



Royal  
Exchange  
Theatre

# designing

# THE SEAGULL

BY ANTON CHEKHOV

# COLD MEAT PARTY

BY BRAD FRASER



...written about, show  
extraordinary, perform  
love and dress in light co  
The Theatre.



exchange  
education

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quite openly.

# TWO PRODUCTIONS ONE COMPANY

Separated by a century and a continent, the playwrights Anton Chekhov and Brad Fraser would seem to be writing about quite different people and different places. However, for the Royal Exchange Theatre, the plays **THE SEAGULL** and **COLD MEAT PARTY** offer an exhilarating opportunity to explore similar threads about human relationships, to examine the claim and loss of fame and success. With two different directors but the same

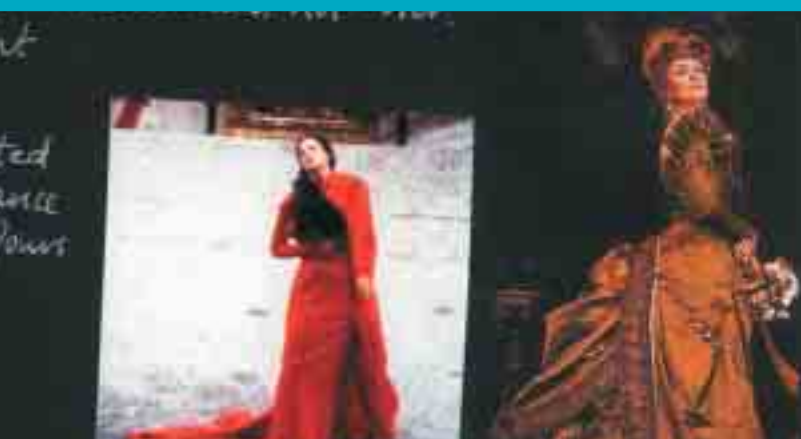
company and cast, there is a fascinating artistic journey here where ideas from one play can help to develop a sense of characters in another.

The actor Colin Tierney who is playing Trigorin in **The SEAGULL** and an ageing rock star, Marcus, in **COLD MEAT PARTY** sees this process, of taking on two scripts and two productions, as fascinating. *"By playing two characters it allows you to have time out, and*

*see the role from different angles. I feel it really helps me as an actor as it allows you to filter ideas and bring the experience of one play to bear on another."*

Conversely, for the designer Liz Ascroft, it is not the similarities that shape her professional excitement but the differences. There are differences that a division of a century or so make obvious but the real difference is one of approach to the setting.

FROM THE SKETCHBOOK OF LIZ ASCROFT



# TWO PLAYS, ONE DESIGNER... THE SEAGULL AND COLD MEAT PARTY AT THE ROYAL EXCHANGE, MANCHESTER

## THE SEAGULL

BY ANTON CHEKHOV



### FLIGHTS OF FANTASY

The scrapbook in front of the designer Liz Ascroft is rich with images. There are faces, bodies, clothes...and seagulls. Every character has his or her own seagull. A seagull in a distinct pose, soaring high in flight, swooping low on a still horizon, lazy and bedraggled on a sea wall, dropping like a dark shadow towards an earth bound death. Each of these birds helps Liz to flesh out what she thinks of the character that she is working on. She simply has to have a very full grasp of the character before she can begin to assemble clothes or put them in a set.

For Liz Ascroft design is not simply about reproducing the world on the stage, being a kind of theatrical architect who is merely involved in copying. There has to be in the design a poetic voice giving an expressive quality to the set and costumes. The work of a designer, for Liz, ought to lift the experience of a play so that the art of the actor is enhanced, so that what happens on the stage is intensified by an atmosphere and a distinguishing perspective. This isn't about Liz Ascroft the designer putting her stamp on a piece of theatre but working, striving – sometimes battling, to make the wonder and dream of the play's visual world present in the occasion of each performance. Somewhere in there is the nub of the difference between being a working artist and being a person who simply fabricates scenes and images. There is, with every theatre project, a journey for Liz in trying to establish what the essential quality is in a play and in its characters. The task is to find the key that begins to unlock a full understanding and vision of a play, its place and its people.

Which is where the seagulls come in. In designing the costumes for Chekhov's play **THE SEAGULL**, Liz Ascroft finds in the images something of the characters that she is exploring. In the visual mind of a designer, they encapsulate aspects of their character and their place in the action in a manner that is more precise, less clumsy than a wordy verbal description. She is looking firstly for a feel, something about the interior of a character so that she can begin to know how to dress, detail, shape and place the exterior.

The images of seagulls are fascinating. Konstantin's bird is a rubbed blur of a bird whilst Sorin's gull is clearly on its last legs. Nina is represented by four birds reflecting the four distinct stages in her career through the play. Shamrayev has ruffled feathers, Masha is distant on the horizon whilst Medvedenko's seagull sits stolidly on the shoreline, he is never going to get off the ground.

### WHY NOT?

- Play the game whereby you choose a role and get people to ask you questions about her or him, whilst you imagine them as other things. You might ask, **"If this person was a bird, what bird would they be?" "If this person were a boat, what kind of boat would they be?" "If this person were a fabric, what texture would they be?"**
- Collect your own images of animals or birds for a particular character and make a collage with notes to explain why you have made these choices and how they give you insight into personality, behaviour, appearance and all the things that make up a three dimensional individual.

### WHY NOT?

- Put together your own scrapbook of ideas for a character. Like Liz Ascroft, don't feel constrained by a sense of period but look for ideas that have some kind of connection for you. Make notes alongside the images that explain your thinking. You might like to include quotes from speeches by the character or observations from other characters in the play.
- See if you can find someone in real life who bears on the character that you are exploring and arrange to interview them. Make sure you are sensitive about the task and that the person who you are interviewing is aware of what you are trying to achieve.

### WHY NOT?

- Decide on a distinctive prop or piece of stage furniture for a character in a play of your choice. Find images that illustrate examples of the item and see if you can come to a decision about the way this thing might look. Make notes that explain your thinking and your decisions.
- Make a detailed model of a piece of stage furniture or a prop. Plan your use of materials carefully and think hard about the scale of the item and how you might reduce it realistically.

**Credits:** **THE SEAGULL** and **COLD MEAT PARTY** are designed by Liz Ascroft.

This booklet is produced with enormous thanks to Liz whose design sketches,

notes and interview comments are used throughout.. Designed by Dragonfly Design - 01270 820122

## FEEDING ON SCRAPS

Long before a pencil etches the fall of a coat, the cut of a dress, Liz Ascroft collects vast numbers of pictures from magazines, books, or any print material that she comes across. There isn't any particular connection in the images other than that they reflect something about the character the designer is working on. The image begins to explain something about the look of a character. It is not even important to have the images come from a particular period. Laid out in her scrapbook, the gaps dense with written thoughts, lines from the play, quick observations and growing ideas, the collection of images begin to give Liz the essence of the character that she is working on.

Liz found photographs by the artist Robert Parke Harrison that played mischievously with reality and made surreal stories in pictures in which he was the central figure. There was a resonance with Konstantin here, Konstantin the true artist, the forward thinking man who breaks artistic boundaries. However, at this point the relationship was slight and unclear. Liz was aware that the images reminded her of a designer friend who always wears a suit. Designer and actor, Stephen Robertson, who plays Konstantin, found themselves mulling over these threads. Stephen told a story of always wearing random combinations of suit jacket and suit trousers as a student having bought a bag of old suits for a few pounds. A strong sense of Konstantin began to emerge, a powerful image of a man who could dress in such a way so breaking with tradition and looking on the outside, to some degree, as he feels on the inside. By the end of the play he could be in a whole suit, being correct, everything tailored and matching. ***"There's something heart-breaking about this,"*** says Liz. ***"Everything about Konstantin gets squashed inside and tidied away."***

***"Once you have got right inside the character and the character is then inside you, the whole process is really, really easy,"*** from the character begins a journey towards someone whole. There are a myriad of details to explore such as personal props, favourite and familiar items, the cut of a character's hair, the style of dress. These things cannot begin to be discovered if Liz does not understand the character and so research is extremely important. ***"If you don't have a good grounding on the inside of the person,"*** she declares, ***"you don't stand a chance in a props meeting of explaining what something is like."***

## DRAWING UP A CHAIR

It seemed important for this play to associate each character with a particular chair – they spend a great deal of time sitting in audiences, sitting at tables, sitting and talking. A chair emerged as a pivotal prop for each character. Not any old chair. Not even a chair that would be strictly right for a 19th century Russian country house. Instead, Liz explored specific chairs for specific characters. For example, having established the characters, Liz took herself off to see chairs in the real, a camera in her hand. The designer would sit in chairs and ponder about each of the characters.

***"If I was Arkadina,"*** she would ask herself, ***"would I sit in this chair? Would I feel sexy? If I were Shamrayev, I'd look for a chair that won't topple. It would have to be four square, rooted, reflecting my sturdy army life."***

Having found the chairs, the photographs taken, Liz would hole up in her studio and spend hours making detailed models of each and every chair. Sometimes there would be several chairs for a character because, whilst they may stand well by themselves, once gathered with other chairs, the meaning and relationships would shift. A particular chair might suddenly seem to be too strongly related to others or seem quite remote and out of place. The chairs not only reflect character, they help underline relationships such as strained marriages and hopeful affairs.

It is painstaking work, model building. Liz thinks this has a particular benefit because it makes you think very hard about why and what you are doing. If you are going to spend a great deal of time making a tiny but detailed model of something you have to be very sure it is the right thing. ***"You become very certain, for instance, that there are no twiddly bits on Shamrayev's chair. He's an army man. But for the beautiful couple, there had to be beautiful chairs. They had to be white and ornate, novel and highly fashionable. Arkadina and Konstantin have to show off."***

## A SENSE OF PLACE

***"There are times,"*** says Liz, ***"when I go quite bonkers."*** She is talking about realising a sense of place in a set. There was the time when she was designing for a play with a strong Greek flavour. Within days, she was walking the hills in rural Greece. Whilst this may not directly inform her designs, Liz finds that there are assaults on one's senses that you simply don't get from looking at a book and pouring over a work table. She talks about the wind and the birdsong and how it might change not what you see, but how you see the scene.

The task for the designer is not simply about building the visual elements of a scene but building the atmosphere. Travelling in Russia has helped Liz in building her sense of place. Alongside this sits research. There is a need to read. To get the detail right.

Watching the film **AN UNFINISHED PIECE FOR MECHANICAL PIANO** by the Russian director Nikita Mikhalkov, the designer delightedly made a discovery. ***"Everything goes outside in Russia. Tables and chairs go out into the garden at the drop of a hat and you sit amongst the weeds reading."*** Liz laughs. We're back to the chairs.

Costume details are often demanding for an actor. For example, the set for **THE SEAGULL** has an uneven floor that makes for a different kind of physicality as the actors move. This is coupled with the fact that Russians historically were happy to wear what we would see as desperately unsuitable shoes. It might be hard for the actors but it was perfectly natural for the Russians. It is a good example of design making demands upon performance rather than just surrounding or supporting the action.



## WHY NOT?

- Research the background to a play of your choice. What information will be essential to your design project? Make notes that will be important in shaping your thinking and ideas for a set and costumes.
- Make a list of research possibilities for your play. Be wide and generous with your sources; remember that novels, other plays, films and television, painting and photography can be creative and factual beginning points.

# COLD MEAT PARTY

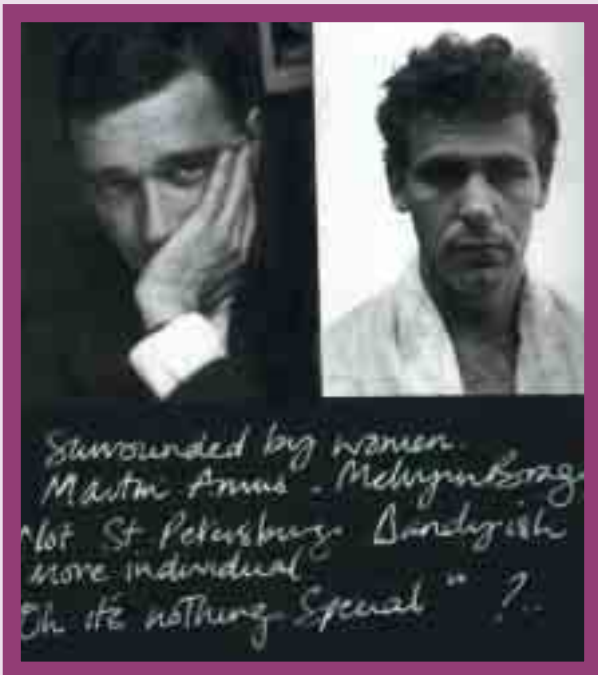
BY BRAD FRASER

Same place, same people, same designer but the era and style are entirely different. For Liz Ascroft the challenge is more than just one of adapting an approach to time and space in working on this production within the Royal Exchange Theatre. She has to turn her way of working quite on its head.

**THE SEAGULL** feels very much within the designer's normal idiom of working to realise a place on stage that reflects the characters that inhabit that world. However, **COLD MEAT PARTY** is set in the lounge of a small hotel. It is no one's space in particular. And it is everyone's space. The audience must not make assumptions from the space about the charact

Liz Ascroft had to struggle with this concept; of a space put together for someone else but that someone else being no one definite. The space is possibly put together for the average hotel guest - but, of course, no such person exists. The designer in Liz wanted to do something thought through and consciously constructed - just as you might do with a room at home. Yet this would mean looking for the person who habitually lives in the room and, of course, there is no such person. However, it is also true to say that each such room, in every bed and breakfast and in every small hotel up and down the land, has been put together by somebody and that somebody has made guesses at what might feel comfortable and interesting to anonymous future guests. There was a real frustration in all this for the designer. So began a research journey with a camera. Posing as a woman looking to book a party in for an important stay, Liz took herself to see as many bed and breakfast establishments and small hotels as she could possibly muster. She found it oddly depressing. Walking into room after room that had been dressed for someone else, yet no one else, she uncovered a characterless world. The camera collected images, recorded pattern and colour, chronicled shape and scale. The prints came back from the chemist. There was not a hint in any photograph of a person that might belong, that might live out their life between such walls.

From these images, the designer began to piece together the set for **COLD MEAT PARTY**. Pieces of



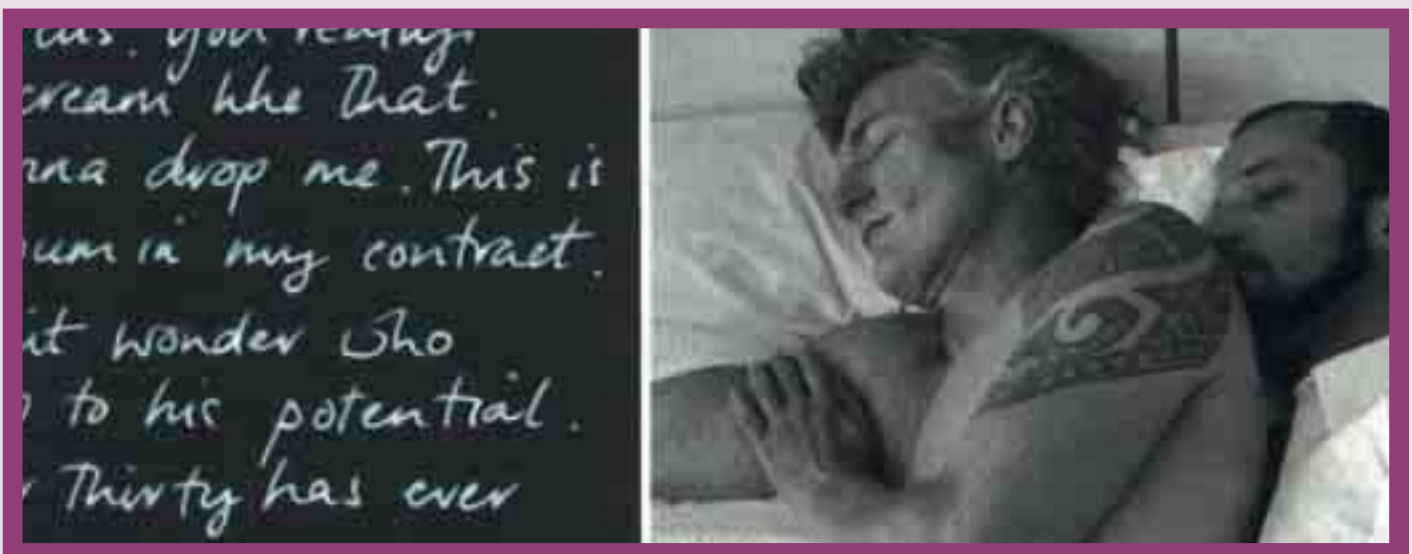


furniture that don't quite harmonise but on the other hand don't seem out of sorts if they sit side by side. Colour and texture that don't quite marry but that don't mock or fight with one another. In doing this, there was also a need to step back from some of the rooms that she had seen because they were not always put together with such neutrality. The pattern of carpets and soft furnishings were not always easy partnerships, colour occasionally seemed overpowering. It was important that the room for **COLD MEAT PARTY** didn't feel like it was making some joke or exercising any kind of judgement.

This is all quite a different approach to the chairs for **THE SEAGULL**, which began their design in a thorough knowledge of the character. The characters are disconnected from the place where the drama of **COLD MEAT PARTY** is played out.

## WHY NOT?

- Find images from design and interior magazines that you think fail to make any kind of statement about who uses the space or lives in the room. Remember that institutional rooms, whilst not feeling personal, more often than not do reflect the work and purpose they are created for. You are looking for spaces that seem to have no human history or character. Bring your images together in a collage.
- Collect fabric swatches, material designs and colours that you can organise into groups where there is no aesthetic relationship yet there is no conflict or clash. Is it possible to visualise a space using these materials so that there is no conscious sense of design?



Cold Meat Party is a CANADIAN EXCHANGE Project supported by the Regional Arts Lottery Programme, The Peter Henriques Fund, The Canadian High Commission, The Granada Foundation, Dr L H A Pilkington Charitable Trust, The Garfield Weston Foundation and Visiting Arts.



FROM THE SKETCHBOOK OF LIZ ASCROFT

# A PROFILE OF LIZ ASCROFT DESIGNER

Liz Ascroft did not make a huge impression at school. Well, at least not as an academic student with a sense of purpose. She seemed to spend a great deal of her time doing things like gardening or playing sport. That is she says, when she wasn't fighting and generally being a bit of a pain.

Sent to paint the fifth form block (and you get the impression this was an attempt to keep Liz quiet rather than educated), she came across a poster for the Manchester Youth Theatre. Lazily slapping emulsion around the margins, she found herself reading the substance of the advertising. The rest, as the cliché goes, is history.

Liz joined the Youth Theatre on a whim and developed a wild enthusiasm for the theatre. Encountering the production designer one day, she asked how she could get to be a designer.

The account of a formal training, an art foundation course and a degree did little to daunt a teenager who had carefully avoided collecting any qualifications throughout her schooling.

It was a steep hill to climb and Liz Ascroft had to begin again at the bottom to collect the school qualifications up to A level, two years on art courses in Preston and Blackpool before being accepted for a degree course at the prestigious Wimbledon School of Art. It was, she says, "just heaven". There is absolutely no doubting that Liz means what she says.

Although she makes light of the graft that was involved in getting the basic qualifications and she tells dizzily funny stories about interviews for courses and late presentation of folios, you know underneath it all is a very serious and determined designer.

**THE SEAGULL** and **COLD MEAT PARTY** are Liz's fourth and fifth designs for the Royal Exchange. It's a theatre space that she loves dearly and which she increasingly feels that she understands. It is not, she observes, a space where you spell everything out for the spectator. She feels strongly that Casper Reed, founding Artistic Director of the Royal Exchange, is right when he says "*that one should always ...give the audience a little bit of floor to dance on.*"

Nominated for a best theatre design award for her work on Brian Friel's **AFTER PLAY** that has recently been staged in Dublin, South Carolina and the Gielgud Theatre in London, Liz is a long way from painting the 5th form block.

# WORKING WITH DESIGN

## A STUDENT'S SKETCHBOOK

**CHARACTER TEMPLATE** Working from a character template is a quick and effective way of exploring colour, pattern and texture for a costume. With the outline of an appropriate human figure either traced or drawn freehand, cut away the figure so that it acts as a transparency in which to frame pattern, colour and texture from magazines. As you are passing the template over the images, you can begin to develop design ideas from the colour and pattern. (See Fig 1)



**COLLAGE LAYERING A CHARACTER IMAGE** Use a photocopied image of an appropriate individual and then begin to build up the costume design by pasting images realising colour and pattern on top. If you want to develop a sense of texture, you might simply continue to layer on the same image. If you want to explore detail then you might photocopy the collage image at various stages. The latter approach also has the advantage of charting the process and allowing you to return to an earlier stage if the development goes awry. (See Fig 2)



**INSPIRATIONS** Almost anything can serve as the inspiration for costume design. A series of photographs from a holiday may offer a clear and confined sense of colour that you can begin to work with. What is at play here is a way of deliberately confining the palette you work with and giving a very clear prompt for the way that you might work on the costume design. Thus in Fig 3, we start with a series of images of the River Dart. In Figure 4, those images shape the use of colour in the collage applied to a series of figures.

**IF THE FACE FITS** There are, of course, no right or wrong approaches to building a sense of character in your mind. Designers use an infinite number of approaches. However, as a starting point it might be useful to research and gather images of faces. Collages on work boards can be generic (a range of old men's faces) or specific (a particular elderly man). These might set off a clear sense of character and an understanding of the dress that might be appropriate.



structuring a very particular approach is to settle on a particular artist who connects in some way with the play under consideration either by sense of place or time. This will help give a constraint to the use of colour, shape and pattern and so add to the coherence of a set of designs. For example you might choose the artist Miro as the aesthetic starting point which then gives a distinct flavour to your realised costume designs.



STUDENT DESIGN IDEAS BY KATH SINGH