

ing the magic

THE SEAGULL

1980

No matter how often one sees *The Seagull*, went the publicity blurb for Teddington Theatre Club's recent production, its magic always works. A dangerous claim.

The magic obviously didn't work when the play was first produced eighty-four years ago. It was greeted with jeers of derision and the playwright vowed never to write for the stage again.

He did, of course, and *The Seagull* went on to become a classic, thanks to Stanislavsky and the Moscow Arts Theatre. But the idea that "the magic of Chekhov" emanates naturally from the narrative is absurd. It has to be worked at very hard indeed.

I got the impression at Hampton Court Theatre that director Gerry Jones was trying to adhere to Chekhov's own curious description of this affecting study of unrequited love and destructive egotism as a comedy. What comedy there is has a

decidedly black hue, comparable with Ayckbourn at his bleakest.

The first two acts were played at the pace and pitch of a Ben Travers farce, with the whole cast on the verge of hysterics, as if to prevent the audience from dropping off. Chekhov needs over-emphasis like Robert Redford needs publicity.

The main culprits were Madame Arkadina (Dorothy Jones), whose vanity and petulance is all the more effective for being understated; and her son Konstantin whose nervous disposition was turned into Basil Fawlty-like paranoia by Gerry Bishop.

Things looked up, however, after a fortifying interval drink. John Roth's carefully chosen incidental music helped create a more conducive atmosphere in which to bring Chekhov's essentially tragic play to its climax.

The performances matured along with the play and I found myself feeling quite sorry for poor old Konstantin when he finally sloped off to put an end to his torment. Nina, the cause of his unhappiness, was played with beguiling innocence and sincerity by Annabel Giles, so good in her last scene; and I liked Mary Davies' wearily wretched Masha.

Considering his physical unsuitability to the role of Trigorin, the famous writer who seduces Nina and then casts her aside, Ron Price proved surprisingly convincing. There was good work, too, from Chris McDermott as the doctor, Gerry Allen as Sorin, and Robin Hope-Johnston as Medvedenko, Masha's ineffectual husband.

The fact that it took the company three acts to get into its stride goes to show how elusive and intangible is the magic of Chekhov. — NS.

Actors back to tough test

NOT long ago the B.B.C. televised for the second time what must by any standards be one of the best productions of any play they have produced.

It was Chekhov's "The Seagull" and if Teddington Theatre Club's version which opens at St. Mary's Hall, Twickenham, next Wednesday, is half as good, the actors will not have done too badly.

Two men return to the cast after long illnesses—Bill Kindley and Bob Freeman. Kindley is cast as Trigorin, who represents many of the artistic aspects of Chekhov himself.

His rival for the hand of Nina,

the country girl who is determined to become a great actress, is Treplev, played by Trevor Hopkins.

Treplev represents Chekhov's own impatience with the traditional forms of theatre and in the first act we see him stage, with the help of Nina, his own rather weird drama.

All new

At one point Treplev explodes in words that must be Chekhov's own sentiments, "We must have new formulas. That's what we want. And if there are none, then it's better to have nothing at all."

That is Chekhov the new dramatist. Trigorin is the short

story aspect of the writer, the man with a talent for biting off in four words a description which vividly recalls a whole situation.

Neither writer is fully the artist Doctor Dorn holds as great . . . "the artist expressing a great idea."

Trigorin recognises that though praised he is not in the same category as Tolstoy or Turgenev and possibly the self-same fear afflicted Chekhov.

Chekhov is notoriously the playwright in whose works nothing happens. He admitted as much when he wrote of "The Seagull" that it contained little action and a hundredweight of love.

Where does the seagull itself come in? It is in fact the sym-

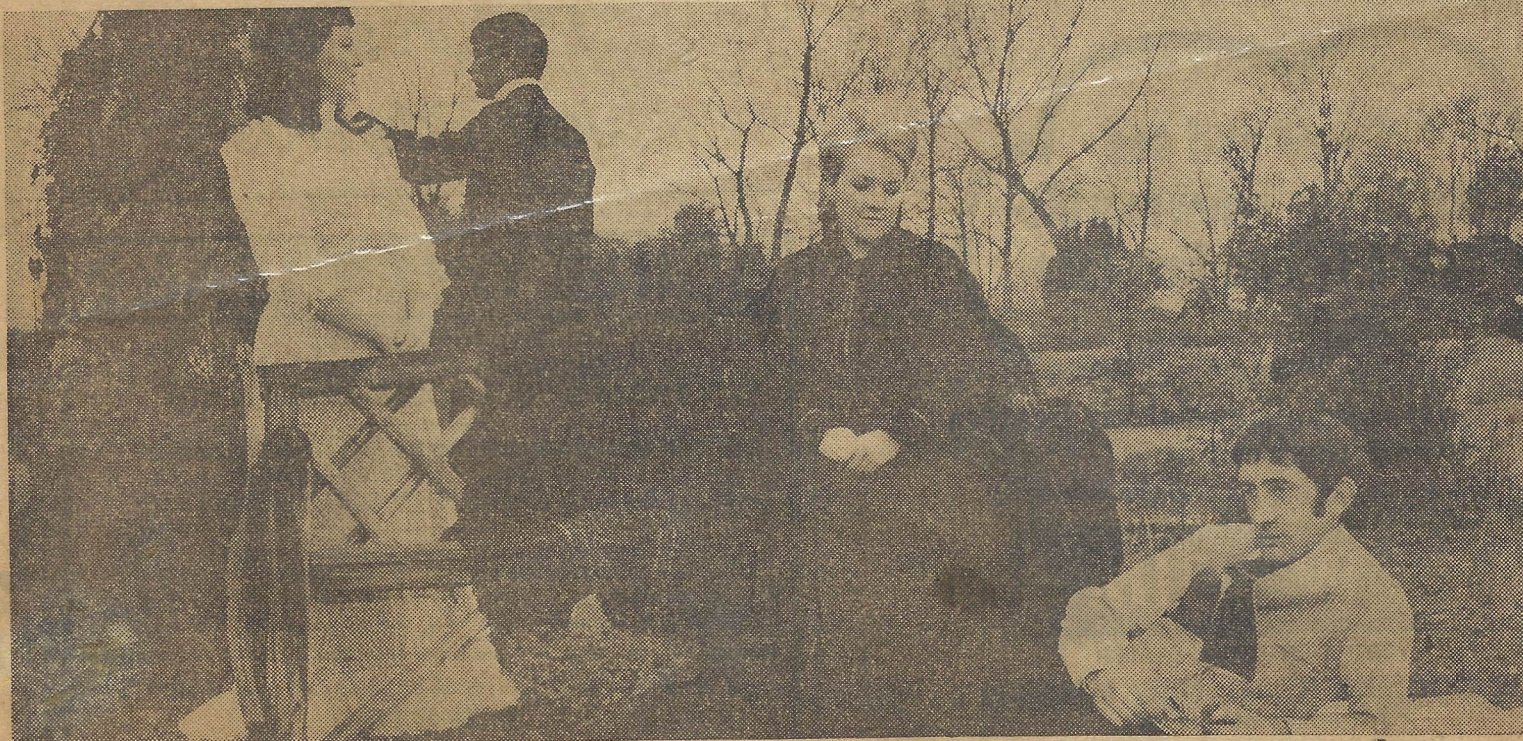
bol representing the useless destruction of beauty.

In the first act Treplev produces a seagull he has wantonly shot and Trigorin murmurs, "A good subject for a short story."

Destruction

Teddington's Susan Atkinson, who plays Nina, has one of the most coveted roles in modern drama. Vanessa Redgrave has the part for the forthcoming film.

Chloe Crabbe is Polina, wife of Shamraev, the manager of the estate, played by Mr. Freeman. Masha, the rather coarse, snuff-taking, vodka-drinking wife of Medvedenko, is taken by Ann Hazell.



● Leading players of Teddington Theatre Club relax in the grounds of Hampton Court House during rehearsals for "The Seagull." On the grass is Trevor Hopkins (Konstantin) with Ann Hazell as Masha, Susan Atkinson as Nina by the seat, and, in the background, Bill Kindley as Trigorin.