

CULTURE

Russian production plays on emotions

On tour across China, director brings contemporary version of acclaimed stage story to tug at the hearts of theatergoers, **Chen Nan** reports.

Konstantin Khabenskiy's version of *The Seagull* is nothing short of transformative. Touring China as part of the prestigious Moscow Art Theatre's international program, this production breathes new life into Anton Chekhov's classic while also reflecting the timelessness of its themes.

On Aug 5, Khabenskiy, who is also the artistic director of the Moscow Art Theatre, presented his rendition of *The Seagull* to an audience in Beijing. While the play's universal themes of love and existential despair resonate with every generation, Khabenskiy's production adds a layer of emotional abstraction and psychological depth, allowing *The Seagull* to transcend time and space. His sensitive direction and ability to capture Chekhov's essential truths has turned this touring production into a cross-cultural experience — one that speaks directly to the hearts of Beijing theatergoers.

The China tour of *The Seagull* by the Moscow Art Theatre kicked off with performances in the capital on Aug 5-10. The tour will continue with shows in Shanghai from Aug 15 to 17 and Xiamen, Fujian province, from Aug 22 to 24.

"Chekhov's works have found a strong following among Chinese audiences, thanks to skilled translators who have introduced his literary style to the Chinese-speaking world," says Zhang Zhaohui, CPC Committee Member and deputy general manager of Beijing Poly Theatre Management Co, which is collaborating with the Russian theater's China tour.

Zhang also notes that the tour coincides with the 165th anniversary of the birth of the renowned Russian writer and dramatist. Written in 1896, Chekhov's world-famous play *The Seagull* has maintained its popularity not only in Russia but among audiences worldwide. The play dramatizes the romantic conflicts of four main characters: Irina, a young actress; her lover, Boris Trigorin, a successful fiction writer; Irina's son, Konstantin Treplev, a young and ambitious playwright; and Nina Zarechnaya, Irina's aspiring young actress with whom the son is in love.

One of the most notable stage adaptations in China was produced by the Beijing People's Theatre in 1991, with translation by Chinese scholar Tong Daoming. The production featured a venerable cast of veteran Chinese actors, including Pu Cunxin, Xu Fan and Yang Lixin, and was directed by Oleg Efremov, then the artistic director of the Moscow Art Theatre.

According to Khabenskiy, who became the artistic director of the Moscow Art Theatre in 2021, the birth of the theatre is intrinsically tied to Chekhov's drama. The Moscow Art Theatre, founded in 1898 by Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, was pivotal in bringing Chekhov's works to life with a new approach to acting and directing. It was this theater company, renowned for its innovation in realism, that famously staged Chekhov's plays, including *The Seagull*, with a focus on naturalistic performance and psychological depth. The production of *The Seagull* is significant because it marked a departure from



The Seagull, the latest stage adaptation of Anton Chekhov's classic by the Moscow Art Theatre, is touring Chinese cities: Beijing, Shanghai and Xiamen (Fujian province). The tour started on Aug 5 and will last until Aug 24.

traditional theatrical performances. Before this, Russian theater often relied on exaggerated gestures, melodramatic performances, and artificial settings. Stanislavsky's production emphasized the internal emotions of the characters and the subtleties of their interactions. This approach was revolutionary and would become the foundation for Stanislavsky's methods of acting, which later influenced directors and actors worldwide, including Chinese artists.

Over time, the Moscow Art Theatre became synonymous with Chekhov's works. It was this theater that took Chekhov's plays beyond Russia, spreading them internationally and cementing them as integral parts of the world theater. *The Seagull*, in particular, was staged and restaged many times, always offering new interpretations while maintaining its core message: the complexity of human relationships and the frustration of personal and artistic aspirations, says Khabenskiy.

Khabenskiy, also an acclaimed actor and director, brings fresh ener-



Konstantin Khabenskiy, the artistic director of the Moscow Art Theatre, in Beijing, on Friday. PHOTOS BY ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY

gy to Chekhov's classic, maintaining focus on psychological depth while ensuring that the play resonates with contemporary audiences. His direction maintains the original naturalism of the Moscow Art Theatre's early productions, while also incorporating modern sensibilities and emotional intensity.

"In this version, we want to strike a chord with today's audience, particularly youth's selfishness and obsession. We highlight the characters' urgent, almost desperate desire

to be heard — a craving for love and recognition that cannot wait," he says.

This "modern anxiety," as Khabenskiy calls it, reflects a "fear of delayed gratification," a pressure to fulfill desires immediately, "to love and be loved without waiting for tomorrow." The director draws a parallel with the modern world, where communication is often fragmented.

"Despite being in conversation, people seem unable to truly listen to or see each other. This disconnection is deeply embedded in the characters' struggles in this interpretation of the play," he notes.

"I understand my role. But can I justify her actions? That might be a bit too much to ask. Still, as our audience connects with it now, you must defend their character no matter how terrible their actions are, no matter how difficult they are to understand," Babushkina adds. "The character I play sees herself as ordinary, but she's a soul that is extraordinary." Babushkina adds, "She longs endlessly for love, but at the same time, she is trapped in the abyss of her own misfortune. I believe this story transcends time and space. It resonates universally."

"Their efforts propel the ambitions of others but ultimately lead to painful falls from grace. These

women, often ignored or hurt, are not merely passive victims; they are catalysts for the characters' fates," he says.

This is the sixth production of *The Seagull* by the Moscow Art Theatre, which premiered in December 2024.

Another distinctive choice in Khabenskiy's production is his "deviation from the traditional ending," he says. In this version, Khabenskiy introduces a new, imagined fifth act that extends Chekhov's world. This brief but poignant monologue follows the departure of the characters, leaving what comes next up to the imagination. After the pain and sorrow have settled, Khabenskiy envisions how life continues after the tragedy. This small addition serves as a bridge to Chekhov's final work, *The Cherry Orchard*, offering a glimpse into the broader cycle of life and change.

For the actors, performing any role in the production is an immense privilege, "as artists, it's human beings," says actor Igor Vernik, who portrays doctor Evgeny Dorn in this version. Vernik previously played the role of Trigorin, the writer, in a previous production.

He describes the characters in the play as seeking refuge in each other, yet despite their desires, they remain like parallel lines — always close yet never truly converging, trapped in eternal uncertainty and existential doubt.

Vernik's Dorn is not the typical detached, melancholic figure often seen in traditional portrayals. Instead, he is a risk-taker, someone who embraces life's unpredictable nature and never retreats from his challenges.

"I find this portrayal deeply exciting, as it reimagines the role in a way never seen before onstage.

Every role, every nuance, and every thematic element of this version offers a new interpretation, pushing the boundaries of Chekhov's original vision," he says.

"When I was younger and read Chekhov's works, I felt that these stories had nothing to do with me. They were dull and boring. After all, during our teenage years, we tend to think that real life should be more intense and dramatic than what we see onstage," says actress Kristina Babushkina, who plays the role of Irina Arkadina.

"As I've got older and revisited Chekhov's work, I realized how much I connect with it now. You start noticing the subtleties that you never paid attention to before. They hit you right in the soul," she says. "You find yourself rereading and watching adaptations of his plays and films. Suddenly, you feel a sharp sting. These stories strike you with precision. That's when you realize the true tragedy of life, which Chekhov captured perfectly."

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Oxford summer program fosters global perspectives

LONDON — In August, 25 Chinese students enrolled in a two-week summer program at St Hilda's College, Oxford, England, which focuses on artificial intelligence and computer science.

The initiative, part of the WeChat Global Education Plan, offers students the opportunity to present their self-developed digital mini-programs to the public in Oxford and London.

The program officially opened on Aug 5, where British educator H-J Colston, who has participated in international mindsets. "Chinese people are much more globally minded these days," Colston said at the opening ceremony.

Tang Jiahao from the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou, Guangdong province, developed a health management application to help his mother track her well-being. The mini-program utilizes AI to recognize food through photos, log nutritional data of the foods, and generate personalized health recommendations.

"Innovation has no boundaries," Tang says. "As long as we use technology effectively, anyone can be a creator." Colston, who cofounded the educational charity Engage with China (EWC), addressed the audience following the student demonstrations and commended their ability to offer practical, real-world solutions.

"These young experts from China

are helping to navigate life with technology," she says.

A veteran educator who has visited China more than 30 times since the 1980s, Colston says the country's rapid development, from a bicycle-dominated society to one of the world's leaders in AI, has influenced her commitment to building cultural understanding between China and the United Kingdom.

Founded in 2018, EWC launched a program to promote a "China-literate" generation among British students through school outreach and scholarships for educational visits to China. To date, the charity has reached more than 6,500 students across primary and second-

ary schools in the UK.

Colston cites an imbalance in cultural knowledge as the charity's key motivation. "Many Chinese students are familiar with Shakespeare and Western culture, but few young Britons know much about contemporary China," she says.

She adds that exchange programs, such as the Oxford summer camp, are essential for fostering global perspectives.

"Making friends with Chinese people will be eye-opening for British students and it gives them a chance to see the world from a new perspective," she says.



The official launch of the global innovation challenge in Oxford, Britain, on Aug 5. PHOTO BY WUKUN / FOR CHINA DAILY