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Chekhov in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Reza De Wet's *Three Sisters Two*

Ingy Aboelazm *

Lecturer of English Literature, Dept. of English Language & Literature Ain Shams
University English Literature

Abstract:

South African playwright Reza de Wet's play *Drie Susters Twee* or *Three Sisters Two* (1997), was originally written in Afrikaans, as a sequel to Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (1900). Despite the obvious parallels between post-apartheid South Africa and Russia in the post-revolution period, de Wet's play does not address the South African situation overtly. In fact, she does not write with the intent of pursuing a political agenda or reinforcing one, instead, she perceives theatre as constructing an alternative, imaginary world. She aspires for theatre to be a transformational space in which new and alternative realities can be explored. The aim of this paper is to examine how and to what extent de Wet is able to apply her notion of a post-apartheid theatre to the writing of her play *Three Sisters Two*.

While it is true that years of protest marked the South African political scene, it was negotiations that eventually helped end apartheid¹. Gibson Cima points out that the disappearance of South African protest theatre after 1990 and the emergence on both national and international stages of a multifaceted post conflict theatre that explored the country's past and present, while continuing to imagine its future, marked the emergence of post-apartheid theatre. Bearing in mind that South Africa's protest theatre represented a rich, artistic, and critically-engaged political theatre, one that provoked audience as well as critics world-wide, post-apartheid theatre deals with less serious issues in response to the country's 1994 political transition to democracy. In addition to this, post-apartheid theatre had to be independent from the subject matters imposed by apartheid: that is to say, the transition from apartheid regime to post-apartheid democracy resulted in a theatre that took a whole new direction, away from the oppositional or protest theatre that was most prominent in the apartheid era. One of the most significant factors to note about South African theatre after apartheid as Johann Van Heerden reveals, is that it needed to deal with new "social and political realities: realities that are complex, stories that are complex and perhaps most importantly a more complex audience who had new habits, needs and expectations" (109). Hence, post-apartheid theatre took the liberty to explore social and political concerns, while also keeping in mind years of protest.

Amongst the new realities that South Africans also faced after apartheid is how people of all races, particularly white Afrikaners² who were perceived as the superior race, struggled to define themselves in relation to the new socio-cultural atmosphere. Thus, post-apartheid theatre marked a shift of attention to the private sphere, to reflection and self-questioning. There was a tendency to elaborate on more personal concerns than before, since theatre became increasingly interested in the personal. In support to such a change in focus, Jane Poyner presents the transition from apartheid to post-apartheid as a turn inward toward the confessional, claiming that "post-apartheid, novelists and writers have been enabled to turn their gaze inwards to the private sphere, to reflection and self-questioning (103) (See also Miki Flockemann, "On Not Giving Up: An Interview with Fatima Dike," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 9.1 (1999): 19.

The aim of this paper is to examine South African playwright Reza de Wet's play *Drie Susters Twee* or *Three Sisters Two* (1997), originally written in Afrikaans, as a sequel to Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (1900). Despite the obvious parallels between post-apartheid South Africa and Russia in the post-revolution epoch, de Wet's play does not address the South African situation explicitly. She does not write with the intent of pursuing a political agenda or reinforcing one; instead, she aspires for theatre to be a transformational space in which new and alternate realities can be

explored. In *Three Sisters Two*, de Wet relocates the source text of her play in the period following the Bolshevik Revolution. The play shows Chekhov's characters twenty years later: the whole tone of the original play is recreated and her ability to create characters and dialogue that seem to evoke an authentic Chekhovian world is demonstrated.

In the post-apartheid theatre, there is still reference to the past in association with all the wrong doings that resulted from it; there is also a tendency to make use of the past as a means of moving forward into the new multicultural and democratic South Africa. In other words, exploring South Africa's past and present, while trying to picture its future marked the rise of post-apartheid theatre (See Lauren Suzanne Steyn. *Performance of Identities in Post- Apartheid South Africa: Reza de Wet's Diepe Grond and African Gothic*. (Masters Dissertation), University of Alberta, 2012: iv, Johann Van Heerden. "Beyond the Miracle: Trends in South African Theatre and Performance after 1994." *Avant-Garde Critical Studies*. 26 (2011): 98-99.) This is the type of theatre that South African playwright Reza de Wet³, a privileged Afrikaner born in 1952 when many whites thought that the world they lived in was safe, sought to explore. Hence, debating the present while looking into the past was a major concern both in reality as well as post-apartheid theatre.

Female playwrights were allowed much space in post-apartheid South African theatre since it has broken free from the old notion of male-dominated playwriting and authorship. In 1999, Temple Hauptfleisch refers to the fact that, "women have profoundly influenced the shape of South African theatre, but most of these women operated mainly in the private and commercial world, for ... the state-funded theatre organizations have hardly ever allowed women into prominent positions of power." (55). This situation according to Yvette Hutchison resulted from the perception of theatre as a public and political space in which predominantly men spoke and protested against apartheid, with women in supporting roles. Nonetheless, in contrast to this, post-apartheid South African theatre has shifted away from almost exclusively male-centred and male-authored plays to include more female voices. This shift in the theatre aligns with a larger shift in South African politics (149).

It interesting to note that at a time when most South African writers felt compelled to focus on the political side of South African life, Reza de Wet has consistently denied having any kind of political message to convey. In her interview with Marcia Blumberg, she acknowledges that she writes out of a purely personal impulse and a love for the theatre, "[t]heatre, for me, should evoke a different world and transport the audience into a different reality, a heightened reality of some kind or another [...] Then you can see your own world in a different way. Talking about what is wrong with society is never as interesting for me as: why are we alive? – as immoral as that may be" (250). Hence, as an artist, de Wet's unique artistic

vision stresses the importance for theatre to transfer its audience to an alternative, imaginative world: a different world where dreams and imagination come to live.

De Wet has been unusually forthcoming both about her disinterest in theatre with a socio-political orientation as stated by Rolf Solberg, “[i]t demeans theatre,” she claims. “Theatre has a much more profound function. It has the profound function of transforming. To enlighten or to inform is deadly Transformation is radiant. To inform does nothing. It only goes into your mind. The other goes into your whole body” (188). De Wet’s vision of theatre basically aims at exploring new South African individuality and temperament. Through her art, she creates alternative realities that give room to her readers to explore different possibilities, thus enabling them new forms of understanding. Such imaginary worlds allow the audience an insight into their lives from a detached position that eventually leads to a realization of one’s own situation. However, such realization is achieved through offering an alternative space: one that provides a form of escape from prevalent South African anxieties.

Furthermore, de Wet does not perceive theatre as having a didactic function, but rather to construct an alternative, imaginary world; her artistic vision according to Jeanne-Marie Jackson seems thus like Chekhov's: not overtly anti-political, but wilfully outside of the political (*Russian Souls* 154). She is nostalgic for a time when racial relationships – especially seen against the background of personal memories – were uncomplicated, “a pre-Eden kind of existence when I wasn't aware and they weren't aware.” (Blumberg 245). It is on this level that she feels connected with Chekhov. Hauptfleisch describes de Wet’s plays as being focussed on specific socio-cultural issues related to her Afrikaner roots and her identity as a woman within that context, *not* on what appeared to be the burning political issues of the day (56).

Chekhov’s reputation as a universal writer stems from his ability to write about characters that readers can relate to. His subject matters as well as characters’ interaction can also be found anywhere at anytime. Boris Eikhenbaum indicates that “Chekhov wrote about trifles not because he did not see or did not wish to see anything big ... Chekhov’s method displaced the distinctions between social and private, historic and intimate, large and small ...” (qtd. in Boym 305). Chekhovian universality resonates widely among the Afrikaans cultural elite as Janet Suzman points out in her ‘Introduction’ to *The Free State*, for his plays can be “all things to all men in all ages” (xxii). De Wet is in favour of this widespread attribution to Chekhovian universality with his emphasis on minutiae. She traces Chekhov’s liveliness not merely to themes with timeless appeal, but to “the artistic structure he creates around the pessimistic givens that transcend [difficult] circumstances” (Blumberg 251). Accordingly, she does not seek

to embody a political or content-heavy sense of South African literature (Jackson, *Retreating Reality* 47).

De Wet has responded to Chekhov's plays with her own *A Russian Trilogy: Three Sisters Two* (1997), *Yelena* (1998), and *On the Lake* (2001), the first in Afrikaans and the others in English. Targeted firstly at Afrikaans theatre goers, *A Russian Trilogy* relies on its audience's familiarity with Chekhov's work which, for many, would have formed part of their upbringing. De Wet's fascination with late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Russian history, may have played a part in her decision to set her Chekhov appropriations in the source text's milieu, but her focus in these appropriations is early twentieth-century and not so much late nineteenth-century Russia (Solberg 179). She had mentioned how Chekhov's nineteenth-century characters had spoken to her own sense of socio-cultural dislocation. They are, after all, the creations of a child of the late nineteenth century who had lived through an especially transitional stage in Russian history. De Wet attempted in *Three Sisters Two* to express her insecurity as an Afrikaner in a post-apartheid context by portraying Chekhov's characters in a post-revolution Russia (de Wet 7).

The plays of de Wet's *A Russian Trilogy* are set in the first few decades of the nineteenth century. Although she transports her readers to a time in the past, the way she writes and how she positions the characters in relation to their surroundings, each other and their social interactions, makes the past feel familiar. The effect that this creates is that it allows the audience enough distance from the subject matter and time in which these stories happen in order to take in the social message and story that is relevant to their own situations and lives (Steyn 19-20). De Wet's most captivating achievement is *Three Sisters Two*, in which the characters of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* are transported to provincial Russia in 1920 amidst the Bolshevik revolution. As Marisa Keuris points out, there has been some criticism that her play does not address the South African situation overtly enough. Although it is true that de Wet's play does not make any direct or specific references to South Africa, it is also apparent that a South African reader or spectator will inevitably see some similarities between Russia at the turn of the twentieth-century and South Africa at the turn of the twenty-first century. These similarities involve the consequences facing a ruling party when a change of regime takes place and the old dispensation disintegrates (155).

De Wet reflects on this aspect in her interview with Blumberg by referring to the situation of the sisters in *Three Sisters Two*; she extends this aspect to include her personal affinity with the Russian people, and to draw parallels between them and the Afrikaners:

As I was writing the play, I became a little more conscious of it, because although the situation was entirely wrong they were born into it and they [had] to go through a very painful process of

renouncing the identity that they had been given. The pain of transition, confusion, loss, of being forlorn and everything fragmenting – Tim Huisamen (a colleague at Rhodes) said to me, ‘Today the Afrikaner is living Chekhov’. The empathy I felt for the characters is possibly apparent in the play. I understand the ridiculousness — their obsessiveness; and they are such hypochondriacs — but I understand them because they are just like me (Blumberg 243).

This correspondence between the national future that Chekhov's characters had anticipated and the present that de Wet's Afrikaner contemporaries had experienced was instantly recognized by Afrikaans audience in South Africa. Thus the Afrikaners' situation in the post-apartheid era which is very similar to the Russians' in the post-revolution epoch is the reason “why the writing of the play was enormously cathartic” (Blumberg 244). This resemblance is further highlighted by de Wet's comment when asked about South Africa's changeover to the new democracy:

Nothing has been gained from the Afrikaner perspective in terms of stabilizing the country and making people happy and giving them a greater sense of security [...]. Everything has been lost for the Afrikaner – Afrikaans is marginalized, there's chaos, danger, people have lived behind fences, everyone's scared, and the money is worth nothing. All in all, it is really like the aftermath of the Revolution when everyone in Russia was suffering and starting to wonder whether it wasn't better before, even if it was atrociously wrong (Blumberg 244).

Now the question that poses itself is why de Wet conceals conservative politics behind the ‘alternative world’ of post-revolutionary Russia in *Three Sisters Two*. The answer is found in reading the play not as a vehicle to represent political anxieties, but as a futile, disabling attempt to escape from these ubiquitous South African concerns (Jackson, *Russian Souls* 155). Hence, in the confined, ordinary spaces of both the provincial Russian gentry on the edge of collapse and Afrikaners left wondering where they stand in a new political order, “narrativity emerges as an ideal of totalizing momentum that seeks a separate space from acknowledged social and political moribundity” (Jackson, *Russian Souls* 131).

Chekhov, on the other hand, wrote *Three Sisters* in 1900. Steve Cohen indicates that during his brief lifetime, Chekhov witnessed the results of the abolition of serfdom, as former owners had to sell their lands because they couldn't manage estates without the free labour of their former serfs. The bourgeoisie and intelligentsia were caught in the middle, with no power, as Czar Alexander III clamped down on non-Russians, non-Orthodox, and university professors in order to ‘save’ Russia from

'modernism.' De Wet wrote this sequel in 1997, at the mid-point of Nelson Mandela's presidency when apartheid gave way to multiracial democracy. Her play shows Chekhov's characters twenty years after we last saw them. The Czar has been overthrown and the Bolshevik Red Army has defeated the White Army which tried to compromise between capitalism and socialism. The Reds took hostages and sometimes shot them in order to force compliance. People like the Prozorovs, the family in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, are fearful of the proletariat. They dream of – and constantly speak of – going back to their old home in Moscow where life was wonderful. They are longing for the good old days when their Russia was great. Hence, the audience tend to sympathize, nostalgically, with the old order, be it in Russia or South Africa.

Place plays a vital role in Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (1901) as stated by Victoria Lantz. He locates sisters Olga, Masha, and Irena in a provincial capital many miles away from Moscow (172). The Prozorov sisters and their brother have been living there after moving from Moscow by their now deceased parents when their army-general father was stationed there in charge of a brigade. Despite the fact that the locale offers the natural beauty of rivers and forests, for Chekhov's sisters, the serenity of the place is a torment, as the agrarian setting reminds them of their distance from Moscow. Longing for being back to their birth-city, the sisters find provincial life isolating and static. Their romantic idea of living in Moscow heightens as the years unfold with the same monotony. The three sisters thus have a deep attachment to Moscow, since it is the place where their mother is buried and where they were born and lived for quite some time (170). Chekhov's Moscow highlights the tension between a happy past, a hopeful future, and the monotonous present (172-3).

It is interesting to see how de Wet envisages each character's life in terms of how Chekhov originally conceived of the character, as well as how a character's youthful hopes and dreams are realized or more often dashed, within the context of a historic event such as the 1917 Revolution (Keuris 153). De Wet situates her play in the summer of 1920 a few years after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution has taken place, "Russia has been in the power of the Bolsheviks since October 1917 but the White Army is still offering resistance" (de Wet 19). The Prozorovs are living in dismal conditions: part of the house has been given to local peasants, they have a shortage of food and each day is a struggle for survival (Keuris 154). Against a background of sporadic gunfire as stated by Gordon McVay in his review of *A Russian Trilogy*, the Prozorov family subsists on "soup bones and green potatoes" after standing "every day in that endless queue ... in the heat ... among dirty people" (de Wet 25). The beautiful "birch trees have been chopped down for firewood" (de Wet 33). Andrey, now forty-seven years old, pale, plump, and very unhappily married, is unable to buy a fresh newspaper, or strings for his violin which, "only has two strings left and he doesn't tune

them because he's afraid they'll also break" (de Wet 37). His youthful dream of becoming a famous professor in Moscow has been entirely shattered, "I was young and filled with hope. I would go to Moscow and become a professor. So many dreams...everything ahead of you...and then it's all in the past [...] when is it suddenly too late?" (de Wet 50); his vulgar wife, Natasha has "three chins" and "snores like a wild-boar" (de Wet 24) and Olga who is nearly half blind "since [her] glasses broke, can hardly see where [she is] going" (de Wet 25).

Not only does de Wet continue with the lives of the main characters, but she also keeps the Russian setting of the original play, as well as the four-act structure and the various themes introduced in Chekhov's play such as loss, devastation and yearning for the past. In fact, the whole tone of the original play is recreated in de Wet's play and one is struck by her capacity to create characters and dialogue that seem to conjure an authentic Chekhovian world (Keuris 152).

De Wet's *Three Sisters Two* can simply be read as a sequel to Chekhov's source text. The play takes up the lives of the main characters in Chekhov's *Three Sisters* a few years after the Bolshevik Revolution. All the main characters are present: Olga, Masha, Irena, Andrey, Natasha, and also Vershinin – now a wounded General in the White Army, "old and grey with a wooden leg" – who once broke Masha's heart by going away when his military brigade was re-stationed to a new location (de Wet 35), and even the old nanny, Anfisa. Sofja is now a pretty eighteen-year-old. Her brother Bobik, a baby in Chekhov's play, is mentioned in de Wet's play, but is now an absent character - he is a soldier in the Red Army and away with the troops (Keuris 153). De Wet creates one new character, namely Igor, who considers himself as a dramatist and whom Natasha initially sees as a potential lover but later rejects as she eventually realizes that he is simply an opportunistic character. Igor, who perceives himself to be "writing an important play about the revolution" that "no one is allowed to see," (de Wet 32) believes that the Bolsheviks are after him, "I was seen this afternoon down at the river by a Bolshevik spy. A special agent. Now my life is in danger. They'll be coming for me" (de Wet 43).

Before the action begins, Chekhov's Koolyeeghin has committed suicide after Masha eloped with General Marovsky of the Red Army. Chebutykin, the older army doctor who long ago knew the parents of the three sisters has died, and Vershinin's wife and two daughters have "died in a cholera epidemic" (de Wet 36). Those who survive find themselves "living on the edge of a precipice," facing "the end of the world" (de Wet 53). The house of the Prozorovs' golden childhood in Moscow has become a Bolshevik "brothel for the Red Army officers" (de Wet 73).

While the Russian Revolution brought about the traumatic downfall of the Prozorovs' economic security and social stature, it had caused them to

romanticize their way of life prior to the Revolution and prior to the death of their parents. De Wet illustrates this by making all the action of the play take place “in the old nursery on the first floor of the Prozorovs’ house. [...] Pictures on the walls depict scenes from fairy-tales” (de Wet 19), illustrating the Prozorovs’ desperate harking back to an idealized past in which they feel protected and nurtured. As Daniël Botha Stander suggests, it is a past as unreal in its perfection as the fairy-tales represented on the walls (30).

Olga, the eldest sister is now fifty years old, an old maid, tall and thin. She is bitter about all the changes that have taken place and complains constantly about the people living with them in their house, how difficult it is to get food, the fact that her glasses are broken (probably the reason why she is also constantly complaining about headaches) and that she can’t see properly. Masha’s arrival makes her think of Koolyeeghin and everyone’s belief that she would probably have been a better wife for him than Masha, “Poor Koolyeeghin ... He should have married Olga. She would have made him happy” (de Wet 37). After Masha elopes with her new lover (Marovsky), Koolyeeghin kills himself and with his death destroys any hope Olga could still have nurtured in this regard (Keuris 153):

Masha: I know...I know you’ve always blamed me. Poor Koolyeeghin. If I hadn’t been such a wicked woman then he wouldn’t have shot himself through the head. Was it the head? No one ever bothered to tell me.

Olga: Masha! Please!

Masha: (*Turns and looks at Olga. Speaks in a ‘schoolmaster’s voice.’*) ‘Amo, amas, amat.’ ‘Five out of ten for good behaviour Masha.’ Is that what you really wanted? That I should be a dutiful wife? Night after night ... lie to him as if I were lying in my grave! (de Wet 36-7).

For a writer who is widely seen to skirt political issues, de Wet seems surprisingly preoccupied with the world beyond the estate. Soon into the first act of *Three Sisters Two*, a discontented Olga is introduced arriving home from the market:

Olga: Just look at me. Covered in dust. The peasants were shoving and pushing. And the way they smell! [...] And after all that, I got hardly anything for our coupons. [...] Today they didn’t even have any rotten fish or horse-meat. I had to take what they gave me! (*Collapses onto the sofa with the basket on her lap.*) I can’t any more ... I simply can’t. I’m in a state of collapse. Every day in that endless queue...in the heat... among those dirty people (de Wet 25).

It is noteworthy that while Chekhov maintained the timeless tedium of everyday life amidst and apart from political upheaval, de Wet is preoccupied with a “dystopic incursion into the meaningful private sphere.”

De Wet's sisters are locked in a time-pressed struggle to preserve the 'timeless' everyday – the ground from which Chekhov's totalizing experience of reality springs – from an outside threat. While *Three Sisters Two* picks up on this anxiety about the encroaching lower classes, de Wet's Olga no longer responds to a particular objectionable behaviour, but to the very fact of the perceived threat. It is Olga who ventures beyond the play's domestic centre into the degrading public domain (Jackson, *Retreating Reality* 58).

Moreover, after years of being a teacher and later a schoolmistress of a school nearby, Olga is abruptly dismissed by the new authorities when she defies their instructions regarding the putting up of portraits of political figures on the classroom walls and letting the students sing 'politically correct' songs (Keuris 153), Olga: "just after they left I took them (portraits of the Czar and Czarina) down. And the next morning we sang our anthem as usual. A week later I got a letter ... 'Your services are no longer required'. Not even 'we're sorry to inform you ...' but 'your services are no longer required'" (de Wet 44-5).

In de Wet's *Three Sisters Two*, the mother's image is kept alive in Irena, the youngest sister, who resembles the sisters' mother. She is now forty years old, petite, pale with dark rings around her eyes, "a somewhat childish old maid" (de Wet 17), but in love with Masha's old lover, Vershinin:

Irena: But ... I love him. I do. I've waited so long to tell someone. When he was ill I used to sleep in front of his door...without anyone knowing...in case he needed me in the night. I'm blushing. Don't look at me. I suppose you think I'm foolish.

Masha: Love is never foolish. And what about him? How does he feel?

Irena: He's very nice to me. But then he's nice to everybody. Maybe he doesn't want to say anything because he thinks I'm too plain. (*Lifts her face to Masha.*) Look at me. I've lost my looks. I'm so pale and there are black rings under my eyes (de Wet 39).

Irena is always thoughtful towards others: bringing water and a fan for Masha; making Vershinin his favourite food and even sleeping in front of his bedroom when he is ill; comforting old Anfisa when she has a nightmare and even in the end trying to make things comfortable for the old nanny before they leave. Olga is, however, worried about her health and always urging her not to become too excited. Irena is intensely happy when Masha arrives, but also very upset when she hears the reason for her visit and realizes that they will have to leave the old house and go to Moscow (Keuris 153):

Irena: I can hardly remember Moscow at all. I remember how I longed to go back there. But when I think about it...everything started fading away...I can still remember our old house in Basmanyana Street. A few of the rooms. And how it felt. I know mamma was there...but I can't see her any more. No matter how hard I try...I can't see her face any more (de Wet 80).

Masha, the middle sister, is now forty-five years old, "once married to Koolyheegin, now the mistress of Marovsky, a General in the Red army. She has a fragile sensuality" (de Wet 17). The sophisticated, rebellious middle sister who is still aware of her charms could not stand being unhappily married to Koolyeeghin and after meeting Marovsky (a general in the Red Army) elopes with him to Moscow, where she has been living for the past five years. The reason for her return, as well as how everybody reacts towards her, forms the dramatic material of the play. It is eventually revealed that her lover has fallen foul of the new regime and that Masha and her family are also in danger of persecution. They all have to flee the family home, ironically to Moscow where Masha hopes to hide them safely for a while before trying to escape to Europe (Keuris 153). Unfortunately, however, according to Masha, the Moscow that the Prozorovs have always longed to go back to, no longer exists, "I'll have to lie to them. They still dream about Moscow...but Moscow has changed into a sort of hell. Crime, disease. And everywhere the smell of sewage and death. Our old house in Staraya Basmanyana Street...our lovely old house...has become a brothel for Red Army officers" (de Wet 73).

De Wet selects Masha, the most rebellious of the three sisters, as the protagonist of her own play to challenge the moral conventions of her family's household through her transgressions and repudiation of conventional family values. Masha, as she is presented in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, already disregards the basic rules of conventional matrimony. She is married at the age of eighteen to a schoolmaster, Koolyghin, whom she soon comes to consider as her intellectual inferior. When Vershinin, a major in charge of a military brigade recently stationed to a new location in town, introduces himself to the Prozorovs, he immediately gets her attention (Stander 29):

Masha: We all want to remember everything.

Olga: We were so excited to meet someone from Moscow. Then we still believed that we'd go back some day. Yes, that's all we dreamt about.

Irena: 'Moscow... Moscow... Moscow'

Olga: 'Yes! As soon as possible' (*Little laugh.*)That was twenty years ago (de Wet 51).

She responds to his refinement and especially to his philosophical promptness. They engage in passionate debates on the nature of life and existence, and despite his status as a married man, they are soon involved in a romantic affair:

Masha: Oh, Vershinin...can't we believe that we're young again...young and in love...that I'm your only love...and that you're mine. Let's pretend that we still adore each other... please... please... and we must believe it... (*Closes her eyes and throwing her head back.*) Kiss me, Vershinin ... (*Touching her throat.*) Kiss me here. (*Vershinin looks at Masha for a moment, then he bends down and kisses her as the light fades to black*) (de Wet 74).

However, to Masha's devastation, his military brigade is re-stationed to a new location, "Masha: When you went away...I was so afraid I'd never see you again. When I asked you, you said, 'Only time will tell.' It was so sweet with you. Who knows what would have happened if you'd never left" (de Wet 55). However, de Wet intervenes with *Three Sisters Two* by presenting Masha with a new lover, Marovsky, a Red Army officer. In this revisionist sequel to Chekhov's play, Masha gathers the courage to revolt against the norms that entrap her in the country town and she elopes with the revolutionary Marovsky to Moscow. Marovsky uses his influence to ensure the Prozorovs' protection against revolutionaries, but when he falls out of favour with Lenin⁴ in 1917, Masha is forced to return to her family and warn them to flee as soon as possible (Stander 29):

Masha: I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't know how I can tell you. I feel as if I'm going insane! I don't know how to begin... I simply don't know...

Irena: You're frightening me.

Masha: Well you see... Marovsky my lover... has been arrested.

Andrey: I wish you wouldn't call him that. And what has he done?

Masha: Nothing! He's done nothing! You know what it's like these days. One day you're important and the next day you're an enemy of the state. (*Quietly*). Lenin had him arrested. They had ... a disagreement.

Andrey: Olga was right. She said if you came back so suddenly, something must be wrong.

Masha: But that's not the worst. I had to flee for my life and I know you're also in danger.

Andrey: That's rubbish! We have nothing to do with Marovsky! I don't even like the man.

Masha: That's the way it is these days. If someone is arrested...it doesn't end there. That's why I came here! To tell you and to warn you.

Irena: Don't talk like that Masha. You're frightening me.

Masha: I've found somewhere in Moscow where we'll be safe (de Wet 69-70).

Masha's return disturbs the familiarity and security of the Prozorovs' home; it also depicts a dark element that de Wet portrays as a gothic space because it contains a family secret that undercuts the propriety its inhabitants seek to maintain. As a matter of fact, the focal cause of estrangement and terror in *Three Sisters Two* is not Masha's announcement of Marovsky's failure and the consequent danger in which they find themselves, but rather Masha's assertion to Andrey that it was a known fact in their neighbourhood that Irena is the illegitimate child of their mother and Chebutykin (Stander 30):

Andrey: You are nothing without Marovsky! You! Marovsky's whore!

Vershinin: Come now!

Andrey: Keep out of this! Shut your mouth you bastard! It's you who started everything! You turned her into an adulterous slut! (*To Masha.*) I'm ashamed of you. For years I've been ashamed of you! I'm only glad Mamma is dead! I'm glad that she's been spared this! (*Pointing at Masha*) To see what you've become.

Masha: What do you know about Mamma? If I'm like anybody in this family, I'm like Mamma.

Andrey: But you're insane! Mamma was refined...an angel...and you are a whore! A whore!

Masha: And what about uncle Chebutykin?

Andrey: What about him? He's been dead for years.

Masha: Don't you remember how he used to say ...over and over again...that he would never marry because he was in love with Mamma?

Andrey: Good God! That's not to say...

Masha: Everyone knew! Everyone in the army. I'm sure Vershinin knew. Marovsky knows. It was quite a scandal!

Irena: Stop it! Stop it!

Masha: And why do you think he came to live with us after Pappa died? And why did he give Irena such expensive presents? (*Pointing to Irena*) Maybe blood is thicker than water! (de Wet 71-2)

With such a revelation, Masha deprives the Prozorovs of any sense of security they ever derived from their idealized recollections of their childhood memories back in Moscow:

Irena: You spoilt everything. (*Cries*)

Olga: What's happening in here? Are you all mad? *(To Masha)*
Since you arrived here this morning all hell has broken
loose!

Irena: *(Runs to Olga.)* Olya ... Oh, Olya ...

Olga: My poor little Irena. *(Puts her arms around her. To Masha.)*
Just look at her. Completely ashen. Are you satisfied now?
And don't think we'll go anywhere with you. Anything will
be better than that.

*(Masha turns her head away. Olga leads Irena to the bedroom.
Andrey's violin is heard. Olga turns and rushes to the passage
door.)*

Stop it!! Stop it!! I detest your disgusting playing!! I detest
it!!

*(Andrey stops playing. Silence. Masha slowly sits down on the
sofa. For a while she stares out in front of her.)*

Masha: What have I done? I'm a wicked person. I wish I was
dead.

Vershinin: Don't say that. You don't always think, that's all.

Masha: It's like a bad dream ... everything is like a bad dream (de
Wet 72-3).

Like Chekhov's source text, the theme of arrival and departure also structures de Wet's *Three Sisters Two*. As the play's first act commences with Olga, Irena and Andrey awaiting the arrival of Masha from Moscow, the play also ends with a departure – this time of the family themselves. Their youthful dream to go to Moscow and live there happily ever after – which is supposed to be realized – has turned into a nightmare: the family is escaping with just the clothes on their backs and a few paltry belongings. No prospect of travelling in style – they will travel in an open truck with other people desperate to get away before the Red Army arrives, and will use tickets bought by the proceeds of selling Andrey's beloved violin (Keuris 154):

Andrey: I sold my violin... Well... I suppose that's the end of it...

Olga: And Mamma's rings?

(Andrey nods. Irena bursts into tears. Olga turns her head away.)

Natasha: Did you manage to get the tickets?

Andrey: Yes, I did. I had to pay a fortune [...] There's nothing left.
It was horrible. You can hardly imagine. So many people:
the wounded, old women, children, chickens, goats. Even
pigs. The noise was unbearable. And the stench. A real
circus. Ba. *(Wiping his forehead with his sleeve.)* All the
trains are full because everyone wants to be somewhere else
(de Wet 81-2).

However, since the new government is now executing all the ‘enemies of the state’ that it can find, Vershinin is in danger and can’t travel with the family. His limp, caused by a war injury, is thus symbolic of his impotent state:

(Vershinin enters from the passage. He seems a little dazed. He is dressed in the uniform of a white army general. He is wearing two medals on his chest.)

Masha: Vershinin...my dear Vershinin that’s how a General should look. Come and sit here with me.

(Vershinin goes and sits next to Masha on the sofa.)

I want to talk to you about Irena. [...] The only thing that can help her is the belief that she’ll see you in Moscow (de Wet 87).

Before the Prozorovs’ departure, Vershinin carefully hands his memoirs to Andrey and Natasha’s daughter Sofya as a gift, “*(Picking up his diary.)* It’s the story of my life. If you read it, you’ll see how many misfortunes one can actually survive. *(Little laugh.)* It’s surprisingly really. There you are. It’s yours. *(Gives the book to her.)*” (de Wet 89), hoping that maybe he can pass along his memories to succeeding generations.

It should be highlighted that de Wet's characters directly oppose the intrusion of politics into their representational sphere of meaning, which ends up unintentionally prioritizing them. In other words, the energy spent resisting this intrusion ends up reinforcing its importance. That is to say, the external actions taking place as a result of the Revolution are foregrounded by the characters, thus, highlighting their significance despite the fact that they struggle to withstand them. Accordingly, this sheds light on the world beyond the rural estate. As for Chekhov's characters, however, the despair that they experience together is a source of ongoing, internal struggle and narrative energy. Revolution in *Three Sisters Two*, on the other hand, “upsets even this chance at fruitful malaise by redirecting the constructive momentum of the play toward external conflict” (Jackson, *Russian Soul* 149).

(The sound of shots being fired some way off.)

Igor: Just listen to that. More executions. I can’t bear it any more [...]. I’m a complete nervous wreck. My stomach is always in a knot. My palms sweaty. And I can’t get a decent night’s sleep because I am always scared that they’ll come and search the house again. It was so terrible ... I’ll never forget it (de Wet 24).

On another note, Igor also refers to Lenin’s *Cheka*⁵ whose main task was to hunt out what became known as ‘enemies of the state,’ “Lenin’s Cheka tortures people for days and sometimes even weeks. They flay them alive. They pull their skin off bit-by-bit” (de Wet 82). Moreover, Andrey

refers to the story of the bloody assassination of Protopopov⁶, imperial Russia's last minister of the interior at the hands of the Bolsheviks:

Natasha: I'm tired of the Protopopov story!

Andrey: Oh, now it's a story? The whole town knew about it!

Mashenka, do you know what happened to Protopopov?

Olga: Must you talk about it? It was horrible.

Irena: Please don't talk about it Andrusha.

Masha: Tell me. I want to know.

Andrey: The Bolsheviks shot him, stuffed him in his grand piano and threw him in the river.

Natasha: Stop it!

Andrey: Something like that makes this whole ridiculous revolution worthwhile. The poor idiot (de Wet 67).

The gunshots that resound throughout *Three Sisters Two*, however, make it difficult to believe that the micro-narrative private domain or de Wet's artistic stance will triumph over off-stage events: more likely, their coincidence spells the violent defeat of the 'timelessly' alternative Chekhovian everyday. That is to say, the Chekhovian private domain in the play has become a peripheral, unsustainable limbo, as the interfering political reality makes private meaning forcibly incomplete (Jackson, *Russian Soul* 155-6).

Again, in *Three Sisters Two*, the internal narrative of the Prozorov household is held hostage by the external occurrence of the bell's destruction that is relegated to a symbolic, politically transparent incident that the audience only hears since it is not represented on stage (Jackson, *Retreating Reality* 60):

Masha: [...] what on earth was that?

Olga: It was a church bell falling.

Masha: A Church bell?

Olga: Yes. You know how many old churches there are in the town ... well every now and then they need a church bell to melt down for ammunition. Then they chop it loose and it falls to the ground. It's so heavy that it falls feet deep into the ground. Then they have to drag it away with horses.

Irena: We've grown used to it ... to the bells falling.

Masha: I always loved to listen to the bells ... ringing for the evening service (de Wet 46-7).

It is to be noted that the steady and certain destruction of the church bells, clearly intended as relics of Russia's pre-Bolshevik Orthodox order, happens outside the representational bounds of the play but does not happen on any meaningful narrative level (Jackson, *Russian Soul* 152).

The 'space beyond' of de Wet's Chekhovian landscape has become definitively political – as opposed to just irrelevant – and poses a direct

threat to private life. Reviewers may well be justified in criticizing de Wet's inattention to the political complexities of Revolutionary Russia, but Olga's complaints about government visitors to her classroom echoes the socio-political unease of the new post-revolutionary milieu (Jackson, *Retreating Reality* 61).

Olga: Said they were inspectors of the New Educational System. I even gave them tea. [...] And then I had to hear how everything was going to change. We wouldn't even be allowed to sing our anthem. We had to sing 'Free Poland'. Imagine. [...] And do you know what they did then! They went into the hall and took down the portraits of the Czar and Czarina (de Wet 44).

Although de Wet's stage directions for Olga state that she "*seems overcome*" (44), the reaction she gets from Masha is, "poor Olga" as *she "looks at herself in the mirror and touches her hair"* (de Wet 44). The power of Olga's or de Wet's "seeming political agenda is negated by its demonstrable insignificance" – it is basically a statement with no effect. However, the infusion of this political commentary within the play's narrative context, does more than fill up space (Jackson, *Russian Soul* 154).

The Russian Revolution stands in for South Africa's own change in political dispensation. However, it should be noted that if this assumption is perceived as transparent commentary on South African life and politics, then the social and racial implications are troubling. As André Brink puts it, "the undisguised nostalgia for a past when the upper classes – white Afrikaners being the superior race – had exclusive access to the good life before revolutionary upstarts – non-whites – spoiled it all" (173) is rather distressing. According to such an interpretation, de Wet strikingly condemns South African reality for being ill-suited to the formal conventions of Chekhovian realism or a preoccupation with everyday life just for its own sake. Nevertheless, *Three Sisters Two* cannot be possibly taken as a proactive political statement or attempt to reproduce Chekhov as a 'timely' dictate for the genteel private sphere over the harsh public one. In other words, de Wet is looking to opt out of political determination altogether, but the timeliness in this goal lies in her inability to represent a meaningful alternative (Jackson, *Retreating Reality* 58-9).

The play ends with the sound of gunfire and explosions, signifying the approach of the victorious Red Army, which again sheds light on the subject of war and devastation:

(Vershinin smooths down his uniform. He looks down at his medals and then he shines one of his medals with his sleeve. He starts loading the gun.)

Vershinin: When they find me, I want them to say 'He was a brave soldier, even if he was our enemy.' [...] I'm Alexander Ignatevich

Vershinin. (*Looks at the door.*) And I'm marching into battle again.

(*After a few moments the sound of an explosion. [...] The sound of shots being fired in the distance. After a few seconds the sound of an explosion as the lights slowly fade to black* (de Wet 94).

In his brief Afrikaans review of de Wet's *Three Sisters Two*, Barrie Hough notes that, "As you listen to how the political configuration in post-revolutionary Russia has changed, how public services such as hospitals and the postal service are falling apart, you almost imagine you're listening to a farm family somewhere in the South African countryside." The idea behind this more perceptive reading is not the comparison between Russia and South Africa or between past and present, but the easily overlooked fact that *Three Sisters Two* indirectly addresses its audience's lives, avoiding explicit commentary to tease at the periphery of political relevance (Jackson, *Russian Soul* 165).

Finally, in spite of de Wet's artistic stance that theatre should present an alternative world, an imaginary space wherein the audience can explore different perspectives, what she deals with in *Three Sisters Two* are the social consequences and situations of a political regime that promulgated an ideology of Afrikaner superiority. Thus, by proxy, her work is inherently political. It warns of the social danger that comes with this political line of thinking. She differs from more overtly political writing, however, in intention, for she does not write her plays with the intent of pursuing a political agenda or reinforcing one for that matter. De Wet writes with the intent of putting the domestic and social dangers and paradoxes on stage that have been born out of the oppressive system of Apartheid: not necessarily to protest it, but to expose it (Steyn 14-15). Thus, through resorting to a time in the past, de Wet seeks a detached, alternative space that provides a form of escapism.

To conclude, although de Wet shifts us to a time in the past, the way she writes and how she positions her characters in relation to their surroundings, one another and their social interactions, makes the past appear and sound familiar. The effect that this generates is that it allows the spectators enough distance from the subject matter and time in which these stories are taking place, to take in the social message and story that is relevant to or resonate with their own situations and lives. This in return opens up the floor for a variety of alternatives, to the self, for perceiving history, life, or even the world at large through a different lens. This allows the audience to make comparisons in order to make choices, thus fulfilling de Wet's artistic stance for theatre as a transformational space in which alternate realities are explored and alternative imaginary worlds constructed.

NOTES

¹ Apartheid was a policy that constitutionally and socially endorsed racism, discrimination and oppression of people of colour in South Africa. It was instituted by the National Party government who believed in a superior white Afrikaner race. However, with the African National Congress's (ANC) election into government in 1994, theatre was bound to change. Thus, when apartheid officially ended in 1990, South Africans of all races had to relearn how to interact with one another: the past discrimination haunted many and reconciliation became increasingly difficult. Furthermore, the transition from apartheid regime to post-apartheid democracy has also posed challenges for literary and cultural critics who study the region, many of whom argue that the new topics, identities, and tropes brought to life in contemporary South African fiction demand new interpretive categories and modes of reading. During apartheid, theatre was either geared toward supporting the ideals of apartheid or protesting against it.

² The Afrikaners are a South African ethnic group who are descended from seventeenth century Dutch, German, and French settlers to South Africa. The Afrikaners slowly developed their own language and culture when they came into contact with Africans and Asians. The word "Afrikaners" means "Africans" in Dutch. Although the Afrikaners were the minority ethnic group in the country, the Afrikaner National Party gained control of the government in 1948. To restrict the ability of 'less civilized' ethnic groups to participate in government, different races were strictly segregated. Afrikaans, the Afrikaner language, is one of the eleven official languages of South Africa.

³ Reza de Wet has established herself as a major South African playwright. She was born in the Free State province of South Africa, and educated in both Drama and English literature. Throughout her career, de Wet has expressed a complex and nuanced understanding of her rootedness in a mixed lineage of English and Afrikaner families. On her father's side, she was related to the South African War General Christiaan de Wet, while her great grandmother on her mother's side was the daughter of a Settler family of Welsh descent. As descendants of such culturally mixed lineages, de Wet's parents raised her bilingually. She maintained that English was her alternative language and not her second language. She felt equally comfortable in English and Afrikaans, while her everyday speech was described as a mixture of both languages. As an experienced actress as well as director, de Wet writes plays that are at once very performable as well as literary. Her plays have won a host of Vita awards (awards specifically for performance) as well as major literary awards. In 1997 she was awarded the most prestigious award for Afrikaans literature, the Hertzog prize for Drama. Since 1986 Reza de Wet has published two trilogies of Afrikaans plays: The first three appeared in one volume, *Vrystaat-Trilogie* or *Free*

State Trilogy, and the next three in *Trits: Mis, Mirakel, Drif* or *Plays One: Missing, Miracle, Crossing*. Her two trilogies were separated by two plays written in English: *In a Different Light* and *Worm in the Bud*. Then followed *Drie Susters Twee* or *Three Sisters Two*. Her plays appeal strongly to the reader and theatre goer through their actuality and underlying depth of meaning. Her dramas have been performed frequently on stage and she has received the Hertzog prize for literature twice.

⁴ Vladimir Lenin is the founder of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), and leader of the Bolshevik Revolution (1917), and first head (1917–1924) of the Soviet state.

⁵ *Cheka* stems from the full name in Russian: The All Russian Emergency Commission for Combatting Counter-Revolution and Sabotage. The *Cheka* was used by Vladimir Lenin to consolidate his power after the 1917 Revolution. The main focus was defending the revolution by removing traitors, which later led to what became known as the 'Red Terror'. The *Cheka* basically became judge, jury and perpetually executioner.

⁶ Alexander Protopopov, a former leader of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries who held a high-ranking position in the *Cheka*, the secret police set up in 1917 by the Bolshevik government, was swiftly executed on the evening of August 30, 1918. The execution of Protopopov was only the beginning of an officially sanctioned wave of violence known as the Red Terror. From 1917-1922 The Bolsheviks executed around 200,000 alleged counter-revolutionaries. Justifying the Red Terror as a necessary measure to secure the revolution and communist government, the Bolsheviks consciously rejected prevailing notions of morality, justice, and individual rights.

الملخص

تشيكوف في جنوب أفريقيا فيما بعد الفصل العنصري: مسرحية ريزا دي فيت
"ثلاث شقيقات 2"
أنجي أبو العزم

حررت المؤلفة المسرحية الجنوب أفريقية ريزا دي فيت مسرحيتها "ثلاث شقيقات 2" (1997) باللغة الأفريقية باعتبارها الجزء التالي لمسرحية الكاتب الروسي أنطون تشيكوف ثلاث شقيقات (1900). على الرغم من أوجه التشابه الواضحة بين جنوب إفريقيا فيما بعد الفصل العنصري وروسيا في فترة ما بعد الثورة البلشفية، لم تتطرق مسرحية دي فيت إلي الوضع في جنوب إفريقيا بشكل صريح. فهي لا تسعى إلي الكتابة بنية انتهاج أجندة سياسية أو تعزيز سياسة بعينها فهي ترى أن المسرح الجنوب أفريقي لديه القدرة علي تكوين عالماً بديلاً وهمياً. فالكاتبة تتوق إلي أن يكون المسرح فضاءً تحويلياً يمكن فيه استكشاف حقائق جديدة.

يستهدف البحث دراسة وتحليل مسرحية دي فيت "ثلاث شقيقات 2" لمعرفة الي أي مدي استطاعت الكاتبة تطبيق مفهومها عن المسرح الجنوب إفريقي فيما بعد الفصل العنصري علي المسرحية قيد المناقشة.

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