

OFF BROADWAY

Not Your Grandma's Theatre

The Seagull, Theatre Review by Lindsey Wilson

That *Seagull* was a one rollicking good time. What's that, you say? *The Seagull* is a darkly spun tale of the domestic destructiveness among Russian citizens in the late 19th century, surely not an example of high hilarity, right? In the case of Michael Barakiva's adaptation currently playing at the Blue Heron Arts Center, I would argue for the play's comedic potential, not to mention the ruthless spin that particular genre is able to put on Chekhov's classic.

The moments of severe sobriety that are spliced between the laughter at first appear too jarring; the characters' subdued reactions to the shattering exploits of one another seem false and unbelievable. However, the more these unbelievable occurrences crop up, the hidden drive in Barakiva's purpose becomes brilliantly clear. For people who lay around griping about their chronic boredom and listless country lives, any unforeseen interruption could seriously threaten their patterns of non-action. By remedying these cries for attention with cutting honesty and nasty selfishness, Chekhov's characters are in turn protecting their own fragile existences. The inability to reach beyond their own barriers and actually connect with one another is what drives them to biting sarcasm and witty insults, forever blockading their true insecurities. With that in mind, director Barakiva's concept of "focusing on the comedy found in everyday life" provides a welcome respite from the gloomy interior of Chekhov's world and serves to heighten the tragedy that eventually befalls these people.

One of the achievements of this production is the gloriously flexible set designed by Mimi Lien. More or less an oversized playground for these oversized children, the opening layout displays a sense of whimsy with its skillfully employed see-saw and real-furniture swing set. The implied sense of being off-balance penetrates the characters' movements, but never hampers their deep-seated urge to escape from the country and leap into magnificent lives of freedom. With the next scene, the playground has transformed into a more concrete setting, taking with it the idealistic expectations established and ruined by the end of the first scene. Just as Masha repeatedly declares she must rip her love for Konstantin from her heart by the roots, but cannot, the organic debris that covers the stage sticks to the actors and glues them to this spot of languorous mutilation. Endlessly transformable, Lien's concepts do an excellent job of furthering the unpredictable route *The Seagull* travels on.

Likewise, the original music and sound design of Ryan Rumery produces an astonishing effect by guiding the audience along with the characters, but also hinting ever so slightly at the impending disasters with appropriate audible friction. Costume designer Oana Botez-Ban's clothing is workable if not a tad mismatched, and Nick Francone's lighting makes excellent use of sharp shadows to highlight the sudden twists in direction. As for the performances, *The Seagull* assembles one of the best ensemble casts I have witnessed in a long time. Each performer commands their time onstage with impressive force and precise comic timing, managing to complete the quest for finding comedy the midst of tragedy. Especially notable are Kelly Hutchinson as the morose and lovesick Masha, Garrett Neergaard as her doting and oft-ignored suitor, Medvedenko the school teacher, and Maria Thayer as the Seagull itself, the tragic ingénue Nina. I was slightly perplexed by Jerry Matz (Sorin) and Linda Marie Larson (Paulina), two natural comic performers who do their best to instill some interest into their secondary characters but instead emerge as though from a modern-day sitcom; extremely entertaining to watch, but out of synch with the rest of the cast. The one performance that left me wanting much, much more was that of Barbara Garrick as Arkadina. As confusing as this concept sounds at first suggestion, exposing the frustrating and often agonizing comedy that surfaces in the minor details of day to day life lends a remarkable hand to framing the ultimate grotesque act committed in the finale. Proffering bits of the absurdism of Samuel Beckett while remaining true to the realistic overtures of Chekhov, *The Seagull* presented here has nothing better to do than soar.

