

British Theatre Guide

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Three Farces

John Maddison Morton, edited by Colin Chambers
Orange Tree, Richmond
(2011)

The prolific Victorian playwright John Maddison Morton wrote more than 125 plays and short comedies that often became great hits in his heyday, inserted as prologues or sweeteners between the more serious items on a playbill.

But theatrical fashions change and despite a lifetime of success Morton ended up as a Carthusian poor brother, dependent on benefit nights for pocket money, while selling his copyrights to survive. He is now all but forgotten, although he does have a lengthy Wikipedia page to his credit. But now the Orange Tree is celebrating his bicentary with three of his more successful playlets, packaged as a triple bill of farces although only one item plays as a true 19th century farce.

Perhaps not quite trusting his authors appeal to modern audiences, director Henry Bell gives the evening a coy winning tone that starts with troubador Daniel Cheyne as the singing compere, introducing the cast and telling us what a lovely evening we are all having. The production does not really need this framing device. Performed by an exceptionally strong Orange Tree cast the three playlets survive the passage of time, thanks especially to Clive Francis who opens the evening as a bellicose old buffer, a patriotic citizen who dismisses his two nieces suitors as miserable cowards.

Slasher and Crasher is a dangerously choreographed melodrama, played with astonishing agility by Stuart Fox and David Oakes in the title roles; a craven pair transforming themselves into fighting cocks in the name of romance, at one point virtually destroying a costly looking piece of the settings with their newly-found aggressive attempts to prove their courage.

But the greater surprise comes with the entrance of Edward Bennett as a young scarlet-clad Dragoon lieutenant in an eye-catching costume, brought in as an intended rival to the suitors but exuding a sweet natured love of all mankind and a generous heart towards the hapless lovers

After the first interval comes an anarchic comedy with sinister undertones, as suggested by its title: *A Most Unwarrantable Intrusion*. We again find Francis at home, but this time as a henpecked husband enjoying a moment of peace and solitude without the interference of his wife or the servants all sent away for a day off. Alas, this scene of domestic serenity is cruelly disrupted by the entry of Bennetts intruder, stripping off his clothes for a dip in the fish pond before barging into the parlour to take possession of the best chair and a couple of jewelled snuff boxes, as well as snarling with all too believable menace.

The audience soon works out the probable solution to this almost Pinteresque tale of territorial invasion, but one is still gripped by the thrilling power of Bennetts control of both scene and plot, as Francis generously cedes the plays focus to his young co-actor.

Finally we come to the truly farcical *Grimshaw, Bagshaw and Bradshaw*, in which Natalie Ogle conceives a *risqué* plan to take over lodgings from the usual male occupant, while Jennifer Higham connives in the devious plot.

Almost at once the cosy bedroom with its slamming doors becomes over-populated by the two girls, the two men who are their victims, plus Francis again, this time arriving as Towzer, a brokers man with an obviously false moustache, ready to bruise reputations and mix up names in pursuit of his unpleasant official duties.

But stay, who is this coming through the door? Why its none other than the intrusive Bennett, now cast as a towering, strong-armed debt collector with a menacing grin. Then after a swiftly played moment of discovery and explanation, the whole company launches into a closing song and dance routine to a tune scored and sung by our bearded troubador Cheyne, plus a reprise before the final curtain calls.

I think it is fair to note here that while some members of the audience laughed and laughed at every joke, there were also a few glum-faced patrons more stingy with their smiles. In other words, if you like this sort of thing, then this is the sort of thing you will like!

Reviewer: [John Thaxter](#)