

The Seagull By Anton Chekhov

The historical context of *The Seagull* is late 19th century Russia, teetering on the brink of massive social change. Within twenty years the Tzar would be dead and a revolution would create the world's first Communist country. Radical groups were being formed against the Imperial State and the harsh conditions in factories.

Additionally, in 1890, Chekhov, knew that he was dying from TB and there is a unique mood that overshadows *The Seagull*. It is infused with melancholy, originating in the haplessness of the characters whose destiny is to either wallow in self-pity or indifference, or consume themselves in thwarted passion.



Chekhov reading 'The Seagull' to the cast

It is these plays, with their snapshots of frustrations of the everyday, that has continued to enthrall audiences over the years. *The Seagull* explores the human tendency to reject love that is freely given and seek it where it is not offered. Many of the characters are caught in destructive, triangular relationships that evoke both pity and humour. We are asked to ponder if this is self-afflicted or engraved upon our human nature? Our hope is that time will resolve these issues. But, in Act 4, Chekhov delivers a coup de grâce showing us the same picture 2 years later and the reality and trappings of time, which robs some, like Madame Arkadina, of beauty, and others, like her son (and perhaps the audience) Konstantin, of hope.

With these themes under discussion, it is not surprising that, when first staged, in St. Petersburg in 1896, it was very badly received. The audience were seemingly not ready to accept a work that challenged almost all contemporary dramatic conventions. Devastated, Chekhov actually walked out during the second act saying that even he lived for another seven hundred years he would not write for the theatre again!

The Seagull is a wonderfully rich tale of passionate love, unrequited love, ambition and thwarted ambition, but it also has some very funny moments. Laughter and tears are mixed into a complex blend, which reflects the absurdity and tragic consequences of conflicting needs.

Certainly, the end is tragic, but there are also comic moments, which we must be explored. We must not feel powerless to explore this Tragic-Comic play and it is often all too easy to become trapped in a narrow definition of Tragedy or Naturalism at the expense of other dramatic genres.

The History of The Seagull and the MAT (Moscow Art Theatre)



Fortunately, Chekhov's friend, Nemirovich-Danchenko took an interest in *The Seagull* despite its initial failure. In 1898 Nemirovich-Danchenko and his more famous co-director of the Moscow Art Theatre, Stanislavski, revived *The Seagull* to great acclaim, and indeed the same theatre would go on to produce all of Chekhov's later work. The production was a great success, although Chekhov himself was critical of some of Stanislavski's methods.

He felt that Stanislavski's approach to the set design was so over-detailed that it left little to the imagination. One of the problems of the naturalistic approach was that it could seem to smother the real – the Realistic essence of the work – with Naturalistic detail.

Checkov once asked why there would be dragon-flies and dogs barking off stage. 'Because it's realistic' an actor replied. 'Realistic! There's a painting by Kramskoy. What would happen if you cut the nose out of one of those paintings and substituted a real one? The nose would be 'realistic' but the picture would be ruined'.

Whilst Checkov may have had reservations about the role of complete Naturalism in his plays, The MAT continued to explore and place emphasis upon subtext, the underlying thoughts and feelings that lay beneath what characters actually said (or didn't say). This method had been carried out with great success and Simov and Stanislavski had made a reputation about presenting productions that were built around historical research, authenticity, rigorous planning and execution of the mise-en-scene, careful attention to detail and designs that responded to the thematic structures of a given play. They did just this with *The Seagull* as illustrated by these notes made by Stanislavski to accompany the Act I conversation between Treplev and Sorin:

1) *Leans over, picks a flower and tells his fortune with the petals.*

2) *Sits facing the audience and nervously pulls at the grass. Smokes. Treplev gets more and more worked up, his speech becomes broken and faster.*

3) *In annoyance he slaps his leg, gets up and leans toward Sorin trying to convince him. Even pounds his chest in excitement.*

4) *Having waved his hand he climbs over the board of the swing and nervously walks around the terrace. A pause of about 5 seconds. Having walked around, Treplev calms down, comes back to his earlier spot, looks at his watch, and sits down straddling the bench.*



In 1896, the play opened to great success and Nemirovich described the applause, which came after a prolonged silence, as *bursting from the audience like a dam breaking*. The production received unanimous praise from the press and The Moscow Art Theatre to this day bears the seagull as its emblem to commemorate the historic production that gave it its identity.