A Faithful Interpretation of an Unfaithful Translation:

Directing *Wild Honey*

by

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ABSTRACT

A Faithful Interpretation of an Unfaithful Translation: Directing *Wild Honey* examines the preparation, pre-production and rehearsal process involved in staging *Wild Honey* at the Frederick Wood Theatre in March 2011.

My objective was to stage a viable, engaging production of Michael Frayn’s re-working of Chekhov’s untitled play. My methods included in-depth table rehearsals, impulse blocking, and working with a vocabulary of active language to best interpret the text with the actors. This play is a great challenge and we continued to unfold new truths from the script right through until closing night.

The paper includes an essay on why Frayn is the ideal person to translate and adapt the works of Chekhov, a pre-production analysis of the script, a journal chronicling the entire process from project proposal until closing night, and a short reflection on the process concluding with final thoughts on the production.
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CHAPTER ONE

Why Michael Frayn Is The Ideal Translator And Adaptor Of Anton Chekhov

With *Wild Honey*, Michael Frayn crafts a fine text from the sprawling manuscript that is believed to be the first extant play by Anton Chekhov. Others have translated this untitled work, often naming it after its protagonist: Platonov. In translating and adapting it into *Wild Honey*, Frayn treats Chekhov’s manuscript like a work in progress, cutting characters, rearranging plot lines and getting the action started with “reasonable dispatch” (Frayn, *Plays 2*, xiv), all in the name of creating not “an academic contribution or… a pious tribute,” but a text fit for production (Frayn, *Plays 2*, 174). That Frayn succeeds in this aim is no surprise; when examining his life and career next to Chekhov’s, similarities abound: both began their careers writing for newspapers before finding acclaim as writers of prose fiction; both overcame frustrations with the theatre on the road to becoming celebrated playwrights; and both have received acclaim as writers of both comic and dramatic works for the stage. Add to this the fact that Frayn speaks Russian and therefore was able to translate directly from the original manuscript as opposed to working from a literary translation and it becomes clear that Michael Frayn is the ideal translator and adaptor of Chekhov’s work.

The road to becoming a celebrated playwright was not an easy one for Anton Chekhov. Though he would often renounce writing for the theatre, he would always return to the medium in spite of the apparent agony it caused him. It was in his early days as a medical student that Chekhov first experienced these agonies over the play that Frayn would eventually turn into *Wild Honey*. In 1882 Chekhov offered the play to an actress, presumably to lure her with the role of Anna Petrovna, but it was rejected. The script was “torn up by its author into little pieces” (Frayn, *Plays 2*, 162) and it would not resurface until sixteen years after
his death. Playwrighting would proceed to take a backseat to other forms of writing for the next few years.

Chekhov the medical student supported his family by penning daily short, humorous sketches and vignettes that earned him a reputation as a satirical chronicler of contemporary Russian life. As Michael Frayn tells it, the short comic works Chekhov produced in this period “matured seamlessly into stories of the most exquisite restraint and insight, and his reputation no less seamlessly with them; even if he had never written a single line for the theatre he would still be one of the most marvelous writers ever to have lived” (Plays, vi). Chekhov’s stories would receive both literary and popular attention, and he would continue to publish regularly for the rest of his life.

Chekhov’s reputation as a gifted humorist and promising storywriter prompted the commission that gave birth to Ivanov in 1887. Though it was his first full-length play to see a stage, he claimed to have written Ivanov in ten days and it is far from the light comedy the theatre probably expected. Reports have it that the author was not pleased with the production. “There were four rehearsals instead of the promised ten, and on the opening night only two of the cast knew their parts; the rest got through, said Chekhov, ‘by prompter and inner conviction’” (Frayn, Plays, xii). Retreating from the form of the four-act drama, Chekhov began to find success with one-act plays. Swan Song and The Bear, which he wrote shortly after Ivanov, were well received as boulevard comedies, but the author’s works for the stage did not receive the critical acclaim of his short stories.

It was with The Seagull that Chekhov attempted to relaunch his career as a serious dramatist some eight years after Ivanov, and the premiere in Petersburg was a notorious disaster. Having confided to a friend that he had written the play “not without pleasure” (Worrall 38), the cold reception once again left Chekhov
the playwright devastated. The author left the audience halfway through the performance to hide backstage, later claiming he would not have another play put on even if he lived another seven hundred years (Frayn, *Plays*, viii).

When the Moscow Arts Theatre staged its now famous production of the same play, it was a hit. Its director, Constantin Stanislavsky wrote: “In the house the success was colossal; on stage it was like a second Easter. Everyone kissed everyone else, not excluding strangers who came bursting backstage… Many people, myself among them, danced a wild dance for joy and excitement” (Frayn, *Plays*, xxxviii). Unfortunately, the playwright was not around to experience this triumph for himself. Exiled in Crimea some eight hundred miles away, Chekhov rarely referred to the production in his own letters from this time, even after learning of the play’s reception. It would seem that “he had kept this production at a distance emotionally as well as geographically, and the Moscow success was considerably more remote from him than the Petersburg failure” (Frayn, *Plays*, xxxviii).

Stanislavsky’s production of *The Seagull* marked the emergence of a stylistic fusion of comedy with serious drama that will forever stand as Chekhov the dramatist’s legacy. And yet, many reports have it that Chekhov was never happy with the interpretation of his scripts by Stanislavsky’s company. His first successes in the theatre were short comedies, after all, and he designated *The Seagull* as a comedy as well. Chekhov found the Moscow Arts Theatre’s production slowed by its attempts at creating a realistic environment, and is alleged to have threatened to include in his next play a stage direction reading: “The action takes place in a country where there are no mosquitoes or crickets or other insects that interfere with people’s conversations” (Frayn, *Plays*, xxiii).

*Uncle Vanya*, which is described by the playwright as “scenes from country life” (Frayn, *Plays*, xx), was another tremendous success for Chekhov, Stanislavsky
and the Moscow Art Theatre. Still the author was not satisfied: “All the notes he
gave about Vanya, when he finally saw it, were directed against the overtness of
the action” (Frayn, *Plays*, xxiii). “It is an overwhelmingly painful play,” says Frayn.
“And yet there is plainly something ridiculous about Vanya himself… Are we to
laugh or are we to cry? Both, no doubt” (*Plays*, xx). It is this quality of Chekhov’s
that continues to both baffle and thrill artists and audiences alike.

Chekhov once said about his work:

> You tell me that people cry at my plays. I’ve heard others say this too. But
> that is not why I wrote them. It is Alexeyev [Stanislavsky] who made my
> characters into crybabies. All I wanted was to say truthfully to people:
> ‘Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!’ –
> The important part is that people should realize that since when they do,
> they will most certainly create another, a better, life for themselves. I shall
> not live to see it, but I know that it will be quite different, quite unlike our
> present life. And as long as this different life does not exist, I shall continue
to say to people again and again: ‘Please understand that your life is bad
and dreary!’ – What is there to cry about in this? (Gottlieb 231)

Writing about his work as a physician, Chekhov recalled: “First of all I’d get my
patients in a laughing mood – and only then would I begin to treat them” (Gottlieb
228). It seems Chekhov the playwright felt that his audience were his patients
and laughter would put them in the mood to create the better life he hoped for
them. “Chekhov illuminates and demonstrates human absurdity – but in an
essentially realistic context in which human behaviour struggles with itself in a
defined society,” causing his audience to laugh in spite of the situation presented
to them (Gottlieb 237). In search of escapism, “the audience often found
themselves viewing characters who themselves were longing for ‘escape’”
(Gottlieb 230).
Even with his reputation as a great playwright already cemented, his later full-length works continued to deny Chekhov satisfaction. Insistent he had written a light-hearted comedy - and in spite of the fact that “on the title-page he labeled it a drama” (Frayn, *Plays*, xxi) – the weeping of several cast members at the first reading of *Three Sisters* convinced the author that the play was destined to fail. After *Three Sisters* had been running for three years, Stanislavsky would write that audiences “began to laugh and grow quiet where the author wanted” (Frayn, *Plays*, xxi). This did not, however, signify a unification of vision between the playwright and director.

The head butting between Chekhov and Stanislavsky continued in the lead up to the Moscow Arts Theatre’s production of *The Cherry Orchard*, which the author had identified as a comedy on its title page. Bluntly, the director told the playwright he was wrong: “‘It’s not a comedy, it’s not a farce, as you wrote,’ he informed him, after everyone had wept in the last act during the read-through… ‘No, for the plain man it is a tragedy’” (Frayn, *Plays*, xxii). Steadfast in his view, Chekhov wrote: “The last act will be cheerful – in fact the whole play will be cheerful and frivolous” (Frayn, *Plays*, lxviii). Frayn counters: “But the cheerfulness is deeply poignant” (*Plays*, lxvii), calling the play a “comedy of inertia and helplessness in the face of truly desolating loss” (*Plays* lxix). Simply put, “we rarely laugh at Chekhov’s characters; usually, we laugh with them” (Gottlieb 236). Certainly, in *The Cherry Orchard*, we cry with them too. Frayn writes: “It is truly not possible to read the play in Russian without being moved, as Stanislavsky and his company were, to tears as well as laughter” (*Plays* xxiii). That is high praise for any writer. It would seem that, like his short fiction, Chekhov’s plays had matured into ‘stories of the most exquisite restraint and insight’, even if the great Russian playwright was never free of his insecurities about his place in the theatre.
Despite joining Chekhov in the elite group of dramatists to find acclaim as writers of both serious and comic works, and the even more elite group of writers to receive praise for both prose fiction and plays, Frayn, too, was late at finding success through the stage. Soured by his own early failure, *Zounds*, written and produced while he was studying at Cambridge, he retreated from the theatre and it would be years before he returned. “People didn’t find it as funny as they should” he said of reactions to *Zounds*. “I hated the theatre. Then very slowly I went back to it” (Moseley 99).

Similarly to Chekhov, Frayn began his writing career as a reporter and columnist at *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, where he carved out a niche as a satirist and comic writer. He would publish four novels in the 1960s, winning the Somerset Maugham Award for *The Tin Men* in 1966 and the Hawthornden Prize for *The Russian Interpreter* in 1967. It was in 1970 that *The Two of Us*, four one act plays performed together by two actors, hit the stage at London’s Garrick Theatre. The reviews were middling, but the experience of watching the four plays from the wings inspired what is still Frayn’s most produced work, *Noises Off*, some twelve years later.

Those dozen interim years mark the emergence of Frayn the playwright. After publishing *Sweet Dreams* in 1973, he would not have another novel out until 1989. The theatre had Frayn’s attention and he its, winning the London Evening Standard Award for Best Comedy for *Alphabetical Order and Make and Break* in 1975 and 1980, respectively, and the 1976 Laurence Olivier Award for Best Comedy for *Donkeys’ Years*. In 1978 he would complete his first Chekhov translation, *The Cherry Orchard*, and begin the six-year process of translating and adapting what would become *Wild Honey*. In the midst all this were the well-received *Clouds* in 1976, and the unequivocal 1978 flop, *Balmoral*. *Clouds* drew praise for Frayn’s “accurate satire” (Page 20) and “mercurial wit” (Page 21). *Balmoral* was well received in its preview performance, leading an apparently still
insecure Frayn to wonder if he had finally “written a farce that worked” (*Plays 2 ix*). In what feels like the inverse of Chekhov’s own experience, the strong preview was followed by an opening night where Frayn recalls “the evening passed in absolute silence, with not a single laugh from beginning to end” (*Plays 2 ix*). *Balmoral* was later deemed by its author to be “a Titanic searching for its iceberg” (*Plays 2 xi*), never achieving critical or commercial success.

It was *Noises Off*, premiering in 1982 that vaulted Frayn into the firmament of great dramatists. Netting him both the Evening Standard and Olivier Awards for Best Comedy, the play would run for several years in London’s West End. It seemed Frayn had written his ‘farce that worked’. With *Benefactors* and *Wild Honey* both opening to critical and commercial acclaim in 1984, Frayn had three plays on in London for just over a year. This intersection of three stylistically different successes is significant not just for the sheer accomplishment, but also because it marked a significant turn in Frayn’s playwrighting.

Frayn says *Benefactors* is “a serious play, but there’s some comedy in it” (Page 38). This work, which would win the Evening Standard Award in the then-unfamiliar-to-Frayn category of Best Play, was seen to be a “significant departure from the kind of plays of which *Noises Off* is a sort of culmination… Darker and more complex than Frayn’s earlier works, *Benefactors*… prompted comparisons to Henrik Ibsen’s *The Master Builder* and to Anton Chekhov” (Moseley 139). Like Chekhov, Frayn was trying to do something more intellectually and emotionally complex than a farce, a form he has not returned to since *Noises Off*. He did a lot of translating in these years as well, with versions of *Three Sisters*, *The Seagull*, and *Uncle Vanya* all opening between 1985 and 1988, but felt his best writing for the stage might be behind him at this point. “I suppose, looking back, that the glorious first night in London marked the climax of my career in the theatre,” Frayn wrote in 1991, reflecting on the opening of *Wild Honey*. “Someone told me recently, with many convincing examples, that few playwrights’ careers last
longer than fifteen years. My first play… was produced in 1970, so maybe my grand climax was also my final curtain” (Plays 2 xiii).

This proved to be far from the truth. His celebrated drama Copenhagen, inspired by a 1941 meeting between Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, would win both the 1998 Evening Standard Award for Best Play and Frayn’s first Tony Award for Best Play in 2000. He would claim the Evening Standard Award yet again in 2003 for Democracy, another drama based in fact about a communist spy in West Germany. Since speculating that his career as playwright might be finished in 1991, Frayn has become a benchmark not only for comedy and farce, but serious drama as well.

Couple all this with the fact that he began publishing novels again in 1989, receiving a shortlist nomination for the Booker Prize in 1998 for Headlong, and it seems Frayn has achieved success in the theatre and literary worlds in a manner that rivals Chekhov. While his career has played out over a significantly longer period of time, Frayn has followed a similar path to Chekhov’s into the pantheon of great dramatists. Who better, then, to tackle the latter’s incomplete and sprawling first work for the theatre?

In translating Chekhov’s untitled manuscript Frayn took inspiration from a letter between Chekhov and his brother Alexander in 1882, wherein Chekhov urges: ‘Either don’t translate rubbish, or do and polish it up as you go along. You can even cut and expand. The authors won’t be offended, and you will acquire a reputation as a good translator’” (Frayn, Plays 2, 166). A good translator is exactly what Frayn is. His Chekhov translations have been called “as close to perfection in the translator’s art as it is possible to get” (Moseley 29). Able to translate the texts directly from Russian, Frayn has said he “wouldn’t dream of writing a version of a play from a language he couldn’t read” (Moseley 30).
His work on *Wild Honey* goes beyond faithful translation, however. Others have tried to respect the whole of what Chekhov left behind by simply condensing it, hoping to highlight hints of the author’s later works. Frayn notes:

Platonov is a sketch for Ivanov; Anna Petrovna, the widowed local landowner, foreshadows Ranyevskaya. There is the great theme of the lost estate, and the dispossession of the rural landowners by the new mercantile bourgeoisie, that will recur in *The Cherry Orchard*. There is the unhappy wife attempting to poison herself, as in *Three Sisters*. There is the drunken doctor, and the vain longing of idle people to lose themselves in work, and so on. (*Plays* 2:160)

Frayn the translator honours the author’s work by aiming to present it in its best possible form. Comparing the process of translating Chekhov’s untitled manuscript with his last four works for the stage, Frayn wrote: “The more one works on these plays, the more exactly one wishes to recreate each line in English. But the more closely one looks at the text we are considering here, the more one’s fingers itch to reshape it” (*Plays* 2:165). He admits:

I tried to write Chekhov’s play for him... I didn’t try to make it my own play. Nor did I try to make it like any of Chekhov’s later plays, because he was a young, very different playwright when he wrote it. I tried to make that play work as a play. And I decided that the only way to do this was to assume that the original text was a rough draft and could be treated with great freedom, with some things changed completely. Yet the central characters, indeed most of the characters, are very much Chekhov’s own – and I hope what’s finally come out is the story that was hidden in the background before. (Moseley 30)
It comes as no surprise that many critics suspected Frayn had inserted a lot of himself into the play. After all, he had taken a play that would run six hours and cut it to a sleek two and a half. “The last scene, set in Platonov’s schoolhouse, is, I suspect, at least as much Frayn’s as Chekhov,” wrote one (Page 52). In response to sentiments like these, Frayn has said: “They supposed... that it began as more or less pure Chekhov and finished as more or less impure Frayn. The converse is (sadly) true. Most of the liberties I took were in getting the action of the play under way with reasonable dispatch” (Plays 2 xiv). Some critics speculated that Frayn imposed the farcical elements in *Wild Honey*, but he humbly persists: “I wish I had written it, but I didn’t. I merely trimmed it and fitted it all more tightly and securely together. And, of course, translated it. I shouldn’t like to forgo credit for that” (Plays 2 xiv).

*Wild Honey* puts on full display both Frayn’s affinity for Chekhov and the latter’s blossoming gift for crafting ‘stories of exquisite restraint and insight’ that would become his hallmark on both page and stage. Their similar career trajectories, with early theatre frustrations followed by success in journalism and prose fiction before returning to and, ultimately, succeeding at the craft of playwrighting, are as unique as their shared success with both comedic and serious material. Frayn is revered for his translations of the Russian playwright’s last four plays and would eventually draw comparisons for his own work. According to Chekhov’s own definition, Michael Frayn must be viewed as a good translator in the case of *Wild Honey*. He takes a script which was torn up and abandoned by its original author, over twice the length of a normal play, and generally dismissed as “altogether too much” (Frayn, *Plays 2*, 159) and moulds it into a taut and viable piece of theatre worthy of the reputation of both the original author and the translator/adaptor.
CHAPTER TWO

Pre-Production Analysis

1. INITIAL RESPONSE TO THE PLAY

I was immediately enthralled. It was Chekhov. It was Frayn. It was neither and both, brilliantly married. What began as a light comedy amongst the members of a small community quickly unraveled into a hilarious and dark farce that was brimming with laughs. I was reminded of George F. Walker’s *Nothing Sacred*, which is itself an adaptation of Turgenev’s *Fathers & Sons*, and of which I saw a strong production at the University of Saskatchewan in 2007. *Wild Honey* satisfied what I wanted to attempt with my thesis production: it features a large ensemble cast with an abundance of good roles for student actors; it is a text that makes strong demands of all the designers; and it is a play that is not often produced or studied and so would be seen with seemingly fresh eyes by its audience.

The script is truly superb. Frayn (working from Chekhov’s original framework) guides the comedy from light to dark with a fluidity I did not experience reading David Hare’s adaptation of the same play, which I found a bit jarring. (Perhaps this has to do with Hare’s strict adherence to the original, whereas Frayn admits to treating Chekhov’s manuscript like a rough draft of one of his own plays.) The play features sixteen roles, twelve of which I would deem to be substantial – meaning many of the large pool of actors from which I have to cast will be given the opportunity to show something of themselves in this production.

On my first reading I was instantly able to picture various BFA acting students in all of the roles. Platonov, whom Chekhov wrote as being twenty-seven, is a real gift to any actor, particularly one who is still completing his training. It is an
incredibly challenging role: a man whom everyone loves despite his horrible actions; a man cursed by honesty and intellect; a man in constant temptation. Similarly, the four women who love him present an equal bounty of gifts: by and large they are intelligent, three-dimensional creations that try to determine their respective fates. The supporting cast of men features enormous opportunities for the actors to stretch themselves comically and dramatically. What more could an actor ask for?

2. TYPE OR GENRE OF PLAY

*Wild Honey* is a dark comedy – incorporating elements of farce, melodrama and tragedy. As in the celebrated major works of Chekhov, *Wild Honey* takes us from tragedy to comedy and back again sometimes in the blink of an eye. The comedy is born out of the characters’ respective tragedies and the absurdity of their actions within the given circumstances. To me, this means the full dramatic weight of each scene has to be there – I do not want a play full of crocodile tears – so it will be an exceptional challenge to find the right balance in rehearsing the play as being serious for the characters while still bringing out all of the comedy in the script. The given circumstances are complex, putting every character in a high stakes situation at all times. A thorough understanding of these circumstances will be essential in order to achieve a strong production of this play.

In order to realize this piece in the right way, I hope to take a thorough pass at the play around the table – rehearsing from the mindset that everything we need is in the text and that our understanding of the text will lead us to the strongest possible blocking. It is my feeling that the best blocking will always come from the actors (given that the entrances and furniture are in the right places) and it is my preference to let the table work lead us to the appropriate staging. From here, a
continued adherence to the text will help us to clarify our moment-to-moment work and endow each scene with the appropriate depth and clarity of given circumstance.

As the play is broken up into four continuously running acts, it will be important to rehearse in a segmented “unit by unit” fashion in order to ensure the proper complexity of action and tone is in place. We will get more out of our run-throughs if we have a thorough understanding of everything within the play and I believe there is a real danger in running entire acts too often, too soon and glossing over the understanding of what occurs moment-to-moment. Instead, it is my hope that by rehearsing each act in smaller chunks we will enjoy a wealth of revelations when we do put entire acts together.

3. STYLE

“The truth can be big” is an adage to which I often subscribe in the theatre. *Wild Honey* demands to be played with emotional realism. It is the moment-to-moment reactions of the characters that give the play its great comic and tragic elements and this can be best achieved if the actors are well grounded in the given circumstances of the text. This is another argument in favour of in-depth table rehearsal.

A great challenge will lie in marrying the emotional realism to the somewhat presentational style required in the Freddie Wood Theatre. Within the reality of what they are playing the actors will have to be sure to react “out” towards the audience, as it is essential that the spectators remain included in the play. This can best be achieved by the actors first finding the emotional truth of each moment and then letting each reaction play through their bodies, leading their reactions out, when necessary.
A commonly held idea about Chekhov (and, by association, Stanislavski and “fourth-wall” realistic theatre in general) is that the actors must act as though the audience is not there. To me this is ineffective and not necessary to realistic theatre. The audience is there. The play is taking place on whatever day it takes place in whatever theatre it is taking place. In fact, I think one of the great powers the actor has is the knowledge that the audience knows that they are not who they are portraying, but that the audience wants to believe it. This means that within the realistic playing of the show, the performers absolutely must include the audience, whether it be sharing a reaction out or taking a pause to allow for laughter, it is absolutely essential that the performers remain conscious of the continuous circuit of energy between the stage and the audience.

So long as everything on stage is coming out of a real place (i.e. the circumstances as laid out by the text) the audience will believe the world that is presented to them.

4. SPACE

The Frederic Wood Theatre is a four hundred-seat proscenium theatre complete with revolve (which we have been advised against using), trap doors (hard to find an excuse to use them in this play) and fly gallery (which we will most certainly use). The audience is wider than the stage, which means that there are some specific sight-line limitations when using the upstage area. In fact, the depth of the stage is itself a potential trapping, as many shows I have seen in this theatre tend to play a lot of the action upstage and at a great distance from the audience.

The fly gallery will allow the set designer to not only build the trees tall, emphasizing the height of the space, but also to fly trees in and out, creating a
unique look for each scene. The depth of the space will allow the set and lighting designers to create a sense of space continuing on beyond the back wall of the stage, seemingly forever. For the outdoor scenes this will be extremely helpful.

As mentioned in the discussion about style, the Freddie Wood demands that the actors share their reactions with the audience. The challenge will be achieving this within the emotional realism of what the actors are doing. All of the cast will have performed on the Freddie Wood stage at least once before this play, which should help equip them with some of the necessary technical tools to play that space as effectively as possible.

Our rehearsal space, BC Binning Studios room 128, is substantially smaller than the Freddie Wood stage, especially in terms of the depth it provides. This means that when we move into the theatre (we hope to do so at least two weeks prior to opening) we will have to adjust much of the staging to the performance space. I believe that if the actors know where they are moment-to-moment and have a firm grasp on what they are doing they will be able to make the necessary adjustments without too much difficulty. Again, all of the actors in the cast will have been through the experience of transferring from this particular rehearsal space to this particular performance space.

For me, the discoveries made once moving into the performance space are an essential and exciting part of working on a play. If one is open to the possibilities that will undoubtedly occur in these transitional rehearsals, one can only gain insight into the work, leading to a more nuanced production.
5. **AUDIENCE**

My perception of Theatre @ UBC subscribers is that they are predominantly over the age of forty. There will also be a good deal of students in attendance, as I know at least one English course has added the text to its reading list and made viewing the production a requirement for the class. Naturally, the audience will also be largely comprised of the family, friends and classmates/colleagues of the cast and crew.

It is my belief that there is no point in trying to please everyone; in fact, it is a recipe for failure. The best way to treat an audience is with respect and I believe this is achieved by trusting them to get what you are doing without any pandering or oversimplifying. Even if they are familiar with the show (it is my assumption that almost everyone will be unfamiliar with *Wild Honey*) it is important to present the play as though they have never seen it before. It is a dangerous thing (done too often with familiar plays, especially the works of Shakespeare) to assume that the audience already knows the story. In fact, it robs the story of any excitement, whether the spectators are familiar with it or not.

6. **GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES OF PRODUCTION**

**Budget:** Our budget is approximately eight thousand dollars. This should be enough money for the design elements we wish to have: a freshly built set of trees and a flexible structure to suggest each scene; a paint job on the stage floor; a hazer to enhance the lighting; a smoke machine for the train effects; and some newly built costumes where necessary.

**Rehearsal Space:** BC Binnings room 128 almost captures the width of the Freddie Wood stage but fails to come near to capturing the depth. While we hope
to play most of the play in the downstage half of the stage, there will certainly be an adjustment once we move into the performance space, but that is to be incorporated as a positive.

**Idiosyncrasies of Performance Space:** The fact that the audience is wider than the stage will dictate a lot in terms of staging and set design – we lose stage width as we move upstage. The actors will have to be sure to share their reactions with the audience in order to keep them invested in the show. Vocally the actors must also be conscious of including the audience and filling the space. The Freddie Wood stage has lots of wing space stage left and almost none stage right. This may affect our scene changes depending on how our set ends up working.

There is room for ample exits on either side of the stage and, if we so desire, upstage. The designs will finalize this, but the options will come in handy, particularly in Act One, Scene Two and Act Two, Scene One.

**Experience of Actors:** They are all BFA students. They have all performed on the Freddie Wood stage before. Many will not have played as substantial a role before as they will in *Wild Honey*. They are all very much still learning and building their own respective processes, but I think one could make a strong argument that this is true for all artists at any stage in their theatre career. What their relative inexperience might lead to is a lack of confidence in their own choices and a need to have their impulses reinforced. It is my hope to create a rehearsal environment where they feel safe to take risks and test-drive their own ideas within the agreed upon given circumstances of the text.

**Other Artists Involved:** Ron Fedoruk speaks very highly of Amanda Larder (set designer) and Wladimiro Woyno (lighting designer). In fact, I asked Ron to design the set or lights and he said he needed to accommodate students so I asked for his best. He claims these two are they. The few pictures of Amanda’s previous
designs look good – she is clearly ambitious with a strong eye for the visual. I know nothing of Wlad, and in fact, have not yet met him.

Vanessa Imeson (costume designer) has a very strong portfolio and has already been in steady contact with me. She seems very keen and like I will not have to worry about her – exactly what I was hoping for.

Emily Griffiths (stage manager) was my SM for Far Away and I had a positive experience with her. She is organized, efficient, hardworking, and provides a good outside eye when solicited.

All in all it seems like an exciting team.

History of the Company: Theatre @ UBC has been around for years and years and years… There is a rich tradition at this university and I am very pleased to be a part of it. It is rare for a director of my relative inexperience to get the opportunity to do such a big show on a big stage (in fact, that was part of the appeal of doing an MFA program) and I’m grateful for it.

As for our company of artists working on Wild Honey: it will be my first time collaborating with every artist other than Emily Griffiths. Fortunately for me, I know all the actors through the theatre department and we have seen each other’s work. Furthermore, they have all worked together both in class and on other productions, so they are relatively comfortable with one another. Ultimately this leaves us in an exciting place: collaborating for the first time, in many cases, with people whose work we know.

Length of Rehearsal Period: We have approximately 140 hours of rehearsal spread out over six and a half weeks from the first day until the preview performance. For a play that should run close to two and a half hours this is not an inordinate amount of time, but it is enough if we use it well. I am grateful for the six weeks, as this will allow for latent learning in the actors – something that will be especially important for the actor playing Platonov. It seems to me much
better to rehearse part-time over several weeks than full-time over just a couple. This will allow us to be exploratory in our approach.

**Length of Run:** The play runs for ten performances over eleven days. This will leave room for it to develop and grow in front of an audience – the final and (arguably) most essential part of the process. It will be important to stress to the actors that the very nature of live performance is that it is different every time, even if we think we’re doing the exact same thing, and that this is to be embraced. The audience can often help to clarify moments that we were not sure of, or force us to reconsider moments we thought we were certain of. Again, this is to be embraced, as it is the audience whom we perform for in the end.

**On “Students”:** Everyone working on this show is a student. This includes me. While I have significantly more experience than most of the people involved, particularly as regards “professional” work (or work outside of a university setting), I am also here to learn and develop a craft.

That being said, I am in a leadership role and I do not intend to shy away from that. I firmly believe that professionalism is a state of mind and that if the director has a professional attitude the company will follow.

There is a temptation to treat student actors (and designers and stage managers) differently than we would a “professional”. Granted, student actors might need more coaching than an experienced pro, but that will not always be the case. It is my intention to treat everyone in this production as I would if it had nothing to do with UBC or any other educational institution.

### 7. PERIOD

The play is set in late 19th century Russia. It would be fair to assume somewhere between 1880 and 1882, as that’s when it is speculated that Chekhov began the original manuscript. We will do the play “in period”, meaning that the costumes,
sets and props will all suggest the time. The actors will honour the manners of the period as the script demands, which will probably lead to some interesting dynamics - especially within the large group scene in Act One, Scene One. What is important is that the play remains vital, that the stakes remain high and that the actors are constantly in pursuit of a clearly articulated objective. This is what will make the play interesting. Playing the period becomes tedious pretty quickly.

One of the most interesting things, for me, about this period is that it appears to be a time of emancipation for women in Russia, and yet the women in this play all seem to rely on men for their way of life. Anna Petrovna pursues Platonov, and it is indeed admirable that the author does not shame her for such a non-traditional directness about her sexuality, but needs Petrin or Glagolyev to prop her up financially. Through this Chekhov is probably exposing hypocrisy of the time: women are “emancipated”, but unable to provide for themselves in a male-dominated society. Sofya seems to have married Sergey for money (that it turns out he does not have), and then pursues Platonov for a full-fledged relationship, beyond the affair that Anna Petrovna seems to be attempting to establish. Sasha depends on Platonov financially and personally, and tries to kill herself twice upon learning of his alleged (and real) infidelities. Grekova is a student, but pursues Platonov to the point of humiliation at the play’s end.

8. EMPHATIC ELEMENT

I would list character as the emphatic element. The varied relationships throughout the play, the reactions to one another and the realizations and changes that grow through those are what drive the action and what interest us as an audience.

Our table rehearsal and focus on bringing everything back to the text will serve this emphatic element well. By focusing on objective and action we are focusing
on what defines each character – the things they do. Ideally we will leave the table rehearsals with a firm grasp of the given circumstances and strong choices about objectives and actions to accelerate our rate of growth through the blocking and on-stage rehearsals.

9. THEME OR IDEA OF THE PLAY

*Wild Honey* is the story of a man who is cursed by honesty, who wants to do the right thing even though he does not know what that is.

10. ACTION OF THE PLAY

*Act One, Scene One:*

The play begins with several “friends” gathering at the Voynitzev estate for a party being thrown by Anna Petrovna. The Colonel has sent Anna Petrovna some fireworks and the play begins with the Doctor setting some off. The Doctor, the Colonel and Glagolyev all pursue her. She complains about the latter and second former to the first former at the top of the play. We learn that Sergey has just married Sofya and that Anna Petrovna and Sergey are in constant fear of having their debt called in by Petrin. We learn that the Doctor has been seeing Grekova and tried to hide it from Anna Petrovna. Platonov and Sasha arrive and Platonov begins to entertain the group (and himself) by moralizing to them. He embarrasses Grekova and is told off by the Doctor. Then Sofya embarrasses Platonov in front of the group, chastising him for not “doing better” in life. This seems to me to be the play’s inciting incident. From here Platonov causes a scene with Petrin and has to be calmed by Anna Petrovna. Petrin encourages Glagolyev to propose to Anna Petrovna so that he can get his money. The Doctor
and Sergey forgive Platonov and get him to start drinking. Platonov embarrasses Grekova again when he’s supposed to be apologizing to her.

**Act One, Scene Two:**

Sasha gives Osip a plate of food and Osip confides his love for Anna Petrovna. Lunch has ended and the party is now spread across the estate, trying to get moments alone with specific targets. Everyone seems to be looking for Platonov. Platonov has been following Sofya and tells her to leave Sergey, proclaiming that if he could he’d whisk her away. Sofya flees and Platonov again pursues her as Petrin and Glagolyev approach, Petrin encouraging Glagolyev to propose immediately. Grekova searches for Platonov and Sergey searches for Sofya. Sofya tries to get Sergey to leave with her and he tells her to talk to Platonov. Anna Petrovna interrupts Platonov’s pursuit of Sofya and tries to start an affair with him. He tells her he can’t be her lover because he cares too much for her. Glagolyev gets Anna Petrovna alone for a brief second, but then the Colonel interrupts and she flees. Sasha must escort the Colonel home and the Doctor again goes in search of Platonov. Platonov catches up to Sofya and she tells him that Sergey told her to talk to him because he would persuade her to stay. He tells her to go because otherwise he “can’t answer for the consequences”. Grekova interrupts and Sofya flees. Platonov repeatedly kisses Grekova, who wants to know if he loves her. He tells her he doesn’t and she tries to flee, but is interrupted by the Doctor and then Sergey. Sergey thanks Platonov for convincing Sofya to stay – something Platonov wasn’t expecting to hear. Grekova tells off the Doctor and decides to stay for the fireworks. Platonov goes to Anna Petrovna for comfort and she tries to cheer him, only to be cornered once more by Glagolyev. He proposes to her (in his own way) and she evades him. He follows her, Petrin in hot pursuit. Sofya wonders aloud to herself if she is ruining her life or just beginning it. The Colonel returns for the fireworks and she
follows him in. Osip watches the fireworks and violently stabs his knife into the garden bench.

**Act Two, Scene One:**

Platonov returns home to demand to know if Sasha loves him. He insults her and is pleased to learn she can fight with him. He goes towards his house to stay with her when Anna Petrovna, who has come over to try to whisk him away, interrupts him. She seduces him and they are about to depart when Sasha begins to call for Platonov from the house. He tells Anna Petrovna to wait while he gets her to sleep. Osip appears, telling Anna Petrovna that he’ll kill Platonov should he ever harm her. Platonov returns and Anna Petrovna tries to whisk him away, but Dr. Triletzky arrives hoping to sleep at Platonov’s house. Platonov sends him off, informing him he must operate on the storekeeper. Platonov returns to Anna Petrovna, but the Doctor again interrupts them. Platonov shames the Doctor, triggering his own guilt in the process. The Doctor, feeling sorry for Platonov, goes off. Anna Petrovna returns for Platonov and he tries to clear his conscience by saying his actions are not his own. She tells him off, but then they are interrupted by a nearby gunshot. She thinks it is Osip, come to murder Platonov. She takes him into the trees and the Colonel and Sergey appear, holding rifles. They are blind drunk and have come to wake Platonov by firing their weapons outside his window. He stops them and eventually convinces them to leave. Anna Petrovna calls to him and he goes to her, only to be immediately interrupted by Sasha. He goes in her direction and Anna Petrovna stops him. The Doctor, returning with Petrin in his arms, interrupts them. Platonov slips into the house to put Sasha to sleep and Anna Petrovna must again hide behind the trees. The Doctor sends Petrin walking home along the railroad tracks and Petrin exclaims that he is going to take Anna Petrovna to court. Petrin trips and seems to pass out and the Doctor heads towards the house in pursuit of sleep, only to be interrupted by Platonov, returning from putting Sasha to bed. Platonov sends him off. Anna Petrovna
chastises Platonov and Sasha, who thinks Anna Petrovna has come to invite them riding, interrupts them. Sasha goes in to change and Anna Petrovna leaves, giving Platonov the option to come to her if he wishes. The Doctor returns and Platonov tells Sasha she must put him to bed. He goes towards Anna Petrovna, but trips over Petrin. While philosophizing with Petrin, Sofya taps on Platonov’s window. Believing her to be Sasha, he goes to her making proclamations of love and fidelity and she leaps into his arms. Sasha appears at the window and Platonov must convince Sofya to meet him at the new summerhouse while simultaneously convincing Sasha that nothing is happening. Platonov asks Petrin for advice and then, upon hearing a train whistle wrestles with the idea of running away entirely. Sasha appears and Platonov flees towards Anna Petrovna, only to be interrupted by Osip. Platonov then runs in the direction of Sofya. Osip lays on the tracks to kill himself, revealing to Sasha that Platonov has left her for Anna Petrovna. Sasha tries to kill herself and Osip chases her. They trip over Petrin and pull him off the tracks, saving him from the oncoming train.

Act Two, Scene Two:

Sofya comes to Platonov’s house to reprimand him for missing their rendezvous yet again and to tell him that he must get his act together because she has told Sergey they are lovers. Platonov asks her to take care of things and she makes a plan for them to leave immediately, departing herself to pack her things. Marko appears with a summons for Platonov to a court date under the charge of assaulting Grekova. Platonov sends Marko to Grekova with a letter saying he cannot accept because he’ll be going away, promising Marko three rubles upon completion of his errand. Osip arrives and tries to kill Platonov, but is interrupted by Sasha. He leaves them there. Platonov tries to win Sasha back, unknowingly revealing that (much to her surprise) Sofya has been his lover, not Anna Petrovna, as Sasha had thought. Sasha leaves Platonov. Platonov beats himself up over it. Anna Petrovna arrives and tries again to start something with him,
revealing that she must marry Glagolyev to save herself financially. She leaves in search of Glagolyev to get money to take Platonov on a trip. Platonov decides to go with her, but opens the door to leave and is blocked by Sergey. Sergey points a gun at Platonov, but breaks down. Glagolyev walks in on the two broken men and asks Platonov (in his own way) if he has been having an affair with Anna Petrovna. Platonov tells him “there is nothing but corruption under the sun” and leaves with Sergey’s pistol. Glagolyev asks Sergey to corroborate and Sergey accidentally gives Glagolyev the impression that Platonov and Anna did have an affair. Anna returns and Glagolyev informs her he is leaving for Paris – alone. Anna berates Sergey for losing the estate, in the process discovering that Sofya and Platonov are lovers. Sofya appears looking for Platonov, who is late for their rendezvous, only to be encountered with Anna Petrovna and Sergey. An argument begins but is interrupted by a gunshot offstage. The two women accuse Sergey of killing Platonov by letting him have the pistol. Platonov returns and informs the group that two peasants have shot and killed Osip. Platonov berates them for not having sympathy for him and tells them that he has decided he wants to live. He begins to exhibit symptoms of hallucinating, saying that it is raining outside. The Colonel arrives, informing the group that Sasha has tried to poison herself. Sofya and Anna Petrovna run off in search of Sasha’s forgiveness, with Sergey in hot pursuit to try to keep them out of trouble. The Colonel berates Platonov and Platonov begs the Colonel to send the Doctor. The Colonel leaves as Grekova appears. Grekova confesses her love to Platonov and he promises that, when he feels better, he will seduce her. At this moment the Doctor, Anna Petrovna, Sofya, Sasha, Sergey and the Colonel enter to see Platonov and Grekova in an embrace on the couch. Chaos ensues. Sofya grabs the gun and wants to shoot Platonov. Marko enters and asks for his three rubles. Platonov distracts everyone and, in the play’s climax, escapes out the window. Everyone pursues him, fearing that he will escape on a departing train. The “world falls apart” and we discover Platonov running down the railroad tracks, disoriented. The train hits him.
11. DRAMATIC METAPHOR

*Wild Honey* is like watching a train wreck in slow motion. We will see everything going horribly wrong piece by piece, but not be able to do anything about it.

12. MOOD

The mood of the play begins in a light and positive place as everyone gathers at the party. From the beginning we see that people are hiding things and as more and more is revealed the mood will become tense, awkward and at times unbearable… In a good way. Getting through the somewhat lengthy exposition of the first act is going to be a tremendous challenge in terms of keeping the audience engaged and entertained. I hope that within the emotional realism of the playing style that the audience will go from moments of holding their breath to laughing uproariously and then back again, sometimes within seconds. The mood should darken and intensify as the play progresses in to the second act and Platonov continues to dig himself deeper and deeper “into the mire”. The moments of laughter will be absolutely necessary given the darkness and the intensity of the situation that Platonov finds himself in.

13. CHARACTERS

Platonov: Qualities: intelligent, charming, abrasive, condescending, self-obsessed

Metaphor: a bull in a china shop

Rhythmic/Musical Quality: Polarized between sharp and smooth
Major Desire: To escape the reality his life has become
Main Action: Causes the whole mess with his promises

Anna P: Qualities: intelligent, empowered, charming
Metaphor: a bird in a windstorm
Rhythmic/Musical Quality: like a trumpet she can be both cool and alarmingly brassy
Major Desire: to feel alive
Main Action: try to establish an affair with Platonov

Sofya: Qualities: spoiled, beautiful, sweet
Metaphor: an overgrown child
Rhythmic/Musical Quality: like a siren
Major Desire: to be loved and spoiled in a truly romantic way
Main Action: pursue whichever man she thinks can give her this desire

Sasha: Qualities: simple, loyal, kind, moral
Metaphor: she is a wallflower
Rhythmic/Musical Quality: a pleasant and easily ignorable drone that rarely plays at a loud volume
Major Desire: to lead a simple and wholesome life with her family
Main Action: do the right thing

Grekova: Qualities: nerdy, shy, fragile, closet romantic
Metaphor: the runt of the litter
Rhythmic/Musical Quality: nasal and controlled
Major Desire: to be loved
Main Action: find out if Platonov loves her
Doctor: Qualities: boorish, heavy drinker, clever, fun loving
Metaphor: a grown-up frat boy
Rhythmic/Musical Quality: a bit sloppy
Major Desire: instant gratification
Main Action: seeking pleasure

Sergey: Qualities: intelligent, self-conscious, a doormat
Metaphor: cellophane
Rhythmic/Musical Quality: soft, gentle
Major Desire: happiness
Main Action: Pleasing Sofya

Colonel: Qualities: loud, drunkard, sentimental
Metaphor: the uncle no one wants at the wedding
Rhythmic/Musical Quality: boisterous and bellowing
Major Desire: to wed Anna Petrovna
Main Action: winning over Anna Petrovna

Glagolyev: Qualities: long-winded, boring, morally upstanding, has money
Metaphor: a fish out of water
Rhythmic/Musical Quality: slow, drawn out, dull
Major Desire: to wed Anna Petrovna
Main Action: maintaining the moral high ground

Petrin: Qualities: conniving, miserly, snooty
Metaphor: a puppet master
Rhythmic/Musical Quality: raspy, serpentine
Major Desire: to get his money from the Voynitzev estate
Main Action: tries to get it via Glagolyev marrying Anna Petrovna
Osip: Qualities: romantic, dangerous, rough
Metaphor: a wolf in sheep’s clothing
Rhythmic/Musical Quality: slow, dark
Major Desire: to love Anna Petrovna
Main Action: to protect Anna Petrovna’s honour

Marko: Qualities: polite, professional, neat
Rhythmic/Musical Quality: clipped, pleasant
Major Desire: to earn tips for his services
Main Action: to do his job well

Anfisa: Qualities: quiet, stupid, scared
Rhythmic/Musical Quality: staccato, shrill
Major Desire: to do a good job
Main Action: please Anna Petrovna

Marina: Qualities: polite, professional
Rhythmic/Musical Quality: measured, slow
Major Desire: to do a good job
Main Action: please Anna Petrovna

Peasants: Qualities: dirty, gross, ill bred, slow
Rhythmic/Musical Quality: swampy, mushy
Major Desire: to be praised for killing Osip
Main Action: killing Osip and showing off his corpse
14. STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS

Like the major works of Chekhov, *Wild Honey* is divided into four continuously running acts; though Frayn arranges them into four scenes over two acts. Act One, Scene One is the longest at 34 pages. It is full of exposition, letting us in on the Voynitzev’s true debt situation, Anna Petrovna’s multiple suitors, the Doctor’s relationship with Grekova, Sergey and Sofya’s recent wedding, and Platonov’s behaviour the previous summer. The play’s inciting incident takes place in this scene, when Sofya asks Platonov “why haven’t you done better?” embarrassing him in front of the group and sending his behaviour in a nasty direction. In this scene we also see Osip bring a gift to Anna Petrovna and learn that Petrin wants Glagolyev to marry Anna Petrovna so that he can collect the money he is owed. The complications begin in this scene as well, with Platonov humiliating Grekova not once, but twice, the Doctor being caught in his feelings for Grekova, and evidence of Platonov and Sofya’s past surfacing just a little.

In Act One, Scene Two we see nothing but complications: Sasha brings a plate of food to Osip and he confides in her his love for Anna Petrovna. Anna Petrovna is trying to set up an affair with Platonov while avoiding Glagolyev, who might just propose any minute. Platonov is continually trying to steal a moment alone with Sofya to urge her to leave while she still can. Grekova is searching for Platonov to ask why he keeps “following” her. Sergey is searching for Sofya so that he can start the fireworks. The Doctor is searching for Platonov because Petrin has given him his money to hold. Sasha must take the Colonel home because he is too drunk. In all of this, Platonov ends up convincing Sofya to stay – the opposite of his intentions, and is left alone at the party without Sasha.

Act Two, Scene One finds Platonov returning home to reconcile with Sasha. Unfortunately, the complications continue as Anna Petrovna has come to find him, Osip is watching them, Sergey is out shooting with the Colonel, the Doctor
wants to sleep over, Petrin is blind drunk and Sofya turns up hoping to begin an affair. The scene climaxes in Platonov running off in the direction of Anna Petrovna, only to be diverted towards Sofya by the emergence of Osip from the forest. Osip goes to kill himself, but then must save Sasha from killing herself. In the end, they both pull Petrin out of the way of the oncoming train, unintentionally keeping the Voynitzevs in debt.

Act Two, Scene Two is, in a way, an extended epilogue – taking place three weeks after the action of the rest of the play. Platonov and Sofya have been carrying on a terrible affair in which he is always late for their meetings. However, a new set of complications begins, as she has confessed the affair to Sergey and they must take action. They agree to leave together at once. Marko serves Platonov with a summons and he sends a letter back to Grekova saying that he cannot make their court date because he will be gone forever, promising to pay Marko three rubles once he has completed his errand. Osip attempts to murder Platonov, but is interrupted by Sasha and cannot do it in front of her. He leaves, vowing that he will, indeed, finish what he has started. Sasha wants to forgive Platonov, but in his attempts to win her back he accidentally reveals that is was Sofya, not Anna Petrovna, with whom he was having an affair. Sasha cannot forgive this immoral cuckolding and leaves him for good. Anna Petrovna shows up, chastising Platonov for ignoring her and again trying to start an affair, revealing that she is going to marry Glagolyev because she has no other option. She proposes to take him on a trip to cure him of his melancholy. Sergey interrupts Platonov’s attempt at following Anna Petrovna, sending them both into a depression. Glagolyev turns up, demanding to know if Anna Petrovna and Platonov have been carrying on an affair. Platonov leaves, presumably to kill himself, and Sergey misinforms Glagolyev that there has, indeed, been an affair. Glagolyev tells Anna Petrovna that he will not marry her, leaving her and Sergey with nothing. Anna Petrovna learns it is Sofya with whom Platonov has been carrying on and, sure enough, Sofya turns up. The complications continue to
mount as Platonov returns. The Colonel then rushes in to ask Platonov to come
to Sasha’s side – she has attempted suicide. Anna Petrovna and Sofya rush off
to beg Sasha’s forgiveness. Platonov begs the Colonel to get him a doctor, as he
is very ill. Grekova shows up and professes her love for Platonov. Everyone
walks in on those two together and chaos breaks out. Sofya is going to shoot
Platonov when Marko shows up for his three rubles and Platonov jumps out the
window to escape. Everyone chases after him. In the end a train hits him. This is
an accident, as he is hallucinating and delirious.

So… How will we rehearse all this? I hope to rehearse in a unit-by-unit style,
making sure that we do not shortchange the constant shifts in dramatic action. To
me this is more effective than constantly running the whole scenes, which will
probably be between twenty and forty-five minutes in length each. This way,
when we do run them, there will be lots of “connective tissue” in place and things
should naturally come together quickly. By focusing on each character’s
objectives and actions we should clearly tell the story. I will try to rehearse at a
pace of about four to five pages per hour, but this will depend a lot on the scene.
Act One Scene One may take more time because it usually has several people
on stage, whereas the rest of the play is mainly a series of two and three-person
scenes. This could change things quite a bit, though I will endeavour to maintain
the page to hour ratio as mentioned. There is a potential trap in focusing too
much on the first scene due to all of the important exposition and the amount of
characters on stage.

**15. DIRECTORIAL APPROACH**

It is my hope to create an environment in which the actors feel safe taking risks in
exploration of their objectives and actions from whatever angle they choose. I
strongly believe that it is best for the actor to discover the moment-to-moment
reality of a scene rather than have it laid out by the director. This gives an actor a sense of ownership over what they are doing and allows them to trust their impulses, leading to them sharing their best ideas. I hope to do this by being thoroughly prepared (for when I need to offer suggestions and tweaks), but letting the actors articulate as much as possible and then building off of what they say. It is my belief that this will encourage them to trust themselves and, again, that this will lead to their best possible work.

The cornerstone of my approach will be to bring all of the play’s action back to the text. This does not mean placing the text on a pedestal; in fact it is the opposite. We will honour the play with a vital and nuanced production that will bring the audience into the world of the play by honouring the action of the story. This will mean an emphasis on the moment-to-moment details, as mentioned previously in this analysis. This type of approach should lead to a great variety of dynamics and rhythm in the playing as well. This approach will also allow us to “impulse block” the play, meaning that the blocking should come naturally out of their textual understanding of the relationships between whomever is on stage. I will be prepared with blocking in terms of where I see things happening, so that if and when we become stuck I can provide a suggestion that will lead to a permanent or temporary solution, allowing us to move forward. Again, this is all about having the actors make the discoveries as much as possible.

16. DESIGN WORDS

These people are cramped. They are bursting out of this world – a world they are trapped in. I hope to create a sense of continuous space upwards (with the trees) and to the back wall of the theatre, so that it feels the world keeps going off in all directions. This will help to emphasize that they are in the middle of nowhere. I would like the set to be suggestive, meaning that we do not need to create entire
rooms (especially for the interior scenes), but rather provide just enough so that the audience can complete the space in their mind’s eye.

I hope for the lighting to be ethereal and beautiful. Dark with bursts of colour coming through.

The costumes can help in the feeling of being trapped by perhaps being slightly too small or tight, helping to elaborate on this visual metaphor. It would also help if they were heavy, helping to weigh down the characters. All this without dampening the sexual energy that runs rampant through the play means striking the right balance costume-wise will be no small feat.

Ultimately, I do not want to shy away from colour. In fact, lots of colour would probably be good. It is summer and these people are coming out for the first time in search of other humans, especially for the purposes of sex.

I want the sound to be loud. The transitional music should carry us into the appropriate mood for the upcoming scene. The trains should rumble the auditorium and, if possible, pan through the various speakers as they “pass”.

The trains in Act Two (and especially the final sequence at the play’s end) are the most important design moments. (We will get furthest by suggesting a train through lights and sound.) They need to happen without visual stagehands – especially the house coming apart after Platonov jumps out the window.
17. AUDIENCE ORIENTATION

The Frederic Wood Theatre has about four hundred seats and is in a permanent proscenium configuration. The audience is wider than the stage, something that will greatly influence our staging.

Things I like about the space: its depth of stage, its height and fly gallery, and its downstage playing area. I think we can use the depth and height to help create a sense of vast space around the scene locations. We can also use the fly gallery to bring trees in and out, helping to frame each scene. It seems to me the strongest choice to resist being seduced into playing too much upstage – something that is easy to do in the Freddie. We will endeavour to play most (if not all) things in the bottom half of the stage, hopefully in front of the proscenium arch.

While it is a large theatre in seating, the Freddie is small enough to demand nuanced performances. The wide audience configuration leads me into believing a kind of V-shape with the point being upstage centre might be a smart way to think of the staging. Reacting out towards the house will be important to keep the audience engaged and “with” the performers. Diagonals as opposed to straight lines will also do us a good deal of service in the staging. In Binning 128 it will be important to remember that the playing space is larger and that the reactions need to come out. It will also be important to reinforce that things are going to grow and adapt in the Freddie – something to be embraced (repeating myself…) rather than feared.

One thing about the actor/audience relationship that is important to me in this (and any) space is that the actors acknowledge the audience by letting them in. This means pausing for laughter when necessary, but also letting them into the emotional moments by giving the audience time to adjust to all the sudden
changes this play serves up. That said, we cannot rehearse for a laugh, and in fact, the laughs will likely come in different places depending on the individual crowds, so the actors will have to feel this out as best they can. Perhaps we can invite some audience in the final technical rehearsals to begin this adjustment.

18. THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

The women all believe everything Platonov says – this seems to be a given. The rules are realistic – nothing magic happens (except for the “theatrical magic” of sets moving and flying) in the world of the play. We will have to convincingly portray that characters have not overheard the “French scenes” just before them (except when we want the opposite), but this should be easy to establish with proper staging. This being Chekhov, time moves at an accelerated rate. What might be twenty minutes in real time are potentially forty or sixty minutes in the play. This should not present any real problem in terms of continuing to play everything “for real”.

19. SPECIAL PROBLEMS

The technical challenges of this play are many: the train effects will be difficult to stage effectively. Hardest of all will be the final sequence where Platonov’s house comes apart (the stage direction reads “the world falls apart”) to reveal the train tracks beyond. The whole design team will have to be on the same page in order to make this work. The key will be planning these things along the way so that they don’t just come up on tech weekend.
CHAPTER THREE

Production Journal

September – December 2009:

I arrive at UBC armed with what I believe to be an excellent list of plays to do for my thesis production. I want to do a show in the Frederic Wood Theatre (a big proscenium with four hundred seats and quite similar to the auditoriums that many of this country’s regional theatres perform in) with more technical demands than I have yet to encounter, not to mention more actors. This is both to challenge myself as a director and take advantage of the fact that I can actually do a big show while at UBC, something that is simply beyond my means as an independent artist.

My first exposure to the group of actors who will make up the senior class in the year of my thesis project (their Romeo & Juliet auditions) is encouraging – and there are lots of talented women. I begin to reconsider the list of plays I have prepared, and begin searching for something with more good roles for females.

My hope is to do something new to Vancouver artists and audiences is coupled with a desire to direct a play without a lengthy academic history. This eliminates the major works of Chekhov, who has written some of the greatest women’s roles of all time (in my humble opinion), though I did look towards these as I searched for possible titles. I encounter David Hare’s Platonov, a version of Chekhov’s first extant play, but find it to be slow-moving in the first act and, ultimately, inaccessible. It is at this point that I learn that Michael Frayn has translated and adapted all the major works of Chekhov, several shorts, and the same first play
that Hare has a version of. Frayn has titled his *Wild Honey*. I check it out of the library.

My first reading of *Wild Honey* is exciting. I instantly begin picturing various UBC students in the roles. It reminds me of George F. Walker’s *Nothing Sacred*, of which I saw a very successful university production in Saskatoon a couple of years prior. The characters are all either thirty and under or over fifty – something which to me seems appropriate for University-aged actors who are mostly in their early twenties. The four women’s roles are incredibly well drawn and exciting. It will provide the types of directing challenges I am looking for. With the deadline for submissions at hand I go with my gut instinct and put *Wild Honey*, a play I have just read for the first time, at the top of my thesis list. My second choice is McDonagh’s *Inishmore* and my third choice is Moses’ *Outrage*.

Here is my production proposal, as submitted:

**WILD HONEY**

*The Play:* WILD HONEY by Anton Chekhov, Translated and Adapted by Michael Frayn


*Local Production History:* I found a review from 2001. That appears to be the most recent production in Vancouver.

The rights are available through Samuel French for $75 per performance.

This proposal is for the Frederic Wood Theatre season.

*Play Description:*

THE SEAGULL meets NOISES OFF in WILD HONEY, Michael Frayn’s translation and adaptation of an early, untitled play by Anton Chekhov also
known as FATHERLESSNESS, A PLAY WITHOUT A TITLE and PLATONOV. This darkly comic farce centers on Mikhail Platonov, a provincial schoolmaster disillusioned at where his once promising life has led him. Many of the characters and themes addressed are seen as sketches of what would appear in Chekhov’s later, most revered works. The story takes place in a provincial country estate where a widowed landowner, Anna Petrovna, returns for the summer after spending the long winter in Moscow. All of her local friends and hangers-on gather for a welcoming party, including two elderly suitors, the district doctor, and Platonov and his wife. Anna Petrovna and two other women vie for Platonov’s attention. The play moves from lighter comedy, through farce, to dark and painful comedy in its final scenes.

The Play and The Department:
The play offers terrific opportunities for set, lighting and costume designers, not just because it is set in another time period, but because the demands of the set and lighting design are essential to the success of the production. The crew and technicians will have lots to do. It’s a terrific ensemble piece that offers eight parts of substance for men and four for women. There are also two or four minor roles for men, depending on if they are doubled. The original production also featured two minor roles for women. This marks twelve roles of substance and eighteen roles in total, if done as in the original. All roles can be cast from the student population.

Production Information: The set needs to be able to both open and close, as well as turn and move on a track quickly and without visible stagehands. There is call for smoke and fireworks, as well as the smell of sulphur.
A Chekhov farce from the author of Noises Off and Copenhagen should have wide appeal at the box office. One would hope that many university
and high school students could have this play tied in with their respective curricula. Geezers should also be into it.

**The Director and The Play:** WILD HONEY provides excellent directing and academic challenges for me. To say there will be a wealth of research material to explore is to make a great understatement. The large scope of the production and enormous cast will be unlike anything I have yet encountered. It is a rare opportunity for a director to get to tackle a play so big.

**January – April 2010:**

Word comes down that *Wild Honey* is officially my thesis play, taking the March 2011 slot in the Freddie Wood.

Further reading of *Wild Honey* is revealing to me a play that could be taken two ways: as a “Chekhovian” piece where everything is played for serious emotional stakes and the comedy comes from the absurdity of the characters’ respective situations; or as a broad farce full of oversized physicality, sight gags and comic “bits”. I favour the former.

Platonov begins to strike me as a truly unique and interesting character. Here is a man who behaves abominably, at his own admission at the play’s end, yet the women of the play are all in love with him. This will be a major challenge – to clearly show why the women are all in love with him while still honouring what he does. Fortunately, he does not seem to act out of any sort of maliciousness, but rather out of an ultimate desire to do what is right. He just doesn’t seem to have a clue what that is. Or, rather, he wants to do the right thing but is not strong enough to resist temptation. He is (and it seems all the characters are) trying to
escape from a less-than-ideal life and find something truly fulfilling. There is also something relatable in the fact that, at twenty-seven, he is already heading into what we might now term “a midlife crisis” – lamenting how he never lived up to his past potential. This strikes a nerve in me, having come out of my undergraduate program ready to conquer the world only to realize that by reaching one summit I was at the base of an entirely larger mountain with more people attempting to climb it and, worst of all - no one cared about the accomplishments I had made climbing the previous one. There is a certain malaise that sets in, realizing that adult life is not what it was made out to be, or at least, not as easy as you had hoped.

Anna Petrovna is also quite interesting to me. Apparently Chekhov first offered this play to an actress, presumably attempting to entice her with the role. She is a woman who, as Frayn points out, is allowed to pursue her sexual desires while remaining unhumiliated for so-doing. Yes, she loses her estate, but she is not “slut-shamed” or deemed to be any less of a woman/lady for doing what she does. In fact, Sofya too, while potentially ruining her marriage (Platonov tells her he’s “ruined her”), also remains unhumiliated in the play. Chekhov (and Frayn after him) does not judge these women; he simply allows them to exist, pursuing their objectives whether it is right or wrong. For a play with multiple mentions of the emancipation of women, it seems no coincidence that these women are allowed to behave in a more traditionally “male” fashion with regards to their sexuality. It is also curious, and no doubt a social point of the original playwright’s, that for all the talk of women’s emancipation, Anna Petrovna, Sofya and Sasha all need a man to provide for them financially.

I approach Ron Fedoruk to design the set and/or lights, but he seems to think that the opportunities will need to be there for students. I ask for his best students and he recommends Amanda Larder as the set designer. He says that of all his students, she is the one in whom he is most confident and excited. Everyone tells
me she is a talented visual artist and I get a good vibe off of her so I am okay going ahead with her as the set designer. Ron tells me that Wladimiro Woyno, a student whom I have not met because he has been interning at the Banff Centre for the Arts all year will likely be the lighting designer. Considering he's been away for a year honing his craft I am confident in Ron’s suggestion. I also figure we can keep the lights relatively simple if need be.

Stephen Heatley and Allison Green ask me to peruse the portfolio of an incoming MFA student in Costume Design. Her name is Vanessa Imeson and she is from Windsor, Ontario. Her portfolio is nothing short of impressive, featuring both contemporary and period work. I am happy to have her on board if she wants to do it. I can tell she will be exceptional.

Over the summer I will direct Conor McPherson’s Rum And Vodka for my outside show. I am glad to be getting to focus on playwrights I like for all of my projects at UBC.

May- August 2010:

Back to Saskatoon mid-May until the end of June. Stage-managing a great play: It’s Raining In Barcelona by Pao Miro. The director, Jim Guedo, was my undergraduate directing teacher and is a truly inspiring artist to watch. He always has such a handle on things and is a good reminder to me that preparation is vital to good direction. His staging is so effective it makes this particular trio of actors seem better than they are. The effect of his design and staging is so strong that it seems to me the audience must think: “this looks so good, the acting must be good too”.
July is filled with *Rum And Vodka* rehearsals in Vancouver. Doing a one-man show with only a chair onstage seems like the opposite of *Wild Honey*, but it’s a great reminder that it is important to always keep an eye (and ear) on where the story is at all times. John Cooper’s supervision leaves this message embedded in my brain and I am forever grateful.

My grandfather passes away in Montreal the night before we take *Rum And Vodka* to Saskatoon. Without his financial support I would have had to go greatly into debt for the first year of graduate school. *Wild Honey* is the type of thing he would have enjoyed – a complex plot and excellent deployment of language.

Vanessa has been in contact and has already started to compile a lot of great images for the show. For me it has ultimately remained on the back burner, but I am beginning to get excited once more.

**September – December 2010:**

Back to school and ready to direct. Doing a remount of *Rum And Vodka* in the DSS in October as an extra event in the Theatre @ UBC season. I think it will play better in that space than the big Broadway Theatre in Saskatoon. Also slated to direct Will Eno’s *The Flu Season* for the Player’s Club in November. It’s nice to have some directing to keep me sharp heading into *Wild Honey*.

I finally meet Wlad and have preliminary meetings with him, Amanda and Vanessa. It remains unknown who will do the sound design. While a couple of key moments rely on this, I manage to stay calm about it.

Auditions are held September 10th with callbacks set for the 12th. I have a strong idea in my head about which actors I might want for which roles, with two or three
frontrunners for each part. The auditions, in my mind, are an opportunity for the actors to show me something I have not yet seen from them, to reaffirm my positive feelings, and, at the very least, to present themselves as capable. I would never head into an audition blindly, not knowing whom I might cast in the lead role(s) if I could at all avoid it.

In these auditions Alex Pangburn shows a nice sensitivity and jumps out as far as intermediate students go. Other than this nothing drastic occurs. I learn Jameson Parker will be unavailable to me because he is doing *Death Of A Salesman* at the Playhouse. He would have been a great guy to have in the cast, but I can live without him. Other than him, I call back all the senior and intermediate BFA students.

At the callbacks they are in groups of three, doing the top of Act Two. This is essentially two scenes: Platonov asking Sasha if she loves him and then Anna Petrovna tracking down Platonov to attempt to seduce him. Some of the women are reading both parts. I am on the lookout for how they handle the adjustments I give them, as well as for natural chemistry between actors. Claire Hesselgrave stands out as Anna Petrovna, showing both a great strength and deep sensitivity. Christine Quintana reads as Sasha, and while not physically suited to the part, makes an impression and I hope to use her in some capacity. David Kaye and Ben Whipple are the frontrunners for Platonov; David seems to be the strongest male (on that day, anyway) and Ben takes the direction I give him quite well.

I go to the casting meeting on September 17th armed with two lists, one featuring David Kaye as Platonov and one with Ben Whipple in the role. David Kaye is in higher demand for the rest of the season and I elect to go with Ben Whipple. In my gut I know that it is the right choice, as it was my first impulse going into the auditions. I cast Sarah Goodwill as Sofya and Mishelle Cutler as Sasha, both of whom I can see in the roles though they were not my first choices. I cast
Christine Quintana as Grekova, a role in which I believe she will excel. I am going to offer Petrin to Andrew Cohen, but he has an opportunity to perform out of province during our rehearsal period and I suspect he is only going to do the show if I cast him as Platonov.

Sure enough, Andrew chooses the out-of-province opportunity and I select Mitch Hookey to play Petrin. I was impressed by his work in *The Marriage of Bette & Boo* last year and am confident he can carry the role. The final cast list is as follows:

Platonov: Ben Whipple  
Anna Petrovna: Claire Hesselgrave  
Sergey: Eric Freilich  
Sofya: Sarah Goodwill  
Sasha: Mishelle Cutler  
Grekova: Christine Quintana  
Dr. Triletzky: David Kaye  
Col. Triletzky: Andrew Lynch  
Glagolyev: Ryan Warden  
Petrin: Mitch Hookey  
Osip: Alex Pangburn  
Marko: Scott Button  
Maids: Christine Bortolin & Jordan Kerbs

It’s a good group and I am happy with all of the casting. I really do believe that casting is a large portion of the director’s job and, when done right, sets everything else up to go right, too.

Amanda and I discuss the importance of the trees and the strengths of a suggestive set. She wants to try to create a single structure that will serve as all three settings. She begins to research Russian architecture and brings in some really interesting images. Seems as though lots of Russian country houses and churches had intricate carvings in them, seemingly for the purpose of casting a specific shadow. She also brings in a painting – Whistler’s “Nocturne in Black &
Gold." It really speaks to the play, with a terrific stream of colours popping out of a pitch-black background. We have agreed upon the importance of creating a space that seems to go off indefinitely in all directions and the painting really supports this. We share the image with Wlad and Vanessa to help them in their planning.

Vanessa begins to take photographs of the actors to help her in her renderings. She and I meet to discuss characters’ ages, hairstyles, facial hair (this will also depend on the actors and what is laid out in the text – Sergey is not to have a beard, for example), costume props, etc. The first few things she has pulled are looking appropriate. We have been trying to determine a way to make the ladies costumes flattering physically while still honouring the period. Vanessa is confident that a corseted style (without actual corsets) ought to do the trick. She is concerned that she will not have the resources to build enough costumes. I tell her to stay the course and trust herself and that we will make do with whatever happens. It is my reasoning that if it is within the budget, then there is no reason why we should not be able to build the costumes we need or alter what is there accordingly.

Wlad expresses an interest in dance lighting (side lighting). I’m all for it as long as we can see the actors faces. He tells me that in the night scenes this will make the actors seem to pop out of nowhere. This sounds ideal to me. These design meetings and planning sessions seem to be paying off.

In October I begin to meet the cast members individually for coffee to discuss their initial responses to the play and their roles. I want to find out how they like to work and talk to them about how I want to work. Seems like this might be a good way to nip any misinterpretations in the bud, as well as giving each performer my undivided attention early on. Having never worked with anyone in the cast before it seems especially important to me to get at least mildly acquainted with
everyone well in advance. Hopefully, this will save us trouble in the future. It is an approach I have never tried before, but it seems low-risk and like it will help acquaint us with each other before the rehearsals begin.

In November, Ron suggests that Amanda and I begin “kibitzing” once a week to just check in. We do and it is quite helpful to our progress. She has come up with a structure that is two pieces that lock together in two different configurations, giving us the verandah plus the exterior and interior of Platonov’s house. Her drawings are incredible and the structure seems like it will work. She is confident that she can make the trees out of rope. If they look anything like her drawings they will be amazing. We remain uncertain how to achieve the final sequence (the world “falling apart” to reveal the train tracks), though we both agree on a motion that we think is strongest – the tracks moving from upstage to down while the set splits sideways and backwards.

In December I am informed that Christina Istrate will be the sound designer. She did makeup for *Far Away* and seems to be a jack-of-all-trades type. We connect on facebook (what a time to be alive…) and agree to meet at the beginning of January.

Rehearsals will begin January 31st. My preliminary draft of a rehearsal schedule looks like this:

Jan 31 – Feb 3 (4 x 4 = 16)  
Feb 6 – 10 (7 + 16 = 24)  
Feb 13 – 17* (5 x 7 = 35)  
Feb 21 – 24 (4 x 4 = 16)  
Feb 27 – Mar 3 (7 + 16 = 24)  
Mar 6 – 10 (7 + 16 = 24)  
TOTAL: 139 hours.

Jan 31: Read-through and designs  
Feb. 1 : pages 173 - 186 (Platonov & Sasha enter)
Feb. 2: pages 186 – 201 (Anna Petrovna enters)
Feb. 3: pages 201 – 215 (Anna Petrovna’s entrance)

Feb. 6: pages 215 – 224 (End of 1.2) / 225 - 241 (Dr. Triletzky’s exit)
Feb. 7: pages 242 – 258 (“Where’s the drink?”)
Feb. 8: pages 258 - 274 (End.)
Feb. 9: Begin blocking 173 - 186
Feb. 10: Block 186 - 201

Feb. 13: Block 201 – 224 / 225 - 241
Feb. 14: Block 242 - 258
Feb. 15: Block 258 - 274
Feb. 16: Finish blocking/Put Together
Feb. 17: Finish blocking/Put Together/ Scene Work

Feb. 21: Scene work
Feb. 22: Scene work
Feb. 23: Scene work
Feb. 24: Scene work

Feb. 27: Scene work 28 pages
Feb. 28: Scene work finish/Put Together
Mar. 1: Put Together/1.1
Mar. 2: 1.1/1.2
Mar. 3: 1.2/2.1

Mar. 6: 2.1/2.2
Mar. 7: Act One with bits
Mar. 8: Act Two with bits
Mar. 9: Run
Mar. 10: Run

THEN TECH*****

This schedule looks to me like it should be effective. I will only call actors when they are needed and hope that this will breed good will among the group. Also, this will allow Ben a night off whenever we tackle the first fifteen pages and I think this will come in handy for him as we progress.
January 2011:

It turns out Christina will not be sound designer and instead the position will belong to Ling Zhong. Ling’s reputation as a hard worker precedes her and in our initial meeting I show her some music I like for the transitions (and the show in general) by a Russian band called Leningrad. We discuss the importance of the train cues and the necessity of panning the trains through the house as they pass through the world of the play.

Vanessa has been given the go-ahead to build what she needs to build, which is ultimately a relief on the costume front after we were temporarily under the impression that we would be limited to what we could pull out of UBC’s existing stock. Everything she has shown me looks great.

Wlad is excited at the possibility of having both a smoke machine (for train effects) and a hazer (for better lighting) and they sound good to me. In fact, the smoke machine seems essential. I wonder why that falls within the domain of the lighting designer. At any rate, we appear to be on the same page.

Amanda and I continue to kibitz. It is clear to me that her structure is going to work. Her Achilles heel seems to be reading the script for clues. Whenever I ask her where the entrances are or how many entrances there are or where the furniture will be she immediately asks what I think. In my Max Stafford-Clark seminar in December, I remember reading a quote from him that said something like “as long as the entrances and furniture are in the right place, the play should block itself”. We begin working and re-working the furniture layouts for Act One, Scene One and Act Two, Scene Two. This, to me, is a curious part of the director/set designer relationship. Having directed many times without a proper designer I have gotten used to placing the furniture myself. I often feel that set designers expect me to tell them where I want the furniture in the scene, so I
wonder whose job this really is to lay these things out. I suppose that’s one good thing about playwrights like Arthur Miller – you always know exactly where everything on stage starts out. While this sort of pre-destination seems to put designers off, they still appear to need me to tell them where I would like the furniture. Maybe this speaks to the experience level of most of the designers I’ve worked with more than anything else.

Some of the actors (Claire, Sarah, David) are in Dead Man’s Cell Phone, which closes just two days before our first read. I will have to remember that they are coming from that show to this one and just hope that they dive right in. Ben is well-rested and feeling good. I am really glad I went with him as Platonov. He possesses many qualities that will come in handy in the role.

Ivan Yastrebov, one of the ASMs for my production of The Flu Season in the fall term, speaks Russian and has agreed to come in to rehearsals to help the actors with the name pronunciations. He’s a good kid and was a treat to work with before.

On February 23rd I am to make a speech for “Arts Wednesday” at a downtown UBC campus. I don’t want to miss a day of rehearsal, but it will be good for the department and probably good experience for me to have to talk about the play.

The rehearsal schedule now looks like this:

- Jan 31: Read-through and design presentations
- Feb. 1:
  - 5:30 – 6: Pronunciations – EVERYONE
  - 6:10 – 7:40: P 173 – 179 (Sergey’s exit) *Add Col. T at 7:00
  - 7:55 – 9:30: P 179 – 186 (Platonov & Sasha enter) *Add Marina and Marko at 8:30
• Feb. 2: pages 186 – 201 (Anna Petrovna enters)

5:30 – 6:50: Pages 186 – 192 (Anna Petrovna’s exit)
7:00 - 8:10: Pages 192 – 197 (Petrin enters)
8:20 – 9:30: Pages 197 – 202 (Osip’s exit) *Add Osip at 8:40

• Feb. 3: pages 201 – 215 (Anna Petrovna’s entrance)

5:30 – 6:50 Pages 202 (Osip’s exit) – 206 (end of 1.1) Anna, Sasha, Glagolyev, Voynitzev, Petrin, Colonel T, Sofya. * Add Platonov and Dr. T at 6:00. ** Grekova not called

7:05 – 8:25 Pages 207 – 212 (Petrin & Glagolyev’s entrance) Sasha, Osip. * Add Voynitzev and Dr. T at 7:35, Platonov and Sofya at 7:45. ** Anna not called.


• Feb. 6: pages 215 – 224 (End of 1.2) / 225 - 241 (Dr. Triletzky’s exit)


12:15 – 1:45 Pages 221 – 228 (Sasha’s exit) Grekova, Platonov, Dr. T, Voynitzev, Anna, Glagolyev, Petrin, Sofya. * start 2.1 at 1:00. -> Platonov, Sasha.

1:45 – 2:45 Lunch

2:45 – 4:15 Pages 228 (AP’s entrance) – 234 (Dr. T’s exit) Platonov, Anna. * Add Sasha and Osip at 3:30. Add Dr. T at 3:45.

4:30 – 6 Pages 234 (AP emerges) – 241 (Sasha & Dr. T’s exit) Anna, Platonov, Colonel T, Voynitzev. * Add Sasha, Petrin and Dr. T at 5:20.
• Feb. 7: pages 242 – 256

* Start 2.2 at 6. Platonov, Sofya

7:05 – 8:25 Pages 248 – 254 Platonov, Sofya
* Add Marko at 7:30.
* Add Osip and Sasha at 8.

8:40 – 9:30 Pages 254 – 256 Platonov, Sasha.

• Feb. 8: pages 256 - 274

5:30 – 6:50 Pages 256 – 262 Platonov, Anna

7:05 – 8:25 Pages 262 – 268 Platonov, Anna, Voynitzev, Glagolyev.
* Add Sofya at 7:30.
* Add First Peasant and Second Peasant at 7:45

8:40 – 9:30 pages 268 – 274 Platonov, Anna, Sofya, Voynitzev, Colonel T, Sasha, Grekova.
* Add Dr. T and Marko at 9.

• Feb. 9: Block 173 – 186

5:30 – 6:50 Pages 173 – 178 Dr. T, Anfisa, Anna, Glagolyev, Voynitzev Colonel T

7:05 – 8:25 Pages 178 – 182 Dr. T, Colonel T, Anna, Glagolyev, Voynitzev, Sofya
* Add Marina at 7:45

8:40 – 9:30 Pages 182 – 186 Dr. T, Colonel T, Anna, Glagolyev, Voynitzev, Sofya, Marina, Marko, Grekova

• Feb. 10: Block 186 - 201

5:30 – 6:50 Pages 186 – 192 Anna, Dr. T, Platonov, Sasha, Voynitzev, Colonel T, Glagolyev
7:05 – 8:25 Pages 192 – 196 Platonov, Sofya, Grekova, Voynitzev, Colonel T, Dr. T, Glagolyev, Sasha

8:40 – 9:30 Pages 196 – 201 Platonov, Sofya, Voynitzev, Colonel T, Glagolyev, Petrin, Osip, Sasha

• Feb. 13: Block 201 – 221

10:30 – 12 Pages 201 – 206 Platonov, Anna, Voynitzev, Petrin, Sasha, Osip, Colonel T, Glagolyev, Sofya

* Add Dr. T and Grekova at 11

12:15 – 1:45 Pages 207 – 212 Sasha, Osip, Anna, Voynitzev, Dr. T, Sofya, Platonov

1:45 – 2:45 LUNCH

2:45 – 4:15 Pages 212 – 217 Petrin, Glagolyev, Sofya, Platonov, Anna, Grekova, Voynitzev (Dr. T has one offstage line on 213... Dave?)

4:30 – 6 Pages 217 – 221 Platonov, Anna, Glagolyev, Petrin, Colonel T, Dr. T, Sasha, Voynitzev, Sofya

• Feb. 14: Block 221 – 242

10:30 – 12 Pages 221 – 227 Platonov, Sofya, Grekova, Dr. T, Voynitzev, Anna, Glagolyev, Petrin, Osip

* Add Sasha at 11:15

12:15 – 1:45 Pages 227 – 232 Platonov, Sasha, Anna

* Add Osip at 1

1:45 – 2:45 LUNCH

2:45 – 4:15 Pages 232 – 238 Platonov, Anna, Dr. T

* Add Voynitzev and Colonel T at 3:15

4:30 – 6 Pages 238 – 242 Platonov, Anna, Dr. T, Petrin, Sasha

• Feb. 15: Block 242 - 262

10:30 – 12 Pages 242 – 247 Platonov, Petrin, Sofya, Sasha, Osip
12:15 – 1:45 Pages 247 – 252 Platonov, Sofya
* Add Marko at 12:45

2:45 – 4:15 Pages 252 – 256 Platonov, Osip, Sasha,

4:30 – 6 Pages 256 – 262 Platonov, Anna

• Feb. 16: Block 262 – 274/Work Bits

10:30 – 12 Pages 262 – 267 Platonov, Voynitzev, Glagolyev, Anna, Sofya

12:15 – 1:45 Pages 267 – 272 Platonov, Voynitzev, Anna, Sofya, First Peasant, Second Peasant, Colonel T, Grekova

1:45 – 2:45 LUNCH

2:45 – 3:30 Pages 272 – 274 Platonov, Grekova, Dr. T, Sasha, Anna, Sofya, Voynitzev, Colonel T, Marko

3:45 – 6 Pages 173 – 186 Dr. T, Anfisa, Anna, Voynitzev, Glagolyev, Colonel T, Sofya, Grekova, Marina, Marko

Bits TBA – Cast members will be notified by the end of the day Feb. 15 as to what will be rehearsed in this time slot

• Feb. 17: Put Together

1:00 Put Together Company

Feb. 21: Pages 173 – 186

5:30 – 6:50 Pages 173 – 178 Dr. T, Anfisa, Anna, Glagolyev, Voynitzev
Colonel T

7:05 – 8:05 Pages 178 – 181 Dr. T, Colonel T, Anna, Glagolyev, Voynitzev, Sofya

8:20 – 9:30 Pages 181 – 186 Dr. T, Colonel T, Anna, Glagolyev, Voynitzev, Sofya, Marina, Marko, Grekova
• Feb. 22: Pages 186 - 201

5:30 – 6:50 Pages 186 – 192 Anna, Dr. T, Platonov, Sasha, Voynitzev, Colonel T, Glagolyev

7:05 – 8:25 Pages 192 – 196 Platonov, Sofya, Grekova, Voynitzev, Colonel T, Dr. T, Glagolyev, Sasha

8:40 – 9:30 Pages 196 – 201 Platonov, Sofya, Voynitzev, Colonel T, Glagolyev, Petrin, Osip, Sasha

• Feb. 23: ****** Presentation downtown ******

Pages 215 – 218 Platonov & Anna

• Feb. 24: Pages 201 - 218

5:30 – 6:40 Pages 201 – 206 Anna, Sasha, Glagolyev, Voynitzev, Petrin, Colonel T, Sofya, Platonov, Dr. T, Grekova.

6:55 – 8:15 Pages 207 – 212 Sasha, Osip, Voynitzev, Dr. T, Platonov, Sofya, Anna

8:30 – 9:30 Pages 212 – 218 Petrin, Glagolyev, Grekova, Voynitzev, Sofya, Anna, Platonov

• Feb. 27: Pages 216 – 244

10:30 – 12 Pages 216 – 224 Anna, Platonov
* Add Glagolyev, Petrin, Colonel T, Dr. T, Sasha, Voynitzev, Sofya, Grekova, Osip at 11

12:15 – 1:45 Pages 225 – 231 Platonov, Sasha, Anna

1:45 – 2:45 LUNCH

2:45 – 4:15 Pages 231 – 238 Anna, Osip, Platonov, Dr. T, Voynitzev, Colonel T
4:30 – 6 Pages 238 – 244 Anna, Platonov, Sasha, Petrin, Dr. T, Sofya, Osip

• Feb. 28: Pages 245 – 260

5:30 – 6:50 Pages 245 – 249 Platonov, Sofya

7:05 – 8:25 Pages 249 – 256 Platonov, Marko, Osip, Sasha
8:40 – 9:30 Pages 256 – 260 Platonov, Anna

• Mar. 1: Pages 256 – 274

5:30 – 6:30 Pages 256 – 262 Platonov, Anna

6:45 – 8:05 Pages 262 – 268 Platonov, Voynitzev, Glagolyev, Anna, Sofya, First Peasant, Second Peasant, Osip

8:20 – 9:30 Pages 268 – 274 Platonov, Sofya, Anna, Voynitzev, Colonel T, Grekova, Dr. T, Sasha, Marko

• Mar. 2: Put Together #2 + Bits TBA

Company

• Mar. 3: 1.1

5:30 – 9:30 (yes, we will take breaks) Stop and go through 1.2 COMPANY

• Mar. 6: 1.1/1.2

10 – 6 Stop and go through 1.1 and run 1.1. Stop and go through 1.2 and run 1.2. COMPANY

• Mar. 7: 2.1

5:30 – 9:30 Stop and go through 2.1 and run 2.1. COMPANY
• Mar. 8: 2.2
5:30 – 9:30 Stop and go through 2.2 COMPANY

• Mar. 9: 2.2
5:30 – 9:30 Run 2.2. / Scene changes. COMPANY

• Mar. 10: Run
5:30 – 9:30 Run plus notes/bits TBA. COMPANY

THEN TECH*****

At the first production meeting Amanda and Vanessa give their design presentations and the faculty and staff seem generally impressed and encouraged. Both women have brought amazing renderings and I feel blessed to have this design team. In my meetings with the designers I have been adamant that we have to be running the show with confidence in what we do and, this way, we should receive support from the department rather than interference and/or opposition.

January 31 – March 16 2011:

The first reading is a positive experience. To me the first read through is just that – the maiden voyage. A chance for the whole company to bond over the show as read by the people who will say the lines. It is a chance to show off the work that has already been done and to highlight what will need work in the coming weeks.
I begin by making a short speech about how Frayn is the ideal adaptor of Chekhov and how we have an advantage in that the play will feel oddly familiar, despite the fact that most of our audience will never have heard of it before. Amanda’s set design presentation is fantastic, as is her set, and is enthusiastically received. Vanessa’s costumes go over in a similar fashion. We have a strong design team and seemingly competent and enthusiastic stage management, which boosts the confidence of everyone involved.

The reading itself goes as is to be expected - lots of pleasant surprises, lots of people who appear to have read an entirely different play than I did. I remind myself that I trust them all and am confident in their casting. In fact, the casting seems to be universally strong. The reading gains steam and finishes up well and everyone’s spirits seem high. Lots of laughter from the cast and crew in the second act. Everyone seems genuinely enthused by the project. For many of the cast this is to be their biggest role at UBC and I think they are all pretty excited by that.

Ivan comes in on February 1st to give everyone a recording of the proper pronunciations and do a bit of coaching. Generally speaking, the actors have good ears. Shouldn’t have a problem there. It’s a funny balance with accents and foreign languages, because while you want to be authentic, it is more important to me that the play be consistent in its playing, so if the actors are onstage listening to their own pronunciation it will deter from the other work they are doing.

I am a big believer in table rehearsals. It is always my goal to highlight questions about given circumstances, objectives and relationships around the table so that the actors will know what they are doing with the text when we enter the blocking phase of rehearsal. It is also my feeling that if the actors know what they are doing with the text, the play should essentially block itself.
Around the table we go through the play once. We talk about given circumstances and ask probing questions. We keep the language active. At times I am a bit dismayed by some of the senior BFA students inability to articulate a scene objective or answer the question “what are you doing/why do you say this?”, but overall they are strong actors who are eager to improve. The relationship between Anna Petrovna and Doctor Triletzky is a bit mysterious to us all and will definitely require continued analysis as we proceed. While some things are still left in the air, we make strong discoveries/choices and leave the table with a much stronger grasp of the play than when we started.

At a production meeting it comes up from the props department that we will need to do some research & development into the fireworks at the play’s top. I would really like for the Doctor to be able to actually light the fuses. Turns out this will require not only a fire permit, but also some tinkering to find the right type of rope/fake fuse to light. Lynn is on the job and will report back soon. She seems a quite capable props master. We also discuss guns and I am told it should be easy to accommodate my request for the two gunshots to take place live offstage using blanks. I think this will add a nice element of surprise and realism to those two moments. Fake gunshots coming through speakers never do anything other than make me feel embarrassed as an audience member. Real gunshots should provide a strong sense of immediate danger.

It is my hope that the blocking comes naturally out of the table work. That said, I am always prepared to provide blocking when we hit a dry spell. Stephen Heatley reminds me to let it be “messy” or “imperfect” after the first pass through. This is reassuring and something I believe every director can afford to hear time and again – especially with a scene like Act One, Scene One, where the stage is constantly full of bodies. The blocking phase is my least favourite, as it often feels as though the moment-to-moment life of the play can be put on the back burner.
Due to a miscommunication in room booking, we are to have our first blocking rehearsal in the scene shop. It’s not ideal, but the ASMs and Keith clear everything and tape out the floor. (If that room wasn’t full of tables and machinery it would actually make quite a good rehearsal space.) The furniture for Act One, Scene One is still not in the right place. It’s downstage centre now and seems to be trapping the whole scene up on the structure. After the first blocking rehearsal I consult with Amanda and decide to move the two garden chairs downstage right and the bench and other chairs downstage left. This frees up downstage centre and seems to anchor the playing space nicely. This means we will have to alter the blocking for the top of the show the next time we come to it. Blocking Act One, Scene One is particularly challenging due to the sheer number of people onstage. It seems that the more bodies there are onstage, the easier it is to settle for general acting choices and park & bark blocking. Finding a way to tell the story clearly while keeping the scene “moving” physically and keeping the speakers in focus will be a great challenge. I have to remind myself that a large cast play with lots of bodies is what I wanted and that I, too, am still studying/practicing my craft. This is my first time co-coordinating more than four speaking actors on stage at a given time.

Our design meetings continue to go smoothly. Vanessa has done some amazing costumes for Anna Petrovna and Sofya. The second round of fittings begin and character shoes and skirts are arranged for rehearsals.

Amanda’s trees and structure continue to improve, but we have yet to solve the problem of the final transition. She has an idea to do the tracks in perspective, which should help suggest that they disappear upstage into the distance. Now if only we could figure out how to move them and the structure simultaneously. We really like the opposition in the movement of the tracks coming forward (downstage) while the structure moves simultaneously upstage… We just can’t
figure out how to achieve this. Ideas that surface: cutting the back wall out of the theatre and pushing the tracks from the scene shop; having the tracks drop like a drawbridge from the back wall; swinging the tracks in and down from upstage left (where there is wing space); lowering the tracks from the fly gallery (this doesn’t give us the movement we want). We keep it in the air.

Ling has brought in some good train sounds and her supervisor, Andrew Tugwell, seems to be a really good designer/teacher. This is encouraging, as I’m starting to suspect that Ling might sometimes pretend to understand what I’m saying more than she actually does. I attempt to be clear in what I want out of the big train moments and dictate to her which pieces of music I would like to use for each transition.

My preliminary, bare bones light cue count for Wlad is twenty-seven cues. We both laugh, as we’re sure it will be at least three times this. We are both hoping to have lots of internal cues that subtly guide the eye of the audience to the focal points of the action. Wlad also needs us to finalize the placement of the trees, but I don’t want to rush this as I think the blocking rehearsals, first put together and subsequent rehearsals will tell us what we need.

Lynn shows me three revolvers and one of them is perfect for Sergey to use on Platonov. We decide to add a prop owl for Osip in Act One, Scene One instead of just using a sound cue or mime. Hopefully Alex can endow it with life.

We learn that we can move into the theatre on February 28th, assuming the stage painting is complete. This is great, as it allows us two weeks on stage before the preview.
After the first put together Stephen has some good questions for me: How bad is Petrin? How scary is Osip? How introspective is Platonov? What is Anna Petrovna’s reaction to Osip?

Truthfully, Alex’s Osip has been a bit too nice thus far. This might be my fault, as I agreed when Alex told me he didn’t want to play him as just a Jud Fry, mean-to-the-core type of peasant. That said, the script calls for everyone to be afraid of him and we need to believe that he is capable of murder.

Mishelle’s Sasha is pretty one-note so far, wallowing in tragedy from start to finish. She seems to be playing the ending at the beginning and I plan to talk to her about Sasha maintaining a positive outlook for as long as possible, giving her somewhere to fall from.

All in all, the first pass at blocking went as smoothly as I have ever experienced as director. It reinforces for me that good table work leads to sensible impulse blocking. We seem to be building a good foundation for this piece. Ryan Warden and Andrew Lynch are bringing lots of offers to the table and Mitch is quite interesting as Petrin. Scott Button really deserves a bigger role than Marko, but he will serve it well and it’s nice to have someone strong in that part. As far as the staging goes, I’m sure it will continue to adjust as we work, with Act One, Scene One needing the most attention in that regard. There is a lot of exposition and a lot of bodies on stage. The Doctor and Anna scenes are still missing something. Sarah Goodwill is doing some nice work as Sofya, but her first scene is still falling short. Act Two, Scene Two was quite strong at the put together. It’s a beautifully composed scene and the weight of everything that comes before it already seems to be dropping in for the actors.
Amanda informs me that not all the trees will be able to fly, but most of them will. This means we’ll have to be strategic about where the static ones live. My first impulse: upstage.

Going through the play again after blocking rehearsals is an opportunity for us to find out where we need to heighten and tighten. It is where I hope to lock down any questions that were still in the air about circumstances, objectives and relationships, and where I hope to clean up any and all unsightly blocking. To me the blocking will and should continue to evolve until closing night, but it’s important for the actors (and designers and stage managers) to have a clear shape to work within. It is from within a solid framework that great impulses and discoveries will come.

The next pass through Act One, Scene One is encouraging. We clean up the Marko section and Sarah takes a big step forward in humiliating Platonov. Christine (as the maid, Anfisa) has great comic timing, but I hope to clean up her movement through her small bit. I don’t want to dictate the exact flow of her scene (it’s quite short), but right now the physicality is sloppy. The Doctor and Anna scenes improve slightly, but still feel like there is something missing. We do a nice job of building the conflict between Petrin and Platonov. Emily makes a good point about how it presently appears that Platonov is insulting everyone when he says “they’re all sitting here with a bulging wad of nothing…” when this comment probably shouldn’t include Sasha or the Colonel. We will have to examine it in detail the next time around. We leave the scene with more questions in the air than I would like, but it is a massive scene full of people on stage and exposition on the page so I assure myself we will get there.

Sasha and Osip’s exchange at the top of Act One, Scene Two, takes a big step forward. A sexual energy is emerging when he touches her face and neck and it suits the moment well. Within Osip’s speech we will need to continue to address
the clarity of the shifts between his own voice and Anna Petrovna’s. The rest of this scene is starting to pick up nicely. Andrew Lynch and Ryan Warden both seem to have trouble standing still on stage - Andrew seems to take a technical note like that, employ it once, and then abandon it. The Platonov and Anna scene around the bench is starting to pick up. Claire has expressed concern that her seduction scenes will all feel the same, but I think we’re working away from that. This one seems to be about approaching him with the idea of starting an affair, whereas Act Two, Scene One seems to be about “let’s start the affair right now”. She is also able to get closer to her point in the later scenes.

Act Two, Scene One is progressing nicely. Ben is doing well to communicate Platonov’s need for something Sasha can’t seem to give him. Amanda and I shift some tree positions and the stumps downstage right and this seems to help the scene along. Anchoring the corners in a large proscenium seems to be an almost fail-safe trick of set design. Anna Petrovna is touching Osip when he cries and I don’t think it’s the most effective choice. We will try without next time. David is doing strong work as the Doctor when he isn’t playing the drunkenness too much. I endeavor to keep Dave on task to play his actions, as this seems to work for him. The final sequence in this scene is a tricky one: is Osip coming to kill Platonov? Why doesn’t he chase after him? Will the audience get that Platonov wanted to go to Anna Petrovna but was forced in the direction of Sofya?

We move into the theatre and quickly realize that we need to rearrange the furniture in Act Two, Scene Two. The table is now in the perfect position, as far as I’m concerned. This scene is still going strong. Sarah is a bit one note right now, blasting vocally to express her anger, but by encouraging her to leave herself somewhere to go, as well as to look for the quiet parts, I think she will improve dynamically, adding nuance to her performance.
Platonov’s monologues between scenes are going well, though I think Ben wishes we could spend more time on them. We’ve decided not to break the fourth wall and it seems to be working well. The emotional journey through the scene seems to be settling in for Ben, so I’m curious to see how it goes at the next put together – hopefully the snowball effect will push him even further in all the right directions. I remind him that he is always in a state of heightened urgency during these monologues, using precious alone time to try to repair the damage that has been done.

The scene with Sasha is blinded with sound & fury at the moment. I’m trying to find moments for Mishelle to bring the volume down. As always, I try to achieve these results by looking at the text – “Why would she blast that line?” “How does she feel about what she’s just found out? Does that stun her? Into silence?” These sorts of questions should yield a more repeatable result than simply asking her to “be quieter”.

The blocking of Anna and Platonov with the bottles is going to be complicated and we might need to add an extra bit of time just to work that. It's quite prop heavy, this last scene. Yet another reminder that actors should begin using props as early in rehearsal as possible – and that directors should facilitate this.

We will have the complete structure soon. Amanda, in consultation with Keith, seems to have come up with a good fix for the final transition: the set will split and pull back and the tracks will be on castors behind, moving forward via a rig in the trap room. It seems like a simple and effective solution that will give us the effect we desire.

The second put together is the first time we have done the first three scenes on the stage. It goes pretty well. The story is coming out clearly. I think we’ll continue to tweak the blocking of the first scene right up until opening night. This doesn’t
bother me, but I remind myself to make it clear to the actors that we’re tweaking what we already have, not scrambling to fix a problem. (Fortunately there are no major problems at this juncture.)

The end of Act One is still an issue: Sofya’s lines to herself are followed by the reappearance of the Colonel. Does this mean the Colonel’s return is what convinces her to stay? I don’t see how this can be. In fact, she’s already decided to stay – she’s told Sergey. So it seems Sofya is having second thoughts about the whole thing… There also seems little or no reason to have Sofya go with the Colonel at this moment other than that it says so in the text. I shall endeavor to work it out.

Grekova needs a little more variation in her crying – I want to make sure that her resistance lasts longer in certain moments than others. It is much more interesting to me to see her resisting the urge to cry rather than giving in to it.

The twenty-one-gun salute scene is funny, but sloppy. We will have to break it down the next time through. I think that Andrew and Eric are concerned with “making it funny”, when it already is funny, they just have to play it seriously.

I want to approach the last pass through each scene by stopping and starting through the scene and then running it at the end of the night. This will mean calling all the actors in each scene for the whole evening. Since I’ve been careful not to keep them hanging around up until this point, I don’t anticipate any resistance to this request.

In a production meeting, Jay confirms that we will have a hazer. Wlad is enthused and insists that we will be too. The support from the faculty and production staff has, by and large, been quite strong and steady. Our strategy to run the meetings without leaning on our supervisors has paid off.
The final passes through each scene are strong. We're on the structure and it looks great. Act One, Scene One continues to blossom. The Petrin/Platonov conflict goes on a lot longer than I had initially thought. This is where the blocking tweaks continue to happen. Overall, the blocking is starting to feel natural and the scene is no longer feeling “clumpy”. I think we have found the key to the Doctor/Anna Petrovna scenes – we were not laying in the right circumstances! The Doctor needs to be hiding the Grekova relationship and not expecting her to turn up off the top in order for the second “alone” scene between him and Anna to work. This way he can full on make advances towards Anna Petrovna at the beginning of the play, as the text seems to suggest. The journey through this beast of a scene is really starting to become clear, but it's not done yet. I think there is still more to be made of Platonov taking a drink at the end of the scene, for instance. I ask Ben what he thinks and he agrees that it must be significant, seeing as he first refuses a drink and then takes one. Chekhov/Frayn’s stage directions are so simple it is easy to dismiss their significance at times.

The pacing in Act One, Scene Two is still leaving something to be desired. I tell the actors that we don't need any gap time between French scenes and this seems to help inject some extra energy into the proceedings. Still can't find the Platonov/Anna Petrovna moment where he says “I should long since have been your lover…” Not sure what to do there, but it needs something else. His touching of her seems like he doesn't really want to, but I think it might be necessary in order for her to follow after him. It seems he is ultimately trying to escape her advances, but by appealing to her reason more than stroking her ego. It's a delicate balance that I hope we're able to find.

Act Two, Scene One is strong. The pace is good and the comedy is really starting to emerge. I think the second half of this play is extremely satisfying. I don't know if I'd go so far as to say it is “better written”, but maybe it's just that it's
more fun to watch the blocks fall down than to see them being put into place. We continue to tweak the blocking of the first bit between Sasha and Platonov and I think it’s going well. Mishelle’s Sasha has developed some nice colours. Mitch is a hoot as Petrin and the twenty-one-gun scene has found a renewed focus that I am grateful for.

Act Two, Scene Two keeps getting stronger. Claire is figuring out the bottles (I must admit I was a step away from jumping in and choreographing it) and her and Ben’s scene can be quite moving. Mishelle and Sarah are both finding good dynamics in their scenes and Ben is starting to find his big monologue (“What about me?”) and use the other actors quite well. The Sergey/Platonov scene was giving us trouble, but I tweaked the entrance and that seems to be all it needed. Ryan cracks me up as Glagolyev and his insanely long cross to the sofa is probably my favourite moment in the whole show. It feels positively Chekhovian (whatever that means… so painful that it’s funny?) and makes me wonder if it’s fair to call Chekhov an absurdist playwright. We are going to end the show on a high note, that’s for sure.

We have a scene change rehearsal at Emily’s insistence, but it seems a bit misguided, as we’re short crew members on the flies and therefore cannot properly gauge how fast it will all happen. I wish I had known that we wouldn’t have the whole crew – this time definitely could have been better used.

I got into an interesting discussion with someone at a pub about actors moving set pieces. This person said she didn’t like it, that it “broke the reality” of the play (she also argued against curtain calls for the same reason). I think that might be precisely what I like about it. If you’re going to see someone move the set, I’d rather it were the company of performers than someone dressed in black. Does that not break the reality? I am not interested in pretending we’re in Russia in the 1880s, even though that’s what we’re suggesting. The power of the theatre is that
the performers know that the audience knows that they are not who they claim to be, but they are going to make the audience believe it anyway. I think that’s what gives the actors the upper hand. I resolve to make sure this attitude infiltrates our scene changes.

Tech weekend goes remarkably smoothly. My old teacher Neil Cadger pops in during the cue to cue to say hello. I find so often that I don’t appreciate educators fully until later and that is certainly the case with him. His insistence that theatre cannot be boring comes from a place of respect for his audience and I think it’s something I’ve held onto since my BFA, even if Neil and I are interested in making quite different types of theatre than one another.

We get through the cue to cue as scheduled and the crew and actors remain in good spirits. This is another testament to what a good team we have. Ling’s train cues sound great in the space and panning through the speakers. The tracks move as they’re supposed to and the structure pulls apart every time… but never in the same way. Keith says we won’t be able to get a consistent break on it so I guess we’ll just have to live with it. The sequence looks great and Wlad’s train effects are excellent. As is the hazer. He was right. The set and lights look incredible together.

Our two tech dresses are solid and having their costumes on and all the elements coming together lifts the actors (as it inevitably does). The final sequence is running alright, though I hope it smooths out in the final couple of tech dresses.

For the March 14th dress rehearsal we move the stage right furniture up and switch all the entrances into and out of Anna Petrovna’s house to the furthest downstage entrance – the one below the proscenium arch. This works well for the scene. May have to use these devices in a few other places too (Osip in Act
One, Scene Two, the Doctor in Act Two, Scene One) for convenience and... well, they just seem like the best possible choice. The lack of downstage entrances is truly a shortcoming of the Freddie Wood stage, but I can’t say I wasn’t warned.

For the March 15th dress rehearsal I continue to tweak the Act One, Scene One blocking. We adjust the exit of the Colonel in to get lunch and he now has a good moment alone with Glagolyev. Also have Sasha and Platonov bringing their own chairs down off the structure to sit with the group stage left. This does help to free up the structure and the space for the first half of the scene. The final sequence is running pretty smoothly, but something is not quite right. Because we don’t know if the structure will split instantly or take a moment there is sometimes a lull in the sound. I ask Ling to build a cue to cover this, suggesting a slowly crescendoing train. This ought to do it.

For the March 16th preview we continue to tweak Act One, Scene One. We decide that Platonov will not touch Anna in Act One, Scene Two on the line “I should long since have been your lover”. This makes a good deal of sense to me at this point, as I again realize that Platonov is cursed by honesty and it is an appeal to sense, not a pickup line.

I realize that I’m happy, but never satisfied. A positive discovery? The preview audience has eighty-six people in it and they are definitely engaged. And they laugh a lot, particularly in the second act. The sound cue Ling has built for the house splitting is the sound of wood splitting. It will cover any gaps, but might feel awkward if there isn’t one.

Still have to fix the end of Act One. We decide that the Colonel will cross the stage on his line “it’s the fireworks” without stopping for Sofya. This will interrupt Sofya’s train of thought and then she will gather herself and go to the fireworks. It serves good comedic purpose too – interrupting a serious moment with a bit of
absurd comedy. We work a bit of Act One, Scene One. The cast is feeling good. The show is ready for audiences. It looks great and I take a good deal of comfort in that.

The opening night crowd is predictably enthusiastic and generous. They applaud the train effect at the beginning of the second act. In the final sequence, David Kaye does not clear a chair he is supposed to clear and it falls as the house splits. Emily cannot call the tracks until the chair is gone. After what feels like a minute, but was probably a few seconds, Scott Button comes out to retrieve the chair, receiving a bit of applause in the process. The play goes over well and I’m excited to see how it evolves over the run.

March 18 – 26:

I see the play again on March 18th, 21st and 26th. Some things, like Act Two, Scene Two (and especially Platonov’s monologue) continue to evolve nicely. The show doesn’t gain or lose too much running time – a good sign. The crowds are well sized and legitimately seem to enjoy the play. On closing night there is too much horsing around going on backstage for my liking and the actors stumble a lot in the first scene, but from then on it was smooth sailing.

It seems to me that we laid in the right groundwork and that the show grew positively over its run. As always, I felt ready to start again once it was open. I don’t think there’s any avoiding that.
CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection

I wanted to do an MFA Directing program to direct shows that I would not be able to afford to direct independently. For my thesis project I knew I wanted to do something on the big stage with more actors than I had ever had at my disposal before. *Wild Honey* satisfied these requirements and so much more. Reading the play feels simultaneously familiar and foreign. Directing it felt similarly.

The text is dense: there are one hundred pages, dozens of entrances and exits, and sixteen speaking characters. Laying in the right groundwork was essential and I feel that the majority of the play, and especially the second act, came together very nicely.

The first scene, which Frayn says was the biggest hurdle in adapting the piece, remains a navigational nightmare, with several characters on stage and exposition to burn. It presents a terrific challenge to any director. Whenever I saw the show in performance I would breathe a sigh of relief every time we made it through Scene One. Were I to do it again I would have punched up the severity of Anna Petrovna’s situation from the get-go, starting at a more rabid pace and indulging some of the melodrama that remains in the text. I would have explored a more physical playing from Glagolyev and the Colonel to see if that could escalate their competition for Anna Petrovna’s affections. If in the same situation again I would push sooner with the actors who needed a push to articulate objectives and actions instead of settling for general playing. Scene one was the only scene where I felt that the set design was not serving us in the best way possible. If we had put the veranda to the stage left side I think we could have made more of the characters’ entrances, as well as the dynamic of the party on the veranda.
The part of the play that left me scratching my head until well past closing night was when Sofya follows the Colonel back to the fireworks at the end of Act One. It escaped me until about a month after the production that she needed to use the Colonel’s appearance to get the inspiration to tell him to take Sergey out shooting. While the Colonel’s cross was hilarious, I feel I could have brought this story point out more clearly.

While I was quite pleased with the second act, the brief appearance of the two peasants did not come across as I envisioned. I had said I wanted them to seem as though they had come out of “Russian Deliverance”, but instead they were two Russian hillbillies and the tone of the scene would shift confusingly every night. Often they drew laughter, presumably for the sheer absurdity of it all, but they misinterpreted the characters and I feel that I mismanaged that moment with the two actors involved. If I were to do it again I would work with the actors to articulate strong objectives from the get-go, keeping the bit focused and driven.

These examples seem to best sum up the learning and reinforce what I already know: The best moments are the best articulated. That is, the director, actors and designers are all aware of what is actively happening on stage and in the story. The weakest moments are borne out of confusion and generalization.

John Cooper, when supervising my Rum And Vodka project, said to me that pre-production work is best summed up by the philosophy that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” I have never believed him to be more right than when I look back on Wild Honey through this lens.

With every production I have directed, including the time I directed the same play twice, I have felt after closing that I am just then ready to start rehearsing. I have never been more prepared for any production than Wild Honey and I still wish I
had been more prepared. And not just in terms of analysis, but in terms of attitude. I would demand that the actors articulate their objective and actions around the table if it was unclear what they were doing. More importantly, I would be sure to insist that they commit to playing *some* objective every time, if not to do any more than lend specificity to the work.

I was very happy with the designers in general. This was the first time I ever had a design “team” at my disposal and it was a real treat. I will continue to collaborate long-term with designers in preparation for a production whenever possible. The sooner everything can be articulated, the better.

*Wild Honey* scared me. Chekhov is one of the greatest playwrights to have lived, and Frayn one of the greatest still living, and to bring their work to the stage comes with a certain responsibility. The text and stage directions are extremely purposeful and it would be at one’s own peril to ignore them. I think my approach to use the text as our guide at every moment was the right one, yielding a strong production that allowed the actors and designers a platform to best showcase their skills.


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Costume sketches by Vanessa Imeson
Appendix B: Set sketches by Amanda Larder