

STEPHEN LOW

## **THE SEAGULL AT SOULPEPPER**

KONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKY, the Russian theatre practitioner who pioneered a new method of acting that was later popularized by Marlon Brando and has since been taught in acting schools around the world, was also one of the first directors of Anton Chekhov's now canonical plays. Naturally, he imprinted many of his ideas onto these plays, which he saw as texts most suitable for the application of his realistic acting method, and thanks to him they have since been heralded as quintessential works of realism.

Despite the fact that Chekhov's plays helped to make Stanislavsky's "method" the dominant style of acting over the course of the twentieth century, the two men were not always in agreement about the genre of Chekhov's work. More specifically, Stanislavsky thought Chekhov's plays were essentially tragic, while Chekhov thought they were comic. If Stanislavsky had not interpreted Chekhov's plays in that way, his "method" may not have attracted the attention and followers it did, and, if I can imagine an alternate theatre history to the actual timeline that exists, Chekhov's plays would be less burdened by being vehicles of realism than they currently are.

The Soulpepper Theatre Company's production of Simon Stephens' new adaptation of Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1896) at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto doesn't take sides in the conflict between Stanislavsky and Chekhov. Rather, Daniel Brooks directs a production that appeals to the realistic acting style inaugurated by Stanislavsky while also drawing attention to the artifice of theatre—an approach that destroys the illusion of realism that Stanislavsky was deeply invested in achieving with his method.

The production begins with a declaration that creating a realistic world for Chekhov's text is not in the cards. Immediately upon entering, the audience sees that the set includes two walls with doors downstage and a plastic sheet hung on the upstage wall. At the beginning of the play, Jacob (played by the understated but effective Dan Mousseau) enters and forcefully sticks

a placard with the word “lake” written in black marker on the plastic sheet. In a comically heavy-handed gesture to ensure that the audience understands that the hanging sheet is meant to represent a lake, he also brings on an industrial leaf blower and blows air at the hanging sheet to create the clumsy but effective illusion that there are waves on the water. Later in the play he enters to retrieve a basket of fruit and lets one drop to the floor instead of biting into it, which reveals that it is plastic, as it bounces across the stage. In this way, the *mise en scène* provides constant reminders that the world of the production is not realistic.

The text of the play also invites the audience to critically consider the theatre and its capacity to hold a mirror up to nature. For example, the first act involves a play written by the unhappy and lovelorn Konstantin, which is a surreal meditation on existence and reality. Konstantin’s play is then criticized by his mother and others in the onstage audience, which invites the offstage audience to compare his writing to Chekhov’s and to consider the nature and purpose of drama more broadly. The production thus capitalizes on the realism of Chekhov’s dialogue while simultaneously embracing the inevitable artifice of live theatre.

Brooks and his cast of masterful actors nevertheless express authentic emotions with force, tenderness, and humanity. For example, Michelle Monteith plays Irina, Konstantin’s egotistical mother, who leads a celebrity’s life as an actress in the big city, and she manages to react negatively toward her son’s literary work and aspirations without coming off as villainous. Instead, she is presented as a complicated woman who has her own desires and dreams as well as a maternal yet often misguided love for her son.

Of particular note are Paolo Santalucia, who plays Konstantin, and Hailey Gillis, who plays his beloved muse Nina. The scene in which Nina returns to town from a tragic attempt to lead the life of an actress in the big city—an attempt that included heartbreak as well as professional failure—to confront Konstantin, whom she abandoned, is one of incredible pathos. This emotional moment, in which the two almost-but-never-quite lovers wrestle with the follies that inevitably plague all youth, is one of the most compelling performances presented on a Toronto stage in years.

Along with these emotionally vulnerable performances, Ellie Ellwand’s Masha, who has chosen an unfulfilling domestic role instead of pursuing her dreams in the city, is presented as drunk, unhappy, and bitter. This performance navigates the difficult task of evoking the audience’s sympathies

rather than their disdain.

As a play about those who pursue a life in the theatre and succeed (like Irina), those whose dreams are fulfilled for a moment but are eventually crushed (like Nina), and those who never have the opportunity to see their dreams come true (like Konstantin and Masha), this production of *The Seagull* became particularly meaningful following Brooks' death in May 2023. In 2001 he received the inaugural Siminovitch Prize, which recognizes artists who have made a significant creative contribution to theatre in Canada and indicates that their efforts over time were meaningful and influential. His long-time collaborator, Daniel MacIvor, noted in the *Toronto Star* that Brooks would "never adhere to the rules of the system of theatre that we had, that had come from the British idea of how the theatre was supposed to work."

Tackling Chekhov's play while rejecting the realism with which it has long been associated due to Stanislavsky's influence is evidence of this. Brooks may have avoided the fate of both Konstantin and Nina, but theatrical success did not make him self-obsessed like Irina. While she bemoans her son's experimental play, he always pushed the boundaries of what theatre could be, and he showed that there is a place for artistic experimentation. The world needs artists who are critical, challenging, inquisitive, and imbued with such an immense capacity to love and be loved.