

**PJC REVIEWS**

**WILLIAM CONGREVE'S *LOVE FOR LOVE* (1695)**

**AT THE SWAN THEATRE, STRATFORD-UPON-AVON**

**ACTED BY: THE ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY**

**DIRECTED BY: SELINA CADELL**

**Review of play seen on 26 December 2015**

William Congreve's witty, frisky comedy *Love for Love* (1695) demands a witty, frisky production – and that's very much what it gets in the intimate space of the Swan Theatre, which is part of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford. The admirable cast work hard from the start at engaging the audience. There is preliminary banter before the play itself begins, to get us all into laughing mode. There are nods and winks to the audience at key moments, to make sure that we get the point. And – a nice touch – when certain key names are mentioned, the entire cast on stage at the time collectively repeat the name, in knowing tones, looking archly at us. There is a clear artifice in this manner of procedure; but that style fits well enough with the play. It is a witty comedy of manners, not an exercise in gut-wrenching realism.

Insofar as there is a downside, this style of acting (and directing) makes it hard for the audience to identify with any of the characters on stage. They all appear as archetypes. Funny, yes, but rather cardboard in their nature – like a pack of playing cards. The fact that some characters have names that highlight their essential nature, like Mr Scandal and Mr Tattle, makes these parts impossible to play except for laughs – which duly follow, but perhaps a trifle mechanically. In particular, the skittish acting makes it hard to believe that the 'romantic' leads, Valentine [Tom Turner] and Angelica [Justine Mitchell], are seriously in love with one another. They could have managed a few more lingering glances and heaving sighs to convince us of their mutual ardour, for

the benefit of the plot which, after all, turns upon their contrivances to render Love for Love.

The one-dimensional nature of most of the characters makes the scenes towards the end, when Valentine's elderly father is duped into making matrimonial advances to Angelica, particularly hard to assimilate into the rest of the play. Sir Sampson Legend [Nicholas Le Prevost] begins as the domineering parent, in pleasing counterpoint to Angelica's doddering uncle Mr Foresight [Michael Thomas], who is continually consulting the stars to read the future, while being chronically unsure of what they mean.

At a certain point, however, Sir Sampson sheds his cardboard character and becomes a tremulously fond old man, as he is ensnared by the heroine. Love makes the crusty gentleman feel youthful again. It's tremendously well acted by Nicholas Le Prevost. So much so, that, even knowing that Sir Sampson is ridiculous and self-deceived, we begin to sympathise with him – and therefore to find the manipulative heroine rather odious for arousing his genuine feelings for her own ends (as she manages not only to win her lover but helps him to keep his fortune too). The difficulty comes from contrasting one character's apparently real emotions with the play-emotions of the rest of the cast.



Sir Sampson Legend [Nicholas Le Prevost],  
self-deceived and flattered into falling in love with Angelica [Justine Mitchell],  
in Congreve's *Love for Love* by the Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford (2015).  
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Still, it's all great fun. *Love for Love*? There are lots of different forms of love; and the predominance of self-love comes top of the list for this witty, frisky satire by Congreve.