

British Theatre Guide

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Hay Fever

Noël Coward

A Peter Hall production

New Victoria Theatre, Woking, and touring
(2007)

One of the most difficult plays to perform that I have ever encountered, said Coward, adding in his customary self-effacing manner It is quite extraordinarily well constructed, and I did the whole thing in three days I didnt even re-write.

Difficult it most obviously is, with a theatrically eccentric family given to holding house parties where they alternately confuse, embarrass and then totally ignore their invited guests, constantly saying one thing while meaning another, and playing up to any situation with dramatic intensity and a total disregard for anyones feelings.

This Peter Hall production was performed at the Haymarket last year with Judi Dench in the leading role of Judith Bliss, her presence in a Coward play ensuring that demand for tickets far exceeded supply. Stephanie Beecham does not have quite the same drawing power as Dame Judi and, on a glorious spring day, this large theatre was little more than two thirds full, which was a great shame as Beacham inhabits the beautiful, glamorous character so well it might have been written for her, voice and mannerisms almost but not quite slipping into caricature with her wonderfully rounded vowels and flamboyant gestures as befitting a former actress.

Based on a family well known to Coward (I wonder if they ever recognised themselves), the play begins with Sorel and Simon Bliss (Madeleine Hutchins and William Ellis) squabbling as brothers and sisters do, about which of their guests will use the Japanese Room. A normal family life so far, but in this free and easy family it transpires that everyone has, unbeknown to the others, invited a guest for the weekend - a very odd assortment and totally unsuited to cope with this unconventional group. We must be very kind to everyone, says Sorel a hopeless ambition!

Judiths guest is a besotted fan, Sandy Tyrell (Christopher Naylor slightly overdoing the wimpy character). Daughter Sorel has invited Richard (Andrew Hall), an older more distinguished man, and novelist husband Davids guest is a young, shy flapper here to help with inspiration for his book The Sinful Woman. Im afraid that I found Emily Pollets exaggeratedly high pitched whine rather irritating in this role, but well played aside from that. Brother Simon has annoyed his mother by inviting Myra, the only one known to them - a spirited performance here from Sarah Berger who knows what to expect and is ready for it, but even she is defeated with many cutting remarks being exchanged between herself and Judith.

Partners are swapped with gay abandon and with an abundance of kissing and flirting which to the Bliss contingent is simply another act, although they manage to convince their guests that the sentiments expressed are serious to their utter consternation.

This unsympathetic, self absorbed attitude extends to the maid Clara (Pamela Butchner) who is expected to prepare bedrooms and provide weekend meals for eight at a moments notice, while constantly being called to answer the door.

The play concludes with the Bliss family happily engaged in an exaggerated argument over the breakfast table, so totally absorbed with themselves that they dont notice their guests can stand no more and are stealthy creeping out of the door.

Coward was right, as always. It is indeed extraordinarily well constructed, amusingly and wittily written and, with exquisite set and costumes by Simon Higlett, a joy to behold.

Touring to Bradford, Richmond, Malvern and Cambridge.

Peter Lathan reviewed this production in [Newcastle](#).

Reviewer: [Sheila Connor](#)