Brief History of Three Sisters Criticism

All of the following excerpts are from: Meister, Charles. "Chekhov Criticism 1880 Through 1986."

Idea for the Play

-Saunders (1960) says that the idea for the play dates to 1883 when Chekhov spent a holiday at Voskressensk, where his brother Ivan was tutor to the three children of Col. B.I. Maevsky. Chekhov watched love affairs develop between village girls and the army officers, and noted the sad partings when the army unit moved out. Also, in 1888 Chekhov rented a house on the Lintvarev estate on the Psyol River near Sumy. He was fascinated by the three Lintvarev sisters, who were intellectual, charming, and high-minded. Two of the women were doctors, and the eldest was blind from a brain tumor. (245-246)

Reception of First Performance

-At the first performance on 31 January 1901, there were 12 curtain-calls after Act I but only a half-hearted one after Act IV, Stanislavsky said (246).

Initial Critical Confusion

-At first, Russian critics were puzzled at why the sisters did not go to Moscow - they were wealthy, and nothing kept them from the move. Later, however, they explained the characters' seeming lack of motivation as the feature of a new dramatic method. I.N. Ignatov in 1901 said that to the sisters Moscow was not a city but "a symbol of a distant resplendent ideal to which suffering souls yearningly direct their thoughts" (246).

The Most Poignant Moment

-Maruice Baring in 1910 said that the departure scene of Act IV was the most poignant one he had seen... The reason for this is that Chekhov followed Goethe's advice: "Everything in a play should be symbolical, and should lead to something else." If Chekhov's plays seem gloomy, it is because they represent the last hour before the dawn... (247)

Time

-One reviewer said that the play revealed "the gradual, undramatic tragedy of time -time the coarsener, the destroyer" (249).

- "To convey the sense of beauty inherent in all of life takes great, universal art. The Three Sisters is not only a drama of self-inhibition, or it would fail of universality. He has created the emotional stasis: Life seems fixed in a moment of significance" (249).

-Waiting for Godot echoes the sisters' "waiting for Moscow" (261).

First American Performance - A Tour of Moscow Art Theatre's production in 1923. New York City.

-"When the curtain fell upon the performance of The Three Sisters Saturday night, one of the most remarkable demonstration sin the history of the American theatre was staged by the capacity audience." After 12 curtain calls, Stanislavsky spoke to the audience in French. When this failed to satisfy the crowd, Stanislavsky came out and addressed them in Russian. When he finished, the applause lasted for nearly half an hour" (250).

Character and Plot

-"The Three Sisters is theater, as experience has proved, but the idea is most expressed through character and atmosphere. What the people in it do not do constitutes a kind of negative plot that counts more than anything else in our impression of the play” (251).

Sounds

-Stanislavsky found that the inner life of Chekhov's characters is intimately connected with the sounds around them, and that these sounds must harmonize with the feelings of the actors (251).

A Broadway Smash

A 1942 New York City production was the first time that a Chekhov play was successful on Broadway.
Idleness, Illusions, and Callousness

-Brooks Atkinson said that the play expressed Chekhov's impatience with "the inability to take action, the flimsiness of illusions, and the triumph of bourgeois callousness over gentility" (255).

-"Because they have not found a meaningful role to play in society, the Prozorovs are superfluous, and Andrey even becomes manic-depressive" (260).

Psychological Density

-Simmons (1962) said that "the subtle interaction of symbol and reality creates an atmosphere of unusual psychological density. The inner action is made more meaningful through the seemingly disconnected dialogue. The illusion of happiness is the main theme....." (256)

-"...Words not only reveal feelings but now also mask them..." (259)