UC SANTA BARBARA

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Theater Again Takes Wing with ‘Seagull’

To those who deeply love the theater, it’s more than entertainment — it’s a source of wisdom and inspiration, strength and comfort. The pandemic shutdown of our nation’s playhouses made it clear that a void is created when our stages go dark.

The central characters of “Seagull” need no such reminder: For them, the theater is both a vital means of personal expression, and a way to give their lives structure and meaning. So it seems appropriate that, for its first show back in its main performance space, the Hatlen Theater, the UC Santa Barbara Department of Theater and Dance is presenting Chekhov’s classic comedy-drama.

“It felt like a perfect match with the moment we’re in,” said professor Risa Brainin, director of the production, which opens Thursday, Nov. 18th. “Every character is either in the theater, or has a relationship with someone in the theater.”

Some of those relationships are quite fraught. “Seagull” is, among other things, about a clash between generations — the older one set in its ways, the younger determined and idealistic. It includes a play-within-the-play, an avant-garde production staged by Konstantin, the 20-something son of a famous actress.

Insisting that the theater of his day — 1896 — has grown stale and boring, he is searching for ways to make it fresh and exciting again. As our own stages reopen 125 years later, Brainin is on a similar quest.

“We’re coming back into a new world!” she said. “We are rethinking how we do everything. We want to break with the expectations of the past and surprise our audiences and ourselves.”

To that end, the audience of about 80 will be onstage for the production — a first for the Hatlen. “It’s set up in tennis court fashion,” she explained. “The stage is a long rectangle, and the audience is on either side. The audience will enter through the backstage, and surround the play.

“This is an experiment we’ve wanted to try for a really long time. It’s such an intimate play, and we all felt it would be better served in an intimate setting. It’s a simple, beautiful set design by Ann Sheffield.”

Brainin has a long history with the play. She appeared in a production while she was an undergraduate at Carnegie Mellon University. A decade or so later, in 1992, she assisted director Garland Wright on a production at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis.

“He really taught me about what I call the ‘Chekhovian groove’ — that place between comedy and tragedy,” she said. “Both have to always be there, as they are in life.”

She directed her own production at Shakespeare Santa Cruz in 2003, which makes this her fourth encounter with the play. “Yet I’m still learning new things about it,” she said. “I’m still having revelations about moments between characters — many of which the actors are bringing to me.”

Also making this production different: For the first time in her career, Brainin is using the translation created in the early 2000’s by Santa Barbara resident Libby Appel, former artistic director of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Appel’s son Irwin, chair of the theater and dance department, gave its world premiere at the university in 2009; Appel subsequently directed it at the OSF in 2012.

“I feel great works of art such as Chekhov plays need to be retranslated every 10 or 15 years,” said Libby Appel, who worked from a literal translation from the original Russian by Allison Horsely. “The rhythm and the feel of the way people speak changes, subtly, all the time.”

One less-than-subtle change she made was shortening the title of the play from “The Seagull” to simply “Seagull.” “While we were working on it, Allison said to me, ‘You know, in Russian, they don’t use articles very much. It’s implied.’

“That knocked my socks off. I always understood that, symbolically, the seagull is Nina (the young actress whose idealism gets shattered during the course of the drama). But she is not the only victim in the play. To have it ‘Seagull’ opens up the symbolism to more than just one character.”

In yet another change, this year the entire theater department was invited to submit ideas for potential productions, and six students joined the play selection committee. “‘Seagull’ was submitted by one of our now-senior actors,” Brainin said. “It was also on my mind to direct, so there was a convergence of our thinking.

“The students are really connecting with the material,” she added. “It’s so much about finding your place in the world, and being seen. Everybody in the play wants to be seen. Unfortunately, they want to be seen by the wrong person!

“That’s such a human thing — especially in college, where you’re thinking about who you are, who your circle is, and how you’re going to make your mark. The issues of the play are so present to them.”

Brainin is shaking things up in one additional way: “Seagull” will be her first production of a classic play at UCSB since 2006, when she directed Irwin Appel in “Timon of Athens.” Most years, she directs a play-in-progress as part of her Launch Pad series. This year’s preview production, Candrice Jones’ “A Medusa Thread,” will be directed by Shirley Jo Finney, who also directed the play in the 2020 LAUNCH PAD BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) Reading Series Festival.

That pairing allowed Brainin to direct “Seagull,” and set the template for a season of surprises. “At this point, going to live theater is an unusual experience,” she noted. “We’re embracing that.”

“Seagull” will be performed at 7 p.m. Nov. 18, 19, 20 and 22; at 2 p.m. Nov. 19; and at 1 p.m. Nov. 20 in the Hatlen Theater on campus. Advance tickets are $17 general or $13 for students, seniors and UCSB faculty, staff and alumni. They cost $2 more the day of the performance. Find information at https://www.theaterdance.ucsb.edu/news/event/900 or call (805) 893-2064. Proof of full vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test result must be presented for entry.

About UC Santa Barbara

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