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Directing STUPID FUCKING BIRD

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
Of
MASTER OF ARTS in
THEATRE STUDIES by

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ABSTRACT
Directing STUPID FUCKING BIRD
Katherine Carton Burris

In my final year as an undergraduate at the University of California, Santa Cruz, I proposed to direct STUPID FUCKING BIRD (an adaption by Aaron Posner of Chekhov's The Seagull) in the Experimental Theater. This capstone thesis details the motivations behind my selection of this play, the decision to direct, the technical preparations involved in its staging, and a brief analysis of Posner's text as an adaptation and response to Chekhov's nineteenth century classic. Taking his cue from Chekhov's interest in deepening the role of the theatre, Posner's characters directly challenge a modern audience by asking them to consider the role of the theatre today. What are the “new forms” of Chekhov's theatre? What are “new forms” today? What does it mean to be an artist?
Stupid Fucking Thesis: Directing SFB
Katherine Carton Burris

Exposition

SORIN: But we can't do without a theatre.

CONSTANTINE: No, but we must have it under a new form. If we can't do that, let us rather not have it at all.

-The Seagull, Anton Chekhov

STUPID FUCKING BIRD, the student production which was the culminating event of my capstone thesis project, opened Friday, May 23rd in the Experimental Theater. The opening night instilled in me a sense of panic: this occasion had been preceded by nearly two years of close reading and living with a text, which I was now about to surrender to my actors.

Inciting Incident

In my third year at UC Santa Cruz, I applied and was admitted to the UCDC program, where (at the suggestion of UCDC Arts Division Professor, Danny Scheie) I secured an internship at the Folger Shakespeare Library and Theatre. The majority of this internship was spent assisting the director Aaron Posner on the spring 2012 production of The Taming of the Shrew. Immediately following I aided in the dramaturgical research/casting process for The Conference of the Birds – an upcoming Folger production also directed by Posner. In addition to my fascination with Aaron’s distinctive style of directing Shakespeare, I was
intrigued by his literary prowess, especially his work with adaptation. Upon hearing that he was working on a play loosely based on Anton Chekhov’s *The Seagull*, (which I had seen Noah Averbach-Katz direct just the previous year at UCSC) I asked if I might be able to read it.

I felt an instantaneous connection to the play Aaron had drolly titled *Stupid Fucking Bird*. I recognized the characters as both definitively Chekhovian and intimately contemporary, and was intrigued by the driving, inquisitive force behind Con’s call to reevaluate our societal relationship to art. In my final week in Washington D.C., I was able to attend a workshop of *Stupid Fucking Bird* at Woolly Mammoth Theatre, where the play had been scheduled to make its world première. This workshop (whose attendees included four of the actors who would originate Posner’s roles, the artistic director of the Woolly Mammoth and the director of the spring 2013 première, Howard Shalwitz) created a communal forum between actors, designers, composer, director, artistic director, and playwright for the analysis, and editorial process of developing a play in its infancy. Posner and Shalwitz headed conversations about the Meta-Theatrics called for by the play, the characters’ relationship to their actors, and the implied authorship/ownership of this text amidst an ensemble of self-referential players. The experience of imagining the world of this play was inexpressibly heightened by the presence of the playwright, and solidified an already subterranean desire to one day direct it. Following my acceptance into the 2013-14 Masters Program, and the world première of *STUPID FUCKING BIRD* at
Woolly Mammoth, I was given permission by Posner to propose his adaptation for staging at UC Santa Cruz.

**Rising Tension**

Both Posner and Chekhov are playwrights deeply interested in the enormous sacrifice one makes in the process of surrendering oneself to love, and sometimes tangentially, creating art. Both Constantine, the son of a famous actress, and Conrad, (his modernized counterpart in Posner’s adaptation) search for “new forms” of theater, which they project onto the character of Nina: the seagull, the actress, the muse. Conrad is fascinated by Nina- an object of unattainable desire, the Daphne to his Apollo. This myth is of particular interest to my understanding of this story. Just as Apollo, god of poetry and music is only able to achieve a symbolic capturing of his beloved (the elusive Daphne) by weaving a crown of laurels out of her tree branches post-transformation, so Conrad fruitlessly pursues Nina. Indeed, the more desperate Conrad grows in his attempts to capture the ethereal nymph, the more intangible Nina becomes, until she undergoes her own metamorphosis. The closest Conrad comes to achieving something like dominance over his artistic ambition, and possession of what he most wants, is in the act of shooting the seagull, that Nina (in his imagination) has become.

**Relevance**
In the spring of 2011, UCSC saw *The Seagull* (proposed and directed by Noah Averbach-Katz) unfold as a story bent on exploring the human obsession with fame, especially through a 21st century lens. Averbach-Katz wrote in his proposal: “Contemporary culture gives us a holy grail to pursue, and finding it lifts us from the doldrums of anonymity. ...But what is the price of drinking from the cup? What happens when we find what we’re looking for?” Framed at all times by a pair of paparazzi videographers, Averbach-Katz’s production asked his audience to reconsider the value we place on celebrities, and reality television stars. While Averbach-Katz’s production embarked on an understanding of the psychological construct of fame through an editing process of Chekhov’s original script, I hope to have succeeded in taking my modernized adaptation back in time by asking not “What happens when we find what we’re looking for?” But *why do we look at all?*

An artist’s struggle to understand his motivation to create something new is a dilemma still wrestled with by artists in the 21st century. Given its marginal state, the question “Is art an indulgence or a necessity?” has become more pressing today than ever. My own incentive to direct this play, and the bearing I hoped it would have on my Santa Cruz community – though undeniably and innately fervent – was never entirely definable to me until the summer immediately following my directing acceptance. Only three weeks after the *STUPID FUCKING BIRD* reading I had organized with the help of my fellow Shakespeare Santa Cruz company members, I received the following email:
“Dear Company,

On behalf of the core staff, we want to inform you that as of 1:30pm today, the Arts Division and UC Santa Cruz have decided that they will close the doors permanently on Shakespeare Santa Cruz at the end of the 2013 holiday show.

This is hard news for all of us, but we remain forcefully proud of our work and utterly grateful to all of you for your extraordinary efforts.

We are committed to making this final week of the summer season an exceptional one for not only our audiences but for us as well.”

The abrupt termination of what I recognized to be an exemplary model of live theatre’s enduring ability to bring beauty, honesty, and human empathy to a collection of people was nothing if not an inflammatory call to action. The academic officials whom I had trusted with my undergraduate education had effectively declared art, specifically my art, to be expendable. Bolstered by a heightened awareness of this indifference towards the artistic community, I found a new and necessary context for Posner’s play, and was spurred on by something like Konstantin Treplev’s own brand of apoplectic vigor. “Why make art” is a question that should be raised globally, certainly, but more direly in academic environments with the potential power to breed generational change. Culturally deeming art “superfluous” will not inhibit artistic creation; only hinder the artistic tenacity and innovation that often precedes major cultural growth.

The Playwright(s)
Formally, Anton Chekhov was perhaps the most influential playwright of the nineteenth century. *The Seagull*, especially, is an unmistakable milestone in terms of the new forms to which his brand of drama gave rise. Written in 1895, *The Seagull* stood apart from its predecessors in several significant ways, as Richard Gilman calls attention to in his book *Chekhov's Plays: An Opening into Eternity*; “This is Chekhov’s first play that doesn’t have a dominant figure, a protagonist whose fate, and our interest in it, dwarfs all others, and so his first thoroughly to disperse action and sentience among a considerable number of people” (Gilman, 70). In addition to this departure from tradition, Chekhov continued to enrage nineteenth century theatregoers through his use of “indirect action,” a technique he employed in which almost all significant action occurs offstage, with the audience permitted only to witness the character’s responses to them. “David Magarshack,” Gilman continues, “accounted for Chekhov’s arrival at artistic maturity in *The Seagull* by drawing a distinction between his earlier “scientific” approach to writing and a new spirit of humanistic concern, and saw an even more important differentiation between his old method of ‘direct’ action and a new ‘indirect’ mode of composition” (Gilman, 71). Aaron Posner’s adaptation honors this Chekhovian trademark; although the simultaneous monologue sequences he has inserted (“WANT” and “Late Night Quartet”) are deviations from *The Seagull* to be sure, they heighten a contemporary audience’s sensitivity to a shared frustration with the circuitousness of life.
Despite these outwardly tragic themes, and the death of a principle character in act IV, Chekhov pointedly termed this play a “comedy.” To provide a logic to what (at least, certainly by modern standards) is far from typically “comedic,” Gilman tells us that “comedy” may be more than a genre or quality, but a labeling resulting from “... A final governing response... to the following questions: What is our state of mind or spirit supposed to be after we finish these works? How are we supposed to understand them, to ‘take’ them, as we like to say?” (Gilman 72). The very description “A Comedy in Four Acts” may therefore be Chekhov's way of demanding a deeper assessment by his readers and audiences— a refusal to be easily digestible, and predictable in the way that popular theatre of his time so often was.

Such an assessment may reveal a “comic” (albeit sinister) understanding of the debilitating stubbornness of Chekhov's characters. In “'Killing Realism': Insight and Meaning in Anton Chekhov” Andrey Shcherbenok writes:

“It has long become a commonplace to observe that Chekhov's characters perceive the world, themselves, and each other inaccurately; however, where does the standard of accuracy come from? To argue that a given Chekhovian character fails to achieve a genuine liberation one has to have a precise enough notion of what true freedom might be; to argue, as has long been a staple of Chekhov studies, that his characters fail to gain a true and timely insight into the state of the world in general and their individual predicament in particular requires an elaborate vision of life as it really is, so as to measure the character's delusion against it” (Shcherbenok, 299).

The “standard of accuracy” as Shcherbenok calls it, is complicated by the extreme self-awareness Posner has allowed his characters. A perfect example of
this self-awareness is the character of Con, who (despite the fact that he knows he is playing a part based on a role in Chekhov's play *The Seagull*) is nevertheless unable to alter his destiny.

Posner’s play strives to explore a relationship between actor and spectator in new and exciting ways. Taking his cue from Chekhov, who is avowedly experimenting with dramatic form in *The Seagull*, Posner too sets the scene (quite literally) for a debate on contemporary artistry by opening on a play within a play. Posner, who has said that he is interested in “communicating Chekhov’s subtext more explicitly, [by] allowing the actors to speak directly to the audience in Shakespearean asides” furthers Chekhov’s subtle meta-theatricality by hailing in a new dimension of reality, created by this direct address. By breaking up the circularity of Chekhov’s character-driven plot with moments of “communicated subtext” from each of the characters, Posner extends an invitation to his audience to engage more personally in their struggles. The frustrating level of “epistemological blindness” which Shcherbenok notes in Chekhov’s characters is significantly reduced for an audience by the inherent vulnerability and endearing quality of Posner’s inserted asides. The self-deprecating honesty found in each player’s spoken subtext allows for a heightened sense of sympathy. Mash, for example, sings “Life Is Disappointing” to the audience, but only after prefacing it with “I wrote this. It sucks, but don’t judge...” (Act I).
In Act II, Sorn (alone onstage) makes a cocktail as he confides in the audience:

“...Here’s the thing. I get up most mornings around dawn or so. It’s still dark, and often still cold. And I’m alone. And I shave and shower and get dressed, and the last thing I do before I leave the house is brush my teeth. And three mornings out of five, I wonder—while I’m brushing my teeth, for some reason, always right then, in the midst of this most mundane of morning ablutions—I wonder... Why do on? Why walk out the door and into the day and do... all the things I do. And you know why I do it?
   Do you?
   Do you?
   Nor do I, my friends. Nor do I...”

As re-written characters consciously trapped inside a re-telling, Posner's characters are perfectly situated to comment on their exaggerated inability to evolve, pointedly highlighting *The Seagull*’s implication that nothing is quite so tragic, or as universal, as the internal battles we wage against ourselves.

**The Characters**

*...All the plays of Chekhov have the predominant element of character. One could barely choose plot as the secondary element. It is unlikely that one would choose language, because the language of Chekhov is intentionally commonplace. An academician might insist that there is theme in Chekhov, but it is so subservient to character, it is so low in the play and rises so gracefully and gently to the surface, that we say, essentially, that Chekhov is without theme. In Chekhov’s plays we go for character, with secondary emphasis on plot, because one must keep the action moving or the audience will fall asleep.*

   (William Ball)

Chekhov’s original characters have remained largely the same in Posner’s modernized world, in spite of the century that separates them. The most
obvious exception to this is the character of Sorn: a combination of both Sorin, landowner of the lake estate, and Dorn, a local doctor. Paulina Andryevna and her husband Ilya Afanasyevich Shamrayev, the farm manager, have both been cut from Posner’s script, along with Yakov and the nameless cooks, maids, etc. Perhaps as compensation for cutting both of Mash’s parents from *Stupid Fucking Bird*, or in tribute to Masha’s preference of Dorn to her own father (potentially a subtle nod to Chekhov’s draft of *The Seagull* in which Dorn was Masha’s biological father), Posner highlights Masha’s youthful vulnerability through her interactions with Sorn. Medvedyenko the local school teacher has been renamed Dev, and true to his Chekhovian counterpart, harbors a deep (albeit unrequited) love for Mash. Konstantin Treplev has been renamed Conrad, or Con. Despite Con’s infatuation with Nina, *Stupid Fucking Bird* is less about Con’s derailment at her abandonment of him, and much concerned with Con as a theatre artist.

In contrast to Chekhov’s play, Posner’s cast is almost entirely composed of artists. Unlike their counterparts in *The Seagull*, Dev and Mash are musicians, making six of the seven characters in Posner’s script (all but Sorn) creatively inclined. *Stupid Fucking Bird*’s implication that each character is to some degree, an artist, amplifies the pattern of dependency seen in *The Seagull*, between unrequited love and artistic productivity. The cycle of deeply passionate, yet distinctly unfulfilling love masochistically fueling an artist’s creativity, is escaped only by Trigorin, who finds an alternative (albeit sadistic) method of creation.

**The Plot**
TRIGORIN: Every word you and I are saying right now, every sentence, I capture and lock up in the back of my brain. Because someday I can use them! When I finish working, I go out to the theatre, or go fishing, to relax and get away from everything. Do you think I can? No, a great iron cannonball starts rolling around in my head, an idea for a new story, and I’m hooked, I can feel my desk reeling me in, and I have to go write and write. All the time! And I never get any rest. I feel like I’m devouring my own life.

- The Seagull, Anton Chekhov

Trigorin is addicted to a physically destructive process of creation, and thus, dependent on destruction itself. Although he feels the weight of this burden most heavily on himself (as he tells Nina), Trigorin’s art takes a much more drastic toll on the lives of others, specifically those who populate his stories. Chekhov’s Trigorin both authors and foreshadows Nina’s destruction, as seen explicitly in Act II:

TRIGORIN: Idea for a short story. The shore of a lake, and a young girl who’s spent her whole life beside it, a girl like you… She loves the lake the way a seagull does, and she’s happy and free as a seagull. Then a man comes along, sees her, and ruins her life because he has nothing better to do. Destroys her like this seagull here.

Following Arkadina’s decision to leave the lake, Nina gives Trigorin a medallion, which has inscribed on the back the title of one of his books, Days and Nights. Upon closer inspection of this inscription, Trigorin sees that it is a reference to one of his own works.

TRIGORIN: (paging through a book) Page one twenty-one… Lines eleven and twelve… Here it is (reads) ‘If you ever need my life, come and take it.’"
While *STUPID FUCKING BIRD’s* “Trig” certainly does not shy away from the opportunity to commodify Nina’s destruction, Posner features the self-destructive tendencies of Chekhov’s characters by cutting Trigorin’s unnerving moment of foreshadowing, and focusing instead on Nina’s masochistic version of romance. Amid the dimly lit sequence of kitchen scenes in Act II, Posner references Nina’s favorite lines from *Days and Nights*:

“NINA: Have you ever wondered if he was asking the right question?

TRIG: Who?

NINA: Hamlet.

TRIG: Which question?

NINA: To be or not to be. I don’t think that’s really The Question at all.

TRIG: Oh no? Then what’s the question?

NINA: To act or not to act. To do, or leave undone. And speaking of undone... [She begins to advance towards him, slowly, gently undone-ing herself...]

TRIG: [Amazed and delighted and aghast...] Who are you?

NINA: [Shrugging off her pajama top or t-shirt slowly, easily. She stands there, smiling at him...] I’m the one with the perfect breasts, remember.

TRIG: Oh, yes, yes...

NINA: If you want them, they’re yours. If you want me, I’m yours. If you want my life, now or ever, it’s yours and yours and always, only yours...”

Whether masochistic or sadistic, love (as an extension of artistry in Chekhov) is inherently violent. In another example of character “epistemological blindness,”
however, Chekhov’s characters fail to recognize their misguided attempts at love as violent until it is too late. In fact, the best of intentions (and an ardent effort at preservation), usually accompany the physically destructive acts within The Seagull.

Chekhov’s logic then, as both a theatre maker, and an advocate for its reform, seems to look something like this: In order to give something life, to breath fresh air into it, it must first be destroyed. Which is why Trigorin (Chekhov’s foil as The Seagull’s authorial figure) actively destroys Nina—to give life to his writing – specifically, to the short story he describes to her, which will immortalize Nina’s ruin. Konstantin Treplev attempts a similar act of commemoration in the shooting of a seagull he has blindly imbued with Nina’s spirit. However, by destroying the dead bird, he achieves only a literal possession of Nina as he once knew her— a feeble imitation of the romanticized literary preservation that Trigorin’s superior artistry can offer. Konstantin’s self-referential recognition of this failure cues a final act of destruction, and the ending of this “comedy.”

The Meta-theatrics

In a meta-theatrical twist, it seems The Seagull’s most successful example of rebirth through ruin was itself: in Act IV we are informed by Dorn that
Konstantin Treplev (Chekhov's mouthpiece for revolution and drastic theatrical reform) has shot and killed himself—effectively destroyed by the words of a playwright who helped usher in exactly the kind of new forms Treplev spoke of. Chekhov himself may have been more of a symbolist than an advocate for the kind of Naturalistic revolution Konstantin’s words brought to fruition, however. It was Constantin Stanislavski’s avant-garde staging of The Seagull at the newly founded Moscow Arts Theatre, which we now pinpoint as the catalytic event responsible for initiating a movement of dramatic reform (much to the consternation of Chekhov, who hated everything about the production).

Constantin Stanislavski’s elaborate staging notes from this 1898 revival indicated that actors should “…Wipe away dribble, blow their noses, smack their lips, wipe away sweat, or clean their teeth with nails and matchsticks.” Aaron Posner pays homage to this level of authenticity, calling in his stage directions for “The actors who are not in the primary scene are very likely on stage a good deal of the time, around the periphery, playing music, eating, watching, etc.” No doubt inspired by Stanislavski’s encouragement of his actors to be almost grotesquely human, Posner has his actors perform such tasks as making smoothies, eating pie (lots of pie), drinking beer, and mixing cocktails on stage.
Within the script itself, Posner welcomes deviations (marked by an asterisk, often when a character description is involved), further calling attention to the play’s awareness of itself. An audience’s delight that their reality is being acknowledged, and therefore honored, fosters an undeniably personal relationship between the world of the play, the actor, and the audience.

**Climax**

**The Space**

*KONSTANTIN: Now this is what I call a theatre! A curtain, two wings, right and left and then nothing. No set. Empty space!*

*The Seagull, Anton Chekhov*
In the hope of setting *Stupid Fucking Bird* in dialogue not only with Chekhov, but also with Noah Averbach-Katz’s production of *The Seagull*, I was a passionate advocate of staging this production in the eX-Space. The vastness of the space demanded dynamism, and a boldness of energy from both the performers and the set design. The hyper meta-theatricality of *Stupid Fucking Bird* calls for the audience to remain conscious throughout that they are watching the play. I therefore encouraged my designer to emphasize the theatrical nature of our playing space. I embraced the challenges of a small budget and used the limitations of our resources to draw attention to the meta-theatrical nature of the piece. For example, I brought up the work lights immediately following the preshow, which remained on until an audience member (or twelve) prompted the shift back into theatricality by telling Con to “Start the fucking play!”

Because the audience-actor relationship was of particular importance to this play, the seating bank arrangement in the eX was carefully considered. I decided to attempt a bold, diagonal playing space by shifting the wooden “dock” structure into the upstage right corner. This allowed for use of the enormous double doors center stage, in turn granting access to the antechamber backstage area. Taking advantage of the large backstage space that was revealed when the double-doors were opened, I created a stage within a stage. Defined by a large Persian rug, a table, a lamp, and a bar, this offstage/onstage space situated upstage center (rather similar to a Shakespearean “inner-below”) became a
space from which the actors could sit, drink, eat pie, or tune their respective instruments while waiting for their cues. This space thus matched the meta-theatrical nature of the piece by serving two functions: suggesting the interior of Sorn’s house, while also serving as a neutral area from which the actors could remain visible to the audience throughout.

**The Staging**

Chekhov takes his implied reader outside classical realism—not into the world of some other literary movement [...] but rather, in a sense, simply nowhere.

(Vladimir Markovich)

Posner’s stage directions call for a “simple, raw, flexible, multi-purpose, transparently theatrical playing space” in acts III and I. As the tangible, physicalized world of what Markovich calls “nowhere,” *Stupid Fucking Bird* demands cohesion, functionality, and (in this case) a readiness to laugh at itself. In lieu of birch trees (characteristic of traditional Chekhov productions, and the sets of Viktor Simov of the Moscow Art Theatre), I decided to evoke the redwoods surrounding the Experimental Theatre and the UC Santa Cruz campus itself. The trees (indicated in the ground plan below by eight black dots) served to both define the empty space of the theatre, and to create a definitively non-Naturalistic world of play for Posner’s characters. Because it was not practical to move these trees, they remained present throughout, even when (in Act II) the action moved into a kitchen, complete with refrigerator and blender.
The set for Treplev's symbolist play in Act I of *The Seagull* is described by Konstantin (in Paul Schmidt's 1997 translation): "Now this is what I call a theatre! A curtain, two wings, right and left, and then nothing. No set. Empty space! The curtain opens, all you see is the lake and the far horizon. And the curtain will open at exactly eight-thirty, just as the moon rises." This curtain, which would have been framed by a proscenium in nineteenth century staging, would then have been dropped to reveal another backdrop – presumably one resembling Konstantin's description of a lake glittering in the moonlight. The conscious reveal of a piece of painted scenery to an audience (by the actor who
has spoken of its beauty), allows for a subtle yet arresting distortion of reality: it asks an audience to make a conscious decision. The Russian Formalist, Viktor Schklovsky is cited by Anne Bogart as having “undoubtedly influenced Bertolt Brecht with his *Four Essays on Formalism* ... [which] developed significant theories on the function of art. Everything around us, he wrote, is asleep. The function of art is to awaken what is asleep. How do you awaken what is asleep? According to Schklovsky, you turn it slightly until it awakens” (Bogart 53).

Reminiscent of Brecht’s *Verfremdung* effect, Konstantin’s (or rather Chekhov’s) demand for a more dynamic awareness is brought about by just this slight “turning” of scenic tradition, creating a heightened awareness in his audience.

The curtain used in *Stupid Fucking Bird*’s staging of “Here We Are,” was initially designed to be struck by Con himself, however, technical safety procedures meant that it remained hung from the mezzanine for the duration of the show. The necessity that the curtains remain hung at a level that would guarantee visibility of a green glowing EXIT sign, though initially undesirable, created an unexpected dialogue between the meta-theatricality of both *The Seagull*, and *Stupid Fucking Bird* as staged in the Ex Space. In lieu of dropping a curtain to reveal a backdrop, the course of the play serves as a kind of extended curtain drop, punctuated by moments of conscious reveals such as the transition in which Con strikes the lake’s “waves.”

The Acting
**KONSTANTIN:** I can't stand her kind of theatre. ...That kind of theatre is tired, it's all worn out. It's so restrictive! The curtain goes up, the lights come on, you're in a room with three walls, and there they are, these servants of art, and all they do is show us how people eat, drink, make love, walk, and wear clothes! And then they try to draw some kind of moral, some nice easy little moral, something you wouldn't mind having around the house. You go, they give you the same stuff over and over and over.... and it makes me sick.

*The Seagull, Anton Chekhov*

Posner prefaces the script of his play with a page of notes to potential directors regarding the physical space and the acting style of his piece. He writes,

“The characters are ‘real’ people. They are also characters in a play. They should be fully invested in the reality of their lives in the play and the stakes are high and deadly serious. At the same time they know that they are in a play, that there is an audience out there, etc. etc. There is no ‘real life’ equivalent to this theatrical reality, no matter how much the actors might want there to be one. There is simply more than one reality going on at a time.”

I interpreted this to mean that the characters have a working knowledge of their own Chekhovian models, (much as we have a working knowledge of our own mortality) but it does not hinder or in any way limit their motivation or vitality. I responded to the frankness with which this device acknowledges the tacit agreement between audience and actor.

The lack of pretense demanded by the script influenced my decision to allow the English actor in my cast to speak in his own accent, rather than asking him to develop an American accent for the performance. While this choice required the creation of a backstory and additional table work to discuss it, each relationship in a character-driven play such as *The Seagull*, or *SFB*, demands
such an in depth excavation of invented history. The challenge of honesty in my production lay in casting college-aged students as characters of different ages. Emma, as Arkadina’s modernized counterpart and Con’s mother, was perhaps (at the youngest) forty. Sorn, who celebrates a 60th birthday in Act III, begins the play at fifty-six. Trig posed less of a challenge, as he is mentioned in *The Seagull* as being slightly younger than Arkadina, though assumingly still in his thirties.

To bridge this gap in age, I began rehearsals with a significant amount of work on physicality, starting with Mary Overlie’s “Viewpoints.” Because some of my actors had not yet been exposed to this brand of physical training, we began very slowly. I introduced them to choreographer Mary Overlie’s SSTEM of Viewpoints (the mnemonic device for the six elements she focused on in dance: Space, Shape, Time, Emotion, Movement, and Story), before moving on to Bogart and Tina Landau’s identifying Viewpoints for stage actors: Time, which includes Tempo, Duration, Kinesthetic Response, and Space – Shape, Gesture, Architecture, Spatial Relationship, and Topography. In the second week we began practicing “open viewpoint sessions” in which the cast was no longer collectively bound to a grid, or to a tempo, and encouraged to incorporate their knowledge of character relationships, discovered so far in our table work. Building towards the vulnerability I would be asking of my actors, we also worked on creating a series of what I called "expressive gestures," which they felt encapsulated the driving emotional needs of their individual characters.
On the first day of rehearsal I posed to them Anne Bogart’s 28 questions (developed and used for her training with the SITI company), asking that they each take time on their own to think through them, either in or out of character, but with Posner’s play in mind. Over the course of the rehearsal time, actors would send me their 28 Questions (if they wanted to share them), and sometimes updates to their original responses, as they continued to make discoveries about their character, and their “character body.” When a sense of trust began to build between my seven actors through extensive view pointing, and character table work, I asked them to each pick a specific moment in the play, and write a letter (in character) to another character. This exercise opened up a kind of group therapy gathering, which we used to motivate the same day’s viewpoint session, which in turn became the fundamental “topography” used in staging “Late Night Quartet.”

While rehearsing another monologue sequence (“WANT”), which required a similar amount of explosive urgency, I briefly incorporated Suzuki into our group vocabulary. The exercise “Sitting Statues” succeeded in creating a collective tension, which I reminded them to find throughout the play.

Falling Tension

To decide is an act of violence, yet decisiveness and cruelty are part of the collaborative process that the theatre offers. Decisions give birth to limitations, which in turn ask for a creative use of the imagination.

(Anne Bogart)
Despite the extraordinary wealth of possibilities a production encompasses before decisions must inevitably be made, the play (as seen by the director, and designers) continues to live and breathe as a collective reminder of the infinite worlds its creation involved. Amid one of the most troubling moments of “decisiveness” I experienced in the rehearsal process of SFB, was the staging of Posner’s ending, which I’d seen revised over the course of several drafts leading up to production. While the technical aspect of the final scene was a challenge in itself (the script calls for a gunshot – presumably with a loaded blank – and the “explosion” of a lighting instrument), I was more preoccupied with staging an ending I did not yet understand.

Just as Chekhov refuses to give his readers an easily digestible ending by labeling his play a “comedy,” Posner too, recognizes the value of a work that is more thought provoking than predictable. The Seagull, as previously mentioned, was Chekhov’s first play without a “main character” or protagonist. Although this break from tradition was notable, Chekhov (as seen in his reaction to the Moscow Art Theatre’s The Seagull) was not ready for the revolution his words had inspired. His play was still written in the Aristotelian plot structure, dependent upon a communal release of emotion (catharsis) by the audience, precipitated by a moment of dramatic climax. In Act III of Stupid Fucking Bird, Con creates a disturbance in this pattern:

CON: Do you have any idea what happens next? Do you? Well for those of you not so well versed in 19th century Russian Drama, this is where I die.
Yep, that’s right, campers, I die. Anguished tears. Burn my manuscripts. Despair despair despair...

Gun shot!
And then you cry. You CRY. Or wake up or whatever... and then stand up, give quick little thumbs up or down or non-committal shrug to whoever you’re here with, and then whip out your phone to check your missed calls and texts before you’ve even sidled to the end of your fucking row!

This is where the play ends, I’m fucking dead, Nina’s shithouse crazy, everyone else prances on their merry way [indicating the audience in front of him...] and no one’s life is changed! Right? Right?!!

Another play, over and done and once again NOTHING REAL has happened!!

Well, this is just a stupid fucking play and maybe I don’t want to shoot myself in the head! Maybe I want to go on like this forever, wallowing in in self-pitying existential angst from production to production to production to production until the end of time! Maybe I want to go on losing and failing and losing and—

Oh but wait! Then where’s the catharsis? This is a ‘play’ or whatever, right, so we gotta have some kind of catharsis or you’ll all want your fucking money back. So where’s the catharsis? [Calling off] Has anyone seen the catharsis? We didn’t forget to bring it did we?!?!

CAN A FELLA GET A LITTLE FUCKING CATHARSIS AROUND HERE OR NOT?!!?"

While Chekhov’s text assigns significantly more credit to Trigorin’s artistry than Konstantin’s, Posner irreverently selects Conrad as the true authorial figure of the play. By delegating the role of playwright to an actor within a meta-theatrical play, Posner denies Chekhov the agency of returning to an Aristotelian plot structure, in this case, a traditional cathartic release.
Con refuses to conform to the formulaic resolution required of him by the original text because he is aware that a catharsis does not necessarily imply the change he (Con/Konstantin) desires. Posner is taking Chekhov’s stance against form one big step further. By putting himself both in relation to Chekhov and in opposition to him, Posner has chosen to comment on our debilitating dependence on tradition. He recognizes, as T.S. Eliot addresses in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that an author must have comprehensive sense of the canonical tradition that has preceded him in order to write at all. Eliot posits that what is best and often deemed “classical” in literary tradition is the work that stems from an author’s palpable engagement with his own tradition. It is for this reason that Posner has chosen to both reinvent Chekhov while giving him (forgive the pun) the bird.

“Stupid Fucking Bird, like The Seagull, is mostly about love, art, hope, and disappointment,” says Posner. “It pits passionate dreams of ideal love and artistic success against the simple hard realities of quotidian life. It’s been fascinating to explore The Seagull—a play I truly love and, in some odd ways, loathe—to find my own resonances and rebellions within it. What has emerged, I hope, in this rough-and-tumble, meta-theatrical mash-up, is a deliberately unfaithful re-imagining that I hope will challenge, amaze, engage, and delight.”
Dénouement

When you begin a picture, you often make some pretty discoveries. You must be on guard against these. Destroy the thing, do it several times. In each destroying of a beautiful discovery, the artist does not really suppress it, but rather transforms it, condenses it, makes it more substantial. What comes out in the end is the result of the discarded finds.

Creativity is first of all an act of destruction.

(Pablo Picasso)

Undaunted by Chekhov’s universal reputation, Stupid Fucking Bird is a thought provoking, entertaining, challenging, and stimulating riff on Chekhov’s The Seagull. Critical of our tired theatrical fare, SFB looks to its audience to demand more. If the theatre is to survive, where is it going? How does it justify itself? How does it pay its way? Stupid Fucking Bird is a play which does not pretend to answer these questions, but sees the urgency of asking them. It is a play which wants to know, but does not insist on knowledge. In his chapter on The Seagull entitled “Art and Love, Love and Art,” Gilman describes the play as “a storehouse of things to come... it [The Seagull] continually presses you to think ahead.” (Gilman 71).
Works Cited


