

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



# Breath by Breath

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by Peta Tait

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EXTRACT

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**ACT 1 Scene 1: Visitors**

*The Promenade, Yalta in April of 1900. Sound of the sea. Olga is looking out as Chekhov enters and comes up behind her. He looks around quickly. He goes to embrace her but changes his mind. He stands very closely behind her. They do not speak for a moment. It is peaceful.*

- Chekhov Did you walk the dog down here to the sea?
- Olga I walked myself. *Turning slightly.* I need this sunshine, since I must rehearse inside that freezing theatre all day.
- Chekhov *Moving closer to Olga.* Are you alone?
- Olga *Laughs.* Not by choice Anton. *She looks at him.* I feel close to heaven here, when the light comes and makes the water shimmer.
- Chekhov *Teasingly.* I am told the climate in heaven is not very hot, but we no longer have to worry about feeling the cold.
- Olga Then all the more reason why I should feel the sun on my skin before I have to leave here.
- Chekhov *Playfully.* Olga, how can you talk of leaving and distress me? You've only been here a few days.
- Olga I shall miss the water very much.
- Chekhov And I thought you came all the way from Moscow to visit me. *He moves as if to kiss her.*
- Olga *She steps aside.* Any thoughts I had of days alone with you, Anton, disappeared when I saw the constant flow of visitors through your house.
- Chekhov *Taking her hand.* Then tomorrow you and I will stroll all day in the garden and inspect my roses. I have treated the stems with sulphur.
- Olga *Ironically.* How romantic. Manure on the roses.
- Chekhov I'll show you how it's done with love.
- Olga *Laughs playfully.* Like you show every actress while you promise her the lead role?
- Chekhov Some are better actresses than others.
- Olga Some are better writers.

- Chekhov            Then the best actress and the best writer should be together.
- Olga                *Mock sigh.* How can that be? I am on the stage in Moscow, you are three days away in Yalta.
- Chekhov            Since we are together at this very moment, we should spend the day *pause* walking in a shady forest up there, looking down on this world.
- Chekhov tries to control a coughing fit. Olga turns away. Malak enters. Olga does not see Malak.*
- Olga                If I say yes and run away from our rehearsal, then you will not believe that I am fully committed to it. You will doubt that I am a passionate artist. If I say no, your feelings will be hurt and you may not give me a second chance.
- Chekhov            I know you love your work and ... the independence it brings ...
- Olga                *Resolutely.* Anton, love's promise is more than words. I will tell our visiting actors that you are here.
- Olga exits. Malak is watching with amusement.*
- Malak                It might interest your friend to know some of the history of the forests, the dark places.
- Chekhov            *Annoyed and watching Olga exit.* I don't think she came here for the forests.
- Malak                You should take her there.
- Chekhov            I've been trying. *Irritated.* Are you following me?
- Malak                It's all the same.
- Chekhov            I'm busy, Malak.
- Malak                Seeking inspiration from another?
- Chekhov            Can't you wait until I'm alone in my study? I help whoever comes to me, don't I? I give money and use my name to write letters on their behalf. What more can I do?
- Malak                For some, the work of writing is a pleasure.
- Chekhov            What few pleasures do I have in this Siberia with sun?

- Malak                    Our winters come too soon.
- Chekhov                You are so insistent; what can I do here?
- Malak                    I always give you what you need, you poor old donkey.
- Chekhov                I do my own listening; those interminable silences between the drips from the samovar tap.
- Malak                    I can't be silenced.
- Chekhov                *Sighs.* These days everyone, even you, only wants to talk to me about theatre and writing.
- Olga returns. She does not see Malak.*
- Olga                      *Playfully.* We wait Maestro, ready to perform at a moment's notice.
- Chekhov                As I feared. The worst ordeal, a ceremonial occasion.
- The actors enter noisily and put together the drawing room set as if they are preparing for their next scene at rehearsal. Malak stands to one side. They do not see him.*
- Actress                 He's here, everyone. The great writer is here to witness our efforts.
- Chekhov greets everyone shyly, except the Actress. They stand awkwardly for a moment.*
- Chekhov                If the playwright cannot come to the theatre, the theatre must come to him. Isn't that so, Danchenko?
- Danchenko             How are you, old friend, feeling any better?
- Actor                    *Said reverentially.* Doctor Chekhov, I would value your advice on my character.
- Chekhov                I'm told, you think I've come only to inspect the actresses.
- They laugh.*
- Vishnevski             *Looking longingly at Olga.* What does Chekhov's seductive Helena say?
- Olga                      "In Russia a brilliant man can't exactly be a saint."

Chekhov                    These days, Vishnevski, as you well know, it benefits a writer's reputation to be an immoral devil, so he can keep company with actresses.

Vishnevski                Did we dream as schoolboys in Taganrog that we would be working together? The two of us have made the journey to this point, my friend.

Chekhov                    Getting to Yalta is easy. It's getting out that presents the problem. Since you are here by invitation, and I am here by exhortation, you will find it easier than I to leave.

*Malak moves forward, seen only by Chekhov.*

Danchenko                Your writing travels easily.

Actress                    *To Chekhov and Danchenko.* People rush to see real life in plays by you both.

Danchenko                They're attracted by Chekhov's name.

Chekhov                    *Said doubtfully.* Perhaps.

Danchenko                You have promised us more plays, and new plays from your friends.

Malak                      *Ironic aside to Chekhov.* Do they want life's truths in theatre now? You should have told me.

*Chekhov throws Malak a look of exasperation as he moves off-stage. Malak moves to the side.*

## **Scene 2: Family life.**

*The actors make the transition into the play-within a-play. The Actress becomes Natalyia, Vishnevski becomes Itzek Dubnow, the Actor becomes Peter Drenteln, Olga becomes Mrs Drenteln, Nemiróvich-Danchenko becomes Alexi Novitski.*

Natalyia                    *Gushingly.* The birds do sing in the morning  
Love is sweet  
Summer is a breath away ...  
*Speaking.* See how everything is alive again as if winter never happened.

Alexi                        You bring a breath of summer with you, my love, all year round. I seem to have forgotten my pocket watch again. Where do you think I left it?

- Natalyia           It makes me so sad to see everything around me so happy, and I don't know why. At least in winter I'm not filled with false promise.
- Alexi                Patience, my dear.
- Natalyia            But Dr Aksakov does not speak. Father, you must talk to him again.
- Alexi                Is he good enough for my only daughter?
- Natalyia            He pleases me. I can tell he has a sensitive soul.
- Alexi                I can tell nothing from his face. Often I suspect that he wants to hurry back to his fossil collecting. I give him an opening in the conversation every time we meet. He is very slow to make his marriage proposal.
- Natalyia            I feel this emptiness inside.
- Alexi                You are too pale.
- Natalyia            It's hopeless.
- Alexi                Natalyia, you need to meet some more suitable men. Given the opportunity any man will fall instantly in love with you.
- Natalyia            What is love? How does it happen? How did you and Mother fall in love?
- Alexi                *Sighs.* That was so long ago, before you were born. I can't seem to remember.
- They remain on stage as Drenteln and Mrs Drenteln take over the action.*
- Mrs Drenteln       *Indignantly.* Gregori must have inherited his physical deformity from you. The fault is not on my side.
- Drenteln            *Annoyed.* I come from good breeding stock. We have a strong boy.
- Mrs Drenteln       Even the doctor says he has been slow to get a tooth. I was so worried that no teeth have come through his gums, I called the doctor to examine him. He says it's a matter of time, but Sonya had several of her teeth at his age. She takes after her mother.
- Drenteln            I thought that church service would never end.
- Mrs Drenteln       You are not listening to me.