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On Suffering Fools

“I once knew someone who was dyslexic,

But he was also cross eyed, so everything came out right.”

-Gummo

“He may be the worst teacher ever,” says one of the students when I ask their opinion of Anton Chekhov five minuets before class. There are a group of them there, clustered outside Anton’s Computer Hardware class. I had waited with them many times before this unique class, and this was definitely not the first time this conversation had come up, not by any stretch of the imagination. We eagerly dived back into the subject, which just goes to show, some things never get old.

“He has a very thick accent” says another student

“I think part of it is that he doesn’t follow the book.” Replies the first.

“He’s insane, I kinda like him though.” Says a third.

And to chime in, a final student sums it up perfectly, “It’s definitely a love hate relationship.”

Then we enter the room. It’s almost time for class to begin.

Now, no one in their right mind would say that Anton is a great teacher, but beyond that, opinions seem to vary. Some hold that they’ve had worse teachers, but they may just be overly optimistic. There are certainly more of little faith in the class as can be noted by the number of laptops that immediately open to gaming sites. These are the students who understand what’s going on. In this jungle, these are the ones you have to get know, if you want to survive.

Enter Chekhov, man of legends. He is wearing his classic brown suit, white dress shirt, and glasses. He walks with a slight lurch in his step. And of course, he’s sporting his iconic smile, which starts to resemble a baring of the teeth more and more as class progresses. Some say he only does it when he’s angry, but to me, it seems to be a constant fixture of the landscape. He sits down at his desk and opens his laptop. We wait…

Some ten minuets after class has begun, he gets up from the device and walks over to the whiteboard. Reaching up as high as he can to get to the top, he begins to write. The lecture begins in that thick Russian accent of his. It does become easier to understand the more you listen. However, he has a seemingly angry, confrontational tone that is created by randomly loud and forceful accents. This is accompanied by long pauses between (and sometimes in the middle of) phrases. The effect created by this does not become any less jarring. To put it simply, between that happy snarl and those speech patterns, many a question has gone to its death.

Today is no exception. Halfway through his explanation of computational logic, Anton turns to ask a question, “How we ANAlyze! The timing diagram of our logical. circuit. ya?” A daunting question indeed. Silence from the class. Then someone raises their hand, and braves a question. We see the bared teeth of the smile and some strange spark of flame appears in our teacher’s eye. A moment of inspiration? No. A jumbled, confused, all around botched explanation follows. Looking onward, it seems to me that the main problem is that he didn’t understand the question in the first place. The student, already regretting his previous action, desperately suggests an answer to his own question. Anton makes a look: terrifying in its ambiguity. He does, however, seem pleased at his ability to instill curiosity and a lust for learning within this student. After a short while of this staring contest, the student crumbles with a curt nod. Chekhov returns to the whiteboard and continues down his own jumbled rabbit hole. The student, seeming just a little bit smaller, turns to his computer gaming neighbor and begs for an explanation. By now Chekhov has gone on with his work. The sound of these students talking in a small group stops him. “I hear discussion, any questions? We discuss together.” Then the smile.

There is a pause, then two students start to ask questions at the same time.

“No!” Anton interjects, “ Too much talking!” He bares a grin… Silence and serenity are once more restored. “We go on.” He continues.

In the back of the classroom, my neighbor is silently chuckling. “It’s not beautiful, but it’s hilarious,” he says before returning to his Bloons Tower Defense.

And Chekhov, done with his explanation, ends with a sample problem that he writes on the board. Sample problems: in this class, dreaded the world around. Once, in another Computer Hardware class, I heard tell that a student asked him to do one of the binary sample problems he put on the board. Anton’s reply? “Oh no! I don’t do that, too many ones and zeros!” As far as I can tell, the ridiculous part is that this could very well be true.

Back in our classroom, Anton starts us off with one of his favorite encouraging phrases. He likes to use it right after writing down very difficult problems, or as an excuse for not answering students’ questions. He uses it a lot. “Just like in the Elementary School.” He parades. The students warily turn to their neighbors, to this community formed out of desperation, and try to struggle through the sample problem together. And Anton, returned to sitting at his computer, breathes a sigh of relief, for a job well done1.

1 A job well done? You ask. Let us delve into this just a bit farther. Sure, he’s verbally abusive, incoherent, and confusing. But out of this, a community is spawned. A class environment is created where we are encouraged to rely on the strengths of those around us, and objectively think about the questions we have for ourselves. Is Anton the crosseyed, dislexic individual in our beginning quote? And, has everything, in fact, turned out right?

With this in mind, the real question I have is this: Who’s the Fool?

Is Anton the Fool for teaching us badly?

Or are we the Fools for not saying thank you?