

## **ALL THINGS CHICKEN – THE BIG PICTURE**

In a modern 'wasteland' of diner dives, stoops and unkempt apartments, two guys talk about profound things in profoundly foolish ways. They obsess. They spar. They ponder the big metaphysical questions: should they eat fried chicken or chicken pot pie? And more importantly...

Why does everyone say “Oh, god” during sex?

And do extra-terrestrials notice the light we generate on earth?

Indeed, ALL THINGS CHICKEN is a comedy-drama about how NOT to live one’s life. Yet despite that caution, it’s also a paean to the saving grace of friendship, no matter how dysfunctional.

But, as to the overall meaning of the movie, the answer is in double entendre of the title, "All Things Chicken."

Yes, the guys eat many permutations of chicken, but the more important of the two meanings is the idea of being a chicken: the two protagonists are two terrified, foolish dudes going nowhere in their lives. They are metaphorically and sometimes literally in the dark, and the movie is both a literal and metaphorical journey toward the light, i.e. toward maturity.

However, in no sense have either of them grown up completely by the end of the movie, but in actually just accomplishing *SOMETHING* by seeing this comet, that action creates the springboard that they can move forward, or at least the character of Ray will definitely do so. As he says, to paraphrase, we just sent a little light up into the universe, with that camera flash.

That light is saying they exist. They count. Even if it's a dim light, they're still part of the light of the heavens.

**A simple formulation of the theme of the movie is that sometimes one has to accomplish something small in order to do something big.**

## **WAITING FOR GODOT**

The film stars Matt Mercer and Andy “Drew” Nye as respectively Dave Shipman and Raymond Chardas, and is written, directed and produced by Yale School of Drama and New York University Tisch School of the Arts graduate Julius Galacki, adapted from his play of the same name.

The original play version began its life at the Yale School of Drama where it was produced. Work continued on the play in Los Angeles where a re-written version was performed by Graham Shiels in the Dave part and the author as Ray.

However, thematically and structurally, the play has always been strongly influenced by Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot” – the seminal absurdist play about two tramps who wait each day for the titular character who never shows up, and which utilized quasi-vaudevillian routines and a circular structure to tell that “story”. So in both mine and Beckett’s play, the core “action” is that two clownish protagonists literally stay alive, make it from one day to the next, by entertaining each other.

“Chicken”, after about half way through in the movie and 2/3 through in the play, has a more discernible linear structure that runs parallel to the vaudevillian routines which continue.

So, “Chicken” the movie lessens but still retains this circular structure. So, the scenes up to the road trip are episodic and in each of the comic scenes are built upon a kind of comic routine (e.g. “Look at this pimple”, and so on). So, while the details may change, the behavioral pattern is repeated day after day... after day.

It also ends with a greater sense of hope than Beckett’s declaration of “I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” (One of course, could also point to that single new leaf, in the second act of “Godot,” on what had previously been a bare tree, to say that perhaps Beckett’s comic though bleak view was visually more mitigated.)

I admit it wasn’t a conscious act of parallelism, but in retrospect, like that Godot-ian leaf, hope in “Chicken” also springs from Nature. For in “Chicken”, the Godot is replaced by a once in a lifetime appearance by a comet, and that Nature in general (whether it be the “comet” monologues reflecting Ray’s inner life, or an outing to a local park) has the ability to rock the two “Chicken” men out of their safety zones.

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The major reveals in story (severe romantic angst leading to suicidal thoughts for "Ray"; parental abandonment for Dave partially justifying his infantilism) eventually explain why they're so stuck in time.

To emphasize this aspect of the script, note the color schemes for the two characters... when Ray is alone in his home the light is sepia / amber as if he is stuck in old photograph, while all of Dave's places including the restaurant are red, essentially symbolic of his hedonism. While sensuality and sexuality of course can be a means toward a deeper connection between two people, for Dave it’s more of a way to keep himself entertained enough so as to not deal with his more painful emotions.

Dave does partially get his comeuppance when his spying on the Women in the Window’s reveals not something titillating but rather a moment of her grief. Dave is ashamed enough that he avoids his usual braggadocio in the next restaurant scene. Unfortunately, he's also too immature to admit shame and responsibility, so instead he deflects Ray’s inquiry by

talking about his pimple on his forehead, and remains out of sorts until he re-captures his usual form by asking out the Waitress on a date.

As stated previously, countering the circular structure of comic “routines” is the through-line of the comet, both the repeatedly mentioning in conversation as well the formal “comet monologues” and finally, the actual road trip itself. To reflect this, all of the nature scenes are more balanced in the color because any healing moments or at least moments of truth only occur in nature. Sometimes truth is in the visuals, which contradicts the words.

The hot woman in the park has a shaved head, bringing in a mystery. Is that the result of chemo for cancer, or something similar - in other words, mortality? The Ray character is disquieted by it, but still enough of a guy to understand why the Dave character ignores what he needs to ignore to instead focus only on the breasts and pelvic area (the visual joke) literally eliminating the offending mystery of baldness. While the boys yap on about whether she's boring or if that even matters, the woman is actually reading Chekhov. Neither of them even notices that fact. There's a good chance that she's actually smarter and more interesting than either of them.

While there are many autobiographical elements that were woven into the script, I've always adamantly refused to call it autobiographical because of the vast differences between myself and the character of Ray. One little difference is that while, like Ray, I'm definitely if-y on the existence of a personified Creator (Catholic grammar school often has that effect on one), I'm also a big believer in signs, just like Dave.

So on the night / morning before the shoot began, my mind was racing and I was thinking about things I wanted to say to Andy and Matt before we started, I came up with the thematic formulation about accomplishing something small. Then when I check my morning emails, my two “quote of the day” emails that I receive every day were these two:

*“The soul should always stand ajar, ready to welcome the ecstatic experience.”  
Emily Dickinson (1830-1886); poet*

*“When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world.” John Muir (1838-1914); Scottish-American preservationist and journalist*

**THE MEANING OF THE BUNNY,  
THE COMET AND OTHER RELATED SCENES**

Ah, the bunny.

The bunny. The bunny....

When is a bunny more than a bunny? For, indeed, sometimes a bunny...

Is just...

A bunny.

And sometimes, it's so much more...

For there are two bunnies in “All Things Chicken.” One is fairly straightforward and reflects the text. The other though jumps forward from the literal into other, more symbolic territory.

The first rabbit appears in the middle of the movie theater scene as a flashback: what the audience is seeing is a literal illustration of Ray's narration about how he got over a depressive episode when he was a boy.

We know it's a flashback because it is clearly denoted as a past event by the faded sepia color scheme and furthermore, the skew of memory is accompanied by slightly out of tune carnival music rather than the very different swelling, lush music which had been underscoring the rom-com movie within a movie.

Ray's narration about hopping home as a bunny is an important character moment because it shows a pattern for Ray: his current romantic angst and quasi-suicidal feelings are nothing new for him, but also that he has had a consistent methodology for surviving and emerging from these dark episodes. In this case of teen depression, Ray shook off his despair with a grand, silly gesture of freedom and play.

And as he explains to Dave, while he literally does NOT have to pull a bunny suit out of the closet, he does need to pull some kind of “play” out of the treasure box. This idea of play also goes a long way toward explaining Ray's friendship with the very different Dave. They seem like such an odd couple, a Mutt and Jeff, a Budd and Lou, a Felix and Oscar, but their banter after all is a

kind of play. Dave makes Ray laugh, and moreover, helps Ray to laugh at himself, which a matter of life or death for Ray.

And when Dave goads and needles Ray, Dave probably is not consciously trying to make Ray more self-aware, but nonetheless Ray is aware of the value of seeing the absurdity of his actions: “I know everything and do it anyway” as he says during the stone skipping scene. He KNOWS that Dave’s solution of seeing an idiotic romantic comedy won’t solve his problems, but he goes anyway. For, he still intuitively knows he needs the company to pass the time, until he can actually DO what he knows he should be doing – moving forward with his life.

Additionally, there is something else that the act of being a bunny / playing so fully accomplished: it was redemptive, or rather allowed / prepared him for the redemptive-ness of the next morning. Again, as Ray narrated: “But the next day, I woke up, felt the sun on my bare arm, smelled that fresh green smell of spring and I wasn’t depressed anymore.”

Enlightenment is its own kind of miracle. And again, it comes from nature.

True redemption in “...Chicken” is always found in nature. “Play” may be the preparation, but by itself it’s at a best a holding action on the path to happiness. Thus, it is no accident that the climax of the movie is on top of the hill “where there are no lights” (i.e. no distractions, no light pollution other than the star themselves) while they are looking at and eventually interacting with the comet by taking a photo of themselves with it.

That photo is the ultimate act of faith as it proves nothing. The comet will not exist on the image, but they KNOW it exists in the space where they’re pointing. And by taking that photo, they simultaneously are placing themselves, however small and dim and insignificant, into the cosmos: “Well, we just sent a little bit of light up into the sky. Some alien up there with a telescope is going to see our little flash a million light years from now.” Just in the act of expressing a moment of friendship, and yes, a kind of love, they were able to say to the universe: We’re here. We exist. We matter.

And like the multi-vocal bunny, the comet is both just a comet, but also something more. It is my secular stand-in for God, i.e. any force and understanding greater than us tiny human beings, whether one calls it Nature, God, Shiva or Zeus.

A major influence in the writing of the play, which eventually became the screenplay, “All Things Chicken” was Samuel Beckett’s play “Waiting for Godot.”

In “...Godot,” two tramps who are essentially clowns, are in a desert wasteland waiting for a powerful person named Godot who never comes. Each evening, i.e, at the end of each act, a young boy delivers the message that Godot will certainly come tomorrow, which of course fills the tramps with despair and anger. So the next morning, each and every day, the two tramps fill the void - that overwhelming sense of hopelessness while waiting for this powerful being – with silly, nonsensical repartee just to pass the time. These discussions or arguments about overly tight boots, smelly feet, turnips, etc. are clearly Existential comedy vaudeville routines.

It’s the tragi-comedy of the clown; the key line in Beckett’s play being: “I can’t go on. I’ll go on.”

So, is Godot god? (Also, note by the way, Godot is typically pronounced Ga-dough in America, but a common alternative, and I believe it was Beckett’s preference, is pronounce it “God-o.”)

I would say yes, but also no, since he’s something else... not tied to any particular religion but rather a secular version of something with greater power... Godot either doesn’t notice that two tramps have desperately been waiting for him, or perhaps is just too busy to come since he has more important things to do.

So thematically, “Godot” is partially about how to live in a world where the deity, if he/she/it exists, never directly gets involved in our existence. God is the blindest of Blind Watchmakers.

However, my worldview is less bleak than Beckett’s. ***True the comet in “...Chicken” is an impersonal force which does not literally “care” about two little guys standing on a hill in the middle of nowhere, but nonetheless, unlike Godot, the comet, in the end, literally does reveal itself, in all its glory and mystery, and just being one with a world filled with such glory and mystery, has its healing and empowering energy.*** So, Dave and Ray have a small triumph and there is a sense, a feeling, at least for Ray, that having accomplished this task of seeing the comet, that more change and healing will happen in the future.

So, getting back to the bunny, when the second one appears – the bunny after the credits – it is in this context and the scene is literally connected / immediately follows the actual word “Godot”.

Specifically, the audience has just completed its journey with Dave and Ray and then has listened to the rousing, happy Celtic music accompanying the credits, though that joy is leavened a bit by the last, bittersweet “in memory” credit card regarding my deceased father. This title card is followed by what appears to be a standard blooper reel: Matt Mercer, the actor playing Dave should say “Let’s go” as he does in the movie, but in this take, Matt says “Let’s Godot (which he pronounced Ga-dough).”

It was a total accident on Matt’s part, but I speculate that he must have had the word “Godot” in his subconscious since I had explained in rehearsals to both actors the “Waiting for Godot” connection.

So the “blooper scene” is both just a blooper scene but also a fortuitous literary reference about the themes and inspiration for the movie. Certainly, not everyone will be familiar with Beckett’s play, but anyone who is, will hear that reference, and then hopefully be in a frame of mind for even more literary allusions that will follow with the 2<sup>nd</sup> bunny scene....

So, that second bunny immediately follows “Let’s ga-dough”, and it seems to be a reprise of the first bunny. A memory. Sweet and wistful. After all, it’s literally the same bunny hopping further down the same street as the previous bunny.

However, this time the bunny is not in the sepia of memory but rather the world is in fully saturated, unrealistic colors – purples and pinks and day-glo greens. So, it’s not a faded memory of childhood and innocence that is being evoked. Instead it’s a world of magic.

I’m hoping the audience will then make a literary jump in their minds to other large human-sized bunnies. There’s the cartoon Bugs Bunny and the magical pooka from the play (and movie) “Harvey”. But with the unreal, out of time, colors, I’m especially hoping the viewer’s mind veers toward the most famous “psychedelic” rabbit of all, Lewis Carroll’s creation, the White Rabbit, which intentionally or unintentionally leads Alice down the rabbit hole in “Alice in Wonderland.”

Disney, Woody Allen and Jefferson Airplane and countless other artists have re-purposed that rabbit for their own variations of Alice and “Through the Looking Glass.”

Note also that I chose a leafy, and blossoming, tree filled street to shoot that scene, and in particular that the bunny stops in front of a house that is in the “Story-book” style of vernacular architecture, just to further emphasize the fable quality of the scene.

So the bunny is both a bunny of the past, but also a bunny leading not just the characters, but the audience forward in the future.

So, follow and go into a place that is often quite dangerous and crazy and absurd, but also quite wonderful and exciting. It’s a last “spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down”, and so end the journey of Ray and Dave.

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*Pragmatic bunny fun fact: literally the bunny is supposed to depict Ray when he was younger, wearing the bunny costume from a children’s play, however, Matt Mercer, who plays Dave, is actually the one in that bunny costume not Andy Nye who plays Ray, because (A) Matt is smaller than Andy and thus conceivably would be what Andy’s height would have been when he was younger, and (B) Matt both fit into the costume better and also was quite game to hop in sweats on a 90 plus degree day in the San Fernando Valley.*