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I Am the Walrus; A Character Study

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I Am the Walrus: A Character Study

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Thesis submitted to the College of Creative Arts at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Acting

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this thesis is to chronicle and reflect upon the steps and tools used in creating the role of Chebutykin in Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. To effectively complete this task there are a few necessary benchmarks to cover including character analysis, the rehearsal process, and the performance of the role itself. Character analysis will be explored using Anne Bogart and Tina Landau's, *The Viewpoints Book*. The rehearsal process will discuss not only the way we rehearsed, but also the tools required to effectively personalize and prepare for performance. Finally, the result will reflect what the process provided the actor in performance and the struggles throughout.

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Joseph Bussey

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INTRODUCTION

The first week of classes at West Virginia University typically involves auditions for the fall semester. In my third year of graduate school that means casting for my thesis role. I vividly remember attempting to place myself within the season that was selected. Essentially, I was auditioning for two shows, *Assassins* and *Three Sisters*. *Assassins* did not fit me particularly well, although I had aspirations of playing Sam Byck, leaving the roles in *Three Sisters*. I identified most with the role of Vershinin, however, I had a gut feeling I would not get to play the role. Knowing that I was too old to play the other characters compared to the other students in the program, left only the role of Chebutykin. Aggravation set in the moment the official cast list went up, because most of my collegiate career has been spent playing characters two to three times my actual age. I wanted the opportunity to use the training I had received, but instead I was thrust into another role where I was not allowed to just be onstage.

The actor's struggle in a Chekhov play is always one of "How do I appear realistic onstage?" Regardless if the actor is playing a character who is outside their age range, type, or even gender, the actor must discover how to operate within the style and world of the play. West Virginia University's production of *Three Sisters* was steeped in the style of realism. Realism as a theatrical term is extremely broad, over defined, and the subject of much debate. Nonetheless, realism is the container holding the play. It formed from a societal need to accurately depict life on stage. Oscar Brockett defines the movement explaining, "The main tenets of the movement were: Art must depict truthfully the real, physical world, and since only the contemporary world

can be observed directly, truth can be attained most fully through impersonal, objective observation and representation of the world around us (Brockett 16).” The directorial approach attempted to remain as faithful as possible to the realistic world created by Chekhov, but as the actor my approach was non-realistic. Therefore, this thesis is not an attempt to contribute to the study of the period, instead, its purpose is to provide the detailed brush strokes that are the character of Chebutykin as I created him for the WVU production.

A character comes to life when an actor translates the playwright’s words to the stage performance. For this reason, the text of the play is where the actor should begin. With a firm grasp on the text the actor can then begin to explore within the given circumstances of the play. The acting technique I used for this exploration was Viewpoints. Viewpoints allowed me to focus on the character specifically and was chosen because of its usefulness to both actor and director. An actor has a duty to be able to think with the mind of a director and perform with the imagination of a child. As the actor Viewpoints allows me to give over completely to what I am doing at that moment, while at the same time providing me the opportunity to analyze why it works or does not work after. Chebutykin, then becomes an amalgamation of the colors created through rehearsal process.

The rehearsal process is an opportunity for the actor to play. The discoveries made in rehearsal further define the shape of the character and the moments of the play. The rehearsal room acts as a blank canvas that the actor can practice the creation of the painting that is the play. It gave me the chance to experience the natural responses of the character in real time and attempt to hone what would become the

eventual production. The closer opening night gets, the more rigid the shape becomes, the more structure the play takes on. Even if the shaping is not complete, the show has a point where it must be performed for the public.

Each performance is merely another attempt at perfecting the painting we have been attempting in rehearsal. The play includes the broad strokes, but by the end of every performance the actors have filled in the gaps and completed the painting. The following includes the process I followed to fill in those gaps from the first rehearsal to the final performance. It is a detailed account of the work I as the actor did and how I analyze and understand text. The result is the character of Chebutykin and it begins with finding his humanity.

There are so many things to consider when taking on the role of a person who is so much older. How do they walk? Talk? Move? More importantly though, how can a younger actor portray the life experience of a sixty-year-old? Much to my dismay, this was originally the bulk of what I thought I would be writing about. What I learned was far more valuable. At its heart, acting is about discovering what makes a character human. When you strip away the outside container of the person, what you are left with is the character's humanity. Most of the time I create characters based on physicality, but I challenged myself this time around to think in terms of what makes Chebutykin human. While it may make the most sense to blindly follow the Stanislavsky acting approach, I have found that placing so much thought on the psychology of the character has been detrimental to my acting overall. I easily get lost in thought and overanalyze both the character and the textual situations the character is placed in. It may seem counter intuitive, but to really get into the character I had to ignore all my acting

crutches. I could not lean upon my acting homework, but instead had to see what it was like to live within the given circumstances of the play.

Chebutykin's humanity comes out of his need to love and be loved. It seems cliché or obvious, but having worked with Professor McGonigle before, both in class and on other shows, I have learned that the actor is always searching for their character's deepest wish. Stanislavski may have called this a "Super Objective" and others may have other terminology to describe the same idea. Ultimately, Chebutykin feels the responsibility to act as a father figure to the girls upon the passing of their father. He deeply loves the sisters, and hopes they love him in return. A younger version of myself would have found some way to illustrate this need to the audience. I would have systematically broken the script down and planned the different ways I could make the stage moments work to communicate the story effectively to the audience. This time, however, I had to trust that it was enough to know my deepest wish and pursue it. Upon discovering this core desire, I could now begin work on creating the character through Viewpoints combined with various other techniques as necessary for personalization.

CHAPTER ONE

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Early on in rehearsals it was discovered and discussed that *Three Sisters* is a character driven play, not a plot driven play. To this end the aim then was on creating a three-dimensional character, and not necessarily communicating any particular story. This sent red flags off immediately for me as much of my training and artistic belief system revolves around how to effectively tell stories. The attention to character means the primary topic of the following pages will be directed at understanding what makes Chebutykin tick. Professor Jerry McGonigle, the director, almost daily at rehearsal spoke to us about how each of these characters are a “thread of a tapestry.” With the tapestry in mind it became necessary to use an acting technique that was based in ensemble work, in this case, Viewpoints. Viewpoints was originally developed by Mary Overlie, an instructor at New York University in the Experimental Wing. Later, Anne Bogart would meet Overlie, and eventually work with Tina Landau to document her teachings in, *The Viewpoints Book*. Overlie had come from a dance background and this allowed her to see the world through the lenses of time and space, the categories into which the Viewpoints fall. Bogart and Landau quickly realized that theatre exists in both time and space and that being able to tell stories using this primarily improvisational dance technique was possible. They began creating dynamic moments of theatre following Overlie’s teachings and Viewpoints is now the training technique for Bogart’s SITI Company. The SITI Company is an ensemble-oriented theatre company whose mission statement reads,

“SITI Company is committed to providing a gymnasium-for-the-soul where the interaction of art, artists, audiences and ideas inspire the possibility for change, optimism and hope.

SITI Company was built on the bedrock of ensemble. We believe that through the practice of collaboration, a group of artists working together over time can have a significant impact upon both contemporary theater and the world at large.

Through our performances, educational programs and collaborations with other artists and thinkers, SITI Company will continue to challenge the status quo, to train to achieve artistic excellence in every aspect of our work, and to offer new ways of seeing and of being as both artists and as global citizens" (SITI.org).

With this ensemble focus and McGonigle's tapestry metaphor in mind, I decided Viewpoints would be the proper approach to creating this character. I chose Viewpoints because it is an actor system that does not rely on the mental and cognitive abilities of recognizing story. Typically, an actor would employ some version of a technique rooted in the Stanislavsky system of acting. While such work is valuable to the actor I found it superfluous in this instance because it blocked me mentally, and overall it resulted in more questions than answers.

For example, in attempting to understand the relationships of the characters I found that Chekhov can be vague about details. For instance, Chebutykin speaks mostly to Irina, with statements like, "I loved your mother." He goes out of his way to buy a samovar for the girl's birthday though the gift is inappropriate, and he has high aspirations for her as he says in Act IV, "Fly on my Angel. Fly on with God's Help" (Chekhov). There clearly is an unspoken bond between these characters that is not addressed. Why focus so much attention on only one of the sisters? Stanislavsky based systems ask the actor to focus on what your character wants, but it is unclear what Chebutykin wants from Irina. As the actor I am questioning if Chebutykin is actually Irina's father, and creating a whole story about how Chebutykin and Irina's mother had an affair. None of this is pertinent to the script, it is simply the actor trying to justify the events of the script. Viewpoints, on the other hand, forces the actor to deal

with the story. What actually happens in the text. This way the actor and the rest of the cast tell the playwright's story and not a fantasy they made up to justify textual events.

The beauty of working through the Viewpoints system is that it does not require the tedious pondering of questions such as "Who am I?" Do not misunderstand, text analysis will always be vital to the acting process, but in terms of creating a character, the basic acting homework can become a hindrance. Viewpoints became a preferable method after performing text analysis because it freed me to respond and act on instinct, rather than in premeditated actable verbs based in a system of "I Want." *The Viewpoints Book* explains, "The word, "want" – much overused and abused in our American system of rehearsing a play – implies a right and wrong" (Bogart and Landau 18). The danger with right and wrong is that the singlemindedness of the concept negates the potential for spontaneity, it burdens the actor with an ideal that cannot be achieved, and it destroys the imagination. In contrast however, Viewpoints empowers the actor by giving them the gifts of surrender, possibility, choice, freedom, growth, and wholeness (Bogart and Landau).

When Viewpoints are brought into rehearsal, one way for the actor to begin is with writing and included in the book is a worksheet for the actor, (the completed version follows).

As your character, fill in these statements

My name is Ivan Romanitch Chebutykin.

I am nearly sixty **years old.**

I am from Moscow.

My profession is military doctor.

Five facts I know from the text are:

1. I am not related to the Prozoroff family.
2. I have never been married.
3. I care deeply for Irina.
4. I read and record the newspaper frequently.
5. I have given up drinking.

Five things I intuit (but which are not stated in the text) are:

1. I crave attention.
2. I am lonely.
3. I had a secret affair with the girl's mother.
4. Irina is actually my daughter.
5. I feel personally responsible for every life I couldn't save.

A telling action I perform in the play is when I smash the girls' mother's clock.

A telling line I speak is "If only I didn't exist."

My greatest fear is being alone.

My greatest longing is to be loved.

Odd habits I have are recording the newspaper, storing newspapers, being territorial

My likes include great food, card games, gambling, good company, music, jokes

My dislikes include Solyony, liquor, lies (Bogart and Landau 128).

In addition to this basic worksheet, which structurally resembles many of the given circumstances outlines accompanying Stanislavsky based acting systems, I found it useful to incorporate an animal into my character study. The character of Chebutykin most closely resembles a walrus. The walrus is a large powerful animal who is extremely sociable and territorial. The walrus is found in the frigid extremes of the arctic where it lounges on the ice in herds of hundreds. This herd depicts the family unit of the Prozoroff house. While Chebutykin is not related to the family he feels the same connection and responsibility for them. The walrus being a social animal resembles Chebutykin. Just as the walrus becomes active and aggressive during mating season, so too does Chebutykin when consumed with extreme emotion. There are further comparisons, but they are best expressed in detail through examining the character via the nine Viewpoints broken up into time and space.

Viewpoints of Time

Tempo

Tempo refers to, “the rate of speed at which a movement occurs; how fast or slow something happens onstage” (Bogart and Landau 8). Tempo allows the actor to experiment with the speed of a movement. Think of a typical wave of the hand, as if to say hello, then speed it up, the wave becomes excited. If you slow it down to the extreme it can be heartfelt as if saying goodbye. The gesture itself has not changed rather the actor’s use of tempo with the gesture. Tempo allows the actor to maximize the possibilities of the given circumstances of any moment simply by how they take advantage of the speed their body moves in space. This does not mean that the actor chooses a tempo and lives within it for the duration of the play, but rather that an actor

takes responsibility for the tempo that best fits the character and moment of the play. Tempo is determined by first finding your personal tempo and ranking that on a scale from one to ten as a five. The character can then be assigned a tempo on your personal scale. For example, upon determining my personal tempo, I then assigned Chebutykin the tempo of four on my own scale of one to ten. This means that Chebutykin naturally moves slightly slower in speed than I do. The speed of four was chosen because the character is roughly twice my age, and with age the body tends to slow down some. Within the confines of *Three Sisters* tempo was used on several occasions.

In Act I tempo is utilized when Chebutykin exits to get the samovar for Irina's birthday. It was a tricky moment as an actor who can easily overplay a moment, or play for the laugh of a moment. At this point of the play textually it is important that Chebutykin looks as though he is up to something, without completely giving away what he is doing. In the script there is a knock at the door and as Olga goes to answer the door, Chebutykin interrupts her saying, "Ooh yes – that's for me – someone knocking for me, downstairs. Back in a minute" (Chekhov 5). To this point, most of Chebutykin's movement has been laborious, at his speed of four, mimicking the tempo of a walrus, but at this moment a burst of energy causes his tempo to increase into the six range as he exits hiding his excitement, in the same way a walrus bursts into action during mating season. This same tempo is also brought back when he returns with the samovar. When Chebutykin reveals the samovar the tempo peaks at an eight as the gesture of removing the coat occurs. At this point he is met with disapproval by the

group and his tempo recedes to a two as he crosses dejectedly toward Irina to apologize in his own way.

The use of tempo proves helpful because it provides the actor with unlimited possibilities for any moment. The description above could happen in many ways, and that is where rehearsal proves necessary. The rehearsal process lets the actor experiment. What becomes interesting then and ultimately the art of acting is the justification of the choices presented through the work in rehearsal and in collaboration with the director.

Duration

Duration can be defined as, “How long a movement or sequence of movements continues” (Bogart and Landau). Duration gives the actor control over individual or extended periods of movement. Think of this in terms of a scene from a movie. An intense action scene may be portrayed in real time and in doing so the eye is only able to capture certain information as it passes by on the screen, however if the same action is slowed down into a slow motion shot the eye is able to gather more information because it is given extended time to see more information. This idea applies similarly onstage. If characters randomly break into song it jars the senses, especially in a realistic play such as *Three Sisters*, therefore it becomes necessary to create the environment where a character would break out into song. This happened several times, but most notably during the, “My Porch” song in Act II.

Following a heated exchange between Chebutykin and Solyony there is a lull in the conversation. This is not expressly stated in the script but was discovered in the

rehearsal process. It was awkward to jump from an argument directly into song and the justification came about that in the awkward silence Irina would begin singing a song to herself. This inspires Tusenbach at the piano, who in turn encourages Fedotik and Rode to play, and eventually Andrei and Chebutykin join in until Chebutykin puts the final stamp on the song. This outline provides a clear description of the action now it is up to the actors and the director to discover how long each moment needs to be communicated effectively. If the sequence is completed too quickly it will appear rushed and unnatural, if it is too slow the audience will check out and stop paying attention.

There is something in the actor that allows them to feel duration, an internal clock of sorts that tells them when to move on to the next phase of the sequence. Duration as a Viewpoint hones this skill for the actor. Think of duration as a sense. In the same way that the eyes provide sight, the actor's instinct detects duration. It is fundamental to the actor because without it, the actor is unable to sense their connection to the timing of not only the writing, but to the audience. While the moment described above was well rehearsed, it still varied in timing performance to performance and audience to audience.

Kinesthetic Response

Kinesthetic response is, "a spontaneous reaction to motion which occurs outside you; the timing in which you respond to the external events of the movement; the impulsive movement that occurs from a stimulation of the senses" (Bogart and Landau 8). In acting most commonly these responses are referred to as impulses. While all the Viewpoints are important, this one is among the most important. Kinesthetic response empowers the actor and creates an environment of spontaneity. Every performance of

a given moment can be totally different without being manipulated simply because all the actor must do is trust that his/her instinctive body will make the right choices as long as the actor is fully prepared and in the moment. This kind of instinctive response is difficult because it requires immense preparation to be able to trust your instincts. The actor cannot be second guessing their lines or what is going on in the scene they must be totally present and respond. There was an unfortunate example of this during one of the performances of *Three Sisters*.

During one of the performances I ended up onstage during Act IV without my pocket watch. As it turns out, the pocket watch is an extremely important prop at that point of the play. Chebutykin checks his pocket watch and says, “My watch is an old-fashioned one with a chime. (winds his watch, it strikes) The first, second, and fifth batteries go exactly at one o’clock. (Pause) And I go tomorrow” (Chekhov 66). Since I was sans watch and realized it after I had made it onstage my kinesthetic response took over and I asked Andrei for his watch. Unfortunately, Andrei had also entered stage without his pocket watch, but by this point the problem had been solved and instinct carried us through the scene, causing the dialogue to read,

“Chebutykin: Do you have your pocket watch?”

Andrei: No.

Chebutykin: Well, my watch is an old-fashioned one with a chime. The first, second, and fifth batteries go exactly at one o’clock. (Pause) And I go tomorrow.”

The moment became slightly clunky onstage, but the added improvised line allowed me to give the necessary information about the batteries to the audience.

This Viewpoint meshes directly with the Meisner training as it allows for the same feeling of spontaneity achieved from repetition in Meisner. When you effectively remove outside distractions and require an actor to deal immediately with the actors and the environment around him/her they have no choice but to problem solve and respond instinctively. Meisner does this by having the actor focus completely on the behavior of the other people in the scene, and kinesthetic response takes it a step further by allowing anything onstage to affect you similarly.

Repetition

Simply defined repetition occurs when an act is repeated onstage. More specifically, however, it can be split into two parts internal and external. An internal repetition manifests from inside the body, while an external repetition is visible outside the body (Bogart and Landau 9). Internal repetition is something only the actor is aware of because they are the one directly experiencing the repetition, whereas, external gestures are experienced both by performer and audience. Internal repetition reminds me of the work we have done with the Michael Chekhov technique. Chekhov technique uses energy qualities to help ground the actor. For example, if the character was angry with another character the actor could think about shooting daggers from their eyes at the other person. The idea of shooting daggers from your eyes is a repeatable feeling although daggers do not actually shoot out of the eyes. It is something the actor experiences, and its effect may be noticed, but undefinable. External repetition on the other hand works through gesture, tempo, and other physical phenomena that occur outside the body. If a character were to clap their hands together every time they entered the stage, it may not be noticed the first or even the second time, but eventually

by the third or another subsequent time the repeated action would be noticed. In *Three Sisters* I employed both internal and external repetition.

An example of internal repetition was brought about through the text and blocking of certain moments in the early stages of the show. Chebutykin frequently makes a spectacle, has a short amount of dialogue, and then returns to the monotony of his life. For instance, in Act I Andrei is being introduced to Vershinin and is being teased by his sisters. At the height of the teasing Chebutykin lifts Andrei from the ground exclaiming, "For love and love alone, nature put us on this earth" (Chekhov 13)! Then proceeds to disappear from the dialogue for a few pages. This type of moment happens several times throughout the play and became challenging to justify onstage. I dealt with it by using internal repetition. When the moment after the exclamation would happen there would be a moment that felt awkward. When the awkwardness would set in, the internal repetition was to breathe deeply and try to remove all the air from the room. In this moment having something to do, even if it was not physical, allowed me to accept the awkwardness of the moment and move on. This breath ended up being a direct reflection of the thought I had been having of "Now What!" As the actor I discovered that the awkwardness was necessary.

External repetition was used throughout the play as Chekhov has given Chebutykin a physical action to come back to, reading the paper. Chebutykin never has a scene without his newspaper, it even found its way outside in Act IV. External repetition can be used to communicate many different things. In comedy repetition happens in threes. In this play, however, repetition helps illuminate the character of Chebutykin. At first it was my suspicion that Chebutykin read the newspaper to

disconnect from the reality around him, but after living through the play several times it became evident that Chebutykin is reading the newspaper to overhear everything without having to comment directly, and at the right moment can get in a good one liner. The newspaper then becomes his connection not only with the outside world, but also with the family atmosphere around him. The more Chebutykin tries to share the more he becomes ignored by those around him, leading to the external repetition of documenting the things that he comments on.

Ultimately, the use of repetition can ground the actor in the given circumstances of the play, as evidenced by the internal repetition. The internal repetition justified the text when it did not make sense on paper, but it can also reveal an important truth about a character as proven with the external repetition of the newspaper. Combined, both were beneficial in creating a world for Chebutykin to exist in.

Viewpoints of Space

Shape

Shape is an amalgamation of lines, curves, and the combination of lines and curves that the body makes. Shape exists in both the stationary form as well as in motion. The body can be manipulated into various round or angular shapes. The only limitation on shape is the actor's physical body and imagination. Shape can also be expressed as a body in space, a bodies' relationship to architecture, which can create a shape all its own, and a body in relationship to other bodies in space. Essentially, anything that the body encounters can help to create new and interesting shapes. Since an actor's body acts as a tool, the actor can effectively use their body to create

the container the character lives in. The question becomes what shape should the actor use? And how do they decide (Bogart and Landau 9)?

Early on I was able to relate the character of Chebutykin to a walrus, so it was this mountainous lump of clay I attempted to create with my body. After studying several different images, I had plenty of fodder to go into a room and begin to play with how I could take up and move through space in a new way. Instantly, the thought of a walrus added an enormous amount of weight, and with the weight a sense of power. Chebutykin felt sedentary but ready to pounce at any moment. The shoulders rounded, the center of gravity in the body dropped, and this pyramid like structure took over my body. My face began to get involved. The corners of my mouth turned down as I imagined the tusks protruding from my mouth. In order to move through space, it was necessary to have a slight waddle. Interestingly, I felt compelled to move and pose, and move and pose. The shape never consumed with constant motion, but never completely still.

The shape was later completed when we received costumes. Wearing the fat suit for the show brought the entire look together. The weight I had been imagining suddenly became a reality in the physicality. When working on the actual set I felt drawn to a certain chair, a certain area that I could call my own. I became territorial over the space, even though Jerry was continually moving furniture throughout the rehearsal process. I felt I needed to pile my newspapers into the area that was mine and in the same way a walrus lays claim to his space, I laid claim to my chair. This was the creation of a shape in relationship to architecture. The bristling mutton chops the

character wore became the whiskers of the massive walrus, and there lounging in my chair, newspaper in hand, I was the walrus (Nationalgeographic.com).

In Act II there is a point where Solyony confronts Chebutykin over the food at the Caucasus. The entire argument is essentially pointless as Solyony mistakes the word that Chebutykin says, but became an example of shape as a body to body relationship. When confronted it became necessary to defend myself. Logic would have had Chebutykin ignore Solyony, but the animal instinct was to take up as much space as I could. I puffed up my chest and got real loud, and when I felt I had made my point I returned to my chair and gave him the stare down. Shape over all became the container that housed the walrus, and the physicality of the container helped to inform the decisions I made as the actor.

Gesture

“Gesture is shape with a beginning, middle, and end” (Bogart and Landau 9). It can be divided into two parts, expressive and behavioral. Expressive gesture reflects the inner state of a character. It can show the character's desires, dreams, it is an idea or a value. They tend to come out of the actor in abstract ways not typically seen in everyday life. In contrast behavioral gesture pertains to those gestures that are physical and observed everyday when walking down the street. They are indicative of a character's intention or symptomatic of a character's plight. Expressive gesture could include an expression of anger or love, which could take any number of physical expressions, while behavioral gesture is the bow a servant performs when in the presence of royalty. The bow indicates the servant's respect (real or implied), and at the same time is required by the servant's status as lower class (Bogart and Landau).

Three Sisters allowed for the use of both expressive and behavioral gesture. An example of the use of expressive gesture occurred in Act III when the Doctor enters drunk. To make this moment work for me, I imagined that my eyes were melting from the inside out. The abstract expressive gesture provided the opportunity not only to have a justifiable reason for the blurred vision of a drunk, but was also a symbolic way to deal with Chebutykin's inner demons. In the scene Chebutykin confronts his very existence. "Maybe I'm not even a man, but just look like I have arms, legs, a head; maybe I don't even exist, but just imagine that I am walking, eating, sleeping (weeps). Oh, God, if only I didn't exist" (Chekhov 47)! The symbol of the melting eyes is an expression of this confrontation. Chebutykin as the doctor has seen so much death and ugliness. There exists a misconception that many of us have either tried or witnessed, in the form of alcohol as a problem solver. Chebutykin uses alcohol to directly deal with all the things he has seen. While the melting eyes are representative of the attempt to forget the death that has happened in his hands, there exists no escape from reality. The vision may be blurred for a while, but in the end the events witnessed by Chebutykin do not reside in his eyes, but in his soul, a realization he comes to by the end of the drunken monologue. Just as alcohol does not solve Chebutykin's problems, the melting eyes do not prevent Chebutykin from seeing lives that have slipped through his fingers.

The expressive gesture links directly to the behavioral gesture. The scene textually requires the Doctor to wash his hands. This behavioral gesture doubles as a ritual. Whenever a doctor deals with a patient, they are required to wash their hands. As Chebutykin is experiencing the sensation of his melting eyes, he metaphorically sees

the blood on his hands from one of the patients who passed away in his care. The inability of the alcohol to repress the memory coupled with sight of the blood causes Chebutykin to wash literally the blood from his hands. The behavioral gesture of hand washing shows his intention to help, while simultaneously symbolizing his unfortunate circumstance. No matter how good Chebutykin is at being a doctor, there is no escaping the fact that some of his patients will inevitably die. He is unable to wash away the truth, and powerless to remove it from his memory. Both behavioral and expressive gesture aided in the creation of the role of Chebutykin and are employable with almost any role an actor will play.

Architecture

Architecture refers to “the physical environment in which you are working and how awareness of it affects movement” (Bogart and Landau 10). It consists of five parts including solid mass, texture, light, color, and sound. Solid mass suggests the walls, floors, ceilings, furniture, and so on. Texture points out the covering of the solid mass, for instance, hard wood floor has a different texture than shag carpet. Both are considered the floor, but the difference in texture influences movement. Light speaks to not only the source of light, be it natural or artificial, but also to the shadows created by the light. Color meaning that the difference in color changes our perception and feeling toward certain objects. For example, if the shag carpet were bright orange there would be a definite feeling toward that carpet, versus the reaction to the brownish hardwood floor. Sound relates to those noises which result directly from the architecture, or because of interaction with the architecture, think of footsteps on the hardwood floor as an example. Architecture can also establish an environment for “*Spatial Metaphors,*”

such as being trapped, or the idea of being stuck between a rock and a hard place (Bogart and Landau 10 – 11).

While all five parts of architecture are important it is the concept of spatial metaphor that will be discussed in this section, as it requires all five to be conceived. Chebutykin though he does not speak often seems to always be around, generating the spatial metaphor of “part of the furniture.” He acts as a fixture of the house. Much the same way a mirror witnesses all the events that are produced in front of it, so too does Chebutykin. He witnesses many of the events of the house, but also has a direct connection to the past, present, and future. He has experienced the moments of the house in his own life, is witnessing them occur in the present, and has an intimate knowledge of how everyone’s story will eventually end. Chebutykin, akin to a mirror, a piece of the furniture, is continually dismissed. On several occasions Chebutykin makes note of interesting information from the newspaper and is met with no response. His outbursts are unnoticed or discarded in the same way that a creaky floor board or a squeaky door are overlooked. Being a part of the furniture then is Chebutykin’s way of fitting into the family. If he disappeared it would be noticed and even missed, but for as long as he is in the room he is no different than the clock he smashes in Act III.

Chebutykin interacts with the furniture by laying claim to it. His chair is surrounded by old newspapers and he sits regally upon it. Rarely does Chebutykin flit from one thing to the next, instead he becomes a part of those objects. In Act III when he washes his hands in the girl’s room he is forced to confront himself. The washbasin conveniently had a mirror attached and it was interesting to be able to see myself as I spoke Chebutykin’s drunken words. Seeing my face as Chebutykin was cathartic in

many ways because I understood how easily a person could slip down the darkened path of alcoholism. The furniture in this way becomes more than material, it becomes a part of who you are.

Spatial Relationship

Spatial relationship involves, “the distance between things onstage, especially (1) one body to another; (2) one body (or bodies) to a group of bodies; (3) the body to the architecture” (Bogart and Landau). This grants the actor unlimited possibilities in staging. Eventually the director will have thought on how this should look from the outside view, but until then the actor has the freedom to play and discover what works and what does not. Ultimately spatial relationships help tell the story to the audience, meaning the actor should be aware of their body in space with regards to others and the architecture. I remember from Friday scene study class on multiple occasions hearing the phrase, “If you are going get that close to each other you either need to hit each other or kiss each other.” When two bodies enter a certain proximity to each other, an expectation is formed of what happens next. It is no different than onstage when something is dropped, our focus goes straight to it and it becomes the actor’s responsibility to pick it up or risk losing the audience entirely.

Three Sisters produced several opportunities to implement spatial relationship. Employing the use of the walrus again I was able use the idea of territoriality to create spatial relationship. My chair became my ice sheet, and I welcomed any who were part of the herd. Walrus mate entirely in the frigid water, and while Chebutykin does not entertain thoughts of marriage or copulation there are several other people he cares deeply for. Using the extreme emotions as the impetus to move helped me take

advantage of spatial relationship. One moment stands out toward the beginning of Act IV. Irina is swinging on the swing that is suspended from the tree outdoors. She is the only character who uses the swing, and it became the place that I let her go. Frequently there are stories of children anxious to leave and go out on their own, but the parents are too stubborn, or care too much to let their children go. This is the case at this moment, but instead of remaining overbearing, Chebutykin releases her like a bird with these tender words, “My beautiful, dear, golden girl...You’ve gone so far, I’ll never catch up with you. I’m left behind, like an old bird that can’t fly after the flock. Fly on, my sweet, fly on with God’s help” (Chekhov 64)! In this moment Chebutykin leaves his ice sheet and plunges into the water, expressing his love in his own way. This may be the closest he ever comes to sharing his love with anyone, and the spatial relationship reflects that, because it occurs in an area of the architecture unused at any other moment. It is a unique interaction that occurs on the stage as Chebutykin pushes Irina on the swing, and it is a moment that is shared by the two of them while Kulygin looks on from afar.

Topography

Topography is, “the *landscape*, the *floor pattern*, the *design* we create in movement through the space” (Bogart and Landau 11). Imagine for a moment that there are red paintbrushes attached to the bottom of your feet. As you move through space the red trail that is left behind is the floor pattern. Over time the floor pattern will delineate the usable space by creating boundaries. These boundaries reveal the landscape (i.e. furniture) and the overall design of the acting space. Topography then is

nothing more than the set of rules describing where and what can be used for movement.

Three Sisters was placed topographically into a forced perspective thrust, narrower at the back wall and wider at downstage. The forced perspective created the illusion of two separate rooms, as there was a dining room and a family room formed without any walls. This forced perspective shape was painted onto the floor and clearly signified the acting space. There was plenty of furniture placed throughout creating obstacles for the actors to deal with, especially when needing to exit quickly or enter quietly. The double room concept was then transformed into a single bedroom on the downstage portion and the back half was walled off with the wardrobe and dressing area, plus the lights literally illuminated the acting space. Finally, by Act IV trees were brought in and the set became an outdoor space taking full advantage of the forced perspective thrust. The trees produced an environment that required the actors to navigate around them. This new sense of space aided in the illusion of not only being outdoors, but more importantly framed and enclosed us in our imaginary backyard.

As the actor during the rehearsal process I treated the pieces of furniture that could be sat on as ice sheets for the walrus. The in between areas were the frigid water. Chebutykin only leaves his seat to do something that must be done now, like when he goes to get the samovar. When he has completed his task, he returns to his icy perch. In a lot of ways this idea led to the comparison of a walrus who leaves the ice sheet to feed in the water and then returns after. The floor pattern created then is in the leaving and returning to a predetermined area. This was true whether the scene was set outside or inside the house. The only exception was Act III, which took place in the

girl's room. Since this space is not typically Chebutykin's, I did not have an anchor position to return to. The scene worked however because previous to coming into the room Chebutykin is wandering the halls drunk. He has already left his ice sheet as it were. In the middle of the scene Chebutykin leaves the room and it is understood that he has returned to his space and is later confirmed when he knocks on the floor of the girl's room.

CHAPTER TWO

REHEARSAL PROCESS

The rehearsal process began as most do with a cast reading and extensive table work. It is in these initial rehearsals that the cast has an opportunity to hear the play and ask any questions they may have about any portion of the play they wish. During these read throughs and discussion, it became apparent that this play had little structure in terms of the Aristotelian model and had no through line story for the reader to follow. It really was as realism is often described to be “a slice of life.” Research then became superfluous in a lot of instances. Yes, the research helped us as a cast to understand Russia better, to understand the time period better, but the reality is that this play is not about Russia, its politics, or even its people, instead this play is about human nature. Taking place entirely at the Prozoroff estate, this play doesn't deal directly with class struggle though there are characters experiencing that struggle. Not to oversimplify, because it is important to understand certain things about a Russian climate, and objects such as a samovar, but more importantly to understand the significance those details play in the lives of these characters. Again, early on it was pointed out this play is about the characters not the plot.

Since the idea of placing value or significance on objects and moments has been brought up it becomes necessary to discuss how the actor goes about assigning said value. Acting instructors continually preach, “personalize the moment”, ask questions such as, “What would you do if you were in the same situation?” made statements including, “Take it personally!” None of these made clear sense before West Virginia University. Nobody in all my prior training had taken the time to teach how an actor

personalizes an event or object onstage. The following is an example of how I understand the process after completing most of graduate school and its implementation into the rehearsal process.

Konstantin Stanislavsky has “the magic IF” and Sanford Meisner says, “Acting is living truthfully under imaginary circumstances.” While this is all true it is no closer to explaining personalization than blanket statements given by directors. Meisner however, most closely aligns with the Viewpoints training for me. Meisner’s system requires you to root your action behaviorally in the other people onstage with you. This proves appealing because it prevents me from thinking too much as the actor, but more importantly the focus is on imagination. In class we spent weeks coming up with imaginary circumstances based on an element of truth that we would then bring into a rehearsal area and live in, and it is in this work that I began to understand how to assign importance to objects and events. In this training it is not so much important in Act I that I know what a samovar is, but rather it is more important that I know what the samovar represents.

In Act I Chebutykin gives Irina the gift of a Samovar, which is totally inappropriate within the context of the play because it is more commonly given as a gaudy wedding present than an ordinary birthday present. In Russia during this time a bride was given a samovar as a symbol of wealth, so for a non-family member to give one to the youngest daughter who is unmarried is unconscionable. It would be similar if I purchased my sister a matching pair of crystal champagne glasses for her birthday. The gift would be totally unnecessary and implies that she should be getting married even though she has no such plans in the near future. Obviously then, we begin to see

how it is more important to understand the significance of the moment rather than fully explaining the history that defines it. I am perfectly capable of creating the imaginary circumstance of buying the crystal champagne glasses and living in that truthfully. The next step then becomes understanding why Chebutykin buys the samovar for Irina in the first place.

This information comes directly from the text. Chebutykin says to the girls after the samovar is unveiled, “My dears, my pretties, you’re all I have – more precious to me than anything in the world. I’m almost sixty, getting old, an insignificant old bachelor” (Chekhov 7). The line signifies that age and fear that he may not be around for the day Irina is married motivates him to buy the samovar, even though it is inappropriate. This action then is incredibly human, not Russian or specific to a time in history. Everything comes out of the text in superior writing. This is not to discount the research portion, but instead shows that emphasis on creating the proper moment is more important than logically knowing the word samovar. With the comparison in mind I can then craft the imaginary circumstances that would cause me to purchase my sister crystal champagne glasses. To parallel Chekhov’s story I imagine that I have recently been diagnosed with cancer and I have not told anyone. It is the day of my sister’s birthday and I have always wanted to be the one to walk her down the aisle, since she no longer is on speaking terms with her father. Unsure of the amount of life I have ahead of me I decide I want to make a grand gesture and give her the champagne glasses that I would give her for her wedding on her birthday since I do not know if I will be alive for her wedding.

The story is imaginary because my sister would never let me walk her down the aisle, and I am not secretly suffering from cancer, but it is easy to draw the parallel between the textual circumstance and the imaginary circumstance, however, the imaginary version is easier for me to understand practically, and more importantly, relatable. This example shows how I prepared daily for rehearsal. Throughout the process I would look at the material we were covering for the day, and first work on the words of the scene. Then I would make sure I understood them, and finally, translate the textual situation into something I could relate to in my own human experience. Rehearsals then were a meshing of allowing the Viewpoints work to give me freedom as the actor, but rooting myself in reality through personalization. This, to the best of my knowledge, is how an actor goes about personalizing individual events and objects.

Another example of personalization can occur out of free writing and an exercise we did in class. The class assignment was to take a monologue from *Spoon River Anthology*, and change the words or phrases of words to help further understanding and meaning. With the new words and phrases the actor not only has an interchangeable set of language that is easier to grasp, but also has a series of words and phrases to begin exploring in depth through free writing. An example of this is provided below using Chebutykin's monologue in Act III.

"Devil take them all...they think because I'm a doctor I can cure anything, forgotten everything I ever knew, don't remember anything, anything. God damn it, last Wednesday I treated a woman at Zasya – she died, and it was my fault that she died. Oh, I knew something twenty-five years ago, maybe, but now – nothing, nothing. Maybe I'm not even a man, but just look like I have arms, legs, a head; maybe I don't even exist, but just imagine that I'm walking, eating, sleeping. Oh, God, if only I didn't exist. Oh, hell, devil knows...day before yesterday at the club they were talking about Shakespeare, Voltaire... I hadn't read that stuff, not a word...but I made faces like I had...and the others, too, just like me. Silly, trivial, vulgar! And I remembered that

woman who died on Wednesday... I remembered everything...Oh, God, I'm twisted, foul, disgusting... I went and got drunk" (Chekhov 47).

Following along, it is not until the word doctor that I am unable to relate. Since I am not a doctor I substitute the word teacher, as that is a profession I have some experience with, and eventually the phrase would read something to the effect of, "They think because I am a teacher I can solve all of their problems." Now the phrase connects with me at a human level. I understand that statement all too well. Everything makes logical sense until the woman who died in Zasya. Not only am I unfamiliar with Zasya, but a random woman's death does not affect me on the same level required in the text. Textually Chebutykin feels responsible for the woman's death, therefore, it is my responsibility to personalize this moment. Again, using imaginary circumstances based on an element of truth I am able to create a parallel situation.

Thankfully in my life I have not experienced a large amount of death, so the only comparable situation I have was when my Grandfather passed away. Instantly, by substituting "treated a woman in Zasya, she died" with "held my Grandfather's hand when he passed away in Castro Valley, CA", and I have my personalization for the scene. It is imaginary because I was not in the least bit responsible for my Grandfather's death (and the details surrounding both his death and my parallel for the story I prefer to keep to myself), but I can certainly put myself into that perspective. It is based in truth because I did ask for a moment alone with my Grandfather when he passed away, and I did hold his hand in the hospital room when I said goodbye. Even now I can feel the deep emotional connection to this moment in my life. The rest of the monologue seems to make logical sense to me, so these become my moments of personalization.

The next step then with the substitutions in place is to allow the brain freely to associate these moments that have been created. I was able to write several pages of the details surrounding my Grandfather's death and invent the many ways that I could be responsible for it, and the blame that would come with that responsibility. Eventually, this style of writing begins to live inside the actor and with the deep connection between the text and the imaginary circumstances forms a link between character and actor of shared experience. I am then unable to talk about the woman in Zasya without also tapping into the feeling of my Grandfather.

In this instance one could spend hours researching what it was and meant to be a doctor in Russia during the late 1800s, but it is more important that the moment of the play is understood. This is not a moment about a Russian doctor grappling with the idea of life and death, it is much more human than that. The moment calls for a human being to question their existence in relation to all other existences, and that is universal. Armed with this work and preparation the actor can then come to rehearsal ready to live fully in the world of the play.

Working in this way allows rehearsal to be a playground. I as the actor continually create more ways to make the moments of the play more personal. This happens in collaboration with the director. Several times Jerry would have feedback regarding moments in the play, whether they were working or not working, and so forth. Then I would have to negotiate what I was bringing into the rehearsal room and adjust accordingly. Ideally, the personalization will align for both the actor and the director and create an environment where the actor feels free to listen and respond in an uninhibited manner. This of course assists the earlier Viewpoints work and makes rehearsals a

creative space rather than a chore or an unpleasant experience. Rehearsal is my favorite time because I enjoy continuing to attempt new and interesting points of view.

CHAPTER THREE

PERFORMANCE

The performance of a show always carries with it a sense of pressure. The audience that you have been preparing for sits anxiously waiting to see the production that has been prepared for them. A different energy fills the theatre on a performance night. Maybe, it is the slight twinge of fear that live theatre creates. The simple idea that no performance will ever be the same, that months of work are suddenly bottle necking to a finish, or maybe it is all of that mixed with excitement. Performances are this elusive thing that are stuck in time. If you think of a movie, a movie is a cropped together series of what are deemed the best shots and takes, whereas a live performance is the culmination of the work to that point. It may not be the actor's best work, it may not be the cast's best work, or the performance any night could appear robotic or the words may not be understood. At the end of every performance though is something that has been experienced both by audience and performer. Each performance is a singular example of what that cast, and crew created, but none of them are the definitive example. The following documents events from the performances of *Three Sisters*.

There is a misconception that performance begins when the lights go up and ends when the lights go down. The first inkling of performance begins ninety minutes before in the dressing room. For the entirety of my time acting I have on more occasions than not been asked to play either older characters, or over the top caricatures, this means for me that the transition to character begins with the first stitch of makeup applied. Chebutykin being nearly sixty years old had some age to his face,

weathered by life, and sported bushy mutton chops. While I grew out my own moustache, it was up to me to apply the mutton chops every night. Once those were applied there was no turning back.

Facial hair and prosthetics are in many ways similar to a mask. They carry with them a character that becomes revealed to the actor if the actor can give over and allow it to. Staring into the mirror newly adorned with facial hair, wrinkles, along with the natural grey in my hair I became Chebutykin every night. He was an old soul who existed somewhere in the mask of make-up and facial hair, and my imagination. These characterizations begin to flow into costume. With the costume and fat suit on the mirror reflects a different body type, a different center of gravity, and a different way of moving. It affects the voice and the muscles, and suddenly the physicality of the walrus, that has been studied and worked on for the past couple months begins to take over. At this point the movement is second nature and no longer requires intense focus or thought to achieve. Chebutykin, ninety minutes later, is ready to read the newspaper.

I like to think of a play's entrances as series of events. To start the play, I know as the actor from the text that it is Irina's birthday and I am passing time until that happens by reading the newspaper. Then, once onstage, I must trust that the written events of the play will occur as they are supposed to. Onstage, there are moments the actor can completely forget they are being watched, these moments are wonderful, but other times the actor is overly aware that all eyes are on them, these moments are the worst.

Stanislavsky writes about circles of attention, basically explaining that the actor can work in a small circle of attention to really focus on something, and eventually those

circles can extend out to include others and eventually the audience, and so on (Stanislavsky). This technique helps me to regain my focus onstage when I begin to feel the audience's gaze. It is also one of the reasons I love props onstage. If mentally my focus leaves the world of the play and I begin to realize that I am performing I can quickly jump to the newspaper, or the card game I am playing onstage, or it can be as simple as squeezing my thumb and forefinger together. Once my focus becomes removed from the audience, the circle of attention can begin to expand outward again.

Performing this show was unsettling, mostly because I knew it was three hours long. The length does not bother me, but considering our audience is comprised, in large part, with Introduction to Theatre students, I was unsure how they would receive a play like *Three Sisters*. Much to my surprise, they laughed. Laughter is like adrenaline to the actor, it is something they can feed off. One thing every actor knows is if they are laughing they are engaged. While laughter is not the only way an audience can be engaged it is the easiest way to tell. This shot of adrenaline can obviously be wonderful for the actor, but it can also be dangerous. As the actor, I begin to become aware of what is causing the laughter, and there starts to build a need to create a further relationship with that audience. The feeling of "if you liked that wait until you see this" starts to creep in. These feelings must be suppressed, and the onus is on the actor to refocus and perform the show that was rehearsed.

The laughter also can be detrimental to the actor when it spurts out in moments that were totally unexpected. For instance, Chebutykin's monologue in Act III, where I talked about using my Grandfather's death to help personalize the moment received laughs every night. The first night this threw me off majorly, because it was the last

thing I expected to happen. Textually, I understood the irony of the statements, but I was so invested in the moment of those statements that the humor escaped me, much the way it does in real life. After that first show I was a little distraught trying to reconcile the laughter in the moment. Often Chekhov's plays are referred to as comedies, however, *Three Sisters* is not, but that does not diminish the idea of being able to laugh at yourself. Everyday people freak out over miniscule things in their lives. They are important in that moment to them, but from the outside it is laughable the stock we put on relatively unimportant moments. While Chebutykin is dealing with a much direr moment, it is no less laughable when someone is able to relate to the situation and understand the absurdity of being human. Aristotle called this interaction between audience and actor *catharsis*, which Anne Bogart defines etymologically as shining light into dark places. When we see the darkest parts of ourselves we have two options, either spiral out of control into depression, or laugh at the absurdity.

Surprisingly there were no major glitches during the run of this show. Sure the performance varied in time and there were minor issues with light boards and misplaced props, but overall the show ran smoothly, even with a week off for Thanksgiving in the middle. I have worked in the slot of the season where the show breaks for a week almost every show I have been a part of at West Virginia University and I have grown to enjoy it. At first it seemed unbearable. The idea of coming back after a week was daunting because I was unsure how it would all come back together. Would we be rusty? In reality, the week off allowed the mind and body to refocus and absorb the material. I always came back with a greater knowledge than when I left. The time really

gave things a chance to settle inside me, to the point that the first couple performances felt like a preview, but what happened after the break was the real thing.

At the end of a performance, after the bows and the exit from the stage, the actor returns to the mirror. Staring back into the mirror there is a reflection on what just occurred and a taking stock of the face in front of you. Here the facial hair is removed, the wrinkles are washed away, and the walrus disappears back into the imagination. This is where a performance ends, not at lights down, but when the mask is removed.

CONCLUSION

Upon the completion of a play there are feelings that overcome me as an actor. I am forced to confront the mental judgment I cast upon myself. Was I successful in my portrayal? What would I do differently if given the opportunity? Was the performance enjoyable? These questions are remarkably self-centered, and I believe a direct result of a system of acting that considers plays from the perspective of "I want," instead of "What does the play want?" *Three Sisters* required me to consider other questions entirely. Questions that are much more global in perspective and deal specifically with Chebutykin's existential struggle. Why are we still doing *Three Sisters*? Does this play still resonate with an audience? What can an audience member take away from this play? The answer lives in the reason art exists in the first place. Catharsis.

Catharsis is a term generally associated with the connection between audience and actor, but it seems to be just as relevant to apply the term to actor and character. Each character an actor plays asks that the actor shine some light into the dark of who they are. By shining this light upon myself, I learn something new about who I am as a human being from each character I play. The process of the creation of character may change, the style of the play may differ, and the people involved undoubtedly switch, but there is comfort knowing that plays are written and performed for a higher purpose. In some way we are all Chebutykin with a need to love and be loved. In some way we are all striving to understand who we are and why we are here. That need for self-discovery not only is the quintessence of humanity, but the driving force behind the creation of art.

Plays such as *Three Sisters* stand the test of time because they are indicative of the human condition. Just as Realism formed out of a need for truth on the stage, *Three Sisters* continues to show audiences who they are. Somewhere between the audience and the actor exists a threshold. Actors attempt to reach through this threshold and touch audiences, while at the same time the audience attempts to reach through from the other side. This grasping for each other is not only remarkably human, but undoubtedly the purpose of theatre.

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