

# Found in Translation: Chekhov Revisited by Reza de Wet and Janet Suzman

**Marisa Keuris**

## Summary

Both Reza de Wet and Janet Suzman recently produced plays that were inspired by two famous plays by Chekhov. Reza de Wet's *Drie susters twee* (1996) (*Three Sisters Two*) is a "continuation"/sequel to Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, while Janet Suzman's *The Free State* (2000) is as indicated in her subtitle, "A South African Response to Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*" (2000). Since these two plays have been discussed extensively from both postmodern and postcolonial perspectives, I have decided to focus in this article rather on the notion of "translation" as propounded in a recent publication by Aaltonen. The concept of "intercultural theatre" also forms an important part of this discussion.

## Opsomming

Reza de Wet en Janet Suzman het albei onlangs dramas geskep wat geïnspireer is deur twee beroemde dramas van Chekhov. Reza de Wet se *Drie susters twee* (*Three Sisters Two*) (1996) is 'n uitbreiding/vervolg op Chekhov se *Drie susters*, terwyl Janet Suzman se *The Free State*, soos aangedui in haar subtitel, "A South African response to Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*" (2000) is. Aangesien beide dramas reeds omvattend bespreek is vanuit postmodernistiese, sowel as postkoloniale perspektiewe, het ek besluit om in my artikel eerder te fokus op die konsep van "vertaling", soos bespreek in 'n onlangse publikasie van Aaltonen. Die konsep van "interkulturele teater" vorm ook 'n belangrike deel van hierdie bespreking.

## Introduction

Chekhov's plays have always influenced South African theatre. His plays (available in both English and Afrikaans translations) have for decades been performed on South African stages, used as set works in numerous student productions, and been adapted for radio drama. South Africa entered a new era with the political changes of 1994 (when its first democratic elections were held) – changes which also impacted on South African theatre. It is interesting to note that Chekhov's plays are still influencing South African playwrights today. In this article I want to focus on how two well-known women playwrights approached two of his classic plays a century after Chekhov wrote

his plays and created two new South African plays – against the background of a new political dispensation in a multicultural South Africa.

Reza de Wet's *Drie susters twee* (*Three Sisters Two*), published in 1996, recreates the world of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (situating the characters and their world approximately twenty years later), while Janet Suzman's play *The Free State*, published in 2000, is subtitled: *A South African Response to Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard"*. These two women are both acclaimed South African playwrights/practitioners: Reza de Wet – an Afrikaner, writer of both Afrikaans and English plays, twice recipient of the Herzog Prize for her plays, and Janet Suzman – internationally acclaimed South African actress based in the UK, but with strong links with South Africa(n) theatre.

The reworking/adaptation of well-known plays is not a new phenomenon within theatre history and it has received lots of attention within postmodernist and also postcolonial studies. Reza de Wet's *Drie susters twee*, for example, has been the subject of such discussion in two South African doctoral studies recently, namely in P.C. van der Westhuizen's "Selfrefleksiwiteit in die (post)modernistiese drama/teater" (1995) and in A.S.P van der Merwe's "Postkolonialiteit in die twintigste- en een-en-twintigste-eeuse Afrikaanse drama met klem op die na-sestigters" (2004). In translation studies (focusing on drama/theatre translations) this aspect has also received recent attention, for example in Sirku Aaltonen's *Time-sharing on Stage: Drama Translation in Theatre and Society* (2000). The aspect of interculturality is often seen as an integral element in all of these approaches – but is especially focused on by Aaltonen. In her introduction Aaltonen calls the various ways in which a source text (original work) can be shortened, changed, reworked, transposed, etc., "examples of intercultural theatre, of exchanges and encounters between cultures, of how cultures seize texts from other cultures, share them, move into them and make them theirs" (2000: 2). She thus uses the term "drama translation" in its widest possible sense and includes all types of dramatic and theatrical reworkings and adaptations – as also found in Reza de Wet's *Drie susters twee* and Janet Suzman's *The Free State*.

In this article I will focus on the concept of drama "translation" in the context of interculturality as used by Aaltonen and discuss both plays against the background of these concepts.

In a recent publication in the series Cross/Cultures 38, *South African Theatre as/and Intervention* (1999) by Marcia Blumberg and Dennis Walder (eds), both Reza de Wet and Janet Suzman are interviewed by the editors and they discuss their reworkings of the two Chekhovian plays, in "More Realities: An Interview with Reza de Wet" by Marcia Blumberg (London, 1 September 1996) and "'God is in the Details': An Interview with Janet Suzman" by Dennis Walder (London, 20 June 1997). I will also refer to these two interviews in my discussion of the two playwrights' work since they shed light

on how De Wet and Suzman see Chekhov today, how he has inspired their plays, as well as how they articulate the role theatre plays in society in general.

It is clear, even from a first reading of the plays, that these two playwrights, however, approached Chekhov from vastly different positions in post-1994 South Africa.

## 1 Drama “Translation” as an Intercultural Exchange

Aaltonen works within the framework of translation studies where a basic distinction is made between the “source text” (e.g. Chekhov’s *Three Sisters/The Cherry Orchard*) and the “target text” (e.g. the plays by De Wet and Suzman). Various codes (linguistic/sociohistorical/cultural/theatrical, etc.) govern the source text – codes which can be and often are reinterpreted (“translated”) in the newly created/“target” play. The term “translation” is used by Aaltonen very broadly and she distinguishes three categories when describing its range, as follows:

[T]exts may be translated in their entirety; or only partially with various types of alteration; or they may be based on some idea or theme from the source text. If the source text is translated in full, the attitude expressed through the agency of the translation strategy is that of reverence ... when the foreign source texts are seen primarily as material for the indigenous stage or expressive of domestic issues, they are subverted to serve the needs of the target system and society through strategies which rewrite them to fall in line with the discourse of the target society.

(Aaltonen 2000: 8)

Translations can thus vary between the more “academic” or faithful translation of the source text and a “free” translation where the source text is partially or wholly adapted/changed in the new text.

While stressing the “transformative” aspects of translation, Aaltonen also emphasises the aspect of intertextuality in this regard:

Translation always implies a transformation of the original, and the original text never reappears in the new language. Yet, it is always present, because translation without saying it, expresses it constantly, or else converts it into a verbal object that, although different, reproduces it.

(Aaltonen 2000: 30)

We are thus constantly reminded of the source text when reading the target text and will inevitably make comparisons between these texts.

Aaltonen links up with the work of Patrice Pavis, Erika Fischer-Lichte,

Annie Brisset and others in further developing and applying the idea of *intercultural theatre* in contemporary theatre praxis. Although interactions between various theatres (across nationalities/languages/time/space/etc.) have taken place throughout history (Aaltonen's Chapter 1: "Intercultural Theatre" mentions a substantial number of such examples), theatre today worldwide bears evidence of "cross-influences between various ethnic or linguistic groups in multicultural societies" (Pavis: 1996: 8).

This aspect is addressed by the two playwrights in different ways. Reza de Wet's play was originally written in Afrikaans (although various performances of it has now been done overseas in the UK in English and even in the Netherlands where it was translated into Dutch by Koen Wassenaar). Chekhov's *Three Sisters* was translated into Afrikaans in 1977 by Robert Mohr, titled *Drie susters*. Reza de Wet worked closely with Robert Mohr on Chekhov productions and probably used his translation of *Three Sisters* as her source text (she uses the same Afrikaans spelling for the Russian characters' names as Mohr). De Wet's *Three Sisters Two* can thus be seen as a continuation of/sequel to an already translated text: thus once removed from the "original" source text, namely Chekhov's *Tri Sestry*. The aspect of language (the translation of Russian into Afrikaans) does not appear to interest De Wet particularly in this play.<sup>1</sup> The main intention with the play seems to be the creating of an authentic Chekhovian world and the Russian characters, setting, sociopolitical context and the dramatic material making up the dramatic events of the play all conspire to evoke such a world.

Janet Suzman, on the other hand, is deeply interested in the aspect of language: on the general level of "translation" (the use of a classic Russian text), the sociopolitical adaptation of this text in a post-1994 South Africa, as well as incorporating the language diversity of South African society in her play. It is clear from her "Introduction" that she carefully considered all of these aspects, for example :

[W]hereas in Russia the common language between the two estates is Russian, in South Africa there is no such binding unity .... South Africa is polyglot and most South Africans will move from one language to another without noticing, even in a single phrase.

(Suzman 2000: xxii)

She regards the language issue as an important issue and one she constantly grapples with. The aspect of character (black or Afrikaner) is often tied up with the aspect of language. She decides for example that although two black characters would in all probability speak Sotho when alone together, in this play they would use English as their language to converse in because the beliefs of another black character influence them in this regard:

I gave up on the question of language, because of course in reality Leko and Pitso would converse together in Sotho. I partly solved it with the other black characters by having the “valet”, Nyatso, arrogantly declare that he refuses to speak anything but English now, thus forcing Kele and Khokoloho to speak English as well.

(Suzman 2000: xxxiv)

In accordance with her intention to present the South African ethnic and social world in all of its diversity, Suzman decided to include in her group of white English-speaking characters (Lucy Rademeyer, mistress of the estate; Leo Guyver, her brother; Anna, Lucy’s daughter; B.S. Pickett, a neighbouring farmer) and black characters (Putswa, the ancient butler; Nyatso, Lucy’s “valet”; Dikeledi, the housemaid; Khokoloho, the trainee manager of the estate; Leko, an entrepreneur and eventual buyer of the estate; Pitso Thekiso, a radical student), also a “coloured” girl, namely Maria (Lucy’s late husband’s child by a black woman, adopted by Lucy) and Karlotta (an Afrikaans secretary). Stating in her “Introduction” that “a South African play would be irretrievably diminished without that [the Afrikaner’s] overriding presence and, “[I]est anyone should assume that the Afrikaner was all bad”, Suzman then decides that Lucy Rademeyer’s deceased husband (whose portrait hangs in the house) should recall the figure of the “greatest Afrikaans political dissident”, namely Bram Fischer (Suzman 2000: xxvi). Suzman thus tries to reflect in her choice of characters the diversity of the South African social reality and also tries by letting her characters make interjections in Sotho, Zulu, Afrikaans and even a few phrases in German and French, to show this diversity through language usage. A glossary is given at the back of the play to explain the meaning of these words.<sup>2</sup>

## **2 Reza de Wet: *Drie susters twee* (1996)**

Reza de Wet’s play takes up the lives of the main characters in Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* a few years after the 1917 Revolution has taken place. De Wet does not only “continue”<sup>3</sup> with the lives of the main characters, but she also keeps the Russian setting of the original play, as well as the four-act structure of Chekhov’s play and the various themes introduced in his play (e.g. the duration of time, unrequited love, the yearning for an idealised Moscow, etc.). In fact, the whole tone of the original play is recreated in De Wet’s play and one is struck by her ability to create characters and dialogue that seem to evoke an authentic Chekovian world.

If one reads *Drie susters twee* in conjunction with Chekhov’s play, it is evident from the start that De Wet’s play can simply be read on a first level as

a sequel to Chekhov's original work. All the main characters (Olga, Masja, Irina, Andrei, Natasha, Wersjinin – now a general, and even the old nanny, Anfisa) are present. Sofja is now a pretty eighteen-year-old. Her brother Bobik, a baby in Chekhov's play, is mentioned in De Wet's play, but is now an absent character – he is a soldier in the Red Army and away with the troops. De Wet creates one new character, namely Igor Illich, who describes himself as a “playwright on the run”, whom Natasha initially sees as a potential lover but later rejects as she eventually realises that he is simply an opportunistic character wanting money from her.

If one focuses on the main characters first it is interesting to see how she envisaged each character's life in terms of how Chekhov originally conceived of the character, as well as how a character's youthful hopes and dreams are realised or (more often) dashed, within the context of a historic event such as the 1917-Revolution.

Olga is now fifty years old, an old maid, tall and thin. She is bitter about all the changes that have taken place and complains constantly about the people living with them in their house, how difficult it is to get food, the fact that her glasses are broken (probably the reason why she is also constantly complaining about headaches) and that she can't see properly. Masja's arrival makes her think of Koelighin and everyone's belief that she would probably have been a better wife for him than Masja. After Masja elopes with her new lover (Marofski), Koelighin kills himself and with his death destroys any hope Olga could still have nurtured in this regard. After years of being a teacher and later on schoolmistress of a school nearby, Olga is abruptly dismissed by the new authorities when she defies their instructions regarding the putting up of portraits of political figures on the classroom walls and letting the children sing “politically correct” songs.

Masja is now forty-five years old, sophisticated and still aware of her charms. She could not stand being unhappily married to Koelighin and after meeting Marofski (a general in the Red Army) elopes with him to Moscow, where she has been living with him for the past five/six years. The reason for her return, as well as how everybody reacts towards her, forms the dramatic material of the play. It is eventually revealed that her lover has fallen foul of the new regime and that Masja and her family are now also in danger of persecution. They all have to flee the family home (ironically to Moscow where Masja hopes to hide them safely for a while, before trying to escape to Europe).

Irina is now forty years old, petite, pale with dark rings around her eyes, an old maid, but in love with Marsha's old lover, Wersjinin. She is always thoughtful towards others (bringing water/a fan for Masja, making Wersjinin his favourite food and even sleeping in front of his bedroom when he is ill; comforting old Anfisa when she has a nightmare and even in the end trying to

make things comfortable for the old nanny before they leave). Olga is, however, worried about her health and always urging her not to become too excited. Irina is intensely happy when Masja arrives, but also very upset when she hears the reason for her visit and realises that they will have to leave the old house and go to Moscow.

Andrei is now forty-seven years old, pale, plump, and very unhappily married to Natasha. He becomes irritated easily and still reads newspapers (although they are all old) and plays his violin (even with broken strings). His youthful dream of becoming a famous professor in Moscow has been completely shattered and he is disillusioned with both his career and his marriage.

De Wet situates her play in the summer of 1920. The 1917-Revolution has taken place and the family is living in dismal conditions: part of the house has been given to other people, they have a shortage of food and each day is a struggle for survival.

Chekhov's play ends with the departure of the military (including Masha's lover, Wersjinin) and the death of Irina's fiancé, Tusenbach, at the hand of Soljoni. While the three sisters are consoling each other, Andrei pushes a pram with Bobik in it and Koelighin (Marsha's husband), who is glad that Wersjinin is leaving, happily retrieves his hat and coat to go home. The theme of arrival and departure also structures De Wet's play. The first act commences with Olga, Irina and Andrei awaiting the arrival of Masja from Moscow. De Wet's play ends (like Chekhov's) with a departure – this time of the family themselves: their youthful dream to go to Moscow and live there happily ever after will now – it seems – at long last be realised. The dream has, however, turned into a nightmare: the family is escaping with just the clothes on their backs and a few paltry belongings. No prospect of travelling in style – they will travel in an open truck with other people desperate to get away before the Red army arrives and use tickets in part bought by the proceeds of selling Andrei's beloved violin.

Although a desperate and depressing prospect for the sisters, their brother, Sofosja and Natasha, the play does not end on a dark note. Wersjinin, who is still in the house and who is supposed to look after Anfisa for a while, is surprised to feel happy, even though everybody has left and remarks that it is possibly “[b]ecause it is still a beautiful day”. Reza de Wet says in her interview with Marcia Blumberg that she views this aspect (an optimistic/positive note within a depressing situation) as an important “trademark” of Chekhov's plays and that she shares his world view:

For me, what the play ultimately is, is what Vershinin says when everyone he has ever known and loved is leaving: “It is still a beautiful day. Why am I still so joyous?” He says, “Maybe, I will still find out!” It is that question that he asks

– “Why am I still happy?” that informs me as a person. Where does the awe come from? In spite of some things, people find moments of pure joy. It is the hope, the capacity for joy, that makes people transcend all limitations. It is often said that Chekhov is negative and pessimistic, but if you see a production of his it always leaves you with a sense of exhilaration.

(De Wet quoted in Blumberg & Walder 1999: 251)

The human condition – lives full of tragedies and ironies – underlines Chekhov’s world-view and is ultimately also the aspect which describes Reza de Wet’s play the best.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of translation studies one can probably describe Reza De Wet’s play as “an imitation” of Chekhov’s play (although a sequel, it “imitates” the Chekhovian world). This does not mean that she simply produced a crude/mechanical continuation of Chekhov’s play. Brisset (1996: 12) states that “imitation is the most radical form of adaptation which produces a new work in its own right”. Reza de Wet’s *Drie susters twee* is not only a new play, it is considered one of her best works. She was awarded the Herzog Prize (the most prestigious literary prize in Afrikaans) in 1997 for it.

Some criticisms<sup>5</sup> were made at the time that her play does not address the South African situation overtly enough. Although it is true that De Wet’s play does not make any direct and specific references to South Africa, it is also apparent that a South African reader/spectator will inevitably see some similarities between Russia at the turn of the twentieth century and South Africa at the turn of the twenty-first century regarding the consequences facing a ruling party when a change of regime takes place and the old dispensation disintegrates.

Reza de Wet acknowledges this aspect of the play in the Marcia Blumberg interview and extends this aspect to include her personal affinity with the Russian people, and to draw parallels between them and the Afrikaners:

As I was writing the play, I became a little more conscious of it, because although the situation was entirely wrong they were born into it and they were having to go through a very painful process of renouncing the identity that they had been given. The pain of transition, confusion, loss, of being forlorn and everything fragmenting – Tim Huisamen (a colleague at Rhodes) said to me, “Today the Afrikaner is living Chekhov”. The empathy I felt for the characters is possibly apparent in the play. I understand the ridiculousness – their obsessiveness; and they are such hypochondriacs – but I understand them because they are just like me.

(De Wet quoted in Blumberg & Walder 1999: 243)

Later in the interview she returns to this aspect and adds on quite a pessimistic note:



Everything has been lost for the Afrikaner – Afrikaans is marginalized, there's chaos, danger, people have lived behind fences, everyone's scared, and the money is worth nothing. All in all, it is really like the aftermath of the Revolution when everyone in Russia was suffering and starting to wonder whether it wasn't better before, even if it was atrociously wrong. That is why the writing of the play was enormously cathartic, because I could express those doubts and fears and the refusal quite to come to terms with it.

(De Wet quoted in Blumberg & Walder 1999: 244)

Janet Suzman in her "Introduction" to *The Free State*, interestingly enough concurs with Reza de Wet on this aspect (affinity between Afrikaners and Russians) when she tries to explain why Chekhov's work is still an inspiration to many South African playwrights:

The Afrikaner, especially finds deep emotional affinities with the Russian passion for the land and its landscapes, for the size and the remoteness of the estates, for the ebullient and sentimental people who inhabit them and, not least, for the complex symbiotic relationship between landowners and peasants.

(Suzman 2000: xxii)

It is precisely on this last aspect that Reza de Wet comments in her interview with Marcia Blumberg. She is nostalgic for a time when racial relationships (especially seen against the background of personal memories) were uncomplicated ("a pre-Eden kind of existence when I wasn't aware and they weren't aware" (De Wet quoted in Blumberg & Walder 1999: 245)). It is again on this level that she feels connected with Chekhov:

I am, like Chekhov, yearning for a time of simplicity and beauty when there is no awareness. It is really an ancient and archetypal situation: a time of unity, the awareness of the universe.

(De Wet quoted in Blumberg & Walder 1999: 246)

By writing a "sequel"/imitation to Chekhov's play Reza de Wet could thus not only show her admiration for him in a creative manner (resurrecting well-known characters of his and continuing with their lives), but could also confront her experiences as an Afrikaner in a changed South Africa – experiences which often entail ironies and evoke ambivalent feelings in most of the participants. According to Aaltonen

[i]n theatre translation imitations are ... common, and they usually draw on the recognisability of well known classics, the archetypes of cultural heritage. The motivation behind writing an imitation may be a desire to emphasise the universality of some issue important in one's own theatre and society, or

underline the symbolic value of the foreign text as a representation of that issue.  
(Aaltonen2000: 55)

In contrast to De Wet's approach and interpretation of Chekhov's work, we find Janet Suzman's "reworking" of *The Cherry Orchard* in *The Free State*.

### **3 Janet Suzman: *The Free State: A South African Response to Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard"* (2000)**

The most obvious difference in approach is, of course, that Reza de Wet wrote a "continuation" and imitation of Chekhov's famous play, *Three Sisters*, while Janet Suzman took another famous play of his, *The Cherry Orchard*, and transposed it into post-1994 South African idiom, i.e. she changed all Chekhov's characters into South African characters and placed them in a South African setting. A process of "acculturation" is used by Suzman, described by Aaltonen as

a process which is employed to tone down the foreign by appropriating the unfamiliar "reality", and making the integration possible by blurring the borderline between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

(Aaltonen 2000: 50)

This process "may also involve naturalisation, in which the foreign becomes replaced by recognisable signs of the Self" (Aaltonen 2000: 55). The reason for this is often, according to Aaltonen "to turn the Other into a vehicle for some social comment in the target society" (p. 56). This process can take many forms:

When sameness is not extended to the entire level of the "letter", some structural elements of the foreign theatre text may be adapted (or reactualised) to the indigenous discourse of theatre aesthetics or the social situation while others are left untouched.

(Aaltonen 2000: 77)<sup>6</sup>

Suzman chose to change every element of the foreign/source text (*The Cherry Orchard*) when writing *The Free State*: setting, characters and language.

The setting of her play in a town famous for its cherries and situated within the borders of the Free State Province can be regarded within the context of the play as a stroke of good luck. The name of the province summons up many historical and political associations for South Africans. Suzman's use of the name *Free State* to title her play does not only indicate a geographical place

or recall historical allusions, it is also a key indication of her intention with the play, namely to propagate her positive vision for a new South Africa in post-1994. Past, present and future interlock with the use of this title.

The process of naturalisation, as well as the use of the newly created play as a vehicle for social commentary, are immediately apparent on reading the foreword to Janet Suzman's *The Free State*. In this introduction (published with the text by Methuen, 2000), Suzman clearly states her political intention with the play: "This play is intended to celebrate the year 1994 when South Africa held its first democratic elections and optimism rode high" (Suzman 2000: xxi). She discusses in detail in this long introduction (18 pages) how she conceived the play, as well as how she tried to solve the problems she encountered in the process of "transposing" the Chekhov play to a South African setting. She acknowledges the fact that various people influenced and inspired her to create this play – even mentioning Reza de Wet's play in this regard.<sup>7</sup>

Everything in Janet Suzman's play is really infused with her political intention with the play as stated by herself early in the "Introduction": "I don't suppose Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* need necessarily be seen through the prism of politics – it is a great play and can be, therefore, all things to all men in all ages. But to a South African sensibility, where the very air you breathe is political, it becomes a play specifically about a new order taking over from the old" (Suzman 2000: xxii–xxiii).

Suzman's deliberations on each character is given in quite a lot of detail in the "Introduction" and I will only highlight some of the main aspects of this discussion. It is important to note that she makes a "political case" for each character and that each character thus has to fulfil a political function in this play. It is also obvious that she wants to present the group as representative of South African society as possible and, at the same time, preserve a positive tone in the play (in accordance with her overall intention with the play: "It urges reconciliation, as did Nelson Mandela, and it exudes benign, even amiable, hope" (Suzman 2000: xxi)).

We do not find many references in Chekhov's play to Liubov Andreevna's husband, but Suzman has decided to include more references to her Lucy Rademeyer's departed husband and to base his character on the life of Bram Fischer (a famous Afrikaner dissident and lawyer who defended Nelson Mandela at the Rivonia Trial in 1964), namely Johan Rademeyer ("an Afrikaans lawyer working for the Struggle", whose "liberating spirit ... presides in the house" (Suzman 2000: xxvi)).

The children of Lucy and Johan Rademeyer also have to "fit" in this politically aware play. Maria (Varya) is adopted by them, but is, in fact, the love-child of Johan and one of the maids, i.e. a coloured girl (again a reference charged with political and historical connotations in South Africa).

Maria's half-sister, Anna, is in Suzman's play a little older (over eighteen) than her counterpart in Chekhov's play. This "adjustment" is necessary, because "she needs to be politically aware in this modern version and filled with the excitement of a new young South African – a first-time voter. She represents ... the perfect amalgam for the new democracy, the blood of both white races coursing in her veins, and eager to sit at the feet of her black lover and imbibe his ideas" (Suzman 2000: xxx).

Her tutor, Pitso Thekiso (Piotr Trofimov), is described in the introduction as "the idealistic activist ... born on the estate, educated by the family ... funded at Fort Hare University by the family to read law, interrupted his studies to join the freedom movement and was sent by the ANC for training in Russia before returning home to be an underground activist" (Suzman 2000: xxxi). His relationship with Anna represents for Suzman "a sort of ideal", namely "the possibility of cross-racial harmony in an integrated modern South Africa" (p. xxxi).

Even Leko (the black entrepreneur who buys the farm) has a history of being active in the Struggle. Suzman chooses to illustrate it by means of a physical feature, namely his "damaged hands": "Leko briefly reveals an intriguing history of incarceration and torture, reluctantly showing Pitso a damaged hand .... The two men can thus have a legitimate reconciliation, Leko having finally admitted his political bona fides" (Suzman 2000: xxxii).

Leo Guyver (Leonid Gaev), Lulu's elder brother, is made ten years older by Suzman and is (as portrayed in Chekhov's play) depicted as a good-hearted, but immature person. Suzman sees him, however, as representative here of the typical liberal – a person "trying hard to embrace the new thinking and immensely disliking the whole set-up" (Suzman 2000: xxxiii). She finally sums up his character as "basically harmless and out of his time – the epitome of someone born to a position he can no longer even try to justify: the white man in Africa" (p. xxxiv).

In Janet Suzman's play the theme of time (changes brought about by time; the duration of time; the belief in a better future – themes found in Chekhov's source play) – is clearly placed within the political context of the new South Africa. She sums up her play with the following words in the "Introduction":

The new order did take over from the old. The fruitless cherry orchard has been chopped down. The old men who couldn't move with times have been left behind and forgotten. But the Rainbow forever shimmers on the nation's horizon as a distinct possibility.

(Suzman 2000: xxi)

The characters in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* often experience the changes brought about by time much more ambiguously; they are often positive (believe

in a better future for themselves/everybody) and negative about it (unsure if things will really change for the better). These fluctuations between positive and negative beliefs often characterise their moods and conversations.

Suzman is, however, determined to end her play optimistically and on a positive note: her characters do not only accept the political changes that took place in 1994 unconditionally, but also unanimously believe that a better future for all will now follow. When Leko enters at the end of Act 3 he announces that he is now the new landowner of the farm:

LEKO: “What was mine is now mine again – it’s simple and it’s also hard, I know, I know. But this moment will pass.”

Lucy’s (the old mistress of the estate) daughter, Anna, agrees with him:

ANNA: “Mother, sweet Mother, oh don’t cry. Dear, kind, darling Ma, I love you Ma, I really do. Yes, the orchard is gone, that’s true. It’s true, but don’t cry, Ma, there’s still a life ahead for you. And maybe, just maybe, it’s meant. *And maybe it was never really ours and it does truly belong to Leko, and to Pitso, and to Putswa.* We can plant another, hey? – even lovelier than this, and you can see it grow, and you’ll understand and a quiet, deep happiness will come to you, like at sunset. Now let’s see that smile, Ma, Mummy, Mama? Come?”  
(Suzman 2000: 60; my italics)

During the leave-taking in Act 4 this positive tone is maintained, when Lulu and Leo (her brother) seem to accept the situation without much regret:

LEO: “Alles sal regkom, they say, and it has. All happened for the best.”  
(Suzman 2000: 66)

## Conclusion

The change in politics and the birth of a new South Africa in 1994 inevitably impacted on the South African theatre scene – a change which is still taking place and still being assessed by many practitioners and theoreticians in South Africa. The two playwrights, Janet Suzman and Reza de Wet are both major figures in the contemporary South African theatre world. It is thus interesting that they are both influenced by Chekhov and that they both used well-known works by him in order to create new South African plays.

Janet Suzman’s reworking of *The Cherry Orchard* is in this sense perhaps the most “straightforward” one of the two. She transforms every aspect of the original Chekhov play in order to create a play that is unmistakably South

African in every aspect of its being (characters, language, spatial and temporal setting) and in the process also states unequivocally her political intention with the play. She uses the words “dissecting and refashioning” (Suzman in Blumberg & Walder: 1999: 258) to describe her transformation from *The Cherry Orchard* into *The Free State*. It is clear after reading the long introduction to the play, as well as the play itself that she did, indeed, go to a lot of trouble to address every little detail in the play from the perspective of her overriding political intention for the play. Depending on one’s viewpoint of the various issues (race, colour, language, the new political dispensation, etc.) one will probably agree and/or disagree with some of these issues. Suzman acknowledges in her interview that Walder’s assessment of the play is correct in that “it made you think in a context of debates, not in terms of just one position that you then either accept or oppose, but in terms of debates going on” (Suzman in Blumberg & Walder 1999: 260). Her play can thus be seen to continue within the tradition of “political theatre” in South Africa.

Reza de Wet’s play occupies a more unique position in this regard. Her play is not overtly political (although as indicated in the above discussion one cannot ignore the covert link between the post-1917 Russian situation and the post-1994 Afrikaners’ experience). In contrast to the mainly political aims and intentions that Suzman expressed when referring to the reason(s) why she chose Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* to take as a point of departure when she wrote *The Free State*, Reza de Wet’s reasons seem to be much more personal. She expressed in the Marcia Blumberg interview her deep love and admiration for Chekhov’s plays and it is clear that she has a deep affinity for his work. This leads her to express also a deep affection for Russia and other Russian authors. Reza de Wet’s oeuvre has always fallen outside of purely “political theatre”. She has always been an original and unique voice within South African theatre and one who often downplays the political in favour of a more universal approach:

“Theatre, for me, should evoke a different world and transport the audience into a different reality, a heightened reality of some kind or another” and “[t]alking about what is wrong with society is never as interesting for me as: why are we alive? – as immoral as that may be”.

(Suzman in Blumberg & Walder 1999: 250)

## Notes

1. An interesting example of the use of language in *The Three Sisters* is discussed by Maria Shevtsova in *Theatre and Cultural Interaction* in French and Russian; Théâtre de l’Enfumeraiie and Teatr. Tembr”; pp. 95-109. In this production the

directors decided to make use of both French and Russian in the production, namely to let Olga, Natasha, Andrei, Vershinin, Soliony, Chebutikin and Ferapont speak French, while Irina, Masha, Anfisa, Kuligin and Tusenbach speak Russian. The reasoning behind this choice is linked up with the work done by Bakhtin regarding language,

that language is, above all, a matter of utterances uttered by speakers whose particular “accents” (values, emotions, world view, position in society and vantage point from which action springs) are invested in their utterances.

(Bakhtin in Shevtsova 1993: 97)

The co-directors (one French and one Russian) of this production used a process of “cultural immersion” with their actors when rehearsing for this play (i.e. the Russian actors went to France to be steeped in their hosts’ cultural environment and the French actors went through a similar process during their stay in Moscow).

2. In his book, *The Language of Drama*, Birch focuses precisely on a “drama praxis which is principally concerned with the relationship of language and ideology; language and power; language and control ... with cultural power” (Birch 1991: 2). He also addresses the relationship between language and reality and emphasises the changing nature of this relationship – many “universes of discourses” are created within social interactions. The use of language in this sense could be the focus of an entirely new study of Janet Suzman’s *The Free State*.
3. Ian Fergusson in his review of *Drie susters twee* states that “it is surprising that few writers have dared to attempt to create a sequel”, but also points out that her play is more than this:

Although it deals with the central figures of *Three Sisters* the De Wet text is more dense and more original than its title suggests. This is a many-layered work, incorporating elements from other Chekhov works which she weaves into an engrossing and contemporary play that is much more than a pastiche in the Chekhov manner.

(Fergusson 1997: 315)
4. Ian Fergusson also highlights this aspect in his assessment of Reza de Wet’s play:

The failure of Russia’s upper classes is not limited to that time and that place but becomes, in this play, a commentary on humanity ... Reza de Wet’s decision to base her play on ideas embodied in a text that was first produced in Russia ninety-six years ago and to set her play seventy-six years in the past triumphantly demonstrates how culture can draw from many wells and springs to enrich and develop our individual understanding of society. It is an object lesson for South Africans who tend to place too much confidence and pride in strictly local cultural values. As Chekhov knew, and as Reza de Wet asserts in this play, mankind has a common humanity and that is what

we need to observe and record if civilized values are ultimately to triumph.  
(Fergusson 1997: 320-321)

5. Even within the Afrikaans literary establishment some people were critical of the play's apparent lack of political commentary. Fanie Olivier in his review of the play states: "Die drama ... word nie die ingrypende stuk ironiserend wat dit moet wees nie" ["The play ... does not become the interventionist piece of irony that it should have been"] (Olivier 1997: 6).
6. An example of this, given by Aaltonen, is interesting enough a Québécois translation by Robert Lalondes of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, which preserved the structure of the original play but reset it in Québec. It showed three Côte sisters living in Abitibi in the 1950s. They were dying of boredom, and only dreamt of one thing, moving to Montreal.  
(Aaltonen 2000: 77)
7. "It has to be said that transposing *The Cherry Orchard* to a South African setting is not a new notion: an expatriate friend of mine, Michael Picardie, wrote his version, *The Cape Orchard* published in 1987, which opened in October of that year in Plymouth and toured the UK .... The playwright Ronald Harwood wrote a screenplay in 1992, which is wonderful, though as yet unmade. Barney Simon (late artistic director of the Market Theatre, Johannesburg, founded in 1976) first broached the idea to me in the late seventies .... The three writers mentioned above are all South Africans and there are others from that country who have found inspiration in Chekhov – the playwright Reza de Wet, for one springs to mind."  
(Suzman 2000: xxii)

## References

- Aaltonen, S.  
2000 *Time-Sharing on Stage: Drama Translation in Theatre and Society*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Birch, D.  
1991 *The Language of Drama*. London: MacMillan.
- Blumberg, M. & Walder, D. (eds)  
1999 *South African Theatre as/and Intervention*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Brisset, A.  
1996 *A Sociocritique of Translation: Theatre and Alterity in Quebec, 1968-1988*, translated by R. Gannon & R. Gill. Toronto: Toronto University Press.
- De Wet, Reza  
1996 *Drie susters twee*. Kaapstad: Human & Rousseau.



- Fergusson, I.  
1997 *Drie susters twee (Three Sisters Two)* by Reza de Wet. *SATJ* 11(1/2) May/September, pp. 313-321.
- Fischer-Lichte, E.  
1996 Interculturalism in Contemporary Theatre. In: Pavis, P. *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, pp. 27-40.
- Olivier, F.  
1997 Reza de Wet se Tsjechov-waagstuk slaag nie. *Beeld*: 6. 3 Maart.
- Pavis, P. (ed.)  
1996 *The Intercultural Performance Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Scolnicov, H. & Holland, P. (eds)  
1989 *The Play out of Context: Transferring Plays from Culture to Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shevtsova, M.  
1993 *Theatre and Cultural Interaction*. Sydney: Berget.
- Suzman, Janet  
2000 *The Free State: A South African Response to Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard"*. London: Methuen.
- Van der Merwe, A.S.P.  
2004 Postkolonialiteit in die twintigste- en een-en-twintigste-eeuse Afrikaanse drama met klem op die na-sestigters. DLitt et Phil thesis, Unisa, Pretoria.
- Van der Westhuizen, P.C.  
1997 Parodie en pastiche in die (post)modernistiese drama/teater. DLitt et Phil thesis. Unisa, Pretoria.