

Tony Randall: Trigorin or Felix ?

by Eric Simpson

Anton Chekov's early twentieth century play **The Sea Gull** is a compelling, disturbing comedy which is full of irony, satire, and at times morbid humour. This play is a fine example of Chekov's art as he paints a ruthless picture of a rotting, decadent society.

It is the task of a good theatre troupe to combine Chekov's cutting, harsh humour with the gripping, intense theme of individual failure and insanity. **The Sea Gull** is not a light comedy; it requires a truly masterful cast and direction to produce a successful blend of humour and tragedy; seriousness and frivolity, wry witticism and lament.

The Neptune Theatre production of **The Sea Gull** opened in Halifax on March 2 and despite several spotty performances the overall effect was unmistakably positive. **The Sea Gull** is a difficult play to perform and the Neptune cast was close to having the inspiration and energy necessary to capture the heart and soul of Chekov. Despite the fact that this production came close to a brilliant triumph, there remained a certain lack of intensity in some of the dramatic scenes and an impression that some of the humour was delivered without the subtle understanding needed to echo the tragic element of the play. Sad, tragic, humour is difficult to attain and in this play insanity and despondency are in a strange juxtaposition with mirth and farce.

The presence of several actors of international reputation in this play may have led the Halifax audience to expect a superhuman performance—however such was not the case. Tony Randall did not seem at ease in a serious dramatic role and his performance as Trigorin, a flippant frivolous writer, was too convincingly blase. Trigorin was so insignificant and devoid of passion that although he was despicable, one could not despise him. Dressed in an early 20th century equivalent of a leisure suit and seated on a divan with his legs crossed, Trigorin did not seem to be an artist in love. . . rather he seemed to be silly and bored.

As he squealed "I don't wanna go." in a very Felix-ish voice, Trigorin was effectively shown to be weak, spineless and feeble. However he lacked the sense of tragic nonchalance that would allow a person to ruin two lives and then later be capable of a complete lack of interest in what he had done.

The most impeccable performance of the evening was given by Gillie Fenwick as Sorin, the white-bearded former civil councillor. Fenwick, the most experienced member of the cast, was delighted as he referred to his failures in life. "Even as a young man I looked as though I had been drunk for days. . . I was never a favorite with women." Fenwick exhibited a true understanding

for the character; his lines were delivered flawlessly and his humour was never stilted. A moving performance by a mature actor.

The third newcomer to the Neptune stage, Brent Carver, played an impressive and convincing Kostya Treplev. Carver is a youthful talent who employed a fine voice and acting ability to portray the gradual decay of an unbalanced frustrated artist. He was strongest in his demanding dramatic dialogues in the third and fourth acts when he alternately raged and whimpered to his mother and his lover, Nina.

Nina, played by Fiona Reid, was truly transformed in the passage of the play. Nina was slightly too flighty at the commencement of the play. Indeed in the first act she was quite childish and markedly unrefined for the daughter of a wealthy Russian landowner. But as the play progressed she became powerfully hardened and the last scene with Kostya was especially effective. This was certainly a change from the Queen of Kensington and although Reid was somewhat less than smooth at times she is undoubtedly an actress with a great deal of talent.

Florence Patterson proved once again that she is an accomplished actress capable of interpreting almost any role with grace and ease. As Madame Irina Arkadina, Patterson managed to be an aging, jaded prima donna in search of her lost youth without undue exaggeration of a former actress' affectations. Arkadina was in a way the focal point of the play as she unwillingly destroyed her

son's life through her selfish, jealous inability to escape her own hollow world. Arkadina is miserly and sometimes bitter, yet as she waves her fan in the air during the third act and laments: "I'm so unhappy, forgive me." it is difficult not to feel sympathy for her.

Susan Wright's portrayal of Masha, the sad, unfortunate wife of the schoolteacher, was solid and steady, tinged with a black humour typical of the play. A poor daughter of the retired army lieutenant who manages Sorin's estate. Masha says she "belongs nowhere and has no object in life." yet she still enjoys a little drink from time to time.

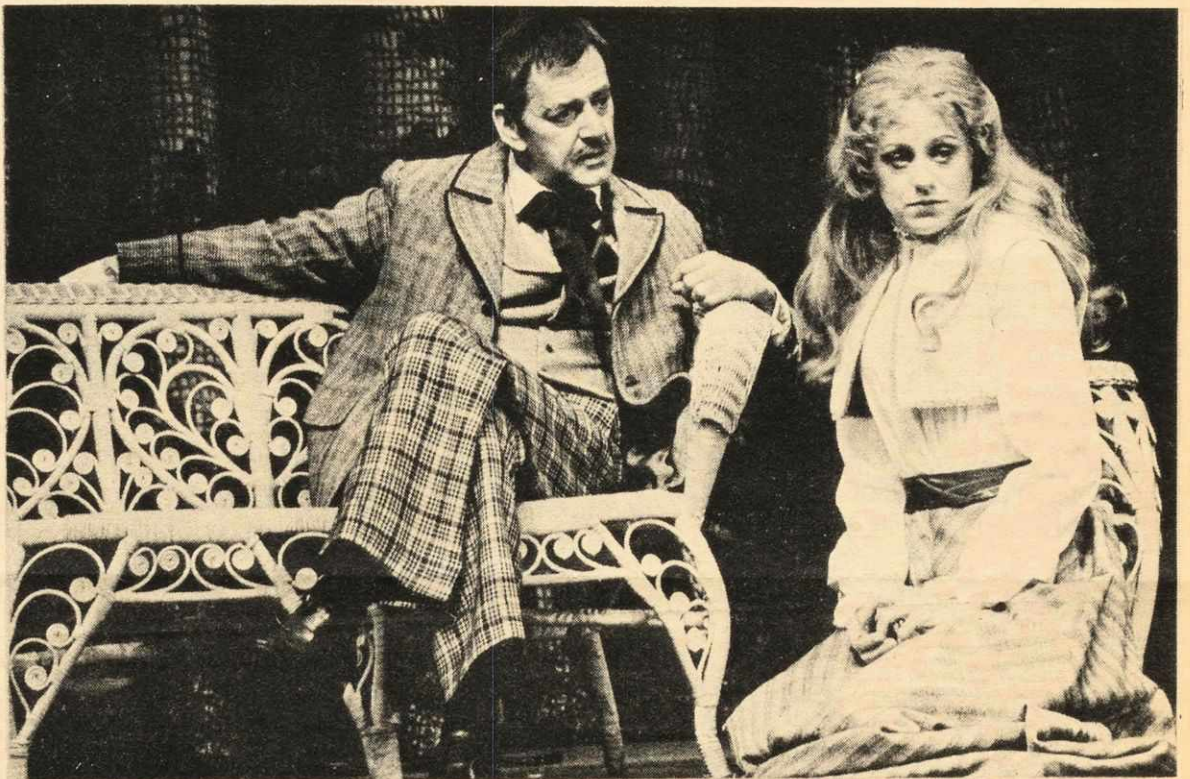
Masha is in love with Kostya but she swears to "tear this love out of my heart, tear it out by the roots." Somehow she perseveres, accepts her fate and retains her sanity.

Masha's husband, Medvedenko, is a fine example of a stock character. Played by Keith Dinicol, Medvedenko plods around stiffly in a coat that is too small for him enduring the butt of many jokes. Whining, poor and unlucky, Medvedenko is a symbol of those in society who will never rise above their station.

Shamarayev, the former lieutenant (David Schurmann) and his wife Polina (Joan

Gregson) are both fairly forgettable characters. Shamarayev had an irritating voice that grated on the ear ; his harsh military manner was overdone. Polina (her passionate attachment to Dr. Dorn in conflict with her otherwise cold demeanor) was acted with a hint of ennui by Gregson.

David Renton's Dr. Dorn was not quite as dashing and attractive as expected but he was certainly kind and reassuring as a doctor should be. However Renton's distinctive voice as he consoled the crying Masha was convincing as Trigorin's upon embracing Nina. continued on page 18



Trigorin [Tony Randall] talks with Nina [Fiona Reid] during a scene from Chekov's *The Sea Gull*.

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