

Title: Killing Ivanov: Chekhov and Suicide
Author: Lisa Yountchi, University of Pennsylvania

Amongst Chekhov's major plays, *Ivanov* is traditionally deemed a work that lacks the vision, talent, or depth we typically associate with Chekhovian drama. Recent scholarship has aimed to rescue *Ivanov* from such analysis by evaluating the play's importance in terms of Chekhov's evolution as a playwright. Nevertheless, scholars continue to describe the play's plot, and especially Ivanov's suicide, as "unoriginal," "conventional" and "the weakest point of the entire play" (Gilman, 66; Pavis, 71; Magarshack, 116). This paper offers a different approach.

From 1887 to 1889, *Ivanov* underwent major revision. Most obviously, Chekhov changed the end of his play from Ivanov dying of an apparent heart attack, to Ivanov shooting himself in the head. This is neither a mere coincidence nor an escape into conventionalism. Rather, by leaving his audience with Ivanov's indelible suicide, Chekhov implicated the "epidemic of suicide" that plagued Russian society from the 1860s to the 1880s. By analyzing Chekhov's letters, drafts of *Ivanov*, and other stories on suicide, I argue that *Ivanov* (1889) reflects Chekhov's growing interest in the problem of suicide, and initiates a topic consistently at play in his work. In addition, by comparing and contrasting Chekhov's analysis of suicide to those promoted within the Russian press, and especially Dostoevsky's articles on suicide in *Diary of a Writer*, I argue that *Ivanov* fosters a dialogue and debate with other popular opinions concerning Russia's "suicide problem." Finally, I ascertain how Chekhov's use of suicide supported and challenged audience expectation.

Gilman, Richard. *Chekhov's Plays: An Opening into Eternity*. New Haven: 1995.

Pavis, Patrice. "Ivanov: The Invention of a Negative Dramaturgy." In *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, ed. by Vera Gotlieb and Paul Allain. Cambridge: 2000.

Magarshack, David. *Chekhov the Dramatist*. New York: 1952

lisayountchi@gmail.com