

## You've Got to Laugh, Haven't You?

by Jennifer Ernst

**The Seagull** reviewed January 13, 2005

There is a Russian proverb, so I am told, that says, "There is no evil without any good." Or, as the opening monologue of the BBC sci-fi show *Red Dwarf* once had it, "As the days go by, we face the increasing inevitability that we are alone in a godless, uninhabited, hostile, and meaningless universe. Still, you've got to laugh, haven't you?"

In director Michael Barakiva's new adaptation of Anton Chekhov's classic *The Seagull*, you do have to laugh, no matter how hostile and lonely the universe is. The characters in the play, set on a country estate in Russia in the summer of 1895, and then two years into a darker future, haven't got a lot to smile about. Loves (both romantic and familial) are unrequited, aspirations are dashed, hopes are extinguished. Life is grim; death is grimmer. It's terribly sad, but it's very, very funny.

A famous actress, Arkadina (Barbara Garrick), and her lover, her son, and her son's beloved are spending a summer together. Konstantin (David Barlow), the son, has written a play inspired by his love for local nymphet and wannabe actress Nina (Maria Thayer), a new kind of theater, according to him, and pretentious avant-garde pomposity, according to Arkadina.

Drunk on artistic longing and unfulfilled love, he careers around in a turquoise silk tunic and a crimson sash, frantically competing with his mother and resenting Trigorin (Saxon Palmer), Arkadina's younger live-in lover, a famous author. Trigorin finds himself attracted by Nina's freshness and vulnerability, driving



Konstantin almost insane with jealousy. As the summer wears on, stakes are raised and actions are taken that will forever change all of their lives.

The cast Barakiva has assembled is wonderful, playing both the comedy and the pathos of the situation without resorting to either slapstick or bathos. Garrick, as the megalomaniac Arkadina, is brittle and narcissistic, but so charismatic. Even when she is being monstrous, she is utterly compelling. Barlow and Thayer are both heartbreaking as their

characters watch their summer of promise turn into a fruitless winter.

Kelly Hutchinson, all in black with her tiny face dominated by enormous eyeglasses, steals her scenes as the tragic and morbid Masha, who just can't rip her love for Konstantin out of her heart. Collapsed in a heap on the dusty floor or draped over a chair, she is every sardonic teenage girl whose intelligence has outstripped her emotional growth. Drinking vodka and despairing, Hutchinson delivers some of the play's funniest lines in a husky, deadpan voice. After Medvedenko (Garrett Neergaard), the hapless schoolteacher, professes his love, she takes a pinch of snuff and says, with devastating sincerity, "I know how much you love me. It's touching. I just don't love you back. In the least. That's all."

Barakiva's adaptation and his direction polish the sharp edges of Chekhov's comedic sensibility, presenting a play that cuts you to the quick even as you laugh. And even after the events move inexorably toward their fated conclusion, when, finally, it seems that despair is the final answer, the devastating ending makes us smile, wryly, at the absurdity of it all.

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