

Moscow Mania - transcript in English

I'm in a theatre among Saint-Petersburg's elite. To watch a staging of *Three Sisters*, a play of the well-known Russian writer Anton Chekhov.

sounds from staging Butusov

Three sisters live together and don't seem to succeed on being happy. They long to go back to their lives in the past, living in Moscow and not in a boring country town. The time when their father was still alive and everything was possible.

sounds from staging Butusov

The only thing they want, is to go back to Moscow. To dance, to fall in love, to run away from the life they are stuck with. Yet a life that is pretty ok. They are well-off, live in a nice house and are surrounded by friends whenever they want; doctors, professors, soldiers with whom they can fantasize and philosophize. About how and if it would all be better in the future. They sit and talk. They sit and talk and keep on sitting and talking. And exactly that, is their problem. No matter how badly they want to go to Moscow, they never actually go. The soldiers they are in love with take off, more and more people leave the town they live in and the sisters stay behind, on the stairs in front of their house. In all of the four seasons we've followed them, nothing has changed, except for more grief.

sounds from staging Butusov

And that is the end of the play.

00:01:52

There was a time I thought I wanted to be an actress in this play. Because it's about women who's life is just fine, but who don't always know what to do with it. However, the longer the more the sisters frighten me. Their negative approach, so passive, it's all so hopeless.

Sien: "But, what if"

Jessa (laughs)

Sien: "wait"

That's why - together with Jessa and Sien - I came up with this idea

Sien: "What is we do what the three sisters never did?"

What if the three of us go to Russia

Jessa: “and and”

And do what the three sisters never did

Jessa: “we do go to Moscow”

What if we stage a new *Three Sisters* in which they not only talk, but actually do something.

So said, so done. We booked our plane tickets. Fixed ourselves a place to stay. Packed our suitcase.

Because we didn't want to make a play about Russia without ever have been there.

And we were off.

00:03:00

I admit, I never really went deeply into the subject Russia before. No idea what to expect. I mean. Russia. Uhm. Yeah. I don't know. I've read some articles in the newspaper, about Putin, sure, like most people in Europe I guess. But beyond that?

00:03:18

They drink wodka. They're poor. Or rich. Weird hairdo's. Fur coats, mini skirts. Big men. Brutal men. With squared heads. Hooligans. Pussy Riot. I remember a thing about Gorbachev, with this stain on his head. Soviet Union – which sounded like Napkin Union in my language when I was a child, ooh that was funny – and when it fell, Soviet Union. But today? Uhm. Wodka, snow, Putin. And that's about it.

00:03:46

sound of horses

tiny song

Well of course the Russian artists, yeah those Russians. Of course

Those, yeah

Of course

Sure

Chagall

But that's the other Russia-

Kandinsky

that's Russia as we know it from the past

Tchaikovsky

Russia we know from books

Stravinsky. Sure

Soldiers in salons in endless discussions at their countryside holiday homes. Wearing grey-green jackets and hairy caps. Who drink a toast to important happenings with wodka, less important with tea, from a samowar. They live surrounded by birch trees, ride carriages and horses. Anyway, the Russia in which Chekhov wrote his *Three Sisters*.

What has happened in Russia since then?

What would the three sisters see if they would wake up today?

00:04:38

We enter Saint-Petersburg

city noises

Not so very different as in my country, I notice at first. Same highways, same industry, same multinational bill boards. Traffic jam. Dirty apartments. I short, a city. And entering a city when coming from an airport is never the nicest thing to do. You always stumble upon the most ugly things first. The outside rings of an onion that you normally peel off. But you have to get through. Somewhere around the station is where we stay.

00:05:23

I thought it would be like medieval Bruges. Shiny near the water with a lot trees and cosy squares. But of course this city has evolved. It looks trendy over here, modern. Lots of people, criss cross. Cars. Everywhere. And everything is huge. The crossroads are huge. The crossings are huge. And the underground incredibly deep. Near the Hermitage – one of the most important musea of the world, the jewel of Saint-Petersburg – it smells like fuel, as it does near the rivers from the postcards pictures, where boats are awaiting hoards of tourists, all set, throbbing engines, generators providing power to refrigerators and always and everywhere music. In every restaurant. In every pub. On the street. In every shop.

metro sounds

00:06:18

Silence is pricy in this country.

And there I am, on the Nevsky Prospekt in the middle of St. Petersburg. Where masses of people cross me twittering. Where nothing ever stands still and everything moves. This is what they would see, the sisters. Chekhov was what they call a progress optimist. He believed in a glorious future for his country. I'm here now, in that future.

funny synth music

Looking for whether Chekhov was right.

I take to the street and speak to the first best person. It's Svetlana, who works as a ticket seller on a tourist boat.

00:07:13

sounds tourist boat

Ze heeft Drie Zusters gelezen, zoals de meeste Russen, ooit op school. Het is haar lievelingsstuk. Net omdat het zo triest is.

Sofie: "And why did you come to the city?"

Svetlana: "To study"

She comes from a village and came here to study. Physics. And yet sticking around in the city. To work, to live. Because just like 100 years ago, there's not much to do outside the city in Russia.

Everybody would like it a lot more if there was a happy ending, she says.

Svetlana: "happy end"

Sofie: "But what would be a happy end?"

Sofie: "Yeah it's a difficult question. If they all get married? Is that a happy end?"

Svetlana: "Happy life, Happy family."

Sofie: "'Happy life, Happy family, mhm."

I get it. It is a rather unsatisfactory ending.

I say goodbye to Svetlana and walk on through the city.

I try to imagine it, Three Sisters with a happy ending.

balalaika music

00:08:30

Chekhov wrote a piece without hope, in which a lot is NOT done. The three sisters dream of going to Moscow, but don't do it. Talking, yes, musing, complaining and supporting, crying and begging, but they don't buy the ticket for the train. Their suitcase doesn't fill up. They don't pull the door. They don't reach their tar beloved Moscow. They see the men leave, who fill their days and are left lonely. Watching patiently. Alone.

Aah Chekhov. What did you do?

I admit there's a lot of beauty in your play. Many generations have recognized the despair of your characters and the questions you ask. But frankly, it also makes me a little nervous.

Quote character : "There will come a time when everything that is very serious and very significant and terribly important to us right now is going to be forgotten".

I read it and over and over again I get it on my hips from the men's chatter

00:09:40

percussion

quote personage: "I think, I'm actually convinced that in 1000 years, man will still be sighing 'Oh what is life hard'"

How they want to change the world from their salon.

quote character: "What if we could relive our lives?"

They scatter around with philosophical reflections but every idea they throw up falls with a dull thud in the sand.

quote another: "No wait a second. I believe there's really going to be some kind of happy life

"I think in 200 years, in 300 years, even in a million years, life will still be the same as it is now.

"that's-"

"nothing changes! It's always the same. Always according to the same laws of nature.

"No no no."

"And we're never gonna know what those laws of nature really are. Or what they're for.

We live life like birds fly. Cranes, for example. Doesn't matter. Like they fly. They don't know why they fly, they don't know where they fly off to. But they fly. That's life. Just fly fly fly." - Sister 1: "There's nothing. No satisfaction at all. Time passes and it's like I'm slipping further and further away from the real, the beautiful life."

"It's a simplistic idea to just take those birds as an example. I think even- I think it's tigher now that life is changing even now."

00:10:35

En die zussen, met hun gezeur. Hadden ze nu toch maar IETS gedaan. In plaats van iedereen anders de schuld te geven van de zwaarte van het leven en de saaiheid van hun bestaan. Waren ze nu toch maar de wereld ingegaan. Al hadden ze eeuwig in hun koets gezeten, of op de trein. Ze waren onderweg geweest. Ze hadden iets gedaan.

Sister 1: "There's nothing. No satisfaction at all. Time passes and it's like I'm slipping further and further away from the real, the beautiful life."

Sister 2: "live and don't know why the cranes fly."

Sister 1: "Moskva"

Sister 2: "why children are born"

Sister 1 "Moskva"

Sister 3: "There's nothing."

Sister 1: "Moskva"

Sister 3: "an abyss, I'm desperate."

Sister 1: "Listen to the wind in the stove."

wind

00:11:20

You wanted to show off a type you saw too often around you. The intellectual with the many words but few deeds. Well-meaning empty words were Russia's biggest problem, according to you.

pen writing

"I started forte and ended pianissimo" you wrote to your friend and publisher Soevornin. You did it on purpose. Because it's a call, to your audience, to go out into the world.

Deliberately not a happy ending.

footsteps

00:11:54

I walk to a beach on a river in the middle of town. On the other side a long row of stately palaces in classic style. The skyline is one line. The height once determined by Peter the Great. He had quite a megalomaniac plan, 'I'll build a city on a swamp', and so it happened.

00:12:20

I put myself on a stray concrete block on the beach and look around. Next to me sits a woman of about sixty. With pink underpants and another type of pink bra. Lydia. She just went swimming, in her underwear. She has laugh lines. Her face is brown, from being outdoors. I smile at her. She smiles back and starts telling. She likes to come here, on the beach, she says. Though she doesn't have money for a bikini. As she tells, she pulls her pants over her swollen ankles with great difficulty. She survived the blockade during World War II. When the city was surrounded and St. Petersburg was still called Leningrad. Nothing was allowed in, in the city, nothing was allowed out. Blocked. No people, no food, no medicine. The Germans thought the inhabitants would fold by themselves. But they stuck to their guns. For three years. Starving or not. Lydia's brothers and father died then. But she's still here and she stayed. She has just enough money to pay off her apartment. And now she's in the mood for ice cream. She's waiting. Is she asking for money? Of course she's asking for money. Suddenly I don't know what to do anymore. Somewhere in my childhood they taught me that I shouldn't give anything if someone on the street asks. Why? I never quite understood. But the result is that I shoot into a cramp, as soon as it happens. "Thou art exactly one of the sisters," I think. "In that scene where she sits in her room wailing while the whole city goes up in flames. The intellectual is only concerned with herself, hiding behind her position. "Now just give me some money for ice cream.

I'll give her some rubles.

Lydia thanks me and walks along the beach, her back slightly bent. I'll check on her.

cello

00:14:53

The Siege of Leningrad. Our interpreter will explain later. Never heard of it.

I imagine what it was like here then. An encircled city. All the railroads have been bombed. Food is running out, weapons are running out, no more tap water, people are frozen on the side of the street in meters of snow.

00:15:31

I imagine how Lydia would walk there, as a little girl. What hasn't she been through? And those people around me? What did all these people around me go through? How can I try to understand anything about Russian life when I don't even know their history?

00:16:00

Okay. I start in 1902, Chekhov writes a piece. About noble intellectuals. Who are bored and feel useless and doubt if they shouldn't go to work. And about a fire in the city, which the sisters anxiously try to keep out. It's as if Chekhov felt something was coming. Because effectively, three years later Saint Petersburg is on fire. 1905. Revolt of the peasants. Led by... Who's it from? The Bolsheviks. Sure, yeah. And then the Bolsheviks. Then for ten years there's a game in which Czar Nicolas promises

everything, but does little. So the people get angry. 1914. World War I. Hunger, death, bad policy. And the people get angrier. 1917. Strikes, protests, everyone takes to the streets, protests, and the Czar falls from his throne. In October 1917, the time has finally come. The people take over. The great Russian Revolution. Away with the old days. Everything has to be new all of a sudden. Palaces are set on fire. Intellectuals vilified, have to pick up the dirt on the streets. If Chekhov's three sisters were alive at the time, they'd almost certainly have been murdered.

00:17:25

Lenin's taking over. Done with what's private. Everyone's equal before the law.

speech Lenin

Thorough communism. Continues too utopian.

Stalin's taking over. No property. No perspective. No freedom. On the street. In the paper. On the radio. On TV. 1945. World War Two. The bombs fly from West to East over people's heads. All the money goes back to the war, the food is rotting again, diseases appear and prices skyrocket. So people get angry. And then that blockade in St. Petersburg for three years. Then the Cold War. Until the bomb bursts and the wall falls. 1989. Done.

00:18:18

And then we're already in the '90s.

Complete chaos. Disorder. Crime.

For years, people were dictated what to think. And then, all of a sudden, they had to do it all by themselves.

I talk about it with Dasja, our interpreter. She grew up in St. Petersburg in the '90s. After studying Dutch Literature she went to Europe to continue her studies. Because she felt like an adventure. And then she met love and stayed, the way it is. She doesn't live in Russia for 12 years, she says, so she doesn't know how her country is doing now, but she remembers the 90's as a criminal time.

00:19:06

Dasja: "I know that in Russia in the 90's a lot of people disappeared. crime was sometimes so bad that a lot of people just disappeared".

She tells me how corpses were found under a bridge near her school almost every week. How her father disappeared during that time and never came back.

Sien: "your daddy? when you were little?"

Dasja: I was twelve

She tells how she spent years watching tall, skinny men on the street to see if it was her father.

Dasja: "He left and never came back home."

She compares the '90s in her country with America in the early 20th century

Dasja: "The Great Depression. Apparently a lot of civilians just disappeared because of gangs by mafia and stuff."

balalaika music

00:19:54

Grisha also makes that comparison with the 20s in America. Grisha is Dasja's best friend. He is an actor, sings songs and just wrote his first book. We're meeting at the cafe.

Grisha: "after the Sovjet Union collapsed about 10 years it was like Chicago in the 20ies in America."

"When Soviet Union fell apart, no one knew how to live anymore",

he says.

Grisha: "The people don't understand how to live. What to believe in after the Sovjet Union collapsed. And after that when Putin came to rule the country to run the country, the people started to get richer little by little and then they tried to understand what ideology should we make up for Russia? What to believe in?"

"What to believe in?" he says. I can't help but think about the sisters. Who also don't know how to live. Without a father or mother. Desperately looking for their place in life.

Sister 1: "I think a man should believe or look for a belief, otherwise his life is empty"

says Masja, one of the sisters in the play.

Of course we want to believe in something. We all do. Because it's unbearable that nothing really matters. People usually need a little something to hold on to. Now let that be something that wasn't there in the '90s. Hold on.

So when Putin emerged in 2000, as a presidential candidate, he was elected en masse.

fragment announcement Putin

Vladimir Putin. A man with a plan.

trumpets

Determined to make Russia into a superpower again. The bringer of structure and prosperity to his country. And who knows, at last, peace.

00:21:56

While first talking about coots and calves, about cocktails and art

Jessa: "Brown eyes"

Grisha: "brown?"

about his beautiful eyes and his Irish or non-Jewish roots,

Grisha: "grey I think, no?"

a deeper layer emerges after a while. Gradually we arrive at the Russia of today and unfortunately also at Russia as we know it from newspapers. The Russia he's worried about."

I talk to him about censorship.

Grisha: "there is kind of censorship to be honest. There is, but, it's not like someone tells you, well, 'we ban this performance'. Officially there is no censorship, but of course you understand there are some themes that you can't touch"

00:22:40

About how they cut out every word the regime doesn't like on TV. How artists are arrested, silenced or falsely accused of fraud or morality. It's about Patriotism. And how Russia is now suddenly the new confession of faith.

Sofie: "it's the new religion, like Russia"

Grisha: "Well yes like a new religion. And it's really crap."

It's about nepotism. Putin's Private Priest. About Europe-bashing. Gay-bashing. About how you can't come out openly when you're gay, and if you want to, you should go to Gay Europe.

Grisha: "Europe is called Gayrope in Russia. It's not ok in Russia, at all. It's not ok. You can't say freely that you're gay in Russia"

We talk about how critical newspapers are boycotted, historical facts twisted. About Ukraine, the Crimea, and the plane that was shot down, and how obvious it was that it was by Russia. But it's best not to talk about any of this.

00:23:41

Grisha: "This is how we live now, it's really strange. It's the road to nowhere"

Sofie: "What's the explanation? How come you think?"

Grisha: "It's 90% of the population believe in it. I don't know how it happened really."

Sofie: "And what's the other 10%?"

Grisha: "It's young people"

I see us sitting there, in a cafe, philosophising about how the rest of the world doesn't understand. And I can't help but see a parallel with the play. How Chekhov's characters wanted to save the world, from their salon. Could they have been like that a hundred years ago? The intellectuals?

Sofie: "what are your hopes for Russia? No, what are your expectations?"

Grisha: "they are not really ... very optimistic"

Sofie: "Yeah, but you talk about it a lot,

But then what can you do

Sofie: "But then what can you do?"

Grisha: "Nothing. What can I do? I can write my books."

00:24:39

"And what do you do?" I ask him a little overconfident because of the alcohol.

When I ask him this, he's right to be a little defensive.

I explain that I try to make a link with the Three Sisters who also talk a lot and do little. I'm not sure he understands.

There's nothing he can do. I understand. He writes his books. What can he do?

What can his generation do?

He can tell about it, yes.

Is there no hope for the future?

I decide to ask someone else.

00:25:18

Alexey, a dramaturge from a renowned theatre. He explains to me why his generation is no longer on the barricades.

Alexey: "my generation was also full of wishes and hopes in the beginning of 2000s. And we really thought that we can build the new future."

Alexey was 20 when Putin was elected. He too believed in him: a young president who wanted to break with the old system. But many people had realised too late that Putin's ideas were becoming more and more rigid.

Alexey: "in the beginning he proposed good things. So that was a trick. We thought that 'Ok, we will go together with the state to build new Russia, all those old time old generation will go away and we will make the new system' But then we discovered that 'Oh Fuck' and that actually, that was the point of disappointment which leads to that riots in 2012."

In 2012, people in their mid-thirties will be back on the streets, deceived by their own dreams.

*Alexey: "my generation felt euhm обманутый
Dasja: Bedrogen.
Alexey: Da."*

Alexey tells me how his generation had been busy, busy building their own happiness, the simple happiness of a family, work. And I'm beginning to understand how you can go from great writers like Chekhov, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky to a seemingly brainless Putin. How a country that produced such great literature now seems to be in such intellectual poverty.

Alexey: "I think that actually the main problem was that through the whole 2000s we just lived our lives and trying just to build our careers, make the families etcetera etcetera. Which is, well good thing. But yeah, not being very political."

Happy Life, Happy Family, I think. They weren't occupied with the proverbial fire in their town or country, but with their own little fires. Because they finally could.

And I'm beginning to understand how you can go from great writers like Chekhov, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky to a seemingly mindless Putin. How a country that produced such great literature now seems to be in such intellectual poverty.

How do you see the future, I ask Alexey. Will people be back on the streets soon?

Not his generation anyway, he says. But the younger generation might.

Alexey: All revolutions are made by young people.

Revolution is something young people do, he says.

Alexey: "In young generation it's just that strong wish to change something in different ways. There is a lot of young energy which want to break old world. Amongst people who in their like 18 – 25, there is big movement to construct like an alternative system. The only question is will they succeed or not? Or they will be finally disappointed again?"

That reminds me of what Grisha says. That the 10% who think differently are young people. The young people. If something's brewing, under the skin, it's, I'm told, with them.

00:29:01

It's my last days in Russia.

Sofie: "it's like underground"

I meet a group of recently graduated theatre makers on the top floor of a warehouse in their own theatre hall. They are overflowing with energy and are wildly eager to exchange with European theatre makers, about theatre, about life, perfect I think.

They would like to do a workshop, about the Three Sisters.

After improvisation sessions on crackling floors around scenes of the Three Sisters, I ask them how they see the future of their country. Apparently it's up to the young people now. How about now, I ask them. Are you still on the street?

When I ask this, I feel a slight disappointment. They'd rather talk about theatre. They want to play. On the floor. They want to pull the cart together and do what they're good at. And make a statement like that.

As ambitious as they are in theatre, they seem so uninterested in politics. Driven people, these people in their twenties, sure, but revolutionaries? No, they're not.

00:30:09

"I don't believe in revolutions", Vanja says. Vanja doesn't watch TV, doesn't believe in systems and wears a sweater with I'M THANKFUL FOR EACH DAY on it.

Vanja: Revolution is started by the hungry, not by those who are hungry, because they want to eat.

He is grateful for life every day. Every second even. And that's why he finds Three Sisters an annoying piece. They're only concerned with themselves. They have everything, but they want more.

00:30:45

That's how Misha sees it, too. He is the artistic director of their beginning theatre and talks confidently with big gestures. Unintelligible," he says, "when people are only worried about themselves. If we want to achieve something, we have to do it together, he says. People should be able to really come together and really do something. Without a system. Yet man doesn't succeed to come together completely,' he says.

The crucial question for him is how we can make total union possible, outside a political system.

Sofie: I think that is the question of all centuries. I say and it is also nice to a person that he still expects an answer to that, while perhaps in the course of the centuries it has turned out that there never will be an answer.

Micha: "Then it's unclear what we're doing here."

He says dryly. And he's silent.

and I don't know if he means this workshop or in general, all of us, on this globe.

00:32:05

It's my last day.

I sit outside on the steps of Chekhov's holiday home and look out over the trees and flowers he has planted himself. I think of all the people I've spoken to and try to understand

It didn't turn out as enlightened as Chekhov had hoped.

Have people gotten smarter? More enterprising? Are they happy? Do they know why they live? No, of course they don't. They want it to get better, of course they do.

"Well, I think that's the question of all centuries,' I said to Misha slightly generalizing on his question if it could ever be better. And I read the indignation in his eyes.

Am I becoming a nihilistic thirty-something myself, who sees her ideals crumbling away. Don't I believe it's gonna get better someday? Unlike Chekhov, am I not a progress optimist? Maybe not, no. Maybe not anymore. But that doesn't mean I don't try every day and still hope. So sorry, Misha, if you've misunderstood me. I didn't mean it as defeatist as it sounded. I meant I'm moved by the eternal phenomenon of HOPE. Like a weed that can't be removed.

WHAT CAN YOU DO? WHAT DO YOU DO? WHAT CAN YOU DO?

I asked, over and over again, on my journey through Russia. And the answer didn't come.

It's easy for me to point the finger. I hear me say to Grisha, "So what do you do? As if he must be trying to save the whole thing because he lives in a country where a megalomaniac rules.

'Nothing.' Grisha said . 'What can I do? I can write my books. I don't know'

and I understand

What can he do? What can I do?

I can't change the whole world as an individual, can I? And care about everyone, everywhere? What can I do? In my own life.

I can read the words of a writer who came down on paper over a hundred years ago. And decide to go after him. I can give money for ice cream if a poor lady asks for it. I can take a train to Moscow, although I don't know what's waiting for me there.



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Moscow Mania is a podcast of Sofie Palmers

You heard the voices of great actors Stefaan van Brabandt and Greg Timmermans and actresses Jessa Wildemeersch and Sien Eggers.

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<https://www.arsenaallazarus.be/kalender/item/den-beer-heeft-mij-gezien---arsenaal>

More information about Sofie Palmers' work:

www.sofiepalmers.com & <https://soundcloud.com/user-844653947>