

The Seagull

Anton Chekov, the supreme Russian dramatist, had his first major theatrical success with “The Seagull” (1896), which set the tone of his sweet-sour pieces dissecting the souls of his contemporaries at the turn of the 19th C. His world of well off but frustrated figures, educated yet stifled, is usually set in languid, somewhat aimless, rural surroundings.

Such a setting serves for this “Seagull,” a lakeside estate of the Sorin family, where Chekov’s core ensemble is a quartet of protagonists: the vain and aging stage actress Irina (Annette Bening); her son Konstantin (Billy Howle), a moody, would-be playwright; the sweet but naive Nina (Saoirse Ronan), an aspiring actress; and Boris Trigorin (Corey Stoll), a noted author and Irina’s younger lover. Also present at the farm are Irina’s sickly brother Sorin (Brian Dennehy), the morose Masha (Elizabeth Moss), daughter of the estate’s manager Shamrayev (Glenn Fleshler) and his wife Polina (Mare Whittingham), as well as the lovesick young schoolteacher Medvedenko (Michael Zegen), and the detached local Dr. Dorn (Jon Tenney).

As is typical with many Chekov protagonists, most of them are strivers, mildly desperate to change something in their lives, but most also are thwarted creatures who cannot break out. A romantic roundelay complicates their striving, as Konstanin loves Nina, who is intrigued with Trigorin, who is linked to Irina, while the teacher desires Masha, who is smitten with Konstanin, while her mother Polina pines for the doctor, who once had a an affair with Irina! Got all that?

The action involves a failed theatrical presentation, a testy relationship between Konstanin and Irina, an attempted suicide, a tiff between Irina and Shamrayev, and a grudging marriage of convenience, among other business. The last act jumps two years ahead to sort out the relationships of these unhappy, snake-bitten characters. Things do not end happily.

This version of “The Seagull” was created by two Tony Award winners, director Michael Mayer (“Spring Awakening”) and playwright Stephen Karam (“The Humans”), and they give it a respect it deserves. The script follows the play quite closely, though, for some reason, the opening splashy sequence—repeated at the end of the film—shows Irina performing at a theater in Moscow, a scene that never happened in Chekov. This is an American production, somewhat surprisingly, after all, and was shot on location at a lakeside in Monroe, NY, a town just northwest of the New York City.

“Seagull’s” cast is essentially American, with the exception of Ronan (Irish) and Howle (British), who both also appear in the newly released “On Chesil Beach” (see recent review on this site). The pair play off each other capably, with Ronan a sweet young woman who is crushed by her naiveté about life, while Howle nicely smolders as a young, surly artiste. Annette Bening carries off the role of the narcissistic Irina with ease, the kind of role she could do in her sleep, and surprisingly, Elizabeth Moss, though she is the chief sourpuss in the film, gets and delivers the best lines as, when she is asked why she always dresses in black, she retorts, “I’m in mourning for my life!”

Overall, this is a competent presentation of the play, and a good introduction to it for those who don’t know Chekov’s work.

(This film is rated “PG-13” and runs 98 minutes.)

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