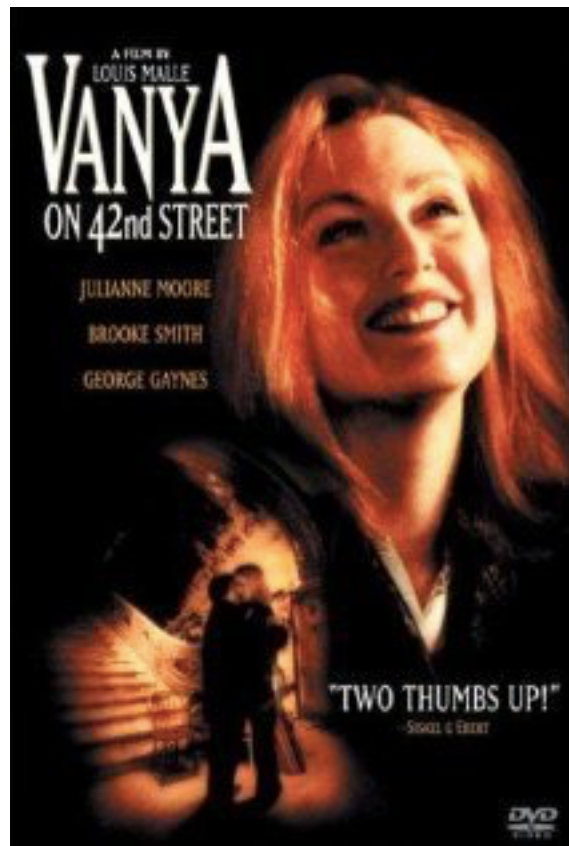


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### **21<sup>st</sup> Century Chekhov:**

#### **Finding Realism and Acknowledging Artificiality in *Vanya on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street***

When watching Louis Malle's *Vanya on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, one gets the sense that they are watching an experiment in realism. Much like the way Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* and other plays revolutionized what it meant to be realistic onstage towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, that same venture could be said for this production towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but through the lens of a camera. Film is in many ways is a more realistic medium of story-telling than theatre. There is no flashing of lights or musical overture or actors being moved to places to

begin the piece, the movie merely just begins. Actors don't have to project intimate-two person-indoor conversations to hundreds of people in the room and you instead can get up close and intimate with characters as you do with others in real life. And there's a sense of time and place a director in film can better immerse an audience member in than a theatre director is able to in the limited space of the stage. Director Louis Malle uses the art form to reengage Chekhov's naturalism, intimacy, and realistic character dynamics by doing things like showing us the actors outside as actors outside of the play and the characters they portray and filming it in a documentary, hand-held style that feels very unplanned and in the moment. But the simplicity of Malle's approach isn't perfect. By being so *real* as to tell us that we're watching a rehearsal of *Uncle Vanya*, the story can lose its realism because it's a movie that films a production of the play, with an audience and actors and props. The film isn't solely the play, *Uncle Vanya*. But it's through that acknowledgement of the performativity of the play that Malle's bare and unpolished interpretation finds modern realism in Chekhov's characters, a realism that could only be achieved through film by telling us we're watching a piece of theater, and then making us forget we are. He does this by taking us outside the performance into the real world and blending the real people involved with the film with the characters they portray, using the lens of the camera to subconsciously instill a natural and close intimacy, and by taking seemingly all of the theatrical components of Chekhov's writing out of this piece of theatre, and instead using them sparingly.

The opening of the film draws you in immediately as the film rejects the attempt to realistically immerse you in the world of the play that a theatrical production does, and accepts the notion that there is a world outside the performance you are about to witness. It relaxes us into thinking what we're seeing is reality because the actors are going by their real names and

their walking around the real streets of New York not performing *Uncle Vanya* and it feels like a documentary of a performance rather than another part of the movie as a whole. By using the setting of the real world, the performance of *Uncle Vanya* is already underway subconsciously. The film is already getting us more and more intimate with the characters we're going to follow by showing us the people behind them, and the actors play into this. When we first meet our characters they're walking the streets of New York like average-Joes. Merely existing, not acting. Our introduction to Wallace Shawn is as shot of him passively eating a knish with this air of disillusionment about him, as he looks on at pedestrians passing by. He later remarks how much sleep he's lost recently but then spends time impressing his friend Mrs. Chao with his knowledge of the theater they're entering. Under the veil of this perceived reality, Shawn is already embodying the attitude and actions of the character he's going to play so by the time the performance starts, we already picture Shawn in the role. The same can be said for when all the actors are walking to the theater and there's the quick image of George Gaynes sifting through the crowded streets in his beach hat and glazed over look, the look of an older man out of time and ignorant of the people around him. Serebryakov incarnate. Or how Brooke Smith asks her director, "is what I'm doing ok?" (Berner & Malle, 1994) Her shy, unsure nature is blooming with the spirit of Sonya, especially when she is then comforted and made happy by the words of her middle-aged, male director. Steve Vineberg notes this mixing of actor and character in his article "Chekhov in America," and how perhaps the best example of this is when we first meet Larry Pine, who in his very first shot walks down the street, looks at a woman's butt, and then continues on with his day walking with a pace of his own. Vineberg states how as they set up for the play, "Larry Pine chats to Phoebe Brand about a play he's appearing in somewhere in the Village; a few minutes later he's complaining to her about how exhausted he is, and you realize

you're no longer listening to two actors conversing, but Astros and Marina" (Vineberg 32). The play has started and we didn't even notice. But nothing has changed. There was no dimming of the lights, no audience murmur quieted, no big overture, and no character entrances to the stage; it's the same. They're in their same clothes, they're in the same area as they just were, they're talking the same way as they just were, and they're conversing on the same things as when we were first introduced to them as people. But the play has begun. Without the presence of a definite stage, there is no telling when the art form has actually begun. We think it is when the first lines of Chekhov's text are uttered, but it's really as soon as the first frame rolls. The play isn't given an official beginning, and thus we don't get the settling-in to experiencing the performance as we would if it was theatre. With theatre the house lights darken, the curtain opens, the lights come up onstage, and the actors unfreeze with Marina initiating a conversation that wasn't happening until we were ready to sit down and watch with "Have a bite to eat, dearie" (Chekhov 193), marking an official beginning to the play. All the while, attempting not to acknowledge that it is a piece of theatre. But by *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* being upfront that this *is* a piece of theater we're about to witness with actors pretending to be characters, we are more prone to believe the attitudes, actions, and images presented to us when the cast are themselves are accurate representations of them as people. But when they start acting and those real world elements are the same as those in the play world, we find ourselves are that much more fully invested as the lines between existence and performance are blended. The actors were just existing as themselves and now they're existing as their characters and the difference is made to be nonexistent. By acknowledging that this is a piece of theater, we're allowed to forget the line between actor and character because they are framed so similarly inside and outside the

performance. But filming the world outside the play is not the only element that more fully embraces this new realism, it's also in its use of the camera as an intimate looking glass.

The camera instinctively makes for a less theatrical experience because of the intimacy an audience can get to the performances that one cannot attain from watching actors on a stage, and the restriction of what an audience is allowed to experience - because it's all through the camera – allows for embracement and abandoning of the performance as realism. When one sees a piece of theater a suspension of disbelief is necessary or else the experience of the work is impossible. As a theatre audience member you need to believe that the characters onstage are not talking at an increased volume, that they are not choreographed to position themselves so that you may better see them, and that they cannot see you nor know that you are there. These are all things that film is able to forgo and that Malle appreciates fully. And that closeness you can achieve with film is utilized as the film is mostly comprised of close-ups on the characters' faces, making the performances that much more intimate and realistic. When you're onstage the emotions and the manifestation of those emotions need to be big so they reach the last row in the highest balcony. But in film you can see the realistic subtleties and nuances of somebody slowly losing it that are never oblivious as they sometimes have to be in theatre. Such as in how Vanya's lines are written in Act I versus how they actually produce on film. In the play (using Senelick's translation), Vanya's language and punctuation of that language when talking about Serebryakov is very openly angry and vengeful: "His conceit! His pretensions!...for twenty-five years he took up someone else's place. But look at him! He struts about like a demigod!... of course I'm upset" (Chekhov 200). Here, you get the sense that Vanya's rage is alive and rampant for all to see; the dialogue was written to fill a theatre. But in the film, by being able to get close to Shawn's performance with the camera, Vanya becomes a man who's past that visceral rage,

that now it is latent in his soul, yet still deftly active and live as it underlines his entire demeanor. And we see it in how he tiredly interacts and sarcastically chides the other characters over things like the inadequacies of Serebryakov; laughing bitterly. He complains about his awful state in a dejected, realistic manner instead of unnaturally shouting about it through most of the first act, as it has him doing in Senelick's translation. The camera allows us to get in close with the characters and forget that they're performing, but merely existing. We're intimate with the characters, so much so, that at times you cannot tell the geography of the stage for long stretches of the film. But that's also the feeling one gets when in conversation themselves, forgetting the location as a whole because of the investment in the other people and the current interaction occurring between them. The decision to keep the awareness of the play's geography outside of the camera only intensifies the focus on the people and the way they talk and look at each other. We don't notice the audience watching the play until Astrov kisses Marina in the beginning of the play, telling her loves no one but her. As he pulls away from the kiss the entire audience is revealed in a single image and we're reminded that this is a show. We've been so invested in the realistic interactions of Larry Pine and Phoebe Brand that turned into Astrov and Marina that when the audience is revealed it comes as a bit of a shock. As if to let the viewers know, yes, the play has in fact started, but it also can be seen as a sort of test for the believability of the first moments of the play, gauging how invested viewers were. But this ability to choose what the viewer sees gets intensified when the play moves to Act II. As Laurence Senelick writes in his intro to *Uncle Vanya* in *Anton Chekhov's Selected Plays*, "the second act moves indoors, its sense of claustrophobia enhanced by the impending storm and Yelena's need to throw open a window" (Senelick 193). The film does this in its own way by moving the audience to the same table that the characters sit at for the majority of the next scene, again testing the audience.

Seeing if they'll remember halfway through the scene, when Sonya is yelling at Serebryakov and throwing his medicine down, all at the other end of the table, will we remember that half of that table being shown is a theatre audience. And when we move on to Act IV, we get our first wide shot of the actors acting against the entirety of the New Amsterdam theater, and the barren, emptiness it signifies. We see this once beautiful theatre and how decrepit and rotting it truly is, with nets holding up the plaster falling from the roof. As Senelick states further, "the physical progression of the stage setting serves as an emblem of the inner development of the action" (193). In this case, as the play comes to its climax at the end of Act III it slowly grows tighter and tighter on the actors as the tension builds. When Act IV begins, it is a clearing of the dust, a relieving breath from the moments before and that natural feeling of needing to take a step back is exemplified in the quick cut to Act IV and the ensuing wide shot from far away of the characters talking. The realism here is enhanced because the framing of the camera matches the feelings of the viewers, something that you lose in a theater when you do a blackout, a stage reset, and then a lights-up. The camera can let us in close and restrict our vision so that we get comfortable with the realistic elements film can provide us, but then at any moment the rug can be pulled out from under us and we're reminded that this is a piece of theatre being filmed. And that same attitude of restriction is seen in all the theatrical aspects the film gets rid of to reject of the theatricality of the play, as well as in the few elements it chooses to keep that bring us back to knowing this is not real.

While the performance of the play takes place in a grand, classic New York theater, as the movie unfolds it seems to gutturally reject any elements that tend to make up a theatrical experience – costumes, heightened lighting, even a stage is technically not used in this rehearsal of the Chekhovian tale. The very first words of Roger Ebert's review of Louis Malle's *Vanya on*

42<sup>nd</sup> *Street* cryptically sum up the production of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* for better or worse: "A table, some chairs, many shadows reaching out into the unseen depths of an abandoned theater, and a long night of truth-telling" (Ebert 1). The stripping-away of expected theatrical staples comes off as a conscious effort to get rid of the unneeded aspects of the theater that may distract and cloud the human relationships at the center of Chekhov's tale. The stage directions of *Uncle Vanya*, and other Chekhovian works, can prove overabundant and numbing in detail so that it takes focus away from the characters, such as those preceding Act IV:

*"IVAN PETROVICH's room; it is both his bedroom and the office of the estate. By the window are a large table with ledgers and papers of all sorts, a writing desk, cupboards, scales. A somewhat larger table for ASTROV; on this table implements for drawing, paints; beside it a cardboard portfolio. A starling in a cage. On the wall a map of Africa, apparently of no use to anyone here. An enormous divan, covered in oilcloth. At left, a door leading to the bedroom; at right, a door in the wall. Beneath the right door is a doormat to keep the peasants from tracking in mud. – Autumn evening. Stillness"*  
(Chekhov 230)

Here, Chekhov's text clutters the stage with things that, although are theatrical extensions of the characters, can take away from the human element of the piece if too much attention is given to them. By reliving the production of having to adhere to these cues, what we get is a film completely on the shoulders of the actors, save for the few elements Malle chooses to keep. Such as the notion of there being no official costumes that resemble the time or place the original text is set in. But by not wearing definite, clear—cut costumes, the subtleties of what they're wearing affect us far more. We can recognize their clothes and what they mean far more than we could with classical Russian wear, which would also take us out of the reality of the play as we know we are not in that place and time. An example of this is how Serebryakov is the only one dressed in layers and accessories. He has a straw hat, glasses, gloves, a cane, a full suit, and overcoat. So although he doesn't enter with a notable costume, his more proper casual wear subconsciously instills this feeling in the viewer of a person of authority and wealth over the others, who are all



wearing normal clothes for the indoors. Or how there are jazz music transitions between the scenes that smoothly overlay one scene onto the next, instead of having the lights drop and a curtain swing in front of the audience, instantly cutting them off from the experience. Or the bells being the only theatrical sound cue, used to signify exits by characters, gives the audience a finality of their departure. It realistically allows us to return back to the characters still on screen and let the ones who've left exit focus. But again, we see moments of how being taken out of the realism, almost just further intensifies the realism, and we see this in the theatrical component of props. Steve Vineberg refers to this as only furthering the experience and as tool that serves the realism, instead of undermining it. Yes, the production uses very base props, but then there's a notable change from the regular gray and brown objects they've been using in Act 3, when the suspense and tension of the play is coming to a full head. During Serebryakov's defense of his insensitive plan, Vanya simmers and bubbles and begins to pop with unchecked anger as Vineberg writes how all of a sudden during the scene "Wallace Shawn sips from an 'I Love New York' coffee cup, and the incongruity snaps you back to the realization that these are contemporary New York actors in rehearsal, but a moment or two later you've forgotten again" (Vineberg 32). But Vineberg doesn't view this as a mistake or fault of the film, he sees it as a testament to the performances and the reality created onstage by the camera. And that this interruption of the realism is only a signifier of how real this piece of theater is, absorbing him even more into the realism of the production. This denial of the theatre and its tools only puts more emphasis on them because of their scarce presence in the film. And that denial of the theatre, but then sudden self-admittance of theatricality, is what pushes this cinematic interpretation into a more and more real world.

However, using film does not always prove to be a realist's ultimate dream. The line toed between being real and exposing the artificiality of the performance is not always walked precisely. Like the soliloquies done by characters take one right out of the reality. With Vanya's in Act II it is done almost directly to the camera, which unless you're Ferris Bueller and a fourth-wall-breaking style has been established, comes off as foreign and unnatural for a film experience. And with Yelena's in Act III, the decision to do a voice-over with Julianne Moore acting the text solely with her face proves awkward because of the constant acknowledgements that this is a piece of theater we are watching. We know that the audience present in the film is just watching Julianne Moore sit and emote for 2 minutes while a recording is played. With Vanya's it's the film's unfamiliarity with theatrical elements, like a soliloquy, that faults the realism in the movie. And with Yelena's it's the piece of theatre's unfamiliarity with cinematic elements like voice-over that undo the realism so well crafted. Or how many of the transitions' jazzy tones are undone by play director Andre Gregory explaining what's going to happen next, as his unnatural interruptions prove detrimental to the warm, engrossing character relationships that flood the meat of the acts. His interactions tend to make it a little harder to settle back into the realism of the play each time it breaks up the action. But when the film allows you to invest in the realism of the story that a medium like cinema can create, that's when you can find moments of self-awareness saying "this is a performed piece of theater," that instead of taking you out of the experience or spoiling the realism, it only further deepens the feeling for the viewer. The film does this by taking us outside the reaches of the text and the play as a theater piece in blending the real world and its people with the characters and play they perform, using the focus and viewpoint of the camera to create realistic and natural intimacy, and by stripping the text of its overtly theatrical elements save for the few used to heighten the realism. By

filming theatre and then openly accepting the play as art and not reality, one can toe a compelling line of realism that's as effective for a modern audience on film, as it once was for an older audience onstage.

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