Chekhov's Seagull: Play-within-the-play and the new drama

When Anton Chekhov parodied the "new art" through the medium of a "play-within-the-play" in *The Seagull*, his mainstream audience of the time – at least the one of 1896, which judged the first performance to be a dramatic failure – did not realize with what accuracy he had identified the theatre form which would dominate twentieth-century European drama as a signature genre of European Modernism.

The "lyrical" genre of the theatrical, non-realistic new drama form, sometimes appearing in the guise of a "fairy drama" (feeriia), or "historical drama," a libretto or a ballet score, took over the European theatre from the first staging of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* in 1894, and continued to maintain its hegemony, in one way or another, as a constituent part of the more strident Expressionist theatre and its successor *theatre of the absurd*. Postmodern theatre is also not without its traces: the concentration on operatic theatre (*Einstein on the Beach*) as well as on adult puppet theatre (Handspan), together with the reliance on Japanese lyrical theatrical forms in deconstructive productions of traditional theatre (Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) or in new plays (Louis Nowra's *The Precious Woman*) all testify to the lasting influence of the fin-de-siècle lyrical drama. Indebted to Wagnerian opera for its origins and Schopenhauerian pessimism for its new affectivity, lyrical drama also influenced the development of early motion pictures. With its musical scores replacing dramatic (tragic) action with (affective but not tragic) mood pictures, accompanied by filmic (miraculous) scene changes, lyrical drama preempted the structural principles of the new artistic medium of motion pictures and supplied the film industry (at least in Hollywood) with its early themes.

Anton Chekhov's "portrayal" of the new lyrical monodrama on his own stage in *The Seagull* was both an act of self-definition and autoparody. For although Chekhov's own dramaturgy, in *The Seagull* and in all his subsequent plays, was far superior to the dramaturgy of the young decadent Treplev, Chekhov's innovative stage devices, from sound effects to elaborate stage instructions and non-sequitur dialogues, can be seen as the more evolved counterparts of the prototype devices used in Treplev's play-within-the-play. Treplev's monologizing World Soul and the externalization of affective, psychic states, the emphasis on sensory perception, like the smell of sulphur signifying the Devil's appearance, the evocation of mood through the twilight setting of the "natural" lake – in itself a simulacrum of the real – all of these are elements of the new drama of Euro-
pean Decadence. Chekhov's own dramaturgy, for all its resemblance to Realism and representational portrayal of Russian life, belongs to the same genre.

Consequently, Chekhov’s art is not about the Russian superfluous men and women, languishing away in the Russian provinces, yearning to come to Moscow but mysteriously unable to act. Chekhov’s new theatre is a dramatization of discourse, of psychic states and of the Unconscious, manifesting itself as a process of language and of semiosis. In all of this, Chekhov’s dramaturgy preempts that of Artaud’s theatre of cruelty, itself born of the Surrealist movement and forming a genealogical link with the later mature theatre of the absurd of Beckett and Pinter.

In theme and structure, Treplev’s play-within-the-play in Chekhov’s Seagull is a model of the new non-realistic drama, which had begun to take shape in European Modernism at the end of the nineteenth century. It is not surprising that the Russian writer was receptive to the new lyrical drama. After all, it was the Moscow Art Theatre, established by Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, which opened in 1898 with a so-called historical drama by A. K. Tolstoy – Tsar Fèdor Ivanovich. This essentially Romantic drama, which was part of a historical trilogy in verse and which was banned from the Russian stage for thirty years, between 1866 and 1898, had affinities with opera and was structurally related to the genre of lyrical drama emerging at the turn-of-the-century in European theatre. In the same year, the Moscow Art Theatre production of The Seagull became a rousing success, after which a stylized seagull became the logo of Stanislavsky’s new Moscow Art Theatre. During the same opening season, the Moscow Art Theatre staged Hauptmann’s Symbolist/Naturalist lyrical drama, Sunken Bell (Die versunkene Glocke), written in the same year in which The Seagull was first performed unsuccessfully at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg (1896). Apart from Hauptmann’s dramas, the European prototype of the lyrical drama was to be found in the plays of the Belgian poet, Maurice Maeterlinck. His Pelléas et Mélisande, first produced in Paris in 1893, travelled to London in 1898 and to New York in 1902 and was, apart from Oscar Wilde’s Salome (1894) the most resonant work of art in the European and East European fin-de-siècle. With incidental music by Fauré, it featured the virtual symbiosis of the dramatic-poetic text and the musical text as a new structural principle of the new drama. This new structural principle explains the close proximity of the new drama to opera and the proliferation of libretti written by fin-de-siècle poets expressly for opera composers. Similarly, there is a predilection among composers of opera for fin-de-siècle lyrical drama as libretti because of their structural proximity to a musical score. Pelléas et Mélisande itself became Claude Debussy’s only composed opera (1902),