

REVIEW FOR BSECS CRITICKS BY

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WILLIAM CONGREVE,
THE DOUBLE DEALER (1693)
at the Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond, London

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running until 26 January 2019

What a pleasure and relief to enjoy a Restoration comedy that is witty and engaging without the cast being forced to ham up everything. True, the plot of *The Double Dealer* is convoluted. The cast do everything that they can to elucidate its twists and turns. But it's complicated, because the web of deceit woven by the double dealer is deliberately complex. Faced with that, the audience is allowed to be bemused and amused, without watching gross over-acting. Instead, there are many vivacious comings and goings as the cast run onto and off the centre stage, supplemented by witty interactions on all sides. At one point, the heroine asked rhetorically what she should do with a miscreant. A voice from the audience, seated close at hand in the intimate Orange Tree Theatre style, suggested audibly: 'Kill him.' With a measured intonation, as though in Congreve's original script, the heroine responded: 'Don't think that I hadn't thought of that', before continuing with her musings. It all fitted perfectly and added to the sense that we were all collectively trying to fathom the plot and to decide what to do.

Great credit should certainly go to the Director Selina Cadell, as well as to all her production team and the entire cast, playing as an effective ensemble. One sign of the care devoted to rendering the play accessible to a twenty-first-century audience was an extra rhyming prologue. It explained some of the

conventions of the play, including the fact that one actor was playing two parts. Since it was not immediately easy to work out who was whom, the prologue was helpful, as well as wittily delivered.

Among the cast, particular praise is due to Edward MacLiam as Maskwell, the double-dealing villain. He played the role with a leprechaun charm, making it almost understandable how everyone was deceived. A star award should also go to Zoë Waites. She had the challenging task of playing two leading female roles, running energetically onto and off the stage in different costumes, sometimes slightly out of breath. Her virtuous and likeable heroine Cynthia was well differentiated from the lascivious Lady Touchwood, who also has her eyes on the handsome hero who is destined for Cynthia.

The programme notes for the play, by Selina Cadell and her assistant Clare Rich, stress that the actors have been encouraged to trust in Congreve's felicitous language to convey their characters. So no hamming. Well, there is a bit. From time to time, the male actors thrust their groins repetitively, to suggest the urgency of sexual desire. But in this rendering, the attempted seductions, which punctuate the story, were genuinely amusing instead of embarrassing as such stage scenes can be. Only when Careless (Dharmesh Patel) stripped to his very twenty-first-century underwear was the illusion of the characters' amatory imbroglio somewhat spoilt. Of course, this move on his part must have been agreed with the Director. But it was a strange decision, since every other character was fully in period attire throughout. I suppose the incongruity was designed to add to the laughter – but we were laughing already.

Perhaps this was a moment when confidence in Congreve's capacity to amuse had slipped. Otherwise, the well-costumed cast, with relatively few props on the bare central stage, managed magnificently to convey their different characters. It was a great tribute to Congreve's writing. As a dramatist, he did not seek to explore character development or moral growth. He enjoyed instead

showing how people's words revealed their natures – or, in the case of the double-dealer, how words can be used to deceive.

What messages did Congreve wish his audiences to glean? One was somewhat annoying. He, or rather the convention of Restoration comedy, implies that every elderly father or husband is constantly ripe for deception. And that every woman is desperate to be romanced or seduced or both at once. Oh for a heroine who reads a book, or at least carries one! However, comedy so often works with conventional assumptions about the credulity of the old and the horniness of the young that it's best to sit back and enjoy.

Moreover, the superficial responses of Congreve's characters provide the essential context in which the deceitful Maskwell operates. So it transpires that the big message is that people should not be too simple and too credulous. They should not take everything at face value. Humans can mask their true intentions; and plausible double-dealers can do so brilliantly well. It's a timely warning, especially in this era of multiple identity deceptions. Who has not recently come across plausible villainy – whether from a fraudulent phone salesman, or via an impeccably deceptive on-line website, or (dare one say it?) from a smooth-talking deceiver in contemporary politics too?

And the most chilling point of all? Maskwell was clever enough to twist and turn things in such a way that his best way of deceiving was to tell the truth. But his apparent truth was enlisted in the service of dark ends. His victims laughed knowingly, thinking that they understood his real meaning. Yet Maskwell's secret was an open one: he was fooling everyone. At the very end, his plot was blown. However, that outcome was presented pretty much as a mechanical device, required by Congreve to provide a happy ending. The real message of *The Double Dealer* remains: Watch out! Even the apparently plausible truth may turn out to be a con. Keep your wits about you, while laughing at human follies, in case the follies should turn out to be your own.