



Ten Chimneys at Arizona Theatre Company David Appleford, 02/21/2010

In 1896, the opening night of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* was a disaster. The audience booed, the actress playing Nina lost her voice on stage, and Chekhov, overcome with both embarrassment and grief, declared it would be the last play he would ever write. However, as time passed, *The Seagull* grew in popularity much to Chekhov's dismay considering how poorly it was first received, and went on to be considered one of the greatest events in Russian theatre.

Jump several years ahead. When playwright Jeffrey Hatcher was commissioned by the Arizona Theatre Company to write a play about two legendary figures of the American stage, husband



Anna Bullard & Steve Hendrickson

and wife team Alfred Lunt and British born Lynn Fontanne, he approached the subjects from an unusual angle; he took real characters in a real situation – the Lunts really did present a production of *The Seagull* in the late thirties – and wrote a what if... comic scenario around the situation. Before the show's opening, the Lunt's invited the cast to stay at their Ten Chimney's estate in Wisconsin in order to explore, discuss and rehearse the play. Jeffrey Hatcher's *Ten Chimneys* is an imagined account of what happened during that time, a theatrical fantasy - a fairytale if you will - of how events could have unfolded when the lives of the volatile real-life character actors paralleled the events of Chekhov's fictional characters.

It matters little if none of these facts are known to you before entering the Herberger Theatre to enjoy ATC's excellent new production of Hatcher's *Ten Chimneys*, but it helps. From the beginning, the script allows those unfamiliar with the classic Russian drama to form an understanding of what is about to unfold. Within minutes of curtains up it becomes obvious that what we are about to see in a twentieth century setting will reflect many of the conflicts performed in the nineteenth century Russian classic.

The *Ten Chimneys* setting is the pool area and studio placed in what looks like the middle of some enchanted woods. It's an eye-catching set design by John Ezell perfectly capturing that fantasy element surrounding the real-life people.

Whether it was ever intended to be perceived in such a way is unclear, but with its densely populated array of richly layered



Suzanne Bouchard & Steve Hendrickson

green leaves and trees decorated around an idyllic rustic cabin where all of the action unfolds, the look of the piece is reminiscent of a classic animated feature and adds to that feeling that what we are watching is really a fairytale.

The casting is mostly just right. Suzanne Bouchard and **Steve Hendrickson** capture the spirit and tone of the Lunts so well you feel as if you might have met them somewhere before. With two characters as theatrically flamboyant as these there is always the danger of easily turning them into colorful caricatures, but under director David Ira Goldstein's skillful direction plus Jeffrey Hatcher's exacting and, at times, rigorous dialog, the marriage of great teamwork – acting, direction and writing – make these two characters as real and as well-rounded as you could hope for. With solid support from Anna Bullard who makes a charming Uta Hagen – the catalyst that sparks the romantic triangle by the poolside – and Michael Winters as Sydney Greenstreet – yes, that Sydney Greenstreet – *Ten Chimneys* is a triumphant addition to ATC's current season.