

David Mold
Director's Note
Uncle Vanya

In the preface to her 2014 version of *Uncle Vanya*, playwright Annie Baker states: "The goal was to create a version that would make Chekhov happy; to create a version that sounds to our contemporary American ears the way the play sounded to Russian ears during the play's first production in the provinces in 1898."

Our production extends Annie Baker's goal by presenting the play in a style that not only sounds contemporary, but also *looks* contemporary – using modern meta-theatre practices that call attention to the artifice of the stage and acknowledge that the audience is watching actors tell a story. We are not in 1890s Russia; we are in the Theresa Lang Theatre in April 2023 and you – the audience – are part of the story we are telling.

Although Chekov's plays are studied in our classes, we have not produced one since the 2012-2013 season, so it was time for our students to experience his work as both theatre makers and audience, and to hear and see its relevance. *Uncle Vanya* is a play I have wanted to return to since I directed it over 25 years ago and is a play I wanted to share in production with our students. However, I knew with a Theatre Arts student body the size of ours, that the likelihood of a play with only nine characters being approved by our Production Committee was zero.

Thus, an exercise in problem-solving began – an exercise inherent in all theatre making. Our concept developed collaboratively over the past year. How do we enlarge the cast? Cast two actors in every role and nine becomes eighteen. How do two actors play each role but be part of one ensemble and not two separate casts? Share the dialogue. How do we share the dialogue? Divide it while still telling a single story with theatricality. Actors perform on platforms under the watch of their castmates seated on risers as audience. (Nayah, the scenic designer's idea.) How do we make it clear who is who in this world? Set the play in two different time periods. (Katie, the costume designer's idea.) How do we connect the time periods? By how the light moves. (Abby, the lighting designer's idea.) How do we enhance Baker's idea of making the play sound contemporary? Add live music that is in dialogue with the spoken word. (My idea.) Nayah, Katie, and Abby each executed their ideas. I have no music skills to execute mine. However, our ensemble does, so Tyler, Dot, Sonia, and Ella created music that is in dialogue with the spoken word and makes the production sound even more contemporary for American ears. The students have embraced our style of storytelling with an enthusiasm that has moved me in rehearsal after rehearsal. They have always been "all in" with our challenging concept as it has evolved. As Annie Baker's goal was in writing the play, our goal has been to create a style of production that would make Chekhov happy.

Words of gratitude: First to the Production Committee which has supported the crazy idea of this production since I first presented it last spring. Second to the Theatre Arts department that has supported my ongoing interest in telling stories through diverse theatrical styles so that our students can learn. A thank you to someone from outside MMC – my wife, Becky, who always listens to my ideas and challenges me to make them stronger and whose support is always incredible. Thank you to the students in this production as they have enhanced our storytelling with their willingness to learn and investigate. They let go of actor egos in service of something larger – telling the story of this play in a unique style – and making that story more important than the success of any of one individual.