STUPID FUCKING BIRD

by Aaron Posner

World Premiere at
Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company
Washington, DC
The rude, childish title of “Stupid F---ing Bird” turns out to be smack on the money for Aaron Posner’s savvy, petulant blitz through Anton Chekhov’s “The Seagull.” Posner’s new play is less an adaptation of Chekhov’s landmark drama than a funny, moving slugfest, a ripe mashup of mock and awe.

That blend hits a sweet spot with the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, where a half dozen images of Chekhov’s face loom on the back wall of Misha Kachman’s set. “Life sucks,” Chekhov said, only not in so many words. In Posner’s update, those are the exact words, repeatedly.

And as “The Seagull” brazenly challenged the theatrical forms of its day — plot-fueled melodramas that Chekhov resisted with his subtle chronicles of ever-baffling human behavior — so too does Posner unzip dramatic style. Let us count the ways:

All of this is more restless than new, yet director Howard Shalwitz’s shrewdly governed, zestfully acted show keeps bursting with both heat and light. Posner roughly keeps to Chekhov’s plot and faithfully sticks to “The Seagull’s” themes as an anguished young man named Treplev — here renamed Con — puts on a radical but poetically dense new show in front of his spotlight-hogging mother, an established stage star.

“It’s a site-specific performance event,” a character helpfully explains of the performance Con cooks up. “It’s kind of like a play, but not so stupid.”

As Con, Brad Koed rants about the idiocies of the world and of theater — the play is loaded with insider barbs about the stage — with the archetypal fury of an angry young man, half bent over and jabbing his finger at his targets, including himself. But per Chekhov, his frustrations are only partly creative. Heartbreak threatens to crush nearly everyone.

Con loves the desirable young actress Nina, but so does the famous writer Doyle. Doyle is currently attached to Emma, Con’s mom. That means double devastation when Katie deBuys’s nervous yet aggressive Nina sidles toward Cody Nickell’s cool yet stammering Doyle in the cozy kitchen late at night.

More from the lovelorn: Mash wants Con. Dev (Darius Pierce) wants Mash. No wonder Mash sings delicate songs, Dev masters the dry quip and Con writes art that aims to tear everything down.
“So much feeling,” murmurs Emma’s older brother, Sorn, and from the delicate opening
dialogue between Gilbert’s tormented Mash and Pierce’s witty but morose Dev, it’s true. Pierce
shows remarkable timing, pausing perfectly before twisting a line toward laughter or
disappointment. The entire ensemble is exacting as Posner switches his terms of engagement
with Chekhov so savagely that he sometimes threatens to strip the gears.

Do the characters say something “sucks” too much? Possibly. Is it too on-the-nose
to have the actors sit in a line
and articulate exactly what
their characters want? You
fear it is, yet the sequence is
deft and hilarious.

The pinpoint cast, which
includes Kate Eastwood Norris as the glamorous and
formidable Emma and Rick Foucheux as the amusing and
tragic Sorn, is superbly balanced. The design plays with Chekhovian imagery — you know what
realm you’re in as soon as you see a large tree branch hovering over a dining table with a
samovar — and straddles period so easily that the bearded Nickell, silhouetted in the wee hours
and offering a monologue about writing, briefly evokes the ghost of Chekhov himself.

The show cagily pulls the pins on the grenades that characterize Posner’s play; sometimes it
blows Chekhov up, and sometimes the play explodes with a genuinely Chekhovian release of
emotion. The show is smart enough to have it both ways: It mines “The Seagull” for
classical heft even while giving it the bird.

STUPID FUCKING BIRD
Reviewed by Tim Treanor
June 4, 2013

One hundred and fifteen years ago, the Moscow Art Theatre produced a play by an obscure
playwright – really, a physician who wrote plays – which changed the history of theater. The
play was called The Seagull, the playwright was Anton Chekhov, and the Constantin
Stanislavski-directed production successfully challenged virtually every convention in the
contemporary theater. In *The Seagull*, characters spoke elliptically, rather than directly; most dramatic events occurred offstage; and the setting, instead of being a few suggestive gestures on a bare stage, was so detailed and realistic that one critic reported that he could smell the lake in the background.

*The Seagull*, thus, talked the talk, in the character of the young playwright Constantine Treplieff, who skewered contemporary theater, and walked the walk, in the person of Chekhov, who showed an alternative.

On Sunday night, Woolly Mammoth Theatre produced a play written by Aaron Posner, a man better known as a director. *Stupid Fucking Bird* won’t change the history of theater – it’s too honest to do that – **but in scope of ambition, wit, insight, power of observation, beauty of language and quality of execution, is as good as anything you’ve seen in Washington this season ….**

…..if you love theater.

I add this caveat because the value of *Stupid Fucking Bird*, like that of the story upon which it is based, is primarily in its critique of the form. Aside from that, both plays are essentially melodramas, in which A loves B, who loves C, who loves D, and so on through the rest of the alphabet.

In this instance, A is Dev (Darius Pierce, bearing a remarkable resemblance to a young Wallace Shawn), a self-admittedly “chubby, bald” and compulsively likeable young man hopelessly in love with the poetically disagreeable Mash (Kimberly Gilbert, hitting the sweet spot with this performance), who loves the splenetic young playwright Con (Brendan Koed), who is consumed with desire for the beautiful wannabe actor Nina (Katie duBuys), who worships the preening literary novelist Doyle (Cody Nickell), who is sleeping with the fading actress Emma (Kate Eastwood Norris), who is in love with herself.

It is a potent stew, and Posner, like Chekhov before him, salts it with enough subterranean danger to fill one of Dr. Freud’s casebooks. Emma is actually Con’s mother, and she represents precisely the sort of theater he intends to overthrow. Doyle is not only the lover of Con’s mother, but a man who holds the position to which Con aspires – a literary king, popular, financially successful, and well-regarded. If you see overtones of *Hamlet* here you wouldn’t be the first – the same observation is frequently made about *The Seagull* – but this is a little like *Hamlet* on steroids. Imagine how melancholy the Dane would have been if Ophelia fell for Claudius just as Hamlet was telling her to get to a nunnery.
But let’s get to the heart of the matter: *Stupid Fucking Bird*, like *The Seagull* before it, demands a realer theater. “Good Christ, we need new forms, new passions, new work, new ideas,” Con rants to kindly old

Sorn (Rick Foucheaux; the character is a mashup of *The Seagull’s* elderly landlord Soren and the wise Doctor Dorn). “New forms of theater that can actually make you feel like living better or fuller or…more!” Sorn tentatively praises the work of Cirque Du Soleil, which Con immediately scorns: “Nothing changed” after a performance, he growls. “Nothing in me, nothing in the world…Nothing real.”

So what is the falsest thing about the theater? That it refuses to recognize that it is theater, and pretends to be real life. Con is having none of that: when he comes on stage at the outset, he announces “the play will begin when someone says, ‘start the fucking play’” and the stage is thereafter silent and motionless until someone in the audience realizes *hey, that’s my cue* and says the magic words.

What follows is a symphony of self-consciousness, and I mean that in the best way possible. Chekhov’s famous maxim is that you can’t show a gun on the wall in the first Act without firing it in the third. Here the great set designer Misha Kachman festoons the back wall of the stage with seven stencils of Chekhov’s face, and thereafter the play fires Chekhov at us for two and a half hours.

Later, Con rails against “tiny, tepid, clever-y clever-y clever-y little plays that are being produced by terrified theatres just trying to keep ancient Jews and gay men and retired academics and a few random others who did plays in high school trickling in their doors.” Suddenly he turns on the audience. “Do you know that six people is now a big play? Seven or eight, like this one….yes, I know I’m in a play. I’m right here and you’re right there, and since you can see and hear me let’s just assume I can see and hear you…..”

Later still, and more disastrously, Con turns to the audience for advice on how to win Nina’s love. “Follow her around,” shouts one audience member who is obviously unfamiliar with the concept of the restraining order. “Date other people,” offers another, forgetting perhaps that in the world of this play Con’s options are Mash and his mother.

One of playwriting’s prime directives is never to break the fictive dream, lest audience members switch their attention from your story to where they will go for drinks after. *Stupid Fucking Bird* bitch-slaps the audience awake on a regular basis, and yet the audience keeps dreaming still, so beautifully written and delivered is the story.
And let’s talk about that delivery, shall we? Posner is bold enough to invite comparisons with Chekhov, but this cast also permits itself to be compared to the great Moscow Arts cast of 1898, which featured Stanislavski as the director and also as a performer; as well as Vsevolod Meyerhold (who Stanislavski called “my sole heir”) and Olga Knipper, who later married Chekhov. I missed the Moscow Arts production, but it is hard to imagine that it was much better than this one. Stanislavski noted that actors should “wipe away dribble, blow their noses, smack their lips, wipe their sweat” and director Howard Shalwitz honors those observations: without being conspicuous, the characters are busy being human throughout the production. deBuys’ Nina, the epitome of pristine beauty, is particularly good at this.

A great play – and this is one – is made up of a mosaic of brilliant small moments, and I list some of them here. Gilbert, an actor of great range and scope, is particularly good playing supernally angry young women; here, she sings her melancholy, self-pitying, slightly ridiculous songs (“You’re born and then you live and then you die/You never get to know the reason why/You breathe and then you don’t, you’ve just begun/You’re hot you rot, and then you’re done…”) with such a righteous conviction that she, almost against her will, becomes sympathetic. Though her passion for Con is insane and her hostility is grating, Gilbert gets enough of Mash’s vulnerability through to marshal us behind her.

Pierce’s Dev is a closet intellectual with a sense of bewildered decency – an unruly array of characteristics which Pierce somehow manages to meld into a coherent character. Eastwood Norris has for many years been the most accomplished comic actor in Washington but Emma is not a comic character. She is instead a desperate woman, hanging on to her lover and her career with all the strength she can muster. She inverts the traditional mother’s role, in that she claws at her son to protect herself, and she hates herself for it, and she does it again. It is an immensely complicated role, and demands a bravura performance. Eastwood Norris gives it.

Doyle is not the complicated role that its Seagull counterpart, Boris Trigorin, is, but it has plenty of mustard to it. Nickell’s Doyle is brilliant, arrogant, shallow, opportunistic, and capable of stunning indifference, as many great writers are. Nickell has frequently acted with Eastwood Norris before (she is his real-life wife) and his scenes with her have the grace of familiarity and the resonance of deep feeling: when Doyle pleads with Emma to “let me go” he sounds less like a man who wants to dump his lover for a younger woman than a doomed soul trying to get out of hell.

Nina is a classic virgin seductress; translated into the twenty-first century, she is a young woman of good intention with normal sexual urges and a tendency to romantic fantasy. deBuys, who showed her mastery of below-the-surface sexuality nearly three years ago in Sarah Ruhl’s In the Next Room at Woolly, gets all of it here, too.

Foucheux’s Sorn melds two of Chekhov’s characters – one wise, and the other ill – and gives us a man who is weighted down with wisdom. He is a witty man, whose remarks are shadowed with sorrow, and Foucheux gives us him with great economy of gesture. He is without self-pity, but not without regret. When he asks his assembled guests whether they have lived their lives authentically, or only acted a part they assigned themselves (a question also being asked in Studio’s The Real Thing) the chilled silence spreads out from the stage and into the audience. And when he says “I want to be twenty-seven again. I think I’m ready to do my late twenties
really well now” the chill, and the shock of recognition, spreads from the audience out into the heart of our self-absorbed city.

Koed plays Con with an unvarying thermonuclear intensity – the Chernobyl of characters – which must be a director’s, and probably a playwright’s, choice. I get the same sensation from watching him that I do from seeing some Hamlets: I’m uncomfortable, and I’m supposed to be. Con is rageful, self-aware, and self-pitying; his self-awareness makes him rage at his self-pity, which therefore increases it. Con’s flaws are not mere character flaws, which he can overcome or we can forgive, but something fatally deeper: flaws in the argument, which Posner, to his eternal credit, recognizes and forthrightly states.

Consider: at the outset of The Seagull, Treplieff presents a play which – though abstract and unconventional – showed integrity of concept, beauty of form, and technical proficiency. Con’s play at the beginning of Stupid Fucking Bird – the play with which he intended to launch his assault on conventional theatrical form – is simply ridiculous, featuring Nina repeating “Here we are” over and over again, and following it with lines that sound dangerously like commercial jingles. Con’s mother, like Treplieff’s, loudly scoffs during the show, but here we are secretly with her.

Or this: Boris Trigorin, the novelist Treplieff seeks to overthrow, is nothing more than a popular middlebrow – a Muscovite Dan Brown. “[I]f you have read Tolstoi or Zola you somehow don’t enjoy Trigorin,” Treplieff sniffs at one point. But Doyle, for all his insufferable smugness, is really a great artist, and Con comes to admit it. Doyle’s “stories are sharp. Clean. Smart. Efficient…So good. So simple. He just says things. Just says them, you know? I have to shock and astound…”

Or this: in a parody of the American musical’s “I want” song, in which characters let the audience know what their objectives will be, Posner gathers his characters together for a festival of self-pity. “I just want to shine!” Nina cries. “I want to ignite the world for one, hot, shining moment…” “I’d really just rather not be hated anymore,” Emma rejoins, and Doyle moons, “I want sweet first kisses. Inconceivable softness.” “I want a bottomless bowl of ice cream,” Dev states, getting to the bottom of our childish, selfish dreams. “A bowl the size of a bushel basket.”

Or, finally, this: Con’s realization that we need not new forms but new dedication. “I mean, new forms. Why? Why? Why new forms? How about this for an idea: just make the old forms better!”
Oh, my – what’s this: someone who, instead of blaming form or convention or tradition or history blames the artists who use them for failing to use them as well as they can? Someone who says that the fault is not in our stars but in ourselves? It is an act of historical importance to tear theater down in order to have it start anew. But it is an act of grace to challenge theater to become greater without tearing it down.

So for this act of grace, Mr. Posner, you and your collaborators at Woolly Mammoth have presented the best play I have seen this year.

‘STUPID FUCKING BIRD’ AT WOOLLY MAMMOTH THEATRE COMPANY
Reviewed by Amanda Gunther
June 3, 2013

★★★★★

Life is what you make of it; happy or miserable, good or bad, it doesn’t matter because life just goes on and on and on. Human beings are flawed. They have needs. They want more. It’s true of all of us as we blunder along down the road of life, ever searching for the ultimate answer to the great question: Why? And we may never find it, but it’s that question that we often find propelling us forward through our daily grind, and such a question finds a poignant exploration in the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company’s world premiere of Aaron Posner’s Stupid Fucking Bird.

Directed by Howard Shalwitz, this play is loosely adapted from Anton Chekhov’s The Seagull. With eerie haunting echoes of the original work in a much faster and more modern approach to the age old question – this play pushes the boundaries of what makes an audience comfortable, what makes an audience think, what makes human beings be, and act and do. A stunning and provocative new piece of theatre well worth seeing.

The brilliantly inspired atmosphere is enhanced tenfold with Set Designer Misha Kachman’s ideas in play. An enormous ink printing of Chekhov against the back wall with smaller ink printing in varying shades flanking either side gives the audience the ever present notion of the
father of this work watching over it. The constant watching eyes of Chekhov’s likeness is an intimidating factor that plays well into the theme of the performance as young Con feels his work is always being judged, and since his work in fact is this work that is based on Chekhov’s work it seems only fitting that the eyes of the master look down to make that call. Kachman does an impressive job cultivating a modern feel for the tightly enclosed interior space of the kitchen in act II, her clever nod to the reality of the play popping up in the alphabet magnets on the fridge that spell out the word ‘actually.’

Playwright Aaron Posner creates an enigmatic, esoteric work that delves deep into the existential pool of the human existence, mirroring formats, character constructs and themes from Chekhov’s original work in this highly engaging and confrontational new concept. Posner doesn’t only focus on the concept of life and its purpose but also seamlessly entwining the jumble of love or what passes as love to some people into the mix of comic and dramatic events of this production. What really makes this show stand out is the complete dissolve of the fourth wall throughout the performance. That extra edge of having the characters interacting with the audience, despite knowing and announcing that they are fictional, really brings the subject matter fully into your face making you confront the conflicts that these characters are struggling through with a brazen raw realness.

Posner has a knack for crafting natural comedy into the dramatic moments of the production as well as stabbing serious plot altering moments into the more lighthearted scenes. The emotions of the production are constantly rolling about, like stones in a rock tumbler, never quite settling into total comedy or drama, happiness or misery; an unsettling notion of continual emotional existence that doesn’t make you uncomfortable but keeps you from ever actually getting comfortable. The work overall provides a perpetual state of sub-existence, characters that in actuality are human beings just like everyone of us, trying to eke out their purpose, find happiness and simply be. Posner’s characters are deeply complex but highly relatable to the everyman as there is something rewardingly identifiable in each of them; be it wanting fame, wanting to be loved, wanting to love, or simply wanting to feel.
Director Howard Shalwitz centers the focal energy of the production into the ensemble in true Chekov style. These seven performers come together as one pulsing ensemble that drives the momentum of the production. Not a moment feels ill-placed or out of synch with the movement of the performance. Each of the performers takes a turn falling into the focal spotlight of the production, blazing a leading moment of emotional upheaval before plunging themselves back into the collective. Shalwitz frames relationships within the production through tight blocking and subtle physical intimacies, adding another complex layer to this richly rewarding production.

The play is populated with intense moments of conflict and unique staging techniques utilized to deliver acute moments of important subtext. Act II involves a scenic set up in the upper and lower balconies of the house with tight focal spotlights on the performers as they speak in unison as men and women to express their feelings of need, want, and desperation; a truly stunning visual and aural experience. Music also becomes a vessel of emotive expressions, particularly for Mash (Kimberly Gilbert). Lyrically dissonant at times, her musical interludes, accompanied by her skillful strumming of a ukulele type instrument, speak volumes to her progression of thought in regards to her meaning and place in life.

Gilbert has a raw voice for singing, giving her songs an earthy and soulful feel to them, a fusion of acoustic bluegrass and blues all focused around her melancholic and depressive mood. Gilbert’s character shows the most progressive growth, eventually shedding her disturbed demeanor in favor for a more positive outlook. It’s Gilbert’s grounded approach that hones in on the concept of loving the one you’re with if you can’t be with the one you love.

Dev (Darius Pierce) is a rather shy and awkward character, creating a silent tension that mounts significantly between him and Mash. With well placed words of wisdom Pierce acts as a voice of reasoning when Con starts to lose his mind. His awkward moments allow for hearty laughs and deep chuckles, particularly when there are pauses as he allows what he’s said to resonate with the audience.

Balancing with ease comic and darkly emotional disturbances is the good doctor Sorn (Rick Foucheux). A seemingly ineffectual character at first, Foucheux provides innocent comic relief until he becomes the unknowing old man of which he speaks early on. With a keen sense of comic timing and a rich understanding of how to let subtext breathe in his dialogue, Foucheux plays the well-rounded character with simplicity that makes him that much more of an important cog in this big working machine.

A ripe hoot of a character comes from Emma (Kate Eastwood Norris). The ageless mother, wildly successful in her acting career, confronted by her own mortality in the face of her grown-aged son, Norris showcases a versatility of moods and uses her voice as much as her body to express herself. Shifting from the cynical and witty sarcasms in the opening act to the wounded but compassionate mother figure in Act II, Norris delivers a compelling performance that every woman with dreams and children will find relatable. Her relationship with Doyle leads to a furious eruptive argument in Act II where she delivers a breathtaking blow of reality in a raw and passionate well ranted monologue.
Doyle (Cody Nickell) is a swarthy smarmy charming man just floating in a phantom cloud of fame. His existence is categorized by his interactions with others. Nickell’s personality is a floating medium between creative genius and savvy romancer. Bereft of passion he is not, be it with Emma or highly intense moments with Nina. Nickell dives headfirst into heated moments with a youthful exuberance belonging to a younger character, convincing the audience of his wayward passions.

The young aspiring actress Nina (Katie deBuys) is swept along in the current of Doyle’s fame. Burning from the inside out in awestruck adoration for his work and his success, deBuys grounds her reality in starry-eyed hopes and dreams, trading love like baseball cards for the shiny new foil as it becomes available. From dreamy to dreary her personality flips like a light bulb blown out by the end of the production; a thrilling transformation, however dark, that makes her existence worthwhile.

While there is no particular leader of the ensemble, Con (Brad Koed) often becomes the front runner; his narrations being those most frequently addressed directly to the audience. Koed has a tight handle on audience interaction and a good sense of improvisation when it comes to interacting beyond the barriers of the fourth wall. Koed’s emotional range is vast and his presence has a frenetic quality about it, much like the play itself, in constant motion, forever evolving and changing. His blustering diatribe about change and wanting new art is one of the most intense and fiercely captivating moments of the production. Koed’s character is both loveable and hateable, you empathize with him and are disgusted by him often at the same time, making him the most intriguing character of the bunch; a performance well executed and extremely focused on its intensity of simply existing.

_Stupid Fucking Bird_ begins when someone yells, ‘Start the fucking play!’ Make sure that person is you by getting your tickets early.

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**BWW Reviews: Woolly Mammoth Premieres Posner's STUPID F##KING BIRD**  
Reviewed by Jennifer Perry  
June 3, 2013

Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, led by the fearless Howard Shalwitz, has never been one to shy away from pushing the limits of theatre. Its premiere of Aaron Posner's 'sort-of' adaptation of Anton Chekhov's _The Seagull_, is certainly no exception. The title alone, _Stupid F##king Bird_, is likely to turn some heads, as one character in the play opines. Like the play that inspired it, this adaptation offers a unique glimpse at the state of the theatrical art form and more broadly, the
difficult pursuit of art and creativity. **Angsty, raw, and real, this play does not shy away from the hard, but well-discussed philosophical questions about art, reality, love and life and what it all means. Yet, it does so in a way that's likely to engage contemporary theatrically savvy audiences** like those generally found at Woolly.

Our protagonist, tortured director/artist Con (an appropriately intense Brad Koed) is seeking a new art form that's largely based in reality rather than fantasy. Using a mediocre and vapid but very pretty actress, Nina (Katie deBuys) to test out his work, he exposes his friends and family to his creation; it doesn't go quite as planned - like most things in his life.

In those few moments, we're introduced to an array of eclectic characters that inhabit Con's world and shape him in various ways - the successful (his self-absorbed actress mother Emma, played to perfection by Kate Eastwood Norris, and successful author Doyle played by Cody Nickell), the misfits (the initially gloomy Masha, charmingly played by Kimberly Gilbert, and the awkward Dev, played by Darius Pierce), and the wise one (Sorn, played by Rick Foucheux). In a series of fourth wall-breaking scenes, Con's complex world is revealed both in the play we're seeing and the one he is presenting (the two often bleed together). Suicide attempts, love triangles, unlikely relationships, successes and failures, and familial and romantic drama - there's pretty much every 'issue' but the kitchen sink.

Yet, somehow it all works (the details of which will not be spoiled here, because they need to be experienced). It's Chekhov, but not. **Posner's 'here and now' language and tongue-in-cheek approach to the material suit the story quite well.** Any attempt to be too 'cutesy' is thankfully, for the most part, avoided even as the fourth wall is broken down with a sledge hammer. Under Shalwitz's keen director eye, all actors excel in their roles and engage with one another in a natural and believable way - something of paramount importance for this kind of play to work. I'd even go as far to say that, collectively, they deliver one of the best ensemble performances I've seen this season.

The real and fabricated worlds of the play are 'built up' with the assistance of some well-designed sets (Misha Kachman), costumes (Laree Lentz), sound (James Sugg) and lights (Colin K. Bills). The sets, in particular, play homage to Chekhov's 19th century Russian world and highlight the highly theatrical nature of Con's world in a unique and innovative way.

This review seems pretty vague, right? All the more reason to **check this one out...**
STUPID FUCKING BIRD
Reviewed by Chris Klimek
June 7, 2013

At Woolly, a Chekhov adaptation flips the bird.

Christopher Durang’s *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* is up for a half-dozen Tony Awards this Sunday. It’s already won a raft of other honors and fancy notices for pulping the venerable canon of Anton Chekhov into an impudent paste. Woolly Mammoth’s world-premiere production of Aaron Posner’s *Stupid Fucking Bird* does Durang one better, or maybe three or four worse: Posner’s confident Twitter-age remix is “sort of adapted” from just one Chekhov play. It’s...fuck. The one with, you know, the bird. *The Seagull*. That’s it.

Even if you have only a casual, Wiki-deep familiarity with Chekhov, the sparkling company of top-tier actors director Howard Shalwitz has assembled makes this an accessible and unfailingly delightful jaunt into misery (or maybe we should say compromised happiness). *Stupid Fucking Bird* has enjoyed an unusually long development process, the better to let it pulse and flicker with the illusion of spontaneity. It’s absorbing in its every glance and revealing in its every sigh.

You’ve got real-life spouses Kate Eastwood-Norris and Cody Nickell (the Kate and Petruchio from Posner’s straight-shooting *Taming of the Shrew* at the Folger last year) playing a volatile couple again: the famous, ungracefully aging actress Emma and the successful author Doyle. You’ve got Rick Foucheux as the country doctor who stays up drinking gin after everyone else has gone to bed. You’ve got Kimberly Gilbert as Mash, plucking out pathetic hymns of heartbreak on her ukulele—lyrics by Posner, music by James Sugg, and yes, sure you’ve had it with beautiful, hilarious women playing ukuleles already, but it turns out Gilbert has been sitting on a lovely, haunted singing voice all these years. Shame!

What does it take to get you to go see a play, anyhow? Some top-drawer talent not-from-around-here? Brad Koed, the New York-based actor who anchors this thing as the dyspeptic young playwright Con (Konstantin in the Chekhov tale), is an effortlessly captivating young face with an old soul. He’s simply too lonely/angry to be a respecter of fourth walls. When he solicits the audience for advice on how to woo the indifferent Nina, who only has eyes for Doyle, it should feel gimmicky, but it doesn’t.

Con is obsessed with inventing a new theatrical form, so Misha Kachman’s set and Laree Lentz’s sharp costumes (Nickell, especially, sports some very smart suits) bespeak a new paradigm each time the action leaps ahead. (As in the original, all the seismic changes happen between acts.) Act 1 takes place beneath the gaze of a half-dozen serial prints of Chekhov’s face. Act 2 unfolds
in a nicely appointed set of a kitchen—you know, where the sink is. Act 3, set at Sorn’s 60th birthday party some years later, looks like a high school gym after the kids have left the dance.

In his more familiar identity as a director, Posner is the most reliable theatermaker in town. He’s less well-known as a playwright, but *Stupid Fucking Bird* might flip that ratio. In its fidelity and its **fearlessness**, it recalls *Gnit*, Will Eno’s flippant update of *Peer Gynt*, which debuted at the Humana Festival of New America Plays this spring (and also, coincidentally, starred Eastwood-Norris). They’re both clear-eyed reconsiderations of towering 19th century works that glower down through the decades predigested—too irreproachable, we thought, to inspire any memorable acts of vandalism.

Well. Posner has compressed the number of acts and characters. His Nina (an astute Katie deBuys) is more aggressive than her 1895 counterpart, and everyone is more forthcoming, going so far as to sit in a row of folding chairs and tell us their desires instead of giving them away through subtext. That’s actually the most heretical thing Posner does. Sometimes rejection in the sincerest form of flattery.