Oregon Shakespeare Festival®

2012 Suggestions for Teaching *Seagull* by Anton Chekhov adapted by Libby Appel, literal translation by Allison Horsley

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Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research the life and writing career of Anton Chekhov. Include his relationship with the Moscow Art Theatre and Konstantin Stanislavsky. In what respects were the philosophies of these two men compatible? In what respects were they less than compatible? What did each owe the other? These and other web sites provide information:
   http://www.sparknotes.com/drama/seagull/context.html
   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton_Chekhov
   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantin_Stanislavsky

2. How was the theatre changing at the turn of the twentieth century? In Russia, what new form was it adapting?
   http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jewestla/6a**ct.htm**
   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nineteenth_century_theatre

3. What was life like in the early 1900s in the Russian countryside? In big cities, such as Moscow or Paris? How did life differ from the city to the country? What was daily life like for peasants? For servants? For the middle class? For the aristocracy? What status was assigned to each class? What was the importance of class in the society?
   http://tars.rollins.edu/Foreign_Lang/Russian/19intro.html
   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Russia

4. Look at a map of Russia. Find Moscow and Kiev. Research these cities. Why would a person from Kiev have lower social status than a person from Moscow? This and other websites provide information:
   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moscow
   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Kiev

5. Research seagulls. What do seagulls symbolize in different societies and cultural myths? These and other web sites provide information:
http://goarticles.com/article/10-Facts-You-Didn-t-Know-About-Seagulls/1402371/

6. Who were Turgenev, Tolstoy and Zola? What works were they best known for? These and other websites provide information:
http://www.online-literature.com/turgenev/
http://www.online-literature.com/tolstoy/
http://www.online-literature.com/emile-zola/

7. Research the system of naming children used in Russia. Become familiar with the characters from the *Seagull's* given names and nicknames. These and other web sites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Slavic_naming_customs
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Seagull#charcraters
http://www.behindthename.com/nmc/rus.php

8. Research the Russian literary concept of the "superfluous man." This and other web sites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Superfluous_man
http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/574296/superfluous-man

9. How do you play the Russian game lotto that is played throughout *Seagull*? These and other web sites provide information:
http://sharedreviews.com/review/russian-lotto

10. What is symbolism? Look for examples of symbolism as you watch the play. These and other websites provide information:
http://dictionary.cambridge.org/define.asp?key=80760&dict=CALD
http://www.uncp.edu/home/canada/work/allam/general/glossary.htm#s

11. Suggested reading: plays, one acts and short stories by Anton Chekhov. These and other websites provide information:
http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ac/jr/index.htm
http://www.one-act-plays.com/playwrights/anton_chekhov.html

After seeing/reading the play

1. What is the significance of the play's title?

2. Refer to your research on Chekhov's writing. For what literary forms is he most famous? Which characters in *Seagull* attempt these forms? Who wishes to attempt them? What do these writers and would-be writers say about writing? What glimpses does the play give of the life of a writer?

3. Treplyov wants to develop a "new form" of theatre. Basing your answer on the fragment of his play presented in Act One, define this "new form." How does it align with your research of the changes taking place in Russian theatre during this time? How does it affect Treplyov's audience?

4. Arkadina and Treplyov recite a short passage from *Hamlet*. How does their relationship parallel relationships in *Hamlet*? What other characters and incidents reflect characters and incidents in *Hamlet*?

5. Choose a character. Describe her or his good qualities and then his or her bad qualities. To what extent do you find her or him sympathetic? Unsympathetic? Describe one instance in which you admire her or him. Describe one instance in which you disapprove. How do you think Chekhov judges this individual?

6. Which characters are preoccupied with money and why? What form does the preoccupation take? What does that tell you about these individuals?

7. What does each character have that he or she is withholding from someone else? What does the person gain by withholding?

8. Refer to your definition of symbolism. What are the symbols in the play? How are sounds used as symbols in the play? What do certain characters symbolize? What do certain places and objects, such as the lake signify for each of the characters?

9. Track the seagull throughout the play. What forms does it go through? At each stage, what does it symbolize?

10. One of the most well-known lines in the play is the first thing Masha says: “I am in mourning for my life. I’m unhappy.” What is she telling us about herself? How does she continue to mourn for herself through out?

11. Which characters are genuinely in love and with whom? For which is the love requited? Unrequited? What emotions other than love draw characters together and how satisfying do they find these emotions?

12. Select a short scene from the play and paraphrase what the characters are saying. Add to that what they are *not* saying. Explain why they allow certain thoughts and feelings to remain unsaid. What is the effect of concealing their thoughts and feelings?

13. Tell the story from the point of view of each individual. Describe not only what each does, but what she or he feels, intends and values. Tell what happens during the two years between Acts Three and Four. How does each character grow and change over the two-year interval? What longings, values and attitudes remain the same?

14. Which characters want fame? What does each want to be famous for accomplishing? What does fame mean to each?

15. What does the medallion Nina gives Trigorin tell him? What action is she hoping to prompt? How does he respond?

16. What does Nina have that Arkadina wants? What does Arkadina have that Nina wants?

17. What attracts Nina to Trigorin? What attracts him to her?

18. How does each character regard country living? How does each regard city living? How content is each with her or his location, and why?

19. In *Seagull*, how does Chekhov distinguish between being a famous artist and being a good artist? What kind of distinction does each aspiring artist achieve?

20. How does each character define success for herself or himself? Which achieve success, and how? Which do not, and why? Which consider themselves failures, and why?

21. Sort the characters according to older and younger generations. Which members of the younger generation are likely to become like which members of the older generation? Which younger people are likely to do better than their elders? What hope does this give for the future?

22. Which characters are concerned with growing old? How does aging affect their attitudes? The actions they perform? How others treat them?

23. What is the social order in the world of the play? What importance do the characters place on class distinctions? In what ways has the social order changed since the freeing of the serfs? In what ways has it remained unchanged? Draw a chart of the statuses of all the characters and explain what factors account for their relative positions.

24. Chekhov described *Seagull* as "A comedy—three females, six males, four acts, rural scenery (a view over a lake); much talk of literature, little actions, five bushels of love." What parts of his description are accurate? What did he leave out?

25. Chekhov called the play a comedy. Identity the comic elements. Describe the elements that strike you as something other than comic. To which dramatic category would you assign *Seagull* and why?

26. Each act takes place at a specific time of year, time of day and location. What is the time and location for each act and what is its symbolic significance?

27. Describe the weather in each act. How does the weather reflect the events onstage and off?

28. What does Nina gain between Acts Three and Four? What does she lose? How do these gains and losses change her approach to life?

29. List the offstage actions. How significant is each compared to what happens onstage? What is the effect of having these incidents take place out of sight and/or between the

acts? Who are the offstage characters? Describe each. How does each influence the action?

30. Refer to your research on the archetype of the "superfluous man". Which characters fit into this category? Why? Which are aware that they fit into this category? How does this knowledge affect their actions?

31. Sorin has an idea for a story called "The Man Who Wanted." Which people know exactly what they want? How do they go about getting it? Which are unclear about their wishes and ambitions? How does their lack of clear goals affect their actions? What does each settle for?

32. Chart the differences between what Trigorin says to Treplyov's face about his writing and what he says behind his back. What do you learn from the discrepancies?

33. Draw a chart of the relationships. Identify those that are similar (e.g., unrequited love) and describe the resemblances and differences.

Members of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's Education department—Sarah Langan, Hilary Tate and Joan Langley—created the "Suggestions for Teaching *Seagull*."

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