

Butusov's Unconventional Stage Interpretation of Chekhov's Plays -- Taking the Seagull as an Example

Gechun Wang^{1,a,*}

¹*Drama, Film and Literature, Nanjing University, Nanjing 210046, China*

a. 2909479517@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Director Butusov often uses subversive means to interpret Chekhov's plays, an unconventional interpretation that nevertheless expresses the very heart of Chekhov's plays. Using the theatrical production *The Seagull* as an example, the paper discusses aspects of Butusov's unconventional stage interpretation of Chekhov's plays: the violent stage temperament, subversive casting, and the director's alternative torture.

Keywords: Butusov, Chekhov, the *Seagull*, nested structure, polyphony

1. Introduction

Butusov believes that Chekhov's works themselves have a strong vitality; he said, I would not say I like to confine him to Russian writers; what he told is something that all people can feel; he saw the human nature of sad, pain and helplessness of life, this is similar to all people.

Chekhov's plays have a temperament close to prose, and directors of all eras have often struggled to express the energy in Chekhov's plays on the theatrical stage throughout the ages. However, Butusov presents the play on stage using body languages like drunkenness, frantic confessions, and complex stage imagery. Butusov uses a very subversive way of presenting Chekhov's play but shows precisely what Chekhov wants to say through those brutal elements.

If Chekhov's plays are hot spring water, Butusov is the man who smashes through the rocks to make the lava roll out of the subterranean layers. However, in a seemingly contrary way, he shows exactly what it is in Chekhov's subtle and introspective plays that make us feel desperate, even afraid. While directors of all generations before Butusov have adapted Chekhov's comedy play *The Seagull* with realism, Butusov's highly personal interpretation reveals the playful, absurd comedy and heartbreaking nature of Chekhov's play.

2. Violent Stage Temperament

2.1. Heavy Use of Solid Offensive Elements

In Chekhov's plays, bloodshed and death are often hidden in the past and behind the scenes, and the stage presents only the dressing of wounds, the knocked-down seagull, the woman after the abortion, and the gathering of people at the exact moment as the suicide. He presents only "after the event," which is often contrary to the requirements of an energetic theater, which is why the rehearsals of "The Seagull" are often unsuccessful. However, Butusov brings those gory elements back to the stage.

In "The Seagull," Butusov uses a lot of body language, or more appropriately, "chains of bodily images"-a series of bodily expressions that are seen, fantasized, feared, sought, and denied in the presentation of the body [1].

Physically, the actors use drunken and frenzied movements. In terms of lines, the characters' originally fragmented lines are put together into significant, frantic confessions, two highly aggressive expressions that make for a very aggressive performance. Butusov also used some horror images, such as in the second act, after Nina and Trigorin kiss, one after another appear zombies, killers, and monsters, and in the fourth act, all the crazy Nina painted with horror makeup; these added to the visual impact.

In addition, Butusov used much blood, almost all the parts of the script that had trauma and death and all the parts that could present damage, he used blood as much as possible: Trepleeff killed the seagull covered with blood, Butusov made a pose to shoot himself but showed a face full of blood, Irina untied the rope of the bandage that imitated Trepleeff was covered with traumatic scenes are always brought to the forefront by the visually striking blood.

Unlike Chekhov's concealment of the death scene, Butusov intentionally brings the death scene to the forefront, repeatedly experimenting with it several times. The same is repeatedly simulated in the final meeting of Act IV, where Trepleeff strangles Nina, Nina shoots him, and he repeatedly kills himself in front of and behind the stage. The multiple ways of death overlap in the same script content, and the death scene becomes a multi-line experiment, even a multi-level hell.

2.2. Cruelty of Character Relationship

Chekhov's plays often use "after the fact" episodes, the most dramatic of which often appear only in the characters' language or at the same time as but not on the stage. Butusov's restoration is the difficult part of the play that was bypassed in Chekhov's play. Tang Kexin says that Chekhov's plays have always been known for their low level of conflict, as his plays are mainly about the minor things in ordinary life, with few ups and downs, so when rude character actions and violent fights are not found in the original plays are brought to the stage, it is evident that they are an alternative interpretation of the dramatic conflict in the original plays [2].

In Act III, Scene IV of the original play, there is a conversation between Trepleeff and his mother while she is changing Trepleeff's bandages, almost in a casual way, which Butusov uses as a focus for Trepleeff's matricide and oedipal complex in *The Seagull*, using imagery that is strongly forbidden to mothers and sons: The baby bath (a symbol of Oedipalism), the rope tied around the face (a symbol of the mother's mental control over the son), the water that floods the face (the mother's oppression of the son, the son's revenge on the mother), the blood all over the face (the legacy of suicide after the mother's indifference and contempt, the frustration of Oedipalism and the emergence of matricide), expose the embarrassing underbelly of the mother-son relationship.

Butusov's brutalization of Chekhov's play lies in the excavation and exposure of the underbelly of the relationship and the simulation of unknown horrors. For example, in Act II, Trigorin's lakeside conversation with Nina uses Chekhov's original text: "By a lake, from an early age, lived a little girl much like you; she loved the water as much as a seagull and was as happy and free as a seagull. However, by chance, a man came and saw her, and because he had nothing to do, he destroyed her like a seagull." In the original play's intent, Nina's attitude toward this cruel prophecy should have been one of lack of perception. In Chekhov's writing, the moment is cruel precisely because of the girl's lack of perception.

However, in Butusov's staged presentation, the innocent girl's smile fades as they kiss passionately, then are quickly interrupted by the sound of a gunshot after the gunshot and the woman entering the door. The first time, a woman with a zombie-like stiff pace and a deadly pale face comes in with two suitcases, compromises Trigorin's change of heart, succumbs, and says she is not leaving, then

collapses, Trigorin carries her away and throws her out the door; the second time a woman with blood on both hands and black mascara tears around her eyes comes to attack Trigorin, throws her blood-stained gloves at the frightened The third time was a woman with a distorted face and masculine features which came in madly to tangle with Trigorin and were pushed out by Trigorin; the fourth time was an abominable monster-faced woman with fangs who came out in a wheelchair and cut off one of her legs and was kicked away by Trigorin; the fifth time, the demons came out in a flurry. All those women came on, stalking and chasing.

These five repetitions are almost the terrifying part of the whole play, the power of fear is not derived from the terrible shape but the bleak fate in front of the ignorant girl's cruel rehearsal. In the end, Nina has desperately struggled to escape Trigorin's kiss because that story, as long as you understand, you can see the violent factor and cruel nature of it. At the time when Trigorin had no qualms about informing Nina of such a cruel, cold and purposeful story, it was also the time when he discovered that he possessed the ability to inflict violence on the other side and, after that, the ruthless change of heart and cruel abandonment were all performed at this moment. According to Russian scholar G. Berdnikov: "The two themes of art and love are closely intertwined in *The Seagull*. 'If love is often cruel and destructive, the reason here lies not in love itself, but in the inequality between people.'" [3].

Some said the woman who interrupted their kiss was Trigorin's former mistress, but that was more of a shadow cast on Nina in the future. The state of the woman in the first four instances points to Trigorin's mistress, or what Nina might look like after becoming Trigorin's mistress: desperate, hateful, insane, and finally, a monster who loses herself and her sanity. The woman eventually loses her subjectivity; her hands are covered with blood, her eye makeup is cried out, and she destroys herself and becomes an alienated, deformed, ugly ghost, a sinner, a monster, and a disabled person.

Trigorin tells this story: the cruelty of destroying a happy and innocent girl and the indifference of "just out of boredom" need enough plot to explain. Not every one of them is Nina's future, but it is the future she may face, or the typical damage women can suffer in love relationships, what love can alienate women into, and how it can all play out in a girl like Nina.

3. Subversive Casting

Butusov's casting in *The Seagull* overturned people's impressions of the original play. In the script, the melancholy young man Treplieff is bald and short on stage, and his actress mother, Irina, is robust and vulgar, with an arrogant face. The uncle appears sitting with an oddly shaped umbrella, topped with mineral water, and eventually gets soaked to the skin. When one sees such a design, one realizes that the image of those uncles in Chekhov's plays should be a wandering, absurd, lazy, and disappointed image.

It is worth mentioning the casting of Nina as the female lead. According to Chekhov's original play, she should have been a pure and slender maiden in the Ophelia style. However, a robust, hairy woman with youthful lust written on her face was chosen to play the role of a seagull attracted to fly to the heart of the lake, where all the traits of lust, vanity, and stupidity are allowed. Her robust figure forms a kind of symmetry with Treplieff's mother, Irina. However, in the first act, when she wears flowers on her head, and her face is bright, there is indeed a kind of youthful energy that Irina has no way to compare. Although the location of "*The Seagull*" is a small place, Nina does not have to have the beauty of a typical beauty, the beauty required of Nina in "*The Seagull*" is young, healthy, innocent to the point of stupidity, and this is what impresses Trigorin.

Trigorin wears a suit on the outside but is topless on the inside, showing both sides of him as a good writer and a beast in gender relations. The blood marks on the bridge of his nose show the tremendous pressure his intellectual status puts on him. In Trigorin's lines, he and Nina are talking by the lake, and Nina is wearing a light-colored dress, while in the actual stage presentation, Nina is

wearing a black, noblewoman-like dress. At that time, she was just imagining her life as a celebrity and facing the defeated Trippolev indifferently. This contradiction between memory and reality shows the illusion that Nina brought to Trigorin. At that time, Nina gave him the feeling of brightness, the feeling of a youthful girl that disturbed the impression of a memory. All this character detail adds to the multi-faceted and realistic nature of the characters.

Butusov's subversive casting gives the characters a fuller image, and these characters appear more textured because of their subtle deviations from the original and are given more life and authenticity.

4. The Three-dimensional Nested Structure of Stage Characters

The set structure is used in the play "The Seagull" itself, and Trepleiff's play, as a play within a play in "The Seagull," provides an inner layer to the drama. In Butusov's stage presentation, he adds some additional character settings to make the play's structure more complex and three-dimensional.

One is the maid, who does not participate in Trepleiff's play-within-a-play, does not interact much with the characters, and occasionally wanders out of the play to dance at the end of each scene. The second is the director, who is present at every level of the play: he is the director of the play; he appears at the end of each act; he dances with the maid who wanders out of the theater; he directly plays Trepleiff and delivers a monologue while foreshadowing the plot of the next act; he tears up the stage of the play within the play after Trepleiff's play within the play is finished, in place of the fire that Trepleiff ignites.

4.1. Goddess of Life

In the original script of *The Seagull*, the maid is a minor character who plays some instrumental role in the last line of the character sheet. However, Butusov uses this character as a virtual stage device, and at the same time, she is the bearer of metaphors.

The maid is often presented on stage as a stray, dancing with extra devotion as the crowd revels. When leaving at the end of the crowd, she repeatedly gives Trepleiff, who remains in place, a look of innocence and sympathy, which hardly ever appears in anyone else's eyes throughout *The Seagull*.

When Trepleiff suffers a failure, different people give different reactions: the doctor expresses his love for his play, but in his mind, he imagines the scene where he gains adoration as a famous writer; Nina, drunk with the appreciation she receives from Irina and others, is almost indifferent to the failed Trepleiff; Irina keeps suppressing Trepleiff's creativity... ..the warm, natural, sympathetic, oasis-like eyes of this maid are enough to understand why almost every soul in Chekhov's play is as desolate as the desert.

After Trepleiff's suicide, beads fall from the fingers of the maid, covering her face to show her tears, so many of them falling and hitting the basin, each moment sounding crisp and clear, showing extreme sympathy and sorrow. However, when the dog appeared, she began to tease the dog again, full of childishness. Then, at the change of scene, she showed a solemn demeanor and danced about seagulls. After that, she returns to a wandering posture, sitting on a rope swing.

The maid keeps deviating from the state of the other characters in the play, always outside the event, on the edge of the story, casting ignorant or sad glances at the ridiculous and pathetic group of people. Her naive and compassionate state makes her the embodiment in the theater of the gods of life, which is inactive and unhelpful, yet at times casts a sympathetic gaze.

Involving the gods of life in the stage is the layer Butusov adds to the stage, where there is not only the will of the character, the will of the director, and the will of the scriptwriter but also the feedback of life itself.

4.2. The Director's Substitution for the Execution Endured by Actors

Tao Peng says that Butusov's "signature" in "The Seagull" is so direct, so bold, so shocking: his crazy dance is full of energy, and his presence brings the whole performance into a state of "madness", through the "carnival" theatrical language, the performance brings the audience into an artistic experience that transcends the rhythm of everyday life [4].

Butusov is present throughout the play at every level: he is the director of the entire play; he appears at the end of each act; he dances with the maid who wanders out of the theater; he directly plays Treplieff in a monologue as he foreshadows the plot of the next act; he tears up the stage of the play-within-a-play in place of the fire that Treplieff ignites after his play-within-a-play is finished. This change in orientation of the director (behind the scenes) - the actor (stage) - audience (auditorium) naturally allows his plays to break through the director-centered design space, the actor-centered performance space, and the audience-centered reception space. The boundaries between the director-centered design space, the actor-centered performance space, and the audience-centered reception space [5].

The significance of the director jumping on the stage is not only to break the fourth wall and make the play interact with the audience but also to show the audience: "It is more than just a script. It is true; it is me. "

When Treplieff feels that his play is confronted with degradation, contempt, and malicious deconstruction, he chooses to ignite the stage of the play within the play. The destruction of the stage is accomplished by the play's actual director, who runs onto the stage and tears the set apart with great force. Butusov, at this moment, becomes Treplieff's inner, yet resonant, expression or outside the script, displaying the heart of the broken creator. He dances wildly on stage after each scene. Before the final scene, he replaces Treplieff alone on stage to rage out Nina's experience and eventually shoots himself with his finger before revealing a face full of blood.

The director intervenes in the destruction scene, and the final stage is full of wreckage, showing the despair of destruction that should be shown by the actors, almost as a kind of alternative to torture. So often, the theater is the expression of pain that the audience will not experience, and the characters are tortured instead of the audience. At the same time, Butusov, as a director, chooses to intervene in the play, allowing the director to substitute the torture for the characters with a natural and strong sense of empathy that tears the distance between theater and reality, allowing the strong feelings in the play to be directly involved in reality.

5. Conclusion

Chekhov's plays need a chance to be expressed in a bursting manner, for beneath the prose expression of his plays, there is already a raging, burning lava. Back in says that "the carnival forms transformed into literary language become a powerful means of grasping life artistically; they become a special language in which words and forms have an extraordinary power of symbolic generalization, in other words, the power of generalization to the depths. Many important aspects of life, rather many important levels, and deep levels can only be discovered, understood, and expressed with the help of this language." [6].

Butusov's dazzling metaphorical imagery, disorganized lines, and character relationships make every gunshot and cruelty in the play visible, allowing everything that is contained to explode directly, forcefully, and intensely.

Chekhov's plays conceal everything, and Butusov is the one who has the correct code. Although he restructures the order of the reloaded lines, reverses the characterization, and adds a great deal of his creative interpretation, he is not so much deconstructing Chekhov as he is articulating the tragic

essence of Chekhov's comedic plays in an impactful and aggressive way that is remotely agreeable and fully appreciated.

What Aalto is saying is: "The theater is so subordinate to discourse, that we cannot help but ask, does theater not have its own language, can it not be regarded as an independent, autonomous art, like music, painting, dance?" I think this is why Butusov needs to express it again and again through Chekhov's original plays because he wants to limit the power of language, anything that needs to be expressed in words, Chekhov has already expressed it, where all the subtle symmetries, the truths of the characters, the unspoken cruelties, can only be reached through the most total and most meaningful use of lines possible, and the use of bodies, props and everything else, not by adding words. Chekhov's plays contain more than enough and can be expressed in something more appropriate than words.

Everything that cannot be expressed in words can be expressed in something other than words.

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