

Theatre Review: Chekhov's The Seagull flies high in Toronto production



It was once said — by Peter Ustinov, who was half-Russian himself — that teamwork and Chekhov are incompatible. It depends what you mean by teamwork. It's true that Chekhov, who learned his dramatic craft by writing farces, created self-absorbed characters who seldom understand or truly communicate with one another. They do, though, share a space. As a group, they find themselves in shared situations; as individuals, each reacts in his or her own way. Chris Abraham's production of *The Seagull*, for Crow's Theatre, honours both halves of the equation. It has a Grade A cast, each of them a distinct personality, with a particular rhythm. Those rhythms, however, are symphonically combined. In that sense, these actors are a team.

We see this in its purest form in the first act. All 10 of the play's characters are onstage. One of them has written a play of his own, another is performing it, and the other eight are their invited spectators, responding in eight identifiably different ways. When we, the real audience, file in we find Konstantin, the playwright-within-the play, fussing nervously over last-minute preparations. His impromptu theatre is his mother's lakeside estate. She is Irina Arkadina, celebrated Russian actress, who greets her son's "experimental" play with barely concealed

impatience, as if she were professionally threatened by it; we can sense her mentally fidgeting even while physically she's in gracious repose. Her lover Trigorin, successful novelist, says barely a word (he'll make up for it later), and projects polite, slightly embarrassed boredom. Dorn, doctor and ladies' man, seems genuinely fascinated. So does Irina's brother Sorin, though he may mostly be motivated by avuncular affection. Masha, addicted to vodka and snuff, also loves Konstantin, unrequitedly, and is accordingly jealous of Nina who's performing his play, without much liking or understanding it, and whom he loves, also unrequitedly. Masha has her own hapless suitor, the schoolmaster Medvenko, constantly complaining in a self-deprecating way, about his impoverished lot; he seems uncertain how to respond, as if suspecting he's there on sufferance, which he probably is. Masha's unhappy mother Polina has eyes only for the doctor, who has been dallying with her. Her husband Shamrayev, the estate manager, is a very good audience; he stands up on his seat in his enthusiasm.

Tony Nappo's Shamrayev, the best I have ever seen, is an emblem of the production's success. There are two sides to this character, and he plays them both to the limit. One is the theatre fan, trying to ingratiate himself

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continued

with his employers with his genial reminiscences of great performances past; nobody's interested, but he carries on anyway, because it makes him feel good. The obverse is his behaviour whenever he's asked a favour; no, he tells the "dear lady" whom he's just been buttering up, she can't have horses to drive into town; and he can switch in a calculated instant from sweet reasonableness to blackmailing rage. His attitude has apparently rubbed off on his daughter; Bahia Watson delivers Masha's famous opening line about being in mourning for her life on a note of sarcastic anger that turns out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. It isn't the subtlest of performances, but it's hard to fault it at any given moment. Certainly it's consistent with how she treats poor Medvedenko after she's deigned to marry him; and Gregory Prest makes him consistent too, resigned to a perpetual fate of walking long miles in the rain.

Anger flourishes in this Russian landscape. Unusually and refreshingly, it fuels Philip Riccio's electric Konstantin as he rails at the culture he despises and, Hamlet-like, at his mother's infatuation with a man who epitomizes it; rage, burning itself out, believably fuels his eventual suicide. Christine Horne's Nina turns out to be his opposite; oblique to begin with, an uncertainly aspiring actress, she matures when personal tragedy and professional failure hit her. She finds a lucidity in despair; she has a job to go to; she will survive. What fells Konstantin is the realization that she still loves Trigorin, of whom he is accordingly thrice-jealous. (He would die rather than admit it. And does.) Trigorin, ironically, can never acknowledge the havoc he's caused; his description to Nina of the novelist's driven life is not the usual sedentary set-piece, but a roving monologue that physically mirrors the restlessness of which it speaks. Tom Rooney makes spinelessness magnetic; he surrenders into relationships. Irina, fearful of losing him, has to throw herself at her feet though Yanna McIntosh, thoroughly successful in her star-lady aspects, underplays the self-abasement: a loss,

as it's one of the play's recurring themes. It's reflected, full-strength, in Polina begging Dorn to take her away with him, an entreaty with which he deals by ignoring it. In contrast to Trigorin, Tom McCamus' urbane doctor is a self-aware philanderer, kind up to a point, with the courage of his lack of conviction. Tara Nicodemo's Polina shows us a subtle kind of revenge in her silence when he returns from his travels in the last act. It's hard, admittedly, to accept this Polina as old enough to be Masha's mother, just as Eric Peterson's Sorin, a deliciously biting portrait of an old man feasting on his own futility, hardly seems to belong to the same age-group as his sister.

Those are minor cavils. These are 10 notable performances, enriching one another; make that 11, since Marcus Jamin does a remarkable amount with the near-silent servant Yakov.

I do, though, have problems with the chosen script; George Calderon's century-old translation (the first English one, I believe) has been adapted by Chicago director Robert Falls; and pretty freely, to judge from the abundance of OKs and four-letter words. More importantly, Chekhov's soliloquies have gone, making Dorn sound less perceptive and Konstantin less articulately desperate. And the seagull itself has had its wings clipped. Admittedly the bird that Konstantin shoots and presents to Nina was never one of its author's best ideas, as he may have admitted by having her ask incredulously "is this a symbol?" Horne's success in her last scene may even owe something to her not having to keep talking about it. Still, it's the title, and we should be made more aware of it in the dialogue than we are. Its final personal appearance, though, is a great success. Nappo proudly presents Rooney with the stuffed bird he'd requested; Rooney, who once wrote a story about Nina and her seagull, professes not to remember it. And the sad and funny thing is that we believe him.