

Elements of Chess

IUP Music Theater and Theater-by-the-Grove

Dramaturg: Michael Schwartz

Chess and the Cold War

“Maybe it costs too much brain-power for the average person to follow it,” *Chess* lyricist Tim Rice commented in an interview in 2001, looking back on *Chess*’ checkered history as a phenomenally successful concept album (1984), a highly successful London stage production (1986), and a highly unsuccessful Broadway production (1988). He might have a point, particularly as we move farther and farther away from one of the defining (and darkest) elements of the Baby Boom generation—the Cold War between Russia and the United States. To “get” *Chess*, and to appreciate the conflicts that simultaneously fuel and thwart the love triangle between the sometimes unsympathetic lead characters, one needs a sense of history as well as a sense of chess.

Following the second World War, the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as the world’s superpowers—each with deadly atomic arsenals that fueled many fictional doomsday scenarios for over 40 years. If you grew up in the United States during the 1950s, you were most likely taught that the U.S. stood for God and democracy, and that the Russians (or “Reds”) stood for godless communism (this is why we added “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance and “In God We Trust” on our money). And while direct all-out war would have been catastrophic, the Russians and Americans found many ways to compete—in space (Russia put its satellites into space first, but the U.S. wound up putting men on the moon), through the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, mutual spying through mutual secret government agencies—the CIA for the U.S., the KGB for the Soviets--and through chess.

In 1972, the Soviets dominated the world chess scene. The greatest and most eccentric American player, Bobby Fischer, had long made chess headlines through his brilliant play and his unorthodox behavior (including a ploy to double his money that is duplicated by Freddy in *Chess*). The “match of the century” between Fischer and reigning world champion, Russian Boris Spassky, ignited the imaginations of chess fans, and equally captured the world’s attention with its heavy political overtones. Fischer won and remained champion for the next three years.

Chess master Victor Korchoi, who defected to the Netherlands in 1974, might have partly inspired the character of Anatoly. Anatoly Karpov, a chess master known for his “boa constrictor” style of play, is a likely inspiration as well.

A defector is one who gives up allegiance to one state or political entity in exchange for another. This is distinct from a change of citizenship, which can be done legally—defection is done outside the law. The Berlin Wall, for example, was erected specifically to prevent defection from East to West Germany. The many people who fled the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc (the communist states of Eastern and Central Europe) for the West were referred to as defectors. Westerners also defected to the East, often to avoid prosecution as spies.

Notable defectors include ballet dancers Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov, gymnast Nadia Comaneci, hockey players Sergei Fedorov and Alexander Mogilny, and many others.

Other References

Budapest, Hungary, 1956: The Hungarian uprising of 1956 lasted from October 23 till November 10—students marched through Budapest protesting the Soviet government. A famous picture depicts Hungarians gathered around the toppled statue of Stalin. Soviet forces moved in to crush the revolution, resulting in the deaths of 2,500 Hungarians and 700 Soviet troops, as over 200,000 Hungarians fled as refugees. Hungarians who led the revolt were often tortured, killed, or detained.

A “second” helps the chess competitor chiefly by providing an analysis and overview of the opponent’s typical moves and strategies. The “arbiter” arbitrates (judges and settles) disputes and keeps score when players are under time pressure.

“Begin the Beguine,” “Miss Vassy Regrets,” and “Anything Goes”: All titles of Cole Porter songs (“Miss Vassy Regrets” is a take-off of “Miss Otis Regrets”)—the references to Porter, with his sophisticated songs of romance and sex, are meant to be ironic.

Yul Brynner (One Night in Bangkok)—one of his most famous roles was the King of Siam (Siam would become Thailand) in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *The King and I*. Bangkok in the 1980s, as the musical suggests, was in a state of economic boom, including a fair amount of high-end “night life.”

Endgame: the stage where few pieces are left on the board and the players make their final moves.

“Knight to E5”—the chessboard is divided into a graph-like configuration of letters and numbers. Each square on the board corresponds to a letter and number.

Glasnost, or openness, was one of two major reform policies initiated by Russian Premier Mikhail Gorbachev in the last half of the 1980s, when Chess is set (the other was Perestroika, or restructuring). Gorbachev wished to reduce corruption and abuse of power at the top of the Communist party. The increased transparency was meant to reform and restructure the Soviet Union, but instead led to its ultimate dissolution in 1991.

KGB, CIA

The KGB was the national security agency (internal security, secret police, and intelligence) in Russia from 1954-1991. They dealt in both legal and illegal espionage (legal “spies” operate under the cover of their home embassy, and if they are caught, they are sent back to their home country. Illegal spies operate without the protection of their home embassy, and can be arrested if caught), and they were instrumental in putting down both the 1956 rebellion in Hungary and the 1968 rebellion in Czechoslovakia (where more recent rewrites of *Chess* set Florence’s backstory). They were the most efficient and feared information-gathering network in the world, with the possible exception of the CIA.

The CIA was established in the U.S. under the National Security Act of 1947, and continues to provide national security intelligence assessment, as well as execute tactical and covert activities at the request of the President of the United States.

A **poison-tipped umbrella** was used to kill Bulgarian dissident writer Georgi Markov in 1978. The murder was planned by the Bulgarian secret police, assisted by the KGB.

Chess and the Rock Musical

Hair is usually cited as Broadway's first rock musical—taking the rhythms (and occasionally the decibels) of rock music and placing them onstage, in this case in the service of a non-traditional story weaving together themes of war protest and the hippie/flower power movement. Chess lyricist Tim Rice, with his frequent collaborator Andrew Lloyd Webber, further popularized the idea of the rock musical with *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Evita*, and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. *Superstar* and *Evita*, like *Chess*, began life as concept albums—songs with the outline of a story—before reaching the stage. In the case of *Chess*, Rice worked with the creators of the music for the internationally successful group ABBA—Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus. The use of the term “rock musical” becomes perhaps somewhat problematic depending upon one's definition of “rock music.” ABBA was not a rock group by any means, and many of the *Chess* songs have a more “pop” sound. (The term “jazz” in reviews of musicals in the 1910s and 1920s is a comparable example of fuzziness of meaning.) Nevertheless, New York critics in the late 80s were not welcoming toward what they considered rock music—Frank Rich of the *New York Times*, in particular, complained that *Chess* was “a suite of temper tantrums...[where] the characters...yell at one another to rock music.” (Not all U.S. critics were unsympathetic to the show.) Still, Rich's tirade points to a general negative feeling about the idea of a rock musical in 1988—the idea that such music had no flexibility, no ability to be light, romantic or funny—only loud and angry. The 21st century might be more accommodating to *Chess* as the musical theatre world has proved more welcoming to different forms of modern music, including rock, rap, and hip-hop.

Chess—the game

The earliest versions of chess are thought to have been played in India and Persia in the 6th century. (There are also some claims for China in the 2nd century BCE.) The game spread throughout Europe by 1000. Writings on chess theory began to appear in the 15th century. Chess clubs, books, and journals proliferated throughout the 19th century, and chess problems became a regular feature in 19th century newspapers. London held the first modern Chess tournament in 1851—the winner was Adolf Anderssen from Germany.

Starting with Mikhail Botvinnik's winning the world championship in 1948, the Soviets dominated the chess world until the collapse of the Soviet Union. During that time, there was only one non-Russian champion, the American Bobby Fischer.

What makes a good chess player? Apparently visuospatial ability isn't as important as one might suspect—what seems to be more important than anticipating moves is the ability to perceive the key features of any position. Chess masters can recognize patterns and then memorize them. (If you remove

the pieces from the chess board, chess masters will demonstrate almost total positional recall.) Other somewhat odd chess master facts: they're more likely to have been born during winter and early spring, and they're more likely to be left-handed. And, not surprisingly, they start playing at an early age (Bobby Fischer began at age 6, although his serious training began around age 12). There also isn't necessarily a direct correlation between "being smart" (overall intelligence) and being a great chess player.

Chess players make a distinction between "strategy" and "tactics"—strategy refers to the long-term goals, while "tactics" are more immediate moves. The two, of course, can't completely be separated (tactics partly comprise strategy; strategy determines tactics), but the distinctions are important elements of the chess vocabulary.