

## Review:

## "the seagull"

reviewed by brook stowe

When Anton Chekhov trudged dejectedly into the frigid St. Petersburg night following the disastrous 1896 opening of his play, *The Seagull*, he had no way yet of knowing that far from being a "flop," the derisive initial response to his new work was in fact the first difficult birth pangs of the modern drama. Chekhov's provincial premiere audience guffawed at *Seagull's* prescient preview of 20th-Century avant-garde theater -- later manifested in both the Russian Symbolist and German Expressionist movements -- and recoiled in confused dismay at the audacity of a playwright who would dare call any work ending in the violent suicide of a major character a "comedy." But even as *Seagull's* tortured young writer Konstantin struggled to find "new forms" of writing to overthrow the calcified pomposity of contemporary Russian theater, so *The Seagull* struggled to carve out a new type of theater for the coming new century. One hundred-plus years later, New York City's Roundtable Ensemble has contemporized Chekhov's play with a radiantly effervescent new staging that is both attuned to modern sensibilities (and attention spans) and scrupulously faithful to the original. Working from director Michael Barakiva's seamlessly streamlined adaptation, this *Seagull* soars across all four acts in less than 2-1/2 hours, including intermission. This is top-drawer theater from start to finish, and an auspicious opening to Roundtable's fifth season. A tightly interwoven elegy to the symbiotic passions of love and art, art and love, this first of Chekhov's four major plays sets forth familiar themes -- the crumbling rural estate far from the bright lights of Moscow, the aimless characters sinking slowly into the morass of their own wistful *ennui*,

and -- always -- love: passionate, histrionic, tragic, vaudevillian; ultimately unrequited and unsatisfying.

In Roundtable's staging, it is perhaps director Barakiva's foremost, overarching achievement that he presents a thoroughly credible sense of *family* with his strong, charismatic cast. Much like the original Moscow Arts Theatre of Chekhov's time, Barakiva's ensemble truly looks as though it has spent years fighting, laughing, bickering, swooning, eating, fucking, deceiving, crying, lying and cherishing one another.

There is nary a sour note nor weak link in the entire cast of twelve. Linchpins are Barbara Garrick's stridently insecure Arkadina, whom Chekhov himself described as a "foolish, mendacious, self-admiring egoist." Garrick's reluctant mother to a grown son gives us all of this, along with the poignancy of a woman who rightly senses her best years are behind her and there will be no getting them back. As Trigorin, the celebrity scribe women fawn over and men envy, Saxon Palmer maintains a tenuous balance between glib acceptance of his fame and utter self-loathing. As the snuff-scarfing, perpetually brooding Masha, Kelly Hutchinson effectively conveys the languid tragedy of the comically self-absorbed. With her oddly contemporary eyeglasses and relentlessly dour black ensemble (and beautifully resonant voice), Hutchinson's Masha is convincingly all-parts bored, save her vodka-chugging moments of aching longing for the oblivious Konstantin.

As Konstantin, David Barlow's portrayal matures well, though his Oedipal histrionics regarding Mom at times push the envelope of

tolerance. As the unobtainable love of his life, Maria Thayer's Nina makes a fetching young ingenue, if perhaps not (yet) kicked around enough by life to wring all the later tragedy Chekhov provides this role. Supporting roles are strong and specific throughout, with Jerry Matz's gently deteriorating Sorin and David A. Green's bombastic oaf Shamrayev standouts. Oana Botez Ban's gorgeous primary-color costumes play beautifully against Mimi Lien's monochromatic, rough-hewn set. Ryan Rumery's original, hauntingly melancholy score complements all. A lifelong fan of the vaudeville, Chekhov saw his "comedies" not in the broad, slapstick sense of that which amused him personally, but rather in the greater, sadder comedy of human existence, that which flails about feebly in the vast void of eternal chaos -- insignificant, inconsequential, yet, at the same time, absolutely everything, because it is all we have. *The Seagull* was Chekhov's early attempt to advance not only the complexities of the human condition, but how they might be freshly represented as well in a dramatic form he had come to find exasperatingly static, bloated and obsolete.

In the end Chekhov found, much like his young writer Konstantin, that it is not the external that really matters, but what is inside. "More and more I think it is not a question of new forms or old forms," Konstantin realizes late in the play. "What matters is to allow what you write to come straight from the heart. This Roundtable production of *The Seagull* comes straight from the heart.

