

Swansong to remember

In his farewell production for the RSC, Terry Hands has found a new dimension to Chekhov

TERRY Hands's 25 years with the Royal Shakespeare Company comes to a grand finale with a revelatory production of Chekhov's *The Seagull*, writes Nicholas de Jongh. He discovers something sinister and dark in the play never clearly seen before.

As a result the romantic atmospherics and displays of volatile temperament which still tend to characterise revivals of *The Seagull* are dispelled. Instead Hands's production, first seen at Stratford's Swan and now promoted to the larger Barbican theatre, discovers an affinity between the Slavic Chekhov and the Nordic Ibsen and also with Henry James. In this lucid revaluation there is no great sense of the "comedy" to which Chekhov referred in the subtitle, unless of the blacker sort.

A new kind of symmetry is achieved. We watch a process in which two self-deceiving artists, an actress and a

writer, caught in a shallow affair of mutual convenience, destroy the innocence and the lives of two young aspirants to the same crafts. And these two apprentices to adult life struggle to face the hard realities which their elders avoid. It may be difficult from that description to recognise the affair of the actress Arkadina with the writer Trigorin, who casually draws young Nina away from Arkadina's son. But so it proves.

Johan Engels's stage set, with its dusky line of tall silver birches and fallen leaves, is the only sign of the romantic. Hands's characters are caught in a sombre light. Rueful, resigned and suitably Russian in look and demeanour they have, with the exception of Susan Fleetwood's Arkadina, come no more to make us laugh.

Love, in its first fling between Amanda Root's touching Nina and Simon Russell Beale's Konstantin, pits a

breathless, stage-struck ingenue against a vulnerable, child-like depressive. You sense disaster. When Miss Fleetwood's comically alluring Arkadina, as infantile as her son, appears, thrusting her voice upon the evening air and gazing distractedly into imaginary mirrors, it is clear that such a flagrant egotist will ignore Konstantin's distress. And her affair with Roger Allam's overpassive but chillingly callous Trigorin seems inspired less by desire than by the need to show off a lover.

By placing the interval after the third act, Hands powerfully emphasises the way time rings down its changes upon Nina and Konstantin — she a cracked up wreck, he in grim alienation scrupulously arranging his papers before suicide. Katy Behean's beautifully love-lorn Masha and Alfred Burke's moribund Sorin are visibly transformed. Yet it is as if Arkadina and Trigorin are quite untouched by life beyond themselves or the disasters they have helped to create. A memorable swansong indeed.

De Jongh on Seagull

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