

Unhappy as we are

Chekhovian tales of provincial Russian miserabilism

Some people are natural doers; others prefer to watch and contemplate. Maxim Osipov's sympathies are usually with the former, even as he shows how easy it can be to fall victim to one's own agency. His characters are no less aware of that danger, yet they carry on doing what they see as their duty – to others but mainly to themselves.

Osipov is a cardiologist based in the provincial Russian town of Tarussa. On his arrival there in 2005, he founded a charity to modernize the struggling local hospital, and eventually, after battles with bureaucrats, succeeded in transforming it into an advanced clinic. When his accounts of that experience were published, followed by his short fiction, some critics hailed him as a new Chekhov; others shrugged, saying that Russia is never short of new Chekhovs. But comparison with the nineteenth-century writer-doctor seems apt in the light of the stories collected in Osipov's English-language debut. Chekhovian themes and characters abound in *Rock, Paper, Scissors*. There is a physician who once "had notions of what was bad and what was good, but with the years he's gotten used to it all"; an actress past her prime, jealous of her younger rival; a stalwart Uncle Vanya character surrounded by idlers.

The setting is mostly the Russian provinces, with their drab scenery, harsh realities and petty affairs; a place where people rarely take the initiative. When they do, their actions often prove "pointless, hopeless, hollow, empty,

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Maxim Osipov

ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS

And other stories

Translated by Boris Dralyuk, Alex Fleming and
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futile". The title story has all the usual suspects: unfulfilled ambitions, frustrated desires, fruitless quests for truth and beauty. A confession written by one of its characters breathes fatalism in his litany of missed chances; if anything can still evoke strong feelings in him it's Russian literature. Stories of lives ruined through indifference make you wonder if things can ever change here. In his essay "In My Country" (2007) – not included in this collection – Osipov wrote of the Tarussa townsfolk: "They don't want to contemplate the future: let it all stay as before" (my translation).

Agents of renewal do appear in these stories, but they usually get bogged down in what they believe to be circumstances beyond their control. The protagonist of "The Waves of the Sea" – once a geologist, now a priest – thinks that it is impossible for people to change and so resigns himself to a joyless existence. His thoughts continually circumvent the present to take sentimental journeys back to the past.



The Chekhov Theatre, Sakhalin Island, Russia. © Alamy

Stuck in a marriage that amounts to no more than muddling along, he and his wife lose the only link remaining between them: their dog, Mona. The name, like their own lives, makes little sense to them, and wasn't chosen for any particular reason, but "they couldn't just call her Kashtanka, like the red dog in Chekhov's story; everyone does that".

Crime is a frequent feature of this alcohol-

soaked life, which revolves around the triangle of "the hospital – the council – the courthouse". "Moscow–Petrozavodsk" throws us in at the deep end, with enough violence to make the doctor-narrator feel physically sick. There is some condescension cut with self-mockery in the worn-out phrases – "ordinary people", "average folks" – that the protagonist and his ilk use to describe both the perpetrators and the victims of the crimes. Elsewhere, irony is sparse yet effective, as when one churchgoer calls a soleas a proscenium and another confesses, "I used the icon as a mirror". The translators convey the Russian original's style well, each giving it their own spin: Boris Dralyuk's idiom packs a punch, Anne Marie Jackson lends Osipov's prose a gentle English timbre, and Alex Fleming meticulously recreates its cadences and wordplay.

"I have hardly seen anyone here work, or indeed do anything, with enthusiasm", Osipov wrote in the same essay. The observation is shared by the protagonist of "Renaissance Man", who is the most active doer of them all, yet whose energy brings him little satisfaction. This upstart's closest prototype is Lopakhin, the enterprising new master of the doomed cherry orchard. His feelings towards intellectuals lurch from reverence for their culture to contempt for their idleness: "What value have [they] created, whose lives have they improved?" Desperate to change something in this "country of fools", he gradually realizes that he can't beat the inertia of his surroundings. Boredom, another proverbial Russian condition, takes over his aspirations and yearnings. Languishing by the window, unable to "tear himself away from the sight of this life – festive, idle, parasitic", he watches it through the scope of a rifle, and soon Chekhov's trusty gun confirms the rules of play.