

THE NINA VARIATIONS

by Steven Dietz

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1. About the play

In Steven Dietz's clever, fierce and heartbreaking tribute to *The Seagull*, Chekhov's star-crossed lovers meet over and over again. In forty-three variations on their famous final scene, the young actress Nina and the young writer Treplev pit their vibrant wit and uprising passions against one another in a fast-paced tour de force of romantic entanglement. In scene after scene, they try to say all the things that were never said, but may have been thought, in Chekhov's original. And by finally speaking their minds, they allow for the possibility that they might find to each other in the end.

2. About the author

Since 1981, Steven Dietz's twenty-plus plays and adaptations have been widely produced at regional theatres across the United States, as well as Off-Broadway, and have won him several prizes all over the world. International productions of his work have been seen on all continents. His recent work includes *Fiction*, *Over the Moon*, and *The Last of the Boys*. He lives in Seattle and works as a playwright and director.

When Dietz was approached to write a new adaptation of Chekhov's *The Seagull*, he was mesmerised by the final scene between Nina and Treplev. His passion for this scene and these two characters grew so strong that he finally granted them a second chance – or to be more precise, forty-three chances – to change the plot. Hence, *The Nina Variations* was born.

3. Characters

Nina

Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya is a young actress who fell in love with the womaniser Trigorin and gave birth to his child out of wedlock. She is torn between her love to Trigorin and her feelings for Treplev, who in contrast to Trigorin would welcome her love. Sometimes she requites the feelings of the latter and shows traces of jealousy, at other times, however, she pushes him away. Even though she might appear arrogant, she is a vulnerable artist who needs constant confirmation. Being both a passionate actress as well as a passionate human being, Nina is entangled in a complex system in which reality and romantic passion, every-day life and the stage, and reason and art become more and more interwoven.

Treplev

Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplev is a young writer deeply in love with Nina, who does not completely requite his feelings. Throughout *The Nina Variations* he keeps trying to write a new play featuring Nina as the main protagonist. He becomes more and more convinced that form and structure as such do not pose the essentials of good art. Consequently, he also seems to abandon his wish to find some form regarding his relationship to Nina, but he repeatedly emphasises how important words, their meanings and the free flow of the same are. Treplev is the typical writer, thoughtful, contemplative, emotional and melancholy. It seems that his melancholy and despair could be healed by Nina only; his happiness and ultimately also his life depend on her. In *The Nina Variations* Treplev is stronger than we expect him to be if we have already met him in *The Seagull*.

4. Chekhov's original play *The Seagull*

For a better understanding of *The Nina Variations*, it is essential to be familiar with Chekhov's original play, *The Seagull*. The following abstract should give a brief outline of the play's plot and characters.

Central symbol of the play is a seagull, a bird that is shot out of boredom and for amusement. Similarly, Nina and ultimately also Treplev are sacrificed as part of Trigorin's leisure activities.

Plot: The famous actress Irena Treplev spends her holidays together with her son Konstantin Treplev (an author) and her lover Trigorin (a famous playwright) on her brother's country estate near a lake. Konstantin falls in love with Nina, who, however, loves Trigorin. Konstantin shoots a seagull and, regarding his life as a complete failure, he tells Nina that he would shoot himself just like that bird, for she cannot requite his love.

Irena, Trigorin and Nina go to Moscow, where Nina becomes Trigorin's lover. Soon later she gives birth to Trigorin's child out of wedlock. Trigorin, however, stays with Irene and abandons the mother of his child. Nina works as an insignificant actress.

Two years later all meet again on the country estate. Meanwhile, Konstantin has been able to claim some success as a writer and hopes that Nina will now be more open to his amorous advances. Despite Trigorin's inconsiderate behaviour, Nina wants to stay with him. This time Treplev puts his threat into practice and shoots himself.

The final scene, in which Treplev and Nina discuss their feelings, determines the outcome of the play, i.e. Treplev's suicide and ultimately Nina's life as an insignificant actress who has lost both Treplev and Trigorin.

In his inter-textual play *The Nina Variations*, Steven Dietz poses the question what might have happened if Nina and Treplev's conversation in the final scene had taken a different turn (or else, forty-three different turns). The play does not necessarily give conclusive answers, but opens up a series of questions about the decisions we make in our lives and how they affect the turn of events.

5. The original final encounter between Nina and Treplev

Situation: Act IV, near the end of the play. Treplev is alone on stage, preparing to write, reading through what he has already written, dismissing it. A pause.

TREPLEV Yes, I'm becoming more and more convinced that it isn't a matter of old or new forms – one must write without thinking about forms, and just because it pours freely from one's soul.
[There is a tap on the window nearest to his desk.]
 What's that? *[Looks through the window.]* I can't see anything. ... *[Opens the French window and looks out into the garden.]* Someone ran down the steps. *[Calls.]* Who's there? *[Goes out and is heard walking rapidly along the terrace, then returns half a minute later with NINA.]* Nina! Nina!
[Nina leans her head against his breast and sobs quietly.]

TREPLEV *[deeply moved]* Nina! Nina! It's you ... you. ... I seem to have had a presentiment, my heart's been aching terribly all day. ... *[Takes off her cape and hat.]* Oh, my sweet, my precious girl, she's come at last! Don't let us cry, don't!

NINA There's someone here.

TREPLEV There isn't anyone.

NINA Please lock the doors, or someone will come in.

TREPLEV No one will come in.

NINA I know Irena Nikolayevna is here. Lock the doors.

TREPLEV *[locks the door on right, then crosses to the left.]* There's no lock on this one. I'll put a chair against it. *[Puts an armchair against the door.]* Don't be afraid, no one will come in.

NINA *[looks intently at his face]* Let me look at you for a little while. *[Looking round.]* How warm, how nice it is here! ... This used to be a drawing-room. Have I changed a lot?

TREPLEV Yes. ... You are thinner and your eyes have grown bigger. Nina, it's so strange to be seeing you! Why wouldn't you let me see you? Why haven't you come here before now? I know you've been in the town almost a week. ... I've been to your place everyday, several times a day: I stood under your window like a beggar.

NINA I was afraid that you might hate me. Every night I dream that you look at me and don't recognize me. If only you knew! Ever since I came I've been walking round here ... beside the lake. I've been near this house many times, but I dared not come in. Let us sit down. *[They sit down.]* Let us sit and talk, talk. ... It's nice here, warm and comfortable. ... Do you hear the wind? There's a passage in Turgenev: 'Fortunate is he who on such a night has a roof over him, who has a warm corner of his own.' I am a seagull. ... No, that's not it. *[Rubs her forehead.]* What was I saying? Yes. ... Turgenev. ... 'And Heaven help the homeless wayfarers' ... Never mind. ... *[Sobs.]*

TREPLEV Nina, you're crying again! ... Nina!

NINA Never mind, it does me good. ... I haven't cried for two years. Yesterday, late in the evening I came into the garden to see whether our stage was still

there. And it is still standing! I began to cry for the first time in two years, and it lifted the weight from my heart, and I felt more at ease. You see, I'm not crying now. [*Takes his hand.*] And so you've become a writer. ... You are a writer and I'm an actress. We've been drawn into the whirlpool, too. I used to live here joyously, like a child – I used to wake up in the morning and burst into song. I loved you and dreamed of fame. ... And now? Tomorrow morning early I have to go to Yelietz in a third-class carriage ... with the peasants; and at Yelietz, upstart business men will pester me with their attentions. Life is coarse!

TREPLEV Why do you have to go to Yelietz?

NINA I've accepted an engagement for the whole winter. It's time to go.

TREPLEV Nina, I used to curse you: I hated you, I tore up your letters and photographs, but all the time I knew that I was bound to you heart and soul, and for ever! It's not in my power to stop loving you, Nina. Ever since I lost you, ever since I began to get my work published, my life's been intolerable. I'm wretched. ... I feel as if my youth has been suddenly torn away from me, as if I've been inhabiting this world for ninety years. I call out your name, I kiss the ground where you've walked; wherever I look I seem to see your face, that sweet smile that used to shine on me in the best years of my life. ...

NINA [*bewildered*] Why does he talk like this, why does he talk like this?

TREPLEV I am lonely. I've no-one's love to warm me, I feel as cold as if I were in a cellar – and everything I write turns out lifeless and bitter and bloomy. Stay here, Nina, I entreat you, or let me come with you!
[*NINA quickly puts on her hat and cape.*]

TREPLEV Nina, why – for Heaven's sake, Nina. ... [*Looks at her as she puts on her clothes.*]

[*A pause.*]

NINA The horses are waiting for me at the gate. Don't see me off, I'll go by myself. ... [*Tearfully.*] Give me some water.

TREPLEV [*gives her water*] Where are you going now?

NINA To the town. [*A pause.*] Irena Nikolayevna's here, isn't she?

TREPLEV Yes. ... My uncle had an attack on Thursday, so we telegraphed for her.

NINA Why did you say you kissed the ground where I walked? Someone ought to kill me. [*Droops over the table.*] I am so tired. Oh, I wish I could rest ... just rest! [*Raising her head.*] I'm a seagull. ... No, that's not it. I'm an actress. Oh, well! [*She hears ARKADINA and TRIGORIN laughing off-stage, listens, then runs to the door at left and looks through the keyhole.*] So he is here, too! ... [*Returning to TREPLEV.*] Oh, well! ... Never mind. ... Yes. ... He didn't believe in the theatre, he was always laughing at my dreams, and so gradually I ceased to believe, too, and lost heart. ... And then I was so preoccupied with love and jealousy, and a constant fear for my baby. ... I became petty and common, when I acted I did it stupidly. ... I didn't know what to do with my hands or how to stand on the stage, I couldn't control my voice. ... But you can't imagine what I feels like – when you know that you are acting

abominably. I'm a seagull. No, that not it again. ... Do you remember you shot a seagull? A man came along by chance, saw it and destroyed it, just to pass the time. ... A subject for a short story. ... That's not it. [*Rubs her forehead.*] What was I talking about? ... Yes, about the stage. I'm not like that now. ... Now I am a real actress, I act with intense enjoyment, with enthusiasm; on the stage I am intoxicated and I feel that I am beautiful. But now, while I'm living here, I go for walks a lot. ... I keep walking and thinking ... thinking and feeling that I am growing stronger in spirit with every day that passes. ... I think I now know, Kostia, that what matters in our work – whether you act on the stage or write stories – what really matters is not fame, or glamour, not the things I used to dream about – but knowing how to endure things. How to bear one's cross and have faith. I have faith now and I'm not suffering quite so much, and when I think of my vocation I'm not afraid of life.

TREPLEV [*sadly*] You have found your right path, you know which way you're going – but I'm still floating about in a chaotic world of dreams and images, without knowing what use it all is. ... I have no faith, and I don't know what my vocation is.

NINA [*listening*] Sh-sh! ... I'm going now. Good-bye. When I become a great actress, come and see me act. Promise? And now. ... [*Presses his hand.*] It's late. I can hardly stand up. ... I'm so tired and hungry. ...

TREPLEV Do stay, I'll give you some supper.

NINA No, no. ... Don't see me off, I'll go by myself. ... My horses are not far off. ... So she brought him with her? Oh, well, it doesn't matter. ... When you see Trigorin don't tell him anything. ... I love him. I love him even more than before. A subject for a short story. ... Yes, I love him, I love him passionately, I love him desperately! How nice it all used to be, Kostia! Do you remember? How tranquil, warm, and joyous, and pure our life was, what feelings we had – like tender, exquisite flowers. ... Do you remember? ... [*Recites.*] 'The men, the lions, the eagles, the partridges, the antlered deer, the geese, the spiders, the silent fishes of the deep, starfishes and creatures unseen to the eye - in short all living things, all living things, all living things, having competed their mournful cycle, have been snuffed out. For thousands of years the earth has borne no living creature, and this poor moon now lights its lamp in vain. The cranes no longer wake up in the meadows with a cry, the May bugs are no longer heard humming in the groves of lime trees.' ... [*Impulsively embraces TREPLEV and runs out through the French window.*]

TREPLEV [*after a pause*] It won't be very nice if someone meets her in the garden and tells Mamma. It might upset Mamma. ... [*He spends the next two minutes silently tearing up all his manuscripts and throwing them under the table, then unlocks the door at right and goes out.*]

Shortly thereafter, Treplev shoots himself.

6. Chekhov and the Russian Theatre

When the movement of Naturalism in the arts swept through Europe, it reached its peak in Russia, influencing artists who would establish traditions that are still strong today. Aleksandr Pushkin may have been the pioneer of modern Russian literature, but it was the playwright Chekhov and theatre director Konstantin Stanislavski who established an influence that has lasted to this day.

After Pushkin had introduced vernacular speech into the mainstream of Russian literature, Chekhov was important in the way he incorporated natural dialogue and everyday life into his dramas and short stories. Chekhov's disdain for Symbolist drama and his poetic realism, together with Pushkin's legacy, strongly influenced Konstantin Stanislavski, the principal director of the Moscow Art Theatre from 1898 onwards. Stanislavski codified not only acting technique, incorporating psychological factors, but also devised a system of stage presentation in which each item had to have a function on the stage – together with Chekhov, he constituted the vanguard of modern drama.

The influence of Chekhov and Stanislavski has been enormous. Stanislavski's "System" approach to acting, though often revised by himself, has heavily informed the Hollywood Method Acting approach, with practitioners ranging from Robert deNiro to Daniel Day Lewis. Chekhov became famous outside of Russia only after his death, but he has been an important influence on such playwrights as Arthur Miller or Tennessee Williams.

7. Possible assignments

Extract 1 (Scene 5)

TREPLEV. You were very good in my play.

NINA. Thank you. That means the world to me – for you to say that.

TREPLEV. I wouldn't say it if it weren't true.

NINA. You wouldn't?

TREPLEV. Certainly not. (*Silence*)

What does this scene tell us about Nina? Does she seem very self-confident as an actress? What does it tell you about the profession of an actor/actress as a whole? Discuss by giving further examples you might know from magazines, TV or *Seitenblicke*.

Extract 2 (Scene 6)

NINA. But, we must have forms. I mean, *mustn't we?* Without them we'd be lost. We'd have no expectations upon which to rely; no inevitability, which – as you know – is the anchor to our days.

Discuss this statement in a descriptive-reflective essay! Do you agree with Nina? Why, why not?

Extract 3 (Scene 9)

TREPLEV. [...] How long did it take me to write the play? The same time it takes to write *every play*: one entire life. That's how long.

What does Treplev mean by this statement? Answer the question while bearing in mind that Treplev is an artist. What does that tell us about the emotions and sensitivity of artists?

Extract 4 (Scene 10)

Nina sits on Treplev's desk. Her eyes are closed. She reaches next to her and grabs a handful of pencils. She opens her eyes. She removes the pencils from her hand and places them beside her ... one at a time ... saying ...

NINA. He loves me. He loves me not. He loves me. He loves me not. (*Treplev enters and watches, unseen to Nina.*) He loves me. He loves me not.

TREPLEV. I love you (*Nina turns to him, says simply...*)

NINA. Yes, I know you do. (*She returns to her pencils.*) He loves me. He loves me not. He loves me ...

How could this scene continue? Write what happens next between Nina and Treplev.

Extract 5 (Scene 12)

Nina, alone.

NINA. My baby is so beautiful. I put my head near her as she sleeps. And I watch her. She is like nothing I've ever seen. Yet, when I first saw Trigorin, he, too, was that beautiful to me. And that beauty – my fascination with that beauty – has turned into loathing. And my baby is part him, part Trigorin – the man who could never find a way to love me completely. And so, as I watch my baby sleep, I wonder: Will she, too, never love me completely? Will I, someday, look at my girl – grown now, vibrant in the world, her father's smile on her lips – and will I begin to loath her, as well?

Why does Nina say all these things? Why is she afraid that she might not love her baby completely? Can you understand her?

Continue Nina's thoughts in an inner monologue.

Extract 6 (Scene 13)

TREPLEV. No. Say nothing. Nothing at all. We must do *no* scene.

NINA. Why? (*He points at the scene number. They both look at it. [...]*)

TREPLEV. We'll wait for the number to change. For this dreaded number to leave us. And when it does ... we'll continue.

Why is Treplev being so careful? Can you understand his behavior? Have you ever come across superstition and superstitious people? Are you superstitious yourself? And do you think superstition is justified? Why, why not? Give examples.

Extract 7 (Scene 17)

TREPLEV. Please forgive me! I seem to have forgotten that the permission to write plays is granted only to a chosen few – and I have encroached upon the monopoly!

Think about Treplev's statement! When you consider the different opinions of society today, does his statement make sense? Why, why not?

What about yourself? Are you a talented artist in some field? Theatre, writing, painting, ...? And are you encouraged to be creative?

Extract 8 (Scene 20)

TREPLEV. We ask: What do you do for a living? When, instead, we might ask: What kind of *living* do you *do*?

What does Treplev mean? And is he justified? Give examples that underline your opinion.

Extract 9 (Scene 22)

TREPLEV. I have decided that critics are our salvation. They are the wisest, kindest, most caring, most committed people in all the world. They are selfless, compassionate individuals who have sacrificed their own *assuredly great careers as artists* – in order to give those of us with lesser talent a fighting chance.

Of course there is some irony here. What does Treplev mean by this statement? And how come that critics often make or break an artist's success. Is that the way it should be? Discuss.

Extract 10 (Scene 37)

Nina, alone.

NINA. You see, I'm not crying anymore. Trigorin walks ahead of me on the street. He turns corners as I rush to keep up with him. He is already seated in a room as I pass through its door. There is a way a man walks when his lover means nothing to him. When she has faded into something as ineffectual as his shadow. I am not introduced. I stand on the edge of crowds, laughing stupidly at the jokes which I can't quite hear. He takes his coat from the hook, leaving mine undisturbed. I lift my

bad and carry it ... his footsteps growing softer ... distant ... ahead of me. The light is off when I reach him. The door is shut. I drape my scarf over a chair. I take the pin from my hat. And, as I hang my coat next to his ... I am close to him for the first time. So, you see, I am not crying anymore.

What does Nina feel? And why does she act the way she does? Can you understand her? Why, why not? Have you ever felt similar rejection, or know somebody who did? Have you ever rejected somebody as Trigorin does?

Imagine you are Nina's friend. Write a letter to her advising her what to do.

General topics

- . Write a dialogue between Treplev and Trigorin in which Treplev finally speaks his mind.
- . Treplev or Nina writes a diary entry about his/her true feelings.
- . Write one more scene for *The Nina Variations*.

8. Vocabulary

fond	hier: kühn, stark
quake	Beben
to trigger	auslösen
seagull	Möwe
worthy	angemessen, würdig
desirable	begehrtestwert
to attain	erzielen, gewinnen
mere	bloß, nur
pedestrian	hier: langweilig, schwunglos
capable	fähig, imstande
to bolt	verriegeln
solitude	Einsamkeit
to screech	kreischen
random	willkürlich
neglect	Vernachlässigung
to vanish	verschwinden
bucket	Kübel hier: eimerweise
spell	Zauber
shallow	oberflächlich, seicht
cunning	durchtrieben, gerissen
out of wedlock	außerehelich
to envy	beneiden, missgönnen
imminent	drohend bevorstehend
elusive	flüchtig, schwer fassbar
gravity	Schwerkraft
sermon	Predigt, Sermon
to spoil	beschädigen
cowardice	Feigheit
to smother	erdrücken, ersticken
encroaching	eingreifend, missbrauchend
needless	überflüssig, unnötig
vocation	Berufung
to worship	anbeten, verehren

dubious	bedenklich, zwielichtig, dubios
epiphany	Erscheinung, Offenbarung
rampant	zügellos, wild
intoxicating	berauschend, mitreißend
fame	Ruhm
contempt	Geringschätzung, Verachtung
to ridicule	lächerlich machen
peasant	Bauer
to annoy	jem. nerven
tawdry	geschmacklos
ripple	Kräuselung, Plätschern
enamored	entzückt, fasziniert
earnest	ernst
committed	engagiert
fortunate	glücklich, günstig
to loathe	hassen
vibrant	lebhaft, pulsierend
to reason	erörtern, begründen
to shatter	zerschlagen
lure	Verlockung
notoriety	Berüchtigtsein, schlechter Ruf
bereft	beraubt
twilight	Zwielicht, Dämmerung
to require	benötigen
to summon	herbeirufen, kommen lassen
empathy	Einfühlungsvermögen
to repent	bereuen, Buße tun
curtain	Vorhang
to encroach upon	eindringen
haste	Eile
elm tree	Ulme
overwhelming	überwältigend
heron	Reiher
hawk	Habicht, Falke

inevitability	Unvermeidlichkeit
habit	Gewohnheit
to accommodate	beherbergen
boredom	Langeweile
salvation	Erlösung
insufficient	mangelhaft, unzureichend
presumption	Vermutung, Annahme
uncluttered	ordentlich
caress	Liebkosung, Zärtlichkeit
unfettered	frei, uneingeschränkt
checkmate	Schachmatt
treat	Leckerei
luminous	glänzend
servile	unterwürfig
thorough	gründlich
premonition	Vorwarnung
dungeon	Kerker, Verließ
to curse	verfluchen
to ensue	folgen, sich ergeben
superstitious	abergläubisch
vile	abschäulich, gemein
failure	Versager
to grace	beehren, schmücken
extraordinary	außergewöhnlich
dagger	Dolch
judicious	vernünftig
spice	Gewürz
garnished	angerichtet, garniert
to devour	auffressen, verschlingen
resolute	bestimmt, energisch
to parade	zur Parade aufziehen
dalliance	Trödelei, Liebesspiele
to evade	vermeiden
capture	Gefangennahme

to disgust	abstoßen, ekeln
conceptual	begrifflich, konzeptionell
sanctity	Heiligkeit
to disown	verleugnen
ill repute	schlechter Ruf
marquee	Markise, Vordach
obedient	folgsam
ability	Fähigkeit
to endure	aushalten, überstehen