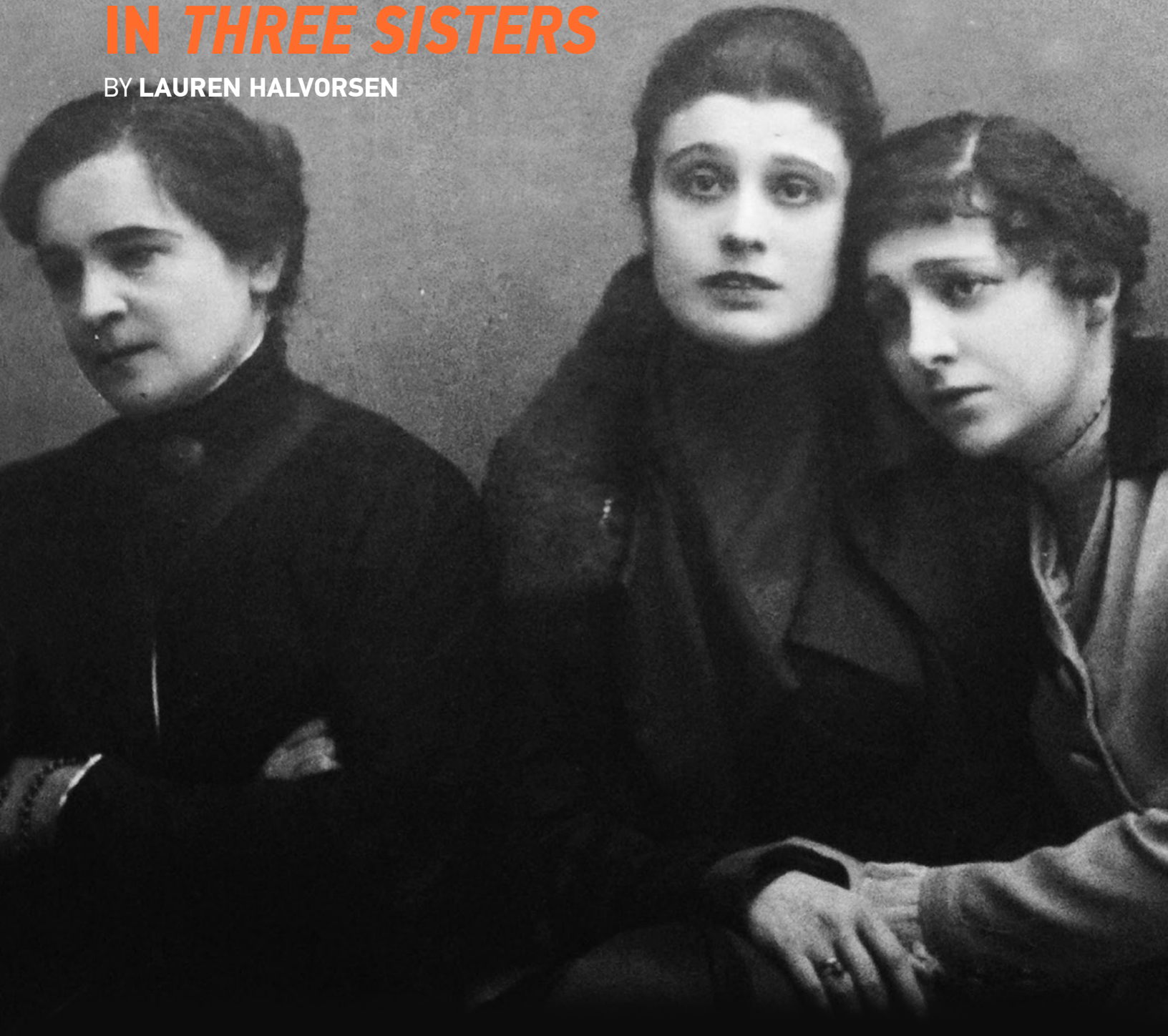


MAIN SERIES | THREE SISTERS

THERE MUST BE MORE THAN THIS PROVINCIAL LIFE: LOSS, LONGING, AND DESIRE IN *THREE SISTERS*

BY LAUREN HALVORSEN



Original cast of *Three Sisters*, Moscow Art Theatre, 1900.

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—PAUL SCHMIDT

In 1898, on the advice of his doctors and at the age of 39, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov moved to Yalta. The temperate climes of the coastal village, a slowly trekked 800 miles from Moscow, alleviated the brutal symptoms of his acute tuberculosis. Chekhov, yearning for Moscow’s intellectual and cultural energy—and his burgeoning romance with Olga Knipper, an actress at the Moscow Art Theatre—christened his place of exile “warm Siberia” and “a lousy dump.” In a letter to a friend the next year, he likened himself to “an army officer stationed in some godforsaken provincial hole”, and in later correspondence lamented, “I am dreadfully bored in Yalta. My life does not run or flow, but crawls along.”

Chekhov harnesses this sense of tedious accrual—the incremental pile-up of minor incidents, as seismic change hovers just beyond reach—in *Three Sisters*, his 1901 tragicomic masterwork about life’s absurdity and heartbreak. A year after the death of their military commander father has stranded them in a backwater garrison town without even the social capital his presence offered, the Prozorov siblings—Olga, Masha, Irina, and Andrei—yearn for more gratifying days. Their ancestral home is occasionally enlivened by soldiers, spouses, family confidantes, potential and prohibited lovers—yet the sisters long to return to Moscow, the city of their childhood, an emblem of hope and transformation. But they stay, searching for meaning amidst missed opportunities and misplaced dreams.

Three Sisters’ expansive scope distinguishes itself in Chekhov’s oeuvre—the play spans more than four years, with long intervals passing between its four acts—as does its notable lack of a single protagonist. The collective focus is intentional: Chekhov wrote the play for the actors of the Moscow Art Theatre, with whom he formed a fruitful creative association after their successful production of *The Seagull* in 1898. *Three Sisters* was a highly anticipated project for the company, but the ensemble was tepid on the play after their first read-through, struggling to navigate its halting language and disjointed structure. Knipper, who originated the role of Masha, recalled, “One could hear: ‘It’s not a play, just the outline.’ ‘It can’t be performed, there aren’t any roles, only the suggestion of them.’” The puzzled ensemble pressed Chekhov for further clarification but were met

with enigmatic responses: “All I knew I have written down there,” he offered, to the actors’ dismay. “At the time his answers seemed vague and incomprehensible to us,” wrote director Konstantin Stanislavsky, “It was only when some time had passed that we were able to come to terms with them.”

This perplexity is understandable, as *Three Sisters* traffics in the unspoken. The language is fragmentary and elusive. Juicy dramatic events upon which other dramas would hinge—fires, duels, affairs—are here suggested by distant sound effects, or altogether occur between acts. As translator Paul Schmidt observes of *Three Sisters*, “What Chekhov accomplished was gradually to cut away the melodramatic moments of the ‘plot’, or shift them offstage, leaving finally only his characters’ helpless, unheeding responses to those moments.”

Chekhov illuminates the nuanced, complex, messy unpredictability and unknowns of real life—and it’s the steady accumulation of these responses and interactions with quotidian concerns that expose his characters at their most complicated junctures of uncertainty, introspection, and desire. The Prozorovs lean towards the nostalgic comforts of the past or the gleaming uncertainties of the future, like plants yearning for light. But these fictive places ultimately erode, leaving the only true state of existence: the present. ♦



Anton Chekhov's home in Yalta. Photo: Irina Afonskaya/Shutterstock.com.