

THE UNCLE VANYA EXPERIENCE

What follows are a series of questions compiled by Constance M. Davis after viewing Thom's outstanding performance of "Astrov" in The Actors Theatre of Louisville's production of Uncle Vanya.

(CD) This particular regional theatre, The Actors Theatre of Louisville, has a reputation for being among the finest in the country, and clearly it's an honor to be invited to perform there. Did it meet your artistic expectations?

(TC) On all levels my experience at the Actors Theatre of Louisville was memorable. From the business and technical staff you received a constant sense of support and dedication to the work at hand. ALL energies went to making the conditions the very best for an actor to work in. The resident company of actors made me feel very welcomed and freely shared their personal enthusiasm about work and theatre. This kind of total energy and commitment on all sides transferred itself to the end product which appears on the stage.

(CD) What was the most attractive about this particular opportunity: the role of "Astrov," this particular Chekhov play, the opportunity to work under the direction of Alexei Visarion, or the opportunity of acting in a well-respected regional theatre?

(TC) It was one of those opportunities when all factors were right—the role, the director, the play, the theatre producing it. I don't feel this happens too often in an actor's work—or at least not often enough.

"Astrov" is one of the great acting roles in what is one of Chekhov's most penetrating plays into the human emotional condition—a condition that has been the same since time began and will be until time ends. Chekhov understands human dreams, lies and loneliness. All of this—guided by the ever constant humanity of Visarion—permitted one a great deal of stretching and going to the edge.

(CD) In portraying a character from a well established play about which much has been written, does this pose special problems for the actor? Did you feel especially challenged to bring something new to this role?

(TC) I would like to answer the second part of the question first. I think any actor or individual who is going through the creative process hopes that he is bringing an individual approach to his work. You strive

to make a reality out of something within yourself which finds its voice in that which you're creating. The actor's persona and psyche has to find its way into the life and psyche of the character he is playing—and it's that blending together of actor/character that forms the creation. Obviously the execution of that blend is what makes the good or bad performance. I think Tolstoy summed it up with "Reality in life—reality in art! Something is added to nature which wasn't there before."

Now the first part of the question—you hope, as the actor that you are going to be able to convince an audience that what you are doing with, let's say a Hamlet," is bringing an added insight to the character. Any actor worth his salt wouldn't imitate another actor's interpretation of "Hamlet" because it would be lifeless—empty. There would be no individual "sharing of blood and guts" between actor/character (as stated earlier about blend). For any character there has to be much delving on the part of the actor into the universe of the character—search, find, think, absorb, implement. When it's a popular character like our example of "Hamlet" you must work twice as hard to find a fresh approach to delving into the character and yourself.(CD) In Uncle Vanya much of the conflict or action would appear to be internal; the drama is developed largely through dialogue and subtle physical action. What sort of particular challenges does this pose for you as an actor? Is your work more difficult as a result of this?

(TC) The challenge is finding in yourself the closest truth to the character—in this case "Astrov." You try to find a way to meet each other in mind and soul. And of course the difficulty rises when you make this effort—since it can hurt.

(CD) It's been said that the role of "Astrov," which you portrayed, is so pivotal in terms of its consequences that the play could have just as truthfully been called "Doctor Astrov." Would you agree?

(TC) Yes. And in reading the letters of Chekhov it's a point that he himself makes as well as critics of the time. I feel that very much of "Astrov" is Chekhov and the enormous conflicts that existed in the writer.

(CD) Would this have been the role you would have chosen for yourself; would you have rather seen yourself in the role of "Uncle Vanya?"

(TC) I most definitely would go after "Astrov—only because I've wanted to do it for so long. I wanted to be challenged by what this man is feeling in his own human charade and fears. Having now done it I'm

ready to sight in on "Vanya" —since these men are mirrors of each other in so many ways—the ideal production would be "Vanya" and "Astrov" switching roles every other week.

(CD) Some critics have described "Astrov" as a tragic figure; others see him as ironic. How did you see him?

(TC) Ironically-tragic—in that order! He wants love, comfort and something to hold on to but turns away from it when the opportunity for it might arise. His own cynical and very perceptive conscience permits him to see the tragedy of indifference that exists in man—but he doesn't really do much about it. He just goes on as himself—playing the game.

(CD) When we saw "Astrov," how much of the characterization/interpretation was Thom Christopher's?

(TC) I would say about fifty percent—Alexei really led, guided, bullied and pushed me quite a distance.

(CD) What were the fundamental or special aspects of "Astrov" that you sought to bring to this part and how did you see these aspects as being integral to the character?

(TC) The main intent was to go after the man's "hurt"—either due to himself or circumstances isn't the issue—but that he can't find a way to resolve that "hurt"—or confusion and frustration within himself. This is what makes him a contradiction in so many ways. He would take "Elena" and use her any way he wanted and all for love—he thinks—and then discard her.

(CD) Did you find that you brought much of the character of "Astrov" home with you at the days end? Is it difficult to shake off another persona, so to speak?

(TC) Yes. What you often carry over as an actor is not so much a specific from the character as you do an overall energy.

(CD) Did you find the "seriousness" of the subject matter, and the character you played enervating? Energizing?

(TC) Yes to both! The nature of the play and what "Astrov" was dealing with emotionally causes a certain emotional drain when all is being poured into the specific demands that the moments require—but it

is that wonderful thing that happens afterwards—when the performance is over and you feel drained that suddenly the realization of "it going well"—"going for it"—that you are energized and feeling like a rocket about to be launched. It basically comes down to feeling good if a job is well done. And that is in all of our lives, I think.

(CD) Did you find that a Rumanian director could bring aspects of fullness of interpretation to bear on a Russian play that perhaps an American director could not?

(TC) Yes, which would be horrendous if he, the foreign director, didn't.

(CD) Did you find your own interpretation in concert with Visarion's?

(TC) Yes more often than not. It was only on the subtle points that we would have to fence with each other— I felt going for a more subtle moment was real and he would want it to go further.

(CD) Were there differences both substantively and in style in the directing by Alexei Visarion from that of an American director?

(TC) Very much so. Alexi took time with the text—actual investigatory time, dramatic time, emotional time and physical time. We use the word "pause" and more often than not live in humongous fear of it— I think it's part of the "illustrative-visual" society we are part of. As is evident in so much of our lives today "speed" both physical and intangible dictates that we don't pause. In theatre, film and television we in America are not geared for moments of silence that are filled with thought, feeling, life. We don't seem to trust a viewers being able to be drawn into the "life of silence". Alexi took great pains to fill each "pause" with a life of its own. Not an indulgent masturbatory life but a real, alive, textured "pause." It must have worked since the audiences were constant in their praise about suddenly realizing after the play was over that so much was achieved with the "unsaid."

One felt that Alexi was bringing his Slavic background to a group of American actors: was steering us to the emotional estates that we very rarely get a chance to go to.

(CD) Were these fundamentally the differences of personality, or would you think that they represent a major cultural difference in the

approach to theatre?

(TC) I think the cultural approach is the significant factor. One still can't deny the fact that historically theatre has been around much longer in Europe—as has Europe vis a vis this country. But a step further would bring us to the importance that theatre has played—and still does in the lives of Europeans. The reality of a more literary society existing in Europe can't be denied—so all of these socio-cultural influences would effect the thrust that the director would bring to his production.

(CD) You have acted in television, film and stage productions. Do you find the transition difficult to make, in terms of the skills you are required to bring to your craft in one of these as opposed to another?

(TC) No. Since it always comes down to a basic level of—go for the truth—the reality of the situation—what is the text screaming for. Now the execution of these factors are adapted to the various media—therein is the difference. Ergo—a wonderful film actor may not be able to bring that same truth to the stage and vice versa. As has been said, "execution is the chariot of genius."

(CD) Is there a particular play, a particular role—any age, any playwright—that you have your heart set on doing?

(TC) Very much so! "Richard .the Third"—the role of Richard, as well as more and more Chekhov. I love the stage and am always hoping to be doing another play.