

Title: (Romantic) Life Upon the Wicked Stage: Images of the Artist and Amorous Relationships in Chekhov's *Skazki Mel'pomeny* (1884)
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Chekhov's long involvement with the theatre world is well-known and documented: soon after he began his literary career writing short, humorous pieces for Moscow weeklies such as *Strekoza*, *Mirskoi tolk*, and *Budil'nik*, he wrote a critical review of Sarah Bernhardt. In that 1881 piece he attacked the actress for her alleged emotional artifice. He also began work on his first full-length play, now known as *Platonov*, at that time. A decade later he had authored no fewer than ten farces and comedies. Despite these beginnings, Chekhov's name is forever connected with later short stories that are more serious in tone and the four major dramatic works written after 1895. The first of these, *The Seagull*, features characters who are, to varying degrees, members of the theatre world. Finally, the writer moved into an even closer relationship to the theatre and its habitués by marrying Ol'ga Knipper, the actress who had played Masha in the original production of *Three Sisters*.

It should not be surprising, then, that the young writer's first published collection of stories should have the artistic world, especially that of the theatre, at their center. The six stories that make up Chekhov's first collection, "On i ona," "Tragik," "Baron," "Mest'," "Dva skandala," and "Zheny artistov," date mostly from 1882. However, "Tragik" the latest work to appear in the compilation, originally appeared in October 1883, while "Zheny artistov," the tale that closes the collection, first appeared in 1880.

In this paper I offer a closer examination of the world of provincial actors, musicians, and writers that Chekhov's (A. Chekhonte's) narrator presents. This impulse stems from Donald Rayfield's suggestion that these "bittersweet" pieces describe the "disparity between the theatrical calling and the degradation of those called to it" (Rayfield, 13). I also explore the possibility that Chekhov deliberately created an artistic unity when he published this collection in 1884. When read as a set, the effects of an eternal love triangle, consisting of the artist, an amorous partner, and Art, arise as a unifying theme. In each tale Chekhov examines a variation of this relationship: his focus shifts from the relationship of an opera singer to her manager husband through the stories of a tragic actor, an elderly prompter, a comedian, and a lovesick conductor and singer. The final tale, which examines the relationship of a Portuguese would-be novelist to his wife, concludes with Antosha Chekhonte's lighthearted admonition to women not to marry artists.

References

Rayfield, Donald. *Understanding Chekhov: A Critical Study of Chekhov's Prose and Drama*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999.