

Birds of Society — Research Notes

This presentation explores the external adjustments used to clarify the conceptual metaphor of Liberty University's production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Directed by Chris Nelson, *The Importance of Being Earnest* took on a new perspective under the conceptual metaphor, "*The Importance of Being Earnest* is Victorian Caged Birds." Each of the actors in this production, including myself, had the task of bringing this concept to life, without compromising the original story. This process combined historical and avian research with the techniques of several acting theorists, to deliver a truthful, accurate, and lively performance.

When deciding on the conceptual metaphor for the show, Professor Nelson began to draw inspiration from the time period of the text: the Victorian Era. During this era, people were restricted by an extreme social code of conduct. Commenting on these restrictions is the main form of comedy in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Another area of Victorian life Professor Nelson pulled from was the interest in the exotic, and, specifically, the interest in exotic birds. From this, he discovered the intricate bird cages made during this era. These cages, though beautiful, entrapped the birds just as to social code of conduct trapped the Victorians. Thus, the conceptual metaphor, "*The Importance of Being Earnest* is Victorian Caged Birds," was born.

In the beginning of this process, the actors were asked to create research presentations on various parts of Victorian and avian life. For the Victorian, we researched courting rules, fan language, fashion, and movement related to daily life. For the birds, we researched behavior relating to showing off, preening, mating, nesting, and aggression, as well as the movement patterns associated with such behavior. Once we had spent a week sharing this research, we spent a rehearsal applying these patterns of movement to our own bodies. This creative session—

nicknamed, “The Bird Cage”—gave us external adjustment options, which we would be able to incorporate as we explored the text.

The rest of the rehearsal process consisted of blocking and working rehearsals. In the working rehearsals, we would apply our researched behavior through the lens of our acting techniques. The main techniques I experimented with in this process were those of Konstantin Stanislavski, Michael Chekov, and Jerry Grotowski. Other techniques, including those of Michael Lugering and Stella Adler, were considered and experimented with, but were ultimately not considered as helpful.

One of the most helpful techniques for applying the external adjustments to the work was Stanislavski’s System. The System is comprised of 10 steps, which set an actor up to successfully integrate themselves into the shoes of a character in a story. The fifth step in the System is scoring. Scoring is how the actor breaks down his/her script, separating each scene into units, which are further broken down into beats. The basis of this separation is driven by the change of need within the characters of a given scene. Once these sections are identified, a verb is assigned to each unit and beat. This verb drives the actor forward with clear emotional and physical need.

Using these identified beats, I was able to filter through the repertoire of Victorian and avian behavioral patterns to find an external adjustment that would match the intent of the verb. Occasionally, the verb would even be a direct reference to avian behavior. For example, when Lady Bracknell is attacking Jack in the interrogation unit, one of the verbs I chose was “peck.” I continued this process until my entire script had been scored. This scoring would be utilized in rehearsal, to make informed decisions of need and movement. These decisions were subject to change, and were expected to, based off the stimuli received from any of the partners in each

scene. A part of Chekov's technique is called "radiating," which refers to process of actively perceiving the exchange of energy happening between the actors on stage. This technique proved to be incredibly helpful in actively listening to my scene partners, which led to unplanned, but informed, honest movements in each scene.

Another step in the System is external adjustments. The process used to gain these has already been explained, but it is important to note that to implement these successfully, the actor must be relaxed and ready. My method of warming up to achieve the relaxed, ready vessel was based in the technique of Jerry Grotowski. His exercises aim to turn actors into acrobats. I found them very helpful in warming up my body and mind. There was a noticeable difference in my physical freedom between the rehearsals in which I implemented these exercises, and in the ones I did not.

In the end, the performance created was focused and honest, filled with the appropriate external adjustments. Our research informed our process, and the techniques of different theorists guided us in bringing the conceptual metaphor to life. As we performed this for an audience, our metaphor was further exemplified by our set, a life-sized bird cage. Hopefully, this presentation will inspire boldness and creativity in other theatre professionals, so that more conceptual metaphors may be successfully integrated and executed.