

The Seagull
BY ANTON CHEKHOV

Research

We have chosen to interpret 'The Seagull' by Anton Chekhov, first performed in 1895. The play is about an aspiring writer, Konstantin, brought up by a family of acclaimed artists. He fails to meet the expectations of his family and his lover Nina, which sends him spiraling into existential crisis. Nina grows cold towards Konstantin and leaves him for the more successful writer, Trigorin. She returns when he becomes more successful, but still heartbroken, he commits suicide at the end of the play.

Commented [EK1]: 1b – Understanding of context of the whole text.

Chekhov is deemed one of the most influential people at the birth of proto-modernism. Evidently, 'The Seagull' has a very naturalistic style. He thought that the play should reflect life. "What happens onstage should be just as complicated and just as simple as things are in real life. People are sitting at a table having dinner, that's all, but at the same time their happiness is being created, or their lives are being torn apart".

Commented [EK2]: 1b – Understanding of original context of the text.

“Chekhov's symbolism and self-conscious reflection on the nature of drama are the main features that distinguish this work from that of earlier realist and naturalist playwrights.^[1]”
-PERICLES LEWIS

Chekhov also worked very closely with Stanislavsky during the making of the play, reinforcing the importance of naturalism- a key convention of Stanislavsky's style. The sense of realism gave us a huge scope to interpret the play in a unique and interesting way.

We chose Kneehigh to influence our interpretation of 'The Seagull' because of the energy the theatre company brings to their stories. Because of the naturalism and sometimes sparseness of action within 'The Seagull', a huge contrast would be made when working with Kneehigh techniques, allowing us to make our performance our own. The vast range of techniques also would allow us to showcase our abilities. After seeing 'The Tin Drum' live, we knew that the theatre company would give us endless opportunities to completely change the original style of our chosen play.

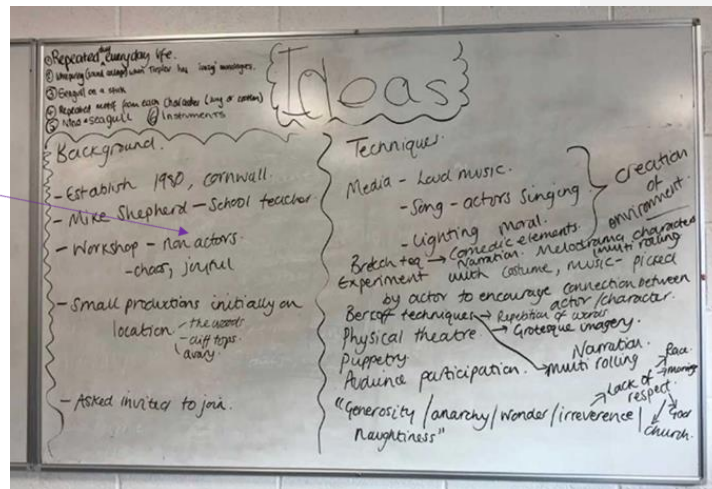
Commented [EK3]: 1b – Company explored

We thought they had a huge range of techniques we could apply to our performance.

Some we have used in our own piece include:

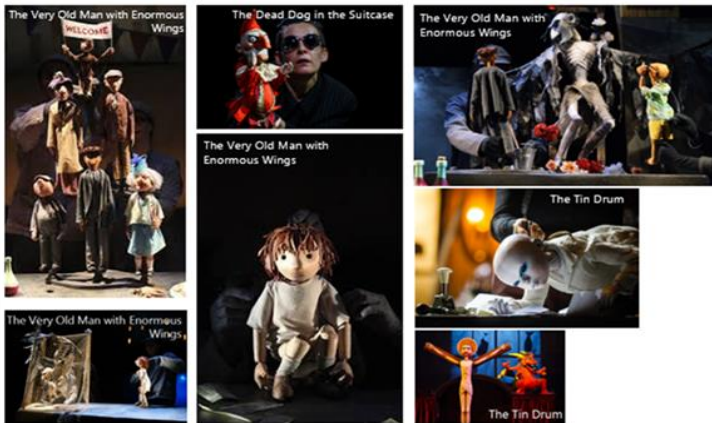
- Puppetry
- Musical motifs and song
- Dance/Movement as an ensemble
- Placards

We brainstormed the background information about the company including its origination and any rehearsal/casting processes. We also collectively thought of all the specific techniques Kneehigh use, so that we could pick ones we thought would work well in our piece



Here, are print screens of a presentation during my early research process:

Kneehigh



PUPPETRY

Kneehigh Theatre Company are well known for their effective use of puppetry. Their puppet maker, Sarah Wright said that they **"are always performing theatrically, functionally, aesthetically, and in other socially networked ways"**. The puppeteer is always visible on stage and often have their own character within the play. However, the normalisation and direct address to the puppets eventually makes the puppeteers appear invisible. The use of puppets may imply a sense of oppression and control. For example, in The Tin Drum, the character Oskar is portrayed by a puppet who is living in an awful time, where everyone is being controlled by 'The Order'.

<http://www.kneehigh.co.uk/list/performing-objects.php>

I did some further research into the meaning of the Puppet in the Tin Drum after viewing Kneehigh's production. In a review of the production by Katherine Love, she states:

Ever-youthful Oskar takes the form of a pale, grave puppet (delicately operated by Sarah Wright), his implacable expression casting quiet judgment over everything else on stage. The austerity of his appearance is at sharp odds with the colour and chaos elsewhere: a single point of unchanging focus in a fast-swirling world. He's an odd, unsettling figure, childishly petulant in some ways yet disturbingly mature in others. As so often with puppets, it's astonishing how much can be read upon his fixed wooden features.

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/oct/06/the-tin-drum-review-kneehigh-everyman-liverpool-gunter-grass>

Commented [EK4]: 1a - Individual contribution
1b - Company explored

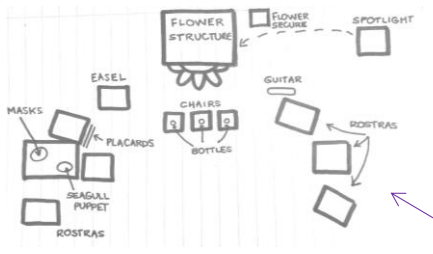
From this, it was clear how much meaning was conveyed through the puppet figure. My own experience was the puppet represented child-like innocence, however the disturbing, almost featureless appearance of the puppet, symbolised the turmoil he faces in the piece, as he is at the centre of a growing nightmare-like world. The puppetry in this production influenced our decision to include puppetry within our piece.

When researching Kneehigh, it was clear that the set played a huge part in the overall production. I also noted the variations of levels and angles, almost scaffold-like, in the set design and how essential the sets are to the overall aesthetic. In the production of Tristen and Yseult, Coleman (the set designer) says he is “always looking at the world [...] and then what gives you a key into that world”. He then discusses how the set was based around a particular object associated with the story, a boat. In this particular video, I noted how fluidly the actors interacted with the set, moving around on the circular boat-like shape stage and swinging on the central pole (the rig) from ropes. We were heavily influenced by this and chose the Russian chamomile to be the central theme as it is the national flower of Russia and represents everything perfection the artist are striving for. Much like Kneehigh, this gives a key into the world of the artist in The Seagull. Coleman states “you need a really robust set that’s almost like an adventure playground” and the fact that the actors should be able to do things with the set, it should be playful. We used this idea in our piece as the actors were able to raise and lower the chamomile flower using a pulley which represented times when hope was present and lost.


Coleman also emphasizes the importance of levels. In Tristen and Yseult, the actors could swing from the centre piece mast, and rise in the middle deck of the mast. Unfortunately, we were unable to be this adventurous due to health and safety, however, we did decide to make use of chairs to add variation in the levels. For example, we devised a scene set in Sorin’s bar where two anonymous Russian men are telling a “folk tale”. They begin stood on the chairs to capture the main focus of the audience, as well as to convey an air of confidence and superiority over, what they feel are, Nina’s naïve views: being famous is the key to happiness and satisfaction.

Commented [EK5]: 1a Fully supported dramatic form chosen to

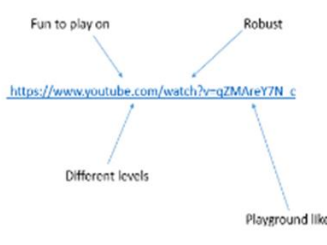
unicate meaning.
Performance space and proxemics well-planned to communicate meaning.



SET DESIGN




Kneehigh also use quite “robust” sets as said by the set designer, Bill Mitchell in his interview:



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZMAreY7N_c

After research numerous Kneehigh sets, we came up with our own design:



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZMAreY7N_c

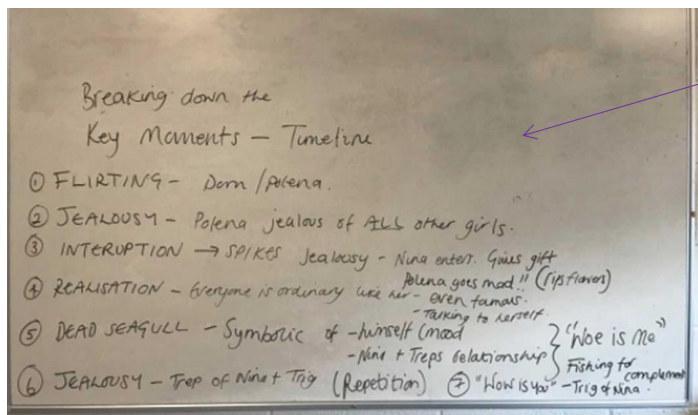
When researching the artistic intentions behind Kneehigh productions, it was clear to see that they wanted their productions to have moral impact on the audience and to make a difference. When discussing the purpose behind their work, Les Bubb (Kneehigh actor) states that "...it can be a moving and memorable was to move society to improve itself through awareness of the bigger picture and how we are all connected".

<https://www.bristol247.com/culture/theatre/interview-the-tin-drum-performer-les-bubb-kneehigh-bristol-old-vic/>

This links cleverly to our artistic intent, demonstrating the desire for fame and fortune will not always provide emotional stability and freedom. In our piece, we demonstrated this through the use of choreographed symbolic puppetry, where Nina, desperate for the love, fame and confidence that Trigorin exudes, is manipulated physically by him, taking control of her. Konstantin, who truly loved Nina deeply, is rejected by her and kills himself. This show the consequences of artificial love and being desperate for fame.

Creation

After reading the play we discussed the key themes within our extract to aid the creative process of our devising- settling on the main theme being satisfaction/dissatisfaction. This largely comes through the character of Konstantin, who in this extract demonstrates how dissatisfied he is with his writing and others' lack of understanding of his work, for example, his line to Nina states "You said just now that you're too simple minded to understand me".



Other themes from across the play include evaluating self, existentialism, love, and fame.

With further analysis and research, I discovered the similarities between Chekhov's own life Konstantin Treplev. Most character in Chekhov's work are frustrated with dreams and shattered expectations leading to either a revelation of breakdown. Chekhov's own life reflects the lives of those in The Seagull as he "lived and wrote in a time when social control and authority were rapidly transforming. His works deal with changing ideals and their impact on life of characters." In his book 'Interpreting Chekhov' by Geoffrey Borny, he explains how Konstantin's "efforts to achieve an identity, both artistic and personal, that was independent of Irina would surely have been seen in a favourable light by Chekhov whose own desire to be a free artist and nothing more." This confirmed that the main theme to focus on within the extract would be dissatisfaction as, not only is this a key theme in the extract, but also in Chekhov's own life.

Information from:

<https://theculturetrip.com/europe/russia/articles/the-wonder-of-anton-chekhov-themes-symbols-and-motifs/>

We then realised commonalities between Chekhov's constructs and the Commedia Dell'arte archetypes. For example, I decided I would take the role of Nina, who is very like the "innamorata" character Columbina (who tends to show her emotion through the positioning of her arms). The characters' similarities include both being "soubrettes" (coy characters) who are down to earth, they are both of lower class and most importantly, they are both adulteresses due to their flirtatious manners. We each chose an archetype to liken to our own character to and then began practicing their body language (see video 1). Now with our new mannerisms, we wanted to create an animated and expressive scene to begin our devised piece. I thought this would be a good idea because in Commedia Dell'arte they communicate the story through their bodies and expression rather than dialogue and this would make our performance easily understandable and full of energy. From here, we decided we wanted an introductory scene where the artists are in an environment where they are in the limelight, so, we began improvising a red-carpet scene in the style of the different archetypes. This also uses the Kneehigh convention of exaggerated, playful and archetypal characters, as seen in The Red Shoes. In this production, all of the characters are archetypes including the protagonist, 'The Girl'. This is important so that everyone can identify clearly with the character (as states by Patrycja Kujawska who played the lead role). It also adds quirky comedy to an otherwise dark piece, which along with musical motifs, is another Kneehigh technique.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOwlrEG_TGE

Commented [EK6]: 1a – Individual contribution

Commented [EK7]: 1b – In-depth understanding of the extract within the context of the whole text.

Commented [EK8]: 1b – Developing characters.

In a video I watched of The Red Shoes rehearsal trailer, I noticed the exaggerated physicality of the actors, which reminded me of Commedia Dell'arte.
<https://kneehighcookbook.co.uk/the-red-shoes-spoletto-2011/> We decided to experiment with this:

II
 Experimenting with the leg movement of Capitano



Experiment the arm gestures of the two "innamorati"

Commented [EK9]: 1a – Developed of creative ideas to create refined piece.
 Proxemics well planned to communicate meaning.
 1b – Well defined structure.

Commedia Dell'arte research also from page 93 in The Routledge Companion to Commedia Dell'arte edited by Judith Chaffee, Oliver Crick.

In terms of the structure of the piece, we felt it was important (being Kneehigh inspired) that there the scenes next to each other contrasted in mood and atmosphere. With such a depressing theme, we had to consider ways that we could present some parts of the extract in a more comical way and similarly, others in a more mysterious and eerie way to capture the audience's attention. The development of an uncomfortable puppet and master movement sequence, where Harry moved my limbs with invisible string to show his character's control over my character (Nina). We devised this movement using slow and deliberate movements to convey that Trigorin's control was manipulative and thought-through. We had to rehearse this using a metronome at first (see video 3) as we originally used the music from Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring' (being a Russian composer). However, we eventually settled on a Russian Lullaby which had more of a set tempo and rhythm so it was more effectively timed. It was also important I kept the same distance between my arm and Harry's arm when we were moving to give the effect there was a metaphorical puppet string between us.

Development

As our theme for our performance is satisfaction, we chose a section of Chekhov's script, which denoted that even the people we admire could be dissatisfied with their lives. We decided that we would include a narrator, who would directly address the audience at key moments in the piece. This is another key feature of Kneehigh's work, very much influenced by Brecht which I identified when watching 'The Tin Drum'. The performers in 'The Tin Drum' broke the fourth wall by narrating the plot, singing the narration out towards the audience (an effective story-telling technique) which instantly alerted me to the importance of his role. Our narrator would be played by the character Dorn, who would also sing some of the lines. I suggested that Dorn would be the best character to play the narrator because I detected that he appears to be the only one in the play who is relaxed about the way life is and doesn't get frustrated or swept away in it as the other characters do. We originally had Dorn reading out the soliloquy in our extract, whilst the others performed movement as an ensemble depicting that everyone is within the same vicious cycle. However, we felt this wasn't a true reflection of the Kneehigh style; the most prevalent convention of this theatre company is song, so we wrote a melody in a minor key to make it sound enigmatic and all agreed it sounded Russian, where The Seagull is set. Running with this idea, we added more Russian elements, which we hadn't previously considered (See Video 2 for original version). We felt that the guitar sound added a folk feel to the music, a style commonly associated with Kneehigh productions. In their production of 'The Wild Bride', the mysterious and dark nature was reflected in the folk style music.

<http://www.kneehigh.co.uk/show/the-wild-bride.php>



Before, our scene started with a sketch which took place at the "red-carpet" event. Yet, we felt the scene didn't flow smoothly with the others because of the huge contrast in music choices (contemporary and folk). Therefore, started again with the introductory scene, where the three artists are on the floors singing the chant "What pretty flowers, give me those flowers". This was taken directly from the script, where Polena grabs the flowers from Dorn out of envy and desire to be with him. This perfectly fits with our theme of satisfaction. They surround a giant chamomile flower model, which becomes the centre piece overshadowing the action. A chamomile is the flower of Russia. Evidently, this shows the artists are envious of the perfect Russian lifestyle, when they begin to reach for the flower. Kneehigh heavily influenced our change, with elements of song, musical motifs, and physical theatre. Other Russian flourishes

Commented [EK10]: 1a – Significant individual contribution to the development of the piece.

-Dramatic conventions to communicate meaning.

1b – Sophisticated reinterpretation showing understanding of extract within context of whole text.

Well-defined structure.

Commented [EK11]: 1a – Sophisticated and creative ideas well developed to produce a coherent piece.

Appropriate selection of conventions to communicate meaning.

1b – Company explored.

Commented [EK12]: 2a – Creative ideas developing.

Commented [EK13]: 1a – Creative ideas are well developed to produce a refined and coherent piece.

Commented [EK14]: 1a – Well planned performance space to communicate meaning in a thoughtful way.

we added include a Russian dance and folk tale. Despite removing the red-carpet scene, we liked the Commedia Dell'arte idea and the use of masks (a common convention of Kneehigh theatre) and decided to have that as a running theme throughout our piece.

Commented [EK15]: 1a – Creative ideas developing to produce a coherent piece.

The developed Commedia Dell'arte character in our final performance

The Doctor leading with chest or belly



The arm gestures of the "innamorata" lovers

Capitano leading with his legs



Use of masks in 'The Tin Drum' for the Policemen. Creates a grotesque character to make a social point, for example, the big crooked and moustache creates an "ugly" and comedy look, communication to the audience they shouldn't be taken seriously. Much of the characterization then comes from the physicality, as seen above in our piece.

Commented [EK16]: 1b – Developed characters. Company explored.

1a – Dramatic techniques to communicate meaning.

<https://leedsplayhouse.org.uk/events/the-tin-drum/>

Within Checkhov's play, Nina takes on the identity of the seagull, having been stripped of all her freedom. We decided to add a new character to our piece. Playing Nina's true conscience, we have a Seagull puppet. This is a common convention in Kneehigh's productions, adding a comical element to our performance. Emma Rice, a Kneehigh director said "These are not children's themes, but I often approach them in a childlike way. In my experience, our basic needs and

desires are the same - to be communicated with, to be delighted, to be surprised, to be scared.”, we think that the seagull captures this childlike comedy, through the use of an animate voice and immature humour. We added our new character within Nina and Trigorin’s scene which before was just a simple conversation. This is also a technique used in a highly effective way in the production of the Tin Drum where the Devil is made uncomfortably appealing due to its comical personality, in my opinion, as a symbolism of how easily people can be drawn into something evil if it is friendly and amusing on the surface. We also use the Seagull puppet in a similar symbolic way. Although in the play Nina does pursue Trigorin’s love, I felt that deep down she knew she only “loved” him because of his fame. The Seagull puppet represents this part of her conscious, however in our reinterpretation I had the idea that my character, Nina, should try to silence the puppet symbolising her attempt to silence those thoughts, as if she is making herself believe that she may want to love him in the future.

Commented [EK17]: 1a – Sophisticated and creative ideas. Fully supported technique to communicate meaning.

Commented [EK18]: 1b – Sophisticated reinterpretation displaying developed characters.



This character is always making inappropriate jokes, creating comic relief with the play.

The Seagull puppet can be compared to Satan in ‘The Tin Drum’

NINA+TRIG:

Trigoin: Oh good morning Nina!

Nina: Good morning Boris!

Trigoin: Wonderful day isn't it? The sun is shining upon the lake. Tak a thing of beauty.

Nina: Yes, it is stunning.

Trigoin: This is the kind of beauty I wish to capture and express in my writing. Yet, I fear my previous attempts were fake and artificial.

Nina: But surely not. You are famous and successful. I must say, I envy you Boris.

Trigoin: You are too kind Nina. But who could envy a man who holds such grave news? I'm afraid I must leave to go to Helitz. I can't help but feel our time together has been cut short...

Nina: Well, in that case there is something I must ask you... something I have been bottling up for quite sometime.

Trigoin: Yes...

Nina: Well, I was wondering... if you could... forgive if I sound stupid... if you could tell me... what it is like to be famous?

Trigoin: Oh... the feeling... perhaps none. I've never really thought about it.

Nina: I long for a life such as yours! The creativity... the fame. But circumstances had me stuck here!

Trigoin: An idea suddenly came into my head. An idea for a short story...

HARRY CONTINUES MONOLOGUE pg. 150-151 * Puppet scene + Anagol reprise here!

ARKADINA CALLS FROM OFFSTAGE.

Trigoin: Coming

Re-enters

Nina: Call it fate, or some form of miracle, but Arkadina has postponed our trip. Nina, I'm staying.

ina: What wonderful news!

NINA+TRIG:

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Nina: Good morning Boris!

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On the left is our original script before the introduction of the ne character. On the right, the highlighting shows where we have adapted the script to develop a new direction for the scene.

Our plan for the introductory scene

SCENE 1

Synopsis
T, H, O on knees around flower. Hasnare raises flower as we chant "about flowers. Hasnare is then born and has a monologue about society and satisfaction.

Characters
Dora → monologue about 'wine and tobacco' wants to talk to audience about individuality
No other characters → ~~commedia-dittante~~
→ we just hear out Hasnare's commentary

Script
Hasnare's monologue contains different parts from script
Kneehigh
Breaking into song + repeated musical motif

This explains Kneehigh's influences and the characters' motives

We developed all our scenes by breaking each down to discover what message we wanted to put out, characters' motives and any Kneehigh influences we wanted to use. With this information, we were able to develop our scenes getting the key messages across.

Refinement

After finalising the content of our piece, we began thinking about the finer details to sharpen our performance. An example of this refinement is in Dorn's monologue at the start of the piece.

Here, one of the artists is smoking whilst the others are playing as his damaged lungs. After choreographing this section, we gave Harry confetti to give the illusion of smoke as well as representing the scattering of hopes and dreams.

Oscar and I, as the lungs, rehearsed inhaling and exhaling in unison to make it look sharper. We then decided to refine our facial expressions, adopting a look of pain on our faces to show the damage of the tar on the lungs. Moreover, as one of the more experienced singers in the group, I led the refinement of the singing, teaching the higher harmony which I felt emphasised the minor key, adding further to the enigmatic atmosphere. It was quite tricky to do this with the less experienced vocalists and we did have some small tuning issues, however I was able to record my voice singing each line to make sure everyone was confident.

Commented [EK19]: 1a – Individual contribution.
Creative ideas developed to create refined piece.



We also refined our Seagull chase We had originally developed this from warm up game of 'tig' as Mike Shepherrd highlights in one of his interviews that is important actors are 'oxygenated' before the rehearsal but that this must all be relevant to the work.

<https://kneehighcookbook.co.uk/play-part-1/>

Therefore, we decided to play tig as Seagulls, but then thought this created an engaging and memorable way to mark the key moment where Konstantin shoots the Seagull so decided to use it in our piece. It also symbolises how all the characters in the extract are vulnerable because of their desperate desires of fame and could potentially all be the victim in this story. At first, the chase took up a lot more space, coming right out into the audience and far up stage (see video 4). However, we in order to improve the flow of the piece, we had to refine this to incorporate the setting up of the props for our next scene.

Hasane, therefore came out of the chase half way through to set up the masks on the chairs. We also adapted the blocking of the chase so that my character, Nina (Seagull version) was shot stage right rather than upstage to ensure the audience could clearly see this important moment.



Originally, we'd rehearsed with a gun sound effect. But, to be more inventive, we practiced replacing the sound with popping balloons on stage. This gave the scene more playful, animated atmosphere as seen in Kneehigh's work. (see image from the production of 'Tristan and Yseult' below. The popping of a balloon also has symbolic references such as the abrupt ending to positivity or child-like naivety which worked well for our piece.

1

Commented [EK20]: 1a - Well-planned space and proxemics in the piece. Development to create a refined and coherent piece.



Fun and child-like props incorporated into the piece.

To improve my own performance, I had to make some personal refinements. I made sure I worked on my diction within the songs, ensuring I pronounced every word to the audience; this would improve the quality of the performance as a whole. I also had to work hard to ensure I smiled the whole way through the Russian dance and maintained the energy throughout sharp movements yet an almost 'bouncy' dynamic to create a sense of fun and enjoyment, rather than showing I was concentrating on the movement. As a group, we spent a large chunk of time refining our timing of the dance, to ensure we were moving effectively as an ensemble (see video 5). Even the smaller details, such as putting the chairs down on the correct beat, were something we needed to work on to make sure the momentum of the dance was not lost.



Commented [EK21]: 1a – Significant individual contribution to the development of the piece.
Techniques to communicate meaning.

Moreover, puppetry scene, I ensured the puppet only made addressed the puppet as opposed the puppeteer. This small acknowledgement allows the puppeteer to become invisible and allow the audience to truly believe the seagull, as a character. This is something I noted in Sarah Wrights puppet direction in 'The Tin Drum', I had to think carefully about my eye contact and positioning. It was difficult to not make eye contact with the puppeteer, but also leave an appropriate gap to still make the puppeteer visible to the audience without it looking 'unnatural'. I wanted to ensure the puppeteer could also be seen as the puppeteer adopts the expressions and mannerisms of the puppet in Kneehigh pieces and I wanted to ensure the audience could see this clearly.