

On "The Seagull" by Anton Chekhov

Roy Lisker

The translation used for most of the quotations in this essay, is that of Milton Ehre in *Chekhov For The Stage* ; Northwestern University Press 1992, pages 17-70

Introduction

The preparation of a production based on a coherent interpretation of Anton Chekhov's play *The Seagull* quickly runs into numerous difficulties. Failed productions are frequent, perhaps the rule rather than the exception: Ambiguities, large and small, abound. Many of them must be left to stand as they are, unresolved. All proposed "solutions" are readily disputed:

Is Nina victorious or ruined at the end? Does Constantine Treplev have to commit suicide, or is this perhaps an after-thought, (on the part of the author or the character?)? Is Arkadina a serious or merely a fashionable actress? Is she or is she not past her prime? Is Dorn still a womanizer? Is he perhaps Masha's father? Sorin's steady progression towards death can almost be seen as a form of exhibitionism; so why is he still alive when the curtain comes down? Should the 'intellectual content' of Treplev's juvenile theatrical that opens Act I be taken seriously? Ignored? Ridiculed?

*Does the "seagull" stand for anything? Or for too many things? Is the play a comedy or a tragedy? Generally speaking, is this accumulation of ambiguities part of the author's intention, or evidence of his inexperience as a playwright? : *The Seagull* was the very first of his great plays, a bold experiment into new territory. And many more.*

It is not the characterizations themselves which are problematic. The “personalities” of the principals are basic, simple, often on the verge of descending into caricature: the buffoonery of Shamrayev; the vanity of Arkadina, (traits that are brought bristling to the fore during their ridiculous quarrel in Act II); the stupidity of Medvedenko; the alcoholism of Masha.

What gives the play depth, what rescues it from being another light-hearted farce of the sort that Chekhov had composed up until then, is the inversion of its structure onto itself. The *Seagull* is a play *about* theatre, as much as it is a play being performed *in* a theater (*Note the difference in spelling*). By virtue of the “play within a play” that initiates it, *The Seagull* sets up an infinite regress, a play (about a play (about a play (within a play (about a play (within a..... on theatre (about theatre (on theatre (about)))) ! Within the conventional elements, both comic and tragic, one finds a deeper human dimension, derived from the relationship of theatre to life.

This reflective imagery is set into motion from its opening: a “play within a play”, an embarrassingly amateur pageant provides the introduction to Chekhov’s more professional comedy/tragedy. The device is brilliant: the consonances and dissonances of the imaginations of the principal characters, contrasted with Chekhov’ sobering realism, sets into bold relief *The Seagull*’s basic themes of art, ambition, idealism and disillusion.

The composition of *The Seagull* came at the culmination of the decades in which Chekhov established his place among the great short story writers of the 19th century: Chekhov, Bunin, Gorki, Maupassant, Hawthorne, James, Harte, Poe, Stevenson, Villiers de l’isle Adam, and others. His background therefore did not predispose him to script a

representation of abstract philosophical ideas, the kind of thing he ridicules in Constantine's opus magnum. *The Seagull* is first and foremost about people, their behavior, their psychology, their frailties. Paradoxically, they are of interest to us through the sheer diversity of their ways of being bored with life. Yet through it is through these characters that Chekhov expounds upon his own ideas about life, art and destiny, and even politics, ideas every bit as abstract and "metaphysical" as those portrayed in Constantine's play. As members of the audience of *The Seagull*, we are permanently stranded in its hall of mirrors, we are never dealing with just a person, or his or her image, or with the many reflections of their images.

Superficially the play's narrative line is laid out through an assortment of standard devices: the linked chain of hopeless love attachments (a theatrical commonplace, almost a cliché, of which the paradigm is Shakespeare's "*Midsummer's Night's Dream*"); the ludicrous vanity of an aging actress, in competition with the innocent ingenue; the gallery of fools (*not excessive in The Seagull, overdone in The Cherry Orchard*); the disastrous play-within-a-play; birds as symbols of both menace and liberty; the terminal pistol shot. While supplying the framework to the play they also function as self-parodies. This mixture of comic and serious drama is unique to *The Seagull* ; like a parade of antiquated automobiles, its self-disparaging devices transport a drama in turns comic and tragic, yet over-shadowed by the unsentimental realism of its author to its inevitable (anti!)-climax. Chekhov's celebrated warning to Stanislavski, that *The Seagull* is a "comedy" has multiple meanings: the veneer of farce covers over both tragedy and compassion, both judgment and reflection.

The Characterizations

How the characters present themselves in Act I is more or less how they will remain throughout the rest of the play. Nina, it is true, changes from a naïve, idealistic young woman to an over-worked actress who feels rejected in love and on the verge of a nervous breakdown. One can look upon this transformation as an inevitable consequence of attitudes revealed in Act I, rather than some new revelation of character. As for Constantine's suicide, he keeps trying to commit suicide all through the play; he just happens to succeed in the end.

It is also a feature of *The Seagull* that, with one exception, all the principals are hanging about on Sorin's estate in every act, and show up on stage at least once. The notable exception is the absence of Dorn in Act III. Yet even he is present *in absentia*: he is simply late for an appointment to change Constantine's head bandage.

Various explanations suggest themselves to explain Dorn's tardiness, the most likely being that he convinced himself that Constantine's suicide attempt was not serious; it's hard to get Dorn to take anything seriously. The other possibility is that Dorn is in bed with a mistress, Paulina for example. His salad days may be over, but roués have a way of going on long past their prime.

Arkadina

Arkadina, the queen mother, has little else to occupy her mind other than the fear that she is no longer the fashionable actress of past decades. She has not lost all her magic: the students in Kharkov (*evoked in the final scene of Act IV*) can still be so carried away by enthusiasm that they unhitch the horses from her coach and carry her aloft on their shoulders. It is remarkable enough that at age 43, in a poor country like Russia where

medicine must have been quite backward relative to Europe, she still has the power to captivate audiences.

This account of her triumph in Kharkov, which Arkadina relates at the game of lotto in Act IV, appears to be more of a commentary on the provincialism of a college town (*relative to Moscow or St Petersburg*) than an acknowledgement of her durability: it is as if Chekhov were conceding that “in a place like Kharkov, even a tired old actress can make a splash!”.

The recognition, or simply the fear, of her inevitable decline pushes her vanity, insufferable in the best of times and charming only in small doses, to ridiculous heights.

To humiliate the alcoholic self-loathing Masha , whom her own son has rejected with such finality that one can't even consider him callous, Arkadina struts about on the lawn, flapping her arms (like a seagull?) informing the infatuated Dr. Dorn that she is as fit a girl of 15. She flies into a rage at her brother's timid suggestion that she might be a trifle stingy: her stage dresses alone , she cries, cost so much that she can't spare a ruble of the 70,000 stashed in her bank in Odessa to buy her son a new suit. Yet, within a few minutes of calling her son a beggar, she grovels shamelessly, abasing herself as low as any beggar whining for baksheesh, at the feet of the famous writer, Trigorin, to maintain the illusion that she can still be loved by an idol of the reading public. Note that her tactic does work: she does, temporarily, drag him away, though she will have to take her place alongside his line-up of concubines, including his latest flame, a cute young thing who also aspires to be an actress.

Chekhov wants us to believe that Arkadina loves her son, although her love tends to express itself mainly in terms of her guilt for treating him badly. This is combined with all sorts of petty jealousies which lead her to inflict serious damage on his attempts to make

something of himself: a simplistic interpretation of *The Seagull* might suggest that this is what finally drives him to suicide. However what drives him to it is Chekhov, who uses the suicide to make a statement, and arranges it for its dramatic effectiveness. As pointed out in a later section, all the characters have good reasons for killing themselves, but it is Constantine who actually does it.

Arkadina will only learn about her son's successful suicide when the curtain comes down. Like Hjalmar Ekdal in *The Wild Duck* one suspects that she is not going to change her ways. The classic stichomythia of Act III brings this out:

Arkadina: You're jealous. People with pretensions instead of talent can only denigrate real talent. Small comfort in that!

Treplev (ironically): If it comes to that, I'm more talented than the lot of you lumped together! (Tears the bandage from his head) You hacks with your shop-worn conventions have seized the upper hand in the arts...

Arkadina: You're incapable of writing even a second-rate vaudeville sketch. All you are is a petty bourgeois from Kiev! Parasite!

Treplev: Miser!

Arkadina: Brat! (Some translations say "Beggar"!)

It is unfortunate that the presence of Constantine clashes at almost every turn with Arkadina's fear of growing old. His youth, his wild energy, his imagination, are like thorns in a heart already too prone to envy. Even his mere existence serves as a constant reminder to her imagined admirers that she is a middle-aged mother and not an adolescent ingenue. Thus she ruthlessly keeps him grounded on this isolated estate in the Ukraine, denies him the money, even the clothing he needs to cut an acceptable figure in society, and openly ridicules his productions in public. His dependency is actually less of a problem to her: does it not

clearly demonstrate to the world that he's worthless? In Act III, talking with her brother Sorin about her son, Arkadina drops her pretense of tolerance and understanding in a sudden outburst:

Arkadina: Oh, what a burden he is! (Pondering) Maybe he should go into the civil service ...

Trigorin

Trigorin delivers a long speech in Act II that tells us the kind of compulsive writer he is: someone unable to resist the temptation to reel off clever plots tied to the observation of petty details. The inspirations that animate his fictions never go beyond whimsies and can hardly be accorded the status of substantial thoughts: even his insensitive recounting to Nina of a "clever" plot linking the death of a seagull to the ruin of a young maiden is a plagiarism on an archaic legend, most recently restated in the quasi-play of Pushkin, familiar to all literate Russians of his time, "Rusalka", or "The Water Nymph". A writer who must resort to cribbing the plots of Pushkin for his ideas cannot be considered fertile in imagination. The disparaging judgments on Trigorin's competence are put to comic effect by Chekhov in several places. Talking to Sorin about Trigorin's worth as a writer, Constantine says:

Treplev: What can I say? Charming, talented ... but ... after Tolstoy and Zola you don't want to read Trigorin.

Trigorin's own appraisal of himself is little better:

Trigorin: And people read it and say: "Yes, charming, clever .. Charming, but a far cry from Tolstoy" (...) And when I die my friends will pass my grave and say: "Here lies Trigorin. Not a bad writer, but Turgenev was better."

Trigorin's working methods reflect his personal relations. He is too easily distracted, too readily fascinated by a detail: the dead seagull, the amount of fish in the lake, Nina's

girlish charm, Masha's black dress. He notes it all down, builds a story around it, sends it off, then promptly forgets all about it. The very seagull that prompted him to jot down the story of his (predictable) treatment of Nina, sits unrecognized, clasped in his hand at the very moment when a 'living seagull' rushes from the adjacent room, and a 'seagull's killer' is about to turn the same murder weapon on himself.

Sorin

Sorin is demoralized and demoralizing; as he endlessly repeats... "and so forth and so on ... " A man already in his 60's, he ages perceptibly through the 2 years chronology of *The Seagull*. His dying signifies the passage of time as effectively as an hour-glass. Now physically elderly, psychologically he's been an old man since his 20's. After wasting his years in dreaming of what he might have done, Sorin awaits his death with the morose grumbling he's habitually used to cover up the truth that, even at this late date, he intends to do nothing to interrupt his lifestyle of tedium and routine.

Masha

Masha, daughter of Polina and the buffoonish Shamrayev (with the faint suggestion that she may actually be the daughter of Dorn) is a confirmed alcoholic; two years have brought her from an incipient to a chronic condition. Her imagination is nurtured by novels, good to indifferent : she quotes them as substitutes for her feelings. She too, like Nina, needs to escape from the mediocrity of her surroundings; her deep desire to live her own "grand unrequited passion" leads her to fix her sights on the totally uninterested Constantine. Outside of her attachment to him she lacks all motivation or ambition. Addictions to alcohol and snuff do nothing to make her more attractive. Her reflex habit of running after

Constantine from morning to night can hardly do anything to improve their relationship. Constantine's callous disregard for her feelings is to his discredit, yet it is hard to imagine that he could find anything attractive about her. Chekhov does not cast her in the role of victim, rather he casts her as someone who casts *herself* in the role of a victim. She truly has no outlets, whereas Constantine has many routes of escape. Everything there is to know about Masha is spelled out in her opening line, a quote from Maupassant, which is also the opening response, and the second line of *The Seagull*: *"I'm in mourning or my life. I'm unhappy."*

Dorn

Dorn is smug, worldly-wise, cynical. Like Chekhov himself he has an unerring insight into human motives, but, unlike his creator, he is not inspired to do anything with it. His characteristic reaction, either to Masha's confession of her love for Constantine, Paulina's wish that he run away with her, or Sorin's professed desire for a full life, at age 60, is "What can I do about it?"

Of course what Dorn/Chekhov is usually saying is that none of these people really want to be helped: Masha needs her grand, unrequited passion every bit as much as Sorin needs his demoralized grumbling. In the one case in which Dorn is inspired to speak up in someone's defense he does so quite emphatically: Constantine's writing does show talent; he will not concede to anyone on this point.

Both Trigorin and Dorn are philanderers, with the important difference that Trigorin does not so much seduce and allure women, as allow them to allure and seduce him. Rather than making him inoffensive it makes him detestable; one can come away from a reading or production of *The Seagull* with the conviction that he is the one true villain of the play. It is

Dorn who is (significantly: *was*) the veritable Don Juan. In his vanished past he aggressively pursued all the wives in the lake district around Sorin's estate. Dull though sometimes witty, cynical, indolent, all too sane – as if Chekhov wishes us to understand that, all in all, “sanity” is the least praiseworthy of all psychological states in a setting where everyone else is mad.

The Workers

One should not overlook the support staff, that is to say the handyman Yakov, his two assistants, the watchman and the maid. From the numerous stories he wrote in which working class personalities are portrayed, one knows that Chekhov did not consider them as inferior in any sense. When Arkadina insults them by giving them the mean tip of a one-third of a ruble each, we know that Chekhov is berating the actress, not the servants.

Chekhov himself explained this: he wrote he preferred the cultivated middle class for the principals of his plays. These would be literate people who had read serious books, who could quote them with effect, and could engage in discussions about ideas: the literate class, in literate theater, for literate audiences.

Constantine Treplev

Standing away from the internal conflicts that fuel the dramatic action, the audience to *The Seagull* will discover that, despite Arkadina's infantile need to be at the center of attention, she is no more effective in doing so in the play which, for a brief spell, brings her into existence, than she has become in the world of fashionable theatre, (ever fickle and hungry for new sensations). The central focus of *The Seagull*, its spotlight, is on her castaway son.

Constantine Treplev may not be the most accomplished, and certainly not the most successful, artist in *The Seagull*, but his is far and away the most interesting personality in its rogues' gallery. There is a simple reason for this: he is the only person on stage with ideas anyone else would want to listen to. All the others are obsessed with their ambitions, appetites, insecurities, vanities, memories, eccentricities:

The mediocre schoolmaster Medvedenko can hardly be said to think for himself.

Masha fixes on Constantine because she needs a "great passion" of the sort she finds in the novels she feasts on; otherwise she is content just to drink, flop around and feel sorry for herself.

Arkadina just wants everyone to keep on looking at her.

Outside of his fiction Trigorin has no ideas to speak of. What does he have to say about art, philosophy, politics, science, religion?

Like the protagonists of *The 3 Sisters*, Nina wants to escape her stifling home situation. This takes the form of a simple, uncomplicated ambition to "be a great actress". Her ideas about the theatre do not go beyond the observation that a real play should contain love scenes.

But Constantine Treplev! He thinks about everything! : The craft of spectacle, the position of the full moon rising over the lake, the need for new forms in the arts, how a writer should go about his work, the World Spirit, the Earth in 200,000 years, the political concerns that got him expelled from the university! Constantine Treplev's ideas about art, theatre, history and the meaning of life enter fundamentally into the form and structure of *The Seagull* itself in 3 ways:

(1) His stated ideas

(2) The perspective created by the dissonance of his play with Chekhov's play.

(3) The metaphor of his life.

Chekhov's portrait of Constantine Treplev endows him with no notable gifts as a writer of either poetry or prose: the poetry in his play is ridiculous, the prose in his stories, by his own admission, flat and commonplace. Even Nina states, in Act II, that his script is boring, (although she seemed to like it well enough to remember every word of it two years later in Act IV). It is in the technical handling of his play, what Arkadina dismissively calls his "stage effects" that he shows his true talent as a brilliant impresario, a master of spectacle. Had Chekhov changed his mind and chosen not to kill Constantine Treplev off, he might well have allowed him to become a choreographer of pageants, carnivals, spectacles, films with casts of thousands, any performance event involving showmanship, dramatic effect, extravagance, ceremony. A maker of masques rather than plays: not Grillparzer, Constantine Treplev is Schikaneder; not Ibsen, but Cecil B. deMille.

Constantine Treplev is as much metaphor as he is person. This is true of any personage in a genuine work of fiction, yet in his case the observation takes on added meaning: certainly there is as much that is symbolic about his relationship to the play as there is with the ubiquitous seagull, part-physical, part-metaphysical, at turns farcical, terrifying, lyrical. Constantine Treplev is a metaphor for the *function of metaphor itself* in the construction of The Seagull: he is the subtext of the play, the life and death of all its phases and transformations.

Nina

Nina is portrayed as a late adolescent, a star-struck worshipper of literature and theatre. Although the daughter of a wealthy land-owner, her domestic situation of comfort and privilege brings her little happiness. Her father is an abusive bully, her step-mother someone cut from the same cloth (Chekhov may have been influenced by the Russian playwright Ostrovsky's masterpiece, "Storm") Since her father's re-marriage Nina has been treated like an outcast. Thus, from the onset Nina is already a "seagull" in its two primary significations: her destined fate as a homeless wanderer, and as embodiment of freedom, of flight and exaltation, the symbol of the artist's life. It was natural that the Moscow Art Theatre would have decided upon a seagull as its icon.

To my mind, the interpretations of The Sea-Gull that portray Nina as rejecting Constantine and adoring Trigorin, the man who has spurned her, are completely off base. A sensible reading of the script indicates that her heart is torn between the two of them. Chekhov crams all the tragedy into Act IV: one sees him working overtime to pitch the essentially comic nature of the first 3 acts into the deep abyss of Slavic melancholy of the final act.

Her situation with Trigorin is far worse than that of merely being rejected. She is always welcome in his hotel suite, provided she is prepared to situate herself appropriately in the harem of his other "attachments". He's hardly interested in a "long-term relationship". Nina's child must have seemed to him as a betrayal; one can easily imagine his relief when the thing died.

Arkadina has fewer problems with knowing her place. But Nina is of that passionate Ibsenite 'all-or-nothing' stamp that cannot accept any compromises in matter of the heart.

Those interpretations (starting with Stanislavski) which argue that her speech about the need to endure shows that she has succeeded in her “quest to live the life of an actress”, are being influenced by the fact that she alone of all the characters in *The Seagull* is unwavering in her dedication. Even Constantine, with his wild proclamations of fierce commitments, appears waffling relative to her. Masha, though she stumbles about in the throes of her “great passion”, keeps a shrewd, watchful eye open to practical realities. Reason enough for the hyper-metaphysical Constantine to find her totally unacceptable.

But this dedication comes across as obstinacy rather than commitment. The deep ambiguity present in her speech about the need to “endure”, is perhaps intentional. Chekhov must have been of two minds about the therapeutic value of a fanatic determination to live the artist’s life. Re-reading his other famous speech about the stoic virtues of a ‘crucified life’ of dreary endurance may give us a clue about his views on such attitudes. That is the speech delivered by Sonja to Vanya in the final scene of *Uncle Vanya*:

SONIA. What can we do? We must live our lives. [A pause] Yes, we shall live, Uncle Vanya. We shall live through the long procession of days before us, and through the long evenings; we shall patiently bear the trials that fate imposes on us; we shall work for others without rest, both now and when we are old; and when our last hour comes we shall meet it humbly, and there, beyond the grave, we shall say that we have suffered and wept, that our life was bitter, and God will have pity on us. Ah, then dear, dear Uncle, we shall see that bright and beautiful life; we shall rejoice and look back upon our sorrow here; a tender smile--and--we shall rest. I have faith, Uncle, fervent, passionate faith. [SONIA kneels down before her uncle and lays her head on his hands. She speaks in a weary voice] We shall rest. [TELEGIN plays softly on the guitar] We shall rest. We shall hear the angels. We shall see heaven shining like a jewel. We shall see all evil and all our pain sink away in the great compassion that shall enfold the world. Our life will be as peaceful and tender and sweet as a caress. I have faith; I have faith. [She wipes away her tears] My poor, poor Uncle Vanya, you are crying! [Weeping] You have never known what happiness was, but wait, Uncle Vanya, wait! We shall rest. [She embraces him] We shall rest. [The WATCHMAN'S rattle is heard in the garden; TELEGIN plays softly; MME. VOITSKAYA writes something on the margin of her pamphlet; MARINA knits her stocking] We shall rest.

Contrast this to Nina's speech about the healing powers of "endurance" in the arts:

Nina: ... "I understand now, Kostya, that in our work –acting or writing, it makes no difference – what matters isn't fame or glory, it isn't all the things I dreamed about, but the capacity to endure. To bear your cross and have faith. I have faith and it doesn't hurt so much now. When I think of my vocation I don't fear life"

Each of these eloquent speeches, tinged with charming homilies from Orthodox Christianity, represents a heroine's desperate attempt to find some redeeming virtue in bleakly oppressive circumstances. Aesop's fable of the fox and the grapes could not be more apt. Their speakers find themselves trapped in a life from which there is no escape, yet which they need to assure themselves is ultimately just and good.

Although Nina turns to Constantine as the only person to whom she can unburden her heart, it is impossible that she will accept him as a companion to share her personal destiny. He is too immature, too terrifying: the lethal intensity of his passion repels her. He, the "domesticated seagull" (shortly to become another "stuffed seagull") is too rooted in the world that is the source of all his miseries; what Nina needs are not hollow confessions of love, but practical help in dealing with the problems which a true "flying seagull" must face. . Torn between her love for the cynical Trigorin, and the self-centered make-believe of Constantine, she recognizes that her one refuge is in the eternal sea-gull strategy: flight to distant goals, endurance in the pursuit of a grand ambition, though it be an engagement in Yeletz, or a hard apprenticeship in mediocre summer stock theater. Sentimentalizing the gypsy life may be a universal cultural indulgence of Western Civilization, but a rude apprenticeship on the streets or in backwaters is not the best school for developing the techniques of a performing artist.

Though she tends to be somewhat selfishly unaware of hurting his feelings (*boasting to someone in love with you, of one's love for someone else, appears to be a universal failing of human nature*) Nina opens up to Constantine in their brief, passionate, unbearable encounter. Weeping freely she recounts , as in a dream, or vision of a previous lifetime, the beautiful adolescent romance by the lake, the sylvan stage, the golden time before the great disillusionment , all gone forever for a soul now bruised and soiled by the world, unworthy even to be in his company.

Nina: Why do you say you kiss the ground I walked on? I deserve to be killed.

It is the classic Chekhov situation: characters talking past one another and imagining they are having a conversation.

The Suicide

With the possible exception of Dorn, all of the principals of *The Seagull* have good reasons for contemplating suicide. Yet it is Constantine, not the others, who actually goes through with it.

Dorn's function in the play seems to be that of a ground level to its voltage. He represents "sanity". It is as if Chekhov were showing us how boring sanity appears in this universe of zany geniuses!

Masha will not commit suicide, although of all the characters in the play it is she who most bitterly hates life, who has less than nothing to live for: a dumb clod for a husband; an unloved baby whom she sees as a chain about her neck; a manufactured "hopeless love" for the wild *poète maudit* , Constantine Treplev; an entrenched addiction to alcohol; a boorish family. Why isn't it she, rather than Constantine, who pulls the trigger?

And in fact, why *doesn't* Medvedenko kill himself? Everyone *hates* him! Even Chekhov hates him, with the particular venom he harbors for all schoolteachers. Medvedenko's wife insults him to his face; his mother-in-law rudely brushes him off; his father-in-law, not bothering to disguise his contempt, bullies him; his own family berates him because he doesn't make enough money (a piddling 23 rubles per month) to keep them in their necessities and small luxuries. If there is anyone with 'logical' reasons to escape the pain of living, it's Medvedenko.

Sorin has been half-dead since his 20's. I remember attending a production of *The Seagull* in which the one reasonably successful scene was added by the director: the death of Sorin.

Arkadina's frail hold on life is just about to be cut away from by the very author who brought her into existence: if the eventual announcement of Constantine's suicide doesn't do it, then incipient lung cancer, heart disease or kidney failure will force her retirement from the stage and the hosts of (largely imagined) admirers.

The reason that the other characters do not shoot themselves is because their suicide would have no meaning in the context of *The Seagull*. Unlike the deplorably accidental situation we find ourselves in real life, it *won't happen* because it doesn't *say* anything. The suicide of Constantine Treplev, being the representation of an idea, is *equivalent* to the suicide of all of them, a metaphor for the hopelessness of an entire world and an entire world-view. In thus making the case that Constantine has no way out, he is saying that the play's dilemmas have no solution: no way out for Masha's hopeless marriage, no way Medvedenko can find security with respectability, no way that Sorin can begin to live after a

long, wasted life, no way that Arkadina can do other than just fade away, no way that Nina can solve her emotional needs by her “endurance” as an actress, no way that Trigorin can throw off his shabby, spineless existence, no way that Dorn can recover from erectile dysfunction. Thereby Chekhov converted the traditional “gun-shot” into an after-thought, a convention of punctuation, rather than as a resultant of tragic forces. His oft-quoted statement that *The Sea-Gull* is a “comedy” has many reflections in its hall of mirrors.

The irony of Constantine being the one to pull the trigger becomes more poignant when it is recognized that everyone likes *him* ! Even his jealous mother likes him! Everyone in Chekhov’s microcosm is entranced by his passionate energy, his boldness, his artistic gifts, his spontaneity. Had Chekhov allowed him to live to make his own pilgrimage “to Moscow” he would have discovered lots of people in the big city who would like him for the same reasons.

The Structure

(a) The play within a play

The characterizations of the principals in *The Seagull* are straightforward; apart from certain details and anticipated developments , they are all already present in Act I. If the characterizations were the substance of the play it would, like the earlier plays *Platonov*, *Ivanov* and *The Wood Demon* , probably be considered a diversion with some sort of sinister undercurrent, nothing more. What gives added depth to *The Seagull*, making it a theatrical masterpiece, is its structure, and the way it relates to its underlying themes.

How extraordinary it is to open a play by another play, before all of the characters in the "real" play have been properly introduced! As with Shakespeare’s famous involution of

form in Hamlet (a play in which ‘involvement of form’ is obsessional), the play within a play is a “Mousetrap”. On a superficial level, Hamlet’s play-within-a-play is designed to entrap the king; on a deeper level, in the way it is actually developed by Shakespeare in Act III, it becomes a means for casting judgment over the whole aristocracy of Elsinore. Likewise, as Chekhov unfolds the drama surrounding Constantine’s play in *The Seagull*, although Arkadina realizes (through the filter of her egocentrism) that Constantine is out to get her, the larger target takes in the whole futile, sadly engaging world of Sorin’s country estate.

Constantine’s way of putting his mother on the spot, paradoxically, is to *stage a failure* ! Whether or not “he” (*that is, the fictional mind of a fictional character*) realizes it, the “blowup” in response to his mother’s heckling was scripted as thoroughly as Nina’s monologue. In this world of *The Seagull*, it is not the “play by Constantine’s” which is center stage, but the “play of Constantine”. Histrionics in other words.

One soon realizes that everyone is cultivating his or her own propensity to self-dramatization: Arkadina’s vanity, Sorin’s pessimism, Masha’s grand passion, Nina’s sacrifice, Trigorin’s talent for mediocrity, Medvedenko’s obsession with money.

The difference between the play-within-a-play involvement in Hamlet, and the one in *The Seagull*, is that, in Hamlet, the audience knows everything about the villainy of king Claudius before the players come on stage; whereas when Constantine’s play is staged we’ve hardly been introduced to any of the principals.

Constantine’s play! What is there to say about Constantine’s play? Such heavy philosophy for a sweltering evening in August! How inappropriate (a word that reoccurs with respect to all the situations in this play) to its audience: to deliver a lecture devoted to the

wild ranting of the religious fanatic Solovyev, in a setting whose intrinsic theatre is best served by a light or witty amusement, a pastoral, or comedy, or, say, a linked chain of hopeless infatuations, like the play that rounds off the “*Midsummer’s Night’s Dream*”?

Or like a play called The Seagull! This is very much to the point: when Masha “confesses” to Dorn that she is in love with Constantine, who is in love with Nina, who is already infatuated by Trigorin, we in the audience feel, “Okay! Thanks, Anton: That’s the right kind of play for an August heat wave!”

A strange construction indeed: *The Seagull* is a play that begins with the production of a play that one expects to be a light-hearted comedy, but is instead a heavy-handed declamation on metaphysics; which is interrupted by the *real* play which, until the final act, really *is* a comedy, built, once again as in *The Midsummer’s Night’s Dream*, around a ludicrous chain of hopeless infatuations; a play which, building upon classic elements of farce, violates all the rules of theatre; a play which, after presentation of an amateur theatrical deliberately out of tune with its surroundings, continues its disturbing trajectory between sanity and disease until descending, in its final act, into Ibsen-like gloom: a ludicrous stuffed sea-gull, a fleeing Ophelia, a gambling tableau, a melancholy waltz from a distant piano and the inevitable gun-shot!

(b)The Evolution

The time-span of *The Seagull* extends over two years. More precisely, there is the brief summer interval of Acts I to III, followed, after a break of 2 years, by a single winter night.

Since the passage of time is schematic, Chekhov employs flash-backs to fill in the gaps. Another playwright might have *begun* the play with the situation of Act IV, and used

flashbacks to “recover” the lost idyll of the previous 3 acts. However, the very starkness of the abrupt juxtaposition of Act IV with what proceeds it effectively captures the sense of a fall from grace in its multiple aspects: before/after; summer/winter; youth/age; life/death; hope/despair; comedy/tragedy; daylight/night.

The developments within all of these dichotomies are, by-and-large, negative. Good weather has been followed by bad; the bright daylight of the first 3 acts becomes the obscure night of the 4th; those who are not about to die physically have done so psychologically. Not a one of them has grown in stature, nor matured in understanding. Some have gotten worse, much worse : Nina totters on the brink of madness; Constantine commits suicide; Sorin continues his long descent from a meaningless life to a meaningless death; Masha is more addicted, embittered, self-pitying; Medvedenko is now openly the butt of everyone’s ambient hostility; Shamrayev is twice the bully.

Dorn, still humming snatches of opera arias is, if possible, even more smug. Commentators see all sorts of deep meanings in these melodies. I doubt that Chekhov intended such associations in the ‘deep structure’; how much do audiences care that the Jewel Song from Gounod’s Faust has some far-fetched association with the plight of Nina? Which one of the male villains is ‘Mephistopheles’: Trigorin or Constantine?

(c) The Technique of Dysfunctional Conversations

That the personalities of all the principals of The Seagull are uncomplicated and easily understood does not mean that Chekhov’s characterizations are hollow: Chekhov invented an extraordinary technique that allowed him to create *full-blooded characterizations of hollow people* ! In The Sea-Gull, despite the heavy inertia that infects their spiritual universe,

Chekhov created living portraits of all its inhabitants. One of the ways in which he did this is quite extraordinary: one might call it the *technique of dysfunctional conversation* .

In a typical Chekhovian conversation, a speaker makes a remark, then awaits a reply. The respondent listens with half an ear, makes some sort of non-committal reply, then immediately changes the subject to something else that bears no relevance to the topic under discussion.

These abrupt transitions reveal the state of mind of his characters; they bring to the fore whatever is really troubling them. The interchange does not constitute rudeness per se: it's just that all of his characters are distracted. Chekhov exposes a deeper psychological level in people whom, so it might appear at first glance, have none. What other playwright has depicted empty people with so much compassion and loving attention?

Some examples:

From Act I:

(1)

Arkadina ...he's a conceited, egotistical brat

Sorin: He wanted to please you

Arkadina: He's just being nasty

Dorn: Jupiter, thou art angry

Arkadina: I'm not Jupiter! .. I didn't mean to hurt his feelings!

Medvedenko: Nobody has grounds for separating spirit from matter ..somebody ought to write a play showing how we school-teachers live...

Arkadina : Let's not talk about plays or atoms... what a glorious evening... why did I hurt my poor boy's feelings? .. Kostya! Kostya! My son!

(2)

Dorn: I suppose we may raise the curtain now. It's creepy

Shamrayev : Yakov, raise the curtain (Yakov raises the curtain)

Nina: It's a strange play

Trigorin: I didn't understand a word ... there must be lots of fish in that lake ...

Nina: Yes

Trigorin: I love fishing

From Act II:

(3)

Arkadina: (Kisses Nina) But we musn't praise you too much – it's bad luck. Where's Trigorin?

Nina: Down by the bathhouse, fishing

Arkadina: You'd think he'd be sick of it (About to continue reading)

Nina: What's that?

Arkadina: Maupassant's "On The Water", my sweet (Reads a few lines to herself) Well, the rest is uninteresting and fake (Shuts the book) I'm worried. Tell me, what's wrong with my son?

From Act III:

(4)

Arkadina (To Sorin): Stay at home, old man. Traipsing about with your rheumatism! (To Trigorin) Who was that? Nina?

Trigorin: Yes

Arkadina: Pardon, we interrupted you ... I believe we're all packed. I'm worn to the bone

Trigorin .. "Days and Nights, page 121, lines 11 and 12)

Yakov: Pack your fishing rods, sir?

Trigorin: Yes, I'll be needing them. You can give the books away.....

Arkadina : (Interrupting her chain of thought) Now that I'm leaving I'll never find out why he shot himself. I imagine the chief reason was jealousy.

From Act IV:

Nina's monologues in Act IV are completely dysfunctional. Chekhov captures the extreme distraction of her mind by letting her talk in such a way that each thought is interrupted by a once or twice removed free association. It is the method used by Shakespeare in "Hamlet" to portray Ophelia's madness.

(5)

Nina: Why do you say you kiss the ground I walked on? I deserve to be killed. (Leans on the table) I'm so tired. If I could only rest ...rest! (Raises her head) I'm a Seagull! ...No, that's not right. I'm an actress. Yes! [...] You can't imagine what it's like when you know your acting is awful. I'm a Seagull .No, that's not right..Remember – you shot a Seagull? By chance a man came, saw a Seagull, and having nothing better to do, destroyed it ...A subject for a short story...No, that's not right.. (Wipes her forehead) What was I saying? ...

In any case, one must note the very significant change of emphasis between Trigorin's story in which the *young girl* is destroyed, and Nina's recollection in which a *seagull* is destroyed:

Trigorin (Act II): A young girl lives all her life on the shore of a lake. She loves the lake, and is happy and free, like a Seagull. By chance a man comes, sees her, and having nothing better to do, destroys her. Here, like this seagull."

Nina (Act IV): By chance a man came, saw a Seagull, and having nothing better to do, destroyed it ... a subject for a short story.. No, that's not right ..."

This could not have been an oversight on the part of its author. In this monologue, uttered in a state between waking and sleeping, Nina is recasting her memories of an idyllic Golden Age before her flight to Moscow. In such a reverie she cannot allow negative images to intrude. She does not want to admit to herself that the essential baseness of Trigorin's character was in fact revealed to her before she left the region. Hence the shift in her recollections, from the destruction of the maiden by the lake, the "Rusalka", to the seagull itself.

(d) The Seagull

The physical and metaphysical seagulls, as symbols, metaphors, living or dead objects, fly about recklessly through the play written in their honor, bringing in their wake many problems of interpretation. Previously I spoke of "inappropriateness": what is most striking about Chekhov's bird is the marvelous way in which it is totally inappropriate to the situations in which its presence is manifested, yet the fundamental aptness with which, as metaphor, it applies to the play as a whole. The extent to which the seagulls of *The Seagull* should always fit so well and so badly is extraordinary. They apply to everyone and to no-one;

are both embarrassingly blatant and remarkably subtle; like the theme of Beethoven's 5th Symphony, they are as obvious as a hammer blow, yet of extraordinary sophistication; as stupid as Trigorin's dumb gawk at a stuffed bird, yet grand as Hart Crane's image in *The Brooklyn Bridge*

"How many dawns, chill from its rippling rest /The sea-gull's wings shall dip and pivot him!"

Or is this concatenation of symbolisms a mere parody? Are the "seagulls" in *The Seagull* to be understood as parodies of Symbolism, of Edgar Allan Poe's "Raven"; Baudelaire's "Albatross"; the swan of Wagner's "Lohengrin", or Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake", or Saint-Saens lugubrious ode; or Ibsen's "Wild Duck"; and other multifarious other birds, fabulous, sublime or ridiculous in the canon of 19th century literature? Could it be that Chekhov is giving us deliberate nonsense?

Nina(Act II) : "Lately you've become irritable, I can't make you out, you speak in symbols. I suppose this seagull is also a symbol, but excuse me, I don't understand... (Lays the Seagull on the bench) I'm just too ordinary to understand you..."

Trigorin arrives; Constantine stalks off in a cloud of love-sick torment. The ambiguous status of the "objective (if dead) seagull" is perfectly captured in the ensuing dialogue between Nina and Trigorin:

Trigorin: "It's lovely here! (Seeing the seagull) And what's this?"
Nina: "A seagull. Konstantin killed it."

Here the dead seagull is a metaphor for both Constantine's brutal confrontation with Nina, expressed in the form of a death threat, and a foretaste of how she will be abused then abandoned by Trigorin.

Trigorin: "A beautiful bird. I really don't feel like leaving...."

The body of the dead seagull as has shifted to an icon of beauty, of love taking flight.

Trigorin: "Try and talk Irina into staying "(Writes in his notebook).

By some exceedingly bizarre train of free association, Trigorin's thoughts descend from an emulation of the seagull's beauty to the sadistic legend of the destruction of an innocent young girl by "a man". We have observed how this strange deviation of thoughts is misquoted by Nina during her delirium in the final act:

Trigorin: A young girl lives all her life on the shore of a lake. She loves the lake, and is happy and free, like a seagull. By chance a man comes, sees her, and having nothing better to do, destroys her. Here, like this seagull."

The action almost implies that he and Constantine are in cahoots to destroy the seagull Nina! The language is very harsh, yet the word "destroy" appears in most of the translations I've read. To destroy Nina *like* the seagull means to kill her!

Yet Nina is not killed, neither by Constantine nor Trigorin, nor is she exactly ruined by Trigorin. She's just made a mistake, compounded by bad luck, with some indications in the final act that she may be on the road to recovery. There can be no doubt however that, in the context of Act IV, Nina is a nervous and physical wreck. Once again, the seagull is pressed into service:

Nina: (Act IV): "... I'm a seagull. No, that's not right ...Remember – you shot a seagull? By chance a man came, saw a seagull, and having nothing better to do, destroyed it ... a subject for a short story.. No, that's not right ..."

The repetitions of the enigmatic phrase: "No, that's not right", have been the subject of endless debate. In the absence of a standard interpretation I feel free to give my own. It is possible that the word "that" in this expression does not refer to either Nina or to a seagull, but to some other train of thought that is going on at the same time. Clearly Nina is coasting between waking and sleep all through the conversation. In her semi-comatose state she

mutters "I'm a seagull". She wakes up, looks around, wonders what she's been thinking about, and says: "No, *that's* not right"

What other ties can one establish between the principals of the play and the seagull as symbol and object? One can cite the vanity of Arkadina. Seagulls are savage birds; they brook no competitors and are murderous when dealing with pigeons, sparrows, starlings - any species of bird smaller and weaker than they are. From Wikipedia:

"...many gull colonies display mobbing behaviour, attacking and harassing would-be predators and other intruders..."

The two babies, the dead one of Nina, the hated one of Masha?

Constantine's suicide? In his morbid state of mind he turns on himself the same gun that, two years before, was used to murder the seagull.

Or merely a vague, global metaphor for blighted dreams, ideals, hopes, loves?

One of the strongest associations is certainly with Icarus, falling to his death in his brave flight, his waxen wings melted by the sun. This strong theme is of course recurrent throughout the drama, and contributes to the overall validity of the metaphor of a stricken bird "vaunted in its youthful sap":

Unlike the three sisters in the play about them, Nina actually makes her flight to Moscow, there to experience rejection, loss and bitter disillusionment.

Constantine, his imagination fed through the extravagant fantasies of Symbolist and avant-garde writers and philosophers, reviles his own mediocrity (a mistake he does not live to correct) and plunges into the abyss of suicide.

Arkadina's fate will catch up with her after the curtain comes down. She, too, has known her Icarian flight.

Trigorin's life changes little, by his own lights. He remains the successful pulp writer, that is to say, a nebbish: who cares about such people?

Yet equally strong in the global structure of the play, the seagull is a genuine metaphor, conventional though far from commonplace, for artistic freedom. It was in this sense that the Moscow Art Theatre adopted the Seagull as its logos. Avian flight is the perennial symbol for spiritual freedom in all the great literatures of the world:

"All's changed since I, hearing at twilight, the bell-beat of their wings above my head" – W. B Yeats *The Wild Swans at Coole*

"As up he wings the spiral stair/A song of light, and pierces air/With fountain ardor, fountain play/To reach the shining tops of day/And drink in everything discern'd / An ecstasy to music turn'd " George Meredith, *The Lark Ascending*

Summarizing: The "seagull(s)" in Chekhov's *Seagull* are too much, too little; too obvious, too subtle; too banal, too sublime. With Ibsen's "Wild Duck" we know exactly where we are; as we do with Baudelaire's "Albatross". With Poe's "Raven" we are embarrassed by where we are, and wish we were somewhere else; Shelley tells us frankly that his "Skylark" is not even a bird, while Keats is "too happy" in the contemplated happiness of his "Nightingale".

Chekhov's seagull, by contrast, will forever remain an enigma. It both works magnificently, yet doesn't work. Every production of the play has to deal with this afresh.

(d)The Gunshots

One now comes to the structural/ metaphorical significance of the 3 gunshots. The "smell of gunpowder" bestows an odor of the cemetery on each act. In Act I there is the whiff of sulfur that Constantine uses as a stage effect. In Act II there is the wanton murder of

the beautiful seagull. As Trigorin says when Masha tells him that she intends to marry Medvedenko:

Trigorin: "I don't see the need for that."

The killing itself is mysterious: what is Constantine doing wandering about the lake with a rifle, in the punishing heat of August without a hat? To kill himself? To kill Trigorin? Why not kill Nina? Unable to make up his mind he kills a sea-gull and, as surrogate gesture of murder, terrifies Nina by dropping it at her feet.

The failed suicide of Act III has already occurred on the previous day. One wonders if there are political overtones to his behavior: Did Chekhov intend his audiences to make some connections with the Nihilists? We know that the Nihilists were in the habit of killing themselves, for no reason at all, as a way of dramatizing the futility of life in Russia. Was it because of his frequentation with their circles that he was expelled from the university?

By continually associating Constantine with the smells of gunpowder, Chekhov clearly indicates that his fictional creation, quite apart from anything that happens in the play, has a suicidal disposition. As in *Hedda Gabler*, if a major character is going around shooting off guns, it has to be the one to do itself in. The logic of a drama of this sort demands it.

The 3 gunshots function like semi-colons, or partial cadences, in the unfolding of the plot: the first kills the sea-gull, the second is Constantine's failed suicide attempt, the third his successful attempt. At one level clear that Chekhov is obviously ridiculing the ubiquity of final gunshots in the conventional theater of his day. Yet more than ridicule is involved: the effect of the first failed suicide attempt is to undercut the second attempt (to speculate that it wasn't successful may be far-fetched; however, Dorn's on-sight inspector could be wrong.

He is not pictured as the world's best doctor (*an idea for an off-beat production: Constantine walks through the door as the curtain comes down!*)

What I mean by this is that it is undermined *theatrically* , in the same way that repeated words or redundant adjectives undermine the force of a sentence. Because of the childish, irresponsible way that Treplev's gun has "gone off" on the two previous attempts (we don't need Dr. Freud here, thank you!) the repeated gesture has become almost comic, leading one to wish that some father figure (conspicuous by his absence) would take the gun away from him, with the stern rebuke: "This is not a toy, sonny!"

Yet, although the climactic suicide is undermined *theatrically* , yet for that reason it receives added emphasis *psychologically* . The reflections that may come out in discussions following the production, which are bound to include the question "Why does Constantine commit suicide?" must inevitably open up the full range of themes, topics and interpretations displayed in *The Seagull*.

(e) Act IV: Interior decorating

For the final act of *The Seagull*, Chekhov specifies furnishings which are a close, almost a mimicking, reproduction of the basic *mise-en-scene* of most of Ibsen's plays: drawing-room, terrace, French windows, doors on either side, a couch, chairs, dimmed lamps, a writing desk. It is almost as if, after the farcical disequilibrium of the first three acts, Chekhov is getting down, in Act IV , to the serious business of tragedy; and, perhaps deliberately so, not quite making it!

The familiar appurtenances of tragedy in the final act are so numerous and so obvious, one is almost tempted to say that Chekhov intends to parody the formats of melodrama.

Here is the dying invalid; the destruction of an idealistic youth by the confluence of political, social and parental forces; the surprise entrance of Nina, the mad Ophelia/Rusalka “as if rising out from the depths of the lake” ; the callous laughter coming from the banquet in the dining-room; the lotto game, reminiscent of the card-playing scene in Carmen; the dreary waltz floating by from a distant piano; the ubiquitous “bird”; the final, anti-climatic, pistol shot.

Like Act I, Act IV is conceived of in the form of a self-referencing reflection of theatre back onto itself. Everything is self-consciously “theatrical”; yet it is also “theatre”. As much a disquisition *about* theatre, perhaps, as a production *in* a theater . Between Acts I and IV one might say that *The Seagull* is not only about actors playing actors, but actors playing actors playing actors ... playing in a play within a play within a play.

#####

#####