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Director’s Notebook:

“17 October. Performance of my “Seagull” at the Alexandrinsky Theatre. It was not a success.”

- Anton Chekhov’s Diary, dated October 17, 1896.

It is said that the actors were booed off stage and the lead actress lost her voice. The premiere of this classic play went down in theatre history as a famous failure. So much so, in fact, that Chekhov himself fled during the second act. This was the first bit of information I read upon beginning my research into this play. Knowing this, I began reading. I wondered how this play rose into success and became a classic… What exactly is it about The Seagull that has spanned generations?

The Seagull by Anton Chekhov

“Art, especially the stage, is an area where it is impossible to walk without stumbling. There are in store for you many unsuccessful days and whole unsuccessful seasons: there will be great misunderstandings and deep disappointments... you must be prepared for all this, expect it and nevertheless, stubbornly, fanatically follow your own way.”

Anton Chekhov

Today, this play is praised as one of Chekhov’s best pieces. So many things intrigued me about it: the time period in context, the role of subtext, the Seagull, the picturesque lake that stands as a scene for so much sadness, the fact that no one ends up happy, and mostly, the richly developed characters who have so much room for depth. But, I knew taking on this text would be daunting. It is so revered in the theatre world; I had some irrational fear of being “generic,” or even soiling Chekhov’s true intentions. But I’m glad I took on the challenge. Once I had read it – I felt drawn to it. The words spoke to me not only as a human being, but especially as an artist. I knew I had found the right
story to convey because of the experience I had upon closing the final page. As primarily an actor, when I read plays, I usually see character choices, backgrounds, and subtleties that could enhance the acting. It wasn’t until I read *The Seagull* that I finally felt inspiration in a different role than an actor. For the first time, I understood this play in the eyes of a director.

**Theatre in context: the play text, its context and the ideas presented**

**Life in Russia**

Anton Chekhov, son of a shopkeeper and grandson of a serf, was born into a Russia on the brink of revolution. The Russian Revolution would begin in 1905, a mere 10 years after the writing of *The Seagull*, and turn the country upside down. Although artistic culture such as literature, poetry, art and music was still flourishing, this period of history was quite mild. Russia was in a calm before the storm, in other words. Smirnoff Vodka was also at its peak of mass production in these years.

(www.chekhovworld.com)

**Censorship**

Alexander III died in 1894, leaving his son, Nicholas II, as the new Tzar of Russia. Under the monarchy, harsh censorship affected Chekhov’s work, also referred to as the “red pencil”. Censorship, after it had been abolished, returned to Russia after an attempted assassination of Alexander II. From then on, the next two Tzars only increased the severity of censorship. Those who did not obey were at risk for persecution from the police and the government. Chekhov displays his frustrations with his work being censored in a letter to Anna Yevreinova, dated March 10, 1889.

“Yesterday I finished and made a clean copy of a story, but it's for my novel, the project that is presently taking up all my time. Oh, what a novel! If it weren't for the accursed censorship situation, I'd promise it to you for November. There's nothing in the novel inciting anyone to revolution, but the censors will ruin it anyway. Half the characters say, "I don't believe in God," it has a father whose son has been sent to life-long forced labor for armed resistance, a police chief who is ashamed of his uniform, a marshal of the nobility whom everybody hates, etc. There's a wealth of material for the red pencil.”

(http://www.thepalimpsest.co.uk)

Clearly, censorship inhibited Chekhov’s ability to deliver social commentary or develop characters in plain words. But perhaps this served him better in the end, as one his shining qualities as a playwright is his ability to convey ideas through connotation and
He illustrated his perspective of the world around him regardless of censorship; however, the influence of the government restraining his creative freedom played into the characters he created in The Seagull.

“What Chekhov most valued from both a personal and sociopolitical stance was freedom. He himself said as much when he wrote in 1888 that his “holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and the most absolute freedom.” The next year, as we have seen, he wrote to Suvorin that “the feeling of personal freedom is essential, and that feeling has only recently begun to develop in me” and suggests that his own life was about how a “young man squeezes the slave out of himself, drop by drop, and how waking one beautiful morning he feels that he has no longer a slave's blood in his veins but a real man's.” In his Notebook he wrote, “Nowhere else does the authority of a name weigh so heavily as with us Russians, who have been abased by centuries of slavery and fear freedom.” Many of his stories and plays deal with the many different ways that his Russian characters, men and women, rich and poor, continue to be enchained either by the sociopolitical system or by their own mental chains.”

(Walter G. Moss, The Wisdom of Anton Chekhov)

Writing

Chekhov wrote The Seagull in 1895, at the Melikhovo farm where he had built a lodge. The unique thing about his writing location was that it was in the middle of a cherry orchard. In the spring, it would be considered beautiful place to write as the cherries were blossoming. However, in winter, it was completely buried in snow. (http://www.theatregold.net)

It is interesting how Chekhov wrote this play in the winter, where the heavy snow was blocking the cherry blossoms underneath. The impact of his environment could have contributed to the peculiar tone of this piece that is infused with melancholy, passion and longing. It would be aesthetically pleasing as well as true to Chekhov’s background to use some of these visual aspects in my production of The Seagull as the characters move through the highs-and-lows of their lives.

Chekhov was diagnosed with tuberculosis in December 1884. (Senelick, The Seagull) He would later die of this same illness. Most likely, his medical condition influenced his work and the ideas explored throughout this play.

With the historical context in which this play was written in mind, I want to set my interpretation of The Seagull in 1930’s America. This way, I can parallel the bleak undertone of the play and constant unhappiness of the characters to the Great Depression.
America in the 1930’s

“The stock market crash of October 29, 1929 provided a dramatic end to an era of unprecedented, and unprecedentedly lopsided, prosperity. This disaster had been brewing for years. Different historians and economists offer different explanations for the crisis–some blame the increasingly uneven distribution of wealth and purchasing power in the 1920s, while others blame the decade’s agricultural slump or the international instability caused by World War I. In any case, the nation was woefully unprepared for the crash. For the most part, banks were unregulated and uninsured. The government offered no insurance or compensation for the unemployed, so when people stopped earning, they stopped spending. The consumer economy ground to a halt. An ordinary recession became the Great Depression, the defining event of the 1930s. During the Depression, most people did not have much money to spare. However, most people did have radios—and listening to the radio was free. The most popular broadcasts were those that distracted listeners from their everyday struggles: comedy programs like Amos ‘n’ Andy, soap operas and sporting events. Swing music encouraged people to cast aside their troubles and dance. Bandleaders like Benny Goodman and Fletcher Henderson drew crowds of young people to ballrooms and dance halls around the country. And even though money was tight, people kept on going to the movies. Musicals, “screwball” comedies and hard-boiled gangster pictures likewise offered audiences an escape from the grim realities of life in the 1930s.”

(www.history.com)

I highlighted some sentences that will help inspire how I will integrate the atmosphere of the 1930’s into Chekhov’s classic. Escaping from life and disappointment after success especially are themes that are prevalent in The Seagull and can be easily reflected into a life in the Great Depression. I will expand on the specific elements I will use in a later section!

Themes, motifs, and the message behind it all

“It’s very difficult to find absolutely what it’s about.”
– Chris Honer, director of a production of The Seagull at HOME theatre in Manchester, England.

The Seagull is a play that is open to a spectrum of interpretations. It is centered on 4 main characters, who all happen to be artists. All of them have personal struggles and insecurities that plague their life, preventing them from ever attaining happiness. Arkadina is a self-absorbed, selfish and flamboyant woman. She is a fading actress and is trying to come to terms with that. Trigorin is a very admired and successful writer who actually lacks any creativity whatsoever. He is shallow by nature, probably as a
defense mechanism. Nina is an aspiring actress who puts acting on a pedestal; she is idealistic, young and naïve, never fulfilling her goals of success and fame. Konstantin is probably the weakest character in the show. His depression stems from his unrequited love from Nina and his failure as a playwright. Each character strives to fulfill their personal desires and improve themselves but ends up disappointed- eternally unhappy people. They reflect everyday people this way: they crave success, love, fame, money to give them happiness. They each love someone or something that will never return the love to them. This play explores several thematic topics: unrequited love, the human ego, happiness and what defines it.

“I am writing a play which I shall probably not finish before the end of November. I am writing it not without pleasure, though I swear fearfully at the conventions of the stage. It's a comedy, there are three women's parts, six men's, four acts, landscapes (view over a lake); a great deal of conversation about literature, little action, tons of love.”

- Anton Chekhov, a letter dated October 1895

I noticed that this show is not centered around its plot, which is unusual. Instead of a traditionally structured play, Chekhov illustrates the lives of the characters: the pitfalls, connections and relationships established work as the show itself. Looking back, with everything in mind, I realize now how the first production of Chekhov’s work could be misinterpreted. Chekhov was ahead of his time; he truly took realism to a new level by choosing to center the show on the depth of his characters, rather than plot or action.

I found it interesting that Chekhov wrote this intending it to be a comedy. To me, The Seagull is a dark satire on real peoples' lives, reflecting traits often found in characters we meet in everyday life. The comedy, however, lies in how the 4 main characters’ fatal flaws are taken to the extreme. Still there is a piece of every character that we can find within ourselves. This raw style in Chekhov’s writing strikes a chord within the audience; I think this is the reason that this play has become a classic and is still relevant today. Times have changed, circumstances have changed, but the human condition is timeless.

Theatre processes: Artistic responses and live theatre experiences

“Chekhov places his characters' lives on stage, as people striving for an ideal image, desiring to be extraordinary. He suggests that just like the living seagull which is changed into art, there can also be a merging of life and art on stage. Life can be expressed through art, of course, but life also is a type of art in itself - it is a
performance. Humans' lives, like those Chekhov puts on stage, are but performances themselves; day-to-day actions create the scenes and the inevitable death provides the curtain.” (www.flamingnet.com)

This concept of relating life and art truly intrigued me! I knew it would be a topic I would want to explore in my production of The Seagull. Funny enough, I realized that this idea was already present in aspects of my life, especially in live theatre experiences. I had just never made the connection.

1. The famous quote from Shakespeare, “All the world’s a stage and all the men and women merely players”, comes from As You Like it. I have actually seen a production of As You Like it by William Shakespeare at the Alley Theatre that worked as an influence for my vision. Although a classic text by every sense of the word, they set it in modern times. This showed me how this is not only possible but can often enhance the meaning of the work to set a play in a different time period. It changes so many circumstances and transforms what everything means as a whole to the characters and to the audience. The play seemed almost suspended in time. The thing that I drew the most inspiration from was the Forest of Arden. It was not a traditional forest, the characters wore present-day clothes and lines were sung as songs that were played on guitars. It culminated in a whimsical, soft, folk-like and quirky production. The use of nature to convey a feeling is a concept I will incorporate in my show (cherry blossoms, mainly). Drawing from the quote, I also aim to explore this idea of the human life as an art form, as a performance.

2. A second immersion experience was seeing a production of Columbinus by Stephen Karam and PJ Paparelli. It explores American high-school stereotypes in the first act. In the second act, these stereotypes become real people as they play out the grim events from the Columbine High School massacre in 1999. Towards the end, a light washed over the stage. All the characters came out, in a surreal, after-death experience; they came together to speak words over this event. School shootings is such a relevant issue, and has become a fear for many students coming to school. Even though I had never experienced anything like what happened at Columbine, I related to the characters. They’re so much like me in so many ways, and that was the spookiest part. Such a tragedy could happen to anyone, anywhere. I felt chills go all over my body. I want this effect on my audience members. I want Konstantin’s suicide to unite the characters and the audience, creating a full-circle.

3. Lastly, seeing Peace in our Time by Noël Coward had a huge influence on my second moment that I will expand on later. It was a twist on the events of WWII, culminating in an intense drama with an interesting premise behind it. The main element that inspired me from this show was that it featured voiceovers of radio recordings. I felt that this production element truly transported me to the world
of this show. It was also so eerie, hearing the radio static and the voices talking about the war approaching; I felt captivated and haunted. I want to utilize a radio voiceover in my production to evoke this same feeling and help give the atmosphere of the 1930’s setting.

MY VISION:

Emulating the 1930’s

This was my initial sketch of my idea for the stage in all four acts:

Very rough, but you get the idea! It’s set in a classy garden outdoors for Act I/II. I want some rusty, folksy vibes from this set, very detailed, realistic, historically accurate, lots of 1920s-1930’s décor. Charming, almost ethereal. I want the colors (of anything that isn’t nature) to be faded and muted. The flowers should be a vintage cream white as a stark contrast. The tree should arc over everything. The audience should feel like they are sitting outside with the characters on a summer evening.

Couldn’t quite draw this one how I envisioned it, but here it is. It’s a dining room setting for the final two acts. I want the opulence of the set to emulate the faded glamour of the 1920’s. It will provide a deep contrast with the depression and mood throughout, emphasizing the rather dark tone of the production.
Here is a photo that provided further inspiration for my set:

![Photo](http://mylusciouslife.com)

This is the kind of elegance I want! This is from the movie set of Baz Luhrmann’s *The Great Gatsby*, which provided a significant amount of my aesthetic inspiration. I would keep the floors a rich brown, except darken the curtains, make them thicker, red. The only light things should be the flowers and the candles... I want almost a haunting reminder of what used to be, the golden 20’s that became a nationwide depression.

**Costumes/ Makeup**

Note: I am specifying the costumes and makeup for the four main characters only, hopefully this will give you a feel for the look I envision. With this, it should be easier to use as a base for the rest of the characters in the show!

I found a makeup line called Besame Cosmetics, which is a luxury vintage makeup brand. They are historically accurate and create modern reproductions of classic makeup that real women wore in the 1930’s. I will be assigning a lipstick color along with costume ideas to both Arkadina and Nina, representing their personalities and how I want them conveyed in the production.
Arkadina: (Thunderhorse Vintage)

Nina: (www.sensibility.com)

1930- Noir Red
This deep matte plum is perfect for Arkadina. It is dark, gives that mixture of power, glamour and sophistication that she embodies.

Konstantin and Trigorin:

On the left, I really like this look for Konstantin. It looks put-together, but definitely is more casual than something Trigorin would wear, providing a contrast. It gives off an effortless vibe.

1935- Cherry Red
Innocent, while still brave and vibrant enough to match her ambition. This color screams Nina!

On the right, I would want Trigorin in a suit like that. It’s simple, but a bit fancier. Trigorin is confident and is a womanizer; I want to
portray him as very vain and into his looks. (as a cover up for his insecurities as a writer, of course)

(www.fashion-era.com)

Transitions

I want the transitions between acts in this production to have major significance in character development. Each one will begin with a blue wash over the stage and swing music playing. This music and blue light will echo and act as a transition device in the production. I want to use about 45 seconds- 1 minute between acts to expand upon and illustrate the characters inner struggles to the audience.

I would also like to make it clear that no words will be added in these transition scenes as that would be altering the script. Only music will be playing in the background as each of the four main characters reveal the deepest part of themselves. The upbeat nature of the music will contrast with the sadness that is prevalent throughout this play and in these particular snapshots of these characters’ mind.

I found the perfect song for these transitions. It’s “I Can't Break The Habit Of You”, by Dolly Dawn & Her Dawn Patrol, recorded January 27th, 1937. It’s in this video, (all filled with music that would work flawlessly to have the intended impact.)

https://youtu.be/2LG9JuOPA_c

- Arkadina’s transition, (calling them blues from here on out), is after Act 3. She is coming to terms with her faded career as a silent movie star, now that talkies are rising to popularity. She’s tearing up non-digital films from the peak of her career in a fit of rage and emotion. I credit this image as a big inspiration for this scene.

(My own photo)
This is my favorite scene from the movie, The Artist. George is tearing up films and ends up burning them. I want THIS—darkness, silhouettes, silent screaming, maybe Arkadina is smoking, her lipstick/mascara is smeared all over. Her elegant façade is crushed.

- Nina’s blue is also after Act 3. Smoothly after Arkadina’s meltdown, lights will blackout, and come back up on Nina standing in front of an empty crib. Swing music has returned. It’s been two years since we last saw her; in that time, she got pregnant with Trigorin’s baby and lost it. The death of Nina’s baby stood as a representation of her unrequited love with Trigorin and her lack of success as an actress. She watches over silently. Perhaps she hums along to the music.

This picture is a fantastic inspiration, this is essentially how I want it to look against with the French doors that I have implemented in the dining room setting.

(www.decoweddings.com)
- Konstantin’s blue occurs after Act One. His blue will consist of him typing furiously on his typewriter. Eventually he gives up, maybe tears up the paper he wrote. I want to leave these choices up to the actor playing Konstantin, but this scene definitely needs to convey his self-hatred regarding his writing and lack of success thereof.

- Trigorin’s blue happens after Act Two. Trigorin masks his insecurity and personal unhappiness within himself through his promiscuity with women. No one expects his struggle as he is painted to be famous, confident, and desired by all. In his blue, he is self-medicating by binge drinking vodka, revealing his alcoholism as a vehicle to hide his pain. It is an interesting parallel that Smirnoff was being mass produced from 1818-1896, when Chekhov wrote this play. Alcoholism was a major issue in the 1930’s as well; drinking was a popular coping mechanism for the Great Depression, one that will be portrayed through Trigorin’s character.

My directorial intentions and the intended impact on an audience

My goal with this production is to help tell this timeless story through a varied combination of production elements. Chekhov wrote this and created characters that are so universal that all of us can even relate to some extent. Maybe the characters in The Seagull don’t end up with what they want, or who they want, or anything at all—but that’s life. Anton Chekhov, through this piece, uses art to create life, and life to create art...That’s what I want my audience to see.

I want a set that whether outdoors or indoors, reflects the time period. I would like the audience to feel like they have stepped into the 1930’s and living through these characters. I want it to have a glamorous and elegant atmosphere. At the same time, it’s cold, eerie, and empty; as in the Golden Age has long left, and all that is left are reminders of how sweet life used to be and could be.

I want the audience to see the time period also mirrored through costumes and makeup that are true to the 1930’s. The music, radios, typewriters, should all strive to be as historically accurate as possible in order to give the most immersive experience possible for an audience member.
This play is a fabulous example of the power of theatre. Theatre has been around for so long because it moves and shakes society. I want this to be a piece that aids in that. I want my audience to leave this production with an impression that stays with them for more than a short period of time. I want the audience to travel on a complex journey with the characters of this production. The audience should be able to find a piece of themselves, no matter how small, in at least one of the characters. Whether it is Arkadina’s arrogance, Trigorin’s insecurity and shallow nature, Nina’s naivety, or perhaps Konstantin’s constant unhappiness, the audience will be able to identify with these character traits and emotions. The issues that Chekhov’s characters struggle with are ones that every person can relate to in some aspect of their life. As a result, my target audience is quite broad because *The Seagull* spans age, gender or status. For example, high school students could relate to this production on many levels—especially over thoughts of suicide, depression, and the plight of unrequited love. But unlike many productions, *The Seagull*’s impact is not limited to only this group of people. Anybody who can understand, process, and connect to these characters should be in this audience. I personally have dealt with so many of the issues that Chekhov’s characters experience; this is why I resonated so deeply immediately upon reading this text. It did not matter that I had never lived in this historical or cultural context, as the potency of *The Seagull*’s themes rose above those boundaries. I would like the audience to experience the power of connecting to such inherent human desires and emotions. As such, I would like the audience to have a very raw and personal reaction to this show. I purposely gave each character a transition period that would add layers of depth to whom they are so that the audience humanizes these characters. I want the audience to question the human condition and their own ambitions and motives.

I also hope to evoke a stronger sense of empathy from the audience. By moving through the ups and downs of these characters lives, I intend for this audience to realize that everybody, no matter how perfect they may seem, are dealing with their own inner demons. It is ideal that this production allows the audience the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. Even if an audience member has never experienced a specific issue in their own lives, they can learn to recognize it in others and empathize with others’ struggles.

I intend for the cherry blossoms and the motif of nature in this production to give the audience a sense of serenity among so much pain. The calm that the cherry blossoms evoke contrast with the unhappiness that *The Seagull* is centered on. I hope for the nature present in the set to give the audience relief, and remind them that among hardship there is always a silver lining… even if it is something as simple as the beauty of nature. The tree that looms over the set persists on blooming, despite its surroundings filled with melancholia. This symbolizes the human condition and its tendencies to come full circle. Even after a tragedy such as Konstantin’s suicide, cherry blossoms will continue to bloom again, and death will soon become life.
Above all, I want this production to be a source of comfort for the audience upon finding characters in this world that are truly, truly relatable. Seeing yourself or your loved ones in The Seagull’s protagonists makes living in this big world a little easier. I believe that’s what Chekhov created with The Seagull. Life on stage.

Two moments

Cherry Blossoms

Cherry blossoms, inspired from the location of Chekhov’s creation of this play, will be a recurring motif in my production. The blossom of them represents the cycle of life and the inevitability of death, life going on in spite of unhappiness. There will be a dead winter tree in the upstage center of the stage. It will be visible in both scenes, outdoors in the garden, or through a French window once the play moves inside. Therefore, I will be using cherry blossoms in both of my moments, with the intent of creating a full circle for the audience.

1. The very beginning of the show.

It is the top of the show. The curtains open slowly to reveal cherry blossoms attached to fishing twine, as if they are floating from the sky, as if they have replaced stars. It looks like there is only a blank space and the cherry blossoms softly swirling around. I want this to be a very aesthetically pleasing and serene moment for the audience. This is the first moment of the production that the audience experiences. I intend for them to feel spiritually connected to this production and its characters before they even know who they are. I want this feeling of serenity to wash away whatever problems the audience walked in with, so that they can complete immerse themselves in this story.

I would use a blue LED light to wash the stage in a sapphire blue color. I picked this moment to implement a voiceover. After doing my research on the 1930’s, I chose to play a recording of Franklin D. Roosevelt from his First Inaugural address in 1933. First there is radio static, then his voice slowly fades in.
“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself”. I picked that quote to be the focal point of the voiceover because I feel like this embodies not only the tone of the 1930’s as an era, but for the lives of these characters. Therefore, this voiceover acts as an ominous foreshadowing device for them. The very thing that led to their destruction was themselves. Swing music fades in immediately. Lights are up, revealing the garden outdoor setting for Act 1, and the play commences.

I made a visual representation of how I want this scene to feel.

2. The last moment of the show- Konstantin commits suicide

A gunshot is heard offstage.

At the sound of the shot, cherry blossoms fall from the ceiling. The blue LED light returns immediately, however it is softer in intensity. Swing music is playing. It is a different song- sweeter, happier. Everyone is frozen except for Arkadina and Nina, who get up from where they are, as if this is happening out-of-body, and walk over to the winter tree on the stage. They each take a cherry blossom and hold it in their hands, staring at it. The acting should be curiosity mixed with sadness, almost child-like in nature. This “scene within a scene” is like taking a sneak peek into their minds as they hear the gunshot. However, they still have not registered what has happened. I envision this very otherworldly, like it’s not quite them who is the driving force behind their movement; perhaps it is Konstantin’s spirit.
The music fades out. The second Arkadina and Nina return to their old spots, the lights come back, brighter than before, and everyone is unfrozen. The lines continue as if nothing had happened until the last one, which is Dr. Dorn’s …

“Take Irina Nikolaevna somewhere away from here. The fact is, Konstantin Gavrilovich has shot himself.”

The swing music returns. Arkadina and Nina are the only ones remaining on the stage. This time they know exactly what has happened to Konstantin and are being themselves. It’s as if we have fast-forwarded through having to tell these characters about Konstantin’ suicide, maybe a few days or so in time. This is not their fresh reaction to his death. True to Chekhov’s style, the “drama” happens offstage (in this case, it’s happened). Arkadina and Nina each take a cherry blossom and tie it to the winter tree, who now symbolizes Konstantin’s memory. This moment should be tender, tugging at the heart strings of the audience. This moment was inevitable, and deep-down they both know that, as Konstantin was destined to be unhappy.

Swing music is fading out as the stage blacks out. The curtain closes.

**Conclusion:**

Anton Chekhov’s *The Seagull* is still performed today for a reason. It stands a timeless text with characters that transcend boundaries; we can find qualities of them within us. I hope that the audience leaves this play pondering the human condition: the elements of love, desire and ambition within us that can either lift us up or destroy us. I hope that the audience is enthralled and enchanted with the complex characters and relationships they see played out in front of them. Most of all, I hope they can reflect inside themselves on how to improve and discover the one treasure *The Seagull*’s protagonists never could – happiness.