

## Chapter 4. *The Seagull*: From Disaster to Triumph

*I really do believe that no play can be set up by even the most talented producer without the author's personal guidance and directions ... There are different interpretations, but the author has the right to demand that his play is performed and the parts played wholly according to his own interpretation ... It is necessary that the particular atmosphere intended by the author is created. (Anton Chekhov)<sup>1</sup>*

*A conductor is entitled to his own interpretation of a score; a director is entitled to his own interpretation of a play. The question is, at what point does leeway become licence? (Michael Heim)<sup>2</sup>*

Despite the fact that he felt that *Ivanov* (1887) had not been interpreted correctly by critics and theatrical practitioners alike, Chekhov had scored a minor theatrical success with that play. He was to endure the pain of seeing his next play, *The Wood Demon* (1889), fail miserably in its Moscow production. J. L. Styan is probably correct when he asserts that:

The former was a success with the public because it was more closely modelled after the kind of melodrama which was common throughout Europe at that time; the latter was a failure because Chekhov had discarded too many of those theatrical conventions the audience expected.<sup>3</sup>

Chekhov was to wait six years before he again risked presenting a new play for production. *The Seagull* (1896) is a transitional play that only partially achieves his aim of showing 'life as it is' in a realistic manner. The playwright did not totally avoid employing the dramatic clichés that he had inherited from the theatrical tradition of his day. Alan Seymour is quite correct when he points to the exaggerated claims that are made about *The Seagull* in terms of its new 'realistic' dramaturgy and contrasts them with what Chekhov actually achieved:

The author is ... quoted as the great master of natural dialogue, seemingly casual conversations which reveal character and atmosphere indirectly. How is this for indirect revelation? Medvedenko (Act 1, *The Seagull*): 'Nina Mikhailovna [Zaryechnaia] is to act in a play written by Konstantin Gavrilovich [Treplev]. They are in love with each other' ... and this to Masha who has lived in the house all her life and may be presumed to be already in possession of this information.<sup>4</sup>

This rather clumsy exposition scene is symptomatic of the work of a writer who was still learning his trade as a dramatist. Possibly the most awkward hangover from the earlier non-realistic dramaturgical practices that Chekhov seems to have inherited was the use of the aside and soliloquy. These conventions

are unsuitable in a drama that is aiming to be lifelike. Direct address to an audience has a long tradition in theatre, but it feels appropriate only in the type of drama that acknowledges its own theatricality.

Chekhov, at the time of writing *The Seagull*, could not avoid including many asides and soliloquies in the play. These pre-realistic conventions can create difficulties for directors attempting to achieve the level of dramatic realism that Chekhov desired. Irina's aside in Act Three – 'Now he's mine' – that marks her triumphant reassertion of power over her lover, Trigorin, reminds one of the heavily whispered asides of gloating melodrama villains and can easily produce a cheap laugh.<sup>5</sup> Treplev's long soliloquy towards the end of Act Four, in which he talks about his insoluble writing problems, is difficult to perform in the realistic manner that Chekhov desired. Michael Frayn found Chekhov's use of soliloquy in *The Seagull* so awkward that he 'was tempted to reorganise the scenes a little to avoid the need for soliloquy'.<sup>6</sup> While Chekhov may not have totally emancipated himself from the dramaturgy of melodrama and the well-made play, nevertheless, *The Seagull* is vastly more natural and less overtly theatrical than his earlier full-length plays.<sup>7</sup>

The initial reception of the play was not favourable. In fact, *The Seagull* had such a disastrous premiere at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St Petersburg on 17 October 1896 that the author vowed: 'I shall *never* either write plays or have them acted.'<sup>8</sup> In fact, the catastrophe that occurred on opening night had more to do with factors outside the artistic strengths or weaknesses of the production. The evening's entertainment had been chosen as part of a benefit performance for the well-known performer, E. I. Levkeyeva, whom Heim describes as 'a fat, mustachioed comic actress popular for her comic roles'.<sup>9</sup> Presumably the audience expected something in keeping with the particular talents of this entertainer and was unlikely to appreciate the subtle nuances of this new type of drama. The audience may well have known that Chekhov had described *The Seagull* as a comedy and consequently were bemused and upset by what they witnessed:

Although there was no part for her in the play, her faithful audience filled the theater expecting to be entertained — if not the way she entertained them, then at least with broad theatrical effects. (*Pashenka*, the play immediately preceding *The Seagull*, had been applauded wildly by the same kind of audience. It told the story of a cafe singer who marries into an aristocratic family, then escapes back to her former life and shoots herself when her husband comes after her.) Looking forward to an evening of either farce or melodrama, they made vociferous fun of Masha's snuff, Treplev's bandage, and could only have been bitterly disappointed when Treplev's suicide took place offstage. Chekhov forced himself to sit through two acts, but finally he fled — first the theater, then St Petersburg.<sup>10</sup>

Lydia Avilova, an admirer of Chekhov, was present at that first performance and has left us a fascinating eyewitness description of what occurred on that occasion. She, like many others in the audience, appears to have found the play difficult to understand. Her comments are useful insofar as they help us to gain some idea of how the play was theatrically interpreted in its initial production. In particular, Avilova describes the manner in which the actress playing Nina performed Treplev's play. As we shall see, the way in which this symbolist playlet is interpreted by directors and actors largely determines how the play as a whole is interpreted and defines the parameters within which any audience makes its own reading. It is clear from Avilova's description of the audience response to Act One of *The Seagull* that the first audience found Treplev's play laughable:

The play seemed to have no meaning for me. It seemed to get entirely lost. I strained my ears to catch every word of every character who might be speaking. I listened with the greatest possible attention. But I could not make anything out of the play and it left no impression on me. When Nina Zarechnaya began her monologue, 'People, lions, eagles ...' I heard a curious noise in the stalls and I seemed to come to with a start. What was the matter? It seemed to me that suppressed laughter passed over the rows of people below; or wasn't it laughter, but an indignant murmur? Whatever it was, it was something unpleasant, something hostile ... The curtain came down, and suddenly something indescribable happened: the applause was drowned by boos, and the more people applauded, the louder was the booing. And it was then that I could clearly hear the people laugh. And they did not just laugh: they roared with laughter. The audience began to come out into the corridors and the foyer, and I heard how some of them were highly indignant, while others gave vent to their disapproval in bitter and venomous words. 'Some symbolic trash!' 'Why doesn't he stick to his short stories?'<sup>11</sup>

Avilova's description of the response to Act Four conjures up a scene in which the St Petersburg audience destroyed Chekhov's play even more ruthlessly than Irina Arkadina had demolished her son's symbolist drama. The first-night audience and the 'star' actress had something in common in terms of their theatrical tastes. Both appear to have had little sympathy with the 'new forms' of drama being offered them:

In the last act, which I liked very much and which for a time even made me forget the failure of the play, Kommissarzhevskaya (Nina), recalling Treplev's [Treplev's] play in which she had acted the World Soul in the first act, suddenly tore off a sheet from the sofa, wrapped it round herself, and again began her monologue, 'People, lions, eagles ...' But she had barely time to start when the whole theatre began to roar with laughter. And that in the most dramatic and moving place in the play which should have made everyone cry! They laughed

at the sheet, ... everyone roared with laughter, the entire theatre laughed, and the end of the play was completely ruined. No one was moved by the shot that put an end to Treplyov's life and the curtain came down to the accompaniment of the same boos and jeers which had drowned the few timid claps at the end of the first act.<sup>12</sup>

It was not just the thwarted expectations of an audience hungry for an evening of light entertainment that provoked the failure of the first production of *The Seagull*. It is generally argued that 'the main reason for its early failure was that Chekhov's artistic intention was not understood by the performers'.<sup>13</sup> Most accounts of this first production judge it solely in terms of what occurred on the disastrous first night. Daniel Gillès' description of the rehearsals that Chekhov attended, and which supposedly gave him nightmares, is fairly typical of this kind of totally negative approach to the St Petersburg production:

Under bad direction the actors, many of whom had not yet learned their parts, understood nothing of the characters they were playing or of the poetry of the play itself, and they performed with the bombast and grandiloquence that were mandatory on Russian stages in those days. They seemed not to understand what Chekhov meant when he often interrupted them to repeat: 'The main thing, my children, is that it's absolutely unnecessary to make *theatre* of it. The characters are simple, ordinary people.'<sup>14</sup>

The implication that the St Petersburg production had involved directorial misinterpretation and actor incompetence was certainly the argument put forward by the co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre, Nemirovich-Danchenko, when trying to convince Chekhov that his company should be allowed to produce the Moscow premiere of the play. He wrote encouragingly to the reluctant dramatist:

Rest assured that everything will be done to assure the play's success ... I am sure that you won't experience anything with us similar to what happened in the Petersburg production. I will consider the 'rehabilitation' of this play one of my greatest achievements.<sup>15</sup>

The closer one looks at the available evidence, the more it becomes clear that the production in St Petersburg was not quite the debacle that both Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavski were happy to assume it had been. Subsequent performances appear to have been received with less hilarity than occurred on the first-night fiasco. Simon Karlinsky has argued that eye-witness evidence suggests that Yevtikhy Karpov's St Petersburg production, 'while under-rehearsed and by no means ideal, was not as bad as subsequent legend made it out to be'.<sup>16</sup> The young and largely unknown actress, Vera Kommissarzhevskaya, who took over the role of Nina from the famous actress Mariya Savina five days before opening, wrote to Chekhov four days after that eventful night, claiming that subsequent performances had been theatrical

triumphs. 'Victory is ours,' she effusively wrote, 'the play is a complete, unanimous success, just as it ought to be, just as it had to be. How I'd like to see you now, but what I'd like even more is for you to be present and hear the unanimous cry of "Author".'<sup>17</sup>

Chekhov may have been partially convinced by the reassurances provided by this actress whose talent he admired, but he nevertheless could not forget how poorly the actors had performed on the opening night. He wrote to his brother Mikhail on the following day that the actors 'acted as if they were ashamed to be in the theatre. The performances were vile and stupid. The moral of the story is: I shouldn't write plays.'<sup>18</sup> On 22 October, Chekhov wrote to Suvorin saying that he had recovered from his gruelling theatrical experience to the extent that now he 'wouldn't even mind doing another play', but he could not resist describing the conditions under which his play had been produced. 'Actually there was only one genuine rehearsal, at which it was impossible to tell what was going on; the play was completely lost in a fog of vile acting.'<sup>19</sup> Even Kommissarzhevskaya, who had impressed Chekhov in rehearsal to such an extent that he wrote to his brother Mikhail on 15 October saying that she 'acts amazingly',<sup>20</sup> had proved to be disappointing. 'Kommissarjevskaya is a marvellous actress ... but at the performance she too succumbed to the prevailing mood of hostility toward my *Seagull* and was intimidated by it, as it were, and her voice failed her.'<sup>21</sup>

Chekhov, ever the realist, thanked one of the first-night audience who had written to 'pour healing balm on the author's wounds', but refused to deny the harsh reality of his own experience:

I did not see everything at the first performance, but what I did see was vague, dingy, dreary, and wooden. I had no hand in assigning the parts, I wasn't given any new scenery, there were only two rehearsals, the actors didn't know their parts — and the result was general panic, utter depression of spirit; even Kommissarjevskaya's performance was nothing much, though her playing at one of the rehearsals was so prodigious that people in the orchestra wept and blew their noses.<sup>22</sup>

It is important not to confuse the first-night performance with the production as a whole. Chekhov had expressed only minor dissatisfaction with Kommissarzhevskaya's interpretation of the role of Nina during rehearsals. He had asked her to tone down her performance of Treplev's play, since, as he pointed out to her, 'Nina is a young girl brought up in the country ... she finds herself on a stage for the first time ... she suffers from stage-fright, she is very nervous'.<sup>23</sup>

When he saw the play, Chekhov was disappointed with the performance, and even with the playing of Kommissarzhevskaya. However, it is clear that

this negative reaction was exacerbated by the fact that she had not done herself or the role justice on opening night as a result of having been 'thrown' by the bizarre behaviour of the audience. Chekhov's disappointment may well have been heightened by the fact that he felt that the role of Nina was of central importance in the play. He is reported to have told Karpov, the director of the production, that 'this part means *everything* to me in this play'.<sup>24</sup>

Chekhov was clearly impressed by Kommissarzhevskaya's overall interpretation of the role. Clara Hollosi provides evidence of how enthusiastic the playwright was about the performance of this actress:

Despite his reaction to this fated premiere, Chekhov maintained a correspondence with Kommissarzhevskaya until the end of his life, and he always remembered her and her performance fondly. For instance, Efros gives his account of a conversation with Chekhov on the occasion of the Alexandrine Theatre's revival of *The Seagull* in 1902: 'We recalled the first *Seagull* in Petersburg. A cheerful smile appeared on Chekhov's sullen visage when he remembered Kommissarzhevskaya's Nina. I don't remember the exact words, only the tone — a tone of delight.' Even a year before his death, when the Moscow Art Theatre was preparing a guest performance in St Petersburg of *The Seagull*, Chekhov suggested that they invite Kommissarzhevskaya to play the role of Nina.<sup>25</sup>

Hollosi's article examines and compares the performance of Kommissarzhevskaya in Karpov's St Petersburg production, with that of Roxonova in Stanislavski's Moscow Art Theatre production in 1898. Having shown that Chekhov obviously preferred the earlier interpretation of Nina's role, Hollosi nevertheless refuses to acknowledge that Roxonova's interpretation of the role was in any way inferior to that of Kommissarzhevskaya. Hollosi states that her article:

... does not intend to suggest that either of the two Nina interpretations discussed ... is 'correct' or 'incorrect' in accordance with Chekhov's likes or dislikes: since Stanislavski the director-oriented theatre has long won its right for independent interpretations of the classics.<sup>26</sup>

Hollosi's genuflection to the concept of director's theatre denies the real value of her research. By accepting the idea that there is no necessary nexus between the playwright's play and the director's interpretation of it, she allows for no possibility of directorial misinterpretation. She concludes by making the trivial claim that her study 'simply wishes to throw light on Chekhov's reactions to some early stage interpretations of one of his fascinating ambiguous characters'.<sup>27</sup> What Hollosi's research has achieved, I believe, is much more significant than she claims.

If one does not accept the highly questionable claim that directors have a 'right' to 'independent' interpretations, in which their directorial decisions need

bear no relation to what Susanne Langer has called the 'immanent form' of the play; if we can accept that some productions are better than others, on the ground that they more fully realise the action of the play; and if, in fact, we accept that a play can be misinterpreted, then we can learn from Hollosi's article the extent to which Stanislavski misinterpreted the role of Nina and distorted the significance of Treplev's symbolist play. Ultimately, the information supplied in Hollosi's article helps greatly to explain why Chekhov felt Stanislavski did not understand his plays.

We need to examine the ways in which Stanislavski failed to realise on stage the vision of reality expressed in Chekhov's playscript and provide some explanation why this director, despite having misinterpreted *The Seagull*, nevertheless had such a success with this production that the Moscow Art Theatre adopted an image of a seagull as its emblem.

Stanislavski was honest enough to admit in his later writings that he found *The Seagull* 'strange and monotonous after its first reading' and, even after having listened to Nemirovich-Danchenko explain the play and having grown to like the characters, he confessed that 'as soon as I remained alone with the script of the play, I ceased to like it and was bored with it'.<sup>28</sup> Despite his misgivings, Stanislavski set about preparing a detailed *mise-en-scène* for the play in the manner of the autocratic director. As he himself put it: 'At that time, while our actors were yet untrained, the despotic methods of the stage director were in full force. The stage director of necessity became the only creator of the play.'<sup>29</sup>

An examination of Stanislavski's prompt-book for this production reveals his obsession with making the stage 'lifelike' and provides evidence that helps us to understand why this auteur director often missed the artistic point of Chekhov's understated dramaturgy. In his writings on the theatre, Meyerhold, who played Treplev in this production, recalled a typical case of Stanislavskian overkill. The director's love of literal realism was combined with his love of melodrama to produce the kind of 'theatricality' that Chekhov was specifically trying to avoid:

One of the actors proudly told Chekhov that the director intended to bring the entire household, including a woman with a child crying, on to the stage at the close of the third act of *The Seagull*. Chekhov said: 'He mustn't. It would be like playing pianissimo on the piano and having the lid suddenly crash down.' 'But in life it often happens that the pianissimo is interrupted quite unexpectedly by the forte,' reported one of the actors. 'Yes, but the stage demands a degree of artifice,' said A. P. 'You have no fourth wall. Besides, the stage is art, the stage reflects the quintessence of life and there is no need to introduce anything superfluous on to it.'<sup>30</sup>

Chekhov was too ill to leave Yalta and come up to Moscow to see the Moscow Art Theatre's 'successful' production of *The Seagull*, but he begged to see a special performance of the play when he had recovered enough to travel to Moscow early in 1899. Chekhov had explained to Stanislavski why it was vital for him to see the production: 'Listen, it is necessary for me. I am its author. How can I write anything else until I have seen it?'<sup>31</sup> Stanislavski staged a special performance, without the use of sets, for Chekhov's benefit. Being able to concentrate on the actors' interpretations of their roles, Chekhov soon made it clear to Stanislavski that he disliked the dandified manner in which the director played the role of the writer, Trigorin, but his most scathing criticism was aimed at the actress Roxonova for what he felt was her inept portrayal of the role of Nina. Writing to Maxim Gorky soon after he had seen this performance, he conceded that it 'wasn't bad on the whole', but was deeply distressed by several performances: 'I can't judge the play with equanimity, because the seagull herself gave such an abominable performance — she blubbered loudly throughout.'<sup>32</sup>

Stanislavski's own account of Chekhov's reaction reveals just how upset the playwright was at Roxonova's depiction of Nina as a weeping neurotic. During the act breaks in the performance of the play the director observed Chekhov and noted that 'his face bore no signs of inner joy'. At the conclusion of the play he delivered his critique of the acting:

Chekhov praised some of the actors, others received their full meed of blame. This was true of one actress especially, with whose work Chekhov was completely dissatisfied. 'Listen,' he said, 'she can't act in my play. You have another actress who could be much finer in the part, who is a much better actress.'<sup>33</sup>

When Stanislavski pointed out that to replace Roxonova in the role would be tantamount to firing her, Chekhov appears to have been so upset by her interpretation that, in his desire to have her replaced, he even went as far as to threaten the director. 'Listen,' Stanislavski reports him saying, 'I will take the play away from you.' Despite hoping that Chekhov would calm down and forget about the idea of replacing Roxonova, Stanislavski was surprised when he kept repeating: 'Listen, she can't act in my play.'<sup>34</sup>

The fact that Chekhov was 'appalled' by 'the hysterical interpretation of Nina'<sup>35</sup> has been noted by many critics, and most assume that the actress was to blame for this depiction. However, evidence cited in Hollosi's article suggests that Roxonova was attempting an interpretation of the role that was uncongenial to her but which had been foisted on her by Stanislavski. As Braun has pointed out, the autocratic approach that characterised Stanislavski's directing style at this stage of his career meant that he controlled every element of the production. 'Every detail of the production was prescribed, including the actor's every move, gesture, and vocal inflection.'<sup>36</sup> Apparently Nemirovich-Danchenko, who was

in charge of the 'literary' interpretation of the play's 'content', had interpreted Nina in a positive manner. However, Stanislavski, whose assigned task was the 'formal' stage realisation of that interpretation, disagreed with his partner's view of Nina's character.<sup>37</sup>

Essentially, Stanislavski regarded Nina as a failure in both her life and her art. He had, as Magarshack points out in his biography of the director, 'entirely misunderstood the character of Nina and in doing so distorted the ruling idea of the play'.<sup>38</sup> That ruling idea was bound up with Nina, and in particular with her ability to grow, suffer and ultimately to endure the painful vicissitudes of living a life without illusions. She embodies the hopeful aspects of Chekhov's overall vision of reality. Unless she is interpreted in a positive manner, this 'comedy' becomes a forlorn elegy celebrating the absurdity of the human condition. *The Seagull* becomes the play described by Gillès, namely, 'the drama — or the comedy, according to the author's self-effacing and dishonest subtitle — of ambitions that will never be realised, of inevitably doomed ambitions'.<sup>39</sup>

If, as I have argued, Chekhov is demonstrably not an absurdist, but rather a cautious optimist — 'a believer in a brighter future for the human race', as Magarshack puts it — then, in order to allow this play to 'imperceptively [force] the spectator to identify himself with this belief',<sup>40</sup> Nina's speeches to Treplev near the end of Act Four must be performed in a manner that suggests that she is not deluding herself:

NINA. ... Constantine [Treplev], I know now, I've come to see, that in our work — no matter whether we're actors or writers — the great thing isn't fame or glory, it isn't what I used to dream of, but simply stamina. You must know how to bear your cross and have faith. I have faith and things don't hurt me so much now. And when I think of my vocation I'm not afraid of life.<sup>41</sup>

Nemirovich-Danchenko, who had a high regard for the actress Roxonova, even telling Chekhov that this 'spirited young actress' had been described by the painter Ivanov as 'A little Duse',<sup>42</sup> felt moved to tell Chekhov that her performance had not been up to the standard of the other performers in the otherwise highly successful first-night performance of the play in Moscow. The reasons that Nemirovich cites for this relative failure are revealing. Having given a detailed description of the wonderful reception given to the performance, he comments on the acting:

Weakest of all was Roksanova who was confused by Alekseiev [Stanislavski], who directed her to play like some idiot. I got angry with her and demanded that she go back to the earlier lyrical tone. That confused her.<sup>43</sup>

Any actor who has ever been simultaneously directed by two directors with very different ideas about the same show will appreciate why Roxonova had every right to be 'confused'. Chekhov had seen two rehearsals on 9 and 11

September 1898 and, presumably, the actress playing Nina had been following Nemirovich-Danchenko's 'lyrical' interpretation of the role, which seems to have accorded with Chekhov's own conception. He wrote to the writer Yezhov: 'I saw two rehearsals; I like it. Roxanova is quite good.'<sup>44</sup> He received news in Yalta however which suggested that something was wrong with Roxanova's performance by the time the play actually opened. Chekhov had asked Yezhov to write and give him his impressions of the performance. Yezhov replied:

Seagull-Zarechnaya — Mme Roxanova was over-anxious to act well, but she couldn't even give a glimpse of the gentle Nina. Her attitude was all wrong, it was as if she were groping blindly, and in each monologue she was searching for the correct path, but alas, could not find it.<sup>45</sup>

Chekhov's anger at the way Nina had been turned into a sobbing wreck under Stanislavski's direction is recorded vividly in Olga Knipper's memoirs. In particular Chekhov was furious at the way Act Four — the Act in which Nina was supposed to face the world's hardships with 'faith' — had been totally misinterpreted:

Chekhov, the mild-mannered Chekhov, walked on the stage with his watch in his hand, looking grave and pale, and declared in a very determined voice that everything was excellent, 'but,' he continued, 'I suggest that my play should end with the Third Act: I shall not permit you to play the Fourth Act.' He was dissatisfied with many things, chiefly with the tempo of the play. He was very excited, and told us that the Fourth Act was not from his play.<sup>46</sup>

Stanislavski had not simply indulged his penchant for making the stage 'lifelike' by including what was to become his trademark — the use of a multiplicity of naturalistic sound effects and attenuated pregnant pauses — he had transformed the action of Chekhov's play to such an extent that, far from being a drama in which inauthentic and spineless behaviour is shown to reduce life to absurdity, and courageous endurance and work is seen as the hope for improving the conditions of life, it became a self-pitying depiction of *fin-de-siècle* gloom and despair. The play for Stanislavski was about the romantic tragedy of the misunderstood and undervalued artist, and this interpretation was pushed by the director with all of the sentimentality that he used so effectively on his productions of melodramas. 'The tragedy,' he claimed, 'is self-evident. Can the provincial mother understand the complex longings of her talented son?'<sup>47</sup> Once having decided that Treplev was some sort of genius 'with the soul of Chekhov and a true comprehension of art',<sup>48</sup> Stanislavski had to find an explanation why this great talent wasn't immediately recognised when Treplev's symbolist playlet was performed. The scapegoat was near at hand. 'Nina Zarechnaya is the cause of the failure of Treplev's talented play.'<sup>49</sup>

In *My Life in Art* Stanislavski outlines the reading of Nina that he tried to impose on Roxonova. It bears little resemblance to the 'lyrical' interpretation suggested by Nemirovich-Danchenko and lacks any of the maturity and resilience that is implied in Chekhov's script, and which was such an important aspect of the vision of reality that he wished to depict. Writing in the overblown florid style that was so congenial to him, Stanislavski creates the melodrama replete with villains and heroes in which *his* Nina can function:

She is not an actress, although she dreams of being one so as to earn the love of the worthless Trigorin. She does not understand what she is playing. She is too young to understand the deep gloom of the soul of Treplev. She has not yet suffered enough to perceive the eternal tragedy of the world. She must first fall in love with the scoundrelly Lovelace Trigorin and give him all that is beautiful in woman, give it to him in vain, at an accidental meeting in some low inn. The young and beautiful life is deformed and killed just as meaninglessly as the beautiful white seagull was killed by Treplev because of nothing to do. Poor Nina, before understanding the depth of what she is playing, must bear a child in secret, must suffer hunger and privation many years, dragging herself through the lower depths of all the provincial theatres, must come to know the scoundrelly attentions of merchants to a young actress, must come to know her own giftlessness, in order to be able in her last farewell meeting with Treplev in the fourth act of the play to feel at last all the eternal and tragic depth of Treplev's monologue, and perhaps for the last and only time say it like a true actress and force Treplev and the spectators in the theatre to shed holy tears called forth by the power of art.<sup>50</sup>

Here we have the perfect example of the limitations of Stanislavski as a director of Chekhov's plays. While not being politically radical, the playwright's social ideas were far more progressive than the conservative Stanislavski, whose attitude towards Nina reveals how little he understood this 'new woman'. Stanislavski's strength lay in his ability to create exciting theatre. Nemirovich-Danchenko's own criticisms of Stanislavski's approach are extremely perceptive and highlight both the director's strengths and weaknesses:

You are an exceptional *regisseur*, but so far only for melodrama or for farce, for productions full of dazzling stage effects, but which bind you neither to psychological nor to verbal demands. You trample upon every creative production. Sometimes you have the good fortune to fuse with it; in such an instance the result is excellent, but more often after the first two acts the author, if he happens to be a great poet or a great playwright, begins to call you to account for your inattention to his play's deepest and most significant inner movements. And that is why with the third act your performances begin their downward turn.<sup>51</sup>

We now have evidence concerning the ways in which Stanislavski changed the meaning of the play. The Russian critic, M. Stroyeva, noted how Nina was encouraged to present herself as a failure, an image of 'ruined illusions'. This critic's description of what Roxonova actually did in performance in order to carry out Stanislavski's wishes is included in Hollosi's article on the two interpretations of Nina. It goes some way to explain why the critic N. Ye. Efros, who was otherwise deeply impressed by *The Seagull*, should have found Roxonova's Nina unsatisfactory, and why Chekhov should have reacted so negatively to this characterisation:

The actress, writes Stroyeva, emphasised mainly the fall of a human being broken by life's vicissitudes. The figures of Nina and Treplyov were associated in this performance with motifs of despondency, nervous agitation, sharp collisions, and half-hysterical sobbings. To underscore the theme of defeat, Stanislavski omitted this line from the last scene: 'I am a seagull ... No, that's not it. I'm an actress. Oh well.' The whole monologue was presented in 'a single stiff pose', she was 'exhausted', 'leaning her tired head on her hand', and only straightened herself in the end. The recollection of Treplyov's play was accompanied by the endless roar of the wind and the sound of rain through the open door. Nina's exit was prepared by the director so as not to leave any doubt in the spectator about Nina's gloomy, or rather tragic, future.<sup>52</sup>

When we look back at the description by the actress M. Chitau-Karmina, who played the role of Masha in the earlier St Petersburg production, of the way Kommissarzhevskaya attempted to play Nina, we can see how much closer she was to Chekhov's own conception of the role than Roxonova's tearful failure was to be. Apparently the original intention in the first production was to ridicule Treplev's play by staging it 'in a comic vein of old-fashioned taste and spirit'.<sup>53</sup> That plan was abandoned when Kommissarzhevskaya played the role in a non-burlesque manner. This 'serious' playing of the symbolist playlet made it possible for Dorn, the doctor in the play, to praise both the playlet and Nina's performance in it, without appearing to be a complete fool. If Treplev's drama is played in such a way that *both* the on-stage and off-stage audiences are forced to judge it as laughable balderdash, then Dorn must appear to the off-stage audience as a character who is incapable of discriminating between dramatic art and dramatic rubbish. Left alone after the play, Dorn soliloquises:

Well, I don't know. Perhaps it's all rather beyond me, perhaps I've gone mad, but I liked the play. It has something. When that child spoke about loneliness, and then afterwards when the Devil's red eyes appeared, my hands shook with excitement. It was all so fresh and innocent. Look, I think he's coming. I want to be as nice about it as I can.<sup>54</sup>

Even though Chekhov's use of the non-realistic theatrical convention of the soliloquy fits uneasily into the new kind of realistic drama he was attempting to write, it does suggest that an audience is supposed to interpret Dorn's account of his response to Treplev's play as an honest one. His being alone on stage when he relates his experience ensures the veracity of his comments since he can have no reason to lie to the audience about his positive reaction to Treplev's and Nina's efforts. Chitau's description of Kommissarzhevskaya's performance would certainly suggest that Dorn's favourable response to Nina's acting and to Treplev's play was not ludicrously inappropriate:

She started the monologue in a low tone of her wonderful voice gradually raising it and engrossing all the attention to its modulations. Then she gradually lowered her voice as if extinguishing a fire, and pronouncing the last words 'and earth will all have been gradually turned to dust' it almost died down.<sup>55</sup>

While some of the audience responded negatively to the play, Kommissarzhevskaya's individual performance elicited rapturous praise. Chitau records that 'everybody felt that the brightness that emanated from the playing of this actress, kept radiating in the theatre. When she came out to bow alone, the audience cheered her with enthusiasm.'<sup>56</sup> Kommissarzhevskaya played the role of Nina in several later productions and, according to contemporary accounts, she always managed to convince the audience that Nina was talented. Indeed, Hollosi points out that Kommissarzhevskaya's playing of Nina was in line with Chekhov's unsentimental view of women. Stanislavski may have held the old-fashioned melodramatic view that to lose her virginity to Trigorin was for Nina to 'give him all that was beautiful in woman', but nowhere in his writings does Chekhov proclaim this antiquated sexist standpoint. Kommissarzhevskaya even felt that Chekhov in *The Seagull* had:

... enriched the portrayals of Russian women with a new facet: that of an awakening creative personality. An unhappy love affair no longer destroys such a woman, but activates her to find her true vocation.<sup>57</sup>

Hollosi recounts the story of Kommissarzhevskaya sending a friend a photograph, presumably of herself, on which she had written a quotation from *The Seagull*: 'When I think of my vocation, I am not afraid of life.' The strength of character implicit in this quotation was totally lacking in Stanislavski's interpretation. Roxonova's Nina 'in the first act ... imitated naivete and in the final scene wavered between tearful melodrama and pathological contrivances'.<sup>58</sup> As Hollosi accurately points out:

The essence of Kommissarzhevskaya's portrayal of Nina is this active acceptance of life together with all its hardships. This theme returns repeatedly in Chekhov's later works, and it seems it is not a coincidence that Kommissarzhevskaya's interpretation and performance captivated the author so much.<sup>59</sup>

I have dealt with the markedly divergent directorial interpretations evident in the St Petersburg and Moscow productions not in order to belittle Stanislavski, but rather to suggest that it is possible to misinterpret a play and still produce a resounding success. More importantly, I wish to argue that it is never justifiable for a director to be totally 'independent' of the 'literary text' when preparing the 'performance text'. Finding the means to communicate Chekhov's play is surely more likely to produce a rich theatrical experience than simply relying on a director's 'whims of temperament and chance outbursts of fancy'.<sup>60</sup>

Raymond Williams has suggested that a major problem faced by directors of Chekhov has arisen because of the playwright's adoption of the conventions of realism. Williams argues that the realistic form militates against the possibility of a director achieving any realisation of the play's action, since the more complete the achievement of verisimilitude, the less visible the action becomes. If Harold Pinter is correct in his observation that in our day-to-day living, 'The more acute the experience the less articulate its expression',<sup>61</sup> then a form of drama that attempts to be lifelike will only be able to express the banal surface of life, while the important inner experience remains hidden. In effect the dramatic 'text' that utilises the conventions of realism is, as Williams describes it, 'incomplete', and the play can only be fleshed out through the imaginative interpolations suggested by the director and embodied in the *mise-en-scène* and the actors' 'subtext'.

Williams sums up what he sees as the major problem of Chekhovian dramaturgy and the limitations of the conventions of realism in the following way:

The representation of appearances, of what is external and on the surface, can be directly dramatized, in that patient stage dressing and carpentry. In Chekhov or Ibsen, on the other hand, what is visible and directly expressible, is no more than a counterpoint to the unrealized life — the inner and common desires, fears, possibilities — which struggles to find itself in just this solidly staged world. When we speak of naturalism, we must distinguish between this passion for the whole truth, for the liberation of what cannot yet be said or done, and the confident and even complacent representation of things as they are, that things are what they seem. This latter convention of the naturalist habit, has been surprisingly durable; it still supports a majority of our dramas, in all forms. But the serious and exploring drama, from Ibsen and Chekhov and Strindberg to Brecht and Beckett, was faced always with a contradiction: that which it seemed to make real, in theatrical terms, was what it wished to show as a limited reality, in dramatic terms. All the difficulties of performing Chekhov come from this contradiction.<sup>62</sup>

Notwithstanding Williams' arguments, it is clear that Chekhov does, in fact, provide the necessary encoded signals in the texts of his plays that allow a

director who is willing to seek them out to decipher them and thus to be in a position to theatrically realise the action of Chekhov's plays without having to resort to the 'whims' and 'fancies' that Nemirovich-Danchenko felt Stanislavski employed. Chekhov, of course, was committed to a form of art which aimed, as part of its project, to hide its own artifice, but even though he wished his plays to simulate real life, he always remained an artist who never confused art with life. His artistry involved using the conventions of prosaic realism and transcending the limitations that Williams thought were inherent in that form. So successful was he in doing this that T. S. Eliot was grudgingly led to say that Chekhov did things of which he, Eliot, would not otherwise have thought prose to be capable.

One of Chekhov's earliest references to *The Seagull* shows that he was consciously trying to create a 'new form' of drama that would replace the cheap theatricality of melodrama and the mechanical structure of the well-made play. 'I am writing a play, ... I am writing it with considerable pleasure, though I sin frightfully against the conventions of the stage.'<sup>63</sup> The main convention of the stage that Chekhov was sinning against was the requirement that plays be full of external or what Magarshack calls direct action. Instead of producing exciting on-stage events, Chekhov was attempting to write a work of indirect action, where the main events of the drama take place off-stage and the text reflects only the trivial surface of life. This playtext, however, incorporated sufficient readable signals to the director, and ultimately the actor, to imply a coherent and rich subtext that could be communicated to an audience in performance. Chekhov wished to show his spectators images of people very like themselves who waste their potential by living 'silly trivial lives'. Consequently, he depicted his characters in a way that showed them doing very little that is significant in terms of overt action — indeed, often doing things that are amusing in their banality. It is the task of the actors to make the audience aware of the characters' subtextual desire to be more significant and effective than they actually are. The tragic subtext of unfulfilled desires is juxtaposed with the comic text of silly trivial behaviour and the audience's perception of the gap between the characters' external and internal lives produces the kind of synthetic tragi-comedy that we now recognise as Chekhovian.

In a letter to Suvorin, Chekhov points out the trivial elements that he intended to use for the surface action of *The Seagull*: 'It is a comedy with three female parts, six male, four acts, a landscape (view of a lake), lots of talk on literature, little action and tons of love.'<sup>64</sup> The 'tons of love' does not produce the kind of romantic comedy in which every Jack gets his Jill. That would be the dramatisation of the successful achievement of desire. In *The Seagull*, and in various ways in Chekhov's later plays, the presentation of relationships involves a whole daisy-chain of unrequited lovers, all of whom seem to choose the wrong potential mate to dote on. Each would-be lover is attracted to another person,

but seems to be aware only of that person's outer life. This trivial outer life is evident in the text. If these lovers were to pay attention to the signs that periodically surface from the subtextual inner life of the characters they are attracted to, they would realise how unreciprocated and pointless their love is. This lack of awareness of the other is not presented as some existential malaise that is an inevitable part of the human condition, but is simply one of the means that Chekhov employs to show that self-centred behaviour makes human beings ridiculous. The characters in the chain are always so acutely aware of their own anguish and desires that they are unaware of, or ignore the suffering of the other characters who love them.

Brooks and Heilman accurately describe the chain of lovers who are unloved, but fail to note that much of the pain experienced by these characters is self-inflicted, resulting from their own hopelessly egocentric behaviour:

Medevenko is in love with Masha, who is in love with Treplev, who is in love with Nina, who is in love with Trigorin, who is in love (at least in his own way) with Madame Arcadin, who is in love with herself.<sup>65</sup>

All of the characters in the chain at some time in the play become self-obsessed; some of them never acquire the necessary objectivity to see themselves and others clearly. The opening dialogue of the play presents a perfect example of this self-obsession:

MEDVEDENKO. Why do you wear black all the time?

MASHA. I'm in mourning for my life, I'm unhappy.

MEDVEDENKO. Why? [*Reflects.*] I don't understand. You're healthy and your father's quite well off, even if he's not rich. I'm much worse off than you — I'm only paid twenty-three roubles a month, and what with pension deductions I don't even get that. But I don't go round like someone at a funeral. [*They sit down.*]

MASHA. Money doesn't matter, even a poor man can be happy.

MEDVEDENKO. Yes — in theory. But look how it works out. There's me, my mother, my two sisters and my young brother. But I only earn twenty-three roubles and we need food and drink, don't we? Tea and sugar? And tobacco? We can hardly make ends meet.

MASHA. [*Looking back at the stage.*] The play will be on soon.<sup>66</sup>

Masha, as we will soon learn, is not in mourning for anyone who has died, she is simply in love with Treplev, who does not love her. Both her costume and her speech are excessive responses to what is a sad but hardly extraordinary occurrence. Steiner justly observed that 'melodrama', in its pejorative sense, occurs when 'the effect is invariably in gross excess of the cause'.<sup>67</sup> Masha's behaviour is ludicrously melodramatic for this very reason. Quoting a line from a short story written by the bleakly pessimistic Maupassant and trailing around

'like Niobe, all tears', can be seen as the silly pose that it is, only if the director encourages the actor playing the role to suggest to an audience that Masha's behaviour is excessive. In the script, Chekhov provides clear signals to the director to indicate that Masha is indeed over-dramatising her situation. He has her almost instantaneously drop the pose of suffering tragic heroine and adopt a much more pragmatic and down-to-earth manner. Masha refuses to put up with any romantic nonsense from Medvedenko when he whines about his unrequited love for her. Far from treating him like some tragic lover who, like herself, 'is in mourning for his life', Masha's response is brutally realistic. She is blithely unaware of the gap between her melodramatically excessive response to her own unloved situation and her realistically hardheaded response to Medvedenko's similar loveless condition. What she says to Medvedenko applies with equal validity to her own situation:

MASHA. What rubbish. [*Takes snuff.*] Your loving me is all very touching, but I can't love you back and that's that. [*Offers him her snuffbox.*] Have some.<sup>68</sup>

Masha's abrupt shift from the world of romantic melodrama to that of modern realism should alert directors to the fact that the audience is not meant to take her grandiose behaviour too seriously. It is peculiarly appropriate that Medvedenko is so bound up with his own problems, especially his obsession with money, he totally fails to respond to Masha's 'tragic' behaviour. He is also completely unaware of the real reason for Masha's unhappiness. At the end of the first act Masha brings her subtextual anguish into the text when she voices her problems to Dr Dorn. He replies in an understanding manner but his comments have a meaning similar to Masha's statement to Medvedenko earlier in the act when she recognised the situation but accepts that 'that's that':

MASHA. I'm so unhappy. No one, no one knows how I suffer. [*Lays her head on his breast, softly.*] I love Constantine.

DORN. What a state they're all in. And what a lot of loving. Oh, magic lake! [*Tenderly.*] But what can I do, my child? What can I do?

CURTAIN.<sup>69</sup>

Chekhov has written Masha's confession of her secret love in the language of romantic melodrama, and it was just this kind of sentimental drama that he was trying to avoid writing. Having unquestioningly employed many of the techniques of melodrama in plays like *Platonov* and *Ivanov*, Chekhov increasingly used these outdated techniques ironically and even parodically in *The Seagull* and the plays that followed.

Dr. Dorn plays the role of *raisonneur* in *The Seagull*. He refuses to treat Masha's dramatic confession as if it were some tragic revelation. Dorn's amused response provides the norm by which an audience is encouraged to judge the appropriateness or otherwise of Masha's behaviour. If a director has the actor

play Dorn in a manner that emphasises both his warmth and his wisdom, as Chekhov's text implies, then an audience will be more likely to see Masha from his point of view. She is a child in matters of the heart and has yet to learn that life must go on even if romance is not fulfilled.<sup>70</sup>

During the two years that separate Acts III and IV Masha has made an unhappy marriage with the boring schoolteacher, Medvedenko, and, although she still loves Treplev, she appears to have acquired a more realistic view of her situation than she had at the beginning of the play. It is her mother, Polina, who remains the incurable romantic. She is still hopelessly in love with Dr Dorn and, despite his rather cool response to her, she continues to behave like some lovesick heroine in a work of romantic fiction. When Polina attempts to encourage Treplev to 'be a bit nicer' to her 'poor Masha', the daughter's response is evidence that she at least has ceased to live her life in the over-dramatised world of romantic melodrama. Like Nina, she learns how to endure in the prosaic real world:

POLINA. ... Please be a bit nicer to my poor Masha, dear.

MASHA. [*Making up the bed.*] Leave him alone, Mother.

POLINA. [*To TREPLEV.*] She's such a nice girl. [*Pause.*] A woman needs nothing, Constantine, just a few kind looks. I've learnt that.

[*TREPLEV gets up from the desk and goes out without speaking.*]

MASHA. Now you've annoyed him. Why go on at him?

POLINA. I'm sorry for you, Masha.

MASHA. A lot of use that is!

POLINA. My heart aches for you. I see everything, you know, I understand.

MASHA. Don't be so silly. Unhappy love affairs are only found in novels. What nonsense! The thing is, don't give way to it, and don't moon around waiting for the tide to turn. If love enters your heart, get rid of it. My husband's been promised a job in another part of the country. I'm going to forget all this when we move. I'll tear it from my heart.

[*A melancholy waltz is playing in the next room but one.*]

POLINA. That's Constantine playing, he must be depressed.

MASHA. [*Silently does two or three waltz steps.*] The thing is not to keep seeing him, Mother. If only Simon gets that new job, I'll be over this in a month, take it from me. It's all so silly.<sup>71</sup>

The production notes that Stanislavski made for his production of *The Seagull* clearly show that he did not discern any of the gentle irony that underlies Chekhov's use of melodramatic excess. Stanislavski's own love of theatricality and melodrama led him to see characters like Masha as wholly tragic and consequently lines like, 'I'm in mourning for my life, I'm unhappy', are taken seriously and underscored with a battery of staging effects that are not specified by Chekhov. The comic irony implied in Chekhov's script is submerged in the doom-laden *mise-en-scène* provided by the director:

The play starts in darkness, an (August) evening. The dim light of a lantern on top of a lamp-post, distant sounds of a drunkard's song, distant howling of a dog, the croaking of frogs, ... the slow tolling of a distant church-bell — help the audience to get the feel of the sad, monotonous life of the characters.<sup>72</sup>

Just in case the audience might still miss the point that the drama that is to follow is of a portentous and gloomy nature, he includes 'Flashes of lightning, faint rumbling of *thunder* in the distance'.<sup>73</sup> Against such a background, it is hardly surprising that Masha's opening line should have been delivered without any comic irony. Peter Holland is surely correct however, when he observes that Masha's 'comment, viewed by Stanislavski as an expression of an essentially tragic attitude, seems rather to be so off-hand as to be mocking'.<sup>74</sup> In Stanislavski's interpretation, there is no perceivable gap between a 'tragic subtext' and a 'comic text'. Instead, Stanislavski provides stage-business for the actor playing Masha that makes her outer life as tragic as her inner life.

In the scene in Act Four where she talks with Polina about how 'silly' and pointless her love for Treplev is, Stanislavski tries to ensure that his audience is in no doubt that it will be tragically impossible for Masha 'to forget all this' and not to 'give way to it'. Masha's resolve is undercut by several 'sighs', and her statement, 'I'll be over this in a month', is accompanied by the following business:

Masha sighs again, waltzes to the window, stops beside it, looking out into the darkness, and taking out a handkerchief stealthily, wipes the few tears that roll down her cheeks.<sup>75</sup>

As Holland points out: 'The stealthiness is the cover for the revelation of the 'truth' of her feelings. Stanislavski views her consistently as someone in the agonies of unfulfilled love, a prolonged scream of frustrated yearning that Chekhov would probably not have recognised.'<sup>76</sup>

One of the major problems for today's directors of Chekhov is that, for many people, Stanislavski's interpretations are often taken to be 'authentic' Chekhov. Yet time and again the playwright complained of this kind of gloomy interpretation. In 1902, he wrote to Alexander Tikhonov:

You say you wept over my plays. You are not the only one. But I did not write them for this. It was Stanislavsky who made them so tearful. I intended something quite different.<sup>77</sup>

Reviewers and directors alike produce variations on the gloomy Chekhov inspired by Stanislavski's sombre vision of his plays. Milton Shulman of the *Standard*, reviewing Philip Prowse's 1984 production of *The Seagull*, confidently asserts that: '*The Seagull* by Chekhov is a play about people who have resigned themselves to unhappiness but still cling precariously to hope.'<sup>78</sup> The production

attempted, according to Shulman, to convey an 'atmosphere of compassionate futility', and no mention is made of any positive vision of reality that might be present in the play or the production. There has been a tradition on the British stage in particular to play Chekhov in this lugubrious manner. St John Irvine's review of Filmer's 1929 production of *The Seagull* at the Arts Theatre Club in London evocatively captures the mood of that production:

Wave after wave of gloom rolled off the stage ... When someone said, 'There must be many fish in the lake!', he spoke as if he was certain that anyone who ate a fish would immediately come out in a rash or contract ptomaine poisoning.<sup>79</sup>

Patrick Miles quotes the reaction of the expatriate Russian director, Komisarjevsky, to mid-1920s British productions which aped Stanislavski's approach. After seeing *The Seagull*, he wrote that he had 'rarely laughed so heartily ... when the nonsense to which this simple play had been reduced by a *meaningful*, monotonous and dreary production was accepted by the audience as a *highbrow* affair'.<sup>80</sup>

Not everyone in Britain in the early part of the century was taken in by the misinterpretation of Chekhov's plays as dramas of pessimism. Frank Swinnerton, for example, wrote in a review in *Nation* in 1920 that to present Chekhov as a 'solemn' playwright was inaccurate:

This is really to falsify the spirit of Chekhov, who was an artist and a humorist ... Until this fact is grasped, and Chekhov is played with some lightness and naturalness of deportment, we shall always lose the true quality of his dramatic work.<sup>81</sup>

Charles Sturridge's 1985 London production of *The Seagull* provides a clear illustration of the difficulties involved in finding the appropriate balance between the comic and tragic elements of the play. In the opening scene of the play, Sturridge directed Phoebe Nicholls in the role of Masha in an appropriately comic manner by having her play her famous first line in a parodically melodramatic fashion that clearly indicated to the audience that her 'tragic' behaviour was decidedly excessive. Michael Billington, reviewing this production, praises Sturridge's attempt to emphasise the comic potential of the script and describes how the actor achieved this effect: 'When Phoebe Nicholls' Masha says she is in mourning, she flings herself tempestuously on a chaise-longue and then spreads her arms wide adding "for my life": it gets a laugh.'<sup>82</sup>

In the same production, the director added a piece of business at the end of the play that was also highly melodramatic. However, unlike his earlier use of this overtly theatrical form, which had been in sympathy with Chekhov's own gently parodic use of it, Sturridge created a moment of pure melodrama which

was in no sense ironical. The kind of cheap theatricality employed in this piece of business epitomises the sort of melodramatic 'event' that Chekhov was desperately trying to avoid in his dramas of 'indirect' action and the sort of theatrical overkill that reminds one of Stanislavski at his worst. Francis King described his negative response to what occurred. 'When brutally violating Chekhov's subtly mordant close to the play, [Masha] sprays the stage with vomit at the news of Konstantin's suicide, the director once again displays his imperfect sympathy with his author.'<sup>83</sup> As Milton Shulman pointed out, 'the usual impact' of the explicitly non-theatrical ending specified by Chekhov in his stage directions 'is devastating'. Sturridge's *coup-de-theatre*, in the form of Masha's vomiting, is paradoxically less effective in that it strains for the kind of theatricality that is alien to Chekhov's drama. As Shulman rightly states: 'Not only does this action make nonsense of the doctor's intention to prevent Arcadina hearing about her son's death, but it negates and spoils the play's understated climax by introducing an element of physical vulgarity that affronts Chekhov's fastidious and cultivated style.'<sup>84</sup>

Directors who are tempted to introduce obviously theatrical business into their *mise-en-scène* might do well to remember that Chekhov's stated aim was to write plays that would *not* conform to the theatrical demands of melodrama and the well-made play but be true to life. It is the ordinary quality of what happens in a Chekhov play that needs to be remembered by directors. Important events do occur but they should not be foregrounded if the director wishes to realise Chekhov's play.

In *The Seagull* several characters are playing lotto at the time of Konstantin's [Treplev's] suicide and thus this potentially theatrical event is barely noticed by those on-stage. This was precisely the effect that Chekhov had tried, unsuccessfully, to achieve in his earlier plays. He had at last managed to 'write a play in which people come and go, eat, talk about the weather, and play cards ... and at the same time their happiness is made or their lives are being ruined'.<sup>85</sup> Chekhov realised how innovative his play was and that it was 'contrary to all the rules of dramatic art' in that 'I began it *forte* and ended it *pianissimo*'.<sup>86</sup> It is to Sturridge's credit that, when he came to revive his production, he restored Chekhov's own understated ending to the play.

One of the more important directorial decisions that needs to be made when directing *The Seagull* is how to interpret the key role of Treplev himself. He is a complex and ambiguous character. Any director who examines the playtext closely will find evidence that Treplev should not be interpreted as being either a misunderstood genius or an untalented nincompoop. He shares some of the playwright's own ideals, yet also has some of the failings that Chekhov saw in the intellectuals of his day. The status accorded Treplev's playlet in any overall production is of pivotal significance. It has been variously interpreted as a work

of genius and as a piece of decadent nonsense. Hanna Scolnicov argues that the unnamed playlet should be called *The Seagull*. She claims that: 'The evaluation of the inset *Seagull* is crucial, for at stake is our understanding of Chekhov's own artistic aims and achievements.'<sup>87</sup>

Treplev is clearly someone who believes that new forms of dramatic art are required. Like Chekhov, he rejects the thesis dramas of his day but, unlike the writer of *The Seagull*, Treplev also seems to reject the kind of realistic drama in which he is in fact appearing as a character:

TREPLEV. ... the theatre's in a rut nowadays, if you ask me — it's so one-sided. The curtain goes up and you see a room with three walls. It's evening, so the lights are on. And in the room you have those geniuses, those high priests of art, to show you how to eat, drink, love, walk about and wear their jackets. Out of mediocre scenes and lines they try to drag a moral, some commonplace that doesn't tax the brain and might come in useful about the house.<sup>88</sup>

Chekhov is no more to be identified with Treplev than he should be identified with Trigorin, the other writer in the play, simply because that character happens to share some of Chekhov's own writing habits. Treplev's play is clearly modelled on the sort of experimental dramas being written at the time by 'decadent' or 'symbolist' writers, the terms being used as synonyms in Chekhov's day. We know that Chekhov had an ambivalent attitude towards the Symbolists. He was certainly excited by the Belgian symbolist dramatist, Maurice Maeterlinck. While he was still working on *The Seagull*, Chekhov wrote to Suvorin recommending that some of this Belgian's work be performed in Russia: 'Why don't you try staging Maeterlinck at your theater? If I were a director of your theater, in two years I would make a Decadent Theater of it — or try to.'<sup>89</sup> Chekhov may even have been influenced by Maeterlinck's innovative staging of *The Blind* in which, as he told Suvorin, there was 'a magnificent scenic effect ... with the sea and a lighthouse in the distance'.<sup>90</sup> Treplev's play is provided with a similarly magnificent scenic effect in the form of a 'real' backdrop of a lake with a 'real' moon reflected in it.<sup>91</sup>

Despite an obvious attraction to certain aspects of symbolism, particularly the movement's commitment to finding new forms to express inner subjective reality, Chekhov would have found the nihilistic and anti-scientific aspects of the movement totally unacceptable. As Laurence Senelick points out:

[Chekhov's] attitude toward the Russian decadents was satirical when it was not downright hostile. He is reputed to have said, 'they're swindlers, not decadents! They try to palm off rotten goods — religion, mysticism and all kinds of devilishness ... They've concocted it all to delude the public. Don't you believe them!'<sup>92</sup>

Chekhov's ambivalence towards the symbolist movement is reflected in *The Seagull* and can be profitably reflected in production. Even though the psychological reasons for Treplev's choosing to write a symbolist drama are clearly connected with his desire to struggle against the power that his mother has over him, the integrity of Treplev's aims need not be questioned. His efforts to achieve an identity, both artistic and personal, that was independent of Irina would surely have been seen in a favourable light by Chekhov whose own desire 'to be a free artist and nothing more'<sup>93</sup> is well known. Treplev's desire for personal freedom is mirrored in Chekhov's description of himself as someone who eventually managed to squeeze 'the slave out of himself, drop by drop' and who woke up one morning and felt that the blood in his veins was 'no longer that of a slave but that of a real human being'.<sup>94</sup> For Chekhov, both personal and artistic emancipation were desirable and inseparable, and it is part of Treplev's tragedy that, unlike Nina, he cannot achieve either. Rejecting the idea that talent and freshness is all that a writer needs, Chekhov wrote:

Talent and freshness can ruin a great deal — that's near the truth. Outside of a plenitude of material and talent, something of no lesser importance is needed. Maturity is needed for one thing; secondly, a *sense of personal freedom* is indispensable. Yet only of late this sense began to burn within me.<sup>95</sup>

Near the end of the play Treplev comes to the realisation that he has failed to achieve artistic independence. Looking at his own writings he says: 'I've talked so much about new techniques, but now I feel I'm gradually getting in the old rut.' He even loses faith in the belief that 'new forms' are necessary — a belief that had sustained him up until this point: 'Yes, I'm more and more convinced that old or new techniques are neither here nor there.'<sup>96</sup> Having lost any sense of artistic purpose, he is confronted by Nina who, while she may not be an exceptionally talented actress, has nevertheless found her 'vocation' and is 'not afraid of life'. His response to her shows just how much he lacks any developed sense of artistic freedom and identity:

TREPLEV. [*Sadly.*] You've found your road and you know where you're going, while I drift about in a maze of dreams and images, not knowing who needs my stuff or why. I've no faith and I don't know what my vocation is.<sup>97</sup>

Chekhov superbly suggests Treplev's lack of maturity, personal freedom and independence in this character's very last line. Nina has just embraced Treplev impulsively and run out through the garden. Left on his own, his last pathetic words suggest that, even at this stage in his life, he is unable to cut the umbilical cord that binds him to his mother: '[*After a pause.*] It'll be a pity if anyone sees her in the garden and tells Mother. It might upset her.'<sup>98</sup> Treplev demonstrates the fact that he now sees himself as a failure both as a human being and as an

artist, by slowly tearing up all of his manuscripts and then leaving the stage to shoot himself.

From a directorial standpoint, Chekhov's depiction of Treplev seems to suggest that this character's aims concerning the need for new forms of dramatic art should be presented positively. What he aspires to is admirable, but, unfortunately, he is not the genius that Stanislavski thought him to be, and his dramatic achievement does not match his aspirations.

By presenting Treplev as a serious artist who fails to achieve his ideals, a director can avoid the inappropriate extremes of interpretation that are sometimes indulged in. Too often, Treplev is presented as either a fool or a genius when, in fact, Chekhov's text suggests the potential for a much richer complexity of characterisation. The one-dimensional interpretations of this character are often the result of directors failing to achieve the necessary balance between the tragic and comic elements. As Arthur Ganz puts it: 'the admirers of the comic Chekhov ... are likely to find in Treplev ... a hysterical, attitudinizing would-be Hamlet, whereas the advocates of the sensitive, melancholy playwright will see a frustrated artist driven to suicide'.<sup>99</sup> Vera Gottlieb makes a similar but more general point when she claims that 'the very essence of a Chekhov play lies in its balance'. She quotes Irving Wardle in support of her argument that British productions rarely achieve that balance. Wardle asserted that British Chekhov fails because directors there 'cannot hold a balance between sympathetic involvement and comic detachment'.<sup>100</sup>

One recent London production of *The Seagull* directed by John Caird appears to have continued the British tradition of one-sided interpretations of Chekhov. Michael Billington's review in *The Guardian* outlines the disastrous results that follow from approaching this play in such an unsubtle way. Having argued that the 'visual fussiness and overelaboration' of the *mise-en-scène* 'works against the spirit of the play', Billington outlines his major criticism of Caird's direction:

But the production itself also tends to italicise emotional, as well as visual, effects. We all know that Chekhov described the play as a comedy. But it seems to me nonsense to treat Konstantin's [Treplev's] play as if it were a load of symbolist tosh with Nina rushing round the stage like a jet-propelled angel. It diminishes Konstantin, it undercuts Dorn's faith in his talent and it obliterates the point that K's theme — the division between matter and spirit — recurs throughout *The Seagull*. The art of directing Chekhov is to give us his polyphonic richness rather than to editorialise or to give undue stress to the tragic or comic element.<sup>101</sup>

Anthony Clark's 1990 production of the play for the Birmingham Repertory Company was flawed in a similar fashion. Paul Taylor, the reviewer for *The Independent*, described the way in which the director trivialised Treplev's play

by having a group of peasants 'provide absurdly irrelevant sound effects' during the performance, and the on-stage audience perform 'antics' liable to raise a few cheap laughs from the audience in the auditorium:

Disrupting the cohesiveness and solemnity of the occasion, an untimely plague of midges reduces this group [the on-stage audience] to a set of fractious individuals scratching and smacking their flesh and producing what sounds like a subversive mockery of applause.<sup>102</sup>

The Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *The Seagull* used the Michael Frayn translation that Anthony Clark had chosen earlier the same year. Terry Hands, however, directed the play in a much more 'polyphonic' manner. Paul Taylor, who had not disliked Clark's production, nevertheless recognised how superior Hands' interpretation was, particularly when it came to the presentation of Treplev's play:

The treatment of that inset playlet is a good example of the shrewdness and sensitivity of Hands' approach. By having Arcadina and the onstage audience chomp Turkish Delight or swat at an invisible plague of flies, directors often minister to a sense that Konstantin's high-flown symbolist drama is merely ridiculous and deserves its humiliating public failure. Minimising such distractions and focusing attention on the make-shift stage, this production lets you feel the sad vulnerability as well as the risibility of his botched search for a new artistic form ... (For), if the play is talentless, what this version of its production makes sure you register is the beauty of the aspiration behind it.<sup>103</sup>

Treplev's play, as Billington noted, does indeed concern itself with themes that are important to Chekhov's play as a whole. This is one of the major reasons why directors who overlay this scene with gratuitous comic business run the risk of achieving the same results as the Shakespearean clowns who, as Hamlet says, are willing to 'set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too; though, in the mean time, some necessary question of the play be then to be considered'.<sup>104</sup>

The struggle between spirit and matter is a 'necessary question' not just of Treplev's play but of *The Seagull* as whole. Nina's character, the World Spirit, describes a world that has reached a state of entropy, which *Webster's Dictionary* defines as 'the degradation of the matter and energy in the universe to an ultimate state of inert uniformity'. This depressing condition depicted in Treplev's play is actually a grotesque parodic version of the state of inert uniformity that epitomises the lives of the characters in Chekhov's play. Their world is one that seems purposeless. They are lumps of matter without any spiritual dimension that would give their lives meaning. They have no faith. Sorin is the supreme example of entropic man. At the end of his life, having worked in what, on the face of it, might seem to be a meaningful occupation, he denies its significance,

and searches pathetically for meaning in trivial hedonistic pursuits. He says to Dorn:

SORIN. [*Laughs.*] It's all right for you to talk, you've enjoyed yourself. But what about me? Twenty-eight years I've worked for the Department of Justice, but I haven't lived yet, haven't experienced anything — that's what it comes to. So I want a bit of fun, it stands to reason. You've always had your own way and you don't care, which is why you're so given to idle chatter. But I want a bit of life, so I drink sherry at dinner and smoke cigars and so on. That's all there is to it.<sup>105</sup>

Sorin lives what Sartre would have called an 'inauthentic' life because he refuses to take any responsibility for his actions, or rather, for his inaction. He is reduced to an entropic state in which he becomes physically immobilised and spends much of his time asleep. Sorin has made his life 'absurd' by adopting a 'nothing to be done' attitude to life that involves the belief that his present condition is the result of fate rather than his own inaction. He has never enjoyed living in the country yet he continually returns there:

SORIN. ... Isn't it typical? I've never done what I liked in the country. At one time I'd take a month off and come down here for a break and so on, but there'd be so much fuss and bother when you got here — you felt like pushing off the moment you arrived. [*Laughs.*] I was always glad to get away. Anyway, now I'm retired I've nowhere else to go, that's what it comes to. I have to live here, like it or not.<sup>106</sup>

Sorin is only an extreme case of what Chekhov shows to be the normal condition of living for most of the characters in *The Seagull*. They fritter their lives away, are constantly bored, and are ultimately aware of their failure to live fulfilling lives. Dorn, the materialist who rejects the idea of any transcendent spiritual purpose to life, realises that life's meaning is totally created by human beings who act purposefully in accordance with their ideals. His response to Sorin's 'bad faith' may, at first, seem rather blunt, but it is very much in tune with Chekhov's own cool objective appraisal of the nature of life. Furthermore, Dorn's insistence that Sorin face life parallels Chekhov's project of making audiences aware of their own inauthentic and wasted lives.

Without making any overt judgements, Chekhov was implying that the behaviour of people such as Sorin, who live their lives dreaming about what they would like to have done rather than actually doing anything to achieve their desires, was both comical and avoidable. Just as Masha wished to elevate the sadness she feels at not being loved by Treplev into a romantic melodrama, so Sorin wishes to dignify his failure by having it transformed into a sentimental novel of self-justification. Chekhov's Dr Dorn is quick to attack such escapist self-dramatising:

SORIN. I'd like to give Constantine a plot for a novel. It ought to be called *The Man who Wanted* — *L'homme qui a voulu*. In youth I wanted to become a writer — I didn't. I wanted to speak well — I spoke atrociously. [*Mocks himself.*] 'And all that sort, er, of thing, er, don't yer know.' I'd be doing a summing up sometimes, and find myself jawing on and on till I broke out in a sweat. I wanted to marry — I didn't. I wanted to live in town all the time — and here I am ending my days in the country and so on.

DORN. You wanted to become a senior civil servant — and did.

SORIN. [*Laughs.*] That's one thing I wasn't keen on, it just happened.

DORN. To talk about being fed up with life at the age of sixty-two — that's a bit cheap, wouldn't you say?

SORIN. Don't keep on about it, can't you see I want a bit of life?

DORN. That's just silly. All life must end, it's in the nature of things.

SORIN. You're spoilt, that's why you talk like this. You've always had what you wanted, so life doesn't matter to you, you just don't bother. But even you'll be afraid of dying.

DORN. Fear of death's an animal thing, you must get over it. It only makes sense to fear death if you believe in immortality and are scared because you've sinned.

But you aren't a Christian for a start, and then — what sins have you committed? You've worked for the Department of Justice for twenty-five years, that's all.

SORIN. [*Laughs.*] Twenty-eight.<sup>107</sup>

It is important for directors not to over-sentimentalise Sorin, or to play Dorn as a totally unfeeling doctor. Too often in productions Sorin's self-pitying comments are played with little sense of the comic irony that is needed to undercut them. Instead of Dorn being an objective *raisonneur* gently laughing at a character who is bemoaning the inevitable fact that he is getting old and wishes that he could have his time over again, the doctor is often played as someone who has become so cynical and hard-hearted that he refuses to treat a patient who is 'seriously ill' with anything else but placebos like Valerian drops, soda or quinine.<sup>108</sup>

Treplev's playlet depicts in symbolist fashion what he sees as the current state of the world and, while that world is a depressingly bleak place where 'all life, all life, all life has completed its melancholy cycle and died', it is not beyond redemption. Chekhov's vision of reality included a belief in the idea of gradual progress that would happen not just through natural selection, but through human intervention, and Treplev's play also incorporates this 'epic vision'. Treplev expresses both his dislike of life as it currently is and his faith in a better long-term future for humanity, in a symbolist form that is quite unlike the form of realism being developed by Chekhov, but the belief that a sense of purpose, symbolised by the World Spirit, is necessary to bring about improvements in the lot of humanity was central to Chekhov's evolutionary vision. The fact that

this progress would take a long time concerned Chekhov deeply. In the 1902 letter to Tikhonov, in which he expressed his certainty that people would 'create another and better life for themselves' once they realised how 'bad and dreary' their lives were, he added: 'I will not live to see it, but I know it will be quite different, quite unlike our present life'.<sup>109</sup> Treplev is likewise aware of the gradual nature of change. Nina, playing the role of the World Spirit, is given the following speech:

NINA. ... Like a prisoner flung into a deep, empty well, I know not where I am or what awaits me. All is hidden from me except that in the cruel, unrelenting struggle with the Devil, the principle of Material Force, I am destined to triumph. Then shall Spirit and Matter unite in wondrous harmony, then shall the reign of Cosmic Will commence. But that will only come about after a long, long succession of millennia, when Moon, bright Sirius and Earth shall gradually have turned to dust. Until then there shall be horror upon horror.<sup>110</sup>

Rather than present Treplev's play as either a work of genius or 'tosh', a director needs to present this symbolist drama in a manner that reflects Chekhov's ambivalent attitude towards this character and his art. It is not Treplev's vision of reality that is defective, but the form in which he expresses it. The weakness of Treplev's play is that it is too removed from real life. Chekhov's art involved presenting 'life as it is' as realistically as was possible. This 'life' was a depiction of 'life as it should not be'. Without sacrificing artistic objectivity by introducing any judgemental 'thesis' and without abandoning the conventions of stage realism, Chekhov attempted to imply an idea of 'life as it should be'.

Treplev's approach to writing is criticised in *The Seagull* by other characters. We can discount the criticisms made by Irina, who, because she perceives her son's play as a personal attack on the type of drama she performs in, is biased in her dismissal of it as 'experimental rubbish'. Several other characters have no reason to be prejudiced against Treplev's dramatic efforts. Dr Dorn, for instance, liked the play and was especially impressed by its content: 'You took your plot from the realm of abstract ideas, and quite right too, because a work of art simply must express some great idea.' However the form in which Treplev expressed his vision did not impress the doctor as much. In particular, he is disturbed by the vagueness of this symbolist play and proceeds to give Treplev what turns out to be a prophetic warning:

DORN. And then a work of art must express a clear, precise idea. You must know why you write, or else — if you take this picturesque path without knowing where you're going you'll lose your way and your gifts will destroy you.<sup>111</sup>

As we have seen, Treplev loses faith in himself and his art and, because he has no purpose or aim, kills himself.

Nina supplies the other telling criticism of Treplev's art when she complains to him that: 'Your play's hard to act, there are no living people in it.'<sup>112</sup> Trigorin appears to have no reason to attack Treplev's work and comments on what he believes to be the reason for the younger writer's limited success. His comment supports Nina's earlier judgement:

TRIGORIN. Things aren't going too well, he still can't find his real level. There's something vaguely odd about his stuff, and some of it seems rather wild. None of his characters is ever really alive.<sup>113</sup>

Treplev's reaction to Nina's criticism is significant in that it indicates to anyone familiar with Chekhov's own artistic credo just how different his symbolist aesthetic is from his creator's realism. Knowing that Chekhov would certainly not have agreed with Treplev's artistic views is useful in helping a director or actor decide how sympathetically or otherwise to portray this character. Attacking the conventions of realism, Treplev scornfully exclaims: 'Living people! We should show life neither as it is nor as it ought to be, but as we see it in our dreams.'<sup>114</sup> This statement is the complete antithesis of Chekhov's own views about drama. Not long after he had written *The Seagull*, he criticised the Norwegian dramatist Bjoernson for writing a play that had 'no action, no living characters and no dramatic interest'.<sup>115</sup>

Like the other self-dramatising characters in this play, Treplev cannot come to terms with reality and consequently makes of his own life a symbolist drama in which he dreams that he is the doomed suffering tragic hero.<sup>116</sup> At the end of the play, Treplev expresses his unhappiness in the overblown language he had used in his symbolist playlet. In that early drama, 'the principle of Material Force' had destroyed life on Earth with the result that:

NINA. ... It is cold, cold, cold. Empty, empty, empty. Terrible, terrible, terrible. [Pause.] The bodies of living creatures have turned to dust, and eternal matter has converted them into stones, water, clouds ... I am lonely ... Like a prisoner flung into a deep empty well, I know not where I am or what awaits me.<sup>117</sup>

In Act Four, Treplev describes his own depressed and lifeless state as follows:

TREPLEV. I'm lonely, I haven't the warmth of anyone's devotion. I feel cold, as in a vault, and all I write is so dry, stale, dismal. Stay here Nina, I beg you, or let me go with you.<sup>118</sup>

The lack of maturity that is evident in Treplev's appeal with its excessive histrionic self-pity suggests that Chekhov did not wish Treplev to be interpreted as a 'hero'. Characters like Masha, Sorin and Treplev all suffer genuine pain, and Chekhov's depiction of them suggests that he wishes his audiences to pity them, but the response of all three characters to their suffering is excessive. Their vain attempts to assume a tragic stature and their adoption of a fatalistic

attitude to life make them ludicrous as well as pathetic. As Laurence Senelick rightly points out: 'Abnegation of responsibility on grounds of human impotence was not sympathetic to Chekhov's way of thinking.'<sup>119</sup>

It is precisely because Nina is able to take responsibility for her own life by facing reality, rather than running away from it, that she, like the World Spirit she once impersonated, is 'destined to triumph'. She overcomes her earlier romantic fantasies about life and the theatre and no longer needs the comforting support of dreams and symbols — reality is sufficient. Nina's mature adjustment to reality is represented by her refusal to see herself any longer as a seagull. The seagull acquires various layers of symbolic significance in Chekhov's play, and, as Senelick has pointed out, both Treplev and Trigorin use the seagull to symbolically 'position' Nina in the role of victim:

When, in Act IV, she repudiates the soubriquet, 'I'm a seagull. No, not that', she rejects not only Treplev's martyr-bird, but Trigorin's fictitious happy-free-and-then-ruined creature. Nina, having found her calling, is not ruined but survives, if only in an anti-romantic, workaday world.<sup>120</sup>

In a scene in Act Two, Treplev associated himself with the dead seagull. He threatens to kill himself unless Nina returns his love. Nina's response to this immature piece of emotional blackmail is to reject his heavy-handed symbolism, and this should prepare an audience for her later refusal to be identified with this lifeless object:

[TREPLEV *lays the seagull at her feet.*]

NINA. What does that signify?

TREPLEV. I meanly killed that seagull this morning. I lay it at your feet.

NINA. What's wrong with you? [*Picks up the seagull and looks at it.*]

TREPLEV. [*After a pause.*] I shall soon kill myself in the same way.

NINA. You've changed so much.

TREPLEV. Yes, but who changed first? You did. You're so different to me now, you look at me coldly and you find me in the way.

NINA. You're touchy lately and you always talk so mysteriously, in symbols or something. This seagull's a symbol too, I suppose, but it makes no sense to me, sorry.<sup>121</sup>

As Peter Holland points out, it is a sign of Nina's essential sanity that she can finally reject this symbolic identification with the seagull. Characteristically, it is Treplev who 'would rather talk in symbols than face up to the reality of his life, a childish egocentricity that culminates in his suicide'.<sup>122</sup>

It is appropriate that the audience ultimately associates the seagull with Treplev rather than with Nina. The inert physical presence of the bird, when it is first brought on stage and later when it appears in stuffed form are suitably overblown symbols for the decadent writer who first attempts suicide and then

succeeds in killing himself. Chekhov, whose own mastery of symbolic realism was becoming increasingly subtle, was able to use this crude symbolism in much the same way that he used melodrama — for the purpose of parody. John Gielgud, who played the role of Treplev in Esme Filmer's 1925 production, failed to detect Chekhov's parodic deflation of the young symbolist, believing him to be 'a very romantic character, a sort of miniature Hamlet'. Despite this sentimentalised approach to the role, even Gielgud could not override Chekhov's comic intentions, as, much to the actor's chagrin and dismay, audiences refused to take the symbolic seagull seriously:

I resented the laughter of the audience when I came on in the second act holding the dead seagull, but on a very small stage it did look rather like a stuffed Christmas goose, however carefully I arranged its wings and legs beforehand.<sup>123</sup>

Chekhov's potentially tragic characters are depicted with a degree of ironic detachment that critics like Vera Gottlieb compare to Brecht's distancing techniques.<sup>124</sup> Certainly Chekhov created a perceptible gap between the tragic inner lives of his characters and their comic public behaviour and, if this gap is made perceptible in production, then that 'anaesthesia of the heart', that Bergson thought was necessary in comedy in order to allow an audience to laugh at what would otherwise be perceived as a painful situation, can be achieved. Stanislavski's production used very little 'anaesthesia' and produced a tragic, bleeding heart version of *The Seagull*. Esme Filmer tried, less successfully, to do the same, but the comic potential of the symbolically portentous seagull could not be suppressed.

In more recent productions of the play, particularly in Britain, directors have attempted to foreground the comic aspects of the drama, but at the cost of the tragic elements. So much 'anaesthesia' is administered that the heart is stopped altogether. Charles Osborne's review of Mike Alfreds' production of *The Seagull* in 1991 describes such a directorial approach:

Coarsening Chekhov, however, appears to have been the principal intention of this staging. Chekhov called his play a comedy, but it is directed (by the perpetrator of this 'new version') as extremely crude farce. It's all very well to break away from the English sentimental Chekhov of a generation ago, but in this instance the baby of elegant comedy has been thrown out with the bath-water of autumnal melancholy.<sup>125</sup>

The manner in which directors have recently interpreted the scene in which Irina Arkadina temporarily manages to stop her lover, Trigorin, from leaving her and running off with Nina illustrates the dangers involved in overstressing the comic aspect of the scene. In addition, these productions reveal the hermeneutic problems that inevitably face directors who produce plays from an earlier period. The significance of the playwright's work that would have

been clear to the play's original audiences may now be misinterpreted or become unreadable to a modern audience.<sup>126</sup>

In a speech that is deeply insulting to the aging Irina Arkadina, Trigorin asks her to set him free so that he can indulge in the fulfilment of his dream of experiencing what he calls 'young love'. He romantically envisions an 'enchanted and magical love that sweeps you off your feet into a make-believe world' and, claiming that 'this love has come at last', asks Irina 'Why should I run away from it?' Irina appears to be in a hopelessly vulnerable position when she responds to his appeal. Chekhov's stage direction says that she is 'trembling' when she replies: 'No, no, no. You can't talk to me like that, I'm only an ordinary woman. Don't torture me, Boris. I'm terrified.' However, within a page of dialogue, Chekhov has this quite extraordinary woman win back control of her man, even if only for the time being. Chekhov shows us Irina using all of her theatrical skills to dominate Trigorin. She turns the situation into a melodramatic 'scene' and plays her role with all of the skill and all of the theatrical quackery of a Sarah Bernhardt.<sup>127</sup> The 'scene' commences when Irina transforms herself from trembling defensiveness into angry attack:

TRIGORIN. ... But now, you see, this love has come at last, it calls me on. Why should I run away from it?

IRINA. [Arkadina] [*Angrily.*] You must be mad.

TRIGORIN. Perhaps I am.

IRINA. You're all conspiring to torment me today. [*Cries.*]

TRIGORIN. [*Clutches his head.*] She doesn't understand, she won't understand.

IRINA. Am I really so old and ugly that you don't mind talking to me about other women? [*Embraces and kisses him.*] Oh, you're mad. My marvellous, splendid man. You're the last page in my life. [*Kneels down.*] My delight, my pride, my joy! [*Embraces his knees.*] If you leave me for one hour I shan't survive, I shall go mad, my wonderful, splendid one. My master.<sup>128</sup>

Despite Trigorin's embarrassment at this public display of Irina's passion for him, he is unable to stop her using every technique in her power to keep him. She insists that he is a 'reckless boy' who needs to be protected from doing 'something crazy'. She asserts her ownership of him: 'you're mine, all of you'. Finally, she praises his artistic skills to the skies, and then, using all of her own artistry, she destroys his resolve to leave her and restores her control over him:

IRINA. [Arkadina] ... Too much hero-worship, you think? Think I'm flattering you? Then look in my eyes, come on. Do I look like a liar? There, you see, I'm the only one who appreciates you, I'm the only one who tells you the truth, my wonderful darling. You will come, won't you? You won't desert me, will you?

TRIGORIN. I've no will of my own, never have had. I'm a flabby, spineless creature that always does what it's told — surely that's not what women like. Take me then, carry me off, but don't ever let me move one step from your side.

IRINA. [*To herself.*] Now he's mine. [*Off-handedly and casually.*] Actually, you can stay on if you want. I'll leave on my own and you can come later, in a week's time. What's the hurry after all?

TRIGORIN. No, we may as well go together.

IRINA. As you like. We'll go together if you say so.<sup>129</sup>

In this scene, Chekhov has reverted to the method of 'direct action' that was the standard practice of dramatists of the time who wrote well-made plays and romantic melodramas. This overtly theatrical scene is however given realistic justification by Chekhov, because it is Irina Arkadina, a specialist actress in these theatrical genres, who 'performs' the scene. Despite the fact that Irina is not spoofing the conventions of melodramatic acting but using them in a serious manner to win back Trigorin, the very fact that such a 'performance' is placed by Chekhov in a larger drama of 'indirect action' encourages an audience to notice how stylistically different this scene is from much of the rest of the play. In such a theatrically low-key context, Irina's melodramatic behaviour cannot help appearing excessive and even ludicrous, and consequently she cannot help appearing to be acting. The gap between her real terror at losing Trigorin and the absurdly theatrical methods she employs to keep him, if presented in performance, is likely to create the appropriate balance between the tragic and the comic aspects of her character.

The difficulty for the actor performing this scene is precisely that of playing both the sympathetic and the laughable aspects of the character. In Charles Sturridge's production of *The Seagull*, the scene was reduced to the level of physical farce. Victoria Radin vividly described the comic business that Irina [Vanessa Redgrave] employed to win back Trigorin [Jonathan Pryce]. She 'grabs [him] by the knees, throws him to the ground and crawls between his out-spread legs while fondling his bottom and declaring him to be a great writer'.<sup>130</sup> The major problem of taking a farcical approach to this scene, and to Chekhov in general, is that the tragi-comic balance is inevitably lost. Michael Billington's review of Vanessa Redgrave's performance highlights the fact that, by playing this role in a farcical manner, the 'anaesthesia of the heart' became total and it was difficult to feel in any way sympathetic toward Irina Arkadina. Sturridge's production:

... comes equipped with a performance by Vanessa Redgrave as Arkadina that often borders on the grotesque and that suggests a profound misunderstanding of the nature of Chekhov's genius ... I don't deny that Ms Redgrave is fascinating to watch (not least in the scene where she uses every erotic trick in the book to keep hold of Trigorin). But in editorialising about Arkadina, she misses any

sense of her residual humanity: this is a woman who (according to the text) once took medicine to a wounded washerwoman and bathed her children in a tub. You'd never guess that from Ms Redgrave's focus on Arkadina's egotistic triviality.<sup>131</sup>

This farcically one-sided and judgemental approach to the role of Irina appears to have been part of the director's interpretation, rather than an invention of Redgrave's.<sup>132</sup> Sturridge's production had originally had Samantha Eggar playing Irina, but, as Francis King noted in his review, the requisite tragi-comic balance was lacking, with the result that Irina became 'funny' but was in no way 'moving':

What is otherwise amiss with this production is crystallised in Samantha Eggar's performance as Arkadina. Certainly, the character is selfish, silly and trivial. But the finest exponents of the role — Joan Plowright, Peggy Ashcroft and above all Isabel Jeans — found in her, as Chekhov himself surely did, both humanity and pathos.<sup>133</sup>

Vera Gottlieb has forcibly argued that Sturridge's production utilised the techniques of English farce in this scene in particular, and consequently 'vulgarized both the character and the play at that moment'.<sup>134</sup> Francis King is surely not claiming too much when he asserts, in his review of the revival of this Sturridge production, that 'the sight of Arkadina and Trigorin grappling amorously with each other on the floor is surely alien to this most subtle of playwrights'.<sup>135</sup>

However, while there is general critical awareness that Chekhov's plays are not simply farces, current British directors, who exhibit a laudable determination to avoid the earlier tragic 'gloom and doom' approach, still seem to find it difficult to produce these plays without introducing crassly inappropriate comic stage-business. John Caird, in his production of *The Seagull*, with Judy Dench as Irina, had his actors play the scene in which Irina tries to stop Trigorin from leaving her in a manner that even outdoes Sturridge in its use of overtly farcical and grossly inappropriate business. Sturridge's Irina 'rugby-tackles Pryce [Trigorin] to the floor, pins him down and massages his haunches as he springs more or less free, thus demonstrating her sexual power over him'.<sup>136</sup> In Caird's production, the hapless Trigorin is not even allowed to wrestle free from Irina's sexual advances:

In Arkadina's third-act scene of abasement, he is flattened while Dench, in a display of ridiculous vulgarity, changes the usual knee-clutching business to knee-trembling sexual interference. She kisses his feet, gropes his privates and works her way up to an orgasmic embrace. She gets to her feet, lights a cigar and, while the writer instinctively reaches for his notebook, casually throws

down, 'Do stay if you want to'. It is a highly charged comic moment, but unjustifiably coarse.<sup>137</sup>

Many modern directors of *The Seagull* seem to believe that their audiences will be unable to grasp the significance of Arkadina's playing this scene as authentic melodrama, and so, they cut the specific business specified by Chekhov and replace it with easily understood farcical business. In fact, even though a modern audience may not have direct experience of the kind of melodramas that actors like Sarah Bernhardt or Arkadina played in, the heightened language and gestures used by Irina in this scene are easily readable as being excessive. The clear contrast between this heightened behaviour and the ordinary everyday mode of address used by the characters, including Irina, elsewhere in the play, makes it possible for the scene to be played for both its pathos and humour. Certainly, if Jeremy Kingston's reaction is reliable, then Susan Fleetwood's performance as Irina in Terry Hands' 1991 revival of his earlier production achieved precisely that double perspective on the character that is so vital if an audience is to be induced to both laugh at and be sympathetic towards her. Irina turns from her son:

... whose self-respect she has shattered to weave her spell upon Trigorin, whipping her tears into fury, enveloping the poor fellow in a she-bear's hug and gobbling him up. Half-way through this outburst of furious sobbing a change in tone comes into her voice, faint but definite. She is expressing the panic of a woman whose lover may be leaving her, but the artist in her, the actress, is feeling its way forward again. Like Roger Allam's mellifluous Trigorin noting down little phrases for his stories, she is noticing the sound of her rage. Its timbre may be helpful when next she plays in *La Dame aux Camélias*.<sup>138</sup>

*The Seagull* is in some ways a transitional drama that shows Chekhov in the process of abandoning outdated theatrical conventions or using them in a new way. The fact that Chekhov had not yet totally emancipated himself from the use of the conventions of the well-made play led one critic to describe *The Seagull* as 'the last of Chekhov's *pièce-à-thèse*'.<sup>139</sup> It is certainly true that the author does propound the thesis that people need endurance in order to find fulfilment in both art and life. While the play certainly uses much of the machinery of romantic melodrama and the well-made play, Chekhov had already begun to use these conventions parodically. By the time he came to write his next play, *Uncle Vanya*, many of the overtly theatrical clichés present in *The Seagull* had gone. The playwright's epic vision is not stated, but rather implied in the action — an action that mirrors the drama of ordinary daily life in a much more realistic manner than had been achieved in *The Seagull*.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Chekhov, A., quoted in Nilsson, N. A. 'Intonation and Rhythm in Chekhov's Plays', in Eekman, T., ed., *Anton Chekhov 1860–1960: Some Essays*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1960, p. 173.
- <sup>2</sup> Heim, M., 'Chekhov and the Moscow Art Theatre', in Barricelli, J-P., ed., *Chekhov's Great Plays: A Critical Anthology*, New York University Press, New York, 1981, p. 139.
- <sup>3</sup> Styan, J. L., *Chekhov in Performance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1971, p. 9.
- <sup>4</sup> Seymour, A., 'Summer Seagull, Winter Love', *The London Magazine*, May 1964, p. 63.
- <sup>5</sup> John Barber, in his review of Charles Sturridge's 1985 production of *The Seagull*, noted that Samantha Eggar's way of playing this aside was funny, but 'the amusement comes a little too pat, so that the pitifulness often gets lost. Samantha Eggar, ... as the fading actress, actually faces the stalls, conspiratorially, to win a laugh on 'Now he's mine!' when Trigorin at last yields.' (Barber, J., *Daily Telegraph*, 29 April 1985.)
- <sup>6</sup> Frayn, M., in Chekhov, A., *The Seagull*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1989, p. xviii. Some directors avoid the problem of trying to justify the soliloquies realistically by not attempting to achieve verisimilitude at all. John Caird's 1994 production employs the kind of symbolist approach to the play's production that is in line with Meyerhold's ideas about how Chekhov should be interpreted. Robert Hewison reports how the 'symbol, fantasies and incestuous desires' evident in the play 'appear to justify Caird's treatment of the text as more of a dream-play than we have become used to. It helps to make sense of the breaks Chekhov made with the otherwise naturalistic conventions of the script by giving several characters brief soliloquies delivered directly to the audience.' (Hewison, R., *Sunday Times*, 17 July 1994.)
- <sup>7</sup> Alan Seymour excuses Chekhov's use of earlier dramatic forms on the grounds that he was still learning his trade. 'If *The Seagull* seems to bristle with tricks left over from the nineteenth-century melodrama (the relentless 'planting' of Konstantin's eventual suicide, for example) these can be allowed, for this was the first play of Chekhov's mature period, the first play of this new kind.' Seymour then astutely points out that, because Chekhov had not as yet fully developed his new form of realistic drama, he created difficulties for future directors searching for the appropriate style in which to play this drama. 'Any of the plays sets great problems to their director and in this hybrid the problems are magnified.' (Seymour, A., op. cit., pp. 63–4.)
- <sup>8</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 18 October 1896, in Friedland, L. S., *Letters on the Short Story, the Drama, and Other Literary Topics by Anton Chekhov*, Dover Publications, New York, 1966, p. 147.
- <sup>9</sup> Heim, M., op. cit., p. 134.
- <sup>10</sup> Heim, M., loc. cit.
- <sup>11</sup> Avilova, L., *Chekhov in My Life: A Love Story*, Methuen, London, 1989, pp. 88–9.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92–3.
- <sup>13</sup> Slonim, M., *Russian Theater from the Empire to the Soviets*, Methuen, London, 1963, p. 121.
- <sup>14</sup> Gillès, D., *Chekhov: Observer without Illusion*, Funk & Wagnalls, New York, 1968, pp. 221–2.
- <sup>15</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., Letter to A. Chekhov, 21 August 1898, in Benedetti, J., ed., *The Moscow Art Theatre Letters*, Routledge, New York, 1991, p. 31.
- <sup>16</sup> Karlinsky, S., *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1975, p. 282.
- <sup>17</sup> Kommissarzhevskaya, V., Letter to A. Chekhov, 21 October 1896, in Karlinsky, S., op. cit., p. 283.
- <sup>18</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to M. P. Chekhov, 18 October 1896, in Hellman, L., *The Selected Letters of Chekhov*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1955, pp. 193–4.
- <sup>19</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 22 October 1896, in Hellman, L., op. cit., pp. 194–5.
- <sup>20</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to M. P. Chekhov, 15 October 1896, in Friedland, L. S., loc. cit.
- <sup>21</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. Koni, 11 November 1896, in Hellman, L., op. cit., p. 197.
- <sup>22</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to E. Shavrova, 1 November 1896, in Hellman, L., op. cit., pp. 195–6.
- <sup>23</sup> Chekhov, A., quoted in Balukhaty, S. D., ed., *The Seagull Produced by Stanislavsky*, Dennis Dobson, London, 1952, p. 22.
- <sup>24</sup> Chekhov, A., quoted in Hollosi, C., 'Chekhov's Reaction to Two Interpretations of Nina', *Theatre Survey*, Vol. 24, Nos 1 & 2, 1983, p. 118.
- <sup>25</sup> Hollosi, C., loc. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 125. Hollosi is correct to point out that there can be no single definitive interpretation of *The Seagull* or of any role in the play, but it does not follow from this that all interpretations are equally valid. She is perfectly accurate when she states that: 'Almost all of the major characters in Chekhov's plays are ambiguous; their interpretation poses no small task for directors and actors. The figure of Nina Zarechnaya in *The Seagull*, in particular, has been construed in many ways. She has been seen as a soaring seagull; a tumbled, tousled bird; a talentless country girl; an emerging artist of promise; a high-reaching neurotic wreck; a future actress of Arkadina's vein; and so on.' (Hollosi, C., op. cit., p. 117.) What I wish to contest in Hollosi's argument is her belief that all of these interpretations are in some way equally valid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Stanislavski, C., *My Life in Art*, Eyre Methuen, London, 1980, p. 321.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 322.

<sup>30</sup> Meyerhold, V., in Braun, E., ed., *Meyerhold on Theatre*, Eyre Methuen, London, 1969, p. 30.

<sup>31</sup> Chekhov, A., quoted in Stanislavski, C., op. cit., p. 356.

<sup>32</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to M. Gorky, 9 May 1899, in Karlinsky, S., op. cit., p. 357.

<sup>33</sup> Stanislavski, C., op. cit., p. 357.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 358.

<sup>35</sup> Braun, E., *The Director and the Stage*, Methuen, London, 1982, p. 65.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>37</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko realised later that such a division of artistic labour was unworkable. The idea that 'in the artistic region we would have equal rights' and that 'he had the last word in the region of *form* and I in the region of *content*' was, as an artistic solution to the problems of direction, 'by no means a wise one' because, as he soon discovered, 'form could not be torn from content'. This point of artistic demarcation Nemirovich-Danchenko ruefully remarked, 'was to become the most explosive in our mutual relations'. (Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., *My Life in the Russian Theatre*, Geoffrey Bles, London, 1968, p. 107.) As Benedetti has noted: 'For Nemirovich, work on *The Seagull* represented the ideal. Stanislavski was bewildered by the play. Nemirovich spent two days going through the text, analysing and explaining. The *concept* therefore was his; Stanislavski's staging was an embodiment of that concept. That was how Nemirovich conceived their working relationship: himself, content; Stanislavski, form. It is significant that in all his correspondence with Chekhov, Nemirovich refers to himself as the director.' (Benedetti, J., op. cit., p. 14.) Stanislavski was eventually to insist on combining the functions of interpretation and staging when directing and this combination has now become the normal role for directors today.

<sup>38</sup> Magarshack, D., *Stanislavsky: A Life*, Faber & Faber, London, 1986, p. 181.

<sup>39</sup> Gillès, D., op. cit., pp. 228–9.

<sup>40</sup> Magarshack, D., op. cit., p. 184.

<sup>41</sup> Chekhov, A., *The Seagull*, in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 2, Oxford University Press, London, 1967, p. 280.

<sup>42</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., quoted in Balukhaty, S. D., op. cit., p. 63.

<sup>43</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., Letter to A. Chekhov, 18–21 December 1898, in Benedetti, J., op. cit., p. 44.

<sup>44</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to N. M. Yezhov, 21 November 1898, quoted in Hollosi, C., op. cit., p. 122.

<sup>45</sup> Yezhov, N. M., Letter to A. Chekhov, n.d., quoted in Hollosi, C., loc. cit.

<sup>46</sup> Knipper, O., quoted in Balukhaty, S. D., op. cit., p. 81.

<sup>47</sup> Stanislavski, C., op. cit., p. 354.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 355.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. The supposedly 'giftless' Nina, in Stanislavski's production, can magically acquire the necessary talent to become 'a true actress' in order that the director can create a *coup-de-théâtre* in which the sentimental tear-jerking potential of the scene is milked to its limit.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Hollosi, C., op. cit., p. 123.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>54</sup> Chekhov, A., *The Seagull*, p. 245.

- <sup>55</sup> Chitau-Karmina, M., quoted in Hollosi, C., loc. cit.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 120.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 124.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 122.
- <sup>60</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., op. cit., p. 121.
- <sup>61</sup> Pinter, H., 'Writing for the Theatre', in *Pinter Plays*, Vol. 1, Methuen, London, 1976, p. 11.
- <sup>62</sup> Williams, R., *Drama in Performance*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1972, pp. 130–1.
- <sup>63</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 21 October 1895, in Hellman, L., op. cit., p. 189.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>65</sup> Brooks, C. and Heilman, R. B., *Understanding Drama*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York, 1966, p. 492.
- <sup>66</sup> Chekhov, A., *The Seagull*, in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 2, p. 233.
- <sup>67</sup> Steiner, G., *The Death of Tragedy*, Faber & Faber, London, 1961, p. 161.
- <sup>68</sup> Chekhov, A., *The Seagull*, p. 233.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 247.
- <sup>70</sup> An early version of the play explicitly stated at the end of Act One that Dr Dorn was Masha's father. In the final version of the play, references to 'my child' appear to have a more innocent avuncular meaning. Some directors in their productions do suggest the possibility that Dorn could be Masha's father.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp. 269–70.
- <sup>72</sup> Stanislavski, C., in Balukhaty, S. D., op. cit., p. 139.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>74</sup> Holland, P., 'The Director and the Playwright: Control Over the Means of Production', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 11, August 1987, p. 213.
- <sup>75</sup> Stanislavski, C., in Balukhaty, S. D., op. cit., p. 253.
- <sup>76</sup> Holland, P., op. cit., p. 214.
- <sup>77</sup> Chekhov, A., quoted in Melchinger, S., op. cit., p. 62. In the textual notes appended to Jean-Claude Van Itallie's 1974 translation of *The Seagull*, Paul Schmidt correctly identifies Chekhov's negative attitude towards interpretations that made his characters into cry-babies:  
The stage direction *almost crying* (*skvoz slyozy*) is one that Chekhov uses over and over in his plays; it occurs four times in this one. The Russian phrase literally means 'through tears', but on no account does it mean that Chekhov wants the actor or actress in question to cry, or even necessarily to come near it. So many of them did, especially under Stanislavski's over-wrought direction, that Chekhov had to write to Stanislavski's partner at the Moscow Art Theater, Nemirovich-Danchenko, on October 23, 1903: 'I often use the phrase "almost crying" in my stage directions, but that indicates only a character's mood, not actual tears.'
- (Schmidt, P., 'Textual Notes', in Chekhov, A., *The Seagull, A New Version*, Van Itallie, J-C., trans., Harper & Row, New York, 1977, p. 93.)
- <sup>78</sup> Shulman, M., *Standard*, 27 April 1984.
- <sup>79</sup> Irvine, St J., *Observer*, 29 September 1929, quoted in Miles, P., *Chekhov on the British Stage*, Sam & Sam, England, 1987, p. 21. The temptation to parody such gloomy productions has proved irresistible and, as Laurence Senelick has noted, when he examined Burenin's 1917 parody of Chekhov, 'the parodist is confusing the play with the production', in this case Stanislavski's Moscow Art Theatre productions. In Burenin's parody entitled 'Cherry Jam on a Treacle Base. A white drama with mood. And not a single act', Chekhov is seen as the writer of proto-absurdist plays full of hopelessness and despair:  
Yes, on the whole life is, so to speak, a hole. What are human beings born for? To fall into the hole. Life has no meaning. Here I sit in an old, sort of baronial, aristocratic house, though in fact it's remarkably bourgeois. I sit and smear the table with treacly jam made from Vladimir cherries. There in the orchard, the actors and actresses, made up as birds, are chirping and cuckooing. There, beside the table, the property flies are flying on the strings which Messrs Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky are tugging with remarkable effort. The gramophone reproduces the buzzing of flies. What is all this for? Why is all this? For, so to speak, 'mood' and the play's success, because without actors and actresses' chirping and cuckooing, without

flies' buzzing, it would flop ... But in a thousand, in a million years new people will be born. And they too will smear treacherously cherry jam on the table as I am now doing. But they, these people of a far-off day, will probably be more intelligent and will not create and present pseudo-realistic plays with mood, in which there is no meaning and in which over the course of four acts characters, for no reason at all, carry on dialogues like those in language primers for French and German ... (Burenin, V. P., quoted in Senelick, L., 'Stuffed Seagulls: Parody and the Reception of Chekhov's Plays', *Poetics Today*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1987, p. 290.)

<sup>80</sup> Miles P., op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>81</sup> Swinnerton, F., *Nation*, 17 July 1920, quoted in Miles, P., op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>82</sup> Billington, M., *Guardian*, 29 April 1985.

<sup>83</sup> King, F., *Sunday Telegraph*, 5 May 1985.

<sup>84</sup> Shulman, M., *Standard*, 29 April 1985.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74–5.

<sup>86</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 21 November 1895, in Friedland, L. S., op. cit., p. 146.

<sup>87</sup> Scolnicov, H., 'Chekhov's Reading of *Hamlet*', in Scolnicov, H. and Holland, P., eds, *Reading Plays: Interpretation and Reception*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 201.

<sup>88</sup> Chekhov, A., *The Seagull*, p. 236.

<sup>89</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 2 November 1895, quoted in Van Itallie, J-C., op. cit., p. 90.

<sup>90</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 12 July 1897, quoted in Friedland, L. S., op. cit., p. 265.

<sup>91</sup> The lake and the moon are of course no more real than are the other staging and lighting effects used in *The Seagull*, but just as Hamlet attempts to convince an audience that he is a real person with an actual 'motive and cue for passion' as opposed to the player who only acts his passion, so in Chekhov's play we are asked to see the setting for Treplev's play not as a 'theatrical set', but as something that is as 'real' as the setting of *The Seagull* as a whole. Since that setting is itself a 'theatrical set', the paradox involved in the attempt to create any 'illusion of reality' is foregrounded.

<sup>92</sup> Senelick, L., 'Chekhov's Drama, Maeterlinck, and the Russian Symbolists', in Barricelli, J-P., ed., *Chekhov's Great Plays: A Critical Anthology*, New York University Press, New York, 1981, pp. 161–2.

<sup>93</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. N. Pleshcheyev, 4 October 1888, in Yarmolinsky, A., *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, The Viking Press, New York, 1973, p. 81.

<sup>94</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 7 January 1889, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 107.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Chekhov, A., *The Seagull*, p. 277.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 280.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 281.

<sup>99</sup> Ganz, A., *Realms of the Self: Variations on a Theme in Modern Drama*, New York University Press, New York, 1980, p. 38.

<sup>100</sup> Gottlieb, V., 'Chekhov in Limbo: British Productions of the Plays of Chekhov', in Scolnicov H. and Holland, P., eds, *The Play Out of Context: Transferring Plays from Culture to Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 163.

<sup>101</sup> Billington, M., *Guardian*, 9 July 1994.

<sup>102</sup> Taylor, P., *Independent*, 23 February 1990. It should be noted that Mr Taylor found the comic business surrounding the performance of Treplev's play 'witty', regardless of its inappropriateness.

<sup>103</sup> Taylor, P., *Independent*, 8 November 1990.

<sup>104</sup> Shakespeare, W., *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 2.

<sup>105</sup> Chekhov, A., *The Seagull*, p. 250.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>107</sup> Chekhov, A., *The Seagull*, p. 271.

<sup>108</sup> David Magarshack quotes from a letter to Suvorin in which Chekhov gave some medical advice to the 58-year-old publisher who had been suffering from giddy spells. The prescription was much the same as that offered by Dr Dorn to Sorin in *The Seagull*, and this suggests that, far from being heartless, Dorn is providing what was considered at the time to be the best treatment for this medical condition. (See Magarshack, D., *The Real Chekhov*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1972, pp. 42–3, footnote 1.)

<sup>109</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. Tikhonov, 1902, quoted in Magarshack, D., *Chekhov the Dramatist*, p. 14.

<sup>110</sup> Chekhov, A., *The Seagull*, p. 241.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238. Nina's taste may not be very sophisticated and she appears to like the sort of romantic melodramas that Treplev's mother acts in. Some of her criticisms of Treplev's new form of drama might apply equally well to Chekhov's new dramatic form. She complains that 'There's not much action, it's just a lot of speeches. I think a play needs a love interest'. Nevertheless, Nina's comment that Treplev's play did not depict 'living people' would have been regarded as a major fault by Chekhov, who was himself so committed to using the conventions of realism.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>115</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 20 June 1896, quoted in Magarshack, D., *Chekhov the Dramatist*, p. 20.

<sup>116</sup> Many of the themes that were important in Russian symbolist literature are utilised by Chekhov in his depiction of Treplev. P. Gurev, in a book on Russian symbolist poetry, outlines some of these recurring motifs. Chekhov's use of these themes testifies to both his knowledge of this literary movement and his subtle debunking of the more pretentious aspects of it. 'The theme of solitude is the fundamental motif of symbolist poetry. In all of the experiences of the symbolist poets, we encounter, either directly or in reflected form, the fact of their estrangement not only from the life of groups, but also from the life of another individual, even their beloved. Solitude is by turns extolled as the delight and happiness of life — it alone remains to the man not wishing to mingle with the crowd — and cursed: he strains to break out of it, seeks salvation among people, in love for a woman, but in vain. He remains alone and alienated from all ... All the forces of his soul recede deep into the individual; his surroundings interest him less and less, and he separates himself from life, as it were, with a translucent screen through which everything seems to him less real, phantomlike. The real world loses something in palpability and weight, and reality comes to resemble a dream; but, in exchange, the images engendered by the soul acquire the brilliance and force of actuality.' (Gurev, P., 'Summing Up Russian Symbolist Poetry', in Rabinowitz, S., ed., *The Noise of Change: Russian Literature and the Critics (1891–1917)*, Ardis, Ann Arbor, 1986, pp. 106–10.)

<sup>117</sup> Chekhov, A., *The Seagull*, p. 241.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>119</sup> Senelick, L., 'Chekhov's Drama, Maeterlinck, and the Russian Symbolists', in Barricelli, J-P, op. cit., p. 164.

<sup>120</sup> Senelick, L., 'Chekhov and the Irresistible Symbol: A Response to Peter Holland', in Redmond, J., *Drama and Symbolism: Themes in Drama 4*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982, p. 246.

<sup>121</sup> Chekhov, A., *The Seagull*, p. 253.

<sup>122</sup> Holland, P., 'Chekhov and the Resistant Symbol', in Redmond, J., op. cit., p. 235.

<sup>123</sup> Gielgud, J., *Early Stages*, The Falcon Press, London, 1948, p. 84.

<sup>124</sup> See Gottlieb, V., *Chekhov and the Vaudeville*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982, pp. 126 and 128.

<sup>125</sup> Osborne, C., *Daily Telegraph*, 25 April 1991.

<sup>126</sup> These problems of interpretation are made more difficult in the case of a writer such as Chekhov because, not only are audiences increasingly removed from the time in which the plays were written, they are also culturally removed because these works are Russian, not English, in origin. For a discussion of these particular problems of directorial interpretation, see Scolnicov, H. and Holland, P., op. cit.

<sup>127</sup> Chekhov saw Bernhardt perform and wrote: 'We are far from worshipping Sarah Bernhardt as a talent.' In her portrayal of Adrienne Lecouvreur Chekhov admitted 'There were brief passages in her acting which moved us almost to tears', but he added that 'the tears failed to well up only because all the enchantment is smothered in artifice. Were it not for that scurvy artifice, that premeditated tricksiness, that over-emphasis, honest to goodness, we would have burst into tears, and the theatre would have rocked with applause'. (Chekhov, A., 'More about Sarah Bernhardt', December 1881, in Senelick, L., *Russian Dramatic Theory from Pushkin to the Symbolists*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1981, p. 87.)

<sup>128</sup> Chekhov, A., *The Seagull*, p. 265.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 265–6.

<sup>130</sup> Radin, V., *New Statesman*, 9 August 1985.

<sup>131</sup> Billington, M., *Guardian*, 5 August 1985.

<sup>132</sup> Trigorin is another character who is often played judgementally and not from his own point of view. We know that Chekhov disliked the fact that Stanislavski played this character as a dandy. In Anthony Clark's 1990 production, Chekhov's weak-willed writer was made into a rather nasty seducer: 'Expatriating on the hollowness of his fame, Guinness [Trigorin] lets you see, in the faintly calculating look in his eyes, how the novelist is using this soul-bearing [sic] exercise as a way of besotting the girl [Nina] further.' (Taylor, P., *Independent*, 23 February 1990.)

<sup>133</sup> King, F., *Sunday Telegraph*, 5 May 1985.

<sup>134</sup> Gottlieb, V., 'Chekhov in Limbo: British Productions of the Plays of Chekhov', in Scolnicov, H. and Holland, P., op. cit., p. 166.

<sup>135</sup> King, F., *Sunday Telegraph*, 11 August 1985.

<sup>136</sup> Coveney, M., *Financial Times*, 5 August 1985.

<sup>137</sup> Coveney, M., *Observer*, 10 July 1994.

<sup>138</sup> Kingston, J., *The Times*, 12 July 1991.

<sup>139</sup> Karlinsky, S., op. cit., p. 281.