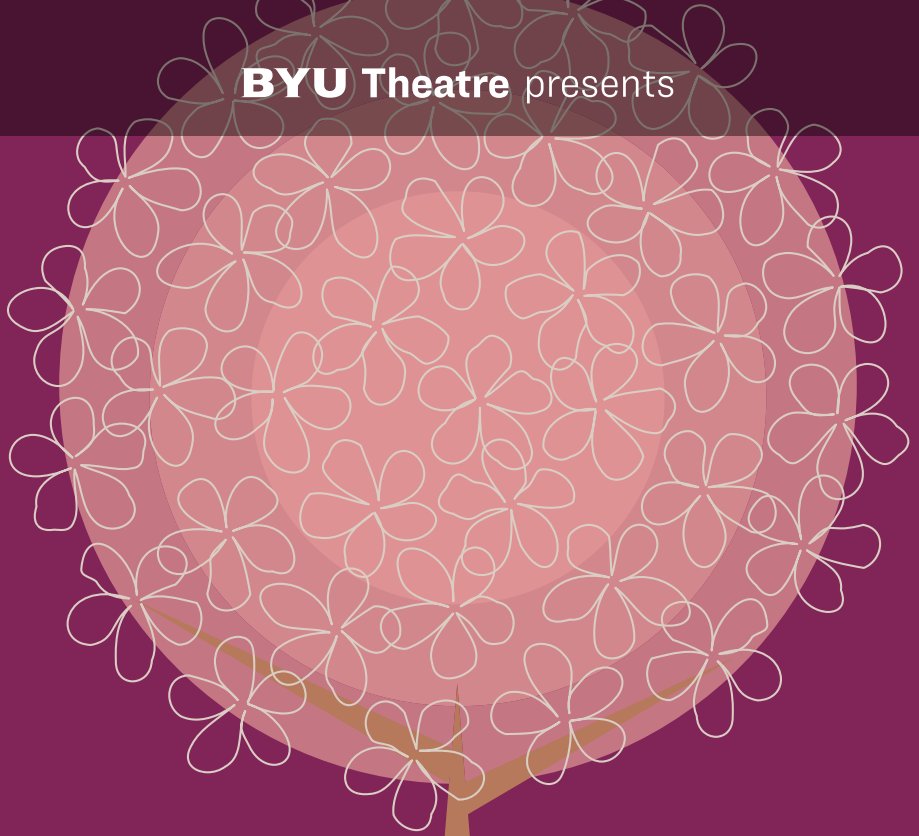


BYU Theatre presents



АНТОН ЧЕКHOV'S

THE

CHERRY

ORCHARD

MARCH 28–APRIL 12, 2025 | WEST CAMPUS STUDIO THEATRE

THE CHERRY ORCHARD BY ANTON CHEKHOV • DIRECTED BY ADAM HOUGHTON




“HOW THINGS ARE”: THE WEIGHT OF WAITING IN *THE CHERRY ORCHARD*

BY SHELLEY GRAHAM, DRAMATURG

Near the end of his life, Anton Chekhov, who had suffered from tuberculosis and depression throughout his life, decided to move to the seaside town of Yalta in order to heal.

On January 18, 1903, he wrote to his wife, the actress Olga Knipper, “I’m writing *The Cherry Orchard* very slowly. Sometimes I feel it’s a success, sometimes a failure...It’s all very ordinary, but that’s how things are, unfortunately.” And just ten days later, he would write to her, “I’m writing...a line at a time. Every day I feel like a dead man who has no strength to get up.” Chekhov’s personal struggles with a relentless illness had likely deepened his understanding of what it means to wait and suffer. Set against the backdrop of the social upheaval of late 19th-century Russia, the characters of his play grapple with suffering in different ways—with hope, denial, or resignation—as they await the sale of their beloved family estate.

“I keep on waiting for something to happen, as if the house is going to collapse over our heads,” Lyubov says in act 2. She embodies the fading Russian aristocracy, waiting in denial and overwhelmed by nostalgia. She and her brother Leonid dream of a miraculous rescue, such as a sudden inheritance, even as the realities of the estate’s inviability loom. Leonid says, “If only we could inherit a fortune from somebody...If only my aunt, the Countess would give us the money. My aunt’s very, very rich” (act 2). Like Chekhov, who continued to write and work even as his health declined, Lyubov clings to a hope for rescue.



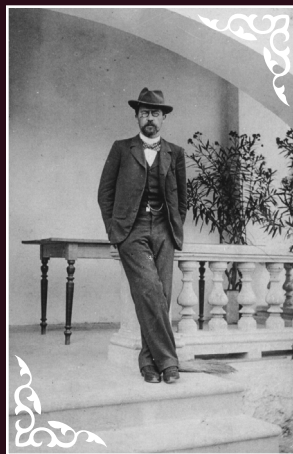
Chekhov’s home in the Yalta district in Crimea where he spent his final years writing and battling illness.

(PUBLIC DOMAIN)

Yet, where Chekhov's writing was an active engagement with life despite his illness, Lyubov's denial keeps her rooted in the past, unable to act in the present.

In stark contrast, Alexander, the self-made merchant, waits for opportunity and change with urgency and pragmatism. Alexander eagerly anticipates the chance to purchase the estate and transform it into a profitable venture. His proactive approach to waiting is rewarded, he thinks, when in act 3 he declares with jubilation, "I bought it! Wait, just a minute, please, my head's spinning. I can't talk..." However, despite his financial success, Alexander's waiting is fraught with an underlying yearning for validation. His triumph in buying the estate does not bring that acceptance, and the family turns away, leaving him isolated and emotionally unfulfilled. Unlike Chekhov, who seemed to approach his illness with quiet acceptance, Alexander's waiting is driven by urgency and a determination to control his fate.

Shortly after finishing the play, Chekhov wrote again to Olga: "I am waiting impatiently for you to play [Lyubov] Ranevskaya. I can already see you on stage, in the garden, by the cherry orchard, and I am filled with joy. It will be a success, because you are my Ranevskaya, and you are made for this role." The play opened at the Moscow Art Theatre in January 1904, in part as a birthday surprise for Chekhov, who had left Yalta at Olga's request to see the final rehearsals. He was nearly too ill to attend the opening, and only made it to the final act. He would pass away just a few months later. But he did see Olga onstage as Lyubov, as he had envisioned; her portrayal was well received and became one of the most iconic interpretations of the role. The writer and his characters, awaiting change, would suffer through both the struggles and the fleeting joys of an uncertain future.



Anton Chekhov outside his home in Yalta, circa 1900.

(STATE CENTRAL LITERARY MUSEUM, MOSCOW)



Olga Knipper as Lyubov Ranevskaya in the Moscow Art Theatre production of The Cherry Orchard, 1904.

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