

# THEATER

## Interview

### Anton Chekhov: the sequel

In *The Moon in Vain*, Rae C. Wright begins where Meryl Streep left off

By Linda Yablonsky

So you couldn't snag a seat for the New York Shakespeare Festival's celebrity-soaked staging of *The Seagull* in Central Park. So you missed Meryl Streep's comic turn as Arkadina, Chekhov's cheapskate diva of a mother. Never mind. There's more to that extravagant creature than meets the festival production's starry eye, and it's on display now at Dixon Place. In *The Moon in Vain*, her "sequel" to *The Seagull*, Rae C. Wright pushes hard on Arkadina's psychosexual buttons and, in classic Chekhovian fashion, really gets up her skirt.

Written with director Lee Gundersheimer, this knotty spin on *Seagull*'s wretchedly dysfunctional family forgoes the ill-fated love affair between Treplev, Arkadina's playwright son, and his favorite ingenue, Nina. *The Moon* focuses on Treplev's enduring need for love from his self-absorbed mother, whom his ghost comes home to haunt on the first anniversary of his death. *The Moon* also picks up where Chekhov left off, bandying arguments on art and theater by neatly connecting the tenuous relationship between Treplev (played here by Ethan Cohn) and his unset-

shorts, white shirt and red Keds, her light-brown, shoulder-length hair partly hidden beneath a white straw hat, she exudes a cockeyed optimism that is starkly at odds with her imperious alter ego, whom Wright feels she was born to play. Last summer, she filled the role in a production of *The Seagull* staged at Show World, the Midtown porn theater that got around Mayor Giuliani's punitive quality-of-life campaign by going partly legit. "It was a great production," Wright enthuses. "People who saw it said they could have sat through another two hours! They loved the characters. Loved them!"

So does Wright. Though she's split from her husband, actor Tim Kirkpatrick, and has no children of her own, she has examined troubled parent-child relations before—most pointedly, and poignantly, in 1995's *She's Just Away!*, a one-woman show in which she took "the grief industry" to task following the death of her mother from breast cancer. (She does a similar favor for meat eaters in *Animal Instincts*, currently undergoing rewrites.) Her family background in Wilmington, Delaware ("You don't meet many people from there!" says Wright)

is an entrance into *The Moon* well. "My mother's relationship with my younger brother is a resource I use for Treplev and Arkadina," Wright says, adding that her mother shared some of Arkadina's incapacity for love. "I worked up enough sympathy from my mother to be able to love her instead of punishing her for her inability to do her job," Wright says, which may explain why she manages to make the chilly Arkadina into a sympathetic figure. Several times during *The Moon*, Wright strides into the audience to shake hands or pass around good



MOM ON THE MOON Rae C. Wright's prima donna is haunted by the ghost of her son in Dixon Place's new play, which imagines a "fifth act" to *The Seagull*.

fortune, eventually inviting unsuspecting patrons to pelt her with paper stones or join her for some improvised repartee. No one resists.

No wonder. For nearly 18 years, Wright was a principal member of the fabled New York Street Theater Caravan, a socially conscious touring troupe that performed plays during the 1970s and '80s all over the U.S. in addition to in Nicaragua and Europe, where the company became a household name. In America, it worked with labor unions and also played Indian reservations as well as in prisons in every state. "I remember performing at Attica after the [1971] uprising," she recalls. "The play we were doing was very physical and had a lot of pathos in it, with a sheriff whose uniform was very clownlike. And I remember watching the guards doubling over with laughter at this actor, and the inmates also were hysterical, and I just felt like, This is a miraculous event taking place! But when you're an actor, you have this connection to the audience and this great goodwill; it's like the goodwill I have as a teacher. I remember one private student I had. I didn't like her work and I didn't like her, but when I was her teacher, I loved her! When you're a performer, that role is the same—what drives you is always love."

For Wright, social activism goes hand in hand with theater. "I think in all my work there's a dialogue be-

tween victims and victimizers," she muses. *The Moon* certainly bears that out. In fact, it's only the first part of an Arkadian trilogy of what Wright terms "performance plays" that she and Gundersheimer have devised. "The next part," she says, "is about a second generation of narcissists and takes place now, in our time. It concerns a young director and an older actress, and their relationship sort of mirrors Arkadina and Treplev's. But this second generation doesn't have a child. They're like the narcissists in that movie *The Anniversary Party*, who don't have children. I'm glad they don't. I applaud them. I do! Good!"

She looks away a moment, one hand toying with a gold medalion hanging from a red ribbon around her neck. "It's a monkey," she says, referring to the image on the charm. Wright admits that she subscribes to what she calls "some feng shui magic," explaining that she was born in the Year of the Tiger and that this is the Year of the Snake. "Snakes are very hard on tigers," she says. "And snakes like monkeys. They play with monkeys. So the snake won't bother me because he's entertained."

He's not the only one.

*The Moon in Vain* runs at Dixon Place through August 24.

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