

# ARISTOPHANES' THE BIRDS

BY **BRIAN RENO &  
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*Aristophanes' The Birds* had its world premiere at the University of Scranton (Dr. Hank Willenbrink, Program Director) on September 23, 2016. It was directed by Gabriel Vega Weissman, the scenic design was by Grace Laubacher, the costume design was by Brooke Cohen Brown, the lighting design was by Dave Yezefski, the sound design was by Conway Rowe, and the production stage manager was Julia Consiglio. The company was comprised of Jessica D'Aquila, Nicolas Gangone, Lauren Garel, Natalie Gray, Conor Hurley, Victoria Kusy, Matthew Naranjo, Zachary Pavlocak, Shaye Santos, and Latrice Smith.

ARISTOPHANES' THE BIRDS was originally commissioned by the University of Scranton Players (Dr. Hank Willenbrink, Program Director).

## *Acknowledgments*

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## *Authors' Notes*

This is a free adaptation.

As we read literal translations of Aristophanes' Attic comedy, we were struck by how the play's plot and humor are driven by references to popular culture. The references are so specific that theatergoers in 414 B.C. must have been rolling in their seats. Thousands of years later, we found ourselves scratching our heads at what Aristophanes was talking about and how we could use Wikipedia to decipher a punch line.

*The Birds* is at its best when it is a reflection of the moment in which it is performed. When we saw the play through its first production in the fall of 2016, we were in a very particular moment in history, weeks away from the presidential election. Since then the play has necessarily evolved. To us, while the specific references have had to change, what doesn't change is the play's timeless themes of hypocrisy, greed, and hubris.

We designed this version to be a bit of an experiment for theatre artists who want to delve into the piece. It's part Attic comedy, part *Saturday Night Live*, part Mad Libs. We've maintained the original structure of the play; it begins with a prologue and is followed by duets, lyric scenes, choral interludes, and episodes. We have also allowed for the specific content to be fluid. We invite changes/edits/amendments to be made as fits the context of the times and the specific artists involved in a particular production, but that is certainly not a requirement.

The gender of the characters are not meant to be taken literally. Anyone of any gender identity can play these roles. This is especially true of the protagonists, Matt and Dillon. Feel free to change their names, pronouns, etc. as seen fit.

Any language that is underlined is an invitation to substitute with something more timely, relevant, or appropriate to the concept of the given production. It may also be left as is. Artists' choice.

Pages 9 and 10 (in the Prologue) can be adjusted or amended. Feel free to change the content or dialogue as seen fit from the beginning of the play until the point where the stage direction reads:

*Dillon's jay starts to make sounds. Matt's crow responds.  
Dillon and Matt stop walking.*

The King: We chose Elvis Presley to be the one who escaped human civilization to live freely among the birds. If this play has a particular social or political resonance to you, please feel free to change The King to another public figure. The character's dialogue may also be adjusted to reflect this new figure. And with that, Matt and Dillon's interest in seeking him out can follow that direction.

## *Dramatis Personae*

MATT

DILLON

RAGS, a personal-assistant bird

THE KING, Elvis Presley

A PROPHET

A SINGER/SONGWRITER

A POLITICIAN

A PR GUY

THE OPEN DEFECATOR

A MOVIE MOGUL

A PROCESS SERVER

FAMOUS SIDEKICK

SUPERHERO #1

SUPERHERO #2

CHORUS LEADER

A CHORUS OF BIRDS

## *Setting*

A wild, barren, open stretch of land in the  
Black Rock Desert, Nevada.

# ARISTOPHANES' THE BIRDS

## PROLOGUE

*A wild, barren, open stretch of land in the Black Rock Desert, Nevada. The sun is beating down on Matt and Dillon as they walk through the desert. A crow is perched on Matt's hand and a jay on Dillon's.*

MATT. Did you always get it with cheese?

DILLON. Always. And bacon, on special occasions. Like, after the Golden Globes last year, I didn't even have to tell them. I just walked in and there was my burger.

MATT. Awesome.

DILLON. Dripped grease all over my tux...

MATT. I'll miss those burgers.

DILLON. Yeah me too. But we're better off. Less cholesterol.

MATT. Cholesterol... won't have to worry about that anymore.

DILLON. Another plus.

MATT. It was so satisfying going in to the big boss and telling him to shove it.

DILLON. I'll bet. I just left a note on my desk. They'll probably never even notice I left. Not like they listened to any of my ideas while I was there.

MATT. Me either.

DILLON. Sad. We really had something to offer them. The whole studio system is crumbling. Did I tell you their slate for next year?



Remakes of *Jaws*, *Citizen Kane*, a live-action version of *Ice Age* and a reboot of *Legally Blonde*.

MATT. Utterly unoriginal.

DILLON. Don't I know it. I told them over and over to try new things. Experiment with new artists, new ideas.

MATT. The key is to package things properly. Don't just remake *Jaws*. Put an original spin on it. Throw in a dash of *Captain Phillips*. Real-life American hero. Somalian terrorists—out. Big shark—in. That works.

DILLON. In this day and age, no one wants to watch a remake of a movie about a straight, male publishing tycoon. What about *Citizen Blonde*? Which charts Elle Woods' climb from Harvard post-grad to Senator of California?

MATT. That's a great idea!

DILLON. They didn't think so. After I pitched *Citizen Blonde* I was basically demoted.

MATT. What do you mean?

DILLON. Well, all of a sudden my job became calling celebrities to let them know they had been canceled.

MATT. Unbelievable.

DILLON. I was supposed to call Woody Allen but I accidentally dialed Woody Harrelson. That was an upsetting call...

MATT. Do you know where we are?

DILLON. I hope my replacement calls him back...

*Dillon's jay starts to make sounds. Matt's crow responds. Dillon and Matt stop walking.*

(*To his jay.*) I wish your directions were a little more specific...

MATT. (*To his crow.*) Not again... Why are you cawing at me?... Do you want me to go back the way we came? I can't read your mind!

DILLON. Seriously. I think we're in exactly the same spot we were, like six days ago.

MATT. This seemed like such a good idea. "We'll get some birds—they'll know how to get there."

DILLON. It made total sense—they must have some of that *Home-ward Bound* animal instinct thing—

MATT. But really, who trusts a crow for directions?

DILLON. Yeah—this jay has no idea either.

MATT. If only we knew where we were...

DILLON. Could you find your way back from here?

MATT. I don't think so... We got these birds so we wouldn't have to rely on our phones out here. But I don't really know what else to do...

*He takes out his phone.*

Siri: Directions to:

SIRI. (*In a loud, deep, distorted voice.*) WHERE AM I?!

MATT. Yeah—these phones are fried...

DILLON. It was that crummy pet shop owner—he definitely sold us the wrong kind of birds! What does he know about navigation birds, anyway?! We would have been better off buying birds from Colonel Sanders.

MATT. You can say that again...

DILLON. (*To bird.*) No offense, but you can't help us find The King... you have no idea where he is! I thought everyone knew The King was born a human but faked his death in order to become a bird... I'm sorry, but this bird is kind of a bum! It does nothing but claw and bite and stare blankly up at the sky with its beak hanging open. What kind of directions are those? Want me to fling myself off these cliffs, bird?!

MATT. Easy, pal. Take a deep breath—right now these birds are all we got.

DILLON. (*With a deep breath.*) Okay. What do you think your crow was saying?

MATT. No idea.

DILLON. Well, which way does it want us to go now?

MATT. It's always cawing something different, but I think it's telling me it's going to pluck all the hairs from my knuckles!

DILLON. No, no, no, no, NO! We're going to DIE out here! These birds are clueless, and we have no idea WHATSOEVER where we are or where we're going. Consider this my elegy: Oh, cruel, cruel destiny—why have you chosen us for this terrible undeserved fate? Our lives were pretty good. We came from good families, had truly

swag jobs making loads of money. Yet we have chosen to exile ourselves...kind of like Cheryl Strayed. It's not that we hated LA. It's a great, powerful city, and people have the freedom to ruin it however they see fit. It's just that animals cry when they need food, and metropolitan yuppies cry when their food's not organic. If they want to be hunting Pokémon, or spending their money on SoulCycling and hot yoga-ing, that's their right. We just wanted to live our lives happily without pretense. That's why we were seeking The King—to learn how he lives in peace as a bird.

*The crow and the jay begin to caw and pull Matt and Dillon in a particular direction.*

What's going on?

MATT. The crow keeps pointing up to something.

DILLON. Maybe there are some more birds around here. Idea: let's make a ruckus to get their attention.

MATT. A ruckus? Great. Why don't we try making our most convincing bird sounds and see what happens?

*They begin to caw and squawk.*

DILLON. This isn't working...

MATT. Yeah, why don't you just try shouting for him...

DILLON. Fine. Hey-oh, buddy!

MATT. Buddy? That's The King you're talking to. Better to call: "Your Highness Oh, Your Highness!"

DILLON. Fine... "KING! Come on out here, man!"

*Enter Rags, a severely put-upon looking servant bird. It's as though he was once very colorful but the colors have dulled and faded in the years of servitude.*

RAGS. Who's there? Who calls my boss?

MATT. Undead mother of Batman! What a giant beak!

RAGS. Sound the alarms! The bird catchers have come!

MATT. No! Don't sound the alarm!

DILLON. What a repulsive man-bird...

RAGS. You're dead men now! Speaking that way to me.

DILLON. (*Stalling.*) But...we're not men...

RAGS. Liar, what are you then?

MATT. (*Improvising.*) We're birds too!

DILLON. Yeah! What he said...

RAGS. You're not birds though...

MATT. Well—entertainment executives... so, vultures if you will.

DILLON. And what the hell are you, judgy-pants? You look like Toucan Sam fell in a pool of Nair.

RAGS. I'm Rags, a personal-assistant bird.

DILLON. Worse than I thought.

RAGS. When my boss turned into a bird, I was assigned to be at his beck and call.

DILLON. Do birds need PAs?

RAGS. Only birds that used to be men. When The King needs his special pills I fly all the way to Barbados to pick them up. Once they all dissolved in my beak on the way back...that was a terrible day...

DILLON. Yikes...why don't you help us out and call your boss?

RAGS. Please no, he just started napping after a fat meal of worms.

DILLON. Wake him up, I'm sure he won't mind this time.

RAGS. He minds every time, but then again he might get mad that I didn't wake him, so what do I have to lose?

*Rags exits and makes a horrifying sound. Dillon clings to Matt. The crow and the jay fly away.*

DILLON. What an awful sound! Damn, my stupid jay just flew away.

MATT. No wonder you and Morgan broke up—you can't even hold on to a little jay.

DILLON. Oh yeah? Where's your crow, big-guy?

MATT. (*Noticing his crow is gone.*) It flew away...on its own volition. With my blessing...

DILLON. How fatherly you must have felt. What a *man* you are.

*Enter The King, Elvis Presley himself, as he looked in the mid-1970s.*

THE KING. Yowza—it's a bright one today...

DILLON. Aquaman's-tight-speedo!



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BY BRIAN RENO &  
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15 n/s (flexible casting)

Two movie moguls abandon an increasingly vain and shallow society, making their way into the desert to live among the birds. Seeking the freedom and tranquility that come with bird-living, they must make a case for why they deserve an avian transformation, but all they have to offer are the pieces of civilization they've tried to leave behind. *The Birds* begs the question: Can human beings truly go against their nature? Originally performed in 414 B.C. and written chockablock full of pop culture references of the time, Reno and Weissman have dusted off Aristophanes' Attic comedy and provided opportunities for theatre-makers to tailor the play to their particular place and time. *Aristophanes' The Birds* is a hilarious examination of humanity's desperate need for control, privilege, and conspicuous consumption.

Also by Brian Reno & Gabriel  
Vega Weissman  
LOOSE CANON

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