

October 3, 2008

THEATER REVIEW | 'THE SEAGULL'

## Thwarted Souls' Broken Wings

By [BEN BRANTLEY](#)

Silence is never empty in Ian Rickson's magnificent production of "The Seagull," which opened Thursday night at the Walter Kerr Theater. When a hush descends on Chekhov's restless country estate dwellers — as it often does, abrupt and unbidden — the air remains alive with crosscurrents of thought, clashing chords of longing and the steady thrum of time passing. Brought to life by a superlative ensemble led by [Kristin Scott Thomas](#), the thwarted souls of "The Seagull" are as self-revealing in frozen speechlessness as they are in frantic flights of conversation.

The careful cultivation of such transparency, to the point that we feel instinctively tuned into the minds of every individual onstage, helps to make this "Seagull" the finest and most fully involving production of Chekhov that I have ever known. The seeming contradictions of tone and character that have sent many a great theatrical artist stumbling into confusion here achieve a cohesiveness that sacrifices neither clarity nor complexity. It is, to make honest use of the language of hucksters, a limited, once-in-a-lifetime offer, as the show runs only through Dec. 21.

"The Seagull" was Mr. Rickson's valedictory production as artistic director of the Royal Court Theater, and when I saw it there last year, I couldn't imagine its being much better and worried about this delicate plant's thriving in a Broadway barn. I arrived at the Walter Kerr as braced for disappointment as any of Chekhov's inveterate losers.

Yet this "Seagull" has only ripened and deepened. The American additions to the cast, who include the film actor [Peter Sarsgaard](#) and the fast-rising [Zoe Kazan](#), create characters who are both as cozily and as uncomfortably a part of the play's extended clan as family members should be. And Ms. Scott Thomas, who was excellent as the aging actress Arkadina in London, here delivers a magnified, intensified performance that more than ever is the keystone to understanding this play.

Let me hasten to add that Ms. Scott Thomas — though her status as a shrewd, chic presence in films like "The English Patient" and "Gosford Park" makes her the most famous of the cast — does not dominate the proceedings. The vain, applause-addicted Arkadina may live life as an unrelenting star turn, but when it comes to acting, a Chekhov play must be a society of equals. If you leave a production thinking only of one person (with that person being, say, [Judi Dench](#), [Ian McKellen](#) or [Meryl Streep](#)), then the show hasn't done its job.

As willfully idiosyncratic as Chekhov's characters are, they are all cut from the same nubby cloth of exasperated loneliness and misfired intentions. Chekhov's work sees the human condition as an exercise in frustration that is both comic ("Ha! They can't get what they want") and tragic ("Sob! They can never get

what they want"). And he works both sides of that equation more successfully than any playwright.

The setting of "The Seagull" — the lakeside estate on which Sorin (Peter Wight), Arkadina's ailing older brother, lives with her grown son, Konstantin (Mackenzie Crook) — is a Petri dish in which frustration mutates and multiplies. "O, is there anything more boring than this pure country boredom?" says Arkadina, who stays there with her lover, Trigorin (Mr. Sarsgaard), a fashionable fiction writer, between theatrical engagements.

Being bored allows Arkadina and company plenty of time to consider their unsatisfactory relationships with one another. Shall I refresh your memory on the chain of entanglements here? There's the aspiring young actress, Nina (Carey Mulligan), who is loved by Konstantin but falls for Trigorin; the vodka-swigging Masha (Ms. Kazan), who loves Konstantin and is loved by the schoolteacher, Medvedenko (Pearce Quigley); and Masha's father, Shamrayev (Julian Gamble), the estate's steward, who is married to Polina (Ann Dowd), who loves the dapper neighborhood doctor, Dorn (Art Malik).

Communication does not come easily to these thin-skinned time markers. Mr. Rickson insightfully elicits this difficulty on a number of levels, starting with the linguistic. "The Seagull" classically includes the angry reflections of Konstantin on the "need for new forms" and the inadequacy of conventional theater and fiction. Here that sense of inadequacy is translated into every word uttered. ([Christopher Hampton's](#) blunt-spoken but sharp-witted translation is the perfect starting point for Mr. Rickson's interpretation.)

The interruption of Konstantin's avant-garde play, performed by Nina in the opening scene, becomes a presiding metaphor for everyone's inability to connect. Conversations are invariably interrupted at crucial moments, shapely epigrams punctured in midsentence and love scenes rendered ludicrous by the unwelcome arrival of a third party.

People speak fitfully and awkwardly in this "Seagull" until they erupt — and how they erupt — in irritation with their own clumsiness and unspoken resentments. (Compare the mixtures of passivity and aggression in Mr. Gamble, Ms. Dowd and Mr. Quigley.) And watch for those moments of heartbreakingly graceless physical contact, where helping arms and caressing hands are shaken off as if they were flies.

The sad thing is that they all want so badly to be understood. They constantly jostle for one another's attention, the implication being that if they aren't acknowledged by others, they may not really exist. That's why they keep humming and singing at inappropriate moments, and why Arkadina, worried that her siren's powers are on the wane, keeps shoving her way into the spotlight.

Ms. Scott Thomas's performance is funnier, sadder and braver than it was in London. Arkadina's fears of fading away assume an almost clownish aspect as she scampers coquettishly to show she could play a girl of 15 or literally grovels in self-abasement before Trigorin. Striking grandly theatrical postures from the age of Duse and Bernhardt, this Arkadina knows that the only way to get attention in life is to be larger than life. Ms. Scott Thomas draws her with a vividness that is equally free of mercy and malice.

The same can be said of the whole cast, which turns loneliness and restlessness into a stuttering pyrotechnic display that provides the color against Hildegard Bechtler's artfully stark set. These characters may be losers, but they're not limp. Mr. Crook's palpably intelligent, fiery-eyed Konstantin doesn't collapse into fatal

sadness; he self-combusts from stymied passion.

Mr. Wight's invalid Sorin evokes the pathetically willing spirit within the weak flesh, while Mr. Malik conveys both the cruelty and compassion in Dorn's willed detachment. Ms. Kazan, who just gets better with every performance, tastily brings out the self-lacerating perversity in Masha's defeatism.

With sly brilliance Mr. Sarsgaard presents Trigorin as an awkward, reticent man transformed by a worshipful public into a closely watched dandy. Power has, in a sense, been thrust upon him, and he exercises it with a passivity that is equal parts purring smugness and self-contempt.

Ms. Mulligan's delectably dewy but determined Nina is just the girl to rouse him from his lethargy. More than any actress I've seen, she captures the raw hunger within Nina's ambition, the ravening vitality as well the vulnerability. This is no mere fluttery sacrificial seagull. There's a reason that the mother-fixated Konstantin falls in love with her.

Despite the solipsism shared by everyone in this "Seagull," you don't doubt that they care for one another, that even that archnarcissist Arkadina loves her son and brother. This in turn makes us care when the tone shades to black in the final act.

Throughout the play death has insinuated its presence in a whisper, whenever someone falls down or a shot is heard. Everyone laughs in nervous relief after such episodes. There comes a point when someone falls down and doesn't get up. What was funny isn't funny anymore. This beautiful production makes that transition with the devastating stealth of life itself.

## THE SEAGULL

By [Anton Chekhov](#); new version by [Christopher Hampton](#); directed by Ian Rickson; sets and costumes by Hildegard Bechtler; lighting by Peter Mumford; sound by Ian Dickinson; music by Stephen Warbeck; production stage manager, Arthur Gaffin; production manager, Aurora Productions; associate producer, Tim Levy; general managers, Stuart Thompson Productions/David Turner and Sonia Friedman Productions. A Royal Court Theater production, presented by Sonia Friedman Productions, Bob Boyett, Robert G. Bartner, Dede Harris, Norman and Steven Tulchin, Fox Theatricals, Dena Hammerstein, Sharon Karmazin, Olympus Theatricals, Spring Sirkin, Tara Smith, Morton Swinsky, Karl Sydow, the Weinstein Company, Falkenstein/Deroy, Florin/Hirschhorn and Gutterman/McGinnis. At the Walter Kerr Theater, 219 West 48th Street, Manhattan; (212) 239-6200. Through Dec. 21. Running time: 2 hours 40 minutes.

WITH: [Kristin Scott Thomas](#) (Arkadina), Peter Sarsgaard (Trigorin), Mackenzie Crook (Konstantin), Art Malik (Dorn), Carey Mulligan (Nina), Pearce Quigley (Medvedenko), Peter Wight (Sorin), [Zoe Kazan](#) (Masha), Ann Dowd (Polina), Julian Gamble (Shamrayev), Christopher Patrick Nolan (Yakov), Mary Rose (Housemaid) and Mark Montgomery (Cook).

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