

## EL JARDÍN DE LOS CEREZOS

*The Cherry Orchard* is the last play by Russian writer Anton Chekhov. It was written as a comedy but in 1904 was staged as a tragedy by Konstantin Stanislavski. The play concerns an estate that must be sold because the family can no longer afford its upkeep. Reforms in the Russia of Tsar Alexander II in the second half of the 19th century caused social shifts that gave rise to a new class while impoverishing certain aristocrats.

Chekhov's theatrical work contains a high degree of realism in which the characterisation of the different figures and their mutual social relations are of great importance. The tone is always undercurrent: the characters sit together, they talk a little and drink tea while determining each other's psychological downfall. The small individual stories stand in sharp contrast to a suffocating social context of political upheaval and a society that is visibly exhausted.

In 1917 the Russian Revolution broke out, fanned by the complete turmoil of the First World War. The Tsardom was transformed into a communist community that would fall prey to internal power struggles before rapidly evolving into a totalitarian dictatorship.

In 1959, revolutionary comrades including Che Guevara, under the leadership of Fidel Castro, expelled dictator Fulgencio Batista from Cuba and installed a socialist society on the Caribbean island. It began as a utopian social project with collectivism and equality as its starting point. Successful literacy campaigns were launched, a prominent healthcare system was developed. Cuba became a model for the poor in Africa and South America while the world became embroiled in the Cold War. The close ties with the Soviet Union were a thorn in the side of the United States, leading to the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. A failed US invasion of Cuba (the Bay of Pigs) and Soviet plans to install nuclear missiles on Cuba — just 150 kilometres from the US — pushed relations to the brink, and a Third World War was only narrowly avoided. The economic embargo imposed by the US against Cuba in 1962, which remains in force to this day, put the Cuban regime in a stranglehold and brought the utopian 'revolutionary honeymoon' to a halt. Cuba came increasingly under the protection and influence of the Soviet Union. When in the early 1990s the Iron Curtain fell and the Soviet Union was dismantled, Cuba was left behind — poor, isolated and wearily tormented. The stubborn adherence to the principles of the revolution pushed the country ever further into a totalitarian, bureaucratic system in which every uprising is crushed at the root with a heavy hand.

After the Covid-19 pandemic, the world has once again become an unstable powder keg, bringing multiple wars, geopolitical transitions and a general restlessness in its wake. It is

not only Cuba that is exhausted (and perhaps has no other choice than to sell 'the cherry orchard') — the entire world is worn out. Societal unrest was already palpable before the pandemic, and the epidemic was not the cause but rather the drop that made the bucket overflow. Over recent decades the political apparatus has systematically lost its power in favour of financial forces; the fourth estate that the press once was fell into the hands of those same holdings and economic tycoons, resulting in subtle — and less subtle — interference and indoctrination. Education deteriorated visibly, only enlarging the snowball of social decay. Digitalisation, the smartphone and polarising social media reshaped the masses into pathetic individuals, making any form of solidary collective action impossible. While the world burns and technocrats draw power ever more firmly to themselves, ordinary life — from which we cannot escape<sup>1</sup> — simply continues; we talk a little and drink tea. The grand narratives and ethical compass of philosophy and religion have been replaced by banal individual noise. Algorithms and data mining are the current despotic systems that steer and control us. Paradoxically, we impose this oppression upon ourselves, in the great 'freedom' that the internet appears to offer us.

*El Jardín de los Cerezos* is a project that departs from the realism of theatre and its direct relationship with photography; both media are, after all, constructions of reality. Inspired by the undercurrent tone of Chekhov's theatrical work and a general sense of powerlessness, present-day Cuba is depicted as a metaphor: a weary society with a heavy political context and history, in which individuals move about carelessly.

The project is divided into three themes: *Cines, Templos and Aulas* (cinemas, churches and classrooms respectively). All three spaces stand for the dissemination of 'grand narratives'. Moral and social principles are propagated here, with the risk of sliding into indoctrination and control. All three engage in a relationship with theatre: priests perform the Bible, teachers act before the blackboard, and cinemas are literally theatre halls where stories are constructed and projected within the black box that the space is — just as the projection of reality in the camera obscura makes image, meaning and lie simultaneously possible.

Bert Danckaert

*1 "What frightens me most is the ordinary routine of life from which none of us can escape. I am unable to distinguish what is true from what is false in my actions, and they trouble me. I see that education and the circumstances of life have imprisoned me in a narrow circle of falsehood, that my whole life is nothing other than a daily effort to deceive myself and other people and to prevent myself from noticing it. I am afraid that I will not escape from this lie until the day I die."*

*Anton Chekhov*