

“[C]ozily reminiscent of a Christopher Guest film, exploring the bizarre participants in a marginal activity: in this case, the Flemish folk sport of finch-sitting. [...] “Vinkensport” has an exuberant, rhythmically vibrant score by David T. Little with an infectious opening chorus.”

-Zachary Woolfe, *The New York Times*



VINKENSPORT, OR THE FINCH OPERA

Music by **David T. Little**

Libretto by **Royce Vavrek**

Commissioned by

Dawn Upshaw for Bard Conservatory

(corrected April 13, 2020)

VINKENSPORT

A small Flemish town...

... with six contestants in a finch-sitting competition. They sit in a row, approximately 6 feet apart from each other, with the boxes containing their birds in front of them; it is silent save for the finch songs that can be heard, as they solemnly mark down the tallies on wooden sticks that they hold. It is a tedious sport – even more so than curling, and it means different things to different folks. Susk-e-wiets, the song of the birds, are heard and begin accelerating with great humor, as the contestants tally their birds' calls in a frenzy.

“Susk-e-wiet-ing”

The Referee waves the starting flag, beginning the competition.

COMPANY

Susk-e-wiet.
Susk-e-wiet.
Susk-e-wiet.
Tick. Tick. Tick. Tally.
Vinkensport!
Susk-e-wiet.
Susk-e-wiet.
Tick. Tick. Tick. Tally.
Vinkensport!
Susk-e-wiet.

Suddenly the lights shift, each of the characters in a tight pool of light.

“One-Ounce Opera Divas, Pt. I”

Company

FARINELLI'S TRAINER

You ask: why vinkensport? I ask: why not vinkensport?

HANS SACH'S TRAINER

Vinkensport! It's the rush man,
It's out of control!

ST. FRANCIS' TRAINER

Nothing much matters except the Church, vinkensport and bingo.

PRINCE GABRIEL OF BELGIUM III'S TRAINER

I'd like to kill the man who created vinkensport...

ELTON JOHN'S TRAINER

(laughing hysterically, quite drunk)

... Vinkenspuuuuurt ...

ATTICUS FINCH'S TRAINER

Tradition. That's why. Vinkensport is a God-damn Belgian way of life!

COMPANY

At the mercy of
One-ounce opera divas.

HANS SACH'S TRAINER

My heart starts racing.

(he sniffs, obviously high on coke)

You feel like you're on top of the world.

And man, that's addictive.

(sniff, sniff)

And it's all because of a sweet little chaffinch!

FARINELLI'S TRAINER

They're all sitting ducks:

Loser one. *(gunshot with finger: bang)*

Loser two. *(bang)*

Loser three. *(bang)*

Loser four. *(bang)*

Loser five! *(bang)*

(secretively)

Let me let you in on a little secret: Farinelli here...

ELTON JOHN'S TRAINER

My husband said: "Go, go play with the townsfolk,"

And I was like: "Darling, I haven't done group thing since my university days..."

(laughs wildly at own joke, then suddenly a little sad)

PRINCE GABRIEL III'S TRAINER

I'd rather saw off my foot,
Than be here with these people,
Ticking and tallying tweets from stupid birds...
I'd rather amputate my right foot
Than count how many times Mr. Finch here sings...

ST. FRANCIS' TRAINER

Got up early to put it in curlers, and did my makeup, too.
Never do makeup.

(looking at Atticus Finch's Trainer)

I hope he notices me.

ATTICUS FINCH'S TRAINER

It goes back a long time...
Created by men with great foresight!
Immortalized by that great poet, Mr. Hardy:

Who hopeth, endureth all things?

Who thinketh no evil, but sings?

Who is divine? This bird.

This bird is divine!

(He makes a tick on his stick)

COMPANY

At the mercy of,
The mercy of
One-ounce opera divas:
Feathered friends with blue-grey caps...
At the mercy of
The hour of sport.
Vinkensport!

*(The lights shift back. Everything is silent except for the finches.
ELTON JOHN'S trainer pours herself a vodka martini from a flask she
has inside her coat. Everybody watches her. A susk-e-wiet is heard
from the box in front of her, she pauses her pouring...)*

ELTON JOHN'S TRAINER

Ooh! He tweeted!
Little Elton John tweeted!

*(EVERYBODY shushes her. SHE marks a tick on her stick, then
finishes her pouring.)*

COMPANY

Shhhhhhh...

HANS SACHS' TRAINER

Come on, Sachsie!

(EVERYBODY shushes HANS SACHS' TRAINER. HANS SACHS' TRAINER starts tapping his shoe...)

COMPANY

Shhhhhhh...

HANS SACHS' TRAINER

(whispering)

It's killing me.
Killing me.
Killing me.

(The lights shift so that only HANS SACHS' TRAINER is visible in flashback.)

Good Little Man-Finch

(HANS SACHS' TRAINER pushes play on his boom box, and heavy metal music blares. HE is frenzied, coked-up.)

HANS SACHS' TRAINER

This is the good shit, Sachsie.
When the beat knocks you in your chest,
Feel the thuds... thud, thud, thud, thud thud.
Blood starts pumping...
And you just want to sing –
Don't you, Sachsie?
Makes me want to run in place,
Karate-chop or kick box...
Right hand uppercut – wham in the jaw.
Bam bam bam flat on his back.
And that's when I'm being nice!

This is the good shit, Sachsie.
It'll get the best of us riled up,
Give us an edge, or something.

Makes you want to sing,
(HE grabs the cage and holds it close to his mouth as he screams inside)

Makes you want to win!
You have to imagine the prize, Sachsie.
Make a mental picture.
This is the good shit, Sachsie.
Hans Sachs, first-placed finch.

(HE grabs a syringe and vile of serum, drawing a small amount into the handle of the needle.)

You have to imagine that big-ass blue ribbon, or trophy, or whatever...
1st place, Sachsie.
Nothing less for the two of us.

Now we've got to make sure to put you in the mood
To sing like a good little man-finch...
(HE grabs the bird from inside the cage and holds it aggressively in his grip. HE injects the needle into the bird.)

Good little man-finch.
Good little dude...
Good little dude-finch.
It's all about the good shit, Sachsie.

One-Ounce Opera Divas, Pt. II

Company

COMPANY

At the mercy of...
One-ounce opera divas.

ST. FRANCIS' TRAINER

(indicating ATTICUS FINCH'S TRAINER)

He lives next door.
My utility room window can see into his bathroom...
I try not to peek,
But he always seems to be having a jolly good time in the shower -
(catching herself, realizing what she's implied)
Oh, singing away, I mean...

ATTICUS FINCH'S TRAINER

(indicating ST. FRANCIS'S TRAINER)

She's always, *always* folding towels at the exact same time I'm doing my business.
Forcing me to get bamboo Venetian blinds installed this week...
Good blinds make good neighbors.

ST. FRANCIS' TRAINER

Maybe I should make him a pie,
Bring it over to him piping hot,
Wearing my lavender apron...
I'll ask: "Do you like mincemeat?"
"Did Luke write a Gospel?" he'll be quick to say.

ATTICUS FINCH'S TRAINER

Jesus Christ!
She named her finch Holy Saint Francis.
"Frannie"
I want to give her a right earful:
"Leave the god-damn church out of the god-damn sport!"
Women ruin everything.

ST. FRANCIS' TRAINER

(lost in fantasy)

... then I'd feed him spoonful after spoonful of my mother's mincemeat recipe.
He'll get all messy.
Mincemeat all over his face.
Loving every bit I shoveled down his throat.

Wulf refuses to eat my mincemeat.
Says I poisoned him a few months back.

(a beat)

Makes me sick to my stomach,
Because I sure didn't mean to if I did.

Leaving Wulf a Message

ST. FRANCIS'S TRAINER

(ST. FRANCIS'S TRAINER sits on a kitchen stool holding her telephone.)

ST. FRANCIS' TRAINER

(very gently)

Hello Wulf,
Um, this your wife calling.
I haven't seen you since last Friday,
And it's, um, Wednesday now,
Was wondering if you were coming home for dinner.
I thought I'd put some roast beef in the slow cooker...
Um...
I know how much you like roast beef...

Just wanted to know, just want to know if you were coming home.
Give me a call, honey.
Okay, honey?
Bye, bye now.

(SHE hangs up. ST. FRANCIS, her finch, sings.)

Second-Class Citizens

ST. FRANCIS' TRAINER

Just you and me for dinner, Frannie.

(beat)

You think he's with the cross-eyed lady again?

You remember her, don't you Frannie?

Two teeth, two tons, two dumb,

The two-bit, one horse whore.

Drives her garden tractor around town!

(to St. Francis)

"Honey, I'm home," as I open the door.

Find her dangling off him,

Legs curled around his back

Like a Chinese acrobat, but ten-times the size.

Sprawled on top of the kitchen counter like a Christmas turkey.

"Wulf," I cry, "what in the name of the holy mother do you think you're doing?"

Tangled in her death-grip he looks at me and says:

"A man's got to do what a man's got to do."

as he keeps stuffing the turkey.

"Get out of the kitchen" he yells at me.

So I go and take the laundry off the line.

When I come back, he's gone.

(PRINCE GABRIEL OF BELGIUM III'S TRAINER appears)

PRINCE GABRIEL III'S TRAINER

Nothing I hate more than finches.

Finch-sitting is what I imagine hell, or purgatory to be.

So many nights I prayed for mass extinction...

the chaffinch going the way of the dodo.

Never came to a single football game.

Never saw me off to college.

Never did much of anything but play with his finches.
A houseful of Princes:

Locked himself in the bathroom after Teflon fumes pan killed Prince Laurent II.
Staged a state funeral when Prince Nicolas IV died in his sleep.
Stored Prince Emmanuel's body in the freezer for six months 'til he was happy with the headstone.

It's funny how the second you lose someone,
Even when they were a fuck-up,
You start to worry about their legacy.

My father was the furthest thing from a hero,
But here I am competing like he did.

**ST. FRANCIS' TRAINER AND
PRINCE GABRIEL III'S TRAINER**

(both singing, but in their individual settings)

A second-class citizen
in my own home.
Waiting for an apology that's not going to come.
Half expecting, at any moment,
For him to arrive at the front door.

(ST. FRANCIS chirps.)

ST. FRANCIS' TRAINER

Maybe I'm better off, Frannie.
Got to keep telling myself that.
At least I've got you, Frannie,
And Jesus.

PRINCE GABRIEL III'S TRAINER

He's got nothing if he doesn't have his legacy of finches,
So Prince Gabriel III and I sit one more time for father.

**ST. FRANCIS' TRAINER AND
PRINCE GABRIEL III'S TRAINER**

(both singing, but in their individual settings)

A second-class citizen
in my own home.
Waiting for an apology that's not going to come.
Half expecting, at any moment,
For him to arrive at the front door.

One-Ounce Opera Divas, Pt. III

COMPANY

One-ounce
One-ounce
One-ounce opera divas.

HANS SACH'S TRAINER

(he sniffs hard, finding hidden cocaine in his nose)

Hello there!

ELTON JOHN'S TRAINER

You listen here, you,
I'm a professional!

(she swigs from a flask)

My husband – he's a professional too:
President of the company that sponsors this...

(she makes a tally mark on her board)

... "sport."

FARINELLI'S TRAINER

Last year Mrs. Crazy there got so drunk
That she lost her see-through blouse
Aand was caught kissing the deputy mayor's seventy-seven year-old father.

ELTON JOHN'S TRAINER

(slurring her words)

Very puuurfeshhhonel.

FARINELLI

You won't find a more consistent bird than my Farinelli.
Perfect susk-e-wiets every time.
Stellar intonation...

... A Quasi-Fetal Position ...

(FARINELLI'S TRAINER directly addresses the audience.)

FARINELLI'S TRAINER

Let me level with you...
Farinelli died years ago.
I woke up one morning,
Found him at the bottom of his cage,

On his back,
In a quasi-fetal position.
(SHE mimics the position)
I poked him with a spatula to make sure he wasn't sleeping,
But he was dead as they get.
So I scooped him up,
Balancing his little carcass on the flat of the spatula as I walked down the hall...
Didn't drop him once!
A one-man processional
To the bathroom.
Flushing him like so many a goldfish and newt before.
(the lights shift, as if she presiding over a funeral)
Dearly beloved, we gather here
To say farewell to this fine creature
With his green rump and red underparts
Who sang so zestfully.
We commit you, Farinelli, fine bird,
To the toilet bowl...
May a thousand angels sing thee to thy rest.
(pause, the lights turn back)
So it's a CD player.
You were wondering what's been chirping from my box?
It's a CD player.
I press play, it susk-e-wiets, I win...
I'm the smartest competitor here.

One-Ounce Opera Divas, Pt. IV

HANS SACHS' TRAINER

(making a tally mark)

Wham bam thank you ma'am.
Keep 'em coming, Sachsie.

COMPANY

Shhhhhhh...

ELTON JOHN'S TRAINER

Elton John, you sure are quiet today.
Should've given you some of mommy's special water...
That's enough to get me "talking"
...to anyone, and I mean anyone.

ST. FRANCIS' TRAINER

Does he even like mincemeat pie though?

If someone made me a pie, I'd rather rhubarb...

ATTICUS FINCH'S TRAINER

She's gonna burn a god-damn hole in my head,
The way she's staring at me.
Keep your eyes on your bird, lady!

COMPANY

At the mercy of...

*(ELTON JOHN'S TRAINER scoots her seat up to a spotlight
downstage.)*

The Professional

ELTON JOHN'S TRAINER

"If you finch-sit with the locals
we'll go away next week,"
My husband likes to bribe me.
He knows I'll do practically anything with a dirty vodka martini in me...
"Lots of fruit, darling!

(a beat, she turns sneaky)

You know I'm going to need something to wear, darling...
And I'm sick of shopping in Brussels.
I'll sit anywhere you want:
With the finches, holding the finches,
On top of the finches,
But I want to do so fashionably."

"Go easy on the gimlets," he says.
"Baby, I've only had one today, I swear."
Well three...
But it takes double digits to get me teetering on stilettos.
I know when to say when.
I'm a professional!

"If you finch-sit with the locals
I'll take you to the Côte d'Azur," he says.
"But I'm sick to death of the south of France...
We were there only three weeks ago.
How about we go to Hong Kong?"
My husband loves Asia..

He always fetishizes the women there.

And likes to dress me up in Cheong Sam
After feeding my liquor all day,
And makes me walk in very slow motion
In the most seductive way.

“If you finch-sit with the locals
I’ll take you to Hong Kong.”
“But I want to go with my friend,” I whine.
He asks who,
I say Georgette, even though I actually mean Gregor.
Gregor is half my age, and lasts twice as long as my husband.

He says “no”, because he doesn’t like Georgette,
Even though she’s half Japanese.
I then get very, very drunk,
And withhold sex for the evening.
...then the next.
...then the next.
Then he’s ready to barter.

“I will send you to Hong Kong,” he says.
“For how long?” I ask.
“Five days,” he offers.
I say: “I want two months, darling, nothing less.”

“If you finch-sit with the locals
And return with your brassiere,
you and Georgette can have a month.”
(she downs the remainder of her martini)
I’m a professional.
I’m a professional...

ST. FRANCIS’ TRAINER

Slut!
(“did I say that out loud?”)

One-Ounce Opera Divas, Pt. V

HANS SACHS’ TRAINER
(ticking his board, very excitedly)

That’s my boy! That’s my god-damned boy!
(Everybody whips their head around to HANS SACHS’ TRAINER.)

COMPANY

Shhhhhhhh!

(beat)

At the mercy of...

“Susk-e-wiet-ing, Pt. II”

(Everything becomes frenzied again as the event is shown in fast-motion.)

COMPANY

Susk-e-wiet.

Susk-e-wiet.

Susk-e-wiet.

Tick. Tick. Tick. Tally.

Susk-e-wiet.

Susk-e-wiet.

Tick. Tick. Tick. Tally.

Time! Time! Time!

Calculate. Calculate. Calculate.

Calculate the winner!

...Hans Sachs!

(A giant blue ribbon is placed on HANS SACHS's birdbox.)

HANS SACHS' TRAINER

Me!

COMPANY

First-place Finch!

HANS SACHS' TRAINER

I won!

ELTON JOHN'S TRAINER

(getting up, drunk as a skunk, then to HANS SACHS TRAINER)

That ribbon really brings out your eyes...

... stud.

(SHE stumbles off)

HANS SACHS' TRAINER

(shaking everyone's hands)

My Sachsie...

He's a hardcore champion finch!

ELTON JOHN'S TRAINER

(catching herself before she exits)

Vinkenspuuuuuurt!

FARINELLI'S TRAINER

This contest is rigged!

Rigged!

I had it down to a science!!

(kicking her box over, the CD player falling out, SHE exits before anyone can see)

PRINCE GABRIEL OF BELGIUM III

I think it's time for a celebratory beer.

(PRINCE GABRIEL puts his arm around HANS SACHS and escorts him off.)

ST. FRANCIS' TRAINER

(to ATTICUS FINCH'S TRAINER)

Your bird tweeted most beautifully.

ATTICUS FINCH'S TRAINER

Uh... yeah... thanks

(beat)

Didn't really listen for your bird.

ST. FRANCIS'S TRAINER

(crestfallen)

I guess you wouldn't.

(a beat)

My name is...

ATTICUS FINCH

(cutting her off)

- It was nice to compete with you, lady.

ST. FRANCIS' TRAINER

The pleasure was mine.

(she backs away, leaving)

Dear Atticus

ATTICUS FINCH'S TRAINER

Well, Atticus.

Another competition come and gone,
And we put up a good fight.

I thank you for your professionalism,
Old man.
And I thank you for your companionship.

You know I don't much like talking –
But somehow I can't help but confide in you.

So many years,
So many stories: both truths and lies.
A lot of fiction spouts from my lips
But like clockwork, I feel guilty
And must come clean.

You keep me an honest man, Atticus Finch,
And for that I am grateful.

I will go home and turn on the radio at one end of the house,
And the television on the other.
Sit in the middle of the news and my favorite Dutch classical music station,
Like I do every evening.

Ten years is an awful long time for a bird.
Ten years can be an awful long time for a man, too.
But being your trainer, old man...
Being your trainer has been an honor.

But a deal's a deal,
dear Atticus...

And after these beautiful years of friendship,
I can't force you to sit in the gulf between the radio and T.V. with me anymore.

*(he opens the box and a sound of fluttering is heard as Atticus Finch
flies away. HE stands watching.)*

COMPANY

(off-stage)

At the mercy of one-once opera divas.

ATTICUS FINCH'S TRAINER

May you live out your days in peace and happiness.
May you build a nest,
Create a family,
And if you ever find yourself by my window...
Sing a susk-e-wiet for me...

One-Ounce Opera Divas, Pt. V

COMPANY

(off-stage)

Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick. Tally.
Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick. Tally.

*(On-stage walks ELTON JOHN'S TRAINER teetering on her stilettos.
SHE walks up to ATTICUS FINCH'S trainer and stares at him.
Suddenly she grabs his crotch.)*

ELTON JOHN'S TRAINER

Nice finch you got there.

(Blackout.)