A DESIGN FOR ANTON CHEKHOV'S

THE THREE SISTERS

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the degree Master of Fine Arts in the
Graduate School of the Ohio State University

by

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* * * * *

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NOTE

A complete illustrated copy of this thesis "A Set Design for Anton Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters*" is located in the Jerome A. Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

The set design for *The Three Sisters*, which is the subject of this thesis, was produced by the Department of Theatre of The Ohio State University, November 4 through November 14, 1988, in Thurber Theatre.
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I would like to thank director Rex McGraw for giving me permission to include his concept statement for *The Three Sister* in this thesis. To my husband, Jim Sobota, and my children, Brady, Joseph, and Nicole, I offer sincere thanks for their support and understanding.
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CHAPTER 1
DESIGN CONCEPT AND PROCESS

Impressionism as a style of artistic expression was the guiding concept for this Ohio State University Theatre production of Anton Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*. Chekhov’s plays have traditionally been mounted in a realistic style, the prevalent style of the Moscow Art Theatre, where *The Three Sisters* premiered on January 31, 1901. Chekhov’s plays, however, are actually closer in spirit to Impressionism, a style of painting of the late nineteenth century. The structure of *The Three Sisters* contains elements of Impressionism’s aesthetics that allow a visual statement about it that is far more poetic than a literal, realistic interpretation. It is in this direction that my design for *The Three Sisters* was destined to go.

In painting, Impressionism was characterized by the artist’s special concern with the fleeting effects of light on form. The Impressionist was less concerned with detailed drawing than with the application of pigment to canvas in new ways that captured the shimmering quality of light and reflections in nature. For painters like Renoir, Monet, and Vuillard, the chief features of the object were indicated with a few strokes, creating a fleeting glimpse—an impression.

As a theatrical design style, impressionism is extremely well suited to *The Three Sisters*. Light plays an important part in the mood Chekhov sets. Sunlight streams through windows and filters through leaves, fire is
seen at a distance, and candies flicker. The action is seemingly formless. As director Rex McGraw points out in his concept statement, the characters only give indications of what they really mean. Circumstances are open to many possibilities of interpretation. "The audience gets a series of impressions and they must figure out exactly what these impressions mean."¹

The play is quite lyrical. It is filled with string music: Andrey plays the violin, Tusenbach the piano, and Fedotik the guitar. This production also underscored scenes with music. The combination of all of this music created a lyrical mood that needed to be expressed in the setting.

The idea of creating an impressionistic, lyrical environment both inspired and challenged me. How does one create an impressionistic set? The set must become a large canvas which can be painted with patterned light. I experimented with various materials and eventually found a perfect solution, stretched cord. Using thousands of feet of jute cord, panels were created that became the main canvas for this impressionistic set. The cord panels were arranged in a maze of paths and at various angles. The lighting on these cords had a shimmering quality which changed them into an atmospheric canvas. The effect was quite lyrical, a perfect complement to the string music in the play. The material was extremely receptive to colored light and projections, offering incredible possibilities for creating atmosphere and mood. The panels also provided paths for the actors to move through. The movement of the actors through these paths created

¹For the complete text of director Rex McGraw’s concept statement see Appendix A.
wonderfully impressionistic images. I extended the use of cord to various 
set pieces--windows, screens, a tree--providing further opportunities for 
these scrim-like effects.

Besides its artistic use as a medium for impressionism, the stretched 
cord had another advantage. It enabled me to create what was essentially a 
unit set. This was extremely valuable since we played downstage of the 
proscenium to make the action more intimate and changed the set "a vista" 
(in view of the audience). The play is set in four seasons, in three different 
locales, so it was important to keep the scene changes simple. Lighting and 
projections on the cord easily changed the mood, atmosphere, and 
environment for the four acts. Properties and set pieces were limited and 
designed to serve double-duty whenever possible: the window unit turned to 
become the outside of the house; the screens moved in to enclose the bed-
room space; slipcovered bedroom chairs became wicker outdoor furniture.

In addition to considerations of style, the theme of the play as it is 
revealed in the four acts became an integral part of the design concept. The 
director noted that hope--hope for the characters to escape from the life 
they presently know--is the commanding image. This sense of hope changes 
with the progression of the play and with the situation of the sisters.

Act I is set in early spring in the second floor parlor and ballroom of 
the sisters' home in a provincial Russian town. The family is celebrating 
the youngest sister Irina's saint's day. It is the end of the year of mourning 
for their father and there is a sense of renewed hope in the air. My design 
needed to capture the festive atmosphere, the sense of spring and hope, as 
well as reflect old Russia and the gentility of the sisters' upbringing in the
midst of a provincial town. I made an early decision to include a window unit which I felt could be very useful as a symbol of the sisters' yearning to escape this provincial town and move to Moscow. I designed the windows to be practical so that they could be flung open in Act I, letting the sisters' hopes and thoughts fly out as the warm spring air was let in. I placed spring flowers about the room and the lighting designer projected shadows of tree branches on the cord panels, adding to the sense of spring and hope.

The furnishings were simple, but tasteful. Their style and the colors and texture of their coverings were carefully coordinated to reflect a sense of old Russia as seen in Russian genre painting of the nineteenth century, yet with a lightness and simplicity that would work well with the impressionistic style of the design. For example, the lyre back chairs with the brass strings in their lyres and their delicate sabre legs were not only perfect for the period, they also carried out the light, lyrical feeling of the play.

The design of the window unit is another example of where I created a light lyrical feeling in the set. By limiting the use of architectural trim and using stretched cord as window panes, I created the suggestion of a bay window, rather than a real bay window. The main entrance to the room was also merely suggested with a rope portiere fashioned of the same cord as the stretched cord panels that surrounded the space and created the play's environment.

Act II takes place in the same rooms of the sisters' home; however, now it is winter and evening. Hope is dimming. It is cold and dark. The same physical space now has a much different feeling. In a transition
choreographed to violin music, the maids of the household deftly go about removing all the flowers, shutting the windows, and clearing the dining table.

Because of the reflective nature of the stretched cord environment, the lighting designer was able to take the audience from spring warmth to winter cold with a change of color and change of the gobo (shadow) projections of bare tree branches. The cord was also a perfect surface on which to project falling snow by using a Scene Machine with a moving circular disc.

I designed a Russian stove that I placed at the downstage left edge of the proscenium. In the first act it was more decorative and helped set the scene in Russia. In this act, however, the stove became a functional piece, offering a bit of warmth and a fire's glow to an act where the attempt at Shrovetide festivity ends in cool frustration for the sisters. Natasha, their brother Andrey's new wife, is beginning to assert herself as mistress of the household and the sisters' hopes for future happiness grow dim.

Act III takes place in a small upstairs bedroom on a hot summer's night. The sisters and their friends are gathered here to escape the confusion caused by a fire burning in the town. The design for this act needed to accomplish several things. There must be the sense of a small bedroom and the feeling that this is not Irina's own room but one that she has been forced to share with Olga at Natasha's insistence. The sisters have been forced out of their normal living area into much smaller simpler surroundings as Natasha takes over the running of their house. In addition,
the set change into this act and into the following act had to take place easily and fluidly.

To meet all of these needs, I designed two folding screens for the downstage areas left and right of the proscenium. In Acts I and II they gave architectural interest to these areas and suggested exits to other parts of the house. In Act III they were easily moved in to enclose the space. I also designed a full-stage curtain of stretched cord to fly in just upstage of the bedroom area, further limiting the space. This curtain had two additional benefits: it served the lighting designer, allowing him to successfully create the sense of a fire burning in the distance; it also allowed for an exceptionally beautiful and fluid scene change into Act IV.

Creative use of set props and set dressing also contributed to the scene. The sofa from the earlier acts now became Irina’s bed. Dressing the sofa with bedclothes gave the impression of a daybed rather than a real bed, thus, reinforcing the sense of discomfort that Natasha is inflicting on the sisters. Olga’s bed was easily moved in on castors and a lightly framed canopy was clipped to invisible cables and raised into place. A plain washstand and a small trunk held the few required props. Three slipcovered bedroom chairs and a covered table completed the design.

The colors and textures of the fabrics in this act were light. I chose lavender pinks and blues in summer cottons which were appropriate to the season and for the simple bedroom setting.

The two folding screens served an additional dramatic function in this act. They were designed with their upper portions open and covered
only with stretched cord. This feature provided interesting opportunities for backlighting. This backlighting allowed characters to be vaguely seen at their activities in other parts of the house, fulfilling the director's request that the characters might sometimes be seen through scrim-like walls. In Acts I and II, Andrey could be vaguely seen as well as heard when playing his violin in his room. In Act III, the screens provided areas for Olga and Irina to move into when avoiding confrontation with their brother Andrey. Because the screens could be backlit, the sisters' reactions to Andrey's words and feelings could be viewed by the audience creating a much richer scene than would have normally been possible.

Act IV takes place outside in autumn. The sisters are now quite literally out of their own home. By placing a cord panel just downstage of the Act I window unit, which was turned to show the outside of the house and positioned further offstage, I was able to enhance the sense of separation between the sisters and their home. The windows are flung open as they were earlier in Act I, but now it is Natasha who stands inside the house at the windows, as she calls out orders to Andrey and his sisters who are on the outside.

The autumn of the year is felt and seen as lighting instruments cast shadows of leaves and branches on the cord panels and on the floor. Throughout the act, characters weave through the paths created by the panels as if through autumnal woods. A simple wood fence and a stylized tree add to the feeling of depth and the sense of place.

The covered table and slipcovered chairs of Act III, their coverings removed, are now the wicker outdoor furniture of Act IV. At the play's end,
however, the sisters do not even sit around this table with its symbolic three chairs. Pushed out of their own home, with a rather dim future ahead, they huddle together on a simple bench on the opposite side of the stage.
CHAPTER II
DESIGN AND PROCESS EVALUATION

I believe the success of this production stemmed from a well thought out director's concept, a clear communication of that concept, and a belief on the director's part that the designers should have freedom to create and contribute. There was, indeed, a feeling of collaboration and respect between the designers and the director which greatly benefited the production.

Long before the first meeting with the director I had a feeling that the design for this play needed to be something other than a realistic detailed set, that atmosphere was extremely important and that it might be possible to achieve this atmosphere by using scrims or gauzes in some unique way. At our first meeting, I was delighted to learn that the director had similar feelings regarding the nature of the staging of this play and that, indeed, he felt it should be done in an impressionistic style.

At this production meeting director Rex McGraw presented a statement that clearly expressed his overall production concept. Following this meeting, the director and I met informally to exchange ideas on how the set design might work in terms of this concept. We talked about how the set and props could be simplified. We discussed where entrances might best be made, how to deal with the dining table that must seat thirteen people, and a piano that is frequently played. We agreed that the scene changes
needed to be a part of the total piece. They needed to be choreographed and integrated into the flow of the play. Most important, we agreed that a scrim-like environment should be a part of the design.

The collaborative nature of this extended meeting proved extremely helpful to me as a designer. Because of it I was able to design a set that was beautiful, functional, and in perfect harmony with the director's concept. The design of the set, in fact, created wonderful staging possibilities that neither of us had anticipated, such as the effective use of the two folding screens for scrim effects throughout the play.

A further testament to the success of this director/designer collaboration is illustrated by the following story. As a parting thought at the end of the first production meeting, director Rex McGraw suggested that if I liked designing to music, I might try listening to the music of Eric Satie. He also suggested studying the work of Impressionist painter Vuillard. The director felt that these two artists expressed the same kinds of feelings that were inherent in the play. I followed both suggestions and found them artistically stimulating. In some earlier research I had been interested in several of the designs of Czech scenographer Josef Svoboda in which he had used stretched cord in a variety of ways to effectively create a sense of atmosphere. I had considered using such a technique in my design for The Three Sisters, but at first rejected it as too austere for what I had in mind and probably too expensive. However, while listening to Satie's music, so haunting and filled with string music, I started experimenting with a simple model. I stretched thread over a small frame and was enchanted with the way the light played on the strings. It seemed to perfectly reflect the music I was listening to. Moreover, it achieved in real life what the
Impressionists tried to achieve on canvas. With a bit more experimenting I was convinced that this was the direction my design should take. Discovering through additional research that affordable materials for this project did exist, I proceeded to develop a ground plan and sketches. At our next meeting, I presented these plans, sketches, and stretched string model to the director who approved of them enthusiastically.

The lighting designer was also quite interested in my concept since the design would rely heavily on his artistry. In effect, he would be painting my set with his light. We knew we would have to work closely and coordinate our efforts for the design to succeed. We conducted a number of larger scale experiments on stage and in the light lab, not only to arrive at a panel design, but to discover all the magical properties of stretched cord and its relationship to light. The experiments were extremely valuable to me, since they answered such critical questions as which type of cord to use and how closely to space it. The experiments also gave the lighting designer a solid starting point for his work. We continued to work closely throughout the design process and felt that the collaboration was successful.

Designing the panels was just a beginning. Integrating them with platforms, set pieces and properties into a solid workable ground plan that would meet all the needs of the play was a most important consideration. I carefully worked out all the details of the design in scale drawings and ground plans. I also found working with a scale model of the set extremely helpful in making good design decisions. The result of this planning was an arrangement of stretched cord panels that was both artistic and practical. These panels not only created an impressionistic environment, but together
with the platforms, set pieces, and furniture, they allowed for the flow of the play both in the movement of the characters and the movement of the scene changes.

While the form of the play's environment was an important design consideration, I was also concerned with the part that color and texture would play in the final design. This was the area in which a successful collaboration with the costume designer was particularly essential. Early in the process I consulted with the costume designer on these matters.

We both were interested in pursuing richness and variety of texture, rather than richness of pattern. When we did select patterned fabric, it was with the idea that the pattern would read as texture. Our palettes were also coordinated. I selected a rich dark green velvet with gold accents for the drawing room furniture. I felt this would work well with both the golden color of the jute cord in the set and with the military uniforms used abundantly in Acts I and II. In Act III, the palette of both costumes and setting was lavenders and pinks.

Before making any fabric purchases, I brought fabric swatches into the costume shop and was always careful to keep my choices of pattern, texture, and color in harmony with the costumes. As a result, the colors and textures of costumes and sets were integrated and balanced. Just as I sought to coordinate my set design with the costumes, the costume designer sought to coordinate his designs with the set. In Act IV, the earth tones of the costumes worked beautifully with the natural tones in the set.

This final act of The Three Sisters epitomized the impressionistic style and atmosphere of the production and the set, a set which together with the rest of the visual contributions of lighting and costumes worked so
incredibly well. The "a vista" scene change into Act IV was one of the most effective impressionistic moments of the play. When the full-stage stretched cord curtain was slowly raised accompanied by violin music, the golden light shimmering off of its hundreds of strings and the vast depth of strings behind it created a stunning picture and an almost religious feeling. The impressionistic effects of Natasha seen faintly off in the house, Andrey pushing the baby carriage through the maze of shimmering cord panels, the soldiers calling out to each other as they moved through these impressionistic woods, and a pensive Masha weaving her way through the paths and layers of string and light were beyond my greatest hopes.

I truly enjoyed the experience of designing the sets for The Three Sisters. I felt that the set design not only met all the needs of the play and was a solid functional design, it was also the most beautiful and artistically satisfying design of my career.
APPENDIX A
DIRECTOR REX MCGRAW'S CONCEPT STATEMENT

Form
To give The Three Sisters a descriptive form it should be properly labeled melodrama. Applying the definition of the form, the play contains an equal mixture of seriousness and comedy. The play's characters fall into three broad categories: three major heroines and three subsidiary heroes (Andrey, Tuzenbakh, and Vershinin); two partial villains (Natasha and Solyony); and four comical characters (Kulygin, Chebutykin, Ferapont, and Anfisa). Considering the time element within the play, the action is episodic in nature and there are numerous chance arrivals and departures. For example, in Act I, Vershinin happens to appear on this particular day or Natasha happens to be late or two officers arrive and happen to see Andrey kiss Natasha. The major characters remain fairly static and never seem to change, although their lives seem to get grayer and less hopeful. They are manipulated by Natasha, the major villainess. She literally pushes the three sisters out of their home: she invades the house in Act I; in Act II, she has closed the curtains and put out the lights; by Act III, she has confined them all to a small bedroom; and, in the final act, she forces them to a bench at the end of the garden and plans to cut down all the trees. Solyony functions as a secondary villain as he slowly forces himself on Irina. in the
last act, he kills the one person who offers her some hope. The three major characters are left alone, although Olga and Irina express some expectancy for a better future. Spectacle becomes an important element in the play. Act I takes place in two rooms filled with flowers and bright sunshine. Act II occurs in the same room but it is now darkened, illumined only by candlelight and the glow from the stove. Act III takes place in a bedroom with burning houses smoldering in the distance and Act IV takes place outside the house with parading soldiers in the distance. Sounds and music constantly reinforce the action of the play and each act features a special event that strongly influences the action. Looking at the play in this way, it can be called a melodrama, but a melodrama at its magnificent best.

Style

What, then, could be a stylistic choice? A style that is not always considered a theatrical style, but one that was used by painters and composers in the late nineteenth century is impressionism. In a way, it is a variant of expressionism. In painting, the forms and colors of objects are rapidly and lightly indicated; light and reflection help create the final effect. In music, composition includes lush harmonies, subtle rhythms, and unusual tonal colors. Classicism may be too large, romanticism too flowery, and naturalism too heavy, but impressionism indicates the lightness, the variety of emotions of the characters, the counterpoint of lines and sounds, the color and the general feeling of The Three Sisters.

The acting would, of course, have to be based upon a sound subtext. The style would be achieved primarily through the creation of an
impressionistic environment. Perhaps, characters could be vaguely seen through the walls and doors before they enter; the properties could be real but not detailed, such as the picture frames with no pictures, a top with no decorations, furniture with simple lines; the costumes could be solid but pale in color, sounds could be barely audible (the clock, the violin, the street-singers). The lighting could certainly attempt to capture the kind of chiaroscuro used by impressionistic painters—soft sunlight, flickering candles, fire seen in the distance and sunlight filtering through the leaves.

The action in the play could also reinforce an impressionistic style. People do not really listen to one another, they interrupt each other, they talk at the same time, they recall events differently, they blurt out their feelings then immediately apologize, they constantly misunderstand each other, they only give indications of what they really mean. For example, why does Solyony scent his hands, why does the Doctor read those silly items from the newspaper, does Ferapont understand anything Andrey says, how much does Kulygin know about Masha and Vershinin—all impressions.

Chekhov has given so many possibilities of interpretation of the given circumstances and so much depends upon the impression that the audience gets from this seeming formlessness. As Chekhov himself remarked, he only wrote plays so that people might get a look at themselves. Treating his play in an impressionistic style is one way of doing that. The audience gets a series of impressions and they must figure out exactly what these impressions mean. Impressionism might also fit well with the need to balance the comic and serious elements of the play; in that way, style would
relate to form. *The Three Sisters* could well be staged as an Impressionistic melodrama.

**Commanding Image**

As a final example, the through line of action and the super-objective could educe a major metaphor. The play’s major action for all of the characters could be: to hope to escape from the life they presently know. The commanding image for each act could be:

**Act I: Beginnings and Greetings: Hope Renewed**

*Time:* Noon on a spring day, Sunday, May 5 in 1889, 1895, or 1901.

*Environment:* Pleasant rooms, bright sunlight, starched, crisp clothes.

*Action:* The Prozorovs, their friends and servants having lost a father a year ago, come out of mourning and renew their hopes for the future as part of the celebration of Irina’s saint’s day. Natasha arrives and serves as a representative of the environment from which they all are trying to escape.

**Act II: Continuations and Frustrations: Hope Dims**

*Time:* Cold winter’s night between 8:00 and 9:30 PM. Shrove Tuesday, mid-February, twenty-one months later.

*Environment:* Darkened rooms, flickering lights, dark, heavy clothes.
Action: The group continues to celebrate, this time with drinking and quarreling. The festivities come to nothing through the efforts of Natasha, who manages to run off for a trolley ride with Protopopov.

Act III: Climaxes and Confessions: Hope Seems Impossible

Time: A hot summer’s night between 2:00 and 4:00 AM, eighteen months later.

Environment: A small room, stuffy, screens closing in, wrinkled clothes.

Action: The Prozorovs and their friends try to escape from the confusion of the fire and its victims into Olga’s and Irina’s room. It is a night for quarrels (Natasha and Olga, Masha and Kulygin); confessions (Chebutykin, Vershinin, Masha, Irina, Andrey); losses (Fredotik, Vershinin); and announcements (Irina’s marriage, the brigade leaving, Olga’s becoming headmistress). Natasha now has command of most of the house.

Act IV: Conclusions and Departures: Hope seems Gone, But is it?

Time: Noon on a fall day, three months later.

Environment: Old garden, distant trees and river, clothes for traveling.

Action: The Prozorovs bid farewell to their military friends. All of the soldier’s leave, the Doctor to
follow the next day. Olga has already left the house with Anfisa, Masha must return to her house with Kulygin, Irina has plans to leave with the Baron. When he is shot by Solyony, she vows to go alone. Andrey surrenders to his existence. Natasha and Protopopov have taken over the house. All remnants of hope seem gone, but are they?

Fedotik and Rode go off anticipating their new life in Poland. As morbid as it may seem, the Baron and Solyony are out of their misery. Vershinin states his hope for the future. Anfisa mentions that she has never been so comfortable. Andrey admits he sees light ahead, Natasha has plans for the future and the house. Kulygin will now have his wife at home to himself. Masha indicates that they must go on living, Irina gives in to her existence of working, and Olga assures them that they are going to live and the future will be better.

Only the Doctor adds a final dissenting note as he says, “It doesn’t matter! It doesn’t matter!”

In the end, then, hope has not been abandoned as each of the characters finds a way to cope with the future. Summing up, The Three Sisters could be called an impressionistic melodrama with “hope for a better existence” as the commanding image. That single statement unites the form, the style, and the commanding image of this great masterpiece.
Desmond MacCarthy, the English critic, has come up with a single summarizing sentence in a quotation that appears in David Magarshack’s work, *Chekov, The Dramatist*, “The essence of Chekhov’s drama is the rainbow effect, laughter shining through tears.”
APPENDIX B

DESIGN DRAFTING
Figure 1. Compositional Ground Plan--Acts I, II
Figure 2. Compositional Ground Plan--Act III
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