

THE SEAGULL/ WOODSTOCK, NY



I can't remember where I first saw the announcement for this spring's Off-Broadway production, "The Seagull/Woodstock, NY," (maybe a bus stop, or the *The New York Times*), but I thought, *This ought to be good*. Whether one cares about Anton Chekhov or not, one of his most widely adapted stage plays lends itself well as a paradigm of contemporary Upstate New York, so well I was surprised no one had thought of it before. The New Group's version, instead of taking place on a country estate outside Moscow with a bunch of spoiled late 19th century Russians, is set on a country estate in the Hudson Valley with a group of spoiled modern Americans. By JANET MERCEL Illustrated by LIA STRASSER

"I KNOW THESE PEOPLE," I said to the director, Scott Elliot, a few days after I'd seen the play on its closing weekend. "I've known them all my life." He laughed delightedly. "It was Thomas's [the playwright] idea to set it in Woodstock. He's in love with it up there. It was brilliant to use this real life enclave where a lot of successful entertainment people have settled. They're either surrounded by fame-obsessed sycophants or they bring in their own. It's a specific energy that's different from the rest of upstate." It's the rural bohemians, I countered, and it's never been just Woodstock.

For the previous couple of weeks, I'd been trying to track down my own real-life rural bohemian—Parker Posey, the play's lead. In a fittingly meta twist, the first time I saw Parker, long dubbed the queen of indie film, in person was around twenty years ago, when I was a teenager wandering around the Woodstock Film Festival. I knew she had a very real presence in the area and I knew that if anyone could accurately tap into the off-kilter performing arts energy of upstate, she would.

"The Seagull," any version, is about an incestuous group of people who revolve around a single estate in the country belonging to the gently patriarchal brother of a famous theater actress (Parker's Irene.) They are creatives, or pseudo-creatives, people overly burdened by their privilege and luxuriant free time—enough to spend days comparing and despairing over each other's

talent and successes. There's a solid mix of full-time upstaters and neighbors (aka people who live anywhere from the next property over to within a ten mile radius), and people who spend their time escaping the city for the country, or vice versa, and whose patience or good humor eventually wears out. They are petty, bored, and everyone is always around.

That dynamic, new and old, is exactly what makes Chekhov's play the perfect vessel to talk about the upstate/downstate dichotomy. But then, Playwright Thomas Bradshaw is a Bard College alumnus, and he and Scott know the area well enough to hit the vibe on the nose. "For a long time, it was people coming up who couldn't afford the Hamptons, or don't love the beach. Or people who take pride in living a more ramshackle lifestyle upstate—you know, you drive up to the big house and property, but it needs a lot of work," Scott described to me (pretty accurately, I thought). "Now there's more people and more money and that dynamic is a bit spoiled. But you wonder what are the values in these glamour-adjacent communities."

Speaking of community, if there's a group of people waiting to surround Parker at her house and land in the Hudson Valley, they're going to be waiting a while. She's having a major career resurgence, zipping back and forth from coast to coast for press and premieres and rereleases of past films. But she remembers what most people don't care to—that Chekhov is

supposed to be funny. Her Irene is completely over the top, thrashable but lovable, refusing to be brought down by life and the constant struggle to remain relevant. Her character is the most narcissistic of the whole self-involved bunch. She's still hot, and the first one to say so. She handpicks her friend group to maintain her perception of herself exactly where it needs to be. It's obvious how much Parker enjoyed playing way, way into type. "Every actress I know is that character," Scott told me. "She creates her own social scene so she is always comfortable to be who she is." (Or wants to be.)

In my attempts to nail down Parker for this story, I came across Amy Stiller, who plays Irene's friend, Pauline. Pauline is absolutely brought down by life, with a morbid daughter and well-off but grumpy husband, and Amy, a New York actor born and raised, embodies another type of upstate presence altogether. "I can't deal with the country bumpkin full-time. The high pressure of the city isn't always bad," she said to me about her regional forays. "I need the balance of the real world." I laughed because Amy grew up in a famously famous showbiz family, and her idea of "the real world" in this context (bashing around in concrete, away from the woods and mountains of the Catskills), is exactly the opposite of most people's here.

By the time I found myself in the audience the night before the play closed, Parker had already mentally, and soon physically, moved on from upstate living, at least for the

moment. She didn't have time for a story, but was punchily upbeat, if vaguely exasperated that I wanted to invade the privacy of her home. Perhaps naturally, because privacy is the reason most people come up here. "I couldn't be further from my upstate life at the moment...and I do miss it," she told me. "But am so looking forward to it this summer!"

Meanwhile onstage, the actors sat griping at each other across one of the only pieces of furniture on a bare-bones set, one of those metal outdoor patio tables that evoke late night mosquito attacks and boozy arguments, and my spine prickled with recognition of the mood while I took in the opening scene. As Irene strutted around the stage huffing at people, Parker's cheerful rejection of my story, via a dazed recounting of the current fever pitch of her career, came back to me. "All this is going on...I'm so very busy... I'm simply not settled enough at the moment..." Had I been talking to Parker or Irene? She sure seemed plugged in to me. As the rest of the cast gradually entered to unfold the plot of one of the most famous plays in the world, I wondered who in the audience around me had more than an ambient familiarity with the specific social dynamic the actors were tapping into. Did they understand that this place is real?

My lines of reality and tragicomedy really started to blur when, after an argument with her lover, Irene storms, "I'm leaving tonight. *This place* makes me miserable!" *This place*, of course, being the source of her misery, and none of the baggage she brought with her. As any regular might acknowledge, when the weight of being alone with your thoughts and the inexhaustible quiet gets too much, even a long weekend can make you feel like "alcoholism or insanity are your only options," as one of the actors in the play darkly points out. Parker and Amy told me they were exhausted after inhabiting the lives of these insular and drama-addicted people, as I was exhausted by watching them. They both used words like "brutal," "all-consuming," and "draining" to describe the experience. ("But FUN yes!" added Parker.) I only thought, imagine growing up here.



