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Dramatic Publishing

The Seagull

Tragicomedy by
ANTON CHEKHOV



Translated by
MICHAEL HENRY HEIM

The Seagull

Tragicomedy. By Anton Chekhov. Translated by Michael Henry Heim. *Cast: 8m., 5w.* The renowned scholar Michael Henry Heim, professor of Slavic languages and literature at the University of California, has written a brilliant new translation of this play that established Chekhov. One of the first productions of the Moscow Art Theatre, the plot deals with a young Treplev, his unfulfilled literary ambitions and his love for Nina. Convinced that he has lost her and furious at her attention to the literary lion, Trigorin, the despairing young man kills a seagull and lays it at Nina's feet as a symbol of his ruined hopes. Nina leaves with Trigorin, only to return later after Trigorin has lost interest in her. In a moving half-coherent speech, she compares herself to the seagull destroyed by a man's momentary whim. In this translation, Professor Heim gives us a fluent, utterly Chekhovian text without making it so contemporary that the play loses its sense of period. This is *The Seagull* that soars. *One ext., one int. set. Approximate running time: 100 minutes. Code: S85.*

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THE SEAGULL

A Tragicomedy

by
ANTON CHEKHOV

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by
MICHAEL HENRY HEIM



DRAMATIC PUBLISHING

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ANTON CHEKHOV

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(THE SEAGULL)

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THE SEAGULL

A Comedy in Four Acts
For Eight Men and Five Women

CHARACTERS

IRINA NIKOLAEVNA ARKADINA

(TREPLeVA by marriage) an actress

KONSTANTIN GAVRILOVICH TREPLeV (KOSTYA)

her son, a young man

PYOTR NIKOLAEVICH SORIN her brother

NINA MIKHAILOVNA ZARECHNAYA . . . a young girl,

the daughter of a rich landowner

ILYA AFANASYEVICH SHAMRAEV a retired

lieutenant, the manager of Sorin's estate

POLINA ANDREEVNA his wife

MARIA ILYINICHNA (MASHA) his daughter

BORIS ALEXEEVICH TRIGORIN a writer

YEVGENY SERGEEVICH DORN a doctor

SEMYON SEMYONOVICH MEDVEDENKO

a school teacher

YAKOV a workman

A MALE COOK

A HOUSEMAID

The action takes place on Sorin's estate.
Two years pass between Acts Three and Four.

ACT ONE

SETTING: *The grounds of SORIN's estate. A broad tree-lined path leading away from the audience to a lake is cut off by a makeshift stage for an amateur performance. The lake is hidden from view. Bushes to the left and right of the stage. Several chairs, a small table. The sun has just set.*

AT RISE: *On the stage behind a lowered curtain YAKOV and other WORKMEN are heard coughing and hammering. Enter MASHA and MEDVEDENKO, left, on their way back from a walk.*

MEDVEDENKO. Why is it you always wear black?

MASHA. I'm in mourning for my life. I'm unhappy.

MEDVEDENKO. But why? *(Thinking hard.)* I can't understand it... You're healthy. Your father may not be rich, but he has a comfortable life. My life's much harder than yours—I make only twenty-three rubles a month, minus pension-fund deductions—and I don't wear mourning. *(They sit down.)*

MASHA. Money doesn't matter. Even a pauper can be happy.

MEDVEDENKO. In theory perhaps, but not in practice. I've got myself, my mother, my two sisters, and my little brother to support—and all on twenty-three rubles.

We need to eat and drink, don't we? We need tea and sugar. We need tobacco. Just try and make ends meet.

MASHA (*looking at the stage*). The play's starting soon.

MEDVEDENKO. Yes. Nina Zarechnaya in a play by Konstantin Gavrilovich. They're in love, and today their souls will merge in the desire to create a unified artistic image. But my soul and yours have no points of contact. I love you. I miss you so much I can't keep away. Every day I walk four miles here and four miles home, and what do I get? Utter indifference. And no wonder. I have no private means and a big family to support...Who wants to marry a man with nothing to eat?

MASHA. Ridiculous. (*She takes snuff.*) I'm touched by your love. I can't return it, that's all. (*She holds out the snuffbox to him.*) Snuff?

MEDVEDENKO. No, I don't want any. (*Pause.*)

MASHA. What a muggy day. We're in for a storm tonight. All you do is philosophize or talk about money. You think there's nothing worse than poverty. Well, I think it's a thousand times easier to go begging in rags than to...But you wouldn't understand...

(*Enter SORIN and TREPLEV, right.*)

SORIN (*leaning on his cane*). I'm just not myself in the country, my boy. Never will be either, you can be sure of that. I went to bed at ten last night, and this morning at nine I woke up feeling my brain was stuck to my skull. From all that sleep and all. (*He laughs.*) I dropped off again this afternoon, and now I'm a complete wreck. It's a living nightmare, if you know what I mean.

TREPLEV. You're right. You ought to be living in town. (*Seeing MASHA and MEDVEDENKO.*) Sorry, but you'll be called when it starts. You can't stay here now. Please go.

SORIN (*to MASHA*). Maria Ilyinichna, do you think you could ask your father to let the dog off the chain? It's always howling. My sister was up again all night.

MASHA. Ask him yourself. I refuse. I don't want any part of it, thank you. (*To MEDVEDENKO.*) Come on.

MEDVEDENKO (*to TREPLEV*). You'll let us know in time, won't you? (*They exit.*)

SORIN. So that dog will howl all night again. The same old story. I never get my way in the country. I used to take a month off and come here to relax and all, but they never let you alone and I was ready to leave the day I came. (*He laughs.*) I was always glad to get away from here...Now that I'm retired, I have nowhere else to go, if you know what I mean. Like it or not, this is home...

YAKOV (*to TREPLEV*). We're going down for a swim, Konstantin Gavrilovich.

TREPLEV. All right. Just make sure you're back in ten minutes. (*He looks at his watch.*) We're starting soon.

YAKOV. Yes, sir. (*He exits.*)

TREPLEV (*looking over the stage*). How's that for a stage: curtain, one wing, another, then empty space. No set. You look straight out on the lake and the horizon. Curtain's going up at eight-thirty sharp, just as the moon starts to rise.

SORIN. Magnificent.

TREPLEV. Of course if Nina's late, the effect will be lost. She should be here by now. Her father and stepmother never let her out of their sight, and getting away from

that house is like breaking out of prison. (*He adjusts SORIN's tie.*) Your hair and your beard are a mess.

Why don't you keep them trimmed?

SORIN (*combing his beard*). The tragedy of my life. I look drunk all the time. Even when I was young, I looked like a drunkard and all. Never had any luck with the ladies. (*Sitting down.*) I wonder why my sister's so cross.

TREPLEV. Why do you think? She's bored. (*Sitting next to him.*) And jealous. She's dead set against me, my play, and the performance, because her novelist might find Nina attractive. She doesn't know the first thing about the play, but she hates it.

SORIN (*laughing*). You're imagining things. Really...

TREPLEV. It annoys her to think that Nina will get the applause. Even on that tiny stage. (*Glancing at his watch.*) She's a psychological oddity, my mother: unquestionably talented and intelligent, capable of weeping over a novel, reeling off all Nekrasov by heart, nursing the sick like an angel—but try praising Duse in her presence. No! She's the only one you can praise; she's the only one you can write about, shout about, rave about in *Camille* or *The Fumes of Life*. But here in the country there aren't any opiates like that, so she's bored and edgy and thinks we're all her enemies, we're the ones to blame. She's superstitious too: afraid of three candles, of the number thirteen. She's a miser: she's got seventy thousand in a bank in Odessa, I know it for a fact. But try and get a loan out of her—she'll burst into tears.

SORIN. You're so convinced she's against the play you can't think straight and all. Calm down. Your mother worships you.

TREPLEV (*pulling the petals off a flower*). She loves me, she loves me not; she loves me, she loves me not; she loves me, she loves me not. (*He laughs.*) See? My mother doesn't love me. Why should she? What she wants is to live, love, wear bright clothes. And here I am, twenty-five—a constant reminder she's not so young as she used to be. When I'm not around, she's thirty-two; when I am, she's forty-three. That's why she hates me. Besides, she knows I don't accept her theatre. She loves the theatre. She thinks she's serving mankind, a sacred art, but as far as I'm concerned the theatre today is all rote and delusion. When the curtain goes up on an artificially lit room with three walls, and those great talents, those priests of sacred art, show how people eat, drink, love, walk, and wear their jackets; when they take stock lines and stock situations and try to squeeze a moral out of them, a smug, homespun, oversimplified sort of moral; when they serve up the same thing in a thousand variations, over and over and over again—then all I can do is run, flee, the way Maupassant fled the Eiffel Tower, afraid its vulgarity would rot his brain.

SORIN. But we need the theatre.

TREPLEV. What we need is new forms. New forms. And if we can't have them, we're better off with nothing. (*Glancing at his watch.*) I love my mother, love her dearly, but the self-indulgent life she leads—running around with that writer, getting her name in the papers—it wears me out. Sometimes the ordinary selfish mortal in me wishes she weren't a well-known actress. I might be happier if she were an ordinary woman. Can you picture a more hopeless, more ridiculous situation? She has some people over—celebrities every one: ac-

tors, writers; I'm the only nonentity present. The only reason they tolerate me is that I'm her son. Who am I? What am I? I left the university in my third year "due to circumstances beyond my control." No money, no talent, and papers that say "Kiev tradesman." Well, my father was from a family of Kiev tradesmen, even though he himself was a well-known actor. Anyway, whenever the actors and writers in my mother's drawing room deigned to pay me a little attention, I had the feeling they were sizing up my worthlessness. The humiliation I suffered reading their thoughts...

SORIN. By the way, what sort of man is he—her writer? I can't figure him out. He never says a word.

TREPLEV. He's intelligent, unassuming, but, you know, on the melancholy side. Perfectly decent. And famous. He's got everything he wants, and he's not even forty. He drinks nothing but beer; the women he loves are past their prime. As for his work...How shall I put it? It's all very charming and polished...but...after Tolstoy or Zola you don't want Trigorin.

SORIN. Well, I like writers. I used to have two great ambitions: finding a wife and being a writer. Never managed either. Yes, it must be nice to be even a minor writer, if you know what I mean.

TREPLEV (*listening attentively*). I hear footsteps...(*He hugs SORIN.*) I can't live without her...Even the sound of her footsteps is glorious...I'm insanely happy!

(*TREPLEV runs up to meet NINA as she enters.*)

TREPLEV. Enchantress! Light of my dreams!

NINA (*excited*). I'm not late, am I? I'm sure I'm not...

TREPLEV (*kissing her hands*). No, no, no...

NINA. I've been nervous all day. So frightened. Afraid Father wouldn't let me come...But then he went off somewhere with my stepmother. The sky was red, the moon about to rise. I raced my horse as fast as it would go. *(She laughs.)* I'm so happy to be here. *(She gives SORIN a warm handshake.)*

SORIN *(laughing)*. Those pretty little eyes have been crying, haven't they? Naughty, naughty.

NINA. It's nothing...Look how out of breath I am. I have to leave in half an hour. We'd better hurry. No, no, don't ask me to stay. Father doesn't know I'm here.

TREPLEV. It's time we got started anyway, time to go and call everybody.

SORIN. I'll go and all. I'm off. *(He starts off to the right, singing.)* "To France were returning two grenadiers." *(He stops and turns back.)* Once I burst into song at the office, and one of the deputy prosecutors said to me, "That's a powerful voice you've got there, Your Excellency." Then he paused a second and added, "Powerful, but disgusting." *(He exits laughing.)*

NINA. My father and his wife keep telling me not to come here. They say it's too Bohemian...They're afraid I'll want to be an actress...But I'm drawn here to the lake, like a seagull...My heart is so full of you. *(She looks about.)*

TREPLEV. We're alone.

NINA. Isn't that somebody over there?

TREPLEV. No. *(They kiss.)*

NINA. What kind of tree is that?

TREPLEV. An elm.

NINA. Why is it so dark?

TREPLEV. It's late. Everything is dark. Don't go so soon. Please don't.

NINA. I can't stay.

TREPLEV. What if I followed you home and stood the whole night in the garden looking up at your window.

NINA. You can't do that. The watchman would see you. And Trésor would bark: he's not used to you yet.

TREPLEV. I love you.

NINA. Sh!

TREPLEV (*hearing footsteps*). Who's there? Is that you, Yakov?

YAKOV (*from behind the stage*). Yes, sir.

TREPLEV. Places, everybody! Time to start. Is the moon up?

YAKOV (*from behind the stage*). Yes, sir.

TREPLEV. Have you got the wood alcohol? And the sulphur? We need that sulphur smell when the red eyes come on. (*To NINA.*) Let's go. Everything's ready. Are you nervous?

NINA. Yes, very. I don't mind your mother. I'm not afraid of her. But Trigorin...I'm so frightened, so embarrassed to act with him here...A famous writer...Is he young?

TREPLEV. Yes.

NINA. What marvellous stories he writes!

TREPLEV (*coldly*). I wouldn't know. I never read them.

NINA. Your play is so hard to act. There are no live people in it.

TREPLEV. Live people! Life must be shown not as it is, not as it should be, but as it appears in dreams.

NINA. There's not much action in your play. It's all words. And I always thought a play needed a love interest...(*BOTH exit behind the stage.*)

(*Enter POLINA and DORN.*)

POLINA. It's getting damp. Go back and put your galoshes on.

DORN. I'm hot.

POLINA. You don't take care of yourself. It's that stubborn streak of yours. You know very well how bad this damp air is for you—you're a doctor. But no, you want me to suffer. That's why you spent the whole evening on the terrace yesterday...

DORN (*singing to himself*). "Oh, do not say you ravaged your youth..."

POLINA. You got so carried away talking to Irina Nikolaevna you didn't even notice the cold. Admit it. You're attracted to her.

DORN. I'm fifty-five.

POLINA. That's nothing. Fifty-five isn't old for a man. You're as handsome as ever and women are still attracted to you.

DORN. What is it you want, anyway?

POLINA. You're all just waiting to fall at the feet of an actress. All of you.

DORN (*singing to himself*). "Once again I stand before you..." It's only natural for people to admire actors and treat them differently from, say, merchants. It's a kind of idealism.

POLINA. Women are always falling in love with you and hanging on your neck. Is that idealism too?

DORN (*shrugging his shoulders*). What can I say? There's been a lot of good in the feelings women have for me. More than anything they've loved my skill as a doctor. Ten or fifteen years ago, if you remember, I was the only decent doctor in the district who would deliver babies. And I've always been honest.

POLINA (*clutching his arm*). Darling!

DORN. Quiet! They're coming!

(Enter ARKADINA on SORIN's arm, followed by TRIGORIN, SHAMRAEV, MEDVEDENKO, and MASHA.)

SHAMRAEV. She was magnificent at the Poltava Fair in '73, magnificent. A sheer delight. Perhaps you know what's happened to Chadin, the comic. Pavel Chadin. His Rasplyuev was incomparable. Better than Sadovsky's—believe me, dear lady. Where is he now?

ARKADINA. That's ancient history? How should I know?
(She sits down.)

SHAMRAEV *(sighing)*. Pavel Chadin! A dying breed. The theatre's not what it used to be. We once had mighty oaks, Irina Nikolaevna; now we're down to stumps.

DORN. True, we've got fewer brilliant interpreters, but the average actor has come a long way.

SHAMRAEV. I can't say I agree, but I suppose it's all a matter of taste. *De gustibus aut bene, aut nihil.*

(TREPLEV comes out from behind the stage.)

ARKADINA *(to TREPLEV)*. When is it starting, dear?

TREPLEV. In a minute. Please be patient.

ARKADINA *(reciting from Hamlet)*.

O Hamlet, speak no more:

Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul:

And there I see such black and grained spots

As will not leave their tinct.

TREPLEV *(from Hamlet)*.

Nay, but to live in vice,

To seek out love in sin's pernicious depths.

(A horn plays a fanfare behind the stage.) Ladies and gentlemen! Attention, please! The play is about to begin. *(Pause.)* I'm starting now. *(He taps his stick and intones in a loud voice.)* O ye hallowed shades of yore floating o'er the lake by night, lull us to sleep and waft us dreams of what shall be two hundred thousand years from now.

SORIN. Two hundred thousand years from now there'll be nothing left.

TREPLEV. Then let them show us that nothing.

ARKADINA. Yes, let them. We're asleep.

(The curtain rises on a view of the lake. The moon, just above the horizon, is reflected in the water. NINA, all in white, is sitting on a large rock.)

NINA. Men, lions, partridges and eagles, antlered deer, geese, spiders, silent denizens of the deep, starfish and creatures invisible to the human eye—in short, all living things, all living things, all living things have come to the end of their mournful rounds...For aeons and aeons the earth has borne no living thing, and this poor moon has lit its lamp in vain. No more do cranes wake calling in the meadows; no more do May bugs murmur in the lime groves. All is cold, cold, cold. Barren, barren, barren. Fearsome, fearsome, fearsome. *(Pause.)* All living things have disappeared in dust. Eternal matter has turned them into stone, water, and cloud. Their souls have merged, and I am that universal soul. I unite the souls of Alexander the Great, of Caesar, Shakespeare, Napoleon, and of the basest leech. I fuse in me the consciousness of man and animal instinct. And I

remember all, all, all, and live each life anew within myself. (*Will-o'-the-wisps appear.*)

ARKADINA (*softly*). Oh, the decadent school.

TREPLEV (*beseeking and reproaching her at the same time*). Mother!

NINA. I am lonely. Once every hundred years I open my lips to speak, and my voice rings out through the void, plaintive and unheard...Even you, pale fires, do not hear me...Bred by the marsh at dawn, you wander until dusk, lacking thought, lacking will, lacking even a quiver of life. Satan, the father of eternal matter, fearing lest life should enter you once more, promotes an endless interchange of atoms—in you and stone and water. You are in constant flux. In all the universe the only element unchanging and unchanged remains the spirit. (*Pause.*) Like a prisoner cast into a deep and empty well, I know not where I am or what awaits me. One thing alone has been revealed to me: in my fierce, unyielding battle with Satan, the epitome of material force, I am destined to emerge victorious. Then shall matter and spirit merge in wondrous harmony, and the universal will shall reign. But this shall come to pass after aeons and aeons, after the moon and bright Sirius and the earth have turned to dust...Until then—horror, horror...(*Pause. Two red dots appear over the lake.*) Behold! My mighty enemy draws near: Satan. I spy his fearsome crimson eyes...

ARKADINA. I smell sulphur. Is that part of it?

TREPLEV. Yes.

ARKADINA (*laughing*). I see. Quite an effect.

TREPLEV. Mother!

NINA. He longs for human company...