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# **“THE SEAGULL”**

**A COMEDY  
OF DELUSIONS**

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## A COMEDY OF DELUSIONS

Translated from the Russian by  
Svetlana le Fleming

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Maya Volchkevich asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work

**Volchkevich Maya.** “The Seagull”. A Comedy of delusions / translated by Svetlana le Fleming. – М., ПРОБЕЛ-2000, 2007.

The book is devoted to a play which became on its appearance a turning point in Russian, and later world, art. A vast amount has been written about the play.

However, “The Seagull” still attracts producers, actors and critics; they read it every time as if for the first time. This book attempts the same.

It is addressed to all those who are interested in Chekhov’s work and the “eternal questions” of his “strange” play, “The Seagull”.

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*The following translations of Chekhov’s works have been used  
Chekhov’s plays, translated by Elizaveta Fen (Penguin Books, 1954),*

*“A Dreary Story”, “The House with the Mezzanine”,  
“My Life” in “The Chekhov Omnibus. Selected Stories”,  
translated by Constance Garnet (Everyman 1994),*

*“An Attack of Nerves”, translated by Constance Garnet  
in “The Portable Chekhov” (Viking Press, New York, 1968),*

*“At a Country House”, translated by Ronald Hingley in “Oxford Chekhov”,  
(vol.7, Oxford University Press, 1978).*

**A.P. Chekhov**

**“THE SEAGULL”**

**A Comedy in Four Acts**

**CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY**

**ARKADINA**, Irina Nikolayevna (Madame Treplev by marriage), an actress

**TREPLEV**, Konstantin Gavrilovich (Kostya), her son, a young man

**SORIN**, Piotr Nikolayevich (Petrusha), her brother

**ZARECHNAYA**, Nina Mikhailovna, a young girl, daughter of a wealthy landowner

**SHAMRAYEV**, Ilya Afanasyevich, a retired Army lieutenant, Sorin's estate steward

**POLINA ANDREYEVNA**, his wife

**MASHA** (Maryia Ilyinichna), his daughter

**TRIGORIN**, Boris Alekseyevich, a writer

**DORN**, Yevgenii Sergeyelevich, a doctor

**MEDVEDENKO**, Semyon Semyonovich, a schoolteacher

**YAKOV**, a workman

**A HOUSEMAID**

The action takes place in Sorin's house and garden.

Between the Third and the Fourth Acts there is an interval of two years

## INSTEAD OF INTRODUCTION

*"I am going to write something strange,"* Chekhov wrote when he was only planning to write a play. This prediction, it must be said, came true in full measure: no other play has had such an unusual fate.

There was the fiasco of the play's premiere at the Alexandrinsky theatre, its performances in the provinces and, two years later, the staging of the play by Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, which established the fame of the future Moscow Art Theatre and became its symbol. Throughout the twentieth century there were numerous productions of "The Seagull" in Russia and abroad. This comedy has attracted the attention of producers, actors and critics like a magnet.

"The Seagull" is Chekhov's only work in which the characters talk a lot about creativity. Chekhov, the man of letters, obviously, needed to speak out in this play which he described as "conversations about literature, five poods\* of love, little action". Two writers, two actresses and other characters with a remote connexion with literature and art, constantly talk about art, talk "as they can and as they want".

Every producer trying to stage "The Seagull" faces "eternal questions" as well as a whole century of mythology relating to the play.

How should the play within the play about the World Soul be performed? Is it a something in the Symbolist spirit? A parody? Or a warning of future catastrophe?

Will Nina Zarechnaya become a real actress, and can one consider the "vulgar charmer" Arkadina to be one?

How close are Trigorin's thoughts about his place in art to Chekhov's own quest?

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\* a pood was about 36 lbs.

Who is Konstantin Treplev? Is he a rebel, the overthrower of old forms in art? A failure, trying to find in writing what life persistently denies him? Or is he a lyrical hero, a prophet of the “new art” of the age?

Why is the play called “The Seagull” and designated a comedy by the author?

Nowadays it is possible to suggest answers to these and other questions, despite the mythology which surrounded Chekhov and the play in the last century.

Maybe we should read the play as if the fiasco on the stage of Aleksandrinsky theatre, its noisy fame at the Moscow Art Theatre and its numerous interpretations had never existed?

We could look at the characters as if they were ordinary people sometimes doing things which are quite unexpected, even by them: each one led by their own destiny and not accepting that their life is a comedy being acted out for the public, a comedy about the creative process, the pathways and aims in art.

We shall try to read and see “The Seagull” as a story from the life of people living on a country estate and their guests from the capital, without scenery, against the background of a lake, the sky, an old house – perhaps the way Konstantin Treplev wanted to stage his play.



Konstantin Treplev's origins are unclear: "...according to my passport, I am a petty bourgeois from Kiev". What does the audience know about Konstantin's father, except that he was a famous actor? Perhaps the sufferings of this "petty bourgeois from Kiev" ("Who am I? What am I?") derive from the fact that he is ashamed of his passport.

Of Arkadina we are told "married name Treplev", but were Konstantin's parents married at the time of his birth or was he born illegitimate?

If this is the case, the relationship of the famous actress Arkadina and her son, whom she calls a "beggar" and a "sponger" reflects the story in Ostrovsky's play "Guilty without Guilt" of the famous actress Otradina and her illegitimate offspring, "the foundling by the fence" Neznamov. In this play Grigory Neznamov really does not know who or what he is; and in Otradina's presence he proposes a toast "to mothers who abandon their children".

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The subject of "illegitimacy" was very sensitive in Chekhov's family. Two of Chekhov's elder brother Alexander's sons were born out of wedlock. When the time came to receive their passports identifying them as "petty bourgeois from Novgorod" these documents were obtained only with great difficulty.

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Nina Zarechnaya's and Trigorin's child was born illegitimate. It is well known, that the story of the relationship of Chekhov's close friend Lika Mizinova and the popular writer Ignatii Potapenko to some extent served the author of "The Seagull" as a prototype. The lovelorn Lika, of course, is not Nina Zarechnaya, and in Trigorin, as in Treplev, we find only as much of Chekhov's fears, pain and sufferings, as he wanted to include. When Lika attended the first performance of "The Seagull" and saw her story in Nina, her illegitimate daughter Kristina was still alive. Less than a month later, Lika lost her child.



Assonance and repetition of similar-sounding words from the same root are hardly coincidental in “The Seagull”, the author uses them regularly. For example, words associated with the name **Treplev** are repeated several times:

“her name is always **being bandied (treplyut)** about in the papers”, says Treplev about his mother in Act I.

“The stagnant marsh gives birth to you before dawn, and you wander until day breaks – without thought, without will, without **a quiver (trepetan’ya)** of life”, from Nina’s monologue of the World Soul in Act I.

“but I have to put in the **tremulous (trepeshushii)** light, the soft twinkling of the stars, and the distant sounds of piano, dying away in the still, fragrant air ...” Act IV, quotation from Treplev’s prose.

Another example is the repetition of the word “**chad**” and its variations:

“But the worst of it is that I live in a sort of haze (**v chadu**), and often don’t understand what I’m writing,” Trigorin says about himself in conversation with Nina in Act II.

The play in which Arkadina acted is called “*The Fumes of Life*” (**Chad zhizni**)\* in Act I.

The comedian “*Pashka Chadin*” is mentioned by Shamrayev in Act I.

While we are on this track, we should point out that the hero of Griboedov’s “Woe from Wit” is Chatsky and the play contains repetitions of the word “**chad**”. In “The Seagull”, however, the word “chad” is linked exclusively to the craft of acting or writing.



There are numerous examples of false and pathetic intonation in the characters’ language; this relates as much to the use of hackneyed quotation as to direct speech. At times quotation and direct speech

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\* a play by Boleslav Markevich



could almost form a unified text. For example, Trigorin manifests the same falseness which depresses him in his own writing at the very times when he should be sincere and direct. Are the characters of “The Seagull” acting in life, or is false pathos a part of them?

*“My darling reckless boy, you may want to behave as if you were mad, but I won’t let you, I won’t let you... You are so gifted, so clever – you’re the best of all the modern writers, the only hope of Russia... You have such sincerity, simplicity, freshness, stimulating humour... With a stroke of your pen you can convey the whole essence of a character or a landscape; people in your books are so alive”* (Arkadina to Trigorin in Act III).

It’s worth comparing this flattery, like something out of a panegyric review, with the actress’ lively self-eulogising, when she describes the secret of her youthful appearance: *“Do you think I’d permit myself to come out of the house, even into the garden like this, in a dressing-gown or with hair untidy? Never. That’s why it is I’ve kept so young-looking – because I’ve never been a slattern or let myself go, as some women do...”*

Or compare, for example, Trigorin’s passionate pleading to Arkadina to “let him go”: *“You could be extraordinary, if you chose. Young love, enchanting, poetical – love that carries you off into a world of dreams – it’s the only thing that can bring happiness on this earth!”* with his delight at some everyday fishing: *“But I don’t feel like leaving. What a heavenly sight! How lovely it is!”*

Or Medvedenko with his “indifferentism”: *“here’s no ground for making a distinction between spirit and matter”* and Masha: *“I am in mourning for my life.”*, *“I feel touched by your love, but I can’t return it”*, *“He has a beautiful sad voice and the bearing of a poet,”* who are nevertheless guilty not of falseness or false pathos, but rather of the bookishness of cliché.

The moderately cynical doctor Dorn, the kind Sorin and the self-satisfied Shamrayev, not to mention the unhappy Polina Andreyevna, sound much more natural, although in their language, too, one can find touches of pretentiousness: *“padat’ nits”* (to prostrate oneself), *“chudno igrala”* (played divinely), *“obozhaet”* (adores), *“I have the*

*greatest admiration for your talent, I'm prepared to give ten years of my life for you – but I can't let you have horses" etc.*

~ ~ ~

Nina Zarechnaya, when talking about her profession as an actress or "about myself in art", cannot help sounding stilted either as a naïve young girl or, even, after she has experienced life behind the scenes. *"For the sake of being happy like that – of being a writer or an actress – I would put up with hostility from my family, with poverty and disappointment, with living in a garret and having nothing to eat but rye bread. I would gladly suffer dissatisfaction with myself in the knowledge of my own imperfections, but in return I would demand fame..., resounding fame..."* she says to Trigorin.

If one listens attentively to the list of all sacrifices she is ready to make on the altar of fame, it all comes true without exception: family rejection, poverty, disappointment, dissatisfaction with herself and knowledge of her own imperfections, although at first glance this "set" of deprivations seems to be borrowed from a romantic story about the thorny path an artist has to tread.

But two years pass, and when she describes to Treplev the dreadful things that have happened in her new life, we hear again: *"I am a real actress, I act with intense enjoyment, with enthusiasm; on the stage I am intoxicated and I feel that I am beautiful"*. How and when in a mere two years could she have managed to feel herself *"beautiful"* and *"a real actress"*, if during this short period of her life she had experienced pregnancy and the birth and death of her child; Treplev himself comments that Zarechnaya acted *"crudely, with false intonations and violent gestures."*

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It is very tempting in the first three acts for the actress playing Nina and for the director staging "The Seagull" to emphasise her naïveté and youthful enthusiasm, and in the last act to concentrate on her tragedy, bordering on madness, or on her lofty alienation from a mundane existence in the name of a higher purpose. But

does her character not leave a general impression of a vague mind and an insensitive inner ear throughout all four acts?

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Nina Zarechnaya began her theatrical career in a similar way to Arkadina, who probably chose the stage without her parents' approval. Even as a young woman Arkadina had been quite strong-willed if she had “led an unorthodox life”, falling for an actor from Kiev, a “petty bourgeois from Kiev” moreover. The birth of her child had coincided with the very beginning of her acting career. Her life had not been easy: acting in State theatres and renting a flat in a house full of lodgers of dubious respectability. Konstantin remembers a fight in the yard when a laundress who lodged there had been badly beaten.

Arkadina and Nina chose similar partners: a famous actor, a famous writer. There is nothing unusual in provincial girls, and not only provincial girls, being drawn to celebrities: the desire to attract interest and try to hold on to a celebrity is quite understandable; they are helped in this by their natural charm and their ability to adapt to their partner's mood. Their readiness to adapt turns almost to nonchalance once they no longer have to make the effort of thinking, how this or that word or action will reflect on them.

At these moments, when they are offended, irritated or wounded, both are concerned only with their own feelings. Arkadina and Nina are far from heartless, they are capable of compassion, but this compassion concerns all people “in general” and not those close to them, in particular.

Arkadina is capable “*sobbing over some little book*” and looking after the sick “*like an angel*”. Nina used to send Konstantin “*intelligent and interesting*” letters. But both are, as a matter of fact, indifferent to Konstantin's fate.

The curious thing is that both are completely tactless towards Konstantin in their demonstrative confessions of love to his “rival” Trigorin. “*I love him. I love him even more than before*”, confesses Zarechnaya, abandoned by Trigorin in the last act; she does not think about Konstantin's feelings after he has confessed that life has become unbearable for him.

Nina forbids Konstantin to leave together with her, but she allows him to “come and see her act” when she “*becomes a great actress*”.

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Why is this condition “*When I become a great actress, come and see me act*” so necessary? Is Nina ashamed of her present imperfections and does she want Konstantin to see her acting on stage, but then what do the words: “*Now I am a real actress, I act with intense enjoyment, with enthusiasm; on the stage I am intoxicated and I feel that I am beautiful*” mean? Maybe for Nina, as for Arkadina, life with its joys, misfortunes and troubles revolves around one thing only – that people round her should see in her a famous actress?

~ ~ ~

Will Nina Zarechnaya ever be a real actress? – this is the question, which most occupies interested readers and audiences of the play. Nina’s monologue in the last act is one of the most difficult for the actress to play. For more than a hundred years since the first night of “The Seagull” the predominant view has been that Zarechnaya “found her way”. But these are Treplev’s words, and he cannot be objective.

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The characters in “The Seagull” are susceptible to superstition, prone to look for hidden meanings in various phenomena and signs. They express themselves in symbols, interpret them and personify these symbols. Even Arkadina, who cannot appreciate anything metaphysical, is prone to superstition – she is afraid of three lighted candles and of the number thirteen.

Is this not the reason for the motif of fortune telling in the comedy, and why the play ends with a game of lotto in which the person “who is always lucky” wins. “She loves me – she loves me not,” Konstantin wonders, picking the petals off a flower, and realises what will be obvious to the audience – that his mother does not love him.

Nina asks Trigorin to choose “odd number or even” when deciding whether or not to become an actress; Trigorin chooses “even”, but Nina’s has only one pea in her hand.

Of course Nina’s words sound very convincing: *“I think I now know, Kostya, that what matters in our work – whether you act on the stage or write stories – what really matters is not fame, or glamour, not the things I used to dream about – but knowing how to endure things. How to bear one’s cross and have faith. I have faith now and I’m not suffering quite as much, and when I think of my vocation I’m not afraid of life”*. They are true but they do not answer the more important question, the one Doctor Dorn asks Konstantin: *“Then she has some talent, after all?”* No matter how much Nina has suffered during these two years, no matter how strong she will be in future in her resolve to put up with her squalid existence, if she does not have talent can we really talk about her vocation as an actress?

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What do the words “*great actress*”, “*real actress*”, “*famous actress*” actually mean?

Arkadina is “*a famous actress*” in the full meaning of the word. Like Trigorin she has developed her technique, and she knows, how to present herself. *“Her name is always being bandied about in the papers ...”* It seems Arkadina likes it this way – she knows how to bring actors and writers together in her drawing room and loves to be the centre of attention. She is just as good at controlling her feelings.

*“That is why I’ve kept so young-looking – because I’ve never been a slattern or let myself go, as some women do...”* she says proudly, and one feels that she does not mean only her hair or her dress. Arkadina is not young, but youthful; not kind, but polite; not sincere, but charming. Her need for success applies also to her possessive attitude to love. *“Now he is mine,”* she says, meaning Trigorin who had asked for, but not received, his “freedom”.

It seems Nina does not have what it takes to become a *famous* actress like Arkadina.

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Nina does not possess Arkadina's fortunate ability to brush off suffering, either in art or in life.

"Now he is mine," Arkadina triumphs after her decisive talk with Trigorin, but only a few moments before Zarechnaya had presented a medallion to the writer with the lines: "*If ever you need my life, come and take it*". Such sincere willingness to sacrifice herself, spiced with the theatrical romanticism of the words themselves, is very touching. But at the same time this naïve susceptibility to pseudo-dramatic feelings from romantic novels presages the unfolding of real-life dramas. Arkadina merely participates, while keeping a sharp eye on how the situation develops, whereas Nina helplessly confuses what happens "in life" with what happens "in art". In her last monologue this confusion becomes more than obvious. Perhaps that is why in some productions Nina reminds us of the mad Ophelia: "*I am a seagull... No, that's not it. I'm an actress. Oh, well!*"

~ ~ ~

Actors and actresses appear constantly in Chekhov's work, especially in the early "Chekhonte" period. These humorous stories contain countless figures of "stage knights" and their adventures. A regular theatre-goer in Taganrog and later Moscow, Chekhov realized his vocation as a dramatist quite early; the future author of "The Seagull" reproduced life and manners on and off stage, describing curious, humorous and sometimes tragicomic, at times even sad, stories from the life of actors and chorus girls, playwrights and impresarios.

The subject of a girl from a good family who dreams of becoming an actress will be worked out in "A Dreary Story", long before "The Seagull". The heroine of that story resembles Nina Zarechnaya in her sincere belief that "The stage is a power that unites in itself all the arts, and actors are missionaries. No art, no science is capable of producing so strong and so certain an effect on the soul of man as the stage..."