

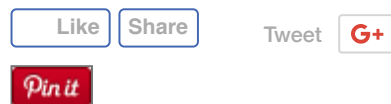


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## Film Review: The Seagull

*Though some of Chekhov is lost in translation to the screen, Michael Mayer captures much of his genius thanks to screenwriter Stephen Karam and a fine cast anchored by a star turn from Annette Bening.*

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/term/93) May 9, 2018



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There's a great deal to recommend in this screen version of Chekhov's iconic play *The Seagull*, directed by Michael Mayer (*Spring Awakening*). But perhaps any film adaptation of the tragicomedy, which galvanized the theatre of 1896 with its realism, does it a disservice.

Theatre, while capable of eliciting great emotion from an audience, maintains a physical distance across the proscenium that frames the world onstage. Distance tempers the absurdities and histrionics of Chekhov's flailing, often self-destructive landed gentry and their servants. Movies, on the other hand, invite intimacy; we're up close and personal among Chekhov's turbulent players, with much subtlety lost in translation. The characters' passions and contradictions sometimes come across—at least in Mayer's go at *The Seagull*—as ludicrous. The end effect of this realism, paradoxically, is artificiality, a jarring sense of actors chewing the scenery.

That said, this *Seagull's* daisy chain of unrequited loves and unfulfilled lives almost always entertains. Adapted by playwright Stephen Karam (creator of the indelible *The Humans*), the well-known story follows a group of people who assemble at a provincial lakeside estate owned by Sorin (Brian Dennehy), a retired civil servant in declining health, and his sister, Irina (Annette Bening), a

celebrated Moscow stage actress. Irina and her younger lover, Boris (Corey Stoll), a successful writer of short stories, have come to watch a play written and directed by Irina's son Konstantin (Billy Howle) and performed by his adored girlfriend Nina (Saoirse Ronan), who lives nearby. The evening quickly goes to hell, as Irina, mid-performance, openly mocks her son's abstract and symbolic play. Even his beloved star, Nina, is unimpressed by the work. Infuriated, Konstantin retaliates by attacking his mother and Trigorin's work as lifeless and old-fashioned.

Further roiling the lovely lakeside home, everyone is in love with someone who loves someone else. Konstantin's adored Nina, who dreams of acting in Moscow, falls for Trigorin (and his literary panache). Irina, the aging diva, loves Trigorin, who sees the enchanting Nina as his final shot at true love. Meanwhile, Masha (Elizabeth Moss), the estate manager's vodka-tipping daughter, has for years been hopelessly in love with Konstantin, who treats her like vermin. Even the estate manager's wife pines for a middle-aged but dashing local doctor, who prefers to keep his options open (an early example of a commitment-phobe?). Completing the party of thwarted souls, Irina's brother Sorin regrets from his sickbed all the joys he has passed up in life. Through the unique Chekhovian alchemy, this array of misery is also funny—and Mayer has captured much of the tragi-humor.

A great deal of credit must go to Annette Bening—run and see this movie for her bravura turn as Irina alone. Equal parts charm and egomania, she channels to perfection the vanity of an aging actress, who seems to be performing at all times, even alone with her mirror. Her shocking cruelty toward her grownup son is partly powered, if hardly justified, by what his age reveals about hers. The set-piece of the film occurs in the third act, when Trigorin begs Irina to free him so he can play out his passion for Nina. To watch Bening in this great scene, as she pleads her case and cunningly shifts the balance of power, against all odds, is to watch acting of the highest order.

Corey Stoll delivers a credible turn as Trigorin, the sort of prevaricating, flabby-willed, self-hating man so dear to much of Russian literature (and likely baffling to a great swath of American viewers). The character offers a fine example of Chekhovian subtext: In his scene with Irina, Trigorin says one thing, feels another—then behaves in yet another way. Stoll is most convincing as the obsessed writer, who pulls stories from the situations around him—including one that telegraphs Nina's fate. Saoirse Ronan literally glows as Nina, especially in her scenes with Trigorin on the lake, which accentuate her blue-green eyes and lightstruck quality. For this viewer, a weak link in the company is Elizabeth Moss as Masha, who owns the immortal response to the question of why she always wears black. Moss, who was priceless in the Swedish Palme d'Or winner *The Square*, is too recognizably Elizabeth Moss and 21st-century—too badass—for *The Seagull*. There's no badass in Chekhov.

Weaker still is Billy Howle as Irina's son Konstantin. Once again, the medium of film disserves such an unstrung character, who appears excessive and implausible onscreen (yet authentic onstage). The love-hate business between Howle and Bening is cringe-worthy.

A final caveat: In an effort to render a piece of theatre more cinematic, Matthew J. Lloyd's camera, often handheld, creates a frantic busyness which is at odds with the playwright's poetic dreaminess. In fact, in certain productions of the play a character might doze off in his chair, mid-sentence. The film, though, offers an estate house perched high above the lake, which allows the characters to observe each other (and confirm their worst suspicions), which would be impossible in the play. For the most part, Mayer goes a long way toward honoring Chekhov's signature blend of deep sadness overlaid by comedy. This is a *Seagull* to celebrate.

Click [here \(https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4682136/?ref=mv\\_sr\\_1\)](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4682136/?ref=mv_sr_1) for cast and crew information.

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