

Warehouse to present 'The Seagull'
Chekhov play reunites director Matthew Earnest, actress Monica Bell

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By Ann Hicks
ARTS WRITER
ahicks@greenvillenews.com

Anton Chekhov changed the theater forever with "The Seagull," says director Matthew Earnest, whose adaptation of the passionate story about theater, love and love of theater opens at the Warehouse Theatre Jan. 25.

The award-winning director says he worked very hard to adapt his version into an idiom that will not alienate American audiences. Earnest, quoting Chekhov, says the play "has five tons of love in it. That's partly what makes it so much fun for audiences and for actors, the constantly oscillating love triangles."

Earnest, who lives and directs in New York City and Berlin, says he's delighted that Monica Bell accepted the role of Irina Nikolayevna Arkadina.

"I wouldn't dream of doing a play of this scope without her," he says.

Such a role is counted among the grand roles for actresses.

"Irina's Tennessee Williams' Blanche DuBois," says Earnest. "Tennessee was a huge fan of Chekhov."

Bell, who was last seen as Nora in the Warehouse's production of Ibsen's "A Doll House" -- also directed by Earnest -- says the Chekhov role is "not one to turn your nose up on."

"I'm in the midst of discovering who Arkadina is, as we're in rehearsal now."

Bell says she sees her character as someone whose lines are blurred. That's in part because she no longer knows when she is acting and when she's not, says Bell.

"The definition of herself is so tied into who she is: a great actress, aristocrat, brilliant intellectual and the mother of Konstantin, who is trying to break into the theater as a playwright."

He disdains all that his mother's world represents, Bell says. "He is embracing something wholly different, something she is either unwilling or unable to look at."

The set for the production is actually the crude wooden stage that Konstantin has built for his play in a clearing in the woods. Konstantin's play, an experimental dance-theater piece about the end of the world and regeneration, morphs into "The Seagull."

Everyone in the Chekhov play creates a dream world in which each expects to find happiness. Some do it literally, in the theater (Arkadina, Konstantin, Nina) and others figuratively (Trigorin, Masha, Polina). Some don't dare to dream at all (Medvedenko, Sorin), and Doctor Dorn claims to accept life just as it is -- no dreams for him, thank you.

"The play will be presented arena style, as seeing other audience members watching the play as we watch it will hopefully reinforce the idea of real life versus the play's projected reality," says Earnest.

The costumes and other design elements are anachronistic, he says, to keep one foot in the present and one in the past. That past includes the dead seagull on loan to the Warehouse from New York's preeminent Public Theatre.

"The theater is a memory box, a place we go to remember who we are, but it's also a place to go to imagine what we might become," Earnest says.

Warehouse artistic director Paul Savas will give a "Theater Talk" before each performance at 7:40 p.m. in the theater's meeting room for interested audience members.