

THE THREE SISTERS IN FRENCH AND RUSSIAN (Théâtre de l'Enfumeraie and Teatr Tembr)

The stage is small, its floor and walls covered in white cloth. To the right, close to the edge of the stage, stands a half-size grand piano and a chair. Behind the piano, ten white columns in the style of classical Greek architecture are spaced out evenly in a semi-circle, leaving room between them and the back wall for movement. As the spectators settle in for the performance, a man dressed in early twentieth-century costume comes in and plays the piano, his sounds - many of them discords - becoming increasingly urgent. His tones echo Scriabin, Rachmaninov, Debussy, Satie and Ravel, but are not the music of any of them.

This is the setting of the first two Acts of *The Three Sisters* directed by Nika Kossenkova and Pascal Larue in May 1993. In the last two Acts, there are twelve columns grouped diagonally to the audience in rows of two and three. The piano now stands at the back of the stage, but does not close up the space leading to the back wall that had been left open at the beginning. The music played and sung throughout the performance was composed by Svetlana Golybina, a concert pianist, who plays the piano in the scene changes between Acts II and III and contributes by her special skills to the profoundly musical quality of the production as a whole.

The production was performed by Teatr Tembr, founded by Kossenkova in Moscow in 1987, and the Théâtre de l'Enfumeraie, which is based in Allonnes, near Le Mans. Kossenkova started out as an actress, playing in Tashkent and Magadan, the Siberian town where Stalin had built a number of particularly infamous concentration camps. In Moscow, she was a driving force of the experimental "studio theatre" movement, including in her repertoire Ludmila Petrushevskaya's *A Suitcase Full of Trivia* and her "monoperformance" rendition of Marina Tsvetayeva's play, *Phoenix*. Both plays by these controversial women, each one haunted, in her own way, by the history of her period and generation, were staged by Kossenkova for the very first time. For twenty-five years and more, Kossenkova has

created, developed and taught her own voice-training method.

The Théâtre de l'Enfumeraiie has been working as a closely-knit group for the past ten years. It essentially grew out of performances mounted by Larue as part of a campaign organized by Arianne Mnouchkine and supported by theatre workers across the board to free Vaclav Havel from prison. The group has been particularly interested in contemporary pieces, notably by Brecht, Le Clezio and Genet. Larue was a pupil of Jacques Lecoq whose principles regarding expression through the human body have deeply influenced his approach to the theatre. This explains why Kossenkova sees her collaboration with Larue as the meeting (in her words, "marriage") of movement and voice.¹ *The Three Sisters* is their first production together.

Moreover, the production is their first attempt at combining two languages. Thus Olga, Natasha, Andrei, Vershinin, Soliony, Chebutikin and Ferapont, who doubles as Fedotik, speak French. Irina, Masha, Anfisa, Kuligin and Tusenbach, who doubles as Rodé, speak Russian. The actors never switch languages, although key sentences delivered in Russian are occasionally repeated in French for reasons that will be discussed shortly.

The few phrases that appear in Chekhov in French to mark not only the social status of the characters but also their genuine accomplishments are delivered in the production in English. Apart from eliminating the difficulty posed by using French for special resonance and meaning, as Chekhov intended, in a production *played* in French, the phrases delivered in English illustrate Andrei's contention that, between them, his sisters speak English, French, German and Italian, as well as their native Russian.

Andrei's gentle, wistful remark on the "useless knowledge" their General father had given them is framed by the production so as to indicate that their being cultivated neither can nor should be dismissed. The three sisters, Andrei and the officers who come to their home certainly belong to a privileged caste. But together they represent the Enlightenment values of critical reason, productive knowledge, social justice and personal ethics, as well as the Renaissance ones of individual liberty, honour and dignity. Soliony continually quotes Lermontov in whom, arguably, all the European currents relative to early nineteenth-century Russia meet. And references to Voltaire and Shakespeare, which are enunciated very clearly by the actors as if to draw attention to their significance, show that the production positively evaluates the knowledge and culture, whether of languages, literature, philosophy or music, of its protagonists.

Language, then, for the production, is not merely a matter of grammatical and syntactic combinations. Nor is voice, for Kossenkova, a

matter of diction pure and simple. Let us put it this way: what Kossenkova highlights throughout the production is the idea to be found off stage, in the works of Mikhail Bakhtin, that language is, above all, a matter of utterances uttered by speakers whose particular “accents” (values, emotions, world view, position in society and vantage point from which action springs) are invested in their utterances.² Speakers and speech, in other words, are inseparable; and they are inseparable from the situation which defines what kind of speech is uttered.

This axiom allows Kossenkova to develop her work on voice for the production. When the actors speak, sing, or hum, or produce whatever sound is necessary for an action, they do not simply produce sounds with their mouth (diction). They draw on the resources stored in their entire being. The being summoned up in the sound emitted by a performer has a whole cultural history that is embedded in her or his individual make-up or psyche. Consequently, voice, as Kossenkova understands it, coordinates actor, character, the context of the play, and the social contexts of the play and the performers (besides demonstrating certain technical and aesthetic achievements without which the coordination at issue would not be possible). This, at least, is how I interpret Kossenkova’s work.

The way that voice *is* utterance and everything - socially, culturally and psychologically speaking - that an utterance conveys, helps explain why an utterance pronounced in a foreign tongue (foreign, that is, to the character who is speaking) does not appear artificial. Thus Masha, for example, when she speaks in English, “inhabits”, as Bakhtin would say, her utterances. Yet her capacity for inhabiting language which, Bakhtin argues, is the very condition of language itself (because language is always the utterance of someone and, therefore, of *their* voice), is predicated, in Chekhov, on the learning and culture of Masha’s milieu. Masha inhabits her milieu. This means that when she speaks in a foreign language (at other points she speaks in French), she conjures up all the ambiguities, tensions and social contradictions - elegance and cultivation in some quarters, vulgarity, ignorance and opportunism in others, poverty and other forms of disadvantage elsewhere - that exist in the Russia of her time and penetrate the sisters’ household.

The character who crystallizes this situation is Natasha who, in Act II, is already the mistress of the house and about to evict the sisters from it by sheer power of coercion. She is also about to become Protopopov’s mistress. When, in Act III, Masha turns in fury on her heel towards the audience and, referring to Natasha, spits out “*sale petite bourgeoisie*”, the clash between two types of society and culture could not be more obvious.

Masha's sudden switch from Russian into French shows in a flash the great pain she had accumulated, and had been hiding, on her brother's and sisters' behalf, as well as her own. Masha, Olga and Irina stand for civilization which, although peopled by the Voltaires of history, is incomplete unless it encompasses kindness and consideration towards others, whatever their social rank.

This notion of civilization seems to underpin the scenes between the sisters and Anfisa, for example, which, if a little awkwardly played, are clearly meant to be portraits of mutual respect and warmth. Where the sisters envelop Anfisa in their solicitude, Natasha stumbles over her (Anfisa sits on the floor instead of on a chair) without bothering to see who or what obstructed her path. Along with Protopopov, she stands for a new order run by self-interested pragmatists. Natasha, after all, is an efficient manager of people and property. Protopopov is a successful small-time bureaucrat.

The sociopolitical implications of the Natasha-Protopopov couple are suggested by the production rather than projected explicitly, Kossenkova and Larue preferring, it seems, an ambivalent view of what this duo might be carrying into the future. However, the directors openly highlight the humanistic perspective that guides, like a compass, the three sisters' deeds and words. The directors also bring into full view the humanism embodied, albeit differently in each case, by Andrei, Vershinin, Soliony, Tusenbach and Chebutikin. The humanistic world view, which filters through these characters and, through them, fills the production drop by drop, modifies Andrei's "useless knowledge". Instead of being merely a humorous or flippant epithet, Andrei's phrase underscores the burning desire and struggle of all the characters cited above - the three sisters being in the vanguard of this struggle - to make their knowledge *useful*.

The links made by the production between civilization, humanism and productive work (connections not altogether unlike those of the "narodnik" - populist - ideology that motivated sectors of the progressive intelligentsia during Chekhov's lifetime) explain why talk of work, which rings right through Chekhov's text, resounds in the actors' voices, their words on work bouncing back and forth between them like notes caught up and sung in different timbres in a choir. Here, too, Kossenkova's attention to the quality of sound is crucial to the kind of meaning that sound is supposed to communicate.

Precision as to the meaning they were looking for prompted Kossenkova and Larue to reject translations that gave "superfluous" rather than "useless", both of them arguing, correctly, that the latter term captured more accurately what Chekhov's Russian wished to say. They finally

settled for Elsa Triolet's translation of 1954 on the grounds that it was the closest one to Chekhov and the one that best suited their own purposes. Adjustments to Triolet's translation were made here and there according to the demands of performance.

These remarks indicate how foreign speech accentuates the importance of voice-utterance to the production. However, its voice-utterances are principally in mother tongues: French for one group of performers, and Russian for the other. Which raises the question of how such problems as gimmickry, artificiality, clumsiness, and many more that are incipient in a bilingual enterprise of this kind, are overcome in performance.

Needless to say, work like this requires a long preparatory process. It also has to rely on what might be called "reciprocal tuning-in" - linguistically, emotionally, psychologically and in terms of life-style, habits, cultural baggage, and so on. Communication between performers in a common language and, through it, to an audience can be difficult enough at the best of times. Doing it through two languages, where neither party is fully conversant with the language of the other, might well seem too difficult by far.

The co-directors began to tackle this potential nightmare by having the actors learn from each other's working principles. Larue invited Kossenkova to give a series of workshops to the Théâtre de l'Enfumeriae on how to produce and sustain sound from multiple sources (for instance, from the toes, the top of the head, an elbow). Her method may be described, perhaps not altogether adequately, as the production of infinite variations on tone, nuance and timbre (hence her company's name), which are produced through the vibration of any given part of the human body. This means that the body resonates exactly like a stringed instrument. Kossenkova's method, apart from nurturing powers of vocal expression, as well as releasing a wide range of expressive capabilities through the body into the voice, aims to give performers the ability to create and project sound without strain.

Larue, for his part, taught the Russian actors the rhythm and fluency of movement; also the lightness and humour to be captured from movement. His work with the neutral mask which, as is well known, is a hallmark of Lecoq's teaching, allowed them to explore communication through motion, gesture, and the smallest details of physical activity. As these observations hopefully suggest, the physicality of Larue's approach complemented Kossenkova's focus on vocalicity which, after all, depends upon physical transmission.

The coordination sought between companies through these kinds of sessions was extended to - let us expediently call it - "cultural immersion".

The Russian actors (as well as the composer and costume designer) were steeped in their hosts' cultural environment during their visits to France. Their French counterparts went through a similar process during their month's stay in Moscow. While in Moscow, they not only experienced the vagaries of daily life, but also climbed the higher planes of inspiration by rehearsing *The Three Sisters* in Chekhov's house, which is now a museum. Art and life, in other words, blended together for concentrated spurts of time over several years.

This immersion, through a common project requiring continual energy and effort, in each other's aesthetic, cultural and daily world - not to mention their respective world's economics and politics - brought about something of a symbiosis between the two groups. It is general knowledge, at least among linguists, that immersion in a targeted environment stimulates and consolidates language acquisition skills. Kossenkova pointed out that the members of the two companies who had had little or no knowledge of the partner language now either understand or speak it with varying degrees of competence by sheer dint of their constant interaction in two languages in work situations, as well as out of them.

Kossenkova's reflections on this spin-off from their project led me to observe that what I have called "symbiosis" had an impact on the performance. That is to say, instead of severing the production in two, a possible outcome of a bilingual and bicultural venture, the two parts crossed over each other. They did not merge. But nor did the seams holding the two together stick out. Obtrusiveness did not happen because the symbiotic relationship between the performers allowed them to listen to each other so sensitively that the criss-cross of languages simply flowed on, as if they were listening and replying in one language.

Bakhtin's term "polyphony" is by far the most appropriate one for the construction, and effect on the listener, of this production. The polyphony at issue not only concerns the two languages as distinct entities we call "Russian" and "French". It involves the process of interweaving, by multiple speakers, of voice-utterances. And it involves the dialogic relationship (Bakhtin, again) between sound (Kossenkova's forte) and movement (Larue's). The symbiosis between the *performers* at a professional/personal level facilitated at the *artistic* level, during performance, the co-existence of multiple elements characteristic of polyphony. Kossenkova and Larue surely did not set out to "materialize" or even "illustrate" Bakhtin's theses. Nevertheless, the result of their interchange is remarkably Bakhtinian.³

The decision to work together came from the shock of recognition, from the realization that the “Other” could provide what “I” lacked. Larue describes his initial encounter with Teatr Tembr as a *coup de foudre* - love at first sight. It was his idea to stage Chekhov. The choice of play was made together. If the preparatory work took some two years, the production lasts, Kossenkova notes, one hour and fifty-two minutes. She stresses that all pauses in Chekhov were scrupulously observed, and not one line of his text cut. The brevity of the performance alone suggests that the dreadful inertia so often attributed to Chekhov is out of sight and sound in this production.

Although the idea of playing Chekhov came from Larue, I was interested in knowing what the stakes were for Kossenkova, what her aims were in combining two national languages and two types of play. I asked this question, remarking that I presumed she did not do experimental theatre solely for the sake of testing an idea, or “laboratory theatre” (here taking up Kossenkova’s terminology) for the sake of pure research.

Kossenkova replied that she wished, first of all, to show the beauty, poetry and musicality of Chekhov’s language, his Russian having great richness of intonation which, she believed, Russian had in general, and far more than French. (She hastened to add that the French people with whom she had discussed the second point agreed with her.) Chekhov’s tonal richness was such that it gave layers and layers of meaning to words, which explained why his plays could be translated adequately into a wide range of languages and be understood. Hence his “universal” quality. Even bad translations could not cover over his particular intonation, his unique poetry. This, she felt, was true of all great poets, Shakespeare among them. What Kossenkova most wanted to do was to bring Chekhov close to the hearts of French spectators by having them hear him properly.

Kossenkova develops her point:

There are directors who see, and Pascal Larue is one of them. I *hear* things. I hear everything in a voice. A voice is like an extract from a whole person. I look for the voice a playwright is speaking in. When I find the intonation, I find the [speech] genre someone is using. I find the right rhythm, the right vocabulary. I can change speech, but I always keep the author’s rhythm . . . I try to find the inner voice of a play. Chekhov’s voice is inscribed in *The Three Sisters*, as are the voices of Euripides, Pushkin, Shakespeare. When a character says “Shakespeare” or “Voltaire”, I have to find them, hear them in the text. . . . Chekhov belongs to a whole group of our early twentieth-century poets - Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov, Andrei Bely, Mayakovsky, Pasternak, Akhmatova - all of whom were great masters of voice. They read their own poetry out aloud. They heard their own voice. Well, Chekhov also heard his own voice out aloud when he was writing.

These and related observations on intonation led Kossenkova to stress that, to her mind, the problem did not lie in the translation of words, but in how they were articulated, enunciated or pronounced. And this fed into my questions concerning the difficulty of working in two languages on stage and off, given especially that all issues of musicality aside (intonation, rhythm, and so on, included), language carries semantic content, as well as a whole host of cultural assumptions which musicality alone cannot communicate.⁴ Did she, therefore, encounter any particular difficulties with actors who, having a Lecoq training, could be said to have come out of a theatrical context that was *culturally* constructed? Did they, in other words, have suppositions about how to perform that did not necessarily coincide with how her own actors conceived of performing?

The replies from Kossenkova concerned both groups. The French actors had difficulty, for instance, in understanding what it might mean to play a Russian officer. First of all, they were anti-militarist and found Kossenkova's military exercises, in preparation for the roles, personally distasteful. Secondly, they appeared to reject the sign systems that went with officers (signs to do with social class, heroism, honour, chivalry - the latter involving some resistance as to how Irina, an upper-class young lady, might react to Soliony's tempestuous advances). Thirdly, they did not always see the point of working on detail, whether of physical or vocal presentation. In addition, not all of Kossenkova's explanatory references met with the same flash of comprehension. References to Dostoevsky, for example, triggered off an immediate response. References to Pushkin, who is one of Kossenkova's main interpretative touchstones for *The Three Sisters* - if not the principal one - fell flat, without echo.

The Russian actors, for their part, were not easily able to abstract from a situation. Nor, consequently, could they give an action the lightness or deftness sought for it. Kossenkova explained how difficult it was for them to play a clown "in general". They had to have concrete indications as to what sort of clown they were, where they were, why they were there, how they were dressed and who they were with. Kossenkova's affectionate, almost parodic account of her actors was followed by an affirmative answer to my question on whether their predilection for such precise contextualization had something to do with the Russian theatrical culture, perhaps even with Stanislavsky's influence on it. She observed, however, that notwithstanding their "Russian" preoccupation - and certainly Chekhovian preoccupation - with shading and detail, the Russian actors were less disciplined than the French ones. This, she believed, was bound up with how much psycho-emotional energy they invested in their work,

leaving them quite tired after a few hours of exertion.

If the actors of Teatr Tembr were uncomfortable with the hours and pace of preparation set by their French partners, they were not thrown off course by most of the theatrical, literary and philosophical references made by them with respect to France. And they were least likely to be puzzled by Kossenkova's discovery of a key to the production in Pushkin. Pushkin is a strong enough cultural icon to spark off a certain degree of consensus among artists as to what he might signify for the show. One of the most important connecting links for the production is that between Pushkin and Lermontov. They stand for similar values, for similar heroism and grandeur, and for a similar inner, moral nobility which, for this spectator at least, distinguishes all the male characters of the production. Whether we take Soliony, who is physically modelled on Pushkin and Lermontov's heroes, or Vershinin, who is portrayed as a man of moral integrity and refinement, or again Andrei, who is shown to be nobody's fool, but suffers from an over-developed sense of decorum - each male character may be said to be a variation upon the themes of dignity, courage and the desire to do something meaningful for self and others.

What is, in fact, striking about the production's male figures is how their image recalls the intelligentsia of the *beginning* of the nineteenth century, as if the ideals of that particular intelligentsia illuminate Chekhov's world and serve as a model for the present. Kossenkova's allusions to the finer details of these cross-references are of a more personal nature. Thus she explained that Pushkin's death in a duel, at the hands of a Frenchman, inspired her conception of the rivalry between Soliony and Tusenbach which led to the fatal duel where Tusenbach is killed. She also explained that, given the association she made between Soliony and Pushkin's biography, it was imperative that Soliony be played by a French actor. By the same token, Olga, who, Kossenkova argues, announces the play's themes, also had to be performed by a member of the Théâtre de l'Enfumeraié. If we follow Kossenkova's reasoning, it seems that the characters who provide the exposition and the action are played by the French performers.

The issue of casting brings us back, of course, to the use of two languages in the production. It was planned that *The Three Sisters* would travel to Russia after performances in France. What this may well suggest are changes in how much Russian is inserted in dialogue delivered in French, since the aim will be to communicate as much as possible, with language and irrespective of language, to Russian-speaking audiences, as was anticipated for French-speaking audiences. It is likely that more

spectators in Russia will understand French - or, at least, enough of it to get the gist of interchanges in this language - than was the case of Russian for spectators in France. Assumptions as to anticipated audiences may well determine not only the quantity of French used, but the very purpose and function of speech units in French and of the bilingual aspect of the production as such.

These reflections remain in the realm of hypothesis. What is sure is that the version intended for audiences in France used Russian phrases, or simply isolated words, in French speech in order to echo the most important thoughts and emotions of a particular character. This procedure of picking out refrains that highlight the motifs weaving in and out of scenes and binding the whole is continued through the production - from the very beginning right to the end. In other words, selected phrases echo the themes to be found in the whole, exactly as occurs in music; and, as in music, they give the major or minor key, and the modulation or transposition of a specific theme.

The production's musical structure is especially evident in how French phrases come in and out of speech in Russian. The fact that there is marginally more French intercepting Russian dialogue than there is Russian in French is hardly surprising, because the audiences watching the performances are taken to be French-speaking before all else. What is surprising is how *little* French is used. And this indicates that French, when used in Russian, has minimal expository, explanatory and narrative purposes. Its main purpose is to gather together the leitmotifs that are repeated throughout the performance, and not only through words. One of Irina's leitmotifs, for instance, is "We must work". When she utters this sentence in Russian, she repeats it in French. Thus, it becomes her sign without being exclusive to her. It distinguishes her, but also links her to others, since almost everyone at some point in the performance talks about the necessity of work. The work leitmotif, in other words, can be heard strongly enough in the speeches of those performing in French (for example, Vershinin and Tusenbach) for its brief appearance, in French, in Irina's usual Russian, to have a special impact.

Let us look at a few more examples. Masha takes up the theme of living. She utters "We must live" momentarily in French as if to bring into focus the central importance of this line of thought for the whole production. The theme of love, which Masha carries through with Vershinin, is brought out in a similar manner. The fact that she speaks in Russian to him, and he in French to her, emphasizes the way the motif-fragment "I love" is borrowed from one language (Masha's borrowing

from French, for example) and echoed or re-echoed in the other. (Thus Vershinin says "I love" in Russian immediately after having pronounced it in French.) Olga, who also carries several themes at once, states in French (since this is the language of the actress) a number of times throughout the production that she is tired. Irina, when she goes to work at the telegraph office, repeats the theme of fatigue in Russian. One or two words here and there uttered by her in French are variations upon the same theme. But the same theme recurs through most of the other characters, whatever language they speak, precisely because it underpins Kossenkova and Larue's interpretation of Chekhov.

What the production is careful to show through *all* semiotic processes - and not only the verbal ones highlighted by bilingual means - is that the fatigue cited by the characters is neither metaphysical nor psychological (or, for that matter, imaginary or neurotic), but is closely bound up with how much they work and how much more they want to do so. They may say they are tired, but the stage shows them to be seemingly inexhaustible. The striving for life, love, achievement and purposefulness (the opposite of what is "useless") is marked out so clearly by the performers for their characters that the last scene, where the sisters are grouped together and return - as if in an opera trio - to their main motifs (working, living, learning) has nothing mawkish, defeatist or pessimistic about it. The production closes with the sisters looking straight at the audience and speaking to it in intimate tones, communicating what amounts to a message of hope.

The musical effects brought out verbally through two languages and, above all, through the voices in which utterances are uttered, are sustained by music right through the production. All the characters, at some point, play the piano. Piano playing continues the flow between Acts, scene changes thus not interrupting the rhythm and beat established. It anticipates or introduces dialogue, signals a change of direction in dialogue or accompanies dialogue. Masha, for example, in her conversation with Vershinin in Act II, covers a good deal of what she has to say while she is playing. This *lieder*-like component is foregrounded through the numerous songs that are sung on stage and off. Most of these songs are folk songs. Others are lullabies. Still others are cries of pain. Take, for example, Masha's singing fragments of her love for Vershinin when he leaves forever. Kuligin, Masha's husband, cradles her in his arms like a child and half-sings words of comfort to her. His half-lullaby, half children's rhyme, fades into a hum.

Humming, like singing, has enormous emotional force in the production.

At the beginning of Act II, humming in the wings merges with the music of the piano on stage. It then takes off on its own, its power and rhythm - all notes in harmony recalling orthodox liturgy and folksong in one - creating a snowstorm. The landscape created through sound gives the winter scene of Act II, which ends with Natasha going off for a ride in a troika with Protopopov. By the same token, the sound gives the characters' inner landscape, which is exteriorized by them through action. Their turbulence, motion and passion - including Masha and Vershinin's passion, which becomes the dominant voice in Act II - is captured in the choral humming whose acoustic images are all the more compelling because those producing them are out of view.

Voices also fade into the distance, as does the humming, like the motion of a troika. So do the voices calling in the forest, echo upon echo upon echo, when Soliony kills Tusenbach. Trailing off into silence, before words and movements take up the rhythm of life again, is used with great economy in the production. It is used poignantly, lyrically, at the beginning of Act II where the flicker of candlelight, traced out by the movements of the characters bringing the candles in, composes a choreography almost without sound. It is used at the end to accentuate Tusenbach's tragic fate.

A similar process of the trailing-off of sound occurs at the beginning of Act III. This time, movement in almost total silence comes from Natasha, who paces around the Greek columns in authoritative and authoritarian mode, and fades into them, as if a spy closely watching what has now become *her* household. The choreographic impulse of movements like these materializes elsewhere in dance, especially in the waltzes and folk dances which are performed and which unite the different social worlds that Olga and Anfisa (Olga perhaps being the closest to Anfisa) represent. Perhaps this is the production's ideal for the future. The Greek columns, meanwhile, stand still and, whether taken as the columns of a noble family's house or the columns of ancient tragedy, remind spectators of the past. The tragic undercurrent of this production, which surges through the actors' play, is caught, as if quintessentially, in the sign of the columns.

THE THREE SISTERS by Anton Chekhov

Théâtre de l'Enfumeraiie and Teatr Tembr

Translator: Elsa Triolet

Directors: Nika Kossenkova and Pascal Larue

Scenographer-Consultant: Yuri Kononenko

Decor and Lighting: Cyrille Guillochon, Benoît Sari and Rodrigue Montebran

Costumes: Irina Titorenko

Music: Svetlana Golybina

Cast

Natasha: Annick Augis

Masha: Irina Borisienko

Kuligin: Vladimir Douchine

Vershinin: Jacques Gouin

Tusenbach, Rodé: Sergei Grousdev and Franck Trillot

Soliony: Pascal Hatton

Irina: Nathalia Orekhova

Olga: Valérie Pourroy

Andrei: Pierre Sarzacq

Anfisa: Maylis Verseils

Ferapont, Fedotik: Christophe Virlogeux

Chebutikin: Jean-Paul Dubois

NOTES

1. Direct quotations and my occasional paraphrasing of Nika Kossenkova's words come from conversations with the Russian director in Paris in May 1993. However, since most of my commentary on the production is my own particular interpretation of Kossenkova's work, her and my voices should not be confused; nor, in consequence, should my views be attributed to her. The director, it may transpire, may not agree with them!
2. Bakhtin's theory of language, in antithesis to theories derived from or related to Ferdinand de Saussure, stresses that language is primarily a matter of speech. Saussurean and almost all other linguistic theories, by contrast, give priority to the notion of language as writing, which has a system of grammatical and other rules that are integral to the structure of language. Bakhtin consistently argues against the notion that language has a structure as such in abstract and which precedes, and even transcends, the speakers who use it (in writing, as well). Since, for Bakhtin, language comes into being between speakers, it is always alive to their shared needs and intentions in a given social time and place.
 This not being the appropriate context for a detailed discussion of Bakhtin's theory of language, attention must be drawn to *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (which was published originally under the name of V. N. Voloshinov), trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1986 and *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, eds., trans. Vern W. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986. For a useful exposition of points relevant to my remarks above on notions developed by Bakhtin around the concepts of speech, utterance, discourse, and so on, see James V. Wertsch, *Voices of the Mind: A Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991. For further details of my own exposition/interpretation of Bakhtin's theory of language, see my review of Wertsch's book in *Science and Society* 57. 1 (Spring 1993), pp. 98-101 and my "Dialogism in the Novel and Bakhtin's Theory of Culture". *New Literary History* 23. 3 (Summer 1992), pp. 747-63.
3. Bakhtin develops his concept of polyphony in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

Since I had been so deeply struck by the Bakhtinian quality of the production, I could not resist asking Kossenkova about it. It turns out that Kossenkova considers Bakhtin to be one of her "great masters", stating that he is indeed one of the main touchstones of her work for the stage. She gave, as an example, her attempt to create a dialogic relationship between actors and spectators by having the former speak to the latter as if they were the interlocutor to whom a given character was speaking or had just spoken (for example, Soliony's addressing Tusenbach and then looking at, and speaking to, the audience as if the audience were Tusenbach). This form of direct address to the audience, which is not a break between stage action and audience (as occurs, say, in Brecht) but a *continuation* of the dialogue on stage, is a way of including spectators in the action and placing them in the

role of participants (even if they do not actually *do* actions), as was the intention of participatory theatre to which belong, among the most famous productions, Arianne Mnouchkine's *1789*, *1793* and *L'Age d'or*. "Participation", in the case of these particular productions by Mnouchkine, means that spectators were able to move from tableau to tableau and thus walk around the different podia designated for performance instead of being glued to their seats.

4. The question of semantics brings up, of course, the issue of how spectators react to and understand a bilingual production when they do not have a grasp of both languages used. This issue will continue to be relevant as long as words are intrinsic to performances and not merely decorative or aleatory. It does not arise in dance performances, for example, which do not incorporate verbal means of sense-making and communication in movement (as do, on the other hand, such genres as the dance theatre of Pina Bausch or Karole Armitage's mixed media compositions).

A study of audiences for this *Three Sisters* was not on my agenda. Nor can my informal, conversational mode of eliciting commentary from spectators here and there claim to have any scientific value. Nevertheless, a spot-check of a few spectators suggested that those who claimed to know the play well or who were theatre practitioners were not concerned by the semantic loss. Those who did not know the play well and felt that understanding the meaning of words was crucial to a complete understanding of a performance felt that they had lost too much from not understanding Russian. It would have been illuminating to converse with spectators who were not theatre practitioners and who did not place great importance on the meaning of words, letting the remaining semiotic processes do the work of communicating meaning to them. The question, then, would be to see just how much they understood from and of the performance, and in what sense of the word "understand"! Understanding, after all, is not purely a matter of cognition.

