Other adults, who had no such background, were puzzled what to make of it. I might have allowed myself to be talked into a stupor of elation, against my inner feelings, were it not for these others' ambiguous responses. The performance had clearly not *convinced everyone*. I wanted it to be so strong that it made every spectator into a believer.

A word should be said about the audience. They were remarkably attentive throughout, and as quiet as any human being can expect of 500 children sitting for 2½ hours in the dark. Nor should it be assumed that these children were especially well-behaved or always given to honoring the hard work of other children: I had seen kids from P.S. 75 start pandemonium and fist-fights during a school production of *Oklahoma*. But they watched *Vanya* with an eerie respectfulness, not laughing at many of the funny lines but treating it as if it were a sober tragedy. All of the classes stayed till the end, which was a tribute on its own. Some kids seemed deeply involved; others were no doubt bored and restless, but went no further in showing it than a pantomime of yawns. Others were leaning forward, straining to catch the actors' voices. But all the children seemed to understand that something "important" was going on before their eyes, even if they didn't quite get it. For many of them, it was their first experience of seeing serious theatre.

There were numerous positive aspects to the first performance, in short, and it had its fans; but I still sensed we could do better. In the meantime, I was exhausted.

After everyone had gone, Mylan and her little sister stayed behind with me in the dressing room. Mylan wanted to get my honest impressions on how it had gone. Already so grown-up in certain ways, she had that love of *post-mortems* and analytical realism which she knew I shared with her. But she also seemed to be checking to see if I was all right. Again, Mylan pulled me out of my doldrums by making us discuss everything with encouraging candor. I got the subterranean impression that she was also flirting with me... and I with her! It is a cliché of the theatre that the director falls in love with his leading lady. Since adults are not supposed to fall in love with children, let us just say that I appreciated Mylan's timely attentions.

11.

Second of February, vegetable oil twenty pounds... sixteenth of February again vegetable oil twenty pounds...

—Vanya, doing accounts, in Act IV

I had decided to regard the first performance as a dry run. This was, in effect, our one uninterrupted dress rehearsal before the real test. We still had a day intervening before the Thursday night performance to work out the kinks.

I came in on Wednesday to talk to the cast as a group. The kids were in great shape, they were telling me not to be so nervous. Tempel had instructed them to calm me down. He, by the way, had gotten his own case of stage-fever, and was by now thoroughly involved in the production. On Thursday night he would be directing traffic from the

wings, freeing me to watch the performance from the audience. Tempel's pride in the project and his kids was a beautiful thing to see.

My speech to the group went as follows: first I complimented them, then I "calmly" pointed out areas for improvement. I spoke about stillness: raising the shiver down their own backs and causing it in the audience. They needed to rediscover the play's emotions. Take time to feel things; don't be afraid to let a moment of silence spread, that's what Chekhov's pauses were put there for in the first place. Play with the pace if you feel like it. Not everything should be even, so mechanically equal in importance as it was on Tuesday morning. Stretch out a passage, give some words the real emphasis they deserve...

This advice may actually have had an effect on their performance, because I saw them experimenting with the pace Thursday evening, with happy results.

We still needed to work on the love scene between Astrov and Elena. Romance was an integral part of the play. A kiss would have been perfect, but barring that, at least the semblance of one. "You tell Slim he has to do it," Mylan whispered to me. "I'll do it if he does it. He's the one who's messing up." The rumor had already spread that Mylan liked Slim in "real life." Whether true or not (Mylan's little sister seemed to think it was true), the overlap between art and life was agitating the performance of this scene.*

I took Mylan and Slim into the old assistant principal's office and locked the door. "These are your instructions. You must have five to ten seconds contact. Slim, you must put your arm around her waist at the words, 'You can't escape.' Mylan, you put *both* arms around him then. And you put your head on his shoulder" (this wasn't easy, since Mylan was taller than Slim) "after you say 'Have mercy.'... Now try it." I stood back and watched their all-thumbs attempt. "One must get the sense that electric currents are pushing you toward and away from each other, and that no matter what words you say to protest, your bodies are obeying their own laws. Slim, try to turn her more toward you."

"You don't know, Phillip. Slim really is a Dr. Astrov in real life!" said Mylan. "He's fresh." Slim turned beet-red and laughed. I demonstrated what I wanted with both partners, to reduce to a kind of dance step what had been too fraught with circumstance; but of course my intervention only led to more hysterics. Slim did not relish taking me in his arms and Mylan cried "No kiss!" when I approached her as Astrov.

The night of the big performance, two telegrams were hanging on the dressing room mirror, one from the Parents Association and one from Mylan's father in Colorado.

Lisa alone had not gone through the experience of doing it before a live audience, and I was a little concerned about her, but she assured me she knew her lines. She had put her hair up in a bun and wore glasses and a dowdy blouse to make herself look less pretty. While I was casting about for

*Slim, on the other hand, was very attached to Lisa—which also had to be corrected for onstage. He would follow Lisa with his eyes when, as Astrov, he was supposed to be utterly indifferent to her as a woman. I had to keep reminding him to neglect Lisa/Sonia for Mylan/Elena.

some way to get the kids in touch with the stillness they would need to act from, it was Lisa, in fact, who started them "meditating." I came backstage behind the side-flats and found each one kneeling or sitting alone, going into themselves. What a sight! I tiptoed away, thinking, I could not have asked for anything better.

Sasha showed up late, on roller skates, with a tape recorder, a Polaroid camera and every other imaginable gadget. It was her intention to "document" the play both by recording it in front of the stage on her rinky-dink tape recorder and by snapping flash photographs. I tried to explain to her that there was more than enough work to do backstage, getting the props ready for each act. Besides, Teri Mack and Jared Crawford, my apprentice, were already set up to videotape the performance for a permanent record.

The audience began filing in a half-hour early, while we were still putting up the scenery. There was no curtain at the Symphony Space, so that all changes had to take place before the audience's tolerant view. I was too nervous to talk to the incoming crowd, but I recognized lots of reliable faces. About two hundred people showed. They donated close to \$500 for the Symphony Space. It was not as large a crowd as I would have hoped (partly my fault, since I never took enough time away from the production to handle publicity properly, or to delegate the responsibility to someone else); on the other hand, it was certainly a legitimate turnout. The fact that most people knew each other, and the presence of children (some seeing it for the second time), gave the theatre a warm community feeling. Isaiah Sheffer of Symphony Space made a welcoming speech and we were ready to begin.

12.

We shall rest! We shall hear the angels, we shall see the whole sky full of diamond, we shall see how all earthly evil, all our sufferings, are drowned in a mercy that will fill the whole world. And our life will grow peaceful, tender, sweet as a caress. I believe, I do believe... (Wipes away his tears with a handkerchief) Poor, dear Uncle Vanya, you're crying... In your life you haven't known what joy was; but wait, Uncle Vanya, wait... We shall rest... We shall rest... We shall rest!

—Sonia, final speech, Act IV

The play was terrific. The acoustics were great, you could hear every word. The adults in the audience (which was three-quarters of the crowd) kept laughing at the ironic lines, and that put the actors in a relaxed mood. They could feel a live audience out there enjoying every moment of them. As I watched the play in the audience, getting shivers from the drama, forgetting even that these were children or actors, receiving the full double-edged meaning of Chekhov's lines, I realized what people meant by "the miracle of the theatre." That night was a miracle. I knew it was because there had been that earlier daytime performance, which had been adequate, but which had not moved me at all. This time there was gooseflesh. I could see why theatre folk are so superstitious and, more to the point, so often seem to have a personal relation to God.

You start believing in divine intervention when all those random, risky elements cohere.

Lisa slowed everyone down; she was on edge, more so than the others, but her seriousness took the form of delaying and going inward, which quieted the cast. A sort of serene sadness played in her movements. There was one woman from Russia in the audience, who had nothing to do with P.S. 75 but had merely wandered in off the street to see *Uncle Vanya*; she commented to me that all the children were good, but Angus and Lisa had the real "Chekhov acting style."

It was Angus's evening. No one could stop talking about him afterwards. And rightly so—this was an *Uncle Vanya* with Vanya at the heart of it. I watched him in total belief. So far as I was concerned, his was the definitive Uncle Vanya; as long as I live I will think of Vanya as a boy with scowling, scrunched-up face and forlorn but imperial arm gestures. He and some of the other kids were 20% better than I had directed them to be. The truth is that they had peaked at just the right time, in the evening performance. Mylan, having gotten her role down long before the others, had gone on to add exuberant femme fatale flourishes. It was clear that she was having a great time onstage, and learning enormous amounts. They all were. Each performance before an audience, they jumped a quantum leap in their understanding of acting.

One of the curiosities of this production was that the children still seemed to be acting for themselves, rather than to the audience. As often as I had told them not to show their backs, in the end I stopped nagging about it, because I preferred them to react naturally to each other even if it meant momentarily turning their backs. The audience became, in effect, eavesdroppers on a world which was not staged for them. Such a solution, coming as it did out of the children's instinctive preferences as well as their limitations as amateurs, actually enhanced the Chekhovian mood. The result was a much purer experience of the characters' lives.

I kept moving from seat to seat in the large hall, to make sure that the voices were carrying everywhere, but also to be part of different sections of the audience. The play so absorbed me that it was as though I were hearing *Uncle Vanya* for the first time, wondering how it would turn out. Each person's pain onstage shot through me; I felt all the rejections, all the anguish of the characters. I was off in Russia—at the same time knowing that these were "my kids" and rejoicing that they were doing so well.

Only one moment jarred the illusion of life, and it was a very funny episode: in the middle of Mylan and Lisa's poignant duet, which was going so perfectly, Sasha appeared at the apron of the stage and snapped two of what must have been the longest and loudest Polaroid flash-exposures in the history of tactlessness. Mylan froze. The whole audience waited for Sasha to get out of the way, but she stood her ground. I think she had never quite accepted not getting one of the big roles, and this mild, attention-grabbing sabotage was her revenge.

During intermission, the audience sort of pinched each other in happy surprise at how well it was going. They were happy too, I thought, as they jammed the lobby, to be escaping that morbid world of provincial Russia for a few moments. All the comments were good. Angus's name was on everyone's lips. And suddenly, the star himself ap-

peared in the lobby, as did the other actors—racing down the aisles to hear their praises sung. They were forgetting my orders about staying in character! It made for an unorthodox intermission, to say the least, to have Vanya and the Nurse and the Professor rubbing elbows with those who had just been watching them, but the audience loved this touch of unprofessionalism even more. They could return to clucking over the kids as cute.

People were shaking my hand as if it were already over. I was afraid the tension would seep out of the second half, but too elated to stay away from the congratulations. One parent, who had been a member of my adult writing workshop the year before and who usually supported our activities, said to me: “Phil, I have to admit that when I heard you were doing *Uncle Vanya* I thought, ‘This time he’s really flipped his lid.’ Forgive me, I owe you an apology.” How many people must have been thinking the same thing and not saying it, just holding their breaths. . . . It gave me a momentary sickening shock to think how close I had come to ruining their confidence in me. This whole production could have so easily turned into a fiasco. One panicky actor could have loused it up. I was grateful that this community had let me take such a chance—and with their kids. Granted I had come through for them over the years, I still felt they had been kind in giving me the room to fail; to go too far, if need be. Artists-in-schools are so rarely allowed the same latitude.

The second half maintained the high quality of the first. The love scene was neither the backpedaling race of the first performance, nor a real clinch, but something in between. The last act, when Elena, the Professor and Astrov go away from the farm one by one, and Sonia and Vanya are left alone, turning “to work” as a momentary anodyne for their abandonment, had a nice hushed floatiness. I had wanted Lisa to take Sonia’s magnificent “We shall rest” speech slowly, so that the audience would know the end had come. The ending had been too sudden on Tuesday morning, partly because Rebecca had rushed her lines, partly because the lighting crew had forgotten to fade out slowly. This time we had worked out a new staging where both Angus and Lisa would be way up in front for her long speech, and the lights would start to fade in the middle of it to total darkness at the end. Lisa pulled a blank, a few lines into the speech; but then her groping through it, her pauses, her difficulty in trying to remember made the speech sound even more sincere and moving. It was as though she were struggling to find the right words with which to console Vanya and herself.

The lights went out and Lisa’s father, Paul Cowan, stood up with tears in his eyes. Then everyone applauded. We had rehearsed the bows and they were fairly neat. Mylan called me onstage (as I had asked her to, not trusting to spontaneous acclamation) and I thanked everyone behind the scenes, and ended by proposing, tongue-in-cheek, “Next year, *The Cherry Orchard*.” A total lie. Inwardly I thanked God for saving my skin: I promised myself I had reached the outer limit, and would never try anything so difficult with children again.

“We did it! We did the Impossible!” cried Angus to anyone backstage who would listen.



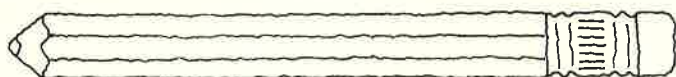
Younger sisters and brothers visit the cast in dressing room, opening night.

They’re gone!

—Mme. Voitskaya (Vanya’s mother), Act IV

The next day, I had arranged to take the cast as a treat to the Russian Tea Room, after three o’clock. This sounds more generous than it is: I had asked them please to bring their own money, about five dollars each, but I would escort them and pay for anyone who couldn’t swing the finances. (Somehow, certain adults still got the idea that I was paying for everyone; their eyes misted over, so great is the need for people to find real “Mr. Chips” figures walking around in everyday life.)

Mike Tempel came with us. He was such an essential part of the cast by now. I had called ahead to reserve a table for thirteen, but on the subway the kids were making uneasy jokes about not being let in; and when they entered through the Russian Tea Room’s revolving doors and gazed up at the swank interior, I could see them go stiff with fright. True to the nightmare, the hostess took one look at the gang of children and refused to seat us. “But I made a reservation,” I said. “You can’t make a reservation for tea and cakes. . . .” she said, retreating toward the back of the restaurant; “You stay here! I’ll go ask the manager.” I saw them talking together and the manager





Taking bows.

frowning. I advanced toward them and started to explain that this group had just put on *Uncle Vanya*, and wasn't it appropriate that they have tea at the Russia Tea Room—but apparently I had already committed a great sin by passing beyond the maitre d's red sash, since they both looked up in horror and motioned me back, caring not at all to hear my sentimental explanation.

Then, they decided to seat us. So the great menus were brought and the waitress put on her children-serving smile (maybe she was thinking that children are notoriously poor tippers). I had expected the kids to be full of talk about their triumph the night before. But for the first half-hour they were so intimidated by the fancy surroundings that they compensated by playing a game of Rich People. Ayesha said, "I almost drowned in my bathtub yesterday. Gracious! a hundred feet is really too big for a bathtub." David was making cracks like "I only sold two yachts today." These were mostly middle-class kids, but apparently they had never been in a joint like the Russian Tea Room. One more educational experience. I drew their attention to the polished samovars and the paintings and the waiters' red peasant smocks: "If only we could have had some of those for the play!" Gradually, they settled comfortably into the surroundings, and stuffed eclairs and swan-shaped cakes into their mouths, and drank tea in a glass, *a la Russe*. I ordered an "Uncle Vanya," a sweet cocktail

which was actually listed with that name on the menu, and let them each take a sip. "My mother's going to kill you when she finds out, Phil!" Mylan said. By the time we had finished there, the Tea Room had given us a lovely sense of closure.

David said he couldn't believe that it was all over. "It's finished! I feel so sad about it. We worked for so long, and now there's no more *Uncle Vanya*..." The other kids seemed to take it in stride; but David had grown the most of anyone in the cast, had jumped from being a crybaby to the most game and dependable hard worker we had. I told him there would be other highs.

Jamal was stealing every sugar cube and matchbook in sight. The kids stocked up on free postcards on the way out. They had promised they would take me out, once or twice during rehearsals, and I had made the same promise to them; but in the end we went Dutch, as was fitting. They were still handing me crumpled dollar bills as we headed up 57th Street past Carnegie Hall, happy to be in the warm sun again. Some were running ahead, mixing with the five o'clock crowd, while others continued to feed me bills from their pockets.

The dollar bills that children give you are different from other people's currency. They are bunched up and folded six times over and very, very sweaty. They don't know how to lie flat. They made my wallet bulge for days afterwards.

After he's gone there won't be a single page of his work left behind. He's absolutely unknown, he's nothing! A soap bubble!

—Vanya, Act II

Of the many responses to our *Uncle Vanya* production, the most unsettling came from Irene Freeman, a first grade teacher who told me in passing that her son had been involved with a production of *Uncle Vanya* in elementary or junior high school a dozen years ago. *So we were not the first!* So, there was another lunatic out there! The guy who did it was, in the words of the rememberer, “the original Mr. Chips.” We may not have been the first to put on a full-scale Chekhov play in sixth grade but *for us* it was the first time. I think this is more important than to have made unprecedented educational history. In education, someone has always gone before you. What counts is to attempt the awesome or the unlikely, and to give kids a taste for the impossible.

I received several letters about *Vanya* in the following week, including two from other Teachers & Writers operatives. The first came from my old co-worker Meredith Sue Willis, a novelist, who said in part:

Frankly, I didn't realize it was going to be *all of Uncle Vanya*. I knew you were doing a serious production, but I thought somehow it was a serious *little* production. My mistake! Phillip, the clarity with which those kids said their lines was astounding. I'm not talking about technique but about meaning coming across. For some reason this *Uncle Vanya* made more sense to me than the one I saw a few years back with George C. Scott (Astrov) and Julie Christie and what's his name the English actor as Vanya. I mean, those folks were more professional actors of course, and I suppose their play was more subtle than yours, but I swear it was not as clear. Your kids were acting a writer's play—out of careful thought and understanding and I think it was a superb achievement. A new subschool of children's acting—out of comprehension and sympathy. . . . I was also proud of the audience, they made a really good effort.

Interestingly, Sue had attended the morning performance. Her response was exactly the way I hoped our production would be taken, as “acting a writer's play.”

The second letter came from Dan Cheifetz, author of *Theatre In My Head* and a man who has taught dramatics to children for years. His note strikes a more uneasy tone:

Phillip—

I had to leave immediately after *Vanya*, and I wanted to take a moment now to give you some feedback on the show. First, I really want to salute your guts in doing such a thing; outrageous and, because so, fascinating. And I realize what a lot of work it must have been—whew! I'm not sure why you wanted to do it though, and I'd really like to talk to you sometime about it. I started out by thinking it “cute” and therefore patronizing to kids: how could they connect with such material? and if they couldn't what's the point. Yet as it went along I got really caught up in the ways some of them at least did connect—with the hysteria, romantic idealizing, friendship, gentleness; it seemed to take on a special life, not the

Vanya of Chekhov but somehow filtered through the kids' grasp of some of the ways adults (especially in pre-Rev. Russia) resemble children. —And a really mind-boggling leap some of them made sometimes into the essence of a scene. The one between the two girls was really touching. The boy who played the Doctor somehow made that complex character work in his own itchy terms; Sonia was a perfect job of casting, believably mothering.

I wonder what the kids got out of it—what the experience was like. No doubt you'll tell.

Anyway, I wanted to send you my acknowledgement of doing something new and courageous.

Dan Cheifetz

The doubts Dan expresses—good, justifiable doubts about the validity of such material for children—are I think where we came in. Perhaps they will never be laid adequately to rest. But this account has been an attempt to set down some of the thinking that went into the choice of that particular play and the mounting of its production.

I could go on to justify *Uncle Vanya* in traditional educational terms by saying that it increased the children's vocabulary, reading and memorization skills (this last, dramatically), taught them a good deal about theatre acting, literature, endurance and team cooperation. I could also agree with Mike Tempel, who said: “Educationally, *Uncle Vanya* was very inefficient. It was labor-intensive, took too many hours from other work and only involved a part of the class and never was really integrated into the curriculum. It went against everything you're supposed to do. All the same,” Tempel added, “it was probably the single greatest educational experience those kids ever had.”

Postscript

That summer I went away to the country. To take a rest. I was sharing a house with several people, and we would often meet by accident on the sun-deck, exchanging pleasantries about the weather or non sequiturs amid glints of confession in a manner that reminded me uncannily of *Uncle Vanya*. Snatches of *Uncle Vanya* would come back to me as my house-mates and I faced the pond, not looking at each other but outward toward that external point, just where the audience would have been. I realized how much Chekhov's plays, with their comings and goings, each character entering a group scene from his or her own world of privacy, are based on country living and the architecture of the suburban house. Now that I was in the heart of Chekhov country, the wisdom of Chekhov's observations struck me at every turn, much more so than they had in an urban setting. I was glad to have been able to study a masterwork so thoroughly that I actually had it under my belt. I mumbled lines of *Vanya's* to myself as I retreated to my cabin. And the funny thing was, I could have sworn that miles away, wherever they were taking their vacations, the kids were also remembering the lines of the play and connecting it with the life they were seeing all about them.

—Phillip Lopate

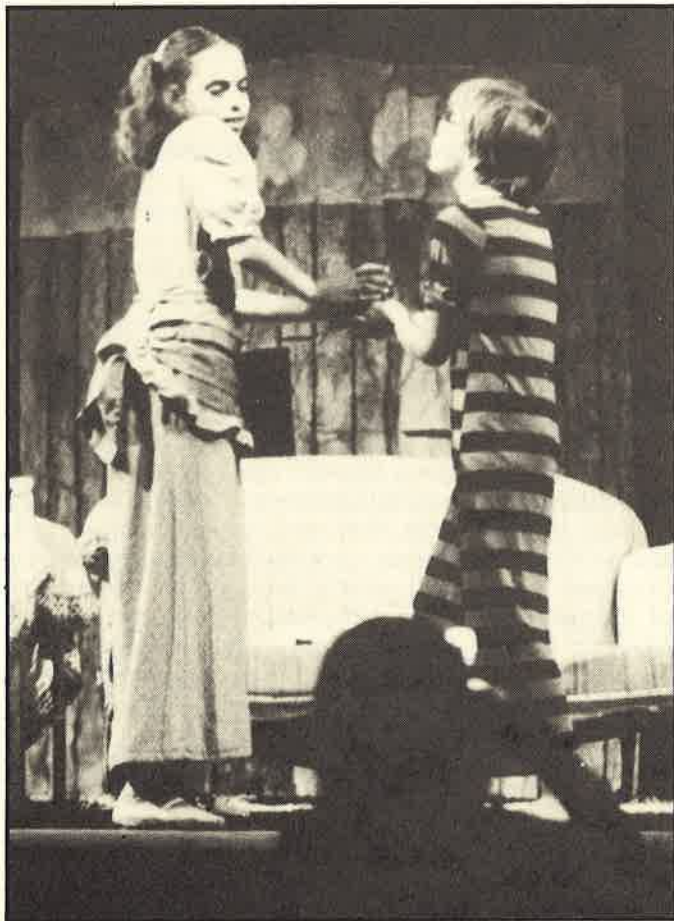
Children Perform the Classics

The following are transcripts of two segments of CBS-TV's "Sunrise Semester" in which several participants in the Uncle Vanya project at P.S. 75 discuss the experience.

SUNRISE SEMESTER—Produced in association with the College of Arts and Sciences of New York University and the School of Education and Health and Nursing Arts of the New York City University presents Drama in Education. Today's topic: CHILDREN PERFORM THE CLASSICS, with Dr. Robert J. Landy, Professor of Educational Theater at New York University.

DR. LANDY: Good morning and welcome. Some time back in July when I was first preparing for this program, I read an amazing article in the *Village Voice*. It concerned an elementary school production of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. On top of the article were four pictures of children, ten- and eleven-year-olds. Underneath were inscribed the names: Sonia, Uncle Vanya, Elena, Dr. Astrov, all

"Help me first to make peace with myself! My darling!" Vanya seizes Elena's hand.



characters in Chekhov's play. Well, my first reaction was that it must be some kind of a joke or hoax, but as I read Paul Cowan's article, which happened to be a personal reflection on seeing his daughter act in Chekhov, I was both moved and determined to learn more about children performing a play that largely deals with despair, unrequited love and the absurdities of life, hardly predominant themes in children's theater, and so began my acquaintance with Phillip Lopate, the director of the production. As I soon discovered, Mr. Lopate is a writer who teaches at P.S. 75 in New York City, through Teachers & Writers Collaborative. The *Uncle Vanya* project began as an exercise in a writing class. His early drama work with the children is documented in his book *Being With Children*, but this centers on a production of *West Side Story*, a far cry from Chekhov. But even that early a production reflects a concern for the needs of the children within their community. I hope to raise a few important questions during the next programs about the form of drama that most of us know best, the school play. In a discussion with Mr. Lopate, whose latest novel, *Confessions of Summer*, has just been published, and two of the actors, Lisa Cowan and Angus Johnston, I would like to explore the realities and implications of using such dramatic literature as *Uncle Vanya* for children's performances. Lisa Cowan, Angus Johnston, Phillip Lopate, welcome. Let me start with you, Phil. How on earth did you decide to use Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* with ten- and eleven-year-olds?

PHILLIP: Well, I asked myself that question every day as I was doing it. I really started off with just a scene from *Uncle Vanya* because I was trying to get the kids to write dialogue and the dialogue was a little flat and I wanted them to get a strong sense of how sometimes people talk to each other without necessarily saying right off what they mean. Conversation can exist at several levels, so I brought in that scene from *Vanya* about unrequited love: A is in love with B, B is in love with C; nobody seems to be getting together. I thought it would probably bore them, but I tried it out on them anyway, and they were surprisingly interested. So then I thought, "Well, what would happen if we all read the play as a study group?" I still hadn't planned to put it on. I just planned to have us read through it, because I wanted to study a large piece of literature, a big hunk of literature, and usually in schools, as you know, you study very little slivers of literature. You never get a chance to study a whole novel. You study a little poem or a little story, but you never get a chance to look at a large work. So I wanted to stick my teeth into a large work, and it just so happened that I loved *Uncle Vanya*. I

had been spending years doing stuff that the kids wanted to do, doing comic books, doing vampire plays, doing Superman plays, and I said, "Well, forget what the kids want to do, this is what I want to do." I was curious to see what kids would make of it, whether there would be any connections between the life in the Chekhov play and their own lives, and I really had no idea how it was going to turn out.

DR. LANDY: Well, fortunately we'll take a look at how it turned out, because we have several clips, and the first one that we'll see today features Lisa as Sonia and Mylan Dennerstein as Elena. Lisa, I wonder if you could tell us what we are going to be seeing in this scene?

LISA: Well, Astrov was just in the room with Sonia, and Sonia was trying to find out how he felt about her and this is right after he's gone off and she still hasn't found anything, but this is how she feels.

DR. LANDY: OK, let's now take a look at the tape.

TAPE IS BEING PLAYED.

DR. LANDY: Lisa, this is the first time you've seen the tapes since you performed, right? How does it feel looking at that? What kind of impressions do you have?

LISA: Well, I don't know—it doesn't seem like I'm doing it, you know—me on the camera.

DR. LANDY: I feel the same way watching myself on TV some mornings, too. Let me talk about both of you. How did you feel when you were first beginning the experience of Uncle Vanya? Did you think it was going to be fun, or crazy, or what were your initial impressions about—at the point that you realized that in fact you were going to do this as a play, what kinds of thoughts were going through your mind?

LISA: Well, at first we thought that it was just going to be a school play and it wasn't going to be very much of a big deal, but it was really exciting, but it was hard at some points, too, of course.

DR. LANDY: What about the idea of doing Chekhov material, the Uncle Vanya material, how did you feel about that? Did that seem appropriate for you?

ANGUS: Well, I thought it was sort of . . . it was a bit grown up. I didn't think we were going to pull it off this well.

LISA: You know, most of us didn't even know who Chekhov was, so it wasn't that impressive that we were doing Chekhov; but if you tell people, well we're going to do *Uncle Vanya*, people were really impressed, so that impresses you.

DR. LANDY: OK, that's a nice comment.

LISA: At first when I told my mother she was really taken aback, and I didn't see what it was, because I hadn't read the play and I didn't even know who Chekhov was and what the play was about, at that point, but . . .

DR. LANDY: Would it make a difference if you were told you were doing Shakespeare?

LISA: Well, if we'd been doing Shakespeare, I think I would have thought it's impossible, we can't do it.

DR. LANDY: Is that because it was more familiar to you?

PHILLIP: How did you connect with the characters in the play? How did you build a bridge to people who are so much older than you? For instance, you, Lisa, or you, Angus, how did you approach people when you hadn't had those experiences yet?

LISA: You don't think of them as being older than you, because you are playing them. You just think of the whole play as ten-, eleven- and twelve-year-olds. I mean you feel

like the people when you are acting. When I wasn't acting it was like—who is she.

DR. LANDY: All right, that's another issue I'd like to explore. We do have another clip today, and this features Angus as Uncle Vanya. Could you tell us what's happening at this point, Angus?

ANGUS: At this point he has just been with Elena and he has told her that he loves her. For the second time in the play she has told him there is nothing she can do about it. She doesn't love him so that's all there is to it.

DR. LANDY: OK. Let's take a look at this clip.

TAPE IS BEING PLAYED.

DR. LANDY: OK. Angus, I have an interesting question for you. You might want to respond to this later, too. Do you remember when you were doing that on the stage, your scene?

ANGUS: Yes.

DR. LANDY: Do you have any memory of what was going through your mind at the time? Were you just wrestling to get the lines out or were there some feelings going on? Do you have any memory of that?

ANGUS: Well, I think it was just about as it was during the whole play. I knew my lines fairly well. Right before I went on I put myself in his place. How would I feel if I were Uncle Vanya? Then when I was doing that, I was acting as if it was something that had been going through my mind for a while, but it was really happening to me.

DR. LANDY: How could you put yourself in Uncle Vanya's place? How could you get to understand someone who you couldn't possibly . . . whose experiences are certainly many years away or perhaps never will be part of your own experiences?

ANGUS: Well, he . . . it was hard. Well, I was trying to put myself in his place and . . .

DR. LANDY: It's a tough question. It's a very, very tough question, but what I'm trying to get at is, when you are preparing for a role that seems so far away from your own experience, how do you do it? How do you make these people real people to you? Lisa?

LISA: Well, I just—well, you know, I don't think about myself at all. When we're rehearsing I'm just Sonia and when I'm not, it's me. I can't think about us both together.

DR. LANDY: How do you get to know Sonia; how do you get to know Vanya; how do you get to know who these people are as human beings?

ANGUS: Well, the thing is, usually when I was studying my lines with my mother, she would ask me, and when I was studying with Phillip, he would ask, "What do you think he is thinking now, and what do you feel about Uncle Vanya," and so I could, by answering them, I could get a certain picture of what he was like and then I tried to make myself into him while I was on stage.

DR. LANDY: Very interesting. Is the same thing happening with you, Lisa?

LISA: Yeah, we just spent a whole lot of time going over the play, and Phil just had this idea of, you know, how to get into your person and if you weren't acting like you meant it you just forget it, we're not going to do this. We start from the beginning again.

DR. LANDY: Could you talk a little about that Phil?

PHILLIP: As we were watching the tapes I remembered the struggle to get the kids past the point of embarrassment

and self-consciousness to express true feeling. I think a lot of times when drama is done with kids they have a way of giggling and acting like, "No, no, it's not happening to me; this is all a joke," and they want to tip-off the other kids in the audience that it's not so important and it's not real. I remember, for instance, a scene between Sonia and Mylan, you and Sonia and Elena, they are all confused in my mind. I remember how at first the two of you—the two girls didn't want to touch each other. They didn't want to embrace, and we kept going over that again and again. You know, this is a real friendship; this is a beginning of a friendship. You know, can we have a little tenderness in this scene instead of just joking tenderness. So I think that there was a real struggle to let sadness come in, to let real emotions come in. It really wasn't easy. We spent most of the time on the emotions and on the lines of the play. We didn't spend much time on, for instance, stage business or movement. Most of the movement you see, like Angus moving around the stage or Lisa and Mylan moving around the stage—these were things that they invented on the spur of the moment. They weren't diagrammed or anything.

DR. LANDY: Did you feel comfortable with that or did you want to be told exactly where to stand?

ANGUS: Well, he was giving us ideas on what he thought was good beforehand and we combined that with what we felt at the spur of the moment. Well, again it was sort of like we were in the character's place and we were moving as if they were.

DR. LANDY: So the feeling at the moment was pulling you from one place to the other. I want to know what kind of problems you encountered during this whole process. I'm talking about from the very beginning... understanding that you were in fact doing this through the process of rehearsing through the performance. Anybody?

LISA: There was a lot. A lot of Angus and Slim, who played Astrov. They didn't get around to memorizing their lines. Everyone would be yelling at them and whispering under their breath their lines. That was a month before the performance.

DR. LANDY: Do you think it's because the lines were Chekhov or classical, these difficult heavy lines, or would that have been the same with any play?

ANGUS: No, it's just that we were sort of lazy. We didn't want to take the time. We were too busy in doing other things. It would have been the same thing if we were doing the *Princess and the Pea* or whatever, or *Peter Pan*.

PHILLIP: But it is a full-length play, so every time they would master one act I'd say, "Okay, you've got Acts I and II and now you've got to go on to Act III." And they would want to stop at Act II.

ANGUS: Yeah, we'd want to stop at Act II and just wait for a while and then go on because we just finished that act and...

LISA: Now you have to do this whole other act.

ANGUS: It was sort of a feeling... first we had a feeling of accomplishment and then remembered there are two other acts.

DR. LANDY: So, line memorization was a problem. What were some of the other problems?

LISA: Well, we would feel frustrated because something wasn't going right. Phil yells a lot, so he would yell and we would get really angry and let all our frustration out on him and on each other.

ANGUS: And during the play...

DR. LANDY: Was any of that frustration coming from the fact that you were doing a difficult play, do you think?

ANGUS: Well, I think...

LISA: Not understanding what we were doing...

ANGUS: Yeah, a bit of that and we were a little bit angry with ourselves because we weren't sure of our lines, and Phil would get angry at us. Then we would feel even more angry at ourselves, and we would let it out and what was supposed to be a tender scene turned out to be an angry scene. But the thing is that we only did that in rehearsals, we didn't do that in the real thing.

DR. LANDY: OK. Are there other kinds of problems that you could think of? Phil, what kinds of problems did you have as a director?

PHILLIP: Well, it's funny to be told how angry I am, because when I was directing it I was not aware of being angry. I was very heated, you know, and to me there is a distinction between raising your voice and being angry. When you're working with ten or twelve kids and they're all talking at the same time you could sort of say, "Now, children, be quiet," and wait for forty minutes or you could say, "Shut up," so I admit saying "Shut up" a lot, and also trying to cut through the fastest possible way.

DR. LANDY: There's a problem that's peculiar to doing Chekhov. I keep going back to that same theme. Would this be the same with *West Side Story* or *The Princess and the Pea*?

PHILLIP: The problem with Chekhov... It would be the same, because when you get involved with a theatrical production all your manners go, and before you know it everyone is letting it all hang out. People are suddenly falling in love and getting mad and we had some real... I remember one actual physical fight between Ayesha and Jamal, but people get very emotionally wrought up. The part that was unique about doing Chekhov was that... you see, if you were doing something like *West Side Story* or a typical kid play you have a song and you have a few lines of dialogue and you have a song. You keep having this release, but the thing about Chekhov is that there is no release except in a very subtle way, so it's a problem for the actors and it's a problem for the audience. You don't have these sort of attention grabbing things. It's all subtle; it's all conversation.

DR. LANDY: Would you do Chekhov again; was it worth it?

ANGUS: Well, I think in the end it turned out to be great, but it was really hard along the way.

LISA: I'm glad that we did this, but if Phil is going to do *A Cherry Orchard* or *Three Sisters* I think it would be a stupid idea....

PHIL: I'm not going to, don't worry.

LISA: If he was going to do it, I wouldn't do it, I don't think.

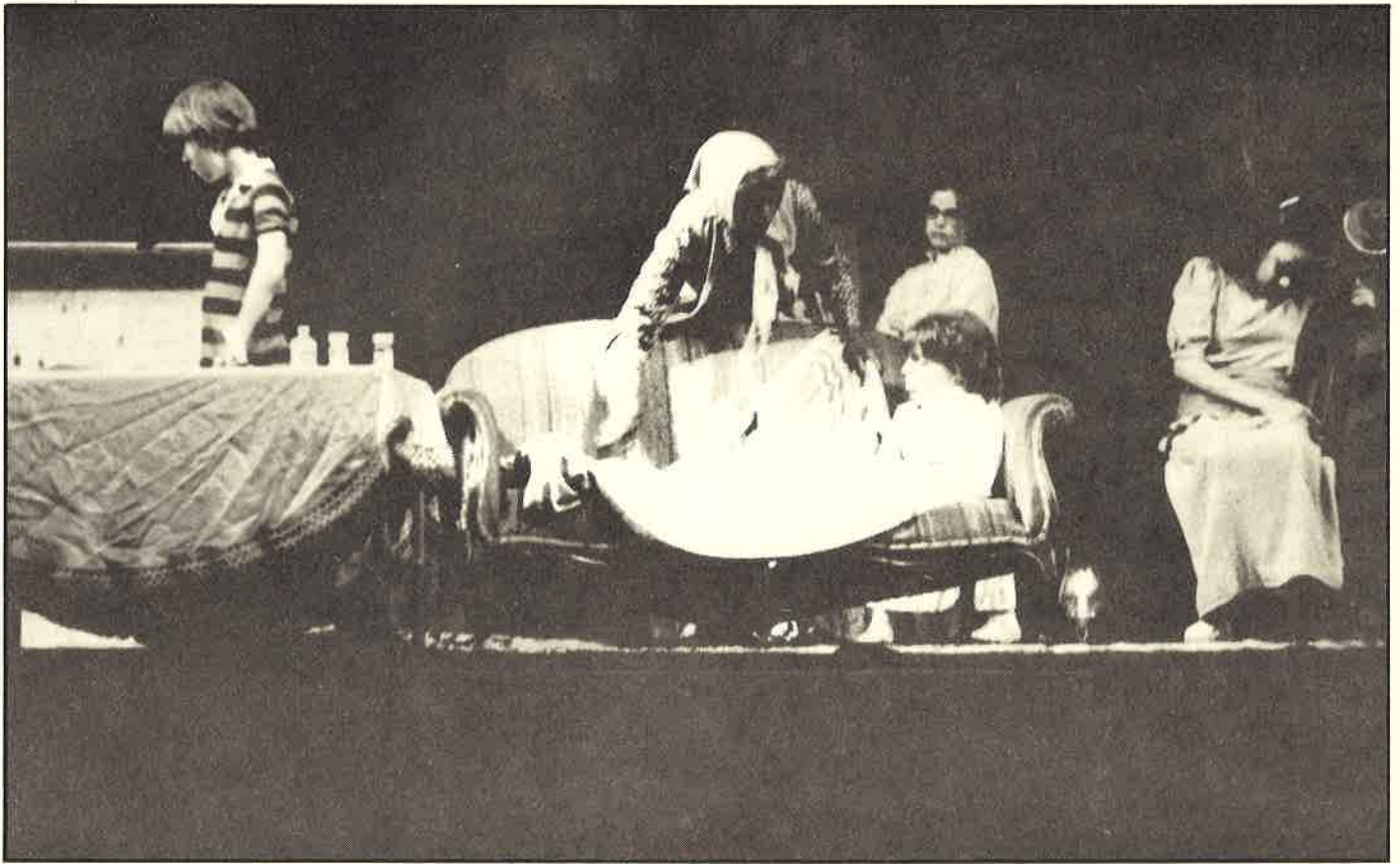
DR. LANDY: Why?

LISA: It's just, I mean once you've done it twice, it just wouldn't be the same thing.

PHILLIP: I feel the same way.

ANGUS: This was for most of us our first play and part of it was fun because it was our first time. Because it was hard, we really had a feeling of accomplishment.

DR. LANDY: I have to cut you off because we're running



"What's the matter, dear? Your legs are hurting? My legs are hurting too," Nurse Mariana (Ayesha Wilson) says while adjusting the Professor's blanket.

The Professor announces to the incredulous gathering his plan to sell the estate, Act III.



out of time. Next time we are going to be continuing with the discussion of *Uncle Vanya*. We'll see you then.

II

DR. LANDY: Could we begin our discussion today with putting the *Vanya* experience in context of the school that it was performed in, P.S. 75? Shouldn't a pre-secondary school drama curriculum be entirely creative drama? Informal drama? Drama used as a process for development? Joining us today to examine some of these issues is Mrs. Joan Johnston, a registered nurse, a student at City College in New York and a mother of three, and also Mr. Michael Tempel, a classroom teacher during the *Uncle Vanya* experience, who has during the past ten years taught elementary school and developed innovative curriculum and trained other teachers. Mrs. Johnston and Mr. Tempel, welcome. Joan and Michael. Michael, could you tell us a bit about the school itself?

MICHAEL: The school is on the West Side of Manhattan. A somewhat unusual, innovative school. We have a lot of outside experts coming in, particularly in the arts. So the idea of somebody coming in and doing a play like *Uncle Vanya* is not new in itself. Teachers & Writers Collaborative has been in the school for many years, and Phillip has done other projects of this sort. The idea of a project approach to learning is the usual in the school. Also, most of the classrooms in the school are organized in a fairly fluid way. We don't have a rigid set of subject periods, so something like this can be worked into a school day without too much trouble.

DR. LANDY: So do you think that this was a natural breeding ground for this kind of experiment—Chekhov with children?

MICHAEL: Absolutely. It's the ideal place if you are going to try something like this.

DR. LANDY: Let me ask you both about your expectations. When you first heard that *Uncle Vanya* was going to be performed by fifth- and sixth-graders, how did you feel about that?

JOAN: Well, I didn't have any expectations. I just took the whole thing with a pinch of salt, at least initially, until Angus came home and said, "I have to learn my lines." Then we started reading the play, and I was not very familiar with *Uncle Vanya*. I had seen it very many years ago, but it wasn't something that I knew very much about. Especially when we started reading it, I said, "My God, why are they doing this? This is all talking, there is no action."

DR. LANDY: What was your answer? Did you have an answer at that point?

JOAN: Well, I spoke to Phillip about it and he explained the way it happened; it had become a fact very gradually. I think probably that was the reason why it was successful, because if he had sat down and said, "Okay, we're going to do *Uncle Vanya* in three months," everybody would have completely...

DR. LANDY: So that was pretty crucial that you could speak to Phillip Lopate about this. In other words, if you were in another school situation where it was impossible to call up the director or the teacher, it might have been a different story.

JOAN: Yes, but it probably wouldn't have happened, as Michael says, in another situation.

DR. LANDY: OK. Michael, what were your expectations?

MICHAEL: Well my first reaction, when Phillip told me he wanted to do this, was that he was crazy. But it didn't seem a lot out of the ordinary, because we've done a lot of major projects and Phillip and I have been friends for quite a while. I figured it was something that he wanted to do and it made a lot of sense and I was perfectly willing to go along with it....

DR. LANDY: You mean by virtue of the fact that he wanted to do it and it was a challenge to him you thought he could pull it off?

MICHAEL: Yeah, my initial reaction for myself was that I wasn't too involved with it. I got much more involved as time went on.

DR. LANDY: Well, last time we took a look at two clips from the full taping of *Uncle Vanya* and thank goodness that's all preserved intact. The whole play has been videotaped. Today I'd like to show another clip. Which is really, as I remember, the last scene in the play, where Sonia and Vanya are left pretty much to their own devices. Why don't we now take a look at that last clip in the play *Uncle Vanya*.

TAPE IS BEING PLAYED.

DR. LANDY: OK, pretty heavy stuff. As I watch I see Lisa struggling with her lines, trying to get her lines out, and somehow I see the character Sonia struggling with the way to deal with *Uncle Vanya* in that last speech. Here we have suffering, death, afterlife. Are these appropriate themes to explore in a play for children?

JOAN: I think they are. I think it's much better to challenge them than to give them baby food or whatever you want to call it. I think that at least, that is with Angus, a lot of the themes that were in *Uncle Vanya* made him think about things and changed his ideas about things and certainly changed my perceptions of him, because he was able to struggle through it, and it was a struggle. I think it was a growth experience, too.

DR. LANDY: Would you say the experience of playing the role of *Uncle Vanya* affected his home life, affected his way of behaving at home or thinking, or did it change him in any way?

JOAN: I'm not sure it changed him very much. At least at the beginning, most of it was just learning the lines and as I said I was kind of playing it down, because I didn't want to make a big deal out of it and then find that it was going to be a total disaster. So I said, "OK, let's do the lines," but it was very low key, and then after I saw him on the stage I couldn't believe it was Angus. It was a very strange experience, because he's never shown any signs of acting ability or being interested in doing this kind of thing. He's not a particularly... He's very articulate and he's self-possessed, but not the type of child who tends to show off in the sense of going up and performing and so he gave me a totally new view of Angus. Probably in that respect it did change our relationship to a certain extent, but it was afterwards, not while it was happening.

DR. LANDY: OK. Michael, the same question. Do you feel these themes are appropriate for children to deal with?

MICHAEL: Yeah, I think the question is how much you



Costume supervisor, Joan Johnston, in the dressing room with Mylan (Elena).

can stretch children, how much you can challenge them. The only problem with it can be that it's so far beyond what they're familiar with. Then a connection isn't made. But I think for most of the children who were involved in this there were connections. They wouldn't have been able to do it if there weren't. The issue of learning lines . . . they didn't really learn the lines that well, they learned the characters, and this is the way Phillip directed it. There were two performances, one during the school day for a children's audience, and at that performance I was in the audience watching, and it seemed to go very smoothly. Only for some reason it was kind of short. It was about a half hour shorter than Phillip and I expected it would be. Couldn't figure it out. The evening performance I was in the midst of this craziness that was going on back stage, and I realized the reason it was about a half hour shorter was because whole sections were being dropped. The lines were just going all over the place. Now, they kept it going, they made the connections, they picked it up, so they were understanding what they were doing or that wouldn't have been possible. It was a big issue—learning lines, and I think that was a burden for a lot of the children. It was a lot of pressure to learn lines. I remember it especially a few weeks leading up to the day of the performance. I was giv-

ing them more and more classroom time to learn lines and also at home it was building, but that's not really what did this. It wasn't learning the lines; it was getting the characters. So it was an understanding of the themes, enough of an understanding to have gotten into it. So I think it did stretch them. I think it was very valuable because of that.

DR. LANDY: OK. And what about the audience? You mention that the first performance was to third- to sixth-graders. Now you were both back stage during that performance?

MICHAEL: No, we were both in the audience.

DR. LANDY: So, you were among the audience. What was the audience reaction like—I'm talking about the children's reaction?

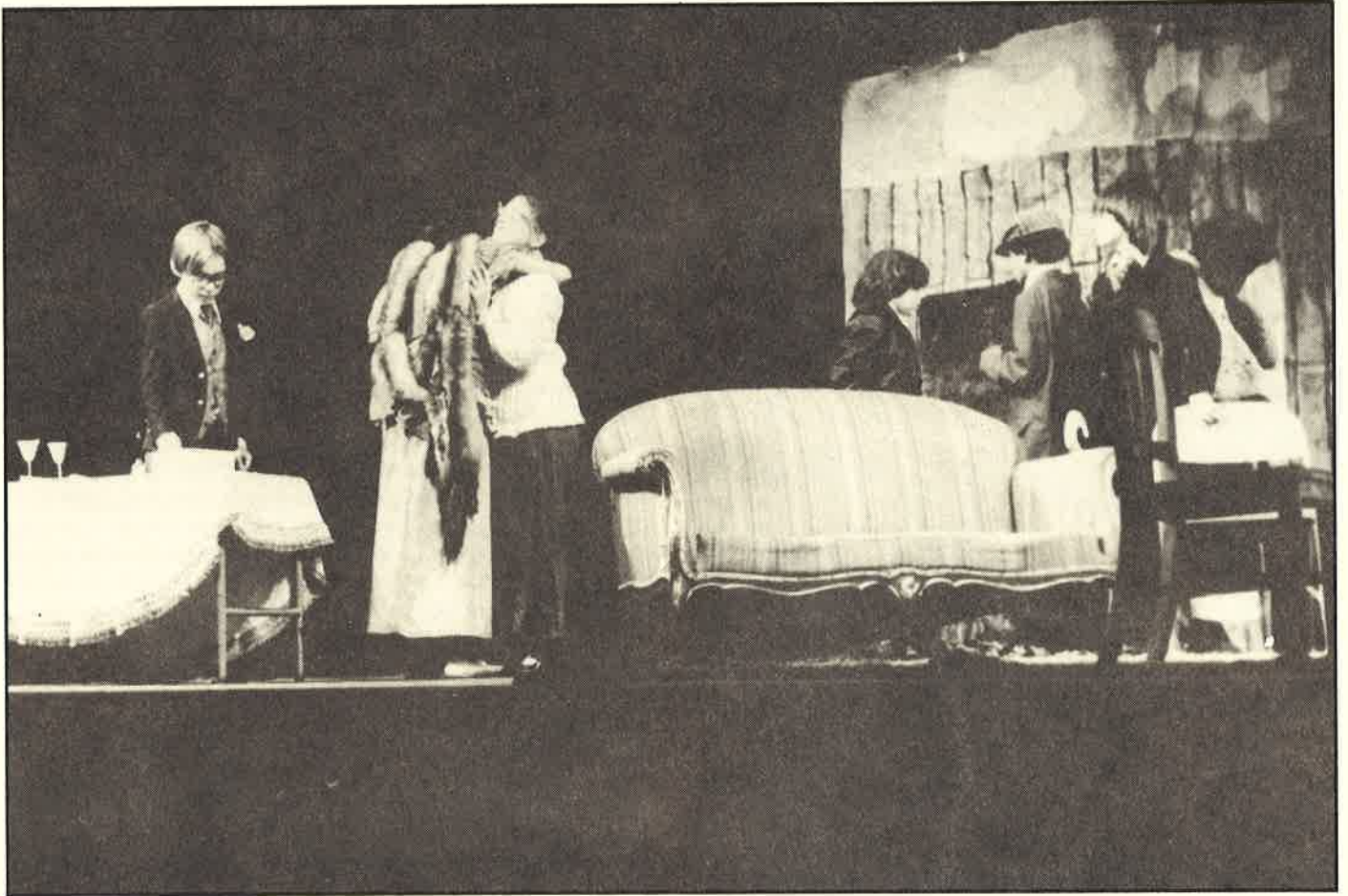
JOAN: It was very interesting. Mike and I discussed it and we couldn't figure out what had happened. The audience was extremely attentive, laughed, applauded and sighed in all the right places and we all felt that they couldn't possibly have understood more than a tenth of what was going on, yet there wasn't any fooling around. They really took it very seriously and we were theorizing that perhaps it was because it was in the theater rather than in the school auditorium.

DR. LANDY: Could you explain that? We haven't made that clear.

JOAN: Well, the school is on the upper West Side, as Michael said, and there is a theater, an ex-movie theater, called the Symphony Space which was made into a non-profit space where they put on plays, musical performances, poetry readings, dance, lots and lots of different things. Phillip had approached the guy that runs the Symphony Space and asked if he would be willing to have the performance there because he felt that the children in the play would . . . It would be much more of an event if it were in a proper theater. And, incidentally, the acoustics were much better and it felt much better. The kids from school had come up the block to the theater and gone and sat down in a proper theater rather than in the auditorium, and they really seemed to feel as though it was an occasion. It was just fascinating, because they were very young and most of them couldn't have understood much of what was going on.

DR. LANDY: Michael, do you see any other reasons why the children were so attentive? I've seen so many children's plays where the audience was practically climbing the walls.

MICHAEL: It was clear this was not your everyday children's play. I think that was clear even to third-graders. The fact of it being in the Symphony Space was key. That just raised the level for everybody. When the kids in the show found out they were going to do it there rather than in the school auditorium it completely changed the whole thing. It became much more of a major event, and for the audience, there they were in a theater. It was staged very well. It looked like a really professional job. Well, it was. And I think that made the difference to the audience and that was key to the confidence in the cast, because there was a lot of nervousness about that. So when we got to the evening performance it was interesting, because I think Phillip was more nervous about the evening performance, but the kids were already . . . they were coasting. They knew they had it. The main reaction I got after the first



The leavetaking scene, Act IV. From left to right: Vanya (Angus Johnston), Elena (Mylan Dennerstein), Sonya (Lisa Cowan), the Professor (David Mager), Waffles (Jamal Mitchell), Dr. Astrov (Slim Pritchett), Mama (Kioka Henderson).

performance from the cast was, “We did it—we pulled it off.” It was that kind of feeling. Very high risk operation—the whole thing.

DR. LANDY: OK, could you talk about . . . could you explore that a little bit?

MICHAEL: Yeah, it’s not what you usually get in school, which is a very controlled situation, risks are controlled. Part of it has to do with segmenting things. You don’t get into something that has a payoff. You know, after three months of hard work you have a payoff in a matter of a few hours. But a lot of things in life are like that. And the risks, well, obviously it could have flopped; they could have fallen apart.

DR. LANDY: What does it mean . . . what would it mean had it flopped, what does it mean to flop in this project?

MICHAEL: I don’t know. I don’t know. I’ve never gone through one of these that has flopped. I haven’t gone through one that succeeded other than this one, so I don’t know. I could speculate. It could have been really devastating, but I’m not sure. It would have been a major experience with failure. What that means, how that would have been dealt with, I don’t know.

JOAN: I think one of the things that was noticeable in the clip was, maybe you didn’t notice it, but I did, was that Lisa was fumbling a little bit and other people were feeding her her lines. It was very much a group effort and that happened more than once that somebody made a mistake or missed some lines or did something a little bit wrong and

either they would recover and finesse it or somebody else would, and there weren’t any really acute large spaces or obvious strained periods. It was very interesting the way that happened.

MICHAEL: There was tremendous mutual support going on while it was happening. It was really something to watch.

DR. LANDY: I wonder how much, the fact that it was *Vanya* and Chekhov contributed to this group feeling, this group cohesiveness. Could it have been there if it were the *Princess and the Pea*? What did *Vanya* have to do with this?

JOAN: I think the fact that it was *Vanya* made them take it a lot more seriously. I think there would have been a lot more fooling around if they had been doing a “children’s play.” This was something really heavy and very serious, and I think they realized, even though they may not have articulated it very well to themselves, that there was this possibility of failure, and so they just took it very seriously.

DR. LANDY: If you were given a choice—I mean this is hard to put yourself back in the past—but if you were given a choice whether your son or your student should be playing in *Alice in Wonderland* or *Jack and the Bean Stalk* or *Uncle Vanya* for the next three months, four months, or five months of his life, what would your choice have been? It’s a very hypothetical question, but I’m curious to know. We’re talking about the people who are watching us, going through in their minds, should I ever get involved in this

kind of project, is it worth it for me in my situation, or should I really make a more safe choice?

JOAN: Well, Angus really got involved mostly because Phillip asked him to. He didn't come and say, "I want to be in *Uncle Vanya*," as far as I gather.

MICHAEL: The process of selecting a cast is very interesting. You can't really take volunteers if you think about it. Who wants to be in *Uncle Vanya*? Who knows what it is? How do you know whether you want to be in it? So it really was a matter of Phillip and I kind of deciding who we thought would be good for it and seeing who was interested in being part of a play, so it was a combination. It wasn't that much on a voluntary basis and it really couldn't be. Which raises questions also: how much were these kids trying to do something that they didn't really know was happening? We did have situations where we felt, with one boy, that he was under a lot of pressure and should be given a chance to get out, which he didn't take and I'm sure he was glad in the end.

DR. LANDY: Were there social implications to that? Could you talk about the social implications of this project for the class?

MICHAEL: That was a big issue for me because my involvement in the actual production was minimal. It didn't just happen. It grew to where in the last couple of weeks I was very heavily involved. This is normal with the way I work and the way I've worked with Phillip on other things. He takes the group and he works with it. A couple of times a week I just allot the time. The rest of the class is doing something else. This is about a third of the class that is involved. The first issue is that we have two groups then. We have those who are doing it and those who are not. At first that's not too important because the play wasn't too important. As it grows, and again the turning point is when it's the Symphony Space and not the school auditorium. Then the issue is a lot heavier. We have a group that is involved in something major and the rest of the class that's not. OK, it presents a serious division in the class and who created that division? Well, Phillip and I created it. Not a good situation. With the standard school plays you have parts for everybody. OK, we could have had people play rocks and trees, but that's fake and everybody knows it. OK, towards the end we had some real necessity for involving everybody else, which was scenery, lighting and so on, so it worked out and it did become a class involvement, but not everybody together on an equal level, but in most things that's the case anyway. It's just not as explicit. There were those who were most involved, the cast, and those who were less involved, but still it became a major thing to the whole class, so again, socially it worked out well. I don't see that as a serious problem in undertaking it. I think the only second guessing I do on it is that this should have been anticipated, but OK, it couldn't have been anticipated. For next time, if there is a next time for anybody who wants to do it, that has to be taken into account.

DR. LANDY: Would you encourage other teachers to do it? Would you encourage other mothers to do it?

MICHAEL: I wouldn't encourage a teacher to do it without someone like Phillip to do it. See, that's the other thing with the standard class play—it has to be fairly non-demanding if you are also expected to do everything else. The time involved, especially towards the end, it's just too

much. Another question with this is, how does it fit into the rest of the classroom curriculum?

DR. LANDY: OK, I'm glad you brought that up.

MICHAEL: Well, it doesn't. Not very well. Again, it has to do with the way I run my classroom, which is not definitely divided into subjects but to have an overall theme or themes which deal with all subjects. Things are not a subject—they're whatever they are, which brings in various disciplines, and something like this could be part of a larger theme but it's not the easiest thing to work in. Turn-of-the-Century Russia is not a big thing in elementary curriculum. Now it could be done. What should be done is instead of this being in isolation it should be connected to a history, to a social context, to a level of technology, to a whole group of other areas that it relates to and that would increase the children's understanding of what they are doing. Now, that wasn't done. Two reasons—one was that this came up in the middle of the year when I was already heavily into other projects and it was just a matter of time accommodation. I just couldn't shift over that easily. And the other is, it's a hard one to do. Had it been Greek tragedy, that would have been an easy one because ancient Mediterranean civilization is a big number for school curriculum and possibly for good reason. For whatever reason it's easier to draw it in. It's part of the kids' experience. This was very much removed from the experiences that they are used to. All right, again, that could have been planned for, and it can be planned for. You don't necessarily choose Chekhov, maybe you do choose Greek tragedy. It's a challenge to go beyond what you usually do in school.

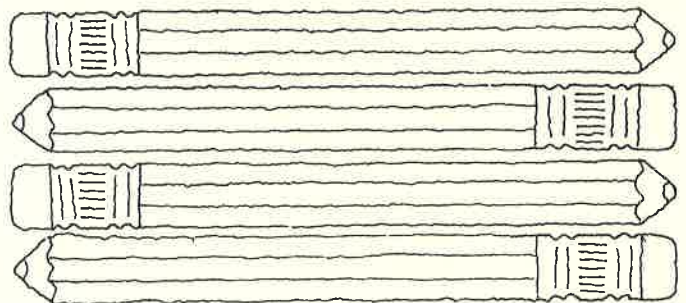
DR. LANDY: Should children perform in theater to an audience? I'm talking about elementary school children. Joan, should children perform in plays? Should they be actors in plays? I call this drama as a product.

JOAN: I think that this type of thing is preferable to the regular children's theater. I think that they're involved in the play in a very different way than when they are up on the stage doing their little number in a class play where, as you say, thirty-two kids are all in the play. I would rather have my child in something like this because I think it's a much better experience. I don't want him to go on the stage or be a movie actor or anything, but I think that this type of thing has a potential for being much more a growth experience than the regular children's theater.

DR. LANDY: Michael, in twenty seconds or less, the same question.

MICHAEL: I agree with that. The other alternative is drama that comes out of children's own writing and experience, which I think is also very valuable, but given the choice between the usual low level school play and something like this—absolutely something like this.

DR. LANDY: Thank you very very much for being with us.



The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 4, 1979

About Education An Experiment In 'Activism'

by FRED M. HECHINGER

"This is—for me—a book about 'activists,' not Mark Rudd-type activists, nor Ralph Nader types, but people who wanted to do something and, though not without discomfort, did it. Are still doing it."

This is how Phillip Lopate, a poet and novelist, describes the book, "Journal of a Living Experiment: A Documentary History of the First 10 Years of Teachers and Writers Collaborative," which he has edited. (Teachers & Writers; 349 pages; \$6; obtainable at 84 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10011.) These activists wanted to rescue the English curriculum and its students, whose creativity, the writers felt, was being choked off by pedagogical stagnation. Later, they were joined by artists inspired by the writers' success.

Now, Teachers and Writers Collaborative is sending its members into New York City public schools to develop long-term projects with students and regular classroom teachers. Through its publications and films, T. & W. has encouraged other writers, artists and teachers to follow their inspired, if often erratic, search. The experiment has enlisted dozens of writers and artists, famous and unknown. The roster includes Muriel Rukeyser, Anne Sexton, Kenneth Koch, Herbert Kohl and Benjamin DeMott. The pioneering T. & W. project at Public School 75 on Manhattan's upper West Side, which Mr. Lopate coordinates, has become a model for schools across the country. Ultimately, it became the model for the Artists-in-the-Schools project which, with Federal and state subsidies, now operates in all 50 states.

The idea was born in the mid-60's during a series of academic discussions, the first at Tufts University. The original seminar was headed by Jerrold Zacharias, the M.I.T. physicist who had become deeply involved in high school teaching reforms. Later, it was joined by others impatient with the status quo, such as Charles Muscatine, the English professor who had rescued Berkeley's curriculum after the great rebellion of 1954.

Much of the initial Government support for the idea came out of the executive offices of Lyndon B. Johnson's White House, where a group of free-wheeling reformers, such as Professor Zacharias, were working in the Office of Science and Technology. Teachers and Writers Collaborative was established in 1967 under a grant from the Office of Education. The linguistic gyrations necessary to get the money tormented the writers' souls. Mr. Lopate still shudders as he recalls the official description: "These activities—writing, reading and talking—are interrelated and interdependent." Never-

theless, the project was born.

The first years were exciting, stormy, frustrating and instructive. After a few weeks in her public school class, Anne Sexton recorded in her diary: "It was the most exciting experience of my life. Everyone was in it together, even Bob Ireland." Other teachers had told her that Bob Ireland had never spoken in class before. A few days later, he handed in three poems that were described as "quite touching."

Predictably, the writers, many of whom were themselves alienated from the schools as well as society, disagreed over standards and goals. Sympathy for black children occasionally degenerated into what Mr. Lopate calls "overvaluation" and a blind acceptance of street language as equal to standard English. June Jordan, a poet, did battle for a different approach. "Will I accept that a black child can write 'creatively' and 'honestly' and yet not write about incest, filth, violence and degradation of every sort?" she asked her colleagues. And she answered: "Yes, there are black children who will insist on becoming not merely 'great black writers,' but great writers who are black the way Shakespeare was an Englishman. I think Deborah may be one of these children."

Deborah, aged 12 and black, had written a poem about her dreams of travel that began:

I would like to go

Where the golden apples grow

It ended:

And when all these places I shall see

I will return home back to thee

Despite such individual triumphs, the experiment threatened to collapse after its first five years. Many writers were consumed by a sense of failure. Not all students responded; some were hostile and disruptive. Administrators feared that "obscene" language and disrespectful expressions in classroom-produced magazines might get them in trouble with the authorities. Teachers often turned hostile, feeling that these privileged Pied Pipers were stealing the children's affection. "Quite often," Mr. Lopate concedes, "close writer-student friendships seemed to be built on the backs of the classroom teacher." In the ideology of the turbulent 1960's some writers had come to do battle against "the enemy"—the school establishment, including its teachers who, however imperfectly, still had to carry the school's day-to-day burdens, while those talented, opinionated, condescending intruders would briefly stay only to move on to other causes. One teacher accused a writer of "ripping off" her students by merely collecting material for an article that later appeared in a national magazine.

The turning point, according to Mr. Lopate, came in 1971. The era of confrontation and of radical dilettantism had run its course. "The real change in attitude came about," Mr. Lopate recalls, "when writers decided to work

in the same school, year after year—to become, in effect, a recognized part of one educational community. It meant a transformation of roles from short-term glamorous visitor to artist-in-residence."

A vital lesson had been learned about the nature of schools as institutions and teachers as the indispensable work force. The institution may be flawed and many teachers fall far short of the ideal, but institutions and staffs cannot be changed or even helped by "saviors" who drop in for a while with halos, or anti-Establishment rhetoric.

The discovery that saved T. & W. was the need for team work, for stress on the *Collaborative* of the title. The P.S. 75 Writing Team, which soon was to consist of three writers and a filmmaker, became the demonstration project. Team members considered themselves co-teachers with the regulars and became involved in "the problems and crises the school faced—budget cuts, vandalisms, district pressures." The results are impressive. They include a regular literary magazine, "The Spicy Meatball," as well as "The 75 Press"; a History of Film course; student-made motion pictures; a Comic Book Club where children produce their own books, and most recently a home-built radio station where children learn to announce, engineer, write and edit radio dramas.

The team model has spread to other schools in Harlem, Brooklyn and the Bronx. Part of its success, probably the reason it survived when so many other brave or grandiloquent experiments of the 60's foundered and disappeared, stems from its readiness to criticize itself. Mr. Lopate's chronicle tells as much about the follies and false starts as about the ultimate success.

"The irony of Teachers and Writers Collaborative is that it started as a lone, counter-Establishment operation and in a matter of several years found itself marching in a crowd. This national Artists-in-the-Schools program now includes dancers, writers, filmmakers, musicians, painters, craftspeople, environmental artists, etc., in all 50 states."

These programs are still subject to attacks and criticism to which Mr. Lopate gives ample space. He, too, wishes that more of the writers and artists took the trouble to study some of the more mundane skills such as classroom management and child development, to read some Dewey or Piaget, and relied less on the "Divine Idiot" theory than on long-term commitment. Still, he is "a passionate partisan" of the force that has been unleashed by those tentative discussions more than a decade ago. "Now," he says, "we know a bit more than we did at the start. Now we have to try to learn what it is we know."

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Jeff Wright's new book of poetry is entitled *Charges*, Remember I Did It for You Press.

PLUGS

Ken, Steve and Lindy Laitin (ages 16, 14 and 11) share their enthusiasm for and knowledge of soccer with beginning players in the first major sports book written by children for children. Addressed to both girls and boys, ages 7 through 14 (and their teachers and parents), their clearly written and attractively illustrated book covers a wide range of problems faced by all young players.

THE WORLD'S #1 BEST SELLING SOCCER BOOK (122 pages, soft cover, 50 black and white photographs, 125 illustrations) is published by Soccer for Americans, Box 836, Manhattan Beach, CA 90266. It is available by mail for \$5.95 plus 75¢ postage and handling. The publisher will make quantity discounts available to schools and organizations.

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studying any discipline. This book presents teaching modes which challenge the social limits of thought and action. \$5.50 paper, \$12.50 cloth. Available from South End Press, Box 68, Astor Station, Boston, MA 02132.

GROWING WITHOUT SCHOOLING. A bi-monthly magazine, edited by John Holt. An exchange between people who have taken or would like to take their kids out of school. What to do instead; shared ideas and experiences; legal information; a directory (by state) of "unschoolers"; many other helpful ideas and resources. All subscriptions begin with Issue #1 unless you indicate otherwise. Issues 1-11 are already in print. Price of a single issue is \$2.00. Subscription: \$10 for 6 issues, \$18 for 12 issues, or \$24 for 18 issues. Write to: Holt Associates, Inc., 308 Boylston Street, Boston, MA 02116.

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Teachers & Writers Collaborative

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A DAY DREAM I HAD AT NIGHT (120 pages) is a collection of oral literature from children who were not learning to read well or write competently or feel any real sense of satisfaction in school. The author, Roger Landrum, working in collaboration with two elementary school teachers, made class readers out of the children's own work.

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JOURNAL OF A LIVING EXPERIMENT: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY OF THE FIRST TEN YEARS OF TEACHERS AND WRITERS COLLABORATIVE edited by Phillip Lopate (358 pages). This new book traces the development of T&W from the turbulent Sixties into the Seventies with humor and poignancy. Herb Kohn, Anne Sexton, June Jordan, Kenneth Koch, and Muriel Rukeyser are only some of the people who talk about their dual identities as artists and teachers. This is a book about activists—then and now.

BEING WITH CHILDREN, a book by Phillip Lopate, whose articles have appeared regularly in our magazine, is based on his work as project coordinator for Teachers & Writers Collaborative at P.S. 75 in Manhattan. Herb Kohl writes: "There is no other book that I know that combines the personal and the practical so well..." *Being With Children* is published by Doubleday at \$7.95. It is available through Teachers & Writers Collaborative for \$4.00.

VERMONT DIARY (180 pages) by Marvin Hoffman. A description of an attempt to set up a writing center within a rural elementary school. The book covers a two year period during which the author and several other teachers endeavor to build a unified curriculum based on a language arts approach.

THE POETRY CONNECTION by Nina Nyhart and Kinereth Gensler (216 pages). This is a collection of adult and children's poetry with strategies to get students writing, an invaluable aid in the planning and execution of any poetry lesson.

TEACHERS & WRITERS Magazine, issued three times a year, draws together the experience and ideas of the writers and other artists who conduct T & W workshops in schools and community groups. A typical issue contains excerpts from the detailed work diaries and articles of the artists, along with the works of the students and outside contributions.

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