

Title: How Well Did "The Seagull" Fly in France

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Abstract:

At a time when a new American film version of Anton Chekhov's "The Seagull" (Chaika) has been released and has met with good reviews, it may be appropriate to consider a very different film version of the play that has not garnered the attention of Chekhov admirers to the degree that it might deserve. This is the bold French adaptation entitled "La Petite Lili," directed by Claude Miller and released in 2003. Miller's film adaptation retains the basic plot of Chekhov's play—at least at the outset—but it reworks the material in original and fascinating ways. From the first scene, significant changes are evident. To begin with, Miller has changed the young protagonist's vocation from writing (plays and short stories) to filmmaking. Second, the French film treats sexuality more openly and frankly than Chekhov did. Most significant, however, are the changes Miller brings to the way in which the central plot is resolved. Whereas in Chekhov's play, Konstantin Treplev, feeling frustrated and unloved, shoots himself, Julien, the Treplev analogue in the French film, approaches a similar moment, but then backs away and ultimately marries the Masha figure. He goes on to make a film version of his early romance with the Nina counterpart, Lili, who, in an ironic twist on Chekhov, has to beg Julien to let her star in his film. And there is yet a further twist, for in Julien's film, the Julien/Treplev character does kill himself, while the "real" Julien has gone on to become a successful filmmaker, raise a family, etc. This paper will analyze the choices that Claude Miller made in Chekhov's play and discuss the effect these transformation have on his (and Chekhov's) audience.