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Synopsis

Randle Patrick McMurphy opts to serve his time for “repeated outbreaks of passion that suggest the possible diagnosis of psychopath,” at the Oregon State Mental Institution instead of prison because he believes it will be an easier sentence. It only takes a couple of hours on Nurse Ratched’s ward for McMurphy to realize his mistake. In Dale Wasserman’s adaptation of Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, McMurphy riles up seven complacent patients who once were unable to cope with the overwhelming pressures of the modern world but now are inspired to rebel against the strict rules of the hospital. Narrated by the long-time, presumed deaf and dumb, Native American inmate, Chief Bromden, the audience is drawn into this tragicomic allegory as the patients question authority and discover their true identities and destinies.

About the Artists

Dale Wasserman

Dale Wasserman wrote for theater, television and film for more than 50 years and is best known for the musical *Man of La Mancha*, a multiple Tony Award winner. He also wrote the stage play *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, based on Ken Kesey’s novel, which has won several Tony Awards. Both shows continue to be produced nationally and internationally with an estimated 300 productions a year.

In January 1979, Dale met Martha Nelly Garza, who became his wife, loyal partner and loving companion, as he quoted in his book, *The Impossible Musical* (2003). More than once, Dale commented that Martha Nelly was the best thing that ever happened to him (aside from MOLM) and that it was their 30-year partnership that had been the greatest contribution to extending his life and his talents to age 94. Together, they worked on numerous musicals and several new plays.

On December 21, 2008, Dale Wasserman, with his loving wife at his side, passed away peacefully of natural causes at his home in Paradise Valley, Arizona. Martha N. Wasserman is now the sole Owner/Licensor of Dale’s intellectual properties.

Ken Kesey

Ken Elton Kesey (1935-2001) was an American writer who gained world fame with his first novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962). In the 1960s, Kesey became a counterculture hero credited with transforming the beat generation into the hippie movement.

“I think McMurphy knew better than we did that our tough looks were all show, because he still wasn’t able to get a real laugh out of anybody. Maybe he couldn’t understand why we weren’t able to laugh yet, but he knew you can’t really be strong until you see a funny side to things. In fact, he worked so hard of pointing out the funny side of things that I was wondering a little if maybe he was blind to the other side, if maybe he wasn’t able to see what it was that parched laughter deep inside your stomach.”

—*One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*

Ken Kesey was born in La Junta, Colorado, and brought up in Eugene, Oregon. His father worked in the creamery business, in which he was eventually successful after founding the Eugene Farmers Cooperative. Kesey spent his early years hunting, fishing, swimming; he learned to box and wrestle, and he was a star football player. He studied at the University of Oregon, where he acted in college plays. On graduating he won a scholarship to Stanford University. Kesey soon dropped out, joined the counterculture movement, and began experimenting...
with drugs—LSD in particular, which was not yet illegal at the time. In 1956 he married his school sweetheart, Faye Haxby.

While still at Stanford, Kesey attended a creative writing course taught by the novelist Wallace Stegner. Also at this time, Kesey took a job at a Veterans’ Administration hospital in Menlo Park, California, where he was paid as a volunteer experimental subject to taking mind-altering drugs and reporting their effects. These experiences as a part-time aide at a psychiatric hospital and the LSD experiments led to Kesey having a vision of a Native American silently sweeping the hospital floor. This image formed the background for One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest.

The film adaptation of the book was a huge success. Kirk Douglas bought adaptation rights, leading to a notable stage adaptation by Dale Wasserman. This popular version of the story ran on Broadway for 82 performances at the Cort Theater during the 1963-64 season, during which Douglas played the role of McMurphy. When he failed to interest a film studio in the project, he turned the package over to his son Michael. Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman refused the leading role; eventually Jack Nicholson was hired to play McMurphy, for a career-making portrayal.

The film was shot in a wing of the Oregon State Hospital, with actual hospital patients playing extras. Though the film won five Oscars, Kesey was barely mentioned during the Academy Award ceremonies, and he made known his unhappiness with the film. He did not like Jack Nicholson, or the script, and sued the producers.

“"This guy's a scamp who knows he's irresistible to women and, in reality, he expects Nurse Ratched to be seduced by him ... This is his tragic flaw. This is why he ultimately fails. I discussed this with Louise—I discussed it only with her. That's what I felt was actually happening with that character. It was one long, unsuccessful seduction which the guy was so pathologically sure of." (Jack Nicholson about McMurphy in Jack Nicholson, the Unauthorized Biography by Barbara & Scott Siegel, 1990).

Kesey’s next novel, Sometimes a Great Notion (1964), appeared two years later and was also made into a film, this time directed by Paul Newman. The story is set in a logging community on the Oregon coast, and centers on two brothers and their bitter rivalry in the family. Hank Stamper is a raw and aggressive man of nature, and his opponent is Draeger, a union official attempting to force local loggers into conformity. Hank's half-brother, the introspective Lee, returns to Oregon after 12 years of East Coast education, ostensibly to help with the struggling family logging industry but secretly to settle a score with Hank. Gradually the Stamper family becomes divided against itself, which has profound ramifications for the brothers and for their home town.

Although Sometimes a Great Notion is now considered Kesey’s undisputed masterpiece, it puzzled critics at the time it was first published. After its relatively lukewarm reception, Kesey gave up publishing novels. Instead he poured his creative energies into a band of “Merrie Pranksters,” with whom he set up a commune in La Honda, California. Kesey bought an old school bus, and toured America and Mexico with his friends, among them Neal Casady, the travel companion who had previously inspired Jack Kerouac’s landmark novel On the Road. Dressed in a jester’s outfit, Kesey was the chief prankster.

In 1965 Kesey was arrested for possession of marijuana. He fled to Mexico, where he faked an unconvincing suicide and then returned to the United States, serving a five-month prison sentence at the San Mateo County Jail. After this tumultuous period he bought farm in Pleasant Hill, Oregon, settled down with his wife to raise their four children, and taught a graduate writing seminar at the University of Oregon. In the early 1970s Kesey returned to writing and published Kesey’s Garage Sale (1973). His later works include the children’s book Little Trickster the Squirrel meet Big Double the Bear (1990) and Sailor Song (1992), a futuristic tale about an Alaskan fishing village and Hollywood film crew. Last Go Around (1994), Kesey’s last book, was an account of a famous Oregon rodeo written in the form of pulp fiction.

Kesey died of complications after surgery for liver cancer on November 10, 2001 in Eugene, Oregon.
Significance of the Title

The play’s title was derived from a familiar, tongue-twisting Mother Goose children’s nursery rhyme called Vintery, Mintery, Cutery, Corn.

Vintery, mintery, cutery, corn,
Apple seed and apple thorn;
Write, briar, limber lock,
Three geese in a flock.
One flew east,
And one flew west,
And one flew over the cuckoo’s nest.

The ones that fly east and west are diametrically opposed to each other. They represent the two combatants in the story. The mental hospital is filled with “cuckoo” patients.

The Characters

**Chief Bromden**  Chief Bromden is the son of the chief of the Columbia Indians and a white woman. He suffers from paranoia and hallucinations, has received multiple electroshock treatments, and has been in the hospital for ten years, longer than any other patient in the ward. Bromden sees modern society as a huge, oppressive conglomeration and the hospital as a place meant to fix people who do not conform. Bromden chronicles the story of the mental ward while developing his perceptual abilities and regaining a sense of himself as an individual.

**Randle Patrick McMurphy** R. P. McMurphy is a big gambler, a con man, and a backroom boxer. His body is heavily scarred and tattooed, and he has a fresh scar across the bridge of his nose. He was sentenced to six months at a prison work farm, and when he was diagnosed as a psychopath—for “too much fighting and fucking”—he did not protest because he thought the hospital would be more comfortable than the work farm. McMurphy serves as the unlikely Christ figure in the play—the dominant force challenging the establishment and the ultimate savior of the victimized patients.

**Nurse Ratched** The head of the hospital ward. Nurse Ratched, the play’s antagonist, is a middle-aged former army nurse. She rules her ward with an iron hand and masks her humanity and femininity behind a stiff, patronizing facade. She selects her staff for their submissiveness, and she weakens her patients through a psychologically manipulative program designed to destroy their self-esteem. Ratched’s emasculating, mechanical ways slowly drain all traces of humanity from her patients.

**Dale Harding** An acerbic, college-educated patient and president of the Patients’ Council. Harding helps McMurphy understand the realities of the hospital.
The Characters (continued)

He has a difficult time dealing with the oppressive nature of society, so he hides in the hospital voluntarily. Harding’s development and the reemergence of his individual self signal the success of McMurphy’s battle against Ratched.

**Billy Bibbit** A shy patient. Billy has a bad stutter and seems much younger than his thirty-one years. Billy Bibbit is dominated by his mother, one of Nurse Ratched’s close friends. Billy is voluntarily in the hospital, as he is afraid of the outside world.

**Doctor Spivey** Nurse Ratched chose Doctor Spivey as the doctor for her ward because he is as easily cowed and dominated as the patients. With McMurphy’s arrival, he, like the other patients, begins to assert himself. He often supports McMurphy’s unusual plans for the ward, such as holding a carnival.

**Charles Cheswick** The first patient to support McMurphy’s rebellion against Nurse Ratched’s power.

**Warren & Washington** Warren and Washington are the hospital aides. Nurse Ratched hired them because they are filled with hatred and will submit to her wishes completely.

**Candy Starr** A beautiful, carefree prostitute from Portland, Oregon. Candy Starr accompanies McMurphy and the other patients on the fishing trip, and then comes to the ward for a late-night party that McMurphy arranges.

**Martini** Another hospital patient. Martini lives in a world of delusional hallucinations, but McMurphy includes him in the board and card games with the other patients.

**Ruckley** A Chronic patient. Ruckley was once an Acute, but was transformed into a Chronic due to a botched lobotomy.

**Scanlon** The only Acute besides McMurphy who was involuntarily committed to the hospital. Scanlon has fantasies of blowing things up.

**Turkle** The nighttime orderly for Nurse Ratched’s ward. He helps the patients throw the after-hours party in the ward.

**Nurse Flinn** A strict Catholic nurse who works with Nurse Ratched. Nurse Flinn is afraid of the patients’ sexuality.

**Sandra** A prostitute who knows McMurphy and is friends with Candy Starr.
The World of the Play

Excerpted from the Forward of One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest
by Chuck Palahniuk

Some people I love, they hate this book.

People say the story is racist and sexist. They say Kesey attacks blacks and women, making them villains. The women are either frigid monsters or whores. The blacks are sadistic sodomites.

Based on whether they accept that theory, people love this story or hate it. As if we have only the two options. But for a moment, let’s consider a third.

Instead of a battle between genders and races, consider that One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest is about the paradox of living in a modern democracy of only two political parties, a dominant theme of modern culture. Cuckoo’s Nest tells the same story as the most popular novels of the last century, a story we’ll be telling and retelling because that paradox is still our paradox, and we will struggle with Kesey’s central conflict: How can you live within a democracy that expects you to participate, to hold an opinion and vote and thereby control and be responsible for your society—but at the same time, you must surrender and follow the will of others if even the slimmest majority disagrees with you?

To live in a democracy, you must be willing to live as a savior or a slave. To have all or nothing. And you have very little control over that choice.

Either way, you’ll be lost. Destroyed. Either by yourself, out of self-hatred. Or by your society because you pose too big a threat.

Or...

Or, you can choose something different. You can learn from the destruction of others. You can create and live into a new system. You can rise above the either/or choice of being a parent versus a child. A savior versus a slave. And you can become an adult, not rebelling against or caving in to your culture, but creating a vision for your own and working to make that option into something real.

That... consider that as the core of One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest. The rebel. And the follower. And the enlightened witness.

Why Was I In There?
by Clare Allan

Clare Allan spent more than a year bewildered as a psychiatric day-patient, but still found herself not wanting to leave.

A little over a decade ago, I suffered a breakdown (whatever that means) and became a patient at a psychiatric day hospital. I spent the 18 months that followed, sitting in a common room with my fellow patients, smoking.

Looking back, it’s hard to see just how we got through so much time. It’s true that there were occasional groups, although these were often cancelled, and once a week we would spend an hour in a one-to-one session with our “care co-coordinator”. I never worked out what these sessions were supposed to entail. They weren’t intended as “therapy” or “counseling” but all requests to be told what the sessions were for would be met with the Kafkaesque response “That’s for you to tell me.” For the rest of the time from 9:30 AM till 4:00 PM, five days a week, we sat in the common room, smoking.
I was a new kid on the block, barely a fledgling in day-patient terms there were plenty of patients who’d been there for ten years and more. My health deteriorated rapidly, to the point where I was sectioned and put on the wards. I begged for my place at the day hospital to be held open for my return. I couldn’t imagine how I’d survive without it. When, six months later, I was finally discharged, it felt like the end of the world.

Looking back, this interests me. Why was it that I was so desperate to stay in a place that not only was failing to help, but was actually making things worse? The answer, I believe, lies in the very human need to belong to something. When I became ill, I became extremely isolated. I stopped working, lost touch with my family and friends and spent my days pacing the streets.

Moreover, a major factor in my breakdown was my sense of not belonging, of somehow not being able to find a space to exist in the world. The day hospital offered me such a space, a label, a place to belong. The only requirement was I must remain ill—this seemed a price worth paying.

At the day hospital, we never discussed the future. But if mental health services want people to get better, it’s vital to help them to build a life beyond the common room, a bridge to the world outside.

Clare Allan’s debut novel Poppy Shakespeare, inspired by her experience of being a psychiatric patient, has been long-listed for the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction and short-listed for the BT Mind Book of the Year Award, 2007.

The History of the Eastern Oregon Insane Asylum

The unnamed psychiatric facility in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest was based on the Eastern Oregon Insane Asylum (later renamed the Eastern Oregon State Hospital). This institution opened in 1913 in Pendleton, Oregon. In 1965, the Eastern Oregon Hospital began providing services to developmentally disabled as well as mentally ill patients, like in Kesey’s novel, and was renamed the Eastern Oregon Hospital and Training Center. In 1985, the hospital was reorganized and became two separate institutions. The Eastern Oregon Psychiatric Center was to provide care and treatment for mentally ill persons, and the Eastern Oregon Training Center was to provide care, treatment and training for mentally retarded persons.
Understanding Electroconvulsive Therapy and Psychosurgery

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is a treatment for depression that uses electricity to trigger a seizure. ECT is most often done in a hospital’s operation or recovery room while the patient is asleep and pain-free. It acts as a general anesthesia. First, the patient receives a muscle relaxant and a short-acting anesthetic. The muscle relaxant calms the patient and the short-acting anesthetic prevents the patient from feeling any sort of pain during the therapy. After this, the doctor sends a small amount of electric current to the brain to cause seizure activity. This electric current lasts for approximately forty seconds. The doctor then gives the patient more medicine to prevent the seizure from spreading throughout the entire body. The patient is usually given an ECT treatment once every two to five days for a total of six to twelve sessions. ECT is used on depressed patients who cannot take antidepressant drugs, are suicidal, are pregnant and severely depressed, have certain heart problems or are psychotic. ECT is also used to treat bipolar disorder. The possible side effects of ECT include allergic reaction to the anesthesia, headache, low blood pressure, memory lapses, rapid heartbeat or temporary confusion.

Psychosurgery There are nerves that connect the frontal lobes to the rest of the brain. The idea behind psychosurgery, later proven to be invalid, was that these nerves were somehow malformed or damaged, and if they were severed they might regenerate into new, healthy connections. Contrary to popular conception, the operation was not used only on psychiatric patients. Many people were lobotomized for “intractable pain”, such as chronic, severe backaches or agonizing headaches.

The three common versions of psychosurgery were prefrontal leucotomy, prefrontal lobotomy, and transorbital lobotomy.

A leucotomy basically involved drilling holes in the skull in order to access the brain. Once visible, the surgeon would sever the nerves using a pencil-sized tool called a leucotome. It had a slide mechanism on the side that would deploy a wire loop or loops from the tip. The idea was to be able to slide the “pencil” into the pre-drilled holes in the top of skull, into the brain, then use the slide to make the loop(s) come out. The surgeon could sever the nerves by removing “cores” of brain tissue, slide the loop back in, and the operation was complete.

A lobotomy also utilized drilled holes, but in the upper forehead instead of the top of the skull. It was also different in that the surgeon used a blade to cut the brain instead of a leucotome.

The infamous transorbital lobotomy was a “blind” operation in that the surgeon did not know for certain if he had severed the nerves or not. A sharp, ice-pick like object would be inserted through the eye socket between the upper lid and eye. When the doctor thought he was at about the right spot, he would hit the end of the instrument with a hammer.

Despite the fact that there was extensive evidence that psychosurgery was not therapeutic, operations continued unabated for decades. This was because it was considered unprofessional to criticize another physician in public, so many doctors who knew that psychosurgery was a farce did not make their opinions known. This allowed the psychosurgeons to continue unchecked from the late 1930s through the 1970s.
Shrinking McMurphy: Why He Dies
by Chris Royle

This is an essay by Chris Royle, a writer for The Red Carpet Broadcast, on the reason behind the death of the main character in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Randle Patrick McMurphy. The essay illuminates themes of death and the transfer of life and is not meant to be read as a synopsis of the play, but rather a possible interpretation for McMurphy's death.

Randle McMurphy enters the psychiatric ward of Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, a stark contrast to the stunted men around him. He is described as bigger than they are both literally and in the sense that he, unlike the powerless patients around him, has no hesitation in standing up to the oppressive nature of the Big Nurse.

Over time, however this difference in size adjusts; as McMurphy empowers the patients to take control, represented by their change in "size," he grows progressively smaller and weaker as his life force is transferred to them. McMurphy's death is consistent with this transfer of power and is necessary as it indicates the complete empowerment of the patients, especially Bromden.

McMurphy's first view of the ward exhibits a group of emasculated men, diminished both physically and sexually. The lady responsible for this is the ball-cutter, Nurse Ratched who the patients agree is "too big to be beaten." McMurphy cannot understand why a man as physically large as Bromden cannot stand up to the Nurse, but Bromden explains: "I'm way too little. I used to be big, but no more."

The Nurse strips away their strength, their freedom, and their masculinity, using tactics such as group meetings to pit the patients against each other. No-one, save McMurphy seems to be able to stand up to her after being continually subjected to her dominating will. So strong is her hold on them that even those that aren't committed remain, for they "don't have the guts to leave."

The large McMurphy very quickly manages to attack the Big Nurse's stronghold, fighting the environment she has created and attempting to restore the patients' masculinity. He begins this change by introducing sexuality to the men through his cards, as well as laughter through his entertaining stories. His first major victory against the Big Nurse occurs when he stages a protest over the power struggle she begins over watching the World Series on TV. Pretending to watch the game, McMurphy soon has the whole ward acting along with him, causing the nurse to lose her cool. This victory, initiated by McMurphy, leaves the patients feeling empowered and united.

Anticipating the continued support of McMurphy and other patients after the Worlds Series event, Cheswick later decides to protest the rationing of cigarettes. Having failed to elicit a response from both McMurphy and the others, he drowns himself in the pool in an apparent suicide. Bromden mentions that Cheswick "never had looked big—he was short and fat." Cheswick,
like the other patients, was not large enough at this point to function alone and required the continued support and guidance of McMurphy.

After this incident, McMurphy takes a renewed interest in the patients, trying to make them laugh, bringing back their sexuality, and making them ‘bigger’ still. He is quite successful at this—Harding begins flirting with the nurses, Billy no longer writes his “observations” in the log book, and Scanlon goes as far as to break the glass at the nursing station; even the doctor is affected and voices his opinions at the group meeting for the first time. McMurphy even manages to make Bromden speak, which proves significant for Bromden talks of his father, a man who parallels McMurphy and the men in that the Chief’s wife grew in strength while the Chief lost it. Similarly, the significant initiative and effort on the part of McMurphy in guiding the men begins to take its toll.

One of McMurphy’s most successful accomplishments with the men occurs on the fishing trip he organizes in which the men can finally be men, as Bromden comments. The patients seem to grow physically as they fish, no longer led by McMurphy but beginning to function alone. “He showed us what a little bravado and courage could accomplish, and taught us how to use it” Bromden comments. Thus he empowers them to help themselves, however at a cost. As the patients grow in strength and self-esteem, McMurphy’s strength seems to dissipate, for Bromden notes that “McMurphy looked so beat and worn out, where the rest of us looked red-cheeked and full of excitement.” It seems that any gain McMurphy makes with the patients takes an equal toll on him.

When they return to the ward, the Nurse, once again, manages to seize control, however Bromden has undergone a marked change. In a fight initiated by McMurphy to defend George against the aides, Bromden picks up and throws one of them to the side, exhibiting his newfound physical strength. Incidentally, as the men once again unite against the aides, and Bromden discovers his power, McMurphy is badly beaten by the Black boys, and the loss of the large stature he had when he first arrived is made more evident. He is further diminished during the ensuing electroshock treatment he receives as punishment, although he does not let on to the others. This allows them to model his behavior without the fear for the consequences they would have endured had they seen the effects on him.

By McMurphy’s last night, the size reversal between him and the patients is almost complete. While the men drink and laugh, and Billy regains his sexuality, McMurphy curls up like a “tired little kid” and falls asleep amid the bustle of the men around him. After undergoing a lobotomy as punishment for the party, McMurphy, already diminished to the stature of a child, is left a vegetable with nothing physical left to offer. However, in order for Bromden to escape as they had planned, one last exchange must occur.

McMurphy’s death under the hands of Bromden signifies the flow of life force, allowing Bromden who is already physically large, to usurp his spirit. In killing him, Bromden grows bigger than he ever was, evident when he finds McMurphy’s hat too small, and in his ability to lift the control box to break the window. McMurphy can therefore live on through Bromden, which is consistent with the Christian undertones of the book. Although the other men could arguably continue without the death of McMurphy, it is necessary in the final transformation of Bromden.

As the men regain their masculinity, McMurphy shrinks in size and ability. He teaches them how to live, for although he initiated most situations, as the men grow they began to act by themselves. Thus McMurphy’s death is necessary in bringing closure which allows them to continue on alone, for in dying, he gives up everything he possibly can, and the transformation of all the patients is complete.
Hatching
“The Cuckoo’s Nest”
by Dale Wasserman

Dale Wasserman, the man who adapted One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest into a play from Ken Kesey’s novel, wrote this piece for The Steppenwolf Company’s 2000 production of One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.

It’s 1962, early Broadway-Pleistocene. My friend, agent-editor Hope Taylor phones to say, “There’s a new book. It sounds like you.” I read the galleys. My instincts light up like starbursts. I wish immediately to make a movie of it. So, I learn, does an old acquaintance, Issur Danielovitch, better known to the public as movie star Kirk Douglas.

We’re old acquaintances; some years previously I had written a movie called The Vikings, which Kirk made into a bloody epic which bled astonishing profits. We are not dear friends but we are mutually respectful, so when Kirk calls to say, “Why don’t we get together on this one?” I listen, if we agree, I’ll write it, he’ll star. Then he drops the hammer: “I want to do it first on Broadway.”

Well. That is a different mess of pottage.

Okay, I’ll write it first for Broadway. But, primero, Kesey’s got to be convinced of this plan because his secret yearning is to be a playwright, himself. Kesey and I meet—the only meeting we’ll ever have—at the fabled Chateau Marmont in Hollywood. That big chip on Kesey’s shoulder indicates that he thinks he’ll be encountering a New York esthete, but his truculence fades when he finds that I’m no more than a self-educated hobo. Actually, we never get around to discussion of intellectual matters. Instead, we compare lumber camps we’ve worked, the aura of small-town jails we have known and, especially, the subject in which Kesey is already submerged, the effects of “psychotomimetic” drugs. (At least that’s what he called them.)

But in order to write this play I need to know much more about asylums, treatments, and the so-called insane. My research covers six institutions, starting with a posh mental clinic in New York where I watch sixty electroshock treatments in one morning and encounter two other writers among the patients. Then down, down the scale to the abysmal cellar of Milledgeville, Georgia, a classic snake pit where the patients spend their days chained to radiators.

Climactically, still unsatisfied that I know my subject well enough, I arrange with the head psychiatrist of an Eastern institution to have myself committed as a
The World of the Play (continued)

The play that opens at the Cort Theatre in the fall of 1963 is not my play. It’s a dramatic goulash cooked by Hollywood chefs. Walter Kerr writes the most intemperate review he has ever written in an otherwise temperate career. Most critics concur, if less violently. What causes pain, however, is the surprisingly personal attacks upon the playwright himself. There are words that burn, bruise and humiliate.

I’m in despair. There’s no excuse I can make, no explanation that won’t sound like whimpering self-interest, no way to say, “It’s not my play.” So I do the self-preservative thing: I run. Actually, I never see that original Broadway production. On the night it opens I’m in California, following my own prescription of therapy by writing a musical based on an original television play of mine. The television play was called, I, Don Quixote. The musical is titled, Man of La Mancha, and it’s playing worldwide today.

So is One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest. But it’s now my own play, for which I take responsibility. It came into its own when regional theatres began picking up on it, its timing exquisitely correct in the Vietnam era of revolutionary politics when the play’s parable became only too clear. It ran for five years in San Francisco, approximately four years more in New York, and thereafter visited and is still visiting world capitals in twenty-seven languages at the rate of a hundred-fifty productions a year.

A sidelight. Ten years after his original review, Walter Kerr was again assigned to review the play; now an acclaimed hit in the second year of its off-Broadway run with a cast including William Devane as Randle McMurphy, and Danny DeVito in the role of Martini the Hallucinator. His re-review is a marvel of bewilderment. He confesses that he still doesn’t “get it,” but concedes that a youthful and wildly enthusiastic audience is “getting it” at every performance.

I am delighted that The Steppenwolf Company has given it an excellent, caring production, one of the finest ever, and that Gary Sinise and Terry Kinney confront ambiguity without fear. I have enjoyed every moment of our collaborative effort. And I am pleased to say that, warts and all, it is my play, and not a stew cooked by a committee.
Discussion Questions & Exploration Activities

1. The title of the play is *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Which, if any, character flies over the cuckoo’s nest? Explain your answer.

2. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* has been criticized for its treatment of race and gender. Discuss in small groups whether you agree with this criticism and why or why not. Use specific examples where applicable.

3. In both the book and the play, Chief Bromden acts as the narrative figure of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Why is Chief Bromden the narrator instead of McMurphy? Who is the protagonist of the novel? How would the story differ if McMurphy served as the narrator?

4. How does McMurphy’s character transform from the beginning of the play, when he is checked into the hospital, to the end of the play? Do his values change? How do his relationships with the other patients change his worldview?

Original Sources & Links to Further Research

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**The World of the Play**
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