Anton Chekhov is regarded by many as the most outstanding short story writer. This may be a surprise at the first encounter with even his most famous stories, because they are rarely driven by plot or anticipation. They are often gentle in character, elusive in purpose; but they create a resonance in the imagination that rings long. Here are twelve stories, from the brightly comic to the overtly tragic, each full of the sharpest observations of personality and situation, and with implications beyond their brief form: the dying actor, the children playing a game, the cabman with his tragedy, the orator’s mistake and, perhaps most richly of all, a family laid bare in *In The Ravine*.

Kenneth Branagh, a leading figure in film, TV and on stage, is equally at home with classic and contemporary subjects. However, as director and adaptor, he has made a particular contribution to Shakespearean performance with his films such as *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Henry V*, *Hamlet* and *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. His productions of Shakespeare in the theatre have included: *Henry V*, *Hamlet* and *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (RSC), *Romeo and Juliet* (Lyrical), *As You Like It*, *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* (Renaissance), *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *King Lear* (World Tour) which he also directed, *Coriolanus* (co-production with Chichester Festival Theatre). He has also played Iago in Oliver Parker’s film *Othello*. Among his other films are: *Sleuth*, *Thor* and *Cinderella*. He has won numerous awards for his work on stage, film and TV as actor and director. He has also recorded *King Richard III* and *King Lear* for Naxos AudioBooks.
In form this is more a novella than a short story. For a generation engaged by masculine plots with a strong conclusion. For a generation engaged by

By contrast, Children is a bright evocation of a group of youngsters having fun while the grown-ups are away. With remarkable economy, Chekhov shows what would have been seen by an invisible but sharp observer in the room during the game. The individual nature of each child emerges in just a few lines, through their response to the game, to the others, to the lateness. And, as we all remember, such evenings are not entirely fun, for intertwined relationships are as strong at child level as later on; some individuals are caring, others selfish, ambitious or confused.

Chekhov wrote about the people he met and observed. The cab driver in Misery is desperate to communicate his tragedy, but those he meets – his fars – are either anxious to avoid involving themselves or are oblivious to it. With whom can he share his grief? The answer is the real tragedy. On the other extreme is the journalist in Hush!, living a fantasy of importance as he scribbles away.

Vertical or horizontal relationships abound. Fat and Thin expresses with a smile the social pecking order we impose on ourselves, while The Beggar shows that things are not always what we presume.

Knowing the dynamics of a theatre company so well, Chekhov set out to have fun, too, with An Actor’s End. Fun, with a dying man? The underlying plot is so very Russian – the need for a return to the roots, to Vyazma, to die. But the colour of the picture comes also from the characters making their exits and entrances, dealing each in their own way with the situation. Here is the comic actor Sigaev, here is the jeune premier Brama-Glinsky, here is the manager Zhukov, the tragic actor Adabashiev, the hairdresser Yevlampy.

And finally, In the Ravine. In form this is more a novella than a short story, yet not in content. Here, in Ukleeva, in the ravine, is an enclosed society with its own cycles of power, submission, blackmail, abuse, and profound Russian sadness. Most people coming into contact with the Tyubkin family are affected by it, some deeply, some only in passing. Grigory Petrovitch Tyubkin rules, for a while, but he cannot remain untouched by the shrewdness and ruthlessness of Aksinya, his daughter-in-law, the gentleness of Varvara, his young wife, or his desperate pride in his wayward son Anisim. Into this family comes the simple Lipa, who can only talk on real terms with the carpenter, and who can, perhaps, understand the tragedy that befalls her son Nikfor; even more tragically, she comes to accept it. It is the way of the world, Chekhov seems to say.

At the age of 26, Chekhov wrote to his brother, Alexander:

When describing nature, a writer should seize upon small details, arranging them so that the reader will see an image in his mind after he closes his eyes. For instance: you will capture the truth of a moonlit night if you’ll write that a gleam like starlight shone from the pieces of a broken bottle, and then the dark, plump shadow of a dog or wolf appeared. You will bring life to nature only if you don’t shrink from similes that liken its activities to those of humankind.

In displaying the psychology of your characters, minute particulars are essential. God save us from vague generalizations! Be sure not to discuss your hero’s state of mind. Make it clear from his actions. Nor is it necessary to portray many main characters. Let two people be the centre of gravity in your story: he and she.

Notes by Nicolas Soames