

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

THEATER REVIEW

New 'Seagull' has the inside track

Redmoon tragicomedy moves indoors, blossoms

By Michael Phillips

Tribune theater critic

Last August, Redmoon Theater took a diverting outdoor whack at Chekhov's tragicomedy "The Seagull," mounting a production full of characters running across great expanses of grass near the Humboldt Park boat house.

That was artistic director Jim Lasko's first of three "Seagull" experiments, retitled "Nina." Now, things have moved indoors. Lasko's new production — gracefully accomplished in its brand of clowning, full of visual wit — carries the title "Seagull," without the "The."

It boasts many of the strengths of "Nina" and most of the same cast (though not everyone's in the same role). Yet it's a more successful and resonant piece. Lasko and company's vision of provincial Russia inside the Steppenwolf Studio Theatre, with its lovelorn characters popping in and out of scenic designer Stephanie Nelson's tiny box-houses, has taken care of the dispersed-energy vibe that marked the outdoor version.

Lasko's adaptation of the 1896 text is faithful to the spirit of Chekhov's mournfully funny classic. We are once again in the throes of cre-



Kristin Randall Burrello plays actress Arkadina in Redmoon Theater's accomplished "Seagull" at Steppenwolf Studio Theatre.

ative self-loathing with young Kostya (curly-haired, hilariously bitter Jim Slonina), the frustrated playwright trying to create "something truly new." His mother, the famous actress Arkadina (Kristin Randall Burrello), has brought to her country estate her famous

"Seagull"

When: Through April 20

Where: Steppenwolf Studio Theatre, 1650 N. Halsted St.

Phone: 312-335-1650

younger paramour, the writer Trigorin (Blake Montgomery), who destroys the young would-be actress Nina (Vanessa Stalling) because he has "nothing better to do."

The building blocks are Chekhov's, but the construction site is Redmoon's. The characters, all part of a daisy-chain of romantic regret, exist in a realm of performance borrowing ideas from silent film, Eastern European circus, French mime, all sorts of things. When, early on, Kostya is supposed to be floored

by Nina in romantic terms, Stalling and Sonina make the moment literal: She flips him over, landing him smack on his prat.

In Humboldt Park, "Nina" couldn't make the tonal transition called for by Chekhov's shattering fourth act, when Nina returns to her pining

Kostya, as if in a dream. Here, Lasko and his best performers come much closer to making it. One second we're watching the cast do their fetching little rhumba, scored by the marvelous composer Mark Messing, who also plays the music teacher, Medvedenko. The next, everything's interrupted by the sound of thunder and rain, and Slonina's Kostya — as fine a performance as I've seen this year — relaying the news about what happened to Nina after Trigorin.

The designs are all of a splendid piece. Every aspect from Kostya's toy theater (designed by Casey Gunschel and Nancy Bardawil) to actor Montgomery's coal-black, painted-on hair makes theatrical sense together. The acting isn't quite up to that level. Some performances are more like single ideas stretched into performance length. And, as with the earlier "Nina," "Seagull" operates on a kind of gentleness and sweetness that smoothes out some of Chekhov's more troubling, more sensual currents. There's a placid side to Redmoon's work, sometimes for the better, sometimes not.

The final image, however, reminds you of how good the company can be when they're reaching high. I won't spoil it, only to say that it involves a pistol shot, a sudden shower and a metaphor, clear yet mysterious enough to click on more than one level.

The same image was used in "Nina"; the second time around, it feels like it matters in a way that Chekhov might've appreciated.