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I have a confession: Since discovering my passion for the theatre, I've intentionally avoided the works of Anton Chekov. So many of my theatre friends consider Chekov to be the pinnacle of playwrights, placing him even higher than Shakespeare, yet fearing that I'd be excommunicated should I not like his works, I stayed away from them altogether. But now, after seeing the opening-night performance of Augustana College's *The Seagull*, I must form and share my opinion. So here it is: It turns out I like Chekov. A *lot.*

Set in 1990's-era California, director Mark Hurty's production of Chekov's 19th-Century tragicomedy concerns a small group of Russians enjoying a holiday at the vineyard of Peter Sorin (Alex Van Beek). *Not* enjoying their time together is Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov (Bart Curtin), a writer frustrated with the common conventions of contemporary theatre, and in love with aspiring actress Nina Mikhailovna Zarechaya (Anna Dundek). Much of his melancholy derives from the mockery of his work by his mother, successful actress Irina Nikolayevna Arkadina (Rachel Krein), and on top of *that* pain, Nina loves acclaimed novelist Boris Alexeyevich Trigorin (Rolf Koos), whom *Arkadina* loves.

The series of unrequited loves continues with Ilya Afanasyevich Shamrayev (Henry Lapka), Sorin's estate manager, who loves Arkadina. His wife, Polina Andreyevna (Mary Naughton), is understandably saddened by this, and by the fact that Yevgeny Sergeyevich Dorn (Matthew Fox Kerr), the local doctor, will not return *her* advances. Meanwhile, Masha (Jennifer Altenbernd), the daughter of Shamrayev and Andreyevna, loves Konstantin, but marries Semyon

Semyonovich Medvedenko (Sean Serluco), who loves her.

As you can probably tell, this is *way* beyond standard boy-meets-girl material. It's also what I found I like about Chekov - his characters are multi-dimensional, with lives that weave together in unexpected ways that mimic true life. And what wordcraft! I can't count the times during Augustana's performance that I made a mental note to remember a sharp-witted line for later, personal use.

What first grabbed me upon entering Augustana's Potter Hall for Friday's performance was the set. Scenic Designer Adam Parboosingh (who also designed the costumes, video projections, and lights) created a playing area with movable pieces, which start as four platforms resembling piers. They are eventually pushed together to form one multi-leveled piece for the terrace, and then altered again to represent a room in the house for play's final sequences. While it makes scene changes a tad lengthy, the construction and ingenuity of it all is quite impressive.

So, too, are the lighting and video projection schemes, which Parboosingh incorporates to illustrate the movement of water, and later uses to create the illusion of floorboards, making it clear that the action is moving indoors. An abstract video effect is also cleverly used during the performance of Konstantin's play.

The cast is a mix of theatre and non-theatre majors (a high percentage of whom, interestingly enough, are majoring in Biology). Altenbernd's Masha is crowd-pleasingly cynical, though there's a noticeable lack of depth to her character's love for Konstantin, while Lapka's performance is overacted to comical effect. It is Kerr, however, who gets the most laughs through the sarcastic delivery of his dialogue. (I must say, though, that Kerr delivers the final line of the play as almost a throwaway, which is surprising given his otherwise rich use of inflection and phrasing.) Naughton is also notable for her focus and nuance, making it clear that her character is burdened with a deep sorrow over her husband's love for another woman, and her unrequited love for Dorn.

Of the leads, Koos is likable, but doesn't come across as the heartless, self-important man described by other characters. Krein is just over-dramatic enough to fit the self-absorbed nature of Arkadina without going overboard, while Dundek does a fine job of portraying a hopeful naiveté early in the play and a touch of madness in the final act. If any of the actors are able to convey true sincerity in the characters' suffering, though, it is Curtin, who gives a subtle, realistic, remarkable portrayal as Konstantin**.**

As mentioned, Augustana's *The Seagull* was my introduction to the work of Anton Chekov, but it was also my introduction to Augustana's theatre productions. And while some actors struggled to fully present the multiple layers of Chekov's characters, several others made good use of his words and showcased finely honed skills - like the show itself, they were a credit to the college's theatre department.

For tickets and information, call (309) 794-7306 or visit Augustana.edu .

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