

British Theatre Guide

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Rutherford and Son

Githa Sowerby

Northern Stage and Threshold Theatre co-production

Northern Stage, Newcastle

(2009)

Written by a Gateshead woman, part of the Sowerby family which owned the Ellison Glass Works in the town, and first performed at the Royal Court in 1912, *Rutherford and Son* has never, until now, had a professional production on Tyneside, even though, in the National Theatre's millennium poll, it was voted one of the top 100 British plays of the twentieth century.

On an impressive set by Naomi Dawson, effectively lit by Anna Watson with superb sound by Jon Nicholls, a cast of eight play out the story of the Rutherford family, owners of a glass works. It's the story of the obsession of patriarch John Rutherford (Fred Pearson) with his business and his desire to pass it on to his sons, but neither wish to follow in his footsteps, with Richard, the elder (Adam Henderson-Scott), choosing the church and John (Ross Waiton) wanting to find his own way, having married a southerner Mary (Laura Haddock) by whom he now has a son. Daughter Janet (Tracy Gilman), now in her mid-thirties, has been kept at home to run the household under the critical eye of her aunt Ann (Val McLane).

Martin (Dickon Tyrrell), an ordinary worker whose devotion to the company has made him Rutherford's right-hand man, is central to the plot with his romantic involvement with Janet and his work relationship with John and has to choose between the company and them.

Then there is a sub-plot about a young worker who steals some money and whose mother (Michelle Newell), at the prompting of Richard, comes to beg for her son's job, only to be - inevitably - rejected.

So we have the obsessive and tyrannical father/boss, the rebellious (in different ways) sons, the downtrodden daughter, the loyal servant, and the unwanted daughter-in-law who does, however, have the one thing that Rutherford wants - his grandson. And it's played out against a background of industrial unrest in the colliery which provides the coal for Rutherford's furnaces. In other words, we are watching the beginnings of the breakdown of the values of a society which was to be accelerated by the First World War and culminate in the General Strike of 1926.

It was a not uncommon theme in plays of the period, the big difference, of course, being that *Rutherford and Son* was written by a woman.

It is dated: the work/family conflict is still with us (and probably always will be) but the characterisation and structure of the piece are very much of its time, as are many of the ideas expressed. At one point, for example, Rutherford complains about "your woman's ways" which drew a stifled laugh from not a few members of the audience, and the ideas about class and the place of women, on which so much of the plot hinges, are foreign to all but the oldest members of the audience, and for them they are a memory of a memory. As a piece of Tyneside dramatic

history and an example of what, in its time, would have been a hard-hitting piece, it makes for an interesting revival - and there is surely a place for such revivals - but it is not a play which has something to say to us today.

That said, director Richard Beecham, his cast and creative team make an excellent job of staging the piece and one cannot but admire the way they make use of the huge space of Stage 1.

At Northern Stage until 3rd October

Reviewer: [Peter Lathan](#)