

# 'Vanya' on Lake Lucille



An exuberant weeklong retreat propels actors head-first into Chekhov's depths

Bill Irwin, in boat, surrounded by the performers and audience for *Uncle Vanya* at Lake Lucille.

DAVE CORDELE

BY STEPHANIE FLEISCHMANN

Actor Boris McGiver is swimming for his life. Giant smoke rings waft above the water as he dodges not two but seven bullets fired with cockamamie precision by the inimitable Bill Irwin, Vanya to McGiver's Serebriakov. The gout-ridden professor's marathon swim is the denouement of a wild goose-chase, a madcap round-robin that swirls through and around the home of directors Brian Mertes and Melissa Kievman on Lake Lucille in New City, N.Y.

Along the way, Serebriakov co-opts a concertina and attempts to disguise himself as a member of a Balkan-style band that keeps changing keys every time the actors appear and disappear. He takes an innocent accordionist (actor Orlando Pabotoy) hostage, dragging him into the hullabaloo as Vanya falls headfirst into the wisteria bushes, gun momentarily collapsing like a rubber band. Lit by the headlights of parked cars, Serebriakov makes a beeline for the bridge and the far side of the lake, where, with Vanya hot on his tail, he barrels into the water and dogpaddles towards the safety of the audience, installed in folding chairs on the sloping green shore.

Every August save one for the past five years, Kievman and Mertes have invited a company of actors, designers, musicians and crew to spend a week with them rehearsing Chekhov, roughly an act a day—eating, drinking, sleeping, imbibing the

Russian master. This year the focus was *Uncle Vanya*. The site of this gathering, a three-bedroom stone house on a half-acre 30 miles from New York City, has been standing since well before Chekhov's time. Originally surrounded by farmland, it has borne witness to an encroachment of the suburbs not unlike that which befell the Ranevskaya family in *The Cherry Orchard*. Indeed, the setting—complete with wishing well and lakeside dock, ideal for borscht-laden, plein-air dinners and late-night, vodka-fueled jam sessions—feels so utterly Chekhovian that “80 percent of your work is already done for you,” says Ted Schneider, who played Kostya in *The Seagull*, the duo's first endeavor in 2003.

The culmination of each year's weeklong exploration is a one-time, site-specific event of epic proportions that begins on Saturday afternoon on the front lawn and ends well after sundown. The performance moves through the house, heading to an enclosed garden behind it, out front once more, and back again. Sandwiched between acts is a potluck barbecue for 300 at the Lake Lucille ball field down the street. A benefit for Habitat for Humanity, the barbecue is hosted by members of the community, who bring dishes ranging from three-bean salad and red velvet cupcakes to locally grown tomatoes with fresh mozzarella and basil. Neighbors help out during the week

by housing many of the company of more than 30 in their homes, or by letting participants pitch tents on their lawns.

"This is *anything* goes," McGiver says of *Vanya*. "It's comic because it's so bitter and beautiful." The play's over-the-top antics are a Chekhov-at-Lake-Lucille hallmark: In past years the lake itself has been illuminated with more than 400 floating tea lights (*Three Sisters*, 2004) and set aflame via aquatic bonfire (*The Cherry Orchard*, 2006). This approach to staging Chekhov's works gets at the heart of his "mysteries," believes playwright Rolin Jones, a producer of the project. The technique breaks open the plays with so much force that three weeks after *Uncle Vanya*, Kievman observes, "the house is still vibrating."

**"AT THE BEGINNING OF THE RETREAT,"** says Mertes, "I always say: 'This place, it will work itself through us and change us.'" For Mertes, as it is for Kievman, the endeavor is about transforming the space, an idea the couple encountered at the 2002 RAT (Regional Alternative Theatre) conference they attended in San Francisco, where playwright Erik Ehn, an evangelist of "Big Cheap

Theatre," spoke eloquently about new stages and staging grounds, and the struggle for political, artistic and architectural space. On the way home, Kievman turned to Mertes: "We need to do a piece of theatre at our house. Chekhov. It screams *The Seagull*." And so they did—not just with the intention of revitalizing the space in which they live and work, but also with the goal of reaching out and changing the community of Lake Lucille itself. "This year, Brian and I canvassed the whole neighborhood," says Kievman, who is fiercely committed to the RAT ethos of hospitality. "We were invited into so many houses. That's been incredible. To know 80 of your neighbors. Taking the time to do that kind of outreach."

Recharging one's batteries is a big impetus for the retreats—at the end of the week, "I feel like all the circuits that were there have been changed," says Mertes—and that benefit extends to all involved, including the crew; the musicians in the band, Yarmulkabra; and chef Alicia Lewis of nearby Nyack, who donates her services cooking elaborate organic feasts for the company, only to leave feeling invigorated. "The process is blessed," declares Irwin.

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Reg Rogers, above, with Irwin in *Uncle Vanya*.

"It's so exciting and rich and volatile, but it's scary too." Actors arrive having memorized as many of their lines as possible. "The thing moves so fast," says Reg Rogers, who played Astrov this year. "Sunday through Friday feels like one giant day."

Every morning starts with a dance rehearsal on the front lawn—"Lord, save me from the dance!" declared actor Matthew Cowles (Telegin) in a toast at dinner the first night. "That insane, wonderful dance," echoed Lynn Cohen, who played Marina, the nanny. Cohen's muscle memory of the play runs deep. In 1951, at 18, she played Sonya in Kansas City, Mo., her first professional job; she also played Maman in Andre Gregory and Louis Malle's *Vanya on 42nd Street*. All of Chekhov's works at Lake Lucille contain at least one breakout dance, a signature gesture that tends to stop the play in its tracks, working against the moment to shake things up.

This year's *Vanya* opened with a dance choreographed by actors Jesse J. Perez and Randy Reyes, a riff on the theme of waking up into one's life that ran through the play and drove the week's work. Replete with images of sleepwalking through life, swimming through dreams, a pull toward waking that opens up to birdlike flight, the dance was an apt metaphor for the leaps all involved found themselves taking as they soared through a play so large and so rich in the space of a week.

The retreats are structured so that the actors can "fall into the story," literally walking into a new environment each day as they encounter a new act. Bricolaged almost spontaneously by designers Deb O (set), Dan



DAN CORDELE

From left, Orlando Pabotoy, Rogers and Mia Barron in *Uncle Vanya*.

Scully (lights) and Daniel Kluger (sound) from what they collected around the house during the hours leading up to the first rehearsal of each act, the physical world of *Vanya* was shockingly complete. “Brian wants you to find something in it for yourself that isn’t factory

made,” says Scully. “Something deeper.” Costume designer Olivera Gajic corroborates: “We are here to discover what the surprises do to the play.”

Deb O’s set for Act 2 was an abstracted room perched precariously on suitcases. It’s

the instability of the world that compels Mertes, who is largely responsible for the beat-by-beat work with the actors. “I’m really interested in seeing what happens in that moment of falling,” he says, “when people don’t know how they’re going to land. It’s the recoveries that draw us in. In Chekhov, the characters are always screwing up and falling down and recovering from collapse.” Mertes and Kievman and their designers aim to create an environment where the actors *can* fall. Safely. And recover. Where accidents are happy and frequent—like the rain that fell serendipitously during the Tuesday night rehearsal of *Vanya*’s Act 2, which inspired the team to mount a sprinkler up in an ancient choke cherry tree in order to produce manufactured rain throughout the entire act for the Saturday performance. The 30-foot ladder Kenny Cahall used to put the sprinkler in place ended up being used in Act 4 just because it was there, in the space. The ladder levitated the rejected Sonya (Marin Ireland)—whose purity of feeling verges on the transcendent—above the opening moments of the scene like a lost angel.

“This is a rare environment where it’s

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all around you, and all you have to do is just give in to it and work as fully, as responsibly as you can with what's in front of you," says Mia Barron, who played Yelena, speaking of a process that's not always so easy for actors accustomed to a more analytical approach. "Brian is interested in *not* knowing what's going to happen—in asking you to lose control."

At some point everybody at the Lake Lucille retreats feels as if they're flying by the seat of their pants—"flying on faith," is how Irwin puts it—a sensation that is built into the shape of the week, in part so that the actors don't have time to filter their senses through a character's eyes or a web of given circumstances. Mertes and Kievman want to see what sort of combustion happens when the actors simply respond to the space. "With Chekhov's words," says Mertes. "As themselves."

As well as living in the moment, company members are responsible for setting the table and cleaning up after dinner. At Lake Lucille, even the chores are calibrated to support the world of the play: this summer, Irwin served as sommelier; Rogers watered



Brian Mertes and Melissa Kievman, at left, with the members of Yarmulkabra.

the garden; Ireland, who had spent as much time as she could at the house before the retreat to feel like the "lady of the house," took out the trash.

As the actors worked through the play, Yarmulkabra—comprised of Jonathan Pratt, Lucas Papaelias, Simone Perrin, Eddie Carlson, Mark Oster and Alex Harvey—wrote eight songs in a week. But even though the

pace was breakneck, there was still time to reflect. "On the rainy day when we just sat in the one room and spoke the text," says Irwin, "I remember thinking: This is a kind of immersion in a play's text that you rarely get even when you have four weeks' rehearsal."

Later that same night, after a day spent cooped up indoors, a spontaneous dance rehearsal erupted. Mertes called Kievman

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STEPHANIE FLEISCHMANN

Irwin with Kievman and daughter Tria Leal.

downstairs to watch, immediately contemplating where in the event they could include the moment the actors had just created.

“It’s why you become an actor or an actress,” says Cohen, “not to do the same old thing but to be challenged. With Brian and Melissa, there are no rules. Instead of saying ‘Why?’ Brian and Melissa say, ‘Why not? Let’s try it. It’s there. Let’s do it. Let’s go further. Let’s make mistakes.’”

#### IN THE MONTHS LEADING UP TO EACH

year’s retreat, Kievman plots the rhythm of the days, and she and Mertes chart the flow of the theatrical event with images designed to amplify in wide-open spaces, pulling the immediate surroundings—and the audience—into the world of the play: the 50-foot-long-by-5-feet-wide butcher-paper map, for example, that Astrov unfolded during his prophetic Act 3 speech on deforestation in *Uncle Vanya*; or McGiver, as Lopakhin in last year’s *The Cherry Orchard*, in a moment charged with exuberance and devastation, chopping down an actual hemlock tree. Eighteen minutes and countless blows of the axe later, the tree (which had, in actuality, been dead for some years), toppled with a momentous splash into the water. “Anything that we can blow out and expand,” says Kievman, “any kind of moment we can open into the neighborhood, that’s what gets us going...and once we start that, the actors pick up on it, and then everybody looks for their swim across the lake.”

Actors make lakeside, often watery entrances and exits in all the plays. Yelena first appeared emerging from the lake, dripping wet, conjuring the mermaid Vanya perceives her to be. “Nice seeing you all,” yelled Astrov from across the lake, as he pedalled off to his

forest home on a vintage bicycle, horn honking, streamers flying. McGiver’s Keith Richards-inspired Serebriakov peeled away with his Yelena in a convertible Mini Cooper, Nick Lowe’s “I Trained Her to Love Me” blaring on the radio. Moments later, the doctor, a gardener through and through, took his final leave (after a gut-wrenching showdown of the eyes with Sonya) in a humble wheelbarrow, rickshaw-style, abandoning Sonya and her Uncle Vanya to a life of work made tolerable only through laughter—a bittersweet comic nuance Irwin brought masterfully to the role.

“We try to give the actors gifts to work with,” says Kievman. Take the fight in the second act of *Uncle Vanya*, for instance, which happened in a pit of mud. It’s late at night. Vanya and Astrov are both drunk and in love with the same woman. Mertes’s staging for the encounter between the two men, fleet-

ing on the page, was inspired by an image he came across amid costume designer Gajic’s research—two men covered in mud.

“In the mud?” Rogers asked in a moment of hesitation just before the first go-round. There is a long pause before Irwin replied.

“Why not?”

And they engaged with a hilarity and a pathos that set Mertes weeping as he held in his arms his three-month-old daughter Tria Leal, who calmly watched the antics of these mud-splattered men. A few moments later, when Sonya showered off her deviant uncle with the garden hose, it could have been the saddest scene in the world.

After rehearsal, Rogers re-emerged, squeaky clean and eating an apple.

“How did you feel about the mud?” asked Mertes.

“Good,” said Rogers. “I like that mud. I could use more.”

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**FOR MERTES, CHEKHOVIAN IRONY—**

laughter through tears—is what happens when an actor goes full throttle in two different directions at once. The director introduced the idea, which he first encountered in 1979 when he was studying at the University of Texas with mentor Paul Schmidt, on the first day of this year's retreat. Although Irwin is new to the process, his understanding of "the weird equation that Melissa and Brian have in mind" was immediate. "It's better if you're 30, 40 feet apart, and running," he says. "It's breathtaking the kind of magnitude of theatrical image and complexity that they're after."

Ireland embodied the notion in her rendition of Sonya, who ran foolishly after Astro and dragged a humongous bag of recycled bottles and cans 200 feet across the garden. Ireland speaks of Sonya as "running toward



From left, Irwin, Marin Ireland, Lynn Cohen and Rogers in *Uncle Vanya*.

hope and despair—that struggle of keeping your heart open, of trying to remember you can't commit to that less just because it hurts. Your heart has to keep breaking so that it

grows bigger."

"We're all humbled by the task of doing Chekhov in a week," says Reyes, who proposed to his girlfriend, Yarmulkabra band member Simone Perrin, on a paddleboat out on the lake the night before the presentation. There was nowhere else he could think of that was more right. "I needed to do it here," he says. "This is our third year. It's become part of our lives, our tradition."

Costume designer Gajic, a former NEA/TCG Career Development Program for Designers participant who arrived in the U.S. from the former Yugoslavia without speaking a word of English, celebrated another kind of milestone at the retreat—her eight-year anniversary in the States. "I called my family in Serbia and let them hear the music playing in the background. They could sense the mood here. It's so Bohemian. It's so home-like. I don't consider this work. I feel like I'm doing my art."

"It's that 'buzz of life thing' Chekhov has," says Kievman, speaking not just of the thrill of "watching people experience what makes their filament vibrate," but of how this way of working on Chekhov's plays seems to extend well beyond the work to life itself. Births (Tria Leal came into the world nine months after the *Cherry Orchard* retreat), proposals, anniversaries...they all seem very much apropos to the gathering.

How does one translate what Irwin calls this "strange and wonderful gig" to the rest of the year? "You have to return to other work, the work for hire," says Irwin. "You can only hope to bring this kind of experience into all your work."

But still, the question looms: "How am I going to go into a rehearsal room now and do Chekhov," asks Rogers, "and not go, BIG

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DAN CORDELE

Ireland in *Uncle Vanya*.

SIGH, when the director says, ‘Lemme tell you my concept, it’s this living room...?’”

By the end of the day on Saturday, the audience had lived through the play with the actors, who had been living the play for a week. For many, the presentation measured high on the Richter scale of most moving theatrical event of the year. “It felt like seeing a shooting star,” writes audience member Chris Muller, a set designer, of the experience of seeing *Vanya*. “In my nearly 40 years of living here, Lake Lucille has never seemed as much a community as it did last night,” says neighbor Jan Connor.

For those lucky enough to watch the process itself unfold, it can seem almost otherworldly: Kim Rubinstein, a director and a friend and mentor of Kievman, arrived a day before the presentation to watch the evening rehearsal from across the lake through the rising mist, the lights reflecting in the water. “It looked like an Edward Steichen photograph,” she says. “One year I want to watch the whole thing from across the lake. You can almost feel the spirit emanating out.”

**Playwright Stephanie Fleischmann, a New Dramatists alumnus and a 2006 HERE Arts Center resident artist, is the author of *Viper*, *The Street of Useful Things*, *The Hotel Carter*, *Eloise & Ray*, *Blue Hyacinths* and, most recently, the song cycle *Red Fly/Blue Bottle*.**

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