

THE SEAGULL

The Questors Playhouse

March 1972

[THE GUARDIAN, 7 March 1972]

The Seagull

What, I asked recently, has happened to Ann Jellicoe? One answer is that she has been at that stronghold of amateur theatre, The Questors, Mattock Lane, Ealing, directing *The Seagull* in a translation by herself and Ariadne Nicolaeff; and a good careful, intelligent job she has made of it without achieving the break with tradition she was evidently after.

In a programme note she stresses that the play is a comedy and that Stanislavsky is to blame for that heavy, introverted, self-pitying style we label Chekhovian. Yet her production lacks that quality of emotional ebullience you find in the very best Chekhov and is throughout played too pianissimo to set the comedy alight. What Miss Jellicoe does bring out strongly is Chekhov's affirmation of the durability of the human spirit (I've never before thought of Nina's final speech as a forerunner to Sonya's in *Uncle Vanya*) and the often neglected accuracy of the social relationships.

The acting, full of English understatement rather than the Russian volatility, is adequate rather than inspired but two performances transcend the general level of honest competence: David Gower's Dorn and Lorna Duval's Nina. And the production confirms that Chekhov is every bit as suited to open stage as to the proscenium arch.

Michael Billington

[THE BRENTFORD AND CHISWICK TIMES, 9 March 1972]

Seen in a fresh light

Ann Jellicoe's production of *The Seagull* at The Questors Theatre, Ealing this week is a revelation. For once it honours Chekhov's own description of the play as a comedy with "little action and tons of love."

Normally, *The Seagull* is played as a tragedy concerning the feelings and frustrations of a tight-knit group, of tiresome, self-centred, country bourgeoisie in pre-revolution Russia.

Miss Jellicoe's interpretation of the play — she also translated the text — puts the tragedy in perspective, drawing out the comedy obviously intended by Chekhov before Stanislavsky turned it into a study in introspection.

It is hard to imagine *The Seagull* as a comedy modern sense, and it would be misleading to suggest that this production has its audiences rolling in the aisles.

Rather, it is the comedy of observation, the subtle intonation of certain lines to give them an irony or ambiguity or poignancy they would otherwise have missed.

There is one scene in particular, after the presentation of Konstantin's monologue, when all the adult characters are grouped in the centre of the apron stage. Miss Jellicoe has them posturing in silence for seemingly long periods before one of them offers up some Chekhovian platitude, like: "It's hot and peaceful. Nobody does anything, everyone philosophises," more like a member of the audience describing the scene from a distance, than one of those participating.

Barbara Hutchins, as Madame Arkadina, wavers between sophisticated gentleness and histrionic hysteria; David Gower, as the suave doctor, manages to be both nonchalant and compassionate at the same time; Lorna Duval is delightful in the title role; John Whibley gives a fine study in egotistical paranoia as Konstantin; and Alfred Emmet, founder of The Questors, makes a lovable and sympathetic Sorin, elder statesman of the group.

Alongside Alfred Emmet's production of *Uncle Vanya* in 1968, this is The Questors at their very, very best.
Nick Smurthwaite

[COUNTY TIMES AND GAZETTE 3 March, 1972]

“Seagull” rehearsals are saved by car highlights.

Rehearsals for the production of Chekhov's “The Seagull” at The Questors Theatre, Ealing, could have been as much a comedy as the play itself, with blackouts stopping 10 hours of rehearsal time.

Working with emergency lighting of car headlights, candles and batteries, the cast, which hovers on the brink of tragedy but never falls over, continued with difficulty.

Ann Jellicoe first translated the play 10 years ago for a production at the Royal Court Theatre. She has produced it for The Questors and it opens on Saturday.

By classical criteria, “The Seagull” is a comedy. It has an “up ending”, Nina's will to endure, and regards its characters with a wry, objective sympathy.

But it is more commonly regarded as a tragedy — due probably to the influence of Stanislavsky, who established Chekhov and made him famous. In doing so he imposed his own style on the play.

The heavy, introverted, self-pitying “Chekhovian” style is more than likely due to Stanislavsky. When the play was written, in the 1890's, dramatic writing was only just struggling free of the Victorian Theatre, and it explored a different dimension to the “real” shipwrecks and “real” battles that were popular at that time.

For this reason perhaps the first production of “The Seagull” was a disaster. Halfway through the first act the audience began to boo and whistle. Two years later at the newly-formed Moscow Arts Theatre it was a great success.

“The Seagull” can be seen on most evenings for the next two weeks. Should power cuts continue, the Theatre is ready with gas heaters, car headlights, blankets and car rugs. so that the show can go on.
