

PLAYBILL

EMPAC THEATER

BAILEY SCIESZKA

CONSPIRACY INFLUENCER

FRIDAY, MAY 13, 2022 / 7PM





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Bailey Scieszka's **Conspiracy Influencer** is a four-part theatrical extravaganza premiering at EMPAC for its Spring 2022 season. This newly commissioned performance combines puppetry, clownery, and drag to create a madcap world populated by characters like anthropomorphic Skittles, Nixon's dead dog, a talking Comet pizza slice, a mob of Beanie Babies, and a demonic clown named Old Put (Scieszka's alter ego). The cast of puppets satirize the wacky conspiracy theories that spawn in dark corners of the internet and contribute to the polarized socio-political landscape in the United States. Over the course of the performance, we follow Old Put's meteoric rise from humble content creator, specializing in doll unboxing Youtube videos, to celebrity influencer at the center of a galaxy-wide disinformation campaign. The performance is the climax of Scieszka's collaboration with curators from the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, EMPAC's production team, and Philadelphia-based composer Joseph Hallman.

The play explores the ways in which history is remembered, resurrected, and sensationalized in America's entertainment-centered culture. The dense, absurdist, and hilarious dialogue in **Conspiracy Influencer** is steeped in the vocabulary of celebrity gossip, the internet, and social media, with characters constantly referencing ideas drawn from 24-hour blog and cable news outlets, cyclically mutated within the churn of subcultural message boards such as Reddit, 4chan, and Youtube's comment sections. Scieszka critically alludes to fabulists who underwrite white American ideology in these forums, humorously and acerbically recasting the iconography of populism via Old Put and their puppet ensemble. Scieszka uses this divisive visual and verbal rhetoric as an emotional counterweight to her otherwise bright and playful imagery in a work that emasculates the trolls of the internet's echo chambers. Laced with clever pop culture references and outlandish hijinks, this puppet show is a pointed meditation on the current state of collective consciousness in the United States.

Conspiracy Influencer is presented in collaboration with the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, and curated by Isabella Achenbach, Eduardo Andres Alfonso, Angelica Arbelaez, Min Sun Jeon, and Guy Weltchek (CCS Bard '22).

Special thanks to Geoff Abbas, Amanda Bard, Maria Bernheim, Vic Brooks, Eric Brucker, Gordo Clement, Lauren Cornell, Sara Griffith, Ian Hamelin, Mike Hanrahan, Ryan Jenkins, Shannon K Johnson, Mike Lake, Zhenelle Lebel, Stephen McLaughlin, Pauline Renevier, Casey Robertson, Ramona Rosenberg, Jeffrey Tranchell, Michael Valiquette, and Stephanie Van Sandt.

I: LIKE SLASH COMMENT

Like Slash Comment begins with Old Put working at a suicide sex talk hotline when they believe a mysterious Youtube commentor is calling them during their shifts. If that wasn't strange enough, Old Put is also actively haunted by the ghost of Richard Nixon's dog, Checkers, who agrees to help Old Put investigate the identity of their online harasser. After a trip into the cloud, Old Put and Checkers find out that the Youtube commentator is Pink Gloves, a "serial re-animator" (the opposite of a serial killer) working in a traveling carnival as a sideshow attraction. Pink Gloves has been trying to contact Old Put because he needs their artistic gifts of sucking the life out of reality to complete his resurrection powers. Pink Gloves explains that all Old Put has to do in order to bring someone back from the dead is to picture them in their mind. He convinces Old Put to bring Princess Diana back to life in order to reinstate her as princess of the world, explaining that she has, in fact, been ruling from beyond the grave since her untimely death. The plan works, but instead of imagining Princess Diana of Wales, Old Put mistakenly conjures the Princess Diana Beanie Baby, re-animating a life-sized version of the child's toy instead. Princess Diana Beanie Baby goes on a rampage destroying the city like Godzilla, until Old Put and Pink Gloves are able to convince her it's better to create than destroy.

CAST OF CHARACTERS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Old Put

Pink Gloves

Checkers' Ghost

Princess Diana Beanie Baby

II: LIZARD IN A WOMAN'S SKIN

Lizard in a Woman's Skin opens with our lead alien clown, Old Put, drunk in their cemetery-turned-art studio. Old Put narrates to the audience à la Nixon's infamous Watergate tapes, hurling insults at Checkers the dog. Over the course of this diatribe, Old Put decides they themselves are a warrior and need to step off the sidelines. When they notice a \$20,000 chair with the girl's name Mary available on the online home goods retailer Wayfair, Old Put calls the company to accuse them of trafficking children. The customer service representative who takes Old Put's call, a talking slice of cheese pizza, assures Old Put that this isn't the case and dares them to order Mary and see for themselves. Old Put is flush with cash after working a traveling revival sideshow with Pink Gloves and decides to order the chair and find out. A grotesque golden human/chair hybrid named Mary arrives to the scene. Old Put explains their life's mission and work to Mary, who misconstrues information from Old Put and calls the toy company Mattel, accusing them of trafficking children because their dolls have human names like Barbie. Seeing Mary's ability to construct outlandish conspiracy theories based on few facts and a lot of emotional speculation, Pink Gloves sees the potential of Mary to be a new attraction in their traveling show, which now has a daily TV spot. Mary makes her debut on the show doing a bizarre song and tap dance number about Mattel and their Barbie trafficking ring. Although Pink Gloves and Old Put have already been espousing all manner of off the wall conspiracies on their show, Mary's Mattel theory has taken things too far, attracting the attention of "Steve," a reptilian dolphin who is part of the intergalactic intelligence agency known as the Men in Black. "Steve" appears on the scene via comet landing, informing our heroes that they are onto some essential truths about the global power structure, but they are still missing a crucial piece of the puzzle. The play ends on a cliffhanger, with "Steve" offering Old Put and Pink Gloves one red skittle and one blue skittle, just like *The Matrix*. If they eat the red skittle they will be able to stay in this wonderland-spectacle, if they eat the blue skittle they can go back to their old life as if none of these misadventures ever happened.

CAST OF CHARACTERS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Old Put

Checkers Ghost

Wayfair Pizza Customer Service Associate

Mary

Pink Gloves

"Steve"

III: CONTENT CREATIONIST

In Content Creationist, we find Old Put as a rich and famous “resurrectionist” working a revival reality show with Pink Gloves. They spend their free time and newly disposable income shopping at auctions with Princess Diana Beanie Baby. At one of these auctions, a puppet auctioneer—a talking Tiffany lamp—suggests a better way for them to waste their money: Physical NFTs, which are literally just paintings. Obsessed with an early American folk painting of a baby holding a corn husk doll, Old Put asks Pink Gloves to help bring the baby back to life. Pink Gloves agrees, but in order to re-animate the baby, Old Put must be impregnated with the painting and give birth to her. While Old Put is pregnant, they crave Skittles but can only find the limited edition “only one rainbow matters during pride” gray Skittles due to a supply chain issue. While Old Put is satisfying one of these Skittles cravings, an anthropomorphic gray pride skittle pops out of its bag. The two quickly fall in love and Old Put asks Gray Gay Pride Skittle to marry them on their reality show. Gray Gay Pride Skittle agrees, but makes Old Put promise that they will never ask where she came from and why she exists. During the wedding, Old Put goes into labor. Following an exciting sequence of events, the baby needs to be cut out of Old Put’s stomach. The newborn looks exactly like the one in the painting...but something is off. Everyone in the wedding party is covered in blood, and vows are exchanged. After the service, Old Put is curious about her new spouse and presses Gray Gay Pride Skittle about who she is, eventually discovering that under her gray paint is a blue candy coating (making her the blue skittle we find out Old Put didn’t take). Abandoned, Old Put begrudgingly breast feeds their newborn corn baby.

CAST OF CHARACTERS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Old Put

Princess Diana Beanie Baby

Pink Gloves

Tiffany

Gray Gay Pride Skittle

IV: KINGS, QUEENS, AND NON-BINARY ROYALTY

The fourth and final play begins with all the puppets from the three previous plays bowing for a curtain call. Once the curtain is pulled, we find all the characters backstage with Old Put. A conflict brews outside the stage door, as a mob of Anti Old Put (Anti-OP) protesters—upset with the content of the previous plays—and their counter protesters have amassed. Old Put tries to convince their company of puppet actors that these protesters are, in fact, crisis actors paid for by the deep state. Unconvinced, a war breaks out among the puppets, who each take sides among the picketing factions. At the zenith of the fighting, Old Put tells everyone to save it for the TV cameras as a surprise reunion for their reality show is about to begin. A puppet that sounds like Andy Cohen brings Old Put and the puppets together in a Real Housewives-style reunion, where all of the characters hash out different perspectives on the stories from the past three plays. This then devolves into a Project Runway-style challenge where the puppet and Old Put have to create art from “unconventional objects.” The grand finale of **Conspiracy Influencer** ends with Old Put literally sucking the life out of the puppets like a vampire, until they all turn into a pile of ashes. Pink Gloves scoops up the ashes, turns them into the Heart of the Ocean, and gifts the stone to Old Put.

CAST OF CHARACTERS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Old Put
Princess Diana Beanie Baby
Checkers Ghost
Pink Gloves
Tiffany
Gray Gay Pride Skittle
Randy Cohen
“Steve”

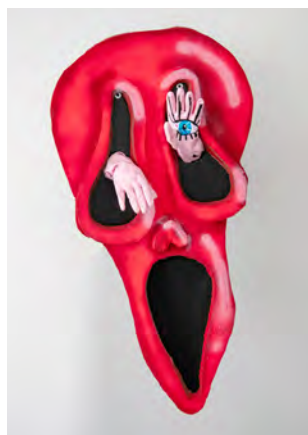
STARRING



OLD PUT



CHECKERS



PINK GLOVES

WHO'S WHO IN THE CAST



PRINCESS DIANA BEAVIE BABY



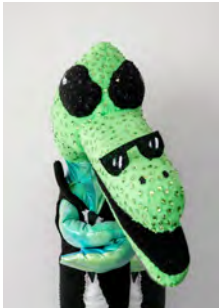
WAYFAIR PIZZA
CUSTOMER SERVICE
ASSOCIATE



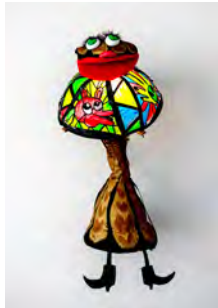
MARY



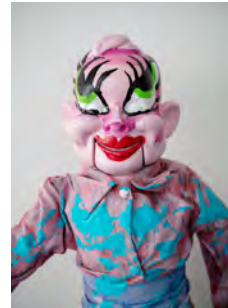
GRAY GAY
PRIDE SKITTLE



"STEVE"



TIFFANY



RANDY COHEM

WHO'S WHO IN THE CAST

In Order of Appearance

Old Put (pronounced /poot/) is an alien clown with different gender identities, who is now Millennial-fluid. A self-taught artist, Old Put began making wicker handicrafts until they worked their way out the sewers of Detroit and went on to create realistic sex dolls in the image of celebrity ambulance-chasers.

Old Put has appeared in all of Bailey Scieszka's puppet-dramas since 2011, when they appeared in the video "Large Larges." They made their on-stage debut in "All The Brown Butterflies," at the Detroit PuppetArt Theater Laboratory in 2013. Other performances include: "Harvest Time Dismemberies," Paris Internationale Art Fair (2016); "Heritage Bloodbath," Bahamas Biennale, Detroit (2016); "The Soft Side of Hardcore," A.I.R. Gallery, Brooklyn (2017); "More Heart Than Brains," Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zürich (2017); "Old Put Betsy Ross," University of Michigan Institute for the Humanities, Ann Arbor, Michigan (2018); and "Old Put Taps out of Depression at a Pizza Parlor," Scarr's Pizza, New York (2019). In 2020, Old Put and the crew moved their productions over to Zoom and broadcast "The Tragic Mirror," "The Old Put Players Present Rusalka," and "The Phantom Menace Syndrome," around da world. Old Put also performs solo and is a maestro of the "slam": a combination wrestling promo/poetry reading.

In addition to their work on stage, Old Put worked as an art director and make-up artist with New York-based fashion house Eckhaus Latta for an editorial by Sharif Hamza for A Magazine. Today Old Put lives off the grid in the Swiss mountains with Peter the Goat Boy and makes money as an online influencer.

Checkers, "The Best-Known Presidential Dog to Never Have Lived in the White House," was gifted to then vice-presidential candidate Richard Nixon as a campaign contribution during the 1952 Election. Checkers was thrust into the national spotlight when Dick went on national television to say that his family was not going to give him up, even if he was a bribe. Checkers' performance as a loveable cocker spaniel warmed the nation's heart to that crook, and Nixon went on to become Vice President. The rest is history. Since his death in 1964, Checkers has haunted the cloud, and been an erstwhile spirit companion to Old Put. Now that he is a real dog again, Checkers is thrilled to bring his talents to stage.

Pink Gloves is a serial re-animator. This is his theatrical debut. Little is known about his past. He came up in the over-the-top world of mega-churches, and plied his skills as an actor and grifter in various cults before crossing over to the stage. Pink Gloves is a cinephile, and binge watches *gialli*: cheap Italian murder-mystery films starring black-gloved psychopathic killers who stalk and butcher beautiful women.

Princess Diana Beanie Baby remains one of the most iconic and beloved beanies. She hit the shelves on October 29, 1997, just two months after the tragic death of the Princess of Wales. For the past 25 years she has been displayed as an effigy, crammed in plastic bins, and languished in basements. She has been a muse to many, including filmmaker Josh Safdie and rapper Ye. Princess Diana Beanie Baby is overjoyed to be on stage, and to remind the world of her namesake with the poem printed on her heart-shaped tag: "Like an angel she came from heaven above; she shared her compassion, her pain, her love; she only stayed with us long enough to teach the world to share, to give, to reach."

Wayfair Pizza Customer Service Associate first donned the headset of a customer service associate in 2008. They approach their work with a can-do attitude, but are often subject to vitriolic criticism because of Wayfair's subpar shipping and handling. In their off-hours they jam out to "emo girl," a song by American rock musicians Machine Gun Kelly and Willow, with Travis Barker. One day they field a fateful call from Old Put and put in motion events that will change the clown's life forever. Is Wayfair Pizza Customer Service Associate a disinterested service worker just trying to do their job or a cog in a trans-dimensional network of malevolent co-conspirators? You decide.

Mary is part person, part chair, and all attitude. Upholstered with a tasteful blend of human skin and cheugy rose gold, Mary is far from your typical piece of home decor. She is a certified doula and loves bringing a wide variety of creatures into the world. An accomplished amateur tap dancer, Mary is available at Wayfair for the modest sum of twenty g's. She is known for listening to her gut and never letting a little factual information get in the way of what her instinct tells her to be true.

Gray Gay Pride Skittle is a pro-slut, sex-positive, pleasure activist who is down with all kinds of fluidities and fluids. Created by the Nabisco company in 2019 to express their solidarity with the LGBTQIA+ community, they aren't afraid to take a stand.

"**Steve**" is a mystery wrapped in an enigma. "Steve" is a dolphin with the skin of a crocodile that lives on the moon. "Steve" starred in Old Put's "Young Country" in 2017, and has been an active participant in the deep state and dark web ever since. "Steve" holds many of the secrets of the universe in their scaly palms.

Tiffany is the latest in a lineage of lamps dating all the way back to 1893 when Louis Comfort Tiffany began dabbling in the art of illumination. She is the embodiment of his maxim that "color is to the eye what music is to the ear." She is also a skilled auctioneer specializing in ancient NFTs.

Randy Cohen began his career as an intern on CBS news where he developed a reputation as a hard-hitting professional journalist. He threw that all away for the sordid world of reality TV, where he made it to the big time as the reunion episode host par excellence. Randy and his best friend Randerson Cooper have been watching balls drop on New Years since 2018.

ABOUT THE ARTIST



Bailey Scieszka (she/they) is an artist working and living in Detroit, Michigan. Her performances incorporate painting, drawing, writing, sculpture and video. After completing her BFA at the Cooper Union in New York City in 2011, Scieszka worked with the Detroit PuppetART Theater from 2013-2014 to produce “All The Brown Butterflies,” her first puppet-drama. She has since staged these performances in galleries, art fairs, dive bars, and more recently over Zoom. Scieszka has exhibited her work at Atlanta Contemporary, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, Stems Gallery (Brussels), Rachel Uffner (New York), White Columns (New York), Maria Bernheim (Zürich), Larrie (New York), and What Pipeline (Detroit). Her work has been featured in The New Yorker, Vogue, Forbes, The New York Times, Cura, and Cultured. In 2018 Scieszka published *More Heart Than Brains: The Collected Plays of Bailey Scieszka* with What Pipeline.

BaileyScieszka.com

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PERFORMERS

BAILEY SCIESZKA / OLD PUT, CHECKERS, PINK GLOVES, WAYFAIR PIZZA
CUSTOMER SERVICE ASSOCIATE, MARY, GRAY GAY PRIDE CUSTOMER SERVICE
ASSOCIATE, “STEVE,” TIFFANY, RANDY COHEN

SARA GRIFFITH / PRINCESS DIANA BEANIE BABY

MICHAEL A LAKE / CAMERAMAN AND STAGEHAND

IMAGE CREDITS

P. 2-3: Bailey Scieszka, *Stabbed by Flags*, 2021, colored pencil, acrylic paint, and gold leaf on paper. Courtesy the artist. Photography by Annik Wetter

P. 10-11: Photography by Michael Valiquette

Back Cover: Bailey Scieszka, *The Flesh Failures*, 2022, acrylic, silver leaf, rose gold leaf, and gold leaf on linen. Courtesy the artist. Photography by Annik Wetter

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