

The Seagull

November 14 – 23, 2008

BMO  **Financial Group**

presents *The Seagull*

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A ballet by John Neumeier after Anton Chekov

(Company Premiere)

Choreography: **John Neumeier**

After the play by Anton Chekhov

Music: **Dmitri Shostakovich, Evelyn Glennie, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Alexander Scriabin**

Set, Costume and Lighting Design: **John Neumeier**

Premiere: The Hamburg Ballet, Hamburg, Germany, June 16, 2002

The Seagull is generously supported in part by an anonymous friend of the ballet.

“Chekhov, like Shakespeare, is an author who creates characters so complete, so true, that they live in the imagination outside and independent of the text. It is the emotional life behind Chekhov’s words that I transform into dance. For me, the central theme and conflict of *The Seagull* is the relationship between love and art – art and love.”

– John Neumeier

The same might be said of Neumeier, creator of a number of Shakespeare-inspired works, among them *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Othello*, *Hamlet* and *As You Like It*. Add to this a sense of Neumeier’s other works re-inventing great western European narratives – *Medea*, *Death in Venice*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Peer Gynt*, *The Lady of the Camellias*, to name just a few – and it’s clear he ranks at the top of the list of those rare choreographers who consistently create compelling full-length works that pack artistic, emotional, intellectual, physical, and, for good measure, financial punch. Neumeier’s confident transformations of central literary legends may owe something to his background as a BA in English and Theatre Arts (Marquette University, in his native Wisconsin), and his deft stylistic range likely stems from training and performance experience in both ballet and modern dance.

In short, the match of Neumeier and *The Seagull*, by the great Russian physician/playwright Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) is a natural. Chekhov’s “comedies,” as he calls them, are character, rather than plot-driven – in part because Chekhov’s people seem to live in perpetual emotional malaise and their self-deceptive aspirations are futile – so not much, other than an offstage suicide or duel, actually happens. While Chekhov’s characters are

notoriously talkative, what they do and who they are behind all the verbiage are what matters. Neumeier's gift is to see a version of those characters and their relationships and to present aspects of their inner being to us through movement, particularly through extraordinarily difficult and highly revealing pas de deux.

Chekhov's setting for *The Seagull* is the provincial countryside by a lake, the *dacha*-cum-farm of Arkadina's brother Sorin, not too far from Moscow. (The ballet's set and costumes were, as it happens, also designed by Neumeier.) There are four main characters, representing different ages, aesthetics, and love relationships. For Chekhov, they were Arkadina, a famous actress, in love with Trigorin, a successful playwright (and Arkadina's somewhat younger lover); Kostya, Arkadina's son, a would-be avant garde writer, who worships Nina; and Nina, an aspiring young actress, Kostya's muse. Neumeier wisely changes their occupations to ones more suited to wordless ballet: a prima ballerina; a major choreographer wedded to classical technique and tradition; an experimental modern dance choreographer; and a neighbour, a young dancer who is in many respects the seagull of the title.

More immediately visible, however, is the series of intricate frustrated love connections and triangles among these four and the many complimentary characters. Like variations on a theme, Polina, wife of Shamrayev (Sorin's estate manager), is violently in love with a middle-aged country doctor, Dorn, who in turn tries to fend off her advances. The Shamrayev's daughter, Masha, is hopelessly in love with Kostya, pursuing him as ardently as he pursues Nina. The schoolteacher, Medvedenko, is in love with Masha, who eventually agrees to the self-sacrifice of an unhappy marriage. The fondness between Sorin and his nephew, Kostya, is imaged by pas de deux at the ballet's beginning and end (another example of Neumeier's careful structuring).

The Plot

The plot is simple: Kostya has created an iconoclastic dance for Nina and his group of Dream Dancers (Neumeier's addition). Family and neighbours come for the performance by the lake. Arkadina and Trigorin make a delayed grand entrance and Arkadina, flirting with all the men, ignores her son, Kostya.

It's a disaster – Evelyn Glennie's sometimes percussive, sometimes gamelan-like score, elicits stylized jerky movements and primitive gesticulations. As Kostya's ballet goes on and on, the bored audience led by Arkadina starts to wander, gossip, and generally misbehave until Kostya, in a rage, attempts a theatrical suicide with Shamrayev's revolver.

In the garden the next day, Arkadina, hearing a Tchaikovsky waltz from across the lake, remembers one of her roles and starts to dance in her chair, first marking the steps, and then completing a charming solo – her aesthetic statement. Kostya, watching from the stage, pointedly turns his back. The two engage in a sad, sensuous pas de deux, with Kostya craving attention and respect she's incapable of giving.

Nina is clearly becoming infatuated with Trigorin and he with her, and soon the two undertake a spontaneous ballet class, an occasion for more intimate touching than necessary. Observing

their lesson, Kostya is upset. Masha, dressed in black as is her custom, tries to arouse his passion, but rejected, she yields to her pursuer, Medvedenko, in a painfully reluctant pas de deux.

The company engages in various amusements, revealing much more about their inter-relationships, until only the four main characters remain: Arkadina warming up on Kostya's stage, Trigorin fishing, while Kostya continues his choreographic efforts with Nina.

Nina and Trigorin share an increasingly passionate involvement, while Kostya dances his despair at losing his love. Arkadina, in a jealous rage, confronts Trigorin in a painful, angry, no-holds-barred pas de deux expressing her desperation at losing her last love. She seems to win him back, but Nina gives Trigorin a chain and pendant to remember her by, lying in front of him as a gesture of her submission. Kostya has seen everything from the stage, which he tears apart before retreating into the consolations of art – the Dream Dancers of his creative imagination.

The second act, a year or two later, opens with a red-hot review. Nina is unidentifiable in a large chorus line, the sort you'd expect in the Berlin or Moscow of the 1920s. The first few sections illuminate the aesthetic alternatives the ballet posits. There's the chorus extravaganza, followed by an elaborate music hall number in black tie and tails, followed by Trigorin's new work – "Death of the Seagull". It's Neumeier's take-off on the absurdity of some 19th century ballet librettos with Trigorin in a leopard skin as The Hunter and Arkadina as The Seagull Princess, his prey.

These music hall turns contrast with more personal backstage moments. After the first cabaret number, Trigorin appears in traditional 19th-century attire, accompanied by ballet girls in Degas dresses. A blonde chorus girl in red satin shorts accosts him – and of course it's Nina. He recognizes her only when she takes off her wig, but dismisses her patronizingly. There follows an agonizing duet to a bittersweet waltz, Nina broken-winged and vulnerable. (If we have read the play, we know that Trigorin impregnated and dumped Nina in Moscow, and that the baby died, but Neumeier's choreography presents the mood of betrayal, not the plot details).

Still in the country, alone with his fantasy, Kostya creates with his Dream Dancers a wonderfully sculpted abstract dance. As Trigorin continues a meaningless tradition, Kostya is turning pain into art. To the strains of a perky polka, Nina is moved to dance – first subtly from a sitting position, then more and more frantically. Confronting an audience affirms her resolve to dance and she accepts her destiny to be an artist.

Meanwhile, in the country Masha is resigned to marrying Medvedenko. Kostya enters reading a letter from Nina, which he kisses and folds into an origami gull, as he had at the beginning of the ballet. There's a strange mournful pas de deux with Kostya and his uncle, Sorin – in the play, the person with greatest understanding of and sympathy for Kostya. When Sorin faints and is thought to have had a heart attack, Kostya's world collapses still further.

Once again, Arkadina and Trigorin make a grand entrance, Kostya yearning for her denied attention. Again, in his fantasy, as if in consolation, his Dream Dancers appear.

As Kostya is left alone, a figure in black enters. It's Nina, who mounts the stage and remembers an angular seagull arm phrase from their first performance together. During a pas de deux as mournful as their first had been joyous, Nina realizes Kostya has not changed while she has become aware of her own destiny as an artist. Trigorin enters. Nina confronts him but then sinks again submissively to lie on the floor in front of him. He simply returns the pendant she had given him earlier and goes back to the card game. She kisses Kostya, picks up her hat, and leaves.

Kostya picks up his paper seagull and slowly tears it to shreds, symbolically destroying his dreams, his Dream Dancers, then seems to disappear—becoming a part of his stage, the centre of his life.

The Score

Most of the music is by Dmitri Shostakovich, that enigmatic Soviet composer who survived by writing film scores, light dance music, and heroic symphonies in accordance with the ideal of Soviet realism – meaning, basically, that no one should make any art that uneducated people couldn't understand. Those works figure prominently in the first sections of the second act with its backstage cabaret setting and its frivolous artistic values, corresponding to the wry sentimental waltzes, brassy polkas and a loving parody of imperial ballet clichés.

But Shostakovich's real passion was for the kinds of pieces he felt obliged to keep hidden in his desk drawer, and these – the initially playful but soon mournful and frightening Symphony No. 15, the brooding Chamber Symphony for Strings – constitute the bulk of the score and suggest the disillusionments of unrequited love, hidden feelings and the issues of artistic integrity that dominate the ballet's emotional content. Shostakovich's oeuvre thus reflects the debate between conventional and challengingly experimental work central to Neumeier's transposition of the story from playwriting to choreography.

The exquisite Andante from the *Piano Concerto No. 2* (also used in MacMillan's *Concerto*) is the first music we hear. It characterizes the innocent love and mutual commitment to new aesthetic values that draw Kostya and Nina together at the ballet's start. In contrast, a slight creation by Tchaikovsky (*December*, from *The Seasons*) provides a suitably tasteful accompaniment for Arkadina as she fondly recalls one of her old dances. For young Kostya's first attempts to create new forms, new aesthetics, Neumeier selects several astonishing pieces by percussionist Evelyn Glennie and, in Act 2, Shostakovich's spare *Piano Trio No. 2* (Largo). Music from *Symphony No. 15* recurs at the ballet's end, giving it a musical shapeliness that is echoed by the ballet's beginning and ending with the making and finally the destruction of one of Kostya's origami seagulls—symbolic throughout the ballet of his artistic aspiration.

– Penelope Reed Doob