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PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS IN CHEKHOV

CORINA GRĂMOȘTEANU



I.L. Caragiale UNATC, Bucharest, Romania
corina.gramosteanu@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper aims to analyse the psychological mechanisms present in the dramaturgy of Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, alongside the psychic transformations undergone by the theatre creator during the process of interpreting and staging these classic texts. Considering the symbolic value of Chekhov's characters at a social and cultural level, all of which were developed under the auspices of the great cultural and historical shifts of the beginning of the 20th century, the present analysis investigates a series of stage expression methods that the contemporary theatre has exhibited over the past decades. In fact, what this essay questions is the creator's level of understanding of his own artistic predispositions, needs, or fears. The way the artist navigates through the realm of signs and aesthetic images born from Chekhov's dramaturgy tests both the discernment that everyone trains in front of the stage, as well as the predilection for certain motives and directorial directions. Moreover, for a theatre-maker, Chekhovian dramaturgy provokes an essential interaction with the emotional and psychological sensibilities of the characters, as it requires great attention to detail in the interpretation and staging of these fine psychological processes.

Keywords: sublimation, psychological mechanisms, the subconscious in creation, Freud, Jungian psychoanalysis.

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Introduction

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov is one of the greatest playwrights and novelists of the Russian literature, known not only for his manner of probing the mechanisms and inter-human relations of the society in which he developed his work, but also for the ability to explore psychology in a raw and full of emotion approach. In his plays, especially the one analysed in this essay—*Uncle Vanya*—, Chekhov chooses not to load his situations with a gratuitous dose of drama, but rather connects their key moments with a sense of particular comedy. His characters are ordinary people (perhaps almost bland and devoid of personal stakes) who, through the inner conflicts carried on from generation to generation, define an entire era of global scale changes.

Thus, not without good reason, I chose to use as a research tool the psychological mechanisms present in Chekhov's characters and situations, given the fact that simultaneously with the publication of his texts, the fathers of psychoanalytic science theorized their great ideas in relation to the social changes of those times.

This paper speaks of the encounter between the theatre-maker and Chekhov's plays, as well as the dramaturgical tools used by Chekhov to illustrate a complex inner universe among people in a society with the same values, customs,

and beliefs. In the following passages, I will analyse how the exploration of alienation and feeling stagnant becomes a climax in Chekhov, as well as the mental hygiene that the artist must self-impose when working with the psychological realism text.

Psychological mechanisms in Chekhov

The purpose of this essay is to investigate the particularity of human character in relation to theatrical art and the applicability of this analysis to scenography. But before imagining and drawing the set, the theatre-maker is obliged to consider the study of human psychology. In this direction, I would like to mention director and professor Ion Cojar, who states the following in *A Poetics of the Art of the Actor* [*O poetică a artei actorului*]:

Before being an object of aesthetics, the actor is an object and subject of Human sciences. And the object and subject of any stage act in which an actor is present is MAN, under all particular and general, Actual and Potential aspects. (Cojar, 1999, p. 97).

The human character is interdependent with the theatrical act and represents a continuous exchange of ideas, values, meanings in a continuous movement and transformation. The aesthetics of the performance and the form of the scenography are revealed through this process of study and research of human nature and psychological systems.

We live in uncertain and unpredictable times. The performance *Uncle Vanya* by A.P. Chekhov at the Vasile Alecsandri National Theatre Iasi, created during the 2020 pandemic, meets a unique and unrepeatable condition.

An applied analysis of this performance proves to be a human necessity today because the creation that underlies it is special both artistically and from the point of view of the life experiences that precede its birth. Chekhov's words "We must live our lives" are as current as when they were put down on paper and acquire, in addition to their extraordinary dramaturgical dimension, a concrete *obligo* role of everyday existence. Fear cannot defeat art, and theatre and emotion are part of life, so "we must live our lives!" (Chekhov, 2009, p. 60).

The *Uncle Vanya* performance is an artistic manifesto, a form of poetic sublimation of the cruel reality we are experiencing. I relate to a type of resistance and endurance that the creative artist is obliged to develop faced with the danger of the death of his art and to find, without losing his authenticity, a mean of expression. The dimension of creation is a privilege and artistic expression

succeeds in acquiring a vital aspect from the perspective of the artist. Creation is translated into a personal and authentic language that each one creates individually to release and move away from self-trauma. Thus, one can move forward both in his creation and in his personal life.

Psychotherapist Constantin Cornea states, on the special condition of the artist and the unique expression of his art:

[The creator] takes his shadows, traumas, dreams, feelings, expectations and mixes them alchemically, giving them other names and forms because he doesn't want to recognize himself in them. But he can no longer contain them. He removes the storm from within, putting it in plays. Thus, he can make love with the woman who denied him. He can punish his tormentors or relive his dramas, under other names as to alienate them. Art is the form through which only artists can become creators. From their own ephemeral dust, they weave intricate tapestries of what they feel. (Cornea, 2020)

The extent of the artist's feelings transcends the plane of immediate reality, and there is a primal need of expression in the concrete universe through his work, to make something imagined palpable. The artist, through his art, bears the responsibility of revealing a new perspective on reality by asking multiple and varied questions, and the duty of the final answer does not lie with him. Each spectator of his art can thus benefit from finding his own true and necessary answer.

The psychological mechanism of frustration

From a psychological point of view, this process of transforming the initial trauma into artistic language, which only creators can perfect, is called sublimation. Roland Chemama gives a definition of this psychological action in his *Dictionary of Psychoanalysis [Dictionnaire de la psychanalyse]*. **Sublimation** is an „unconscious psychic process that, for Freud, explains the ability of the sexual impulse to replace a sexual object with a non-sexual object, without losing too much of its intensity” and “represents the solution that allows to operate with the sexual, without causing repression, satisfying the demands of the Ego, consolidated by the ideal of Ego. (Chemama, 2009, pp. 340-342)

It illustrates the artist's way of transforming personal experience, often traumatic, into an artistic act and allowing the conscious Id to work with the unconscious Id without training repression and satisfying the rigors of the responsible and lucid Id. Chekhov, through his writings, perfects this process

that moves the energy born from instinctual and selfish beginnings towards the achievement of altruistic and spiritual goals.

Sublimation means nothing less than the alchemist's trick of turning the base into the noble, the bad into the good, the useless into the useful. Anyone who knew how to do this would be certain of immortal fame. (Jung, 1966, p. 37)

Through this action, Chekhov makes a detailed examination of human psychology by applying comparative thinking to a collective.

He invests his characters with distinct cognitive types organized in a system of mental actions that turn into gestures and deeds and positions his characters in common situations in terms of space and time. He follows the path of each one in the situation he imagined, but leaves room for the theatre-maker to interpret and research the personal version that appears later in the performance. What he proposes is the association of several characters with their own judgment gathered in a space that belongs to several of them, usually a house, but with different pasts and traumas. The physical space in which the characters are placed is the trigger in the reiteration of the trauma. Time is compressed and presents, at an alert pace, insertions from the past into the present, into reality and participates in the intensity and amplification of the dramatic emotion.

Paradoxically, the stage effect achieved is that time becomes suspended.

Whatever the cultural influences may be in a given instance, our responses to the basic human tasks of growing up, aging and dying, take place in cycles of love and loss; of dreaming oneself into existence and confronting the full force of the constraints of external reality; of feats of daring and the search for safety; of wishes to identify with those one admires and the need to safeguard (from one's own wishes to identify) the uninterrupted evolution of one's self. (Ogden, 2006, p. 68)

Emotional changes are detected and noted from the point of view of the observer with an emphasis on the humanity of his characters. Chekhov analyses but also distances himself from his characters which can be seen as an experiment of human relations within social groups. I noticed a similarity between Ogden's statement and Chekhov's theatre, namely that regardless of the past, man acts according to primal needs and primal traumas. What Chekhov does in his plays is an acceleration of the pace of information about

the characters so that all these manifestations are achieved and exhausted in their entirety in a short period of time.

[Theatre] is about life. This is the only starting point, and there is nothing else fundamental. Theatre is life. [...] Life in the theatre is more readable and intense because it is more concentrated. The act of reducing space and compressing time creates a concentrate. (Brook, 1995, pp. 8-10)

Uncle Vanya, as an applied analysis, represents the supreme form of expression of the two meanings of sublimation. On the one hand, the psychological perspective expressed by Freud attests to the fact that through sublimation, erotic drives and sexual energy are transformed into intellectual or artistic activity. This process is the very core of Chekhovian creation, so that the Russian playwright entrusts each of his characters with a facet (if not more, in the case of very special characters) of his own depressive illness. Psychotherapist Constantin Cornea emphasizes a viable perspective on the defining psychological state for the image of Chekhov which, throughout his career, was reflected in the outline of his memorable characters:

[In order to reach] the sublimation form related to chemical bodies, a special process is noted, namely the one that involves passing from the solid state directly to the gaseous state; thus, the unity of each individual, disappointed by his own life, “vaporizes” under the effect of his own depression, floating through life in anticipation of passing into non-existence (2020).

As a keen observer of human nature, Chekhov’s empirical vision transcends the play, and his personal experience is transcribed and sublimated through his characters. The emotions of the characters are very different in manifestation or varied in intensity. At Chekhov, they acquire an oversized value, elevated to the rank of martyrdom in depression, frustration, melancholy, sadness, drama, anguish.

The state of cessation of activity, depression

Another psychological manifestation present in Chekhov’s plays is **depression**, which manifests itself through a “profound change in mood, in the sense of sadness and moral suffering, correlative with a disinvestment in all activity” (Chemama, 2009, p. 82).

Chekhov invests the play's temporal dimension with a clear and specific identity. From the beginning of the play, the viewer learns, through the character Vanya, what it means to lose oneself and the world. Time, in Chekhov's play, remains suspended. The state of depression merges, in the world imagined by Chekhov, with the excessive heat. Moreover, the space reflects the abandonment of the characters and the fact that no one works anymore or intends to change anything about the surrounding environment.

VANYA: Ever since the Professor and his wife have come, our daily life seems to have jumped the track. I sleep at the wrong time, drink wine, and eat all sorts of messes for luncheon and dinner. It isn't wholesome. Sonia and I used to work together and never had an idle moment, but now Sonia works alone and I only eat and drink and sleep. Something is wrong. (Chekhov, 2009, p. 10)

Saying that no one is working anymore is both an abandonment and a shift in focus from what used to matter. The visit of the two, Serebryakov and Yelena Andreevna, interrupts the rhythm of the daily activity of those who live in this space—more precisely, that visit symbolizes a suppression of time. The *Uncle Vanya* performance which was staged in Iasi begins with an atmosphere of “new house” renovation—the renovation, the exchange of energies represents a return of reality in the reflection of what reality should mean. Vanya no longer works, and this fact appears as a result of his depression. Moreover, the fact that he is not loved activates his entire decline.

The scenography is revealed in front of the spectators as an installation setting. The space is in an unfinished stage, integrated into the architecture of the theatre stage. There is no black trim specific to the Italian-style stage. Everything is revealed and subordinated to the concept of *theatre within theatre*. The lights are on view, with the “grill” and “hangers” at the level of the spectators' perpendicular gaze, the spotlights are aligned at equal distances, and the “courtyard” and the “garden”, specific theatrical terms for right and left wings, are written in large letters on the theatre walls. The audience discovers a space devoid of defining lines or exact features: more precisely, a construction site in progress. A partially crumbling wall to be plastered and painted with a special turquoise patina, an atypical construction scaffolding, paint buckets, a carpentry workbench, piles of wood. Timber plays an important role in the set design and each wooden crossbar is strategically placed and serves the acting. The floor of the house, built in false perspective is in the works. It is only partially finished, and the wood is still in its natural colour. With the arrival of the two, Serebryakov and Yelena

Andreevna, time seems to stand still, and the space remains suspended waiting for the renovation to continue. The space, in terms of circulation, has many *mise-en-scène* possibilities. The timber is activated and changed in position and meaning throughout the performance. For example, upon learning of the proposed sale of Serebryakov's desired estate, Vanya throws wooden beams in his direction, and they land in a cross shape. This sign clearly amplifies the drama of the moment, but it also refers to Vanya's sacrifice, of a messianic altruism, but which represents a denial of reality and a reference to an illusion that amplifies depression. It is the inability to live in the present.

O is a state of being-in-the-present-moment, a moment that "Is too much for the senses, / Too crowding, too confusing – / Too present to imagine" (Frost, 1942a, p. 305). Our capacity for being-in-the-present is "obstructed" by the humanly understandable wish to protect ourselves from its blinding glare. We seek shelter from the O of the present moment in the shadows of memories of what we think we know because it has already been and in our projections of the past into the future. (Ogden, 2006, p. 85)

This character does not choose himself but chooses to sacrifice himself for the other in a way that seems altruistic and true to him, at his own expense. Chekhov's characters in *Uncle Vanya* do not enjoy life and reflect different forms of depression of different intensities:

[Serebryakov] suffers from the depression of someone who once had a social position that fed his own narcissism, but which now no longer brings him any joy. Thus, he dives into the River Styx, playing with imaginary diseases, from which he hopes to be saved by those close to him (Cornea, 2020).

Astrov, the doctor and Chekhov's direct alter-ego is

haunted by the trauma of a medical mistake, behind which he hides his own fear of fighting life, allowing himself to be carried away by melancholy, towards a depression from which he tries to hide. Vanya manifests another type of depression and simply exists in Heideggerian manner, without the consciousness of *where* and *towards what*, preferring only to exist, to administer his brother-in-law's property (Cornea, 2020).

His only false hope for change is the existence of Yelena, and thus “we have the image of a depression, looking for its saving light in the distant flame of an impossible and inaccessible love” (Cornea, 2020).

The characters expose the drama of the failure of their own lives in an apothecic manner enhanced by adjacent stimulants, such as alcohol. Through the frequent consumption of alcohol, an anaesthesia of the senses is desired. There is a desire to deny the feeling of love and falling in love because love in this play only gives birth to suffering. The mutual feeling of love is never long-term, situations do not end in a happy marriage or real joy. It is just broken up into little romantic escapades where the characters share brief moments of truth. An example of analysis in this direction is Claudiu Goga’s directorial solution to the staging of *Uncle Vanya* at the Vasile Alecsandri National Theatre in Iasi. He opts for an authentic solution regarding the Yelena Andreevna and Astrov scene. Astrov and Yelena have an affair just before the two (Yelena and Serebryakov) leave the house. The audience sees this and becomes complicit to the whole action. Through a plastic screen that delimits the two spaces, interior and exterior, the sexual act between Yelena and Astrov can be distinguished (the two engage in a stage choreography of maximum intensity above a table, like a painting). The public is invited to peek as well. In front sits the family impatiently awaiting Yelena’s arrival. Serebryakov is waiting just as anxious. Astrov brings Yelena Andreevna in his arms as in the *Pietà*, offering her to Serebryakov, aware that he will lose her.

One can thus observe in Chekhov a permanent fear of living the present and acting bravely, heroically. This very feeling paralyzes and leads to frustration, anguish, and unhappiness. Repression of sexual desire and refusal of immediate action create strong inner conflicts in Chekhov’s characters. Precisely these repulsions dictated by morality or civilization are most often to the detriment of the individual, respectively the Chekhovian character, but they are exceptional from a dramaturgical point of view, raising many questions and creating many possibilities of interpretation and mise-en-scène. The theme of the impossibility of love is reflected in the drama of the construction of the situation and leaves the reader and the creator of the performance room for their own interpretation. In 1923, Freud states in the *The Ego and the Id* the following ideas:

We shall now look upon the mind of an individual as an unknown and unconscious id, upon whose surface rests the ego, developed from its nucleus the Pcpt-system [...]; the ego does not envelop the whole of the id, but only does so to the extent to which the system Pcpt forms its surface, more or less as the germinal layer rests upon the ovum. The ego

is not sharply separated from the id; its lower portion merges into it. (in Chemama, 2009, p. 110)

Thus, the catalyst factor for triggering the inner conflict between the active Ego and the Id of the character Vanya is the emergence of the character of Yelena Andreevna in his environment. Vanya idealizes this much desired and expected feminine presence at a subconscious level:

I met her first ten years ago, at her sister's house, when she was seventeen and I was thirty-seven. Why did I not fall in love with her then and propose to her? It would have been so easy! And now she would have been my wife. Yes, we would both have been waked to-night by the thunderstorm, and she would have been frightened, but I would have held her in my arms and whispered: "Don't be afraid! I am here." Oh, enchanting dream, so sweet that I laugh to think of it. (*He laughs*) But my God! My head reels! Why am I so old? Why won't she understand me? (Checkov, 2009, pp. 37-38)

Through his own projections of his vision of love, Vanya transforms Yelena Andreevna into both her ultimate desire for fulfilment and his salutary solution to the realization of the failure of his own life. All this illusion is a projection and denial of the libido.

Jung and Freud refer to the libido from diametrically opposite points:

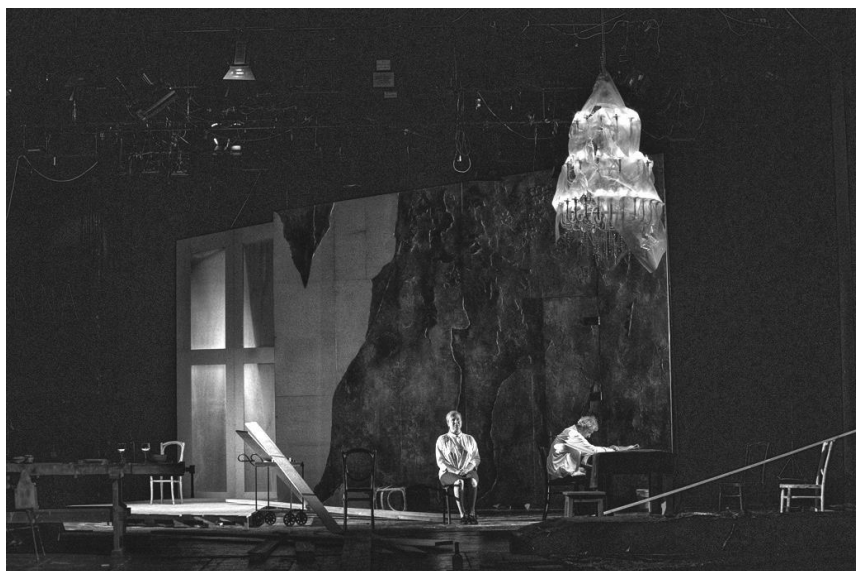
For Freud, libido was the energy specific to the sexual instinct, but capable of the most diverse metamorphoses, from complete suppression to sublimation profitable to culture. Jung opposes a symmetrically reversed view: libido is the general psychic energy manifested in various forms, including sexual energy. (Zamfirescu, 2006)

The rejection of the female character and the denial of the sexual instinct creates an inner conflict in Vanya which, viewed from the perspective of theatrical mechanisms, is a catalyst engine for many of the scenes that populate *Uncle Vanya* and gives the two analysed characters their depth. A pertinent example from the performance is the monologue presented at the edge of the stage as an inner reflection of the character Vanya. This moment triggers the closeness of the actor with both the audience and the character. The persistence that Vanya develops in his shy way of conquering Yelena sharpens this disagreement between the conscious Id and the unconscious Id. The confrontation between the two sides of

the same personality becomes antagonistic and creates frustration and anguish. If Vanya had known satisfaction through the fulfilment of love and the conquest of the desired object, would he have established an inner emotional balance? Always getting the desired object diminishes the degree of initial curiosity and interest. The intensity of desire decreases in direct proportion to obtaining the desired object or person. With the consummation of the relationship, attention inevitably turns elsewhere. This manifestation belongs to the basic human condition, to a need that is contained in the primal, visceral human instinct. Choice through the prism of the conscious Id varies according to endurance and knowledge of the processes that take place within consciousness.

Here we touch the true nature of the accentuated affective complex; it's always about desire and endurance. We spend our lives in the struggle for the fulfilment of our desires: all our actions result from the desire for something to happen or not to happen. (Jung, 2008, pp. 49-50)

In *Uncle Vanya*, the main character does not know this kind of balance between desire and resistance. The success of curbing the unconscious Id is only partial and manifests itself in the short-term. The visceral Id surfaces, especially since the state of drunkenness of the characters in *Uncle Vanya* is almost permanent. They search a numbing of the senses through the consumption of alcohol, a banishment of sadness and loneliness through the alteration of immediate reality. The effect works, however, completely the opposite because the state of intoxication lowers the level of self-control of the individual and thus the character becomes different from the conscious Id and sometimes contains aggressive manifestations. We can say that, through alcohol, the individual is stripped of the mask that society or customs have imposed on him. This reaction can sometimes be translated as an act of courage towards the Id, but in Vanya's case it manifests itself through desperate acts of conquest or reflective monologues on life from the perspective of failure.



Uncle Vanya, Vasile Alecsandri National Theatre, Iași, 2020.
Directed by Claudiu Goga. Scenography by Corina Grămoșteanu.
Source: Personal archive.



Uncle Vanya, Vasile Alecsandri National Theatre, Iași, 2020.
Directed by Claudiu Goga. Scenography by Corina Grămoșteanu.
Source: Personal archive.

Refusal to accept Reality, frustration

Chekhov's characters are dominated by anguish, frustration, and melancholy. They are hopelessly unhappy and unable to accept their fate. Frustration is the "state of a subject unable to obtain the desired object of satisfaction and denotes any impossibility for a subject to approach what he desires" (Chemama, 2009, p. 143).

This deprivation of obtaining the desired object, which is contained and not actively manifested, is not often encountered in Chekhov. Precisely for this reason, most of his characters act instinctively, and this visceral impulse is enhanced by the consumption of alcohol. It is about an ideal that has no concreteness in Chekhov's writings. Pain is the one that has a clearly defined voice in Chekhov, and drama is the one that has power and manifests itself in the form of sadness or personal abandonment. Personal sacrifice is always done for the benefit of others, out of a sense of duty. This action can be interpreted as another form of sublimation of the author.

"Theatre cannot replace life, but it can be a metaphor to help us come back from the experience of life stronger." (Brook, 2012, p. 11) This way of interpreting this aspect generates many other questions that can provide keys to the reading and directorial direction of Chekhov's work. Does the question of denying reality ever arise in Chekhov's dramaturgy? Is the ideal image of love that the individual creates for himself or the disappointment that he has to go through to make himself understood ever projected? What is the trauma that causes each character to act from this individualistic perspective, devoid of light or hope? Another topic of thought is whether a character in *Uncle Vanya* that manages to overcome his trauma and who acts by breaking the mould can be identified. To arrive at that long-desired answer by every lover of Chekhovian drama requires that the personal intentions and attitude of each character be closely scrutinized. Since Chekhov's own traumas and projections make Chekhov's characters lack the natural impulse of action, it is necessary for those who approach a Realism dramaturgy of such depth to delve into the specialized literature of those times, especially that focused on psychoanalysis. Carl Jung explained love as a desire to be permanently in a state of balance between human psychic components.

Jung's theory divides the psyche into three parts. The first is the ego, which Jung identifies with the conscious mind. Closely related is the personal unconscious, which includes everything that is not currently conscious but can be. The personal unconscious is most people's understanding of the unconscious in that it includes both memories that are easily brought to mind and those that have been suppressed for some reason. But it does not include the instincts that Freud would like to include.

But there is another style of approach, of understanding love, its motivation, namely the one described by Sigmund Freud, the one who argues that love comes from our ancestral desire to have sex and nothing more. All our love, everything we do, comes from this desire for sexual fulfilment. All earthly love is subject to this principle. Even the love of a child expressed towards his parents, ideas much debated in his famous writings on the myth of Oedipus. That “profound alteration of desire, conceived by Freud as psychoneurosis par excellence, characterized by a specific subjective loss, that of the Ego itself”, as described by Roland Chemama (2009, p. 220), is what drives the actions of Chekhov’s characters. Everything an individual thinks, the way he behaves and his thoughts, all lead the human psyche to the same finality, namely the organic desire to have sex. It seems that the feelings that the brain creates about someone, the vegetative changes in the human body, the feelings that a person feels when he loves, all these would be nothing but a brilliant way of the brain to lead to the final goal. That of achieving a union with the beloved, desired being. Through the prism of these psychoanalytic theories, the Chekhovian dramaturgy full of remorse, repressed impulses and unbridled desires can be understood. Thus, as admitted by the studies that deepen the same issues found in Chekhov’s plays,

the subject’s unconscious (repressed) desire will seek to express itself in spite of its conscious intention, inducing a disturbance whose nature seems to depend, in fact, only on the degree of repression, just as, for example, repressed desire only modifies the professed intention, gets confused with it or simply takes its place (Chemama, 2009, p. 24).

Conclusions

In conclusion, *Uncle Vanya* can be compared to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, except that in the case of Chekhov’s patients, they are no longer admitted to a hospital. The walls of the hospital are the boundaries of each character. Everyone has succumbed in their own way to the struggle of life, allowing themselves to be carried away by the daily life that they only observe, without bothering to change it. Even the feelings that Uncle Vanya and Astrov feel for Yelena only change their internal feelings, lighting a flame in the wasteland of non-being, destined to bring neither light nor warmth. Thus, without being spatially limited, as the patients in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* were, the characters walk through a life devoid of proportions or stakes, each in their own cardboard box that limits their horizons, desires or expectations of any kind. The characters seem seized by their own

limitations, like a ship floating in an abyssal ocean, each thinking about himself, as Sonya sums it up, referring only to uncle Vanya: “You have never known what happiness was, but wait, Uncle Vanya, wait! We shall rest. (*She embraces him*) We shall rest” (Chekhov, 2009, p. 103) And so, unknowingly, Sonya describes in simple words, what “each one lives, without feeling..” (Cornea, 2020).

This challenge can have a significant impact on the theatre creator’s mental state, as it involves a deep immersion in the inner tensions and contradictions of the society of the time, viewed through the lens of the present.

”Only that aspect of art which consists in the process of artistic creation can be a subject for psychological study, but not that which constitutes its essential nature.” (Jung, 1966, p. 98)

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Corina Grămoșteanu is a graduate of the Scenography Department of the I.L. Caragiale National University of Theatre and Film and a PhD candidate at the same university. Her PhD thesis delves into the research and development of new methods and concepts for creating opera costume. Her area of expertise is theatre, opera, and film scenography. She collaborated with important Romanian and international directors such as: Silviu Purcărete, Gábor Tompa, Andrei Șerban, Alexandru Tocilescu, Alexandru Dabija, Gigi Căciuleanu, Max Emanuel Cenčić. She designed the costumes and scenography of important performances staged in theatres and opera houses in the country, as well as in Europe: Bayreuth Baroque Opera Festival, Germany; Opéra-Théâtre de l'Eurométropole de Metz, France; Opera Regensburg, Germany; Opera Karlsruhe, Germany; Opera Maribor, Slovenia; Bucharest National Opera; German State Theatre, Timișoara; Bucharest National Theatre; Odeon Theatre, Bucharest; Metropolis Theatre Bucharest; Vasile Alecsandri National Theatre, Iași.