Psychoanalysis at the Theatre

AFTERPLAY

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Brian Friel (1929-)

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You enter a crowded restaurant alone and someone asks if you mind that they join you. You begin to talk about where you are from, where you went to college, your professional interests, family concerns, what is in the news. You learn that the stranger is in town to see a family member, visit the monuments, attend a Board meeting, interview candidates for a fellowship, or give testimony on the Hill. You present yourself in a certain way, gauging how much of yourself to share. The conversation may remain halting, guarded. Or you may feel an instant connection, perhaps founded on a background in

common, a similar perspective, or a shared sense of humor. Whatever the basis, it is possible with some men and women, and not others.

When it is possible there is a feeling of connection. This sense of "clicking" between people is a "spontaneous unconscious function of the gregarious quality in the personality of man" (Bion 1959 p. 136). It is an instantaneous combination of the personalities at conscious and unconscious levels. What do two strangers go through to arrive at this fit? How do they use their defensive postures for protection, and when do they give them up? How do they reach an emotional place where they can be frank and fully present with one another? What is it that forges this intimacy of the moment? What leads to a second moment? These are the questions that lie at the heart of Brian Friel's one-act *Afterplay*, an artful curio, a theatrical gem, a contemplative piece on personal history and the establishment of intimacy.

Friel sets the scene in a Moscow café in the early 1920s. He puts together two of Checkhov's secondary characters from the edges of two of his well-known plays – Sonya Serebriakova and Andrey Prozorov – to see what happens to them 20 years later. In their original dramatic settings, Sonya is the pragmatic niece of the disorganized *Uncle Vanya* (1899) and Andrey is the ineffectual but enthusiastic brother of *The Three Sisters* (1901). Sonya and Andrey are minor characters in these major plays. In *Afterplay*, they have our attention all to themselves as they get to know one another by sharing

complaints, jokes, and reminiscences over cups of tea and soup. We learn from their conversation that Uncle Vanya has died 19 years ago after a stroke that Sonya attributes to the strain of his heart being broken following his rejection by Elena, Sonya's stepmother. Andrey has survived the loss of his wife Natasha, unlike his sister Masha who shot herself because of unrequited love. Such references and allusions to the Checkov narratives enrich the context for the educated audience. Nevertheless the play must stand on its own, as must Sonya and Andrey as they confront the dilemmas and disappointments of middle-age.

Up from the country on matters of personal business in the early 1920s, the two characters had met by chance in a café, in Moscow, the city that had always been regarded by Andrey's three sisters as the city of dreams where their real life would begin. In the same café, the next evening, Sonya and Andrey connect again over tea, soup, and fresh brown bread. They joke about the physical effects of the Spartan conditions in Russia – chilblains, frostbite, chapped lips, stiff legs, and numb bottoms. Andrey, a shy classical musician of shabby elegance who lives on a small property in the provinces, has come to the big city with his violin as his passport. He boasts about the wonderful diva in La Bohème for whom he plays in the orchestra, and he brags about his doctor son and engineer daughter. Sonya is thrilled that her new friend is so illustrious in the arts and suitably impressed by his gifted children. Like Andrey's sisters she has no children of her own. Sonya is now in charge of the

country estate that she had inherited from her mother and that her Uncle Vanya had mismanaged while in charge of it on her behalf. Sonya has come to the city to struggle with complicated paperwork issued to her by the Ministry of Agriculture and the central bank. She is considering their business plan for her to maintain the estate by planting trees which will require less of her time than grain crops. The afforestation project will appeal to her family friend, and her late Uncle Vanya's physician Dr. Michael Astrov, a man who sings the health-giving praises of trees and bees and chases his dream of saving the world. Sonya is afraid of losing a precious small garden that she had purchased in her youth, a symbol of her lost potential for procreativity.

Keeping one another company, Sonya and Andrey tell stories of the past and present and plan for their futures. They reveal details of their lives and habits, and as they do so they develop a relationship of the moment and deal in their characteristic ways with the opportunity that their chance meetings afford them. At first trying to hide their loneliness and longing for love with numerous fictions, Sonya and Andrey gradually confront their self-deceptions and personal truths and how these influence their relationships.

Admitting their vulnerabilities brings Sonya and Andrey closer, and then their many fears interfere with real intimacy. A strong dose of vodka is not enough to quell their anxieties about loving and being loved, even though the effects of the alcohol provide a giddy coziness, a welcome distraction,

revelations of drinking habits, and a moment of rebellion. In a moment of alcohol induced boldness Sonya takes a step out of the mould of the past and gaily plans to blow her money on a visit to the opera to hear Andrey play and the much-touted diva sing in La Bohème. His artifice about to be caught out, Andrey covers his shame by trying to put her off so that she will not discover his secret. Thinking that his lack of response means that he wants to concentrate on his work undisturbed, she promises that she will be discreet at the opera, claiming that her interest is not in possessing him but in adoring his genius, along with that of the diva and the master Puccini. Still Andrey does not welcome her idea. Hopes dashed, she falls into the state of fear she hates, into that "endless tundra of aloneness, of loneliness stretching out before."

Andrey is moved to deflate the fable of his involvement in La Bohème. He admits that he is merely a street musician. He thinks Sonya is angry, justifiably so, but she says that she has no reason to care. He continues to strip away the layers of the onion of deception: His daughter lives miles away and barely stays in touch; his son is serving a jail sentence. Whenever Andrey has enough money to bribe the guards for the passes, he comes to Moscow to visit his son for the allotted hour. Andrey reveals his reality, and his true self emerges. Sonya understands.

Andrey asks Sonya about Michael, her beloved Dr. Astrov, the tree and

bee man. Andrey may be checking out the competition or perhaps he is sensitive to a corresponding fiction on Sonya's part. Sonya responds by speaking passionately about having loved Dr. Astrov for 23 years, all the while packing up her stuff to leave Andrey. She and Andrey having exchanged addresses, they part amicably, properly, but with restrained passion, and Sonya prepares a graceful exit, planning to meet Andrey again.

Sonya hesitates and returns to admit one final fiction: The great Dr Astrov is in fact married, and more than that, he is married to her beautiful stepmother Elena, the one whose rejection killed Uncle Vanya. Sonya cannot promise to see Andrey again because Michael who lives mainly apart from Elena comes looking for Sonya when he is drunk. Sonya needs to wait at home for him, to be there whenever he may appear, because in these moments they "give each other occasional and elusive sustenance." Andrey is no stranger to longing, so he understands. Sonya tells Andrey that grasping elusive moments helps her to cohere so that the tundra of loneliness that still frightens her, no longer holds terror. She must be referring to her occasional moments of contact with Michael, but she might possibly be inferring that her it is these two chance meetings with Andrey that have led to this hopeful progression. She leaves quickly. Optimist that he is, Andrey quickly resumes contact with her by writing a letter. Who knows, maybe they will meet again next month?

Self and society

Like Checkov the Russian playwright whose work he has rendered in English, Friel (born in Northern Ireland in 1929) deals with national politics and personal themes of family life filled with false hope, thwarted ideals, depression, futility, and distorted perceptions of reality. Friel says that he is drawn to the Russian characteristics of "behaving as if their old certainties were as sustaining as ever – even though they know in their hearts that their society is in meltdown and the future has neither a welcome nor even an accommodation for them" and he finds them sympathetic "because they have no expectations whatever from love but still invest everything in it" (qtd. in Delaney 2000). Like Checkov, Friel deals empathically yet humorously with the tragedy of life not lived fully and relationship potentials not fulfilled. As Richard Pine (2002) notes, both playwrights are concerned with "a lifetime's experience of emptiness, of longing, of deferral; action (the real world) always taking place elsewhere." Where Checkov's lens was a wide angle on family and society, Friel's is a telephoto on the two characters rescued from the edge of the earlier plays and given their due.

Similarly, the perspective of the family therapist who deals with the family system and its way of relating to the family members, the generations, and the wider society differs from that of the psychoanalyst who deals with the internal world and relationships in love and work. Yet both of them are dealing with the correspondence between the inside and the outside, between real relationships in the outside world that affect how a person matures over

time, and the internal memory trace of those relationships from the past that color the current relationships and expectations. It all depends on your point of view. In life and therefore in theatre that captures life, similar patterns are reflected at different levels of scale. The shapes at the centre of a complex inherently chaotic system like life are re-created at the edge. It is from the edge that Friel draws Sonya and Andrey to illuminate Chekhov's themes and propel them into the future.

Peripheral to the main narrative in the plays in which we first met them before the revolution, Sonya and Andrey are invited to step out of the old frame to become central characters in their shared drama and in the imagination of one another. Friel takes them from their dependency on the family setting of the Imperialist years and sets them as lone figures adjusting to the post-revolutionary collectivist Soviet system. Friel shows us that without their family systems and the old order, Sonya and Andrey have lost their bearings. Through their dialogue, Friel deals with the emotional memory of human experience, with hopes, loves, and losses at the personal level at a time of huge social change.

Afterplay is about the relationship between two lost souls and their disconnection from their past life in rural Imperialist Russia and their disorientation in the new Communist society represented by Moscow, the ideal city of Andrey's sisters' shared dream. Shortages of supplies and mutiny

had led to the removal of the Tzar from power. Revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries continued to fight it out until the Bolsheviks gained control, nationalized the industries, instituted collective farming, invested heavily in the Arts, and introduced administration by workers' committees. Sonya embodies the struggle to cope with the new rules and regulations imposed on the estate while Andrey (who has not benefited personally from the increase in Soviet investment in the Arts) has joined the ranks of the poor artistes who subsist on bread and soup.

I am inferring the influence of the time and the political situation on the two characters. The play goes on as if the couple is isolated from the harsher realities of life in Moscow after the revolution. Meeting in the early 1920s, the characters are living during a time of Civil War. There would not be a Ministry of Agriculture. Sonya would not have been allowed to continue living on 300 acres. The peasants would have been in control of the land, and she would have been killed, banished, or relegated to a small house on the land at best. Poverty and food shortage would have been extreme. A Russian psychologist colleague who saw the play with me found it unbelievable that the two characters could be reminiscing with no direct reference to the social conditions, as incredible to him as if New Yorkers on Sept 12 were not mentioning the destruction of the World Trade center. Drought and famine nearly undid the Communist economy until Lenin allowed limited private ownership in farming later in the 1920s.

So we have to think of this as a play that is more about intimacy than about the social order. It shows that ordinary people go on living their lives no matter what is going on. It has them forming a relationship. It shows that people connect in the present based on a degree of fit between their past experiences and how these experiences have been structured in their personalities and are then expressed in their intimate relationships.

Sonya and Andrey are drawn together because they are strangers in the big city, provincial people who are up against the new system. They look at each other and find something familiar there. They talk about family, loves, jealousy, betrayal, and ideals never achieved. Sonya is attracted to Andrey because he reminds her of her hapless Uncle Vanya. Andrey is attracted to her as a dependable person unlike his wife who has divorced him, and a courageous one unlike his sister who killed herself in adversity. They are alike in being strangers facing defeat and they are different in that Sonya is fighting to remain self-sustaining whereas Andrey (who may be remembered as a gambler and drunkard from The Three Sisters) is close to destitute. Whatever money Sonya can bring in will be ploughed back into the land. Whatever money Andrey can earn as a music teacher in the provinces will be used up financing his trips to the city, apparently so that he can have the pleasure of playing in the highly regarded opera, but really so that he can tend to his incarcerated son. Even though life has got them down, Sonya and Andrey find some hope in their connection. I imagine that Andrey sees in

Sonya the strength for getting over losses, and that she sees in him the ability to appreciate great music and to enjoy the simple pleasure of fresh brown peasant bread.

Sonya and Andrey are joined by their amusement in references to the discomfort of life in Russia at that time – chapped lips, chilblains on the feet, rashes, a numb bottom. This cartoon of physicality puts matters of basic comfort up front and serves to distract the protagonists from being aware of sensual longings. They also connect over conversation about land, both of them having lived in country estates, but of different size. Sonya manages 300 acres: Andrey a quarter of an acre. Sonya will have acres of trees: Andrey has two birches. Although I see in my mind two silver birches that have been there for years like Andrey and Sonya, I also see the pair of trees as elements of former glory, standing tall in comparison to the image of Andrey's actual legs and bottom, numb from too much sitting.

At times Sonya and Andrey interact like a practical, but flustered, worn-down mother and her sweetly eager but hapless son. At other times they are like a brother and sister, or cousins, comparing their experience of the same family in which they grew up. They recognize a sense of kinship when they compare themselves to their identical canvas carrier bags, symbols of their selves as culture carriers filled with detritus of the past. Finally they are a middle-aged man and woman in a time-limited couple, a fragile couple whose

formation is as compromised by family trauma as the getting together of couples in the earlier plays, and whose destiny is to carry forth the legacy from that generation.

Sonya and Andrey see in one another the hope of a new love, and each of them makes an assertive move towards it, Sonya with her generous gesture of staying another night to attend his opera performance, and Andrey in asking to meet again and in writing his letter. Nevertheless Andrey's inflated self-portrayal, Sonya's anxious practicality, and their shared history of rejection in love block the flowering of their feelings for one another, and the tyranny of the past keeps them stuck as a temporary couple. They will have to continue taking turns in shedding the chains of the past to break free from their disappointing relationships if they are to inspire new love for one another.

Conclusion

Tom Keatinge (2002) experienced *Afterplay* as "a mixture of real life anguish and racing fantasy as the two colliding characters continue on the paths defined for them by Chekhov, both miserable in their existence, almost finding solace with one another." In contrast, Alan Bird (2002) found *Afterplay* "bland and prosaic – two characters frozen in time and totally isolated from the world around them" and Peter Marks (2005) thinks of

Afterplay as "a protracted sketch, an indulgence, a well-written exercise in advanced-placement theatre, an extended inside joke, a master class in acting technique, all a parlor game." Harvey O'Brien's opinion comes closest to my own. He holds that "the play itself becomes an incomplete reflection which still inspires thought and contemplation" (O'Brien 2002).

I agree that *Afterplay* is an object for contemplation, a reflection on the topic of self and society, individual and couple. Sonya and Andrey could be members meeting at a Club lunch table, divorced people talking about their children at a soccer game, a widow and widower who meet over bridge at a senior centre in their seventies, people embarking on an affair, or teenagers who study at the coffee-shop. The fears that inhibit their encounter back then have resonance today: We are hurt when we see desire invested in someone other than ourselves. We misinterpret anxious preoccupation as a rejection of us. Like Sonya and Andrey, we hide our frailties and distort our realities to make them palatable. We too show ourselves in the best light to find acceptance and protect our self esteem. In Sonya and Andrey, we see ourselves and our longing to be in a meaningful relationship. In *Afterplay*, we see a universal dance of intimacy.

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