

Title: The Breaking String Revisited: Chekhov's Plays as Hypertext
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A fruitful approach to Chekhov's major plays is to view them as stages in an evolving thematic system, on the analogy of a series of paintings by the same artist, in which various motifs recur. A case in point is the gunshot, one of the most brutal intrusions of sound into any theatrical performance. In each of the plays there is a gun and hence an actual or potential gunshot, resulting from the hero's realization that the object of his desire does not love him. In *Ivanov*, the hero simply goes off to one side and kills himself. In *Diadia Vania*, the eponymous character fires at his tormentor Serebriakov; the business of the fourth act then consists in preventing his suicide – including hiding the gun. *Chaika* returns to the suicide ending, although Dorn represents the sound as an exploding phial. In *Tri sestry* Tuzenbakh engages in a duel/suicide, but the sound of the gunshot has become muffled and distant. Finally, in *Vishnevyi sad* Chekhov parodies the motif, placing the gun in the hands of Epikhodov and then Charlotta, but does not have it go off. The “zero presence” of the gunshot is replaced by the mysterious noise “of a breaking string” which different characters interpret differently. Thus the gunshot can be seen as a motif that is modulated in play after play, assuming a greater ambiguity and abstraction, and merging with the motif of the distant indistinct sound that might be a lift falling down a pit shaft, or even a bird cry, but is certainly disquieting. The gunshot, no longer merely a convenient way to end the play, becomes an increasingly subtle element in the musical score and acquires a semantic polyvalence that invites various interpretations without imposing any.