

The Seagull: Is there a “Chekhovian mood” at present?

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Directed by Michael Mayer; screenplay by Stephen Karam, based on the play by Anton Chekhov

Michael Mayer has directed a new film version of Russian writer Anton Chekhov’s play, *The Seagull*, written in 1895 and first produced in 1896.

Mayer’s film, with a screenplay by Stephen Karam, begins at a Moscow theater in 1904. The actress Irina Arkadina (Annette Bening), after a triumph, is told that her elder brother is dangerously ill. In the middle of the night, she rushes to his estate outside the city, accompanied by the celebrated writer, Boris Trigorin (Corey Stoll).

Irina finds her brother, Sorin (Brian Dennehy), on death’s door. Her son Konstantin (Billie Howle), a would-be playwright, who lives with his uncle, is also present. When Konstantin finds himself alone for a moment, there is a knock at the window. It is Nina (Saoirse Ronan), a young woman with whom Konstantin was much in love and who left to become an actress two years before ...

Other than making these brief scenes, which in Chekhov’s play come close to the conclusion, into the opening of their film (and repeating them later), Mayer and Karam remain faithful to the original drama (or comedy, as the playwright termed it).

It is two years earlier. Konstantin is staging his foolish, grandiose Symbolist-Decadent play, set tens of thousands of years in the future (“All is cold, cold. All is void, void, void. All is terrible, terrible”), at dusk on the grounds of his uncle’s estate, with Nina in the lead role as the “soul of the world.” His mother, the author Trigorin—with whom she has begun a relationship—and Sorin are in the audience, along with the local doctor, Dorn (Jon Tenney). Also present are the estate manager, Shamrayev (Glenn Fleshler), his wife Polina (Mare Winningham) and daughter Masha (Elisabeth Moss). The latter is being pursued by the ineffectual, poverty-stricken schoolteacher, Medvedenko (Michael Zegen).

There are numerous undercurrents. Irina Arkadina is bored in the country, jealous of Nina’s appearing in Konstantin’s play and hostile to the latter’s attempts to create “new forms of art.” She ridicules the play and succeeds in ruining her son’s experiment. Konstantin dislikes Trigorin, the short-story writer, whose works he finds insubstantial. Sorin, already ill and musing about death, regrets that he never succeeded in fulfilling his two greatest desires, to become a writer and to marry. Polina and the doctor have had an affair at some point. She is unhappy in her marriage to the boorish Shamrayev. Masha, her daughter, appears destined to follow in her footsteps. In fact, Chekhov’s play begins with Medvedenko asking Masha—who is unrequitedly in love with Konstantin—why she always wears black. “I’m in mourning for my life,” she replies. “I’m unhappy.”

For Konstantin things only get worse in the following days. In a fit of anger, he shoots a gull (not a “seagull,” in fact, the drama takes place on an inland lake) and places it at Nina’s feet. He warns her he will soon end his own life in the same way. Trigorin determines to make Nina, lovely and naïve, his latest conquest. Prophetically, he tells her an idea for a new story: “A young girl grows up on the shores of a lake, as you have. She

loves the lake as the gulls do, and is as happy and free as they. But a man sees her who chances to come that way, and he destroys her out of idleness, as this gull here has been destroyed.”

Konstantin does attempt suicide, but fails. Nina falls in love with Trigorin and tells him she has decided to take the plunge—she will leave for Moscow and become an actress. He arranges to meet her in the city.

Two years later. Masha and Medvedenko are married, miserably. Sorin is fatally ill. We learn that Nina and Trigorin lived together and had a child, who died. Nina has not proven to be an especially brilliant actress, although she has something of a career. Trigorin has returned to Irina Arkadina. Nina, as before, knocks on Konstantin’s window. They talk, she begins to compare herself to the gull. She is still hopelessly in love with Trigorin. She has a second-rate acting engagement for the winter, in the provinces. She leaves ...

Chekhov’s plays, wrote the famed Russian-Soviet theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold years later, “corresponded to the general mood of the Russian intelligentsia at that time.” Meyerhold, who became a friend of Chekhov’s, played a leading role in the legendarily successful 1898 Moscow Art Theatre production of *The Seagull* (the original production, two years previously at a different theater, was an abject failure). Konstantin Stanislavsky directed—and performed in—the 1898 production, which also featured Olga Knipper, Chekhov’s future wife.

Nina’s tragedy, wrote Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, Stanislavsky’s colleague and co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre, specifically spoke to the situation of many girls “from the provinces at the time—girls whose ambition it was to escape from the dullness of their environment ... to find something to which they might ‘give themselves,’ all of themselves; flamingly and tenderly to sacrifice themselves to Him, the gifted man who had stimulated their dreams. As long as women’s rights were rudely limited, theatrical schools were full of girls like these.”

The “general mood of the Russian intelligentsia” in question, if one accepts Chekhov’s drama-comedy as a guide, contained discouragement, disillusionment and the sense of one’s personal insignificance and the pettiness and egoism of one’s concerns and ambitions. Add to that the dullness and stagnation of life in the country, where the only interruption of the boredom apparently extending to the end of time takes the form of desperate intrigues and pointless, doomed (and sometimes destructive, as in the case of Trigorin-Nina) love affairs, and the picture of life for this layer of society that emerges in *The Seagull*, and in Chekhov’s stories and plays generally, is not an attractive one.

As Elisaveta Fen wrote, in a 1959 introduction to a volume of Chekhov’s plays, “the characters ... behave and talk as if they have lost their way, lost faith in themselves and in their own future.” Of course, other social forces and “moods” would shortly exert themselves explosively and eloquently in the 1905 Revolution.

American director Michael Mayer (born 1960) has done a competent job with *The Seagull*. This is an effort at a straightforward presentation of Chekhov’s play. The basic themes and ideas come through. The actors are

generally fine. There are moving and even insightful moments. Saoirse Ronan, who seems a little over her head at certain points, makes an emotional and troubling final appearance as the now experienced and wounded Nina. Elizabeth Moss is also moving as Masha, who “voluntarily” enters into a marriage she knows will make her life nearly unbearable.

But this *Seagull* never rises to any great height. It is largely uninspired. There is no particular indication that Mayer, who describes himself as a man of the theater, has any strong film sense. The many close-ups and quiet conversations, if the truth be told, become a bit tedious. It is a film made without strong purpose.

How much of this is Mayer’s fault and how much of it is the fault of the conditions under which this interpretation of Chekhov’s work takes place?

Meyerhold repeatedly refers to Chekhov’s theater as a “theatre of mood” rather than Realism or Naturalism.

There is something to this. One indelibly associates Chekhov (1860-1904), for better or worse, with the quiet desperation and feelings of impotence and ineffectiveness of his leading characters. Chekhov brought tremendous honesty and sincerity to his stories and plays (“Life unfolded in such frank simplicity that the auditors seemed almost embarrassed to be present,” Nemirovich-Danchenko said of the opening night of *The Seagull* in 1898), but not the widest range of situations and emotions.

The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, who liked Chekhov personally, once complained to him, “A playwright should take the theater-goer by the hand, and lead him in the direction he wants him to go. And where can I follow your character? To the couch in the living-room and back—because your character has no other place to go.”

Elisaveta Fen, in her introduction to Chekhov’s letters, wondered how it was possible for “so profoundly Russian ... moods, characters and dramatic technique” to have been so well received, for example, in England between the world wars. She suggested the answer might lie “in the social temper of the periods concerned.” Fen argued that for the typical, educated middle class Englishman, “few would deny that the intellectual and emotional climate of the years 1919-39 was one of disappointment and depression ... The two periods [in Russia and England] ... are stamped with spiritual discouragement.”

This strong association with definite moods, of course, works both ways. Because of his specific characteristics as a writer, Chekhov inevitably seems somewhat out of place under certain social circumstances, circumstances of rapid social upheaval and transformation, for example.

In *Literature and Revolution*, written in the early 1920s, Leon Trotsky referred to Stanislavsky’s Moscow Art Theatre as belonging to the “islanders,” that section of “the intelligentsia who live on an island in the strange and hostile ocean of Soviet reality.” He went on, in more astonishment than anger, “Just imagine: these people are living, to this day, in the mood of the Chekhov Theater. *The Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vanya* [two of Chekhov’s other major dramas] today!” In other words, how incongruous this subdued “Chekhovian mood” was in convulsive, ferociously energetic, post-revolutionary Russia, where the masses were still quivering in every fiber.

In a later passage in the same work, Trotsky pointed to “the passive realism of the Chekhov school” and suggested that “the experiences of *Uncle Vanya*” may well “have lost a little of their freshness.”

But the pendulum didn’t stop there either. The emergence and eventual domination of the Stalinist bureaucracy had created new political and cultural conditions by the late 1920s. In the name of “proletarian culture,” a great deal that was superficial, vulgar and “narrowly rationalistic” came to the fore in Soviet literature and drama.

Aleksandr Voronsky, the editor and literary critic, Left Oppositionist

and Trotsky’s co-thinker, felt it necessary in 1927, in his essay, “Notes on Artistic Creativity,” to come out forcefully in defense of Stanislavsky (whose theater had responded in the meantime to the artistic implications of the Bolshevik-led workers’ revolution), the Moscow Art Theatre and Chekhov. In a comment on Stanislavsky’s *My Life in Art*, Voronsky argues in favor of the theater director’s painstaking efforts—his book, Voronsky writes, “is permeated with blood and sweat”—and great artistic creativity.

He specifically and pointedly takes note of Stanislavsky’s emphasis on intuition and the need of the artist to “turn away from one’s common, everyday mood and become infected with the creative mood” and to “forget himself and yield to the flow of other feelings.” Again, Voronsky is taking aim here at pragmatic, utilitarian, cheap, purely “external” realism, which the national-minded ruling caste in the Soviet Union was encouraging. Here, under these conditions, Voronsky was promoting psychological insight and “inner realism” too, a secret which, he insists, the great literary artists—including Chekhov—understood.

“It is not hard to strut about,” Voronsky continued, almost provocatively challenging the advocates of so-called proletarian art, “or to write and say with a condescending expression that the Art Theatre represents the past. Perhaps it does represent the past, but this past was wonderful, we haven’t yet grown to its height, and our writers and actors have something to learn from it.”

There are a remarkable 475 films or television programs based on Chekhov’s works or associated with them somehow, many of them in the postwar period, when disappointment and discouragement were widespread sentiments. And other feelings too. It’s not necessary to identify Chekhov simply with a “retrograde” sensibility. But he seems to come to the fore at more socially quiescent times, which also allow perhaps for reflection and regret.

The Soviet film *The Lady with the Dog* (Iosif Kheifits, 1960), based on one of Chekhov’s most memorable short stories, would likely have been inconceivable in an earlier period of Soviet history. A man and women, both unhappily married, meet at a resort. They have an affair, but return to their old lives. They meet again, and make tentative plans to go on meeting, but the reality that they cannot get out of their marriages oppresses them. In the final scene, the audience is only aware of the Russian winter and the couple’s hopeless situation.

Does Mayer’s new film indicate the presence of a “Chekhovian mood” in the American intelligentsia today? The election of a Trump and the general and unprecedented filthiness of the political and cultural atmosphere have undoubtedly generated disquiet and unease. Feelings of impotence in the face of the growth of the far-right may exist in certain intellectual and artistic quarters.

And from the point of view of the issues raised by Voronsky, Chekhov and his circle as the representatives of a more serious, principled approach to art and to the audience, there may be something there as well. Each time a “classic” is filmed at present, no matter how inadequately, one has the feeling that the actors (and probably others involved) give a sigh of relief, appreciating that they have the opportunity for once to do something other than an empty, stupid superhero movie.

On the whole, however, the upper middle class in the film and entertainment world has done well for itself economically in recent years. Identity politics, among other things, has the function of offering this affluent layer the illusion it is “socially engaged” and “influencing things.”

Complacency and a lack of urgency largely prevail. Mayer’s *Seagull* reflects this in its own way. It is not done with tremendous passion or commitment. Chekhov’s work, to be effective, must suggest the cruelly, tragically suppressed feelings and drives under the surface. The quietness or even “half-heartedness” of the characters merely expresses the force of that suppression. Here, too often, there is merely passivity. American

filmmaking hasn't yet grown to the height of this "wonderful" past, far from it.

As noted, Chekhov is not for every time and place, or for every taste, but he was a serious artist. He wrote in a letter, "I hate lying and violence in all their forms—the most absolute freedom, freedom from force and fraud in whatever form the two latter may be expressed, that is the programme I would hold to if I were a great artist." Who do we have like that today?



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