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**Staging Gogol: Making Classical Texts Accessible for  
Contemporary Audiences**

**Notes to the Rehearsal Process**

As a director, my goal is always to have the audience recognize themselves in the world I create onstage. Though over 175 years old, Gogol's play contains an incredibly contemporary critique of the myth of "true bliss" and demonstrates the absurd pressures we place on ourselves and others to complete one's life through marriage. I wanted my audience to see themselves inside Gogol's hyperbolic world, as objects driven by social programming. In order to create a staging that achieved this, I extended the a-historical approach of the translation and adaptation of Gogol's text I co-authored with Yana Meerzon to the production's design and worked with an ensemble of actors to create a physical approach to Gogol's humour.

The notion of accessibility was always at the forefront of my mind while staging the first production of this new translation as part of the University of Ottawa's 2016/2017 season. When I speak of accessibility, I am referring to the presentation of material to an audience in a way that is approachable – where no previous knowledge of the material being presented is needed to comprehend, interact with, and relate to its subject matter. Audiences require no previous knowledge of the play's text, nor its historical context, in order to engage with its performance.

By employing an a-historic approach to the design and stylized form of acting, the production made Gogol's 175 year old play accessible to a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience, demonstrating that our quest for happily ever after remains as prevalent -- and as absurd -- as it was in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia. What follows is a detailed explanation of the a-historical design elements employed by the production, and my interpretation of each of Gogol's characters as they relate to the comic types found in *Commedia Dell 'arte*.

To remove Gogol's play from its original setting - 19<sup>th</sup> century St. Petersburg, Russia - which our contemporary Canadian audience would have a limited understanding of, I asked the

designers to avoid visual signifiers that were indicative of that historical era. Instead the design created a self-contained a-historical world that was able to emphasize the hyperbolic qualities of Gogol's play. The design emphasized the societal pressures the characters face with moving walls, and the absurdity of Gogol's text in bright colours. By using metaphor and colour to evoke an emotion, rather than a historic setting, the design, like the translation, was made accessible to our 21<sup>st</sup> century audience.

Though Gogol is credited as the father of Russian realism, in its characters the *Marriage* heavily relies on recognizable comic types such as those found in Commedia Dell 'arte. Using physical comedy traditions known as lazzi (or shtick) found in Commedia Dell 'arte, circus, and vaudeville, I worked with the actors to create a stylized physical approach to Gogol's comedy. Physical comedy by definition does not employ language and engages an audience through the information being presented within a physical routine. So, by breaking down Gogol's characters into recognizable comic types, such as "the cultured snob" (Anuchkin), "the dirty old man" (Zhevakin), or "the brute" (Omelette), the audience was able to recognize each character from their own cultural precedents. By using a stylized approach that relies on recognizable comic types and prioritizes physical rather than verbal forms of communication, the *Marriage* was presented in a style that was accessible for a 21<sup>st</sup> century Canadian audience.

In the following, I will describe and examine my work with the actors, suggesting exercises or resources that other directors may employ while attempting to create a similar stylized form of acting.

### **Creating a Set Design through Emotion, Not History.**

Wanting the audience to recognize themselves in Gogol's story I -- as well as the production's set designer Roger Schultz and costume designer Vanessa Imeson -- felt that if the production's design looked "Russian" our North American audience would easily write off the play as foreign. At the same time making the production's design look overly contemporary felt heavy handed, as it would force an older society with very dated societal expectations into our own world. Instead, we wanted the audience to feel that they were somewhere in between Gogol's world and their own. To achieve this, we first had to establish the world we were trying to create onstage.

Important to the production's design was the ability to illustrate the world surrounding Gogol's characters. Within Gogol's short stories *The Nose* and *The Overcoat*, the city of St. Petersburg takes on its own character; the city's police and clerical staff act as its arms and legs who slap and kick the protagonists into action. Like these stories, *Marriage* is a story where its protagonists have no agency, and are apprehensively thrust into action by the world around them. In order to make the production accessible to our 21<sup>st</sup> century audience, we needed to create a new – and self-explained – world for Gogol's characters to exist in. More importantly, the a-historical design needed to provide the audience with an understanding of the world as a character within the play.

The play is based on an uncanny feeling; laughter is often at the expense of a character's suffering, as they inhabit a world where they possess no agency. This is best exemplified when Gogol's protagonists, Podkolyosin and Agafya, are left alone onstage for the first time in the last 15 pages of the play (Act II Scene XIV); a mockery of the “meet cute” trope favoured in the genre of romance, Podkolyosin and Agafya spend most of the scene in silence, completely unaware of how to hold themselves. Though Gogol employs many other characters in forcing his protagonists together, it seems as though the world itself slowly closes in on the two “lovers,” reminding them that “marriage is the only way” (Act I, Scene I). This feeling is crucial for the audience's understanding of the world as a character within play. It became the job of the design team to create the sense of oppression in which Gogol's characters live and to convey it to the audience. The goal of creating the world of Gogol's play, and the feeling of its pressures closing in, became the jumping off point for the set design.

The *Marriage* takes place in three locations: Podkolyosin's house, Agafya's living room, and an interior room within Agafya's home. Rather than setting the third location in any room in Agafya's house, Schultz and I decided that the third location would be Agafya's bedroom. This allowed the action to be a continuous intrusion into Agafya's private space –



*Roger Schultz's set design. Even Gilchrist (Zhevakin), Cullen Mcgrail (Kochkaryov), Matt Hertendy (Podkolyosin), Luke Brown (Anuchkin), Sam Randazzo (Omelette).*

demonstrating that there was no where she could go to escape the pressures of choosing a husband. The design consisted of three 10' tall walls and a 14' circular riser centre stage; with each change in location the walls moved inward, until they were adjacent to the centre stage riser. As each location changed, the space became more limited, as did Podkolyosin and Agafya's ability to escape getting married. By gradually restricting the playing space, the set design acted as a metaphor for pressure mounting from the world surrounding Podkolyosin and Agafya. The walls closed in on the characters in between scenes, accompanied by an interlude where the ensemble enacted the mounting burden of the marriage business the protagonists faced.

To stress this feeling even further, I created a series of interludes that acted as transitions in between scene locations, as well as a brief prologue. The purpose of these transitions was to illustrate the world itself, and how it influenced the action in the following scenes. These transitions used the entire ensemble, who did not portray individual characters, but instead worked as a unit to illustrate the pressures to marry within the society inside Gogol's play.

The play begins with Podkolyosin lying in his bed smoking. In our production Podkolyosin lay in bed dressed in a night gown, looking incredibly melancholic, appearing to be a "man of no purpose or meaning" (Act I Scene XI). In order to justify Podkolyosin's first line "Marriage!



Matt Hertendy (Podkolyosin) centre. Left to right: Even Gilchrist, Robin Stars Breiche, Cullen Mcgrail, Luke Brown, Katie Macneill, Monica Bradford-Lea, Sam Randazzo (as cast).

Marriage is the only way” (Act I Scene I), the opening moments of the staging illustrated the world around Podkolyosin, and juxtaposed his melancholic incomplete life with a society who had fulfilled their duty of marriage and discovered “true bliss.” To achieve this, I worked with the entire cast to create a series of dynamic stage pictures, consisting of drinking, partying, and

celebrating their sense of completeness in the world. Juxtaposed with these stage pictures, Podkolyosin would lay smoking in the fetal position, appearing to be unborn and incapable of any action. Within this brief staging, the audience was able to witness the world of the play and how it informed the action onstage.

Similar to the opening moments of the production, each location change was accompanied by an interlude called to evoke the Gogol’s phantasmagoria. Just as the world demands Podkolyosin fulfill the society’s expectations to be married, the same is expected from Agafya. To illustrate this the production used a deck 52 playing cards – featured in Act I Scene XIII as a fortune telling tool – to demonstrate the multitude of suitors Agafya must choose from. Within the transition from Act I Scene XII to Scene XIII, Arina and Fyokla each presented playing cards representing the various suitors for Agafya to consider. As Agafya rejected each card, other members of the cast crept closer and closer until Agafya’s personal space was completely invaded. The entire cast became invested in Agafya’s decisions – and continual rejections. In this moment, once again, the cast embodied the expectations surrounding Agafya, not individual characters. As the transition reaches its peak, the cast showered Agafya in playing cards, emphasizing her indecision and the overwhelming nature of the society’s expectations of marriage.

Schultz and I also attempted to capture this overall feeling of Gogol's absurd and uncanny world within the set. To achieve this we used imagery we associate with the concept of "true bliss" – often found in contemporary weddings – and hyperbolized its presence onstage. We added the sense of chaos and disorder to the bright and colourful patterns often used for decorations of contemporary weddings. The set design of the 1986 television show *Pee Wee Herman's Playhouse* became a useful resource image, given its disarray of bright patterns. By utilizing an aesthetic driven by a feeling found within Gogol's writing, Schultz was able to create a set design that was void of signifiers that may indicate a historical period. However, this did not solve the issue of allowing an audience with no knowledge of 19<sup>th</sup> St. Petersburg to understand the class system underpinning Gogol's world.

### **Costuming: Establishing Class and Indicating Stock Characters**

While the objective of the set design was to create an aesthetic that mimicked the emotional core of the text, the costume design needed establish a code in order to translate the class system of 19<sup>th</sup> century St. Petersburg. The design needed to differentiate between the gentleman/ noble class and the merchant class, while following the a-historical design concept set forth by the set and adaptation. Imeson achieved this by creating a unique fashion for each character as a representative of a certain social class. The gentleman/noble class evoked elegance by using bright pastel colours, with more revealing cuts of jackets and pants. To contrast this, the merchant characters wore a more modest dress: longer cuts of clothing, with subdued colours. Even though the design was void of historical references, Imeson was still able to create her own code which gave the audience the information they needed to understand the characters' relationships. All of this worked to the goal of making Gogol's play accessible to the audience who would not know the difference between the merchant and gentleman classes.

Gogol was able to evoke many of his characters' comic type through their professions, many of which were members of the military or civil service, which would be clearly distinguished through their costume. Given the a-historical approach of the design – and our audience's limited knowledge of the professions within 18<sup>th</sup> C. St. Petersburg -- Imeson had to discover a new way to indicate each character's comic type. Our costume choices needed to create character expectations, just like Gogol's use of professions. To do this, Imeson drew her inspiration from *Commedia Dell'arte*, in which stock characters are associated with specific pieces of costuming.

Imeson chose to focus on the silhouette of the stock characters found in Commedia, and incorporate them into the world we were creating.

While I am not suggesting Gogol's characters perfectly match those from Commedia Dell'arte, they clearly hold similarities. The use of stock characters allows the audience to easily understand the comic pattern of each character – Anuchkin's snobbish obsession with French for example. As the audience begins to recognize the pattern, they are able to anticipate future actions, making the characters more accessible. By emphasizing physical traits related to the comic pattern of each character, the costume design gave the audience hints about the character.



Omelette  
Sam Randazzo

Imeson's costume design. Omelette's large figure drew inspiration from El Detroi, as well as his name. His role of the "chief superintendent manager" means he possess a large gravitas.



Kochkaryov  
Cullen McGrail

Imeson's costume design. Kochkaryov holds many similarities to the white-faced clown from circus -- or straight man in vaudeville. Kochkaryov is responsible for driving the action, and swiftly punishes those who don't play by the rules of the world. He held a cane throughout the production, as a holdover from the white-face clown's wooden paddle.



Zhevakin  
Even Gilcrest

Imeson's costume design. Zhevakin's character holds many similarities with Pantalone, namely his age and unsettling obsession with young women. His hunch, and the disfigured nose he wore in the production, were inspired by the Commedia character.



Anuchkin  
Luke Brown

Imeson's costume design. A mockery of the educated elite, Anuchkin holds similarities to El Detrio as well. His slender figure derives from Il Capitano, given his entire persona is built on the false pretense of being an "educated man."

## Working with Actors: Tools for Decoding Classical Text

Each of Gogol's characters possesses a deep fear of dying without achieving their dreams – without living a complete life. This moment is best exemplified in Act I Scene XIX:

### *OMELETTE*

*Odd weather these days: this morning it looked like rain, but now it doesn't.*

### *AGAFYA*

*Yes, the weather is particular: sometimes it's fine, and then later on it's not. It's really disagreeable.*

### *ZHEVAKIN*

*Now when I was in Sicily, it was the springtime but if you think of it, it must've been our February. I would leave the house and it would be sunny. And then, it would be rainy. And then, when you look at it, when it rains it pours.*

### *OMELETTE*

*It's worse if you're on your own, in weather like that. It's quite different for a married man; things are never dull for a married man. When you're on your own, however, it's worse than--*



*ZHEVAKIN*

*Death, it's worse than death.*

*ANUCHKIN*

*Yes, you could say that...*

The notion of death hangs over the above the exchange, as each character contemplates their existence. While this fear of dying without finding completeness to one's life is relatable to a contemporary audience, what each character needs in order to complete their life is not. Particularly for those playing the suitors, it can be difficult for an actor living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to understand why, say in the case of Omelette, to get "a beautiful stone house with silver spoons" (Act II Scene V) is an appropriate life goal. What Gogol's characters want is ridiculous and wrong, but it must be the job of the actors to make the character's objectives relatable. A useful exercise in pursuing this objective on stage is to ask the actor to create a mental image of this objective, which is understandable to them. For example, Omelette's obsession with Agafya's house and properties can be translated into the image a castle; the character wants a heroic fortress that symbolizes power and respect. By encouraging each actor to associate a specific mental image with the goal that drives their character through the narrative, I expected them to justify the character's desires. By justifying the character's desires, they were able to tap into the existential fear that lurks in the scene above.

Gogol's text reduces nearly every character to an object without agency. Consider the way Fyokla, the matchmaker, describes the suitors to Agayfa in Act I Scene XIII. Her description is almost entirely dependent on their body parts: Anuchkin's lips are "plump little plums", and Zhevakin is praised for his proper nose. Agafya is not exempt from this either, when she is referred to as "bread fresh out of the oven" in Act I Scene VIII. Gogol's insults do this as well, referring to individuals as "door knob[s]" (Act II Scene XVI) or "stuffed beaver[s]" (Act I Scene XI). The imagery of individuals as inanimate objects runs throughout Gogol's play. These absurd comparisons relate to Henri Bergson's claim that "we laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing" (Bergson, 20). Bergson uses a man falling to illustrate his example, where the man's movement has no agency as he is governed by the laws of physics (Bergson, 5). In that moment, the man is reduced to a thing and that physical reduction to an object is what the audience finds humorous. Given that Gogol's text was ripe with examples of people being reduced to things, it seemed appropriate to utilize a similar approach in the acting style. This physical

approach to comedy made Gogol's humor accessible; the only clues the audience needed to understand a joke were given to them through the physicality.

Much like the world of vaudeville and circus, where comedy relies on the use of physical routine, Gogol's play lends itself to an exaggerated form of heightened physicality. Consider Act I Scene X, in which Kochkaryov frightens Podkolyosin causing him to drop his mirror. While a style of psychological realism may simply see an actor gasp and drop the mirror, our production saw Podkolyosin leap into Stepan's arms from across the stage. Podkolyosin's physical reaction was exaggerated, it became an acrobatic stunt, reminiscent of what may be found on a circus stage.

This style of comedy hinges on the creation of patterns that an audience can recognize. A comic routine then consists of the establishment of a pattern and a break in this pattern, or an acceleration of the pattern to the point of absurdity. In the form of vaudeville these routines may be referred to as "gags" or "shtick"; they are known as "lazzi" in the practice of Commedia Dell'arte. Many of these comic routines are written into Gogol's text. Consider the exchange between Kochkaryov and Fyokla in Act I Scene X, regarding the location of Agayfa's house:

*FYOKLA*

*Agafya. Agafya Tikhonovna.*

*KOCHKARYOV*

*Agafya? Not Agafya Tikhonovna Brandakhlystova?*

*FYOKLA*

*No -- Agafya Tikhonovna Kuperdyagina.*

*KOCHKARYOV*

*The one who lives in Shestilavochnaya?*

*FYOKLA*

*No she lives on Peski --*

*KOCHKARYOV*

*Oh yes I know it.*

The above exchange establishes the pattern of words growing in syllables, creating an expectation that all words will become longer as the exchange develops. This pattern is then broken when Fyokla uses the two syllable word "Peski", following Kochkaryov's six syllable word "Shestilavochnaya." This device breaks the previously established meaning pattern, effectively ending the comic routine.

Hints of comic patterns can be found within both the text and stage directions. The most obvious example of this occurs at the beginning and end of Act I Scene XIV, XV, and XVI. Within these scenes, the Tikhonovna's servant Dunyashka attempts to greet all three suitors:

*ARINA.*

*Dunyashka show him in and ask him to sit and wait.*

*[DUNYASHKA runs out. A voice is heard saying: 'Is anyone at home? They're at home, please step inside.' AGAFYA, ARINA and FYOKLA try and peep through the keyhole.]*

*AGAFYA (Shrieking)*

*Awh! He's so fat!*

*[All hurtle out of the room.]*

*SCENE XIV*

*[OMELETTE and DUNYASHKA.]*

*OMELETTE.*

*Well. Hmm. Okay. They said to wait. I suppose I can wait.*

*[...]*

*Nowadays they promise you stone houses, additions, silver spoons, but once the noose is tied all you find is pillows and duvets.*

*[The doorbell rings. DUNYASHKA runs through the room. A voice is heard saying: "Anyone at home?" – "hello?"]*

*SCENE XV*

*[OMELETTE and ANUCHKIN]*

*DUNYASHKA*

*Wait here. They will be with you shortly.*

*[ANUCHKIN and OMELETTE shake hands].*

*OMELETTE .*

*Good day to you.*

*ANUCHKIN .*

*And good day to you, sir! What an honour, to address the father of the house!*

*[...]*

*OMELETTE (Aside)*

*The liar: "strolling by", ha! It's a wife he's after!*

*[The doorbell rings. DUNYASHKA runs through the room. A voice is heard in the entrance-hall, saying: "Anyone in?"]*

SCENE XVI

[The same, with ZHEVAKIN, accompanied by DUNYASHKA.]

ZHEVAKIN (to DUNYASHKA)

*Would you be so kind as to brush my coat...*

The pattern here relies not only on Dunyashka's entrance, but the manner in which each entrance is performed. Dunyashka must juxtapose her entrances from the house's interior to the exterior; attempting to play the polite host, she abruptly races on stage to answer the door, she then returns to the stage appearing calm and collected, with a new suitor. This pattern creates an expectation within the audience: each time the doorbell is heard, we expect Dunshkya will dash through the room. Just like the verbal pattern mentioned earlier, this physical pattern can be altered – breaking the audience's expectations – by having Dunshyka play both entrances as exasperated, effectively ending the comic routine. Breaking down both Gogol's text and stage directions into comic routines, is an effective exercise in making the play accessible to actors. Both these verbal and physical routines have a rhythm to them, and actors can use this musicality to assist in their comic timing.

Working in this style requires the actors to understand the musicality of the play text. Each actor was encouraged to think of the play's rhythm, and how their text fit into this rhythm. A vocabulary of words borrowed from music, like crescendo and decrescendo, can be helpful in getting the actors to understand the text as music. Consider the following exchange in Act I Scene XV:

OMELETTE .

*Good day to you.*

ANUCHKIN .

*And good day to you, sir! What an honour, to address the father of the house!*

OMELETTE

*I am not the father. I don't even have any children yet.*

ANUCHKIN .

*Oh, I'm so sorry! I beg your pardon!*

OMELETTE [aside]

*I don't like the face of this guy: is he here for the same business as me?*

[Aloud.]

*I presume that you have some business with the lady of the house?*

*ANUCHKIN*

*No, no... no business, I was just uh, strolling by.*

*OMELETTE [aside].*

*The liar: "strolling by", ha! It's a wife he's after!*

The comedy of this scene relies on the rhythmic delivery of the text. The actors built a crescendo into the text approaching the punchline of "I'm not the father of the house" and played a long rest following Anuchkin's apology. The scene then repeated this pattern: a crescendo and a rest. This routine was then interrupted by the introduction of another character onstage, which would alter the rhythm already established onstage through previous action.

For a director, side coaching can be a powerful tool to help the actors find the rhythm of the text. Using words like "tempo" can assist the actors in the moment, encouraging them to get on beat with the text. Another strategy that works towards this goal is to create percussive sounds by tapping or clapping to the rhythm of the text from outside the scene. The director in this case takes on the role of a conductor, and assumes the responsibility of ensuring each player is on time in their delivery. Much like the members of an orchestra, the actors will eventually begin to feel the rhythm of the text in their bodies, and will naturally fall into time.

By creating an understanding of the rhythmic nature of the text, and the relationship of the text's rhythm to their objectives, the actors can make the text easily accessible to the audience. Much like working with Shakespeare or other verse/poetry-based text, rhythm becomes another tool for creating patterns for the audience to participate in, much like the ones exemplified above. Tuning the audience's ear to pick up on these games ultimately assists their understanding of the action onstage.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of the first production of this new translation and adaption was to invite our contemporary audience to contemplate their own search for happiness, and all the ridiculous feats that accompany it, by recognizing themselves inside Gogol's hyperbolic world. In order to access

this 175 year old text, originally written in Russian, the artistic team eliminated historical references from both the text and the staging. Instead of evoking a historical period onstage, the designers and I prioritized the emotion core of Gogol's text. Furthermore, the designs attempted to establish a code to indicate character relationships regarding class, as well as suggest a comic type that would be recognizable from popular culture. By using physical comedy, which incorporated comic routines found in Commedia Dell 'arte, vaudeville, and circus, the audience required no previous knowledge of Gogol's text or its historical context. Rather the source of the comedy within the production was purely physical and rhythmical. The a-historical design approach and emphasis on physical comedy, allowed a contemporary audience to access a play removed from its historical period. This approach is a useful way to make classical texts, such as Gogol's, enjoyable and understandable to contemporary audiences.

## **Literature**

Bergson, Henri. "Laughter." *Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Bernard Dukore. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 1974.