

THE THREE SISTERS

Captured Live on Stage at Novosibirsk's Red Torch Theatre



SYNOPSIS

In a Russian provincial town the four children of General Prozorov, Olga, Masha, Irina and their younger brother Andrei live a life of not so subtle desperation. Olga, the eldest of them, works tirelessly and unhappily as a schoolteacher. Masha, the middle sister and the artist of the family, has been married to Fyodor for 7 years, and after initially being enchanted by what she took to be wisdom, she now sees as pedantic, and scowls at his clownish attempts to compensate for the emptiness between them. Irina, the youngest sister, is still full of hope. She speaks of going to Moscow and meeting her true love. It was in Moscow that the sisters grew up, and they all yearn to return to the sophistication and happiness of that time. Andrei is the only boy in the family and the sisters idolize him. He's in love with Natasha, who is somewhat cowed by the sisters' collective disdain and suffers under their glare. The play begins on the first anniversary of the General's death, but it is also Irina's name-day, and everyone, including local soldiers (led by the gallant Vershinin) come together to celebrate. At the very close of the 1st Act, Andrei exultantly confesses his feelings to Natasha in private and fatefully asks her to marry him.

A year later, as Act 2 begins, Andrei and Natasha are already married, their first child is a boy named Bobik. Natasha is having an affair with Protopopov, Andrei's superior, a character who is mentioned but never seen onstage. Masha comes home flushed from a night out, and it is clear that she and her companion, Vershinin, are giddy with the secret of their mutual love for one another. Natasha, who has turned the emotional tables on the sisters, manipulatively quashes plans for a party in the home. Tuzenbach and Solyony both declare their love for Irina.



Act 3 takes place about a year later in Olga and Irina's room (Natasha has wrested control of the household and forced the two sisters to live in one room). There has been a fire in town, and, in the crisis, people are passing in and out of the room, carrying blankets and clothes to give aid. Olga, Masha and Irina are angry with their brother for mortgaging their home, keeping the money to pay off his gambling debts and conceding all his power to his wife. Masha, alone with her sisters, confides in them her romance with Vershinin. Kulygin (her husband) blunders into the room, doting ever more foolishly on her, and she stalks out. Irina despairs at the common turn her life has taken and rails at the folly of her aspirations. Out of this resignation, and supported by the pragmatic Olga, Irina decides, despite not loving him, to accept Tuzenbach's offer of marriage. Chebutykin drunkenly stumbles and smashes a clock which had belonged to the Prozorov siblings' late mother, whom he loved. Andrei then vents his self-hatred, acknowledges his own awareness of life's folly and his disappointment in Natasha, and begs his sisters' forgiveness for everything.

In the 4th and final Act, outdoors behind the home, the soldiers, who by now are friends of the family, are preparing to leave the area. There is an undercurrent of tension because Solyony has challenged Tuzenbach to a duel, but Tuzenbach is intent on hiding it from Irina. He and Irina share a heartbreaking delicate scene in which she confesses that she cannot love him, likening her heart to a piano whose key has been lost. Just as the soldiers are leaving, a shot is heard, and Tuzenbach's death in the duel is announced. Masha has to be pulled, sobbing, from Vershinin's arms, but her husband willingly, compassionately and all too generously accepts her back, no questions asked. Olga has reluctantly accepted the position of permanent headmistress of the school where she teaches and is moving out. Irina's fate is uncertain but, even in her grief at Tuzenbach's death, she wants to persevere in her work as a teacher. Natasha remains in charge and in control of everything. Andrei is stuck in his marriage with two children. As the play closes, the three sisters stand in a desperate embrace, gazing off to the sound of a band's gay march. As Chebutykin sings Ta-ra-ra-boom-di-ay to himself, Olga's final lines call out for an end to the confusion all three feel at life's sufferings and joy: "If we only knew... If we only knew".

"Beguiling beauty and unbelievable intensity." (Vienna)

"Wordlessly expresses the essence of Chekhov's play." (Moscow)

"A theatrical tour de force!" (Paris)

CREATIVE TEAM

Director: **Timofey Kulyabin**
Set Design: **Oleg Golovko**
Lighting Designer: **Denis Solntsev**
Assistant director: **Natalya Yarushkina**

CAST

Vasily Vasilyevich Solyony: Konstantin Telegin
Andrey Sergeyeovich Prozorov: Ilya Musyco
Nikolay Lvovich Tuzenbach: Anton Voynalovich
Nataliya Ivanovna: Clavdia Kachusova
Olga: Irina Krivonos
Irina: Linda Akhmetzyanova
Masha: Daria Yemelyanova
Fyodor Ilyich Kulygin: Denis Frank
Aleksandr Ignatyevich Vershinin: Pavel Polyakov
Ivan Romanovich Chebutykin: Andrey Chernykh
Vladimir Karlovich Rode: Sergey Bogomolov
Ferafont: Sergey Novikov
Anfisa: Elena Drinevskaya

Russian Sign Language w/ English Subtitles.

**THE FILM WILL RUN FOR 248 MINUTES WITH TWO BREAKS;
4 MINUTE PAUSE AFTER ACT 1 AND 8 MINUTE PAUSE AFTER ACT 2**

Now in its second season, Stage Russia HD features productions from Russia's most renowned theater companies, staged by its greatest directors and selected to showcase the full breadth of Russian theater's styles and ideas.

THE IDEA

TIMOFEY KULYABIN, Director

For a long time I'd been cherishing the idea of doing a production without sound, or rather somehow excluding words from the perception of the audience. For example, a classical play on the stage fenced off by soundproof glass. Later this idea transformed into this production of "The Three Sisters".



I got in touch with a sign language tutor and asked her to train some of my actors to perform a page from Scene One, the morning of Irina's birthday. The actors attended the classes for a month and then, without any stage setting, simply "pronounced" the silent text.

And I felt a very strange effect: the characters gesticulated in complete silence, but the text, which I knew quite well, sounded inside my head. There was a certain magic in this as the unsaid words became not less but more significant. Later we added subtitles, which only amplified the effect. Chekhov's text had turned into one of the characters, in fact into the protagonist.

We invited advisers with limited hearing to our rehearsals. As a result, very particular details of this kind of life have been meticulously reproduced in our performance. The hearing impaired are military men, are able to play musical instruments, work as teachers and doctors. Much of what had seemed inevitable theatrical allowances became authentic. There, outside the walls of the Prozorovs' house, were all those unfriendly places and people: the grammar school, which left Olga so exhausted; the telegraph office that depressed Irina; Natasha's lover Protopopov, the blazes of fire...All this very much coincides with the perception of the world by the deaf as they regard it as strange and even hostile. This world hasn't been cut out for them. Initially the production hadn't aimed at such social impact, but once it had outlined itself it made no sense to resist the opportunity.

THE IMPLEMENTATION

OLEG GOLOVKO, Stage Designer

The characters of "The Three Sisters" are engaged in household trifles all throughout the play. These daily activities might cause strong irritation if the environment aesthetically contradicts such a way of existence. The situation that develops in our production is a simulated reality, a theatrical experiment which nevertheless demands visual authenticity. In this production costumes and props fill in the interval from the early 20th century through the beginning of the 21st century: from overcoats and female blouses of Chekhovian times to modern jeans and gadgets. The epoch of theatrical naturalism, to which Chekhov's dramas in a sense belong, always demanded huge lists of things. However, is our everyday life any different? You might be sitting in a comparatively empty, minimalist room, and still, if you are attentive enough, you'll count up to 600 objects.

The fact that the characters in our case are deaf has affected a great number of details. Even the process of manufacturing the scenery and furniture was different. As a rule, I spend a great deal of time making sure that the scenery and props do not produce any extra sounds. In this case, it was the opposite. For the first time in my professional career I was happy to hear the stage floor creak, the doors of cupboards clap, and the dishes in the sideboard tinkle when someone passes by. As it happens, this scenery has not only a visual, but also an acoustic aspect. The Prozorovs' house has a music score of its own.

THE PERFORMANCE

IRINA KRIVONOS, Olga

Acting in gestures is close to acting in a foreign language. You have to master each word separately, then connect them and work on "pronunciation" for quite a while, otherwise you won't "sound" convincing. All dialogues are very concrete, you cannot give prolonged speeches raising your eyes up to heavens or turning away "with implied meaning". The action is straightforward. You look into your partner's eyes and express very distinctly what you want from him. Having lost your habitual way of influencing the partner through words and intonation, you look for other kinds of expressive means—your body, plastic arts, ordinary actions.

There are many subtleties that distinguish the deaf from the hearing; there is no "quiet vs loud" gradation. People who hear, try try not to rattle kitchenware, chairs and other things, they try to laugh and cry quietly so that not



overheard. For the deaf those semitones simply do not exist, so I have to control my own behavior constantly. It results in a very rigid stage existence, it's unbelievable pressure. You feel as if you are part of a score, but when everything converges, you gain certain freedom. You feel how polyphony gets born, and you catch its rhythms, and float along...

GESTURE ON STAGE

Sign language as a method appeared in theaters across the globe long before it received the official status of Language of the Deaf. Elizabethan theater practiced a complex system of symbolical gestures based on rhetorical and physiognomic theories of the late Renaissance. These gestures designated not only "pure" emotion, but also plot collisions. At present, hundreds of "deaf" or mixed theatrical companies exist in the world, and many of them have gone far beyond social projects for a certain niche audience and are now participants in the general theatrical process.



Among the well-known examples was the silent performance "Deafman Glance", which laid the foundation of Robert Wilson's international fame in 1971. "Shutters Shut" has been significant in the career of such choreographers as Paul Lightfoot and Saul Leon

on the stage of The Netherlands Dance Theatre. It is a duet of two dancers "accompanied" by a poem recited by the author, Gertrude Stein, whose most complicated constructs of verse and intonation get their physical embodiment through purely choreographic elements and elements of the sign language of the deaf. In 2014, Miroslav Slaboshpitsky's film "The Tribe" telling about life in a boarding school for the deaf, collected awards in Cannes and Berlin. The premiere of "Fidelio", the opera by Beethoven directed by Claus Guth, was shown at the Salzburg festival in August, 2015. In this production, the alter-ego of the female protagonist, invisible to those around her, talks to her in a sign language.

TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH BY OLGA VARSHAVER

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