



# THE CHERRY ORCHARD

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## INTERVIEW WITH TIAGO RODRIGUES

**Why adapt *The Cherry Orchard*, Anton Chekhov's last play, first performed at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1904? In what way does this play, which mixes genres and temporalities, speak to our time?**

**Tiago Rodrigues:** All my projects are born of encounters with people. Even if I want to adapt a text or tackle a subject, directing always begins with a desire to work with someone. For *The Cherry Orchard*, it all began in Lisbon with a conversation with Isabelle Huppert. We'd only recently met but we both quickly felt we wanted to work together. I wanted to adapt an existing text, which isn't what I'm used to, as I usually write my own plays. I told her about Chekhov, and was surprised to learn she'd never performed any of his plays. Afterwards, we continued talking about the Russian playwright. *The Cherry Orchard* seemed to be the most relevant work to talk about our time, and the complexity of the character of Lyubov seemed perfect for Isabelle Huppert. Lyubov Andreievna Ranevskaya is a tragic heroine in a comic drama. Like all great tragic characters, she has "no hope left to hope" while the other characters do. They don't know yet what is going to happen, but they all understand that the years to come will be very different from what they've always known. They think they can still be saved. But Lyubov doesn't. She's absolutely radical in her nostalgia and melancholy, a position she maintains throughout the play as she bids goodbye to her childhood, to her time, to the world. But it's just one of Chekhov's many masks. This aristocrat, deaf to the call of ruin, tragic prisoner of a disappeared world, is an agent of change as much as its victim. I even think that with her way of gliding over everything, with the alienation of all tragic heroines, she already knows everything about the play she inhabits. Lyubov knows that the outcome is unavoidable, as if she'd been reading over Chekhov's shoulder. Her story and her fall have to happen so that history can move forward. As for the other protagonists, they're still full of contradictions and doubts. They have desires and wants, while Lyubov is already far beyond this confusion induced by the rapid changes of the early years of the 20th century. Those characters do live in different temporalities, in a sort of poetic confusion of times. Some are at the end of their story, like Gayev, Lyubov's brother, a decadent aristocrat obsessed by the beauty of the past. Others, like Lopakhin, with his project of buying the estate at auction, dream of the future and of a thriving economy. They dream, like Yasha, Lyubov's young manservant, whose ambition is to succeed on his own and for himself. They're living through a changing, confusing time, which will drag the old feudal world into modern society, which means of course capitalism and maybe, on day, democracy. In 2018, I would likely have had a different reading of the play. Today, it helps me talk about the general confusion about the uncertainty of the future, faced with this mixture of cruelty and violence, of hope and beauty, which is at the heart of the great historic changes the characters are living through, which I see as the main topic of the play. To adapt *The Cherry Orchard* is to speak of women and men convinced they're experiencing something no one ever has. It's tackling an unprecedented historic moment. It's talking about the pains and hopes of a new world that no one can understand yet. It means looking at ourselves.

**Each of your directions invites us to do away with our habits as theatregoers. Here, you invite us to look elsewhere by breaking the fourth wall. From that point of view, you don't seem particularly interested in realism...**

Realism isn't my religion, but it provides frameworks! It can be interesting sometimes when working with the actors, who can make use of many tools having to do with realism, like psychology or illusion. But to me, the problem of an actor who has to handle the complexities and contradictions of his or her character, the words Chekhov wrote for them, is much more real and present. From the point of view of direction, I'm not particularly interested in realism because my love for the text comes from its poetry and lyricism. Removing the realistic convention as a way of adapting Chekhov means going straight to the vitality of the text. Just like refusing to use the fourth wall, it's an aesthetic and political choice. Sometimes the conventions created by the history of theatre for texts or genres end up destroying them rather than helping them survive. That's why, for instance, I try to avoid big lights, which force the actors into fixed postures. But I have no rules when it comes to directing, because I refuse to lock myself up in an aesthetic prison. I'd rather come up with new rules with my cast and crew for each new subject, to create circumstances as free as possible. I work mostly from initiatives by the actors, by responding to them and trying to promote a debate which can lead to quick decisions that help harmonise all those propositions. This search for liberty also finds its expression in the scenography. It is meant to evoke rather than to illustrate. We didn't create physical manifestations of the spaces Chekhov describes. It allows the actors to use the text to call on something that isn't there. It's a way of giving more power to the author without necessarily obeying him. And in the end, it's the same principle I applied to the chronology, the stage directions, the direction conventions attached to *The Cherry Orchard*. The goal was always to start with a unique text to find a collective voice.

**Since *The Cherry Orchard* was written in Russian, which translation did you use, as a Portuguese director who speaks French very well? What will be the tempo of the performance?**

We worked on the translation by Françoise Morvan and André Markowicz, which was made for the stage. It's a dream of performance, an incarnation of Chekhov's words. I'm fascinated by its close relationship to the voice and body of the actors. It gives more formal liberty to the actors than other translations, which aren't as close to the idea of the actor. I'm all the more interested in it because, throughout the creative process, I tried, with the actors and the crew, to tackle the topic of the play with a certain narrative freedom. I didn't try to direct *The Cherry Orchard* as it should be directed, though I know it's an almost blasphemous thing to say! In concrete terms, *The Cherry Orchard* is a polyphonic composition, complex and elaborate. It is often described as a choral, for instance. But Chekhov's approach to it is unique and subtle, a choral made up of solos. As if every singer had a solo, and that those solos came together to create a choir. I think that each solo has to be performed at full power for it to work. We followed that idea of liveliness and diversity for the casting, which echoes in the various cultural backgrounds of the actors and musicians surrounding Isabelle Huppert. Actors from different generations, different countries, different practices. Formally speaking, the play is divided into acts framed by stage directions, but without any cuts between scenes. Each act is made up of a confused succession of events which could be taking place more or less at the same time. I wanted to highlight this structural confusion, which affects the narrative itself, but also the characters and the temporality of the play, rather than to obey an organisation that was the result of the way the Moscow Art Theatre functioned in the early 20th century. I adapted *The Cherry Orchard* without ever losing sight of the inherent freedom of the text. It sometimes allowed me to step away from the strict chronology of the text to better talk about the speed at which the world changes in the play. A world which changes faster than the bodies of the characters, for the events quickly spin out of their control. We therefore work on an effect of instability combined with perpetual movement, the idea of time running away from the characters, not allowing them to find a solution. I've always thought that *The Cherry Orchard* was about the end. First as a reader, when I was but a drama student, then as an artist, I've always considered Chekhov's final play to be a work about the end of things, about death, about farewells. But I was wrong. *The Cherry Orchard* is a play about the end of a world, but the end implies new beginnings. From where I am now to look at *The Cherry Orchard*, I know for sure that it's about the inexorable power of change. From that point of view, the tempo of the play is *allegro vivace!*

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu in February 2021 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cleach

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