



WHAT'S SO FUNNY ABOUT A DEAD SEAGULL? Musings on *The Seagull's* Opening Night

TREPLEV: Today, I have done something despicable— I have killed this seagull. I lay it at your feet.
NINA: What's the matter with you? (*Picks up the seagull and looks at it.*)
TREPLEV: (*After a pause*) Soon, in the same way, I shall kill myself.

When Jack Huntley delivered this line as Treplev in *The Seagull* last Saturday night, he had the audience in hysterics. In fact, the whole play was like this— actors often had to wait 2 or 3 seconds for laughter to die down before continuing their lines. How could this be? It's a story full of unrequited love, unfulfilled dreams, narcissism, regret, and depression— it even ends with a suicide. Yet Chekhov called it "A Comedy in Four Acts"— and it was received on opening night with genuine laughter. Why?

Chekhov's play, directed by Margaret McConnell ('25), centers around the variously depressing lives of four characters: the embittered older writer Trigorin (Arel Foster, '25), the tortured younger writer Treplev (Jack Huntley, '25), the self-absorbed retired actress Irina (Jordan Kammeyer, '25), and the young and ambitious actress Nina (Sadie Lewin, 27). Each of them deals with their own personal tragedies throughout the play, alongside several equally troubled secondary characters.

When I emerged into the FSK lobby after the play, I was tickled to discover that much of the post-show discussion was not about the performance itself—it was about the audience. *Why did we laugh?* people asked. Was it right to laugh at such depressing scenes? Was it *supposed* to be funny? Was it a tragedy? Was it a comedy? What's going on?!

"I think the audience was wrong," Avery Bravo ('26) told me. "There were moments when people definitely shouldn't have been laughing." For her, one such moment was the scene with the dead seagull. I, on the other hand, did laugh at that scene— but I didn't really know why. Was I wrong? Is the audience ever wrong? I'm not sure. If people laugh at something, surely it

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COLLEGE HISTORY TASK FORCE REPORT: An Overview, Part One

The history and legacy of the College exist for most members of the St. John's community in a mist of half-remembered facts, lies told on admissions tours, and the odd plaque commemorating soldiers or Francis Scott Key hanging around campus. Because of this, it is understandable that for some, it feels like the College exists, or at least should exist, in an ahistorical void, where inquiry can be pursued without the burden of time and space.

However, the longer I spend at the College, and the more I read about the College's history, the more I recognize the vital importance of understanding our place in history to any intellectual pursuit, and that pretending to not think about the College's past is, in effect, choosing one interpretation of it and its significance to tacitly support. In particular, legacies of slavery and discrimination leave a stamp on communities to this day, and the College's impact on the communities around it has been too long ignored.

For this very reason, the Board of Visitors and Governors, sparked on by Adrian Trevisan, put together a task force four years ago to examine the history of the College. Its work has finally come to fruition in the form of a report recently distributed to the College community, which features a general history of the College, biographies of all the men after whom buildings on campus are named, and an architectural survey. By examining these histories together as a community, we will be able to avoid stumbling unthinkingly into a certain interpretation of the legacy of the College, and instead be able to make an active choice, with proper thought and discussion, about what our responsibility is in commemorating the history of our institution. The taskforce is calling for comments on the report in order to encourage this kind of conversation, and to make recommendations to the Board of Visitors and Governors about steps the College can officially take to remember its history.

The full report, which everyone should read, a discussion guide, and a form in which to submit comments may be found online at sjc.edu/chtf. However, recognizing that some people may not have the leisure to read the entirety of the report, I will provide here some extracts from the section on the individual men, which is the focus of the task force.

However, these lack some important context present in the original report and are not a replacement for it. Rather, I hope to make the report as accessible to the largest number of members of the community as possible, to ensure that the conversation about our historical legacy is well informed and includes the whole Polity.

Hector Humphreys (1798-1857)

Hector Humphreys was born in Canton, Connecticut in 1797, near his cousin John Brown, the abolitionist who led a raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859. Humphreys attended Yale College, after which he moved to New York City to pursue theological studies. He was admitted to the order of the Deacon in Trinity Church, New Haven on March 21, 1824. Humphreys was appointed Professor of Ancient Languages at the newly established Washington (present day Trinity) College at Hartford, and his success at that institution made him a promising candidate for president of St. John's College.

Hector Humphreys served as the principal of St. John's College from 1831-1857, and he is credited with recovering the college from the financial struggles it faced in the early nineteenth century. Many of the organizational changes that Humphreys made had a lasting impact on the curriculum and campus at St. John's. During his time as principal, Humphrey placed a greater emphasis on science and established a laboratory for research purposes. He made military training voluntary and split the preparatory school into two sections, the Grammar School and the English School. The Grammar School served those who aimed to attend college, and the English School was for those who did not.

Humphreys also led the department of "Moral Science" and covered the Greek and Latin departments due to limited faculty. In addition to his adjustments to the curriculum of St. John's College, he also raised funds for the construction of a Boarding House which was completed in 1837. This building, now known as Humphreys Hall, was intended to relieve crowding in the College Building, present-day McDowell Hall. In 1855, Humphreys encouraged the Board to expand the campus again with the addition of faculty housing and

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This Week in Seminar

Freshman:

- Thursday, November 14th: Plato: *Phaedo*, 57A–84B
- Monday, November 18th: Plato: *Phaedo*, 84B–118B

Sophomores:

- Thursday, November 14th: Plotinus: (selections)
- Monday, November 18th: Augustine: *Confessions*, I-V

Juniors:

- Thursday, November 14th: Preceptorial
- Monday, November 18th: Preceptorial

Seniors:

- Thursday, November 14th: Preceptorial
- Monday, November 18th: Preceptorial

Friday Night Lecture:

"Aristophanes' Clouds and the Power of Logos" - Stephanie Nelson

Upcoming Events:

Friday, November 15th

- Friday Fare: Cannoli and Berries, FSK Lobby, 4pm-5pm

Saturday, November 16th

- Listening Session of Original "Theatre of Turmoil" Soundtrack, with Composer Zachary Konick, Conversation Room, 2pm-4pm
- Energeia's Open Mic Night, Boathouse, 9pm- 12am

SHOULD SOCIETY BE
HARMONIOUS?

Socrates says that the ideal republic is harmonious, and this has become a common image in political thought. People form a city like notes form a chord. But Zuckerkandl taught me a new word, an alternative to harmony: polyphony. So, extending the metaphor, could a polyphonic society be better than a harmonious one?

Harmony and polyphony are two forms of multi-toned music. Harmony is “melody plus accompaniment.” The melody is in charge, and the alto, tenor, and bass lines are for the sake of it. Sure, the harmony has some power to change the ‘vibe’ of the melody, but for the most part it is subservient to the laws the melody sets down. The biggest of these laws is rhythm—every part in a harmonic piece will sing the same words at the same time. If this were a city, it would be hard to see the backup parts’ individuality, and even harder to imagine them free.

Polyphony is the opposite. The parts sing different melodies at different times, and there is no one leader that dominates the piece. Each part gets its time in the sun, and once that time is done, the part steps aside to make room for another. With no eternal ruler, polyphony is more democratic than harmony.

Moreover, each part in polyphony is unique and whole. In Sicut Cervus, the sopranos give us one musical idea, the altos another, and so on. Unlike in harmony, in polyphony every part can rightly be called individual. This makes polyphony truer to human nature. I am not my neighbor transposed a fifth up—I am someone else entirely. When I join a

society, I want this fact to be recognized, my me-ness to be affirmed.

It would be easy to take this line of thought too far, though. ‘Let me do and say whatever I want!’ But a society built on this idea would be like a song made of a dozen different chants all playing at once. No matter how good each may be on its own, when they all come together they create “nonsense [and] disorder.” Absolute freedom is unmusical. This is why, in polyphony, each part’s “right of self-assertion” is constrained by duty to the song. Every part shares the same key, time signature, and lyrics. They strive for the same end, coming together in one chord on the final syllable. These constraints elevate the piece to something beautiful. They also create the circumstances that allow glimpses of harmony to appear. But these glimpses come about naturally, like a murmur of sparrows, rather than by the melody’s strict command.

So which city is better, the harmonious or the polyphonic? I know I would choose the latter. I think the former image, much like cell-state theory, is a friend of tyrants (but if you want to hear more about that, let’s talk face to face).

But regardless of which city you would choose, I hope this encourages you to be intentional with the images you use. Because if we understand these metaphors and use them with care, we will know what kind of community—what kind of world—we want to live in.

Henry Haggard

What’s So Funny About a Dead Seagull? (cont’d)

must be funny—especially in a theater. Who is a better judge of comedy than the audience itself?

But, of course, it’s not all up to the audience. Director Margaret McConnell was expecting some laughs. She reminded me that Chekhov himself considered the play a comedy, albeit with some very tragic themes. It’s certainly not a comedy in the Shakespearean sense. “I guess you would call it dark humor,” said McConnell. “I think part of what can make something funny is the tragedy that goes along with it.” She ultimately wanted to preserve this balance of comedy and tragedy, keeping a bit of both.

Until opening night, McConnell didn’t know what would get laughs: “As often happens in comedies, when you’ve been practicing a show for weeks and weeks, you forget that things are funny,” she said. “[The actors] found the audience laughing at things we’d never laughed at in rehearsals, and they would change the way they delivered certain lines, because they knew it would get a laugh.” In this way, the audience does influence the show environment—for better or worse. There were some truly poignant moments during the second half of the play which felt lost on an audience primed for comedy—for instance, Nina’s reunion with Treplev, or old Sorin’s lament of his unfulfilled dreams. “I wanted to get married—” he said, “and I never got married. I always wanted to live in town—and here I am ending my life in the country, that’s all.” Quiet little tragedies such as these fell through the floorboards on opening night: the audience just wasn’t prepared to take them seriously. They are sad things for me to write. Yet when I saw them, I laughed. How strange.

“It is not a complete farce at all,” says McConnell. “We are laughing at Treplev, but at the same time we can understand his pain. We can relate to him.” In her opinion, to present the show only as a comedy would miss its depth. Some of it is meant to touch us in a different way.

And then, of course, there is the final scene: Treplev’s suicide. After four acts of laughter, the play ends on a decidedly tragic note. Irina presides over a card game, laughing and talking loudly about herself. The other characters, worn out by life’s disappointments, distract themselves with cards and music. When Treplev shoots himself offstage, they even laugh, thinking that the gunshot was a bottle of ether exploding in the doctor’s bag. This final moment encapsulates much of the play’s mystery for me: is it a tragedy or a comedy? Is it a suicide or a bottle of ether? Chekhov answers the second question in the last line of the play: Treplev really does kill himself. What are we to make, then, of his subtitle, “A Comedy in Four Acts”? After the final scene, the audience walked into the lobby unsure of whether to laugh or cry.

Aristotle writes in the *Poetics* that “comedy aims at representing men as worse, tragedy as better than in actual life.” (1448a) So, which is the Seagull? Insofar as its characters are ridiculous, melodramatic, narcissistic, and absurd, it is a comedy. We laugh because they are worse than us. But perhaps the tragedy appears in those few moments when we see them as something more—something better than us—or maybe, even, when we see in them something of ourselves.

Helen Wagner

Hector Humphreys
Profile (continued)

a new dormitory. Humphreys argued that fair compensation included staff housing and adequate dormitory space, believing such benefits would attract a higher standard of teachers to join the faculty, leading to an increase in enrollment. According to the 1840 census, Humphreys housed one free African American man and woman while living in Annapolis. Historic records do not indicate that Humphreys enslaved any individuals.

El’ad Nichols-Kaufman

Aphorism of the Week

Οὐδένες ὁμοιότεροι τῶν ἀλλήλοις μαχομένων.

Tarik Mahmud



Cast and Crew of Anton Chekhov’s *The Seagull*

ABOUT THE ST.
JOHN’S
COLLEGIAN

The St. John’s Collegian is the weekly newspaper of St. John’s College Annapolis. We work to bring quick and timely coverage of important events going on, to help develop a more informed student body. If you’re searching for more in-depth investigations and reporting, as well as essays, art and culture, check out the Gadfly, our affiliated publication, which is published once every three weeks.

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