

Review: The Seagull

A FINE PRODUCTION FINDS THE COMEDY AND TRAGEDY IN CHEKHOV'S COMPLEX, VERY HUMAN CHARACTERS



In the hands of director Chris Abraham and his excellent cast, *The Seagull* glows with rich humanity.

Chekhov's classic play follows the unhappy fortunes of characters who have fallen in love with the wrong people and pay no attention to those who in turn love them. Konstantin (Philip Riccio), a young would-be playwright and the son of celebrated performer Arkadina (Yanna McIntosh), loves his neighbour Nina (Christine Horne), but she worships the writer Trigorin (Tom Rooney), Arkadina's lover. Arguably, though, Arkadina is most enamoured of herself.

Meanwhile, Masha (Bahia Watson), daughter of estate manager Shamrayev (Tony Nappo) and Polina (Tara Nicodemo), pines for Konstantin, while she herself is the object of the poor teacher Medvedenko's (Gregory Prest) yearning. Polina's emotional and sexual focus is Dorn (Tom McCamus), the local doctor.

The only person not sighing for another is Arkadina's brother, Sorin (Eric Peterson), who understands the others' broken hearts but is caught up in his own unfulfilled desires.

Abraham weaves these tales together superbly, playing with silences as well as Chekhov's words to reveal the inextricably linked comedy and pathos in the characters' lives. With its discussion of the value and sorts of theatre, writing and art generally, the play offers some thoughtful moments, but these never submerge the work's emotional truths.

There are many tiny instances that beautifully convey the complexity of this world. Masha and Medvedenko are cruel to each other, sometimes without meaning to be so; when the frustrated Konstantin tells Sorin about his hopeless life, the older man expresses enormous sympathy just by touching his nephew's shoe with his cane.

Knowing how much Konstantin cares for Nina, Masha mimics her gestures when Nina performs – and in Horne's presentation, gives emotional weight to – a scene from Konstantin's philosophical, not very dramatic script. Trigorin, bored and slightly ashamed of his professional success, waxes eloquent only when he talks about his art. An episode involving an unintended romantic triangle and a small bouquet is at once passionate, horrific and comic.

The staging literally brings the audience into the world of the play. With the help of set/costume designer Julie Fox, lighting designer Kimberly Purtell and sound designer Thomas Ryder Payne, the production breaks the fourth wall. Characters enter and exit through the audience, some viewers sit on what is usually the stage, we get a sense of the vistas beyond the house and yard where the action takes place, and there's even a towering tree smack in the middle of the audience.

The result? We don't so much observe this world as become part of it, far beyond simply understanding what the characters feel. Even though the tension sometimes slackens in the final scene, the strong cast allows us to feel the truth of lives that can never know satisfaction.