

a film by
Dominique de Rivaz

A selfie with **ANTON CHEKHOV**

Image : Dmitrij Leltschuk - Dominique de Rivaz | Editing : Sophie Watzlawick | Music : Jonas Fischer | Producer : Heinz Dill
With : Philippe Gray - Alexandra Karamisaris - Michel Voïta - Adrien Barazzone - Rustam Akhmedshin | Colorgrading : Christoph Walther
Sound design : Peter von Siebenthal | With the support of : Canton de Berne, Service de la Culture et Swisslos - Frederik Paulsen, Consul
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Production : Louise Productions Vevey | Associate producer : Dominique de Rivaz

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PITCH

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860-1904) is, after Shakespeare, the world's most performed playwright. A Russian doctor and writer, he is only 44 years old when in July 1904 he uses his last breath to say, in German, '*Ich sterbe* [I'm dying].' Ranging from Moscow to Badenweiler in the south of Germany, *A Selfie with Anton Chekhov* interrogates these last words, to give the author's brief and altruistic existence a perspective from the point of view of our own mortality.

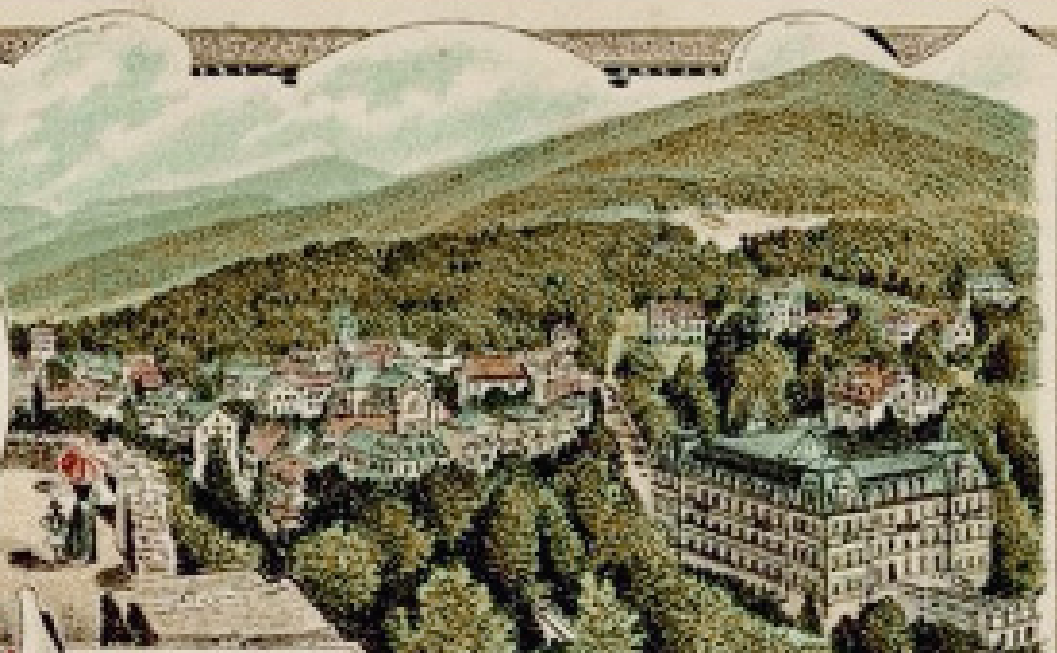
SYNOPSIS

A Selfie with Anton Chekhov, a documentary essay by Dominique de Rivaz is a pioneering exploration of Anton Chekhov's life and death.

A century apart, clutching a camera, travelling from Moscow via Berlin to the south of Germany, she, the director, traces the last journey taken by Chekhov, who was then in the last stages of TB. The repatriation of his body, first in a basket for dirty bedding, then in a refrigerated box-car for oysters, would end in Moscow to the sounds of a vulgar fanfare and in a moment of endless contemplation.

As it finds its way, enriched by unpublished archive material, a polyphonic story develops. It is interspersed by the moribund Chekhov's last letters, some optimistic, some ironic, the director's own travel log, the cold-blooded listing, by a doctor specialized in palliative terminal care, of the stages in the process of dying, the prose meditation in Nathalie Sarraute's story '*Ich sterbe*'. The journey progresses to the rhythm of an analysis of Chekhov's modernity, both in his work and his personality.

A Selfie with Anton Chekhov is a requiem encompassing all deaths.



GRUSS
aus **BADENWEILER.**



Mon cher Richard
 Nous voici au Park
 par une chaleur inégale
 Un bonjour de la famille
 F. Zahmpf

CHEKHOV, IS US

Nobody, not even Chekhov, would have bet a kopeck that crowds would enthuse about his life when he died, even less that his work would survive him.

Yet, all the same... More than 115 years after the Russian writer, struck down by TB, breathed his last, his personality, his plays and stories, his letters have not lost an ounce of their interest. In fact we are dealing with more than just interest. They inspire powerful affection, immediate understanding and continue to fascinate today's readers and audiences in countless different languages and cultures. Chekhov plays are advertised every day of the year.

There is a mystery about Chekhov. Born in poverty, beaten by his father, he later becomes the mainstay of his extended family. He never makes anything of it, he never tries to court powerful people, let alone the Tsar's court. He never tries to influence his contemporaries, never bothers with politics. He practises medicine, he writes. There are more than six hundred short stories, nothing special you might think at a casual glance, which show life as it was lived and people as they were.

His plays are in keeping with the stories: nothing appears to happen. Characters who find their own selves a burden dream of another life. Sadness and resignation. But we are forgetting about Chekhov's humour, which is both subtle and caustic.

In June 1904 a man gets in a train, leaving Moscow for the spa of Badenweiler, a few kilometres from Basel. Chekhov is a doctor, he has no illusions about the state of his health. But like anybody else, he thinks things will get better. That in a few weeks he will stop coughing and will be able to travel for pleasure. For Chekhov, as for us, death can be put off for a while.

Today, like yesterday, we know instantly that Chekhov is us.

AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD

'Ich sterbe.'

'Anton Chekhov is the only writer and the only man, perhaps except for Goethe, who incarnates an ideal, a model worth emulating. Chekhov, alone among writers, Chekhov in all his plays, texts and letters demands that we observe, as an imperative, the very high moral and ethical standards which gave his life story its strength.'

Peter Stein

Ich sterbe... These two words have forced my cinematic projects to change direction. Those last words that Chekhov pronounced the moment he died. Two words that he pronounces, not in his mother language, Russian, but in German, of which he had only a rudimentary command. He was 44.

I have to set off to find these two words, to put on Anton Chekhov's shoes for his last journey, a final bitter-sweet ironic joke, 'to go and die over there, rather than having journalists in my garden', or perhaps, at heart, was he hoping for a miracle from German medicine?

Badenweiler is a small spa in the Black Forest, a few kilometres from Mulhouse and Basel, and it was there that Anton Chekhov and the actress Olga Knipper-Chekhova stayed in June and July 1904. I was able, between a patient leaving and another arriving, to spend a moment in room No. 106, a room all tourists would love to see, but from which they are barred, in the hotel where Chekhov passed away on 15 July 1904 (by the Russian calendar then, but 2 July by the European). The hotel is now a rehabilitation clinic.

Clutching my camera, travelling from Moscow to Badenweiler via Berlin, following Chekhov, who was then in the last stages of TB, I found worlds which, when I discovered them, were both familiar (I have spent the last 30 years of my life between Switzerland, Russia and Germany) and yet surprising. I left as a reader, but led by my research, I gradually found myself taking on the form of

an investigator. I was also lucky enough to find in England a privately owned portrait of the young student Leo Rabeneck, the only witness, apart from Olga, of Chekhov's death; I could compare and correct others' accounts, since Chekhov's eventful life lends itself to contradictory interpretations... For example, in June 1904, Chekhov and his wife were suddenly faced with sanitary regulations newly introduced in Badenweiler. After two nights in the palatial Grand Hotel Römerbad, Chekhov, plagued by continuous bouts of tubercular coughing, was asked to pack his bags. The decision was not, as is mistakenly reported, taken by the hotel manager, who was in fact forced to put into effect rules applying to the large hotels of the district. A sentence in the press in August 1903 confirms this: the Spa Committee, wishing to restore the image of Badenweiler, asked that only 'persons who are healthy or convalescent' should be admitted, and that no more pulmonary patients be accepted. Chekhov and his wife were therefore removed to the edge of the park. The doctor treating him, Dr Schwoerer, had Chekhov, now in his death agony, moved to the Hotel Sommer a few days before he died, a better hotel, but a merciless transfer for a man on his death-bed.

If there are countless theatrical and cinematic adaptations about Chekhov with male authors, there are still too few stagings and productions by women directors. *A Selfie with Anton Chekhov* dares to take a feminine stance, an intimate look, the sort of essay one would perhaps prefer to call a 'poem'.

I chose to open and close the film with two extracts from '*Ich sterbe* [I'm dying]' from Nathalie Sarraute's collection *The Use of Speech*. Because *A Selfie with Chekhov* goes hand in hand with a requiem.

In fact, its polyphonic structure is in harmony with the structure of Chekhov's plays: a number of voices mingle, interact, or are suspended to give way to silence.

In this essay the documentary layers make allowances for the imaginary, moments of serendipity during filming, improvisations or quirky compositions.

The writing, whether of the film or of the voice-over, in every case underwent rewriting which was the result of patient filming over

the years, and then in the collating process of final editing (the editor being Sophie Watzlawick). This Odyssey has had its fortunate moments, at the Moscow State Library and the archives of the *Théâtre d'Art*, where we were allowed to consult and then film Chekhov's original manuscripts! It was a very emotional experience to suddenly find oneself looking at the pages of *The Cherry Orchard* with all the crossings out! Or to hold in one's hands portraits of Chekhov on the original, and damaged, photographic plates!

All his life Anton Chekhov kept up a rich correspondence, which has been bowdlerised 'to prevent indecency' by Soviet researchers. Dipping into the letters results in getting to know an exceptional personality, witty, modest, brilliant, someone who could live... across the landing. The film includes fragments of this correspondence (recently re-translated in *Vivre de mes rêves (Living my Dreams)* published by Robert Laffont, and Chekhov, although dating a hundred years back, suddenly appears terribly contemporary to us.

Russia... my Russia. Its immense area is itself a character in Chekhov's stories. There are flashes illuminating Russia to be found in my first attempt at a documentary, *Elegy for a Lighthouse*, about a village covered in sand, beyond the Arctic circle; *Bath-House Day* (a medium-length film on the massacre of 33,771 Jews at Babi Yar near Kiev); *Surmatanz*, Tallinn's morgue and fish factory, after the disintegration of the USSR; two photographic collections, *The Sand Men of Shoina* and *Kaliningrad, Europe's Little Russia* (published by Noir sur Blanc); *Dushenka*, my first novel (published by L'Aire, Schiller prize for new discoveries); and finally *A Selfie with Anton Chekhov*...

The spirit of Anton Chekhov's plays and stories, the urban and rural universe that he dissects so thoroughly, is today still the same. His X-ray of society and human pettiness is something you can encounter any day in this, our century. Reading Chekhov means understanding Russia today. Filming Chekhov is a way of thanking him.

Dominique de Rivaz

ARTISTIC AND TECHNICAL SHEET

Script and direction	Dominique de Rivaz
Image	Dmitrij Leltschuk Dominique de Rivaz
Editing	Sophie Watzlawick
Music	Jonas Fischer Synchron Stage Orchestra Vienna
Production	Louise Productions Vevey Heinz Dill
Production assistants	Chloé Sedlatchek & Laetitia Cervini
Color grading	Christoph Walther, Trinipix
Sound design	Peter von Siebenthal, Projektstudio GmbH Kathleen Moser, Daniel Bleuer
Translator	Donald Rayfield
With in the role of the doctor	Philippe Gray
With the voices of The narrator	Alexandra Karamisaris
Letters of Anton P. Tchekhov	Michel Voïta
Extract from the Cherry Orchard	Adrien Barazzone
Maxime Gorki	Rustam Akhmedsin



DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Film essays

- *Un selfie avec Anton Tchekhov*,

Louise Productions Vevey, 62', sortie automne 2021

- *Élégie pour un phare*

Prix du Cinéma du Canton de Berne 2014

Louise Productions Vevey, 56', RTS, ARTE, 2013

Feature films

- *Luftbusiness*

Meilleure interprétation masculine pour Dominique Jann, Quartz 2009

Festival international du film de Locarno 2008, section « Ici et ailleurs »

Tómas Lemarquis, Dominique Jann, Joel Basman

Cab productions (CH), Iris productions (LUX), SF DRS, Arte, 96', 2007

- *Mein Name ist Bach*

Prix du Cinéma Suisse 2004

Sélectionné pour représenter la Suisse aux Oscars 2004, catégorie 'Meilleur Film Étranger'

Jürgen Vogel, Vadim Glowna

CAB Productions (CH), Pandora Film (D), Twenty Twenty Vision (D), ARTE, WDR, 106', 2003

Documentary films (excerpts)

- *Claude Goretta*

Portrait du cinéaste suisse Claude Goretta, 26', RTS / SF DRS, 2012

- *Chère Jacqueline... Hommage à une grande Dame du Cinéma*

Portrait de la cinéaste Jacqueline Veuve, 52', TSR, 2005

- *Mon père, c'est un lion (Jean Rouch, pour mémoire)*

Coréalisation Lionel Baier, 7', 2002

- *Georges Borgeaud ou les bonheurs de l'écriture*

PCT Production - INA, 52', 1993

Short films

- *Bubble Wrap*, 8', Short films Festival Berlin ; Thessaloniki Short Film Festival, 2019

- *Le Jour du Bain*

Court métrage noir/blanc 35 mm, 20', 1994

Léopard de Demain, Festival international de Locarno

Prix du Canton de Berne

Grand prix du Festival du Court Métrage de Namur

- *Aélia*

Court métrage noir/blanc 35 mm, 20', 1985

Prix du Public Meilleur film étranger Festival du Court Métrage de Clermont-Ferrand

Prix du Court Métrage Festival de Figueira da Foz - Prix du Canton de Berne



Literary publications

Le Monsieur qui vendait des choses inutiles, Ed. Le Cadratin, 2019

Jeux, Éditions Zoé, 2014

Rose Envy

Roman, Éditions Zoé, 2012 / Éditions H hamac, Québec, 2015

Sélection Prix Wepler 2012

Sélection Prix du Public Radio Télévision Suisse 2013

Sélection Le roman des Romands 2013

La Poussette

Roman, Éditions Buchet-Chastel, 2011

Sélection Prix Rive gauche 2011

Douchinka

Roman, Éditions de l'Aire, 2008

Prix Schiller Découverte 2009

Tache : [taʃ] n. f.

Collection Théâtre Suisse

Éditions L'Âge d'Homme & Société Suisse des Auteurs, 2002

Photography

Kaliningrad, la petite Russie d'Europe

En collaboration avec Dmitrij Letschuk

Éditions Noir sur Blanc, 2020

Le Petit Peuple des chantepleures

Bouquet photographique sur la vie secrète des arrosoirs

Éditions Noir sur Blanc & Till Schaap Edition, 2016

Les Hommes de sable de Choïna

En collaboration avec Dmitrij Letschuk

Éditions Noir sur Blanc & Till Schaap Edition, 2013

Sans début ni fin - Le Chemin du Mur de Berlin

À pied, le long du chemin du Mur de Berlin,

Éditions Noir sur Blanc, 2009

Theater direction

• *Femme non-rééducable, Mémorandum théâtral sur Anna Politkovskaïa*

Texte : Stefano Massini (L'Arche Ed.) - Jeu : Dominique Bourquin

Prod. Association Mise en Scène & Le théâtre pour le moment, Coprod. Théâtre populaire romand TPR, 2016



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