

PJC REVIEWS

THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL (1777)

By: Richard Brinsley Sheridan

Directed by: Jessica Swale

Presented by: The Red Handed Theatre Company, with The Production Exchange and Park Theatre (Finsbury Park), 12 June -7 July 2013

Reviewed by: Penelope J. Corfield,

after viewing with Tony Belton, 28 June 2013

Yes, yes, yes: have you heard the news? Sheridan's effervescent *School for Scandal* is brought to witty, sparkling life in this brilliant production, performed by an outstanding cast of actors.

If you had the luck to be at Finsbury Park in early July or, following that, at the Bury St Edmunds Theatre Royal in mid-July, then you had a great treat. And if you are anywhere else in the country, then do urge your local venue to book this production, by the Red Handed Theatre Company. It deserves more than just a few weeks in the spotlight.

The director, Jessica Swale, has trusted Sheridan's script to make the audiences laugh. And we did, throughout the play. Swale has updated the action in a number of ways, notably by adding some songs (with lyrics by Swale and Laura Forrest-Hay). The music adds to the general jollity without detracting from the central focus upon the unholy pleasures and risks of scandal. Indeed, a final chorus reminds us that we all 'scandalise' – while the actors sing cheerfully that they are 'prettier and wittier' at the task than we are.

But the core of the play is a brilliant play of words, and the audience is allowed to savour them. Swale has resisted the temptation (too often unresisted by stage-directors) to turn all ‘period’ comedy into farce.

Certainly, there are farcical moments. At one point, the comely Lady Teazle [Kirsty Besterman], who is an eager apprentice at the art of scandal-mongering, hides behind a screen in the private rooms of a man to whom she is not married. There follows a classic range of comic manoeuvres. Her husband later tries to hide behind the screen as well; but is fobbed off with the excuse that it hides ‘a little French milliner’. Eventually the screen falls. The result is a pure theatrical moment of tragi-comedy. The audience laughs at the fun but also at the painful revelation of the married couple’s mutual shock and dismay, amidst the heartless world of scandal. It reminds one, incidentally, of Oscar Wilde’s comedic debt to Sheridan, not just in witty scripts but also in the screen scene in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892).

These moments of farce, however, do not take over the entire play. We can hear Sheridan’s clever jibe at the hypocritical Joseph Surface [Tom Berish], who is ‘*too civil by half*’. We can laugh wryly at the final declaration from the doting Sir Peter Teazle [Daniel Gosling] that all would live happily ever after ‘*as Lady Teazle and I [long pause] intend to do*’. We can admire the feisty performance from Maria (Jessica Clark) who provides the ‘true love’ interest without simpering. And we can hear the honey-venomed words of Mrs Candour, who purports to deplore scandal but clearly relishes and embellishes it. Buffy Davis is superb in the role, her face and demeanour embodying a kaleidoscopic array of alternating attitudes. How Rowlandson would have loved to sketch her.

But it is invidious not to praise the entire production team and the entire cast. So warm commendations to all the other stars, who were great both individually and as an ensemble: Lady Sneerwell [Belinda Lang], Mrs Rowley [Rachel Atkins], Charles Surface [Harry Kerr], Sir Oliver Surface [Timothy

Speyer], Sir Benjamin Backbite [Michael Bryher], Mr Snake/ Careless [Charlie Tighe] and Mr Crabtree/ Moses [Russell Bentley]. In the modern mode, the actors interact with the audience and, at times, sit amongst them (cue much girlish laughter).

In another fine stroke of direction, too, Charles Surface's sale of his family portraits is illustrated by those actors, who were not actually in the scene, posing around the theatre in picture frames as the illustrious Surface ancestors. The effect, especially in a small auditorium, is very involving. It was therefore regrettable that the actors took no more than one curtain call, at the end of all the high jinks and laughter. I was not the only one who wanted them to return at least once more, so that we could fully convey our enthusiasm.

Lastly, what did Sheridan intend us to learn? Well, firstly, he demonstrated how cruel and how simultaneously enjoyable good gossip can be. The gossipers were bonded into a group by their shared pleasure at being aware of everyone's harmful secrets and by maliciously magnifying the fuss at every turn.

Conversely, therefore, the other moral of the play is that it is essential, when judging others, to disregard immediate impressions and tittle-tattle. Not for nothing are the rival brothers in this play named Surface: Joseph is smooth-tongued but false, whilst Charles is a spendthrift rake but good at heart. Guess who ultimately gets the girl? Deeds not words prove to be the best guides. By the same token, the Lady Teazles of this world may themselves be bitten by scandal as well as biting others. The message is a timeless one, apt for devotees of today's social media as well as of Georgian news-sheets and gossip parties.

Much later in 1895, another grand stage lady is given a distinctly Sheridaneseque observation, when Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell remarks that: *'We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces'*. Many an era, like the Georgian epoch or the second Elizabethan half-century, might say the same. But don't be misled. Disregard society's outward mixture of tinsel and not-very-secret malice

(cf. the Princess Diana experience) and judge deeply for yourselves. And, in the meantime, call for the return of this scintillating production of the *School for Scandal*, if you can.