

Stage: Small Delights

By HOWARD THOMPSON

See "The Sea Gull" before it closes Sunday afternoon at the Philip Nolan Theater (243-8900), 15 Vandam Street. To witness what the new Ensemble Theater Company has done with the Chekhov classic is a tingling reward. Another, smaller-scale off Off Broadway treat is Carlo Goldoni's "The Mistress of the Inn," performed by the West Side Community Repertory Theater (874-9400 and 666-3521,) at 252 West 81st Street. This one, an amusing vintage lollipop dating back to 1752, also ends its run Sunday.

With a company primarily striving for mood, as though tiptoeing around old Russian eggshells, the Chekhov masterpiece can emerge as a reverential bore. But the tone here is thoughtful and vigorous, under Sheldon Patinkin's direction, with both a good, unified cast and a lean production design enhancing the Stark Young translation, surely the most lucid and concise "Gull" available in English.

Watching this wonderful old play now in such hands, as the characterizations seep through the tersely eccentric facade, it is possible to see why "The Sea Gull" put Chekhov the playwright and the Moscow Art Theater on the map. And surely Chekhov would have approved some Ensemble Company embroidery, such as a strolling guitarist-tenor (Gary Novic-

kij) to thread the tableaux, and Tony Giovannetti's sparse props, abstract panels and sensible lighting.

Timothy D. Lewis's credible young Constantine now suggests an overnight stoic, not a psychotic brooder.

Best of all are Christopher Camille Walsh, as the love-lorn miserably wed Masha, and Linda Russell, a truly luminous "sea gull," bruised but rushing ahead to meet life.

After a fiery "Waiting for Lefty," their first production, and now such engrossing Chekhov, the E.T.C. has established itself as an enterprise of solid promise.

In their thimble-sized showcase uptown, the five-year-old West Side Community Repertory Theater has mined a compact, tasteful and funny evening out of "The Mistress of the Inn." The title defines the plot, as a pocket-picking landlady manipulates her smitten tenants, including a frisky old marquis, whose portrayal by Santiago Gonzalez is hilarious.

The spirit and construction of the play, the zestful performances and Andres Castro's wise direction all spell fun. It's easy to see why Goldoni's vivid farces, written in commedia dell'arte style, helped to clear the Italian stage of its antiquated buffooneries.