



# Seeing Things

## THE SEA GULL AND THE PHOENIX

THE great plays, the miraculous, the inexhaustible and cello-toned realizations of all that was unique in his method and genius, were to come afterwards, "The Three Sisters" in 1900, "The Cherry Orchard" four years later. But already in "The Sea Gull"\* Chekhov had by 1896 almost found himself as a dramatist and, because of doing so, had written one of the modern theatre's masterpieces, a play which, if not great in the totally fulfilled sense of its successors, has its unmistakable interludes of greatness.

To Tolstoy "The Sea Gull" was "nonsense," "utterly worthless," "a very bad play." His disrelish is not surprising. One of the supremest of artists, he aged, in spite of his brilliant flashes of insight, into one of the most prudish and boorish of Babbitts on the subject of esthetics, as is proved on page after page of "What Is Art?" A block to Tolstoy's admiration, which David Magarshack notes in "Chekhov the Dramatist," was that Tolstoy, accustomed like many another at the century's turn to the drama of direct action, could not adjust himself to the drama of "indirect action" (Mr. Magarshack's phrase) at which Chekhov excelled.

Define Chekhov's playwriting in any terms that isolate its special qualities; call him, as Nina Tournova did, "the voice of twilight Russia"; admit that characters and mood are his substitutes for plot; marvel at him for finding in a condemned Czarist society so touching a score for what is timeless and placeless in human frustration; or reach for such a fancy tag as "tangential" to describe the dialogue in which his egotists empty their hearts often without listening to each other, and in the very process of seeking to place him Chekhov's importance as an innovator looms the larger.

He has had a thousand imitators but no equals. Probably no people

have ever talked as his people talk. Although their phrases are the phrases of daily life, they serve a different purpose and follow a different pattern. Chekhov has a clinical eye for what is on the surface but his real concern is what lies deep within. Theatrical realism has always been an illusion. As Chekhov grew to employ it, it became an illusion of an illusion. Indeed, it became a new form, fortunately different from the murky and dehumanized form attempted by the young dramatist who is a character in "The Sea Gull," but a new form nonetheless. It was new in its approach and revelations: new in the poetry it possessed though masquerading as prose; and new in its style and dimensions.

This new, this Chekhovian, form is the source of "The Sea Gull's" strength and magic. The story Chekhov tells about a well-known actress, whose lover, a second-rate novelist, wins and destroys her son's sweetheart, is interesting enough. What is fascinating and superbly rewarding, however, is not this main story or the lesser ones, but the uses to which Chekhov puts them. He does not imprison his characters in a plot. Even when they are caught up in a particular situation, they remain free to think in terms of their whole lives, their lost hopes, and abiding concerns. Each of them is his own biographer; each in a sudden

line here or there or a speech, long or short, reveals his innermost secrets or bares his weaknesses. They see through each other as they see through themselves. Indeed, "The Sea Gull," so "Hamlet"—drenched in its overtones and conflicts and yet so Chekhovian in its mood and means, is at its most engrossing and active at those many moments when Chekhov halts his narrative to turn in individual insights into universal truths. This is particularly true of the famous scene in which Trigorin discusses the agonies of authorship and the trials of being a writer "delightful but not so good as Turgenev."

Is this play, which takes place on the country estate of the actress's brother and ends in the suicide of her son, a tragedy as Stanislavsky is now condemned for thinking? Or is it a comedy as Chekhov described it and Mr. Magarshack has recently contended? Obviously, it would seem, it is both. Stark Young made this clear in the fine translation he did for the Lunts in 1938 and in his brilliant explanatory preface. This mixture of wit and despair, this invitation to smile and sympathize simultaneously, is as much a part of the Chekhovian method as it is a proof of Chekhov's wisdom as a man.

His new dramatic form has always presented special challenges to actors. With the best of good intentions and a devotion so plain it almost hurts, the company downtown at the Phoenix has tried to meet these challenges, and for the most part failed badly. Although Montgomery Clift wanders into Chekhov somewhat like a fugitive from James Jones, at least he brings a needed tension to Trepnev, the young playwright. The trouble is that this tension so seldom finds release in either Mr. Clift's face or his voice, and seems to disappear entirely in the crucial last-

## Too Many People

By Max Eastman

TOO many people on the earth, too few  
Who hold the oak door open, and who nod  
To the passing stranger as the passing god.

Look from the stars and you will see whereto  
This hungry fungus, man, has spread his drab  
Compactions, and is spreading, till the space  
Made rich by nature for his ease and grace  
Is petrified as fruit is by a scab.

Packed on this dwindling planet, famished, men  
Will push and fight like beasts. No grandeur then,  
No high designs, no epic-dream, no play,  
No poised serenity in what they say,  
Nor reasoned kindness in the things they do.  
This is not fancy; this is death-bed true.

\* THE SEA GULL, by Anton Chekhov, adaptation prepared by Mira Rostova, Kevin McCarthy, and Montgomery Clift. Presented by the Phoenix Theatre (T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton). Directed by Mr. Houghton. Settings by Duane McKinney. Costumes by Alvin Colt. With a cast including Montgomery Clift, Judith Evelyn, John Fiedler, Will Geer, Sam Jaffe, Kevin McCarthy, Mira Rostova, Maureen Stapleton, George Voskovec, June Walker, etc. At the Phoenix Theatre, New York City. Opened May 11, 1954.

act scene when Treplev must stand mute during the long speech in which Nina confesses her continued love for Trigorin. Judith Evelyn is an acceptable Arkadina, capturing the vanity of the actress even if not suggesting her glamour, and John Fiedler is touching as the ineffectual school teacher. By all odds the best performance of the evening, and an excellent performance it is, is Maureen Stapleton's warm-hearted and very human playing of Masha, the defeated young woman who wears black because she is in mourning for her life.

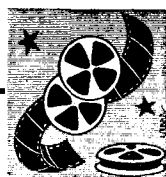
Then and there, to my way of thinking, the virtues of the revival come to a full stop. I could find only utter inadequacy in Will Geer's caricature of the estate manager, in June Walker's playing of his wife, and in Sam Jaffe's characterization of the actress's invalid brother. I cannot imagine a more negative Trigorin than Kevin McCarthy or a less satisfactory Nina than Mira Rostova.

Everyone knows it takes time, and a lot of it, for a group of actors to master Chekhov. All too plainly the production at the Phoenix has been thrown together in a hurry. This, however, is not the only trouble. The styles of playing are as mixed as the accents of the players. Worse still, Norris Houghton's direction is guilty of an equal uncertainty. It establishes no clear line, creates no cohesion, and misses nuance after nuance.

The Phoenix's first season has been an excitingly distinguished and contributive one. No doubt, after such successes as "Madam, Will You Walk," "Coriolanus," and "The Golden Apple," T. Edward Hambleton and Mr. Houghton are entitled to a failure. The pity is this failure had to be "The Sea Gull," a play which many of us hold in the same affection as do those participating in its present revival.—JOHN MASON BROWN.



Miss Evelyn and Mr. Clift in "The Sea Gull."



SR GOES TO THE MOVIES

## "Dial M" with a Touch of Hamlet

ONE of the piquant turnabouts of our time is Frederick Knott's "Dial M For Murder" (Warner Brothers), which was first seen as a play for television and has now turned up on the movie screen. The sturdiness of Knott's tidy thriller results from the fact that he has managed to play a full-scale chase in mental terms within the confines of a single room. Under Alfred Hitchcock's knowing direction, the film version of "Dial M For Murder" retains most of its entertainment values. If it falls short of the Broadway incarnation it is because of the casting of the central role.

Evelyn Waugh, in "The Loved One," assured us that a hardy band of British mummies was stoutly preserving the sahib tradition under the foreign palms, yet from this gallant group Hitchcock could give us no one better than Ray Milland for the role of Tony Wendice, the would-be uxoricide. Milland in the past has shown himself a capable farceur and a mettlesome dramatic performer, but he is clearly the wrong choice for this role, on which the entire piece depends. That it is the pivotal part is demonstrated by the fact that in the Broadway production the roles of Mrs. Wendice and the American mystery writer were quite poorly acted without dragging the evening down, while Grace Kelly and Robert Cummings are perfectly fine in the motion picture without lifting it up.

Milland does all that he is asked to do, yet he projects a sodden, unpleasant quality. In the Broadway show Maurice Evans exhibited a characteristic bounce that may have been somewhat alarming in "Hamlet" but was eminently suited to the villain in the British game-of-murder. The point about Tony Wendice is not merely that he is a thoroughly bad lot, a tennis bum who married an heiress and then proceeds to plot her violent demise. The point is also that he is a rakish, charming, sardonic sort of cad who accepts himself completely and enjoys making up his grisly puzzle as much as the traditional detective inspector relishes finding the key. Evans played him as the perfect sharper, with a smile on his face and an ace up his sleeve, altogether a cut from the same cloth as the scapegrace he tempts into ticking off the beautiful Mrs. Wendice.

If Evans had a touch too much of Wendice to be Hamlet, it is fair to say that Milland has a touch too much of Hamlet to be Wendice. He is too troubled by psychological insight, too unhappy that he is going to have his wife murdered. His failure to catch the crispness of Evans's stage performance is largely the reason why "Dial M For Murder" on the screen never catches the cosy excitement of the production on 45th Street.

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Like many Americans over the age of thirty, director Richard Brooks has not forgotten the moment in 1937 when Lana Turner first walked across the screen in "They Won't Forget." In that chin-lifted, high-heeled, sweater-straining strut lay the essence of high-school sex, and Brooks has pleased himself by beginning and ending "Flame and the Flesh" (M-G-M) with the same bewitching amble. Unhappily, Lana Turner is now lending her embonpoint and her wiggle to what might very well have been the script for an Italian movie about one of those torn-chemise adventuresses who is all bad but all woman. She is succulent; but seventeen years and possibly as many pounds have not altered her quality as the high-school bad girl, and the immaturity of her playing combined with a rough-hewn, cliché-laden script serves to make "Flame and the Flesh" a heavy-breathing, lightweight drama.

After her opening stroll through the streets of Naples, Lana Turner moves in on a good-hearted musician, Bonar Colleano, but soon casts her incendiary glances at his roommate, Carlos Thompson, a cafe singer who is ready to abjure the rake-hell life for the true love of the patron's daughter, Pier Angeli. The rest of the story, a stormy and predictable escapade for Turner and Thompson, is marked by such dialogue as "Don't own me, just love me," and "How can I love you when I don't even like you?"

Joseph Pasternak, the producer, has delighted the eye with some authentic exteriors of Naples, and some interesting on-location interiors of a number of Neapolitan restaurants, which—I was mildly disappointed to learn—do not exhibit murals of New York Bay.

—LEE ROGOW.