

Preparing The Seagull to soar

AN ALL-STAR CAST, UNDER THE DIRECTION OF CHRIS ABRAHAM, IS CREATING A BUZZ FOR THE NEW PRODUCTION OF THE CHEKHOV CLASSIC, OPENING SUNDAY AT BERKELEY STREET THEATRE.



Photo by Keith Beaty

There are some plays that go into rehearsal with such a blue-chip air of distinction about them that, in the words of Arthur Miller's Linda Loman, "attention must be paid."

One such show is the Crow's Theatre production of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*, which starts performances at the Berkeley Street Theatre on Sunday.

It's directed by theatre's man of the moment, Chris Abraham, with a stellar cast who could turn Kardashian tweets into dramatic gold, only they're dealing with one of the finest scripts in the history of world drama.

Yanna McIntosh, fresh from her Stratford triumph as Cleopatra, plays Arkadina, the diva to end all divas; Philip Riccio, one of the pillars of The Company Theatre, is her tortured playwright son, Konstantin; Christine Horne, last seen burning up the stage with Allan Hawco in *Belleville*, tackles the fragile actress Nina; and Eric Peterson, one of our nation's theatrical treasures, is the sour yet sagacious Sorin.

Those four are supplemented by superb veteran actors, including Tom McCamus and Tom Rooney as Dorn and Trigorin. Gregory Prest, an actor who normally stars in *Soulpepper* shows, here plays the relatively minor role of Medvedenko.

No wonder Abraham sounds like a child who got all the presents he wanted on Christmas morning.

"The cast don't like it when I call them 'my dream team,'" laughs Abraham, "but the truth is that everyone I asked said yes. I got exactly who I wanted to star in a play that I've always really wanted to do."

There's no doubt that the script itself is a major drawing card. Riccio speaks for his fellow cast members when he explains: "The *Seagull*. It's kind of one of those plays, isn't it? I went to an arts high school and I first read it, I thought, 'That's me, that's what I feel. How did Chekhov know it?' And it's a feeling that's increased over the years."

By Richard Ouzounian

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But Abraham himself tends to attract top actors these days.

After a long and distinguished stewardship in indie theatre, he made a seamless transition to Stratford. There, he started with smaller shows, then delivered a hat-trick of major successes, with *The Matchmaker*, *Othello* and last season's controversial same-sex marriage, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which had its admirers and detractors but caused a welcome buzz.

But Abraham has also been the artistic director of Crow's Theatre and is helping lead its upcoming move into a new playhouse at the corner of Carlaw Ave. and Dundas St. One of the shows he began there, *Winners and Losers*, has just opened off-Broadway, and this spring, he'll be directing the real-life husband and wife team of Ben Carlson and Deborah Hay in *The Taming of the Shrew* at Stratford before steering the commissioned production of *The Watershed* for the Pan Am Games cultural program this summer.

Right now, however, he's focused on *The Seagull*, one of Chekhov's major masterpieces.

"What fascinates me the most about the play is Chekhov's ability to capture our inability to understand just what is enough.

"There's a quote that I love from Eudora Welty. She once wrote that 'Chekhov shows that fantasy can change a man's life, but living without it is living with the loss of something real.' Sure, having fantasies means you have baggage and they can become problematic, but taking them away can absolutely kill you. That's what this play proves."

Abraham has been known for moving plays out of their original period, but he's keeping *The Seagull* in the fin de siècle time frame in which Chekhov wrote it.

"Russia is sort of bursting at the seams with challenges related to its economics, its class system," he says. "There's very little actual mention in the script about this shift, but you can feel it everywhere."

Riccio agrees. "When I was just out of theatre school, Soulpepper was doing Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* and I went to see it and said, 'Yes, this is just the kind of work I want to do with my life.'

"Chekhov appeals to young artists universally, because no matter when you encounter him, you feel he's breaking through to doing something new," Riccio says.

"The idea of theatre is constantly changing. And Chekhov represents the struggles of every younger generation trying to find its place."

Abraham shares this vision and extends it beyond the immediate realm of the artists who fill the world of this play.

"I think *The Seagull* is Chekhov's cruelest and most brutal play. Fundamentally, it's about a family, a multi-generational family and the conflict between a mother who's an artist and a son who's an aspiring artist," he says.

"Like all families, you are a product of your times. And your children react against the world you're stewarding. And yes, this play is about a theatrical family, but it could be about any family."

What delights Abraham most is the golden thread running between his company and Chekhov's work through the generations.

"Tom Rooney played Trigorin in Winnipeg a few seasons ago. Now he's playing it here. And Eric Peterson played Konstantin at Tarragon almost 40 years ago. Now he's playing Sorin here.

"What a world that is!"