

A cautionary tale . . . in five acts

Anton Chekhov and I wrote a play together 15 years ago. I know, I know, he'd been dead by then for more than 90 years, but wait for it, okay?

This past summer my wife and I attended a performance of Chekhov's last and greatest play, *The Cherry Orchard*, starring Zoë Wanamaker and a stellar supporting cast at the National Theatre in London.

It was a live production -- but we weren't in England. We were nearly 5,000 miles away, in a suburb of Dallas. Saved us a *lot* on airfare . . .

We were able to attend the play because two years ago the National Theatre boldly introduced a new way to bring drama to the masses worldwide. Each year, the National has filmed four of its plays and beamed them live across the globe to more than 100 countries, and the third season has just been announced.

It was an enormous artistic and financial risk. But it's paid off. As artistic director Sir Nicholas Hytner puts it, "We've been able to reach more than 100,000 people with each film, twice the number we can accommodate in the theatre itself" during the run of a typical play.

Not incidentally, of course, the films have created a significant source of new revenue for a nonprofit theatre challenged by the recession and its domino effects throughout the nonprofit world.

Unfortunately, most nonprofits spend too much time searching for a white knight (*read: donations from individuals and Foundations or subsidies from government*). Some Board members and executives fear that adopting or expanding earned revenue strategies will lead inexorably toward mission drift; for others it's just too scary.

Nonprofit arts organizations are no exception, but attitudes did begin to change a bit in the mid-1990s. As a result, Theatre Communications Group, the national organization for the American theatre, invited me to introduce the concept of social enterprise at its annual conference in 1996. It was only a breakout session somewhere in the bowels of the conference

hotel, but it was a way to start the conversation, and I needed to do something special to get the attention of my audience.

So Chekhov and I stayed up late the night before and created the social enterprise version of *The Cherry Orchard* (hey, come on, I *do* have a graduate degree in dramatic literature!).

The next day I read the new version to the audience, then talked a bit about the promise of social enterprise for nonprofit theatres. For example, I've long been an admirer of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, so I used it as an example that has only become more impressive with the passing years. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, the average nonprofit theatre in the United States during 2005 (the most recent numbers available) covered only 52 per cent of its annual operating budget with earned revenue, compared to 65 per cent in 1990, most of it from ticket sales. But the Oregon folks consistently outperform their colleagues (earned revenue covered 78% of their \$29.1 million budget in 2011) because they constantly re-invent themselves.

I have no idea if anybody in the breakout room enjoyed the social enterprise version of the play or afterwards heeded what I said. But I read the same version and made similar follow-up remarks five years later to a group of arts and business leaders in the U.K. – and Barbara Phillips *did* listen.

She had just been appointed head of the new Social Enterprise Unit in the U.K.'s Department of Trade and Industry -- and for the next four years she had me deliver keynote speeches and master classes about social enterprise to thousands of voluntary and community sector organizations in all nine regions of England, plus Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

So here, with apologies to my favorite playwright, is the social enterprise version of *The Cherry Orchard* (all the words are taken from the translation by Stark Young). It's my attempt to present the dilemma confronting nonprofits today as starkly as possible, in a context theatre people will immediately recognize. And it's my plea for arts organizations everywhere to take greater risks, even if it means abandoning some long-standing traditions.

ACT ONE: “DENIAL”

LOPAHIN: We must decide definitely, time doesn't wait. Why, the matter's quite simple. Are you willing to lease your land for summer cottages or are you not? Answer in one word, yes or no? Just one word!

LYUBOFF: Who is it smokes those disgusting cigars out here . . . ?

ACT TWO: “FALSE HOPE”

LOPAHIN: The rich Deriganoff intends to buy your estate. They say he is coming personally to the auction.

LYOBOFF: And where did you hear that?

LOPAHIN: In town they are saying it.

GAYEFF: Our Yaroslavl aunt promised to send us something, but when and how much she will send, nobody knows . . .

LOPAHIN: How much will she send? A hundred thousand? Two hundred?

LYOBOFF: Well . . . maybe ten, fifteen thousand . . . we'd be thankful for that.

LOPAHIN: Excuse me, but such light-minded people as you are, such odd, unbusinesslike people, I never saw. You are told in plain Russian that your estate is being sold up and you just don't seem to take it in.

LYUBOFF: But what are we to do? Tell us what?

LOPAHIN: I tell you every day. Every day I tell you the same thing. Both the cherry orchard and the land have got to be leased for summer cottages, it has to be done right now, quick . . . the auction is right under your noses. Do understand! Once you finally decide that there are to be summer cottages, you will get all the money you want, and then you'll be saved.

LYUBOFF: Summer cottages and summer residents . . . it is so common, excuse me, but that's what it is.

GAYEFF: I absolutely agree with you.

LOPAHIN: I'll either burst out crying, or scream, or faint. I can't bear it. You are torturing me!

ACT THREE: “REALITY”

LOPAHIN: I remind you ladies and gentlemen: August 22nd the cherry orchard will be auctioned off. Think about that! – Think! –

ACT FOUR: “RESIGNATION”

PISHTCHIK: What happened at the auction? Go on, tell us!

LYUBOFF: Is the cherry orchard sold?

LOPAHIN: It's sold.

LYUBOFF: Who bought it?

LOPAHIN: I bought it.

ACT FIVE: “REQUIEM”

FIERS: (*Going to the door and trying the knob*) Locked. They've gone. I'll lie down awhile . . .
(He lies still)

(There is a far-off sound as if out of the sky, the sound of a snapped string, dying away, sad. A stillness falls, and there is only the thud of an ax on a tree, far away in the orchard)

CURTAIN