

Risky Business

Sherilyn Forrester, Feb 03, 2011

ATC's premiere of a new play is a worthy effort, even though it ends up feeling a bit thin

It's a rare thrill to witness a fully produced world premiere of a new play.

Quite generously, Arizona Theatre Company has invited us to attend the birth of *Ten Chimneys*, by Jeffrey Hatcher. ATC and Hatcher have enjoyed a rather extensive relationship. The theater has produced several of his plays, including *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Ella* and *Tuesdays With Morrie*. ATC commissioned Hatcher to write *Ten Chimneys*.



Suzanne Bouchard, Steve Hendrickson & Anna Bullard

Because of the considerable costs of mounting plays, a theater company producing a piece without a track record takes on substantial risks. It's a gamble—a calculated one, but a gamble nonetheless, and one many theaters are not willing to make.

Hatcher's play offers a peek into the world of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, the storied couple of the theater whose work, from the 1920s to their retirement in 1960, defined the ideal of the actor as artist. Even when most of their colleagues were lured by Hollywood's beckoning big bucks, they refused to be seduced, holding fast to the idea that the theater was the actor's truest medium.

At *Ten Chimneys*, the name of their country estate in Wisconsin, the two built a studio where they and their actor friends would begin the rehearsal process far from the lights of Broadway. Hatcher's play puts us at *Ten Chimneys* in the late 1930s, as Lunt ([Steve Hendrickson](#)), Fontanne (Suzanne Bouchard) and their troupe gather to explore *The Seagull*. Russian playwright

Anton Chekhov's iconic work examines writers, theater and life in general, which predictably includes matters of love and hope, disillusion and despair. These are, of course, the sort of things members of a theater troupe might encounter in their own lives and work. Hatcher's work is fiction, but it's firmly rooted in the history and traditions of Lunt and Fontanne.



Suzanne Bouchard & Steve Hendrickson

ATC has brought to life Hatcher's new piece with full-out enthusiasm. They've given us a capable cast, an almost breathtakingly beautiful set, skillfully designed and constructed costumes, and near-perfect lighting and sound design. ATC artistic director David Ira Goldstein has fashioned these components of playmaking into an engaging entity which bounces along with a friendly pace and captures Hatcher's comedy perfectly.

But—and you were probably expecting a "but"—the play, although thoughtfully conceived and often deliciously funny, is not a totally successful effort. It is sometimes confusing, and in spite of a fairly successful setup in the first act, it loses its way during the second. Ultimately, it feels thin.

The play begins promisingly. *Ten Chimneys* is populated by Lunt's family. His mother, Hattie (Linda Stephens), is a grande-dame diva despite having never set foot on the stage, and she has a cordially adversarial relationship with her daughter-in-law. His half-brother, Carl (Marcus Truschinski), runs errands and is a pool-hustler by trade. A rather dour half-sister, Louise (Naomi Jacobson), manages the estate. The group is awaiting the arrival of Sydney Greenstreet (Michael Winters)—or "G-string," as they call him—to be followed by the other members of

The Seagull cast, who will trickle in as rehearsals progress. The core group of Bouchard, Hendrickson and Stephens banter playfully—and skillfully—and deliver delightful zingers as they demonstrate their relationships with each other, while building a relationship with us.

However, unexpectedly, along with Greenstreet comes Uta Hagen (Anna Bullard), the young woman who will

refreshing; he doesn't attempt to bend his characters and his story into awkward postures while attempting to telegraph this information. But these speeches risk being a distraction, inviting an attempt by viewers to put pieces together for a puzzle that may not be relevant. Ultimately, Hatcher's characters are not Chekhov's, and although there are obvious intentions of creating echoes of Chekhov's story, Hatcher doesn't provide quite enough for



play the role of Nina. And so the carefully parsed plans of the famed couple are unsettled.

Hatcher's instincts are right: Witnessing star-level actors at work is sure to offer plentiful opportunities for making fun. And by choosing *The Seagull* as the play they will tackle, Hatcher opens doors through which other dimensions of humor and thought can be exploited.

However, while invoking Chekhov, Hatcher has to toe a fragile line. By referencing *The Seagull*—its characters, its plotlessness, its discussions of the nature of art—there's a risk that those unfamiliar with the play will feel excluded from what might seem like an inside joke. At the same time, Hatcher sets up expectations that his characters and their story will, at least in some ways, replicate Chekhov's story, which would invite comparisons, favorable or otherwise.

Hatcher addresses the first issue in the most direct of ways: From time to time, he sends a character downstage to address the audience in brief speeches which distill the essence of what's happening at a given point in *The Seagull*. The directness of Hatcher's approach is

Goldstein and company to deliver a richly resonating emotional impact.

Part of the problem may be Bullard's awkward portrayal of Uta Hagen, whose presence necessarily provides complexity among the group. The actress has an impressive résumé, but here, her characterization feels stilted and over-reaching. This is such an irony, because not only was the real-life Hagen a much lauded actor; she was also a respected acting instructor who had an immeasurable impact on actors-in-training. Hagen's book *Respect for Acting* is still a valued resource for those who seek to understand and improve their craft.

Ten Chimneys is certainly a worthy effort, but it seems to aspire to too much—or too little—for us to feel like fully invested members of this curious entourage. Despite some fine acting, impressive production elements and Thatcher's intriguing concept, *Ten Chimneys* doesn't quite reach us as profoundly or genuinely as we desire—and as we are led to expect it to.