

Chekhov's Tales Get Comic Book Style

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One of Seth's illustrations in "About Love," a book of Chekhov's stories.

Seth hates comic book readings. "Especially when the cartoonists do special voices for each of the characters," he said.

Standing affably in a vintage-inspired getup, Seth, a cartoonist, graphic novelist, and illustrator, described the struggle of separating himself from the clichés associated with fantasy storytelling.

He thinks that the comic medium is better suited for stories about regular, mundane existence than about superheroes. Seth called it the "ring of truth," as most of his work is autobiographical. His graphic novels include "Clyde Fans," "It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken," "Wimbledon Green," a collection of sketches called "Vernacular Drawings," and the comic book series "Palookaville," among others. Though for Seth, a graphic novel is a "Frankenstein monster of a term."

Recently, Seth illustrated a novel of Anton Chekhov's translated stories, entitled "About

Love." It's set to be released by Biblioasis on Oct. 9th.

Chekhov is one of Seth's favorite writers, because of the sympathetic and yet obtuse nature of his work, Seth said. "I remember I even began a sketchbook comic adaptation of *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov's last play, back in my late 20s."

In "About Love," Seth created artwork for each of the characters and included a series of double page landscape spreads. In the beginning of the novel, his long sequence of drawings leads the reader from the village to the country, like the title sequence in a film. "I didn't want to overdo the amount of drawing in the book and risk interfering with the story itself," he said. The images are more decorative than illustrative.

Thinking in sequences, Seth imagined the pacing of the book. "About Love" was similar to the sequence of a comic book page. There was an unconscious rhythm to how one image followed another.

It was a solitary pursuit for Seth. "The cartoonist sits alone at a drawing table for most of his life. He is struggling with himself, his past and his attempt to create something of meaning. It's the nature of the work. I always tell aspiring artists that if you want to become a cartoonist, you'd better enjoy being by yourself," he said.

Once a month, Seth locks himself away inside an old hotel. He brings a typewriter, two packs of cigarettes, and a bag of Lays potato chips with him every time. Sometimes, he said, he'd wander off too far inside his head while cartooning and break down crying. Yet there is something that keeps Seth drawing.

For most artists, drawing is a seemingly magical process. For Seth, drawing is about creating a link between inner and outer reality, looking within and sketching what he sees on a piece of paper.

"There's something about the simplicity of being able to take things inside of you and just replicate them," he said.

Resembling a character in a noir, with two blonde streaks running along his slick, black hair, Seth, born Gregory Gallant, said his pen name separates him from his younger self. It's his created identity.

"These are personal style preferences: It is frustrating when his vintage appearance is equated with something in his work," said Dr. Kathleen Dunley chair of English at Rio Salado College in Arizona. "Popular culture still has a hard time overcoming the idea that comics can share serious stories."

Looking back to the 1980s, Seth saw himself as an unsophisticated rural kid. He used to have a helmet of 70s hair, a sparse teenage mustache, and buttons on the lapel of his lumber jacket.

Another former student of illustration, Maurice Vellekoop, remembers Seth wearing lots of leather and silver. "He had bleached-blond hair and he wore makeup too," Vellekoop said. "He knew so many freaks and went to nightclubs filled with cross-dressers and drug addicts."

During those years, for a first-year drawing assignment, Seth was asked to come up with a drawing of a party. When everybody's pictures went up on the board for critique, someone commented on his. They said that it was a good idea to have the party drawn as a cartoon. This comment described Seth instantly because he had not been trying to draw a cartoon. He had been trying to infuse his sketch pad with as much reality as he could.

Seth's sartorial eccentricity, the sepia tones prevalent in his work, and the austere nature of his comics are iconoclastic. Seth's drawings, these characters trapped inside grids and boxes, and the stillness of his comics act as counterpoints to everyday clutter and visual overdrive. "In a world where the digital text continues to evolve, having an exquisite book helps to preserve the medium. His books have a tactile dimension that cannot yet be replicated in digital form," Dunley said.

Seth believes that a computer is a filter that stands between him and the final product. "Technology opened a door," said Seth. "I wish it had stayed closed." This distaste might be present because of his aesthetic attachment to the early 20th century.

Sporting a 1940s suit with HB pencils tucked into its front pockets, Seth said, "There used to be a human quality to how objects were designed. When you look at 1925, you can look at almost anything that was produced, and you can see that beauty was a concern in its creation. You could pick up a bottle of Ex-Lax now and evidently see that it is not a beautiful object."

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