

British Theatre Guide

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Demi-Monde: The Half-World of William Morris

Devised by LOVE&MADNESS and Jack Shepherd

Studio 3, Riverside Studios

(2010)

Mix Dickensian tones with a touch of Sherlock Holmes and you conjure up the wonderful world of *Demi Monde*, one of three plays currently running at the Riverside Studios as part of LOVE&MADNESS' *desire and destruction* season.

Demi Monde tells the tale of arts and crafts movement designer William Morris and how politics slowly acts as a distraction to his patterns, painting and poetry and ultimately ends up consuming him.

Apart from being a master craftsman, Morris has a desire to run his business as an organisation in which everyone has an input. He also wants people to realise that art can be beautiful and useful, a notion alien to his colleagues and friends who believe that art can only be one or the other.

Morris despises the capitalist system, which in itself is somewhat of a contradiction as his business benefits from and contributes directly to the system he so despises. Having his own strong views on how society should be run, Morris sets up a splinter socialist party, The Socialist League, but anarchists fester within and soon they outweigh the original party members. This wasn't what Morris had in mind.

Aside from problem politics, Morris' somewhat sorry life is also depicted. A workaholic, he is oblivious at first to his wife's affair with Rossetti, who flirts with the 'little water lillie' whilst Morris is busy with a woodcut. Morris doesn't seem to mind greatly, coming over as a man who struggles with people and relationships. Early in the piece he states he can't do human forms, but can do design and poetry. This becomes a metaphor for his life.

Metaphors and similes feature heavily in the show. They add a Morrissean poetic nature to the play which is most enjoyable. One character's emotion is likened to a pressed flower, beautiful but dead, and when contemplating how best to overthrow the capitalist system another states that you can't make an omelette without breaking an egg. Morris is described as having the frame, but not the constitution, of an ox and such well thought out allusions mean the audience know exactly what is being implied in beautiful poetic form.

Rosetti is gloriously acted by Jonathan Warde. Intoxicated most of the time, Warde excels at playing the complex drunk and there is most definitely something of Leonard Rossiter's Rigsby about him. Warde also shows his acting talent in many other roles, as do the rest of the cast, effortlessly slipping into new characters by adopting accents and gestures. The quick and simple transformations are a real lesson in acting.

This is a beautifully crafted piece of theatre that keeps the imagination alive. *Demi-Monde* doesn't need an extensive set; the few props and scenery evoke setting perfectly, complemented by Paul Green and Josh Pharo's exquisite lighting design.

2010 marks a decade of LOVE&MADNESS' work. Over the past ten years they have accomplished a tremendous amount with numerous tours and productions and their latest show at the Riverside Studios does not disappoint. Here's to the next decade of their work! Long may it continue.

Playing in rep until 17th March 2010

Reviewer: [Simon Sladen](#)