

THE SEAGULL

By Anton Chekhov
in a new version by Tom Stoppard.



The Seagull

by Anton Chekhov

Directed by Jim Holmes

CAST

MASHA
MEDVEDENKO
SORIN
KONSTANTIN
SHAMRAEV
POLINA
DORN
NINA
ARKADINA
TRIGORIN
COOK
MAID
YAKOV

Andrea Massoud
Steven Truelove
Barry Caiger
Keenan Viau
Bill Horsman
Susan Monaghan
Rob Johnstone
Katie Ryerson
Bev Brooks
Dean Adema
Julie Clayton
Inna Tarabukhina
Lee Powell



*Capital Critics Circle Award
Best Community Theatre Production
Capital Critics Circle Nomination
Best Director, Community Theatre*





NAC, Third Wall theatres top Critics Circle winners

The NAC English Theatre and Third Wall Theatre bagged the lion's share of wins at last night's ninth annual Capital Critics Circle Awards. The NAC/Soul-Pepper Theatre co-production of William Congreve's *The Way of the World*, directed by Peter Hinton, won best production, while the Audrey Ashley Award for a body of work went to Hinton for his successes as artistic director of NAC English Theatre. Roger Forbes, meanwhile, was awarded best actor for his one-man show *Falstaff*, an NAC English Theatre/The Old Castle Group co-production.

At Third Wall, Joel Beddows took best director for *Empire Builders*. Lynn Cox won best design for the same play.

The NAC and Great Canadian Theatre Company productions and co-productions received multiple nominations in the professional category. In community theatre, Tara Players' production of the Jeffrey Hatcher farce

Smash, directed by Bill O'Connell, racked up four nominations. David Holton took home best actor for his performance as Sidney in the play.

The awards honoured the best English-language productions and performances of the 2007-2008 season. Winners, who receive cash, plaques and certificates, are chosen by Ottawa-area theatre critics, including *Citizen* critic Patrick Langston. This year's awards were sponsored by the *Citizen* and former *Citizen* theatre critic Barbara Crook Greenberg.

Other awards for standout work in the past season: best production (community): *The Seagull* at Kanata Theatre, directed by Jim Holmes; best director (community): Michael Gareau for the Orpheus Musical Theatre Society production of *A Christmas Carol*; best design (community): David Magladry for lighting in *Woman in Black* at Ottawa Little Theatre.

ARTS

THEATRE REVIEW

The Seagull a worthy effort, but won't appeal to everyone

BY PATRICK LANGSTON

No doubt with some trepidation, Kanata Theatre has mounted its first Chekhov play. It was a smart move: *The Seagull*, while not without flaws, is a brisk and assured tribute to Chekhov, to Tom Stoppard's translation, and to Kanata Theatre's willingness to move beyond safe community theatre fare.

Not everyone would agree: Tuesday night's opening performance saw a clutch of folks leave at intermission. Maybe they were depressed by the inevitability of Chekhov's story about trampled hopes, vanity, and the downward spiral of a theatrical (in every sense of the word) family, which has committed itself to a skewed vision of art and love.

Arkadina, an actor and the matriarch of that family, clings stubbornly to her vision of the artist as royalty. Beverley Brooks brings the right amount of hauteur to the role, painting Arkadina as an increasingly out-of-sync cheerleader for conservative, orotund theatre. She also lets us glimpse a spunkier Arkadina buried somewhere beneath the staid, manipulative actress, a tantalizing hint of wasted human potential.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Nina, a star-struck ingénue whose dreams of life on the stage lead nowhere but to single parenthood and summer stock roles. Katie Ryerson nicely handles the mutation from spirited freshness to despair.

Dangling somewhere between the two is Konstantin, Arkadina's writerly son. Starved for attention from his aloof mother and head-over-heels for Nina, whose affections of course lie elsewhere, he's yet another doomed character in a parade of them. Keenan Viau never settles into his role as the high-strung Konstantin, and we experience too little of this young, sensitive man's turmoil. Viau's jagged stage movements and 100-yard-dash exits are meant to convey urgency but instead suggest that director Jim Holmes needed to help his actor find a subtler external expression of internal turmoil.

Elsewhere, Dean Adema gives us a suitably vain Trigorin, the lionized writer who takes advantage of Nina's naivete, Andrea Massoud as Masha mistakes whiney for caustic, and Barry Caiger's Sorin helps illuminate the comic moments that heighten the

play's poignancy.

Ian Carlisle's sets deserve mention as well, especially the sense of alienation his scattered trees and receding lake bring to the first three acts.

Tuesday night, the play's famously anti-climatic ending was mistimed, leaving the audience uncertain whether the play, or just a scene, had ended. A slightly bolder approach would solve the problem.

The Seagull continues at Ron Maslin Playhouse until Feb. 16. Tickets & times, 613-831-4435.

online: Empire Builders review

Please see Patrick Langston's review of Third Wall Theatre Company's production of *Empire Builders* online today under latest news or in tomorrow's Arts section.

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Getting only scraps from C

Stratford's *Seagull* is marred by a muddled setting and flat performances

THEATRE

KATE TAYLOR

The *Seagull*

Written by Anton Chekhov
Directed by Diana Leblanc
Starring Martha Henry,
Peter Donaldson, Michael Therriault
At the Stratford Festival
in Stratford, Ont.
Rating: ★★

Following hard on the heels of the Soulpepper Theatre Company's emphatically Russian version of *Uncle Vanya* in Toronto, the Stratford Festival offers a *Seagull* that is floating about in never-never land. At the Avon Theatre, designer Astrid Janson has created a rather tropical backdrop by stretching out great leaves of translucent green fabric and then stacking them up as horizontal slats in screens that encircle the stage. She dresses the cast in costumes of linen and chiffon, which occasionally hint at an Edwardian garden party, but which are largely modern. It's all very pretty, but we could just as easily believe ourselves to be in Bali last year or in New Orleans circa 1950, than in a country home by a Russian lake one summer at the end of the 19th century.

Perhaps director Diana Leblanc wants to remind us that this classic endures through time. Well so it

does, but that doesn't necessarily mean it can exist out of time. At any rate, the setting would be a lot more convincing if the actors didn't look so lost in it. Some of them seem to be playing contemporary figures, others historical ones, but none of them offer much explanation as to who these people are.

Of course, *The Seagull*, with that clunky big bird as its ungainly symbol and its many self-conscious allusions to *Hamlet*, is not an easy play to stage. Young Konstantin (Michael Therriault) has cast his girlfriend Nina (Michelle Giroux) in his new play, which they are performing for his mother, the famed actress Irina Arkadina (Martha Henry) and her lover, the writer Trigorin (Peter Donaldson). The play's a bust; the melancholy Konstantin loses Nina to Trigorin, shoots a sea gull for her and then tries shooting himself. Played seriously this can seem ludicrous; played just for laughs, it's tasteless.

The trick, which the Shaw Festival managed with a production directed by Neil Munro back in 1997, is to expose the richness of the characters in all their folly, thus balancing the laughter and the tears. But at Stratford, the performances are often so shallow that good jokes fall flat; at Tuesday's opening matinee, actor Brian Tree entered the last act with a great big stuffed sea gull to a few bemused titters in the audience. Leblanc



Clockwise from bottom left, Michelle Bedford: relationship woes in never-

needs to tell us more firmly that this bird, for all that it embarrasses Trigorin by reminding him how he has destroyed Nina, is also grotesquely funny.

Henry, the leading lady cast as the leading lady, offers a cruel version of the self-absorbed Irina Arkadina, revelling in her selfishness. She's fun to watch, creating the

Chekhov's classic



CHRIS NICHOLLS

Giroux, Michael Therriault, Peter Donaldson, Martha Henry and Brian never land.

kind of character you love to hate, but never showing much of the woman's charm, which must surely be key to her manipulations. Still, it's a plausible reading of the role, as is Brian Bedford's spritely work as her aging brother Sorin, although his gentle comedy and English accent seem to belong in a much less modernized production.

Otherwise, the performances are narrow, occasionally offering comic promise — Rod Beattie's notion of the Pollyanna-like doctor Dorn as some affable country squire is amusing — but never probing the characters or achieving much drama. These are not complicated relationships after all — Nina and Trigorin are a May-December af-

fair, Konstantin suffers from the earnest self-righteousness of youth — but here they remain mysterious. Donaldson so stresses Trigorin's ennui, he all but removes the character from action and never shows any powers of seduction, while in the hands of Therriault and Giroux, Konstantin's melancholy and Nina's idealism appear as mere poses; they don't offer any sense of belief in their own ideas.

In previous productions of modern classics, whether it was *Long Day's Journey into Night* in 1995, *Death of a Salesman* in 1997 or Chekhov's own *Cherry Orchard* in 1998, Leblanc usually mined the script for detail, so that many lines rang clearer and truer than they would have in less capable hands. This time, Chekhov's blunt dialogue and aggressive symbolism seem to defeat her, as though she is not at all sure what someone might mean by saying, "I'm in mourning for my life" or "I'm the sea gull." (Her text is a recent translation by Tom Stoppard that shouldn't cause any trouble.) Now, all kinds of improbabilities, invisible in most productions, arise. Why would a fledging playwright let his stage hands go for a swim moments before the curtain is supposed to rise? What kind of woman sits down to play a parlour game the second she walks through the door from picking up her lover at the train station? These and much more important questions go unanswered in this little lost *Seagull*.

To Nov. 3 in Stratford, Ont.;
1-800-567-1600.

THEATRE REVIEW

Stratford Seagull lays an egg

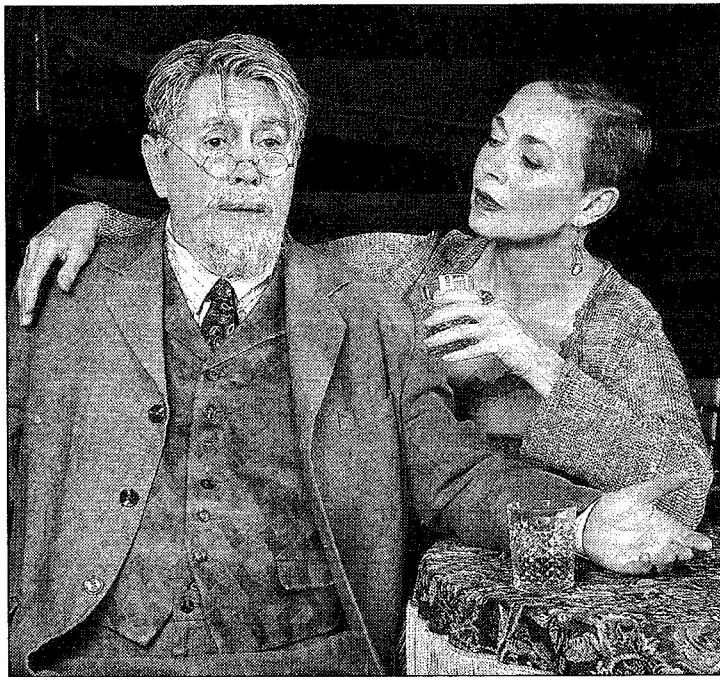
BY JAMIE PORTMAN
Stratford

The Stratford Festival's new production of *The Seagull* is dedicated to the unfortunate proposition that nuance, subtlety and subtext are of little importance when staging the plays of Anton Chekhov.

To be sure, director Diana Leblanc shows some awareness that the playwright labelled this work "a comedy" and that there are supposed to be elements of both farce and pathos in a stage piece where a remote country estate becomes a tragicomic metaphor for human failure and spiritual isolation.

Regrettably, the production which arrived this week at the Avon Theatre prefers the shallow depths. It seems reasonable to point out that alternating dosages of sitcom and soap operatics tend to trivialize Chekhov's true intentions.

To be sure, there are a few moments of gold among the per-



V. TONY HAUSER

Brian Bedford as Sorin, here with Martha Henry as Irina Arkadina, provided the Stratford Festival production of *The Seagull* with its only real triumph.

To be sure, there are a few nuggets of gold among the performances. Michael Therriault brings some emotional truth to his portrayal of Konstantin, the young writer who yearns to be a great playwright only to find his earnest but pretentious effort mocked when he stages it before his insensitive actress mother, Arkadina (Martha Henry).

It is a typically Chekhovian device to offer a character who is endearing in his very absurdity. Therriault understands the needs of the role: the self pity remains part of this Konstantin's nature even after he attains a sort of success, but so do the ravaged dignity and tragicomic despair which lead finally to the famous gunshot in the night.

But let's face it: the production's only real triumph belongs to Brian Bedford, nodding his life away as Konstantin's aging uncle, Sorin. It is the most complete Chekhovian performance of the evening: an old man contemplating the unfulfilled dreamscape of his past life with a rueful "if only" sense of failure. Bedford's performance, meticulously understated though it may seem, carries enough authority to bring a whole world onto the Avon Theatre stage — a late 19th-century world of a remote Russian provincial estate in all its isolation and purposelessness.

Regrettably, this world is not supported elsewhere in the production. Tom Stoppard's serviceable translation is not at fault, but the physical look of the show is a major offender. Astrid Jensen's set design is a mish-mash of pretentious expressionism: a door without walls looms up like a page from an Ikea or Home Depot catalogue; layer upon layer of hammock-shaped silk fills the background in an attempt to denote the sea but still ends up looking like layer upon layer of hammock-shaped silk.

The costumes further transport us away from 19th-century Russia, ranging from the bizarre deco decadence of Martha Henry's outfit (is she by any chance dressed for a

only real triumph.

masquerade ball?) to the flimsy frocks affected by Michelle Giroux in the role of Nina, the aristocrat's daughter who is the object of Konstantin's yearning. The festival advises that the actors are supposed to be doing the play in rehearsal clothes; in this instance the device adds up to pointless affectation.

There's little evidence that either Leblanc or the majority of her performers stopped and asked themselves what *The Seagull* is really about — virtually every character is emotionally isolated and tormented by failure — and why it is such a challenge to bring off. Consequently, this production shows little awareness of subtext or of how important the most minute and seemingly insignificant detail can be in giving substance to the play's concerns.

As Nina, Giroux offers no satisfactory indication as to why the doomed Konstantin should be so smitten with her. Rather, she's more like an earnest schoolgirl trying out for the role of Anne of Green Gables. In the key role of Trigorin, the successful novelist who is Arkadina's lover and later the man who seduces Nina and then casts her aside, Peter Donaldson fails to convey the char-

acter's frayed but still potent charisma. Neither does he convey any sense of the second-rate intellect lurking beneath the bogus exterior. Rod Beattie is no more than perfunctory in the role of Dr. Dorn, a character who is in many ways the all-seeing chorus to the proceedings.

Finally, there is Henry's disconcerting approach to Arkadina. Henry seems to assume that because she is playing an actress, it is enough to deliver a bundle of mannerisms and present her as someone who is constantly giving a performance. Henry does capture Arkadina's maddening self-absorption; she captures nothing of the mercurial personality which makes Arkadina, for all her flaws, one of the fascinating characters in dramatic literature. She fails signally to convey anything of this woman's inner life or of her devotion to her art (which is very real) or fear of failure and decay. The portrayal is full of flounces and sweeping gestures, of meaningless declamations to an invisible gallery. It is all hollow posturing, the type of "acting" in which every line of dialogue becomes a strident pronouncement. Sorry, but this *Seagull* lays an egg.