

# Theater: Jane Austen On Stage? Bedlam Ensues!

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**THE SEAGULL** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**SENSE & SENSIBILITY** \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**BEDLAM AT THE SHEEN CENTER**

Others -- led of course by the New York Times -- have acclaimed Bedlam as a theatrical company of exceptional quality. See their latest productions of Chekhov's *The Seagull* and a new adaptation of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* done in repertory and you'll immediately know why. They're a strong ensemble with versatile actors and a keen intelligence devoted to the pure theater extolled by Cheek By Jowl and others right up the recent *Peter* and *The Starcatcher*. It's theater that exults in the marriage of their talents and your imagination to create something special that needs no elaborate sets or frippery. The Chekhov is good (no small feat). The Austen is delightful and near masterful. And I will be certain to see whatever they do next.

You know the stories. In *The Seagull*, a famed actress heads to the country for a rest, only to have her petulant son Konstantin throw a fit when she giggles at his "play" and her lover -- a writer who, she believes, should be thrilled to have her -- grows besotted with a much younger ingenue. Meanwhile, the son is the object of affection for Masha, a woman he cannot see while she in turn is stalked by an obdurately dull school teacher named Medvedenko who makes less than \$2000 a year and has no source of conversation other than the injustice of such a thing. It does not end well.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwood women are thrown onto hard times by a weak-willed half-brother and his viperish wife. The willful younger sister Marianne is admired by the sober and deeply worthy Colonel Brandon but has her head turned by the dashing and feckless John Willoughby. The reserved and appealing older sister Elinor forms a deep attachment to the modest and equally reserved Edward Ferrars. But all seems to conspire against them and they are so careful of their emotions you despair of them even beginning a courtship much less consummating one. It ends very well because of course this is Austen. Her greatness lies in making the happy ending not inevitable but real and wholly earned.

Both plays begin and end with a dance. Ending with a dance is an Elizabethan tradition carried on by the Globe in London and it's a delightful one. In *The Seagull*, it feels a bit random and beside the point, though not a bother. In *Sense & Sensibility*, it is integrated more wholly into the show: the cast dances around in modern dress and then slowly disrobes their outer garments to reveal period dress as their dance reverts from modern free-for-all to the more formal style of Austen's era.

Indeed, many of the directorial flourishes in *Seagull* feel a little unnecessary. The Russian play features a dramatic set change from act one to act two. In act one we are watching via stadium seating as the mostly outdoor scenes are performed. In act two, we move to a semi-circular seating around the action that is much more intimate and involving. While the staging would have been trickier, you only wish the whole show had been done that way because it's so well-suited to the work. Jarringly, the young would-be playwright Konstantin (played by the director Ken Tucker) pops up in a silly red devil costume that feels more low-brow Will Ferrell than witty.

But these are minor concerns since most of the actors are spot-on and immediately involving. Vaishnavi Sharma is wonderful as the self-involved star, making her more human and less indifferent than I've seen before without

ever underplaying her self-regard. Jason O'Connell is equally compelling as the writer Trigorin. The scene where she opens herself to him and we see the vain actress slip away and the insecure woman of a certain age remains is very moving. Up and down the cast holds our attention, from the doctor (Nigel Gore) right down to Masha, the daughter of the estate's manager who is forlornly in love with Konstantin. She's played by Andrus Nichols, who was so compelling that when my guest and I wondered who might play the lead in *Sense* we both hoped it would be her (and had our hopes confirmed). Even the often ponderous teacher Medvedenko is played by Samantha Steinmetz with wonderfully droll comic timing worthy of Ellen Degeneres at her best.

The weak links unfortunately are Tucker as Konstantin and Laura Baranik as the aspiring actress Nina who is wooed and destroyed by the writer Trigorin. Partially, it's casting. We accept Steinmetz as a male teacher but somehow Tucker's size and age make it hard to see him as the son of Sharma. And Baranik isn't quite up to the devastation of Nina. This means the final scene where Tucker and Baranik survey their shattered lives falls somewhat flat. But a solid *Seagull* is no mean feat and the flat comic flourishes felt like minor missteps. Both of these actors fare much better in *Sense & Sensibility*.

Indeed, almost everyone fares much better in *Sense and Sensibility*. The set design is immediately promising: it includes elaborate floor to ceiling window panels on wheels that can be moved around to create a wall or separate areas or pulled back to frame a scene and allow outsiders to peer in on the action like the busybodies that pepper Austen's novels. Another key feature are chairs on wheels. While Tucker clearly did very good work with the actors on *Seagull*, his every directorial intention is superbly successful in *Sense & Sensibility*. The audience lines the walls on two sides with the action taking place in the middle. He's aided at every stage by the scenic design of John McDermott, the costumes of Angela Huff, the lighting of Les Dickert and especially the choreography of Alexandra Beller.

The show begins with the dance I described. Then the actors launch into a babble of conversation, each of them addressing audience members with the currency of the times: gossip. Those simple white chairs on wheels prove wonderfully versatile. During a dinner party, the actors are arrayed around the space a large table would occupy. But when one character begins to timidly offer a tidbit of social news, others swoop in like sharks smelling blood; they herd her off into a corner, forcing every vital drop of news from her lips. At other times, when say Elinor hears distressing news, her chair is wheeled around and around across the large rectangular stage in dizzying dismay. A carriage ride is handled deftly and amusingly without straining for laughs. A scene of two young women chatting with superficial politeness is staged like a duel, with each of them at opposite ends of the stage on their little white chairs, like gunfighters facing off on the main street of a town. A dozen other moments are handled with similar ingenuity and cleverness.

The boisterous and essentially harmless if overwhelming Mrs. Jennings is an ideal fit for Tucker, who here uses his imposing size to marvelous effect without ever stopping to caricature. If anything, she's more delightfully menacing than a figure of fun. When the Dashwood women meet her and their other relations, Tucker simply has them bark out howls to indicate the pack of dogs that follow them everywhere, a neatly disorienting effect that is hilarious and slightly unnerving at the same time as you almost look here and there for the animals that seem to have invaded the stage.

And the cast rises to the occasion of Austen's brilliant novel and this excellent adaptation by Kate Hamill (who plays the passionate Marianne). Gore is very good as the Doctor in *Seagull* but he's even better as the moving Colonel Brandon. His monologue detailing the dastardly life of John Willoughby may be the show's emotional high point. Similarly, John Russell is fine as the prickly estate manager in *Seagull* but really good as both the dashing Willoughby and the spineless half-brother of our heroines. (One scene where he enthusiastically greets his sisters sans wife is a bit split personality; perhaps he should seem a tad more apologetic in his enthusiastic greeting? Otherwise, his work is impeccable.)

I can go up and down the line. Thanks to Tucker's inventive but always emotionally motivated direction and

staging, the actors shine. Steinmetz scores again in two wonderfully opposite turns as Mrs. Dashwood and the silly Anne Steele. Baranik fares much better as the villains Fanny Dashwood and Lucy Steele than she did as Nina; nastiness suits her. Andrus Nichols fulfills my expectations as the intelligent and sensible -- almost too sensible -- Elinor. Jason O'Connell is sweetly tentative as Edward Ferrars and his scenes with Elinor are brimming with unspoken affection. Sharma -- the best thing in *Seagull* -- is strong as the littlest Dashwood, a role that might easily have been played too broadly and for laughs.

But here the playwright modestly lets herself down. The willful Marianne is not an easy role and while Hamill shines as adaptor, she is fine but not exceptional as that impetuous young woman who must maintain our sympathy while being an utter dolt, not to mention emotionally imploding at various key moments.

One can sense director Tucker's leanings towards broad humor leading him astray in *Seagull*. That tendency is in check most of the time in *Sense*. When an intended betrothal enrages the Ferrars, the scene where they pile on in a fit of indignation worthy of a rugby scrum works well because it's a bit of gossip being related to a third party. The exaggeration is amusing. If it were the actual scene unfolding, the staging would be ludicrous and out of sorts with the tone of the show.

Unfortunately, that pratfall instinct overwhelms the finale. Elinor and Edward are finally meeting, finally free to declare their love. She's just had the supreme disappointment of misunderstanding that Edward has married another. He gently, diffidently, tentatively, sweetly clears up the confusion...and she runs screaming from the room. This moment of slapstick tragically robs us of emotion at the finale. It is technically faithful to the text. Austen writes, "Elinor could sit it no longer. She almost ran out of the room, and as soon as the door was closed, burst into tears of joy, which at first she thought would never cease." But what reads well does not always play well. And on stage we've just enjoyed a burst of high comedy. What the climax needs is heart. The impeccable 1995 film adaptation shows how this scene can have tremendous impact when played quietly. If Tucker and Nichols are looking for a combination of laughter and emotion, of seeing Elinor burst forth like a dam as the tears flow in a manner amusing but touching, well they haven't found it yet. Another laugh, finally, is not what's needed here.

So this *Sense and Sensibility* gets the humor and certainly the gossipy, unforgiving world of high society to a "t." Its staging is -- with that glaring exception -- impeccable and truly inventive. It's worthy of a much longer run on a bigger stage and it ranks as one of the best shows of the year. But it does not move you nearly as much as the novel does and a great adaptation should. Still, it's only a few tweaks and -- my apologies to the excellent adaptor -- perhaps a switch in casting away.

Already, it ranks as perhaps the greatest stage adaptation of this novel in history. That's not as high praise as it should be since I slowly realized how very rarely Jane Austen has actually been adapted to the stage at least on Broadway and as far as I can tell the West End. Even though her novels are marvels of dialogue and character and brimming with plot, they have almost never made it onto the boards, despite an endless stream of versions on TV and at the movies. It's certainly the first time I've seen a stage production of any of her work. Here and there a musical version is attempted, but even that rarely. Austen's sightings on Broadway are rare to the point of bemusement. A stage adaptation of *Pride & Prejudice* ran for six months beginning in 1935 (and was turned into the marvelous 1940 film starring Laurence Olivier). In 1959, a musical spin on *Pride & Prejudice* ran for just over two months. And that's it. What can possibly explain it?

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single novel in possession of a good plot must be in want of an adaptation. Finally, *Sense & Sensibility* has received a theatrical one worthy of it.

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