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SELECTED DIRECTOR PROGRAM NOTES

STUPID FUCKING BIRD, 2015

If you read the first act of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* carefully, you'll notice that all the young people of the play -- Constantine, Nina, Medvedenko, and Masha -- complain bitterly about their parents. While their angst may be a touch adolescent, their dissatisfactions are more than valid: Constantine's father is out of the picture, and his mother, a famous actress, not only overshadows him but has neglected him his whole life to pursue her career; Medvedenko is forced to forgo basic pleasures like tobacco to support his family, including his parents, on a teacher's salary; Masha's father is imperious, and her mother is obviously in love with another man; Nina's mother is presumably dead, and her father and step-mother are intolerant and most probably abusive.

All four of these characters suffer a legitimate void. And they all believe, or want to believe, that they can fill that void with the fulfillment of their romantic or artistic ambitions (or both). That is, they all fiercely compensate for the emotional malnourishment of their childhood (and present lives), by fighting for *relevance* -- a relevance that will only be affirmed by the *other* (the object of their lust, an adoring audience, the validation of critics, the belated unconditional acceptance of mother). And they all project their desires -- with great subconscious brilliance -- onto an object that will surely never adequately return the favor.

Then again, aren't we all doing this to one degree or another? In fact, this might be exactly what *Stupid Fucking Bird* is itself doing. In this case, the over-shadowing parental figure is Chekhov himself. Like Shakespeare before him, Chekhov, for most theater artists, stands as a towering patriarch. What are we to do in the face of his stupid fucking genius? I mean -- what? How do we top his plays? How do we move on from them? How do carve out our own relevance in relation?

In *The Seagull*, when Constantine rails against old forms (and when Con does it in *SFB*) and cries that the answer -- to everything -- is only in new forms, his aesthetic argument is really only a thinly veiled sublimation of his need to strike out at his mother, to differentiate himself from her. Though when he summons her, and his friends and family, to witness a performance of his experimental play that implicitly mocks her art, he's at once being oppositional *and* begging for her approval. He's at once saying to her, "Fuck you and please love me."

And that is precisely the posture Aaron Posner assumes in dealing with our theatrical father, Chekhov. By reorganizing Chekhov's play -- by toying with its narrative, and mostly by playing with its form -- Posner is at once thumbing his nose at Chekhov and writing him a love letter (he is doing just what Constantine attempted, only more successfully!). By pulling *The Seagull* apart and reconstituting it into a post-modern structural pastiche, with songs, movement sequences, audience involvement, and alternating genres, SFB makes sure to assert nothing is sacred, not even Chekhov.

At the same time, with an adaptation that is irreverent and bold, Posner adoringly brings out the best of Chekhov to a contemporary American audience that is prone to mistake Chekhov's work as dour and slow. Indeed, *Stupid Fucking Bird* lays vigorous claim to how fun, funny, passionate, energized, sexy, absurd, heart-breaking, contradictory, soulful, and surprising Chekhov really is. And how fun, funny, passionate, energized, sexy, absurd, heart-breaking, contradictory, soulful, and surprising our lives on this strange earth really are.

IMAGINARY INVALID, 2016

The first association many people have with *The Imaginary Invalid* is as a satire of the medical profession. While that's certainly one aspect of the play, I don't quite see it as the play's dominant theme. Argan's hypochondria, his manic pursuit of a cure for his "ills" is, deeper down, an expression of a less definable emotional ache. Argan substitutes a list of imagined maladies for that ache, so to convince himself a material solution is possible. As a variation on that theme, his daughter Angelique similarly "aches." She, too, thinks the solution lies outside of herself, in her case in the object of her affections, Cleante. If she can just *have* Cleante, all will be well.

Argan and Angelique each ache, but each in the ways typical of their age: Angelique pines romantically, while Argan grieves the slipping physical and social power that can come with aging. Indeed, his insistence that he's ill is as attention getting as anything else -- if he's sick and dying, well, nobody will have license to leave him.

Both Argan and Angelique are naïve or foolish in their own ways. Of course, none of us can ever fully escape life's pangs, though there's good fun in seeing others try. While ultimately there are no panaceas, how human to believe there are, and how funny to grasp for them. And Moliere has created a world of delightful freaks in *The Imaginary Invalid*, each passionately grasping for silver bullets. To our good fortune, James Magruder has written a spirited and contemporary translation/adaptation of the play that captures the full verve and hilarity of the 1673 original. We hope you enjoy it.

MR. BURNS A POST ELECTRIC PLAY, 2017

It's important I don't tell you end of this story. It would ruin it. Suffice it to say that *Mr. Burns, A Post Electric Play* -- a great story in and of itself -- examines the very nature of storytelling. Though I can tell you that it begins, as the first human storytelling likely began, around the light of the campfire. And it ends, rather more complexly, but still in relation to light.

Exactly *why* human beings represent their experiences and their fantasies in stories may be too complex to be completely understood. What we *do* know is that the need for story is universal -- it is a pillar of the human experience, ubiquitous across time and culture. In his book, *Three Uses of the Knife*, David Mamet suggests that storytelling is fundamentally an exercising of our adaptive capacity -- the very thing that has enabled us to survive. Certainly, for the characters in *Mr. Burns*, storytelling is tantamount to survival.

All cultures need to tell stories, and our stories themselves are connected -- iterative variations of one another. Bugs Bunny was born from Br'er Rabbit, who in turn was born from African folklore. Many of Shakespeare's basic storylines existed before he wrote his plays. The stories of the gods and heroes of 12th Century BC Greece were transmitted orally for four hundred years, written down in the 8th century BC (very appropriately for the purposes our play by Homer in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*), only to eventually be adapted into dramatic works in the 4th century BC by Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides. The citizens going to see the plays at the Festival of Dionysus *all knew these stories already*. What they were going to see was Euripides' latest spin. And that spin was, obliquely or directly, a response to present-day times.

Similarly, *Mr. Burns* is in some ways an age-old story, a variation on a theme. It is at once universal *and* a product of its times. It is highly referential, and its main reference -- *The*

Simpsons – is perhaps one of the most referential story forms ever, each episode packed with scores of references to popular culture, literature, and history. This kind of layered referentiality, sometimes ironic, sometimes sincere, creates its own unique aesthetic that our cave painting ancestors would be baffled by. What they *would* recognize in *Mr. Burns*, however, is this: sometimes the closest we human beings can get to expressing our awe -- at the beauty and brutality of the world, at the inextricability of life and death -- is by telling a story around the campfire.

ANGELS IN AMERICA, 2018

It's interesting, maybe ironic, that twenty-seven years after it premiered at the Eureka Theatre, *Angels in America* is experiencing a revival, with performances on Broadway and at theaters across the country. Ironic because its dominant theme is change: its inevitability and griefs, though its absolute necessity, too. Our relationship to this play – as a topical piece – surely is different now than it had been when it was being performed twenty-seven years ago. Certainly, like all great plays, *Angels in America* is both of its time and beyond it, and so withstands reiteration.

The iconography of *Angels* is as almost as old as human culture itself. What, then, to make of it exactly? In Act II, the character Joe Pitt makes the play's only direct reference to a specific ANGEL – it is God's angel from Genesis 32:22, an angel God sends to wrestle Jacob. Jacob must fight this angel alone, be crippled by it, and inevitably lose the fight. That is, God sends this Angel to remind us that in the end we must lose – that we are ultimately powerless in the face of the forces of life and death.

No other demographic in modern American history better understood fighting against overwhelming forces and insurmountable odds, in death's shadow, but imbued with the spirit of life than the gay community in 1980s New York City. They fought that fight with great elan and humor. Indeed, *Angels in America* is a very funny play, epitomized by its central suffering figure, Prior Walter. Prior, though in great pain, never loses his wit. Even at the end, face to face with a confrontational Angel, perhaps about to die, he cracks a joke. Let's not forget that Kushner describes *Angels* as a "Gay Fantasia." So, while this play might be profound and painful, it is also fantastic, sort of like life on earth.

TWELFTH NIGHT, 2018

Twelfth Night is a play of delicious contradictions. Of course, it's funny and can delight. It's also framed by sadness, by two women grieving for dead brothers. And while the play gets roughly "happier" as it goes, it maintains its awareness of the transience of youth, of love, and of life, woven in through Feste's songs:

"Come away, come away death
And in sad cypress let me be laid.
Fie away, fie away breath,
I am slain by a fair cruel maid.
My shroud of white, stuck all with yew,
O prepare it.
My part of death no one so true

Did share it."

Melancholic and *yet* -- recognition of impermanence can be as much an exhortation as a lament. When Feste sings "In delay there lies no plenty, /Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty./Youth's a stuff will not endure," he delivers us to the contradictory consequence of the awareness of mortality.

And more paradox still can be found in the play's exploration of human desire. That is, it's *because* Viola is disguised that Olivia's and Orsino's homoeroticisms emerge. So, while her "mask" hides her identity, it also reveals truth by giving license for the expression of repressed desires. Similarly, Feste impersonates Sir Topas to express his deepest contempt for Malvolio, and Malvolio puts on a costume (yellow stockings) to reveal his actual desire for Olivia.

In this sense, our ability to separate what is the mask and what is the face becomes difficult if not impossible. Add to that mistaken-identity-hijinks, and occasional meta references to the audience itself, and *Twelfth Night* sends us on an epistemological journey in which, as Feste says in Act IV, "Nothing that is so is so."

In a time that cries out for the reclaiming of foundational truths, that's not so reassuring. Though know this: *Twelfth Night's* love, laughter, longing, and song – through the long arc of the human experience at least -- do endure.

GHETTO, 2009

For the Jews of the Vilna Ghetto, even the quotidian was fraught with wrenching and paradoxical moral dilemmas. The simple joys of school, of attending a lecture, of going to see a play, became complicated within the frame of the Holocaust. On the one hand, a life without these things within the abject circumstances of the ghetto would have been one of utter despair. On the other hand, even the shadow of normalcy might engender a false sense of security, discouraging physical resistance. That is, the pursuit of culture, while spiritually imperative may well have been strategically unwise.

This paradox may have been especially painful for the theater artists of the ghetto. The sociopolitical efficacy of theater was certainly brought into question in the context of brutality. Many of Vilna's residents objected to the establishment of the Ghetto theater. In large part, these objections were based on the belief that "play acting" dishonored the recently dead and those mourning the dead. Others objected to anything that dissuaded Jews from physical resistance, or which distracted from confronting as fact the prospect of annihilation. Meanwhile, after initial objections, the theater in Vilna became successful. Performances were sold out weeks in advance. Audiences were able to – however briefly – shed despondency. Some ghetto citizens, knowing there were to be deported the next morning, put on their best clothes the night before to attend a play.

While it may offend to suggest that some European Jews were slow to physically respond to violence, we can also regard that response as the byproduct of a set of otherwise deeply admirable characteristics. Certainly, the Jews of Vilna had developed a wonderful culture filled to the brim with intellectual and artistic activity. It is indeed *possible* that that culture may have retarded full-scale physical resistance to the Nazis. And yet, as a Jewish-American, whose grandfather was Lithuanian, I consider it an honor to have come from a cultural tradition that was not predisposed to violence.

All of this is to say that the Holocaust cast the role of theater -- and of art in general -- into doubt. Joshua Sobol's compelling play, *Ghetto*, dives straight into that doubt raising many questions – in subject matter, structure, and style – without offering any definitive answers. It's here that I begin to find what I consider points of aesthetic vitality for storytelling: contradiction, complexity, ambiguity, paradox. Moreover, the asking of prickly, substantive questions (and the critical thinking that follows) seems healthier to me than the proclamation of moral truths. It also seems in the best of the Jewish ethos.

Even the fact of a Holocaust play itself raises difficult questions. First, is it possible for the Holocaust to be dealt with in works of art at all? Second, if it can be dealt with, will the experience be cheapened, trivialized, or exploited in the treatment it is given? And third, what moral responsibility do artists have in taking up the Holocaust theme? The answers to these questions are complicated, controversial, and avoid the monolithic.¹

This is not to say that everything is relative all the time, that we can never have any firm ground beneath our feet. Here's something that seems true about human beings: the need to converse, to commune, to express, to hear and be heard is psychologically foundational. It is a need so profound that it asserts itself even in the most grotesquely disadvantageous circumstances. Astonishingly, the Jews of the Holocaust not only maintained theater in the ghettos, but everywhere they were confined, including in the death camps. Imagine that: a play in a death camp.

What's more, these performances were sometimes even able to maintain some chutzpah. In Buchenwald, revues were performed in camp barracks, strained by the presence of armed SS guards. At once such performance, an emcee, who had worked professionally in cabarets before the war, introduced the night's program with a typical patter: "You know, times really don't change. I remember when we had the Kaiser, we always had some swine pushing us around. Later when we had the Republic, was it any different? No, we still had swine pushing us around. And what of today?" He waited for an answer. The air was electric as the prisoners watched the SS men out of the corners of their eyes. No answer. Finally, he answered the questions himself. "Why today is Monday."²

¹ *The Theatre and the Holocaust*, Introduction, Edited by Robert Skloot, University of Wisconsin Press, 1982, pg. 11

² *Theatrical Performance During the Holocaust*, Edited by Rebecca Rovit and Alan Goldfarb, "The Freest Theater in the Third Reich: In the German Concentration Camps," by Curt Daniel, John Hopkins University Press, 1999, pg. 154