

British Theatre Guide

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Hay Fever

Noël Coward
Theatre Royal, York
(2005)

Hay Fever, Noel Coward's tale of the bohemian Bliss family and their hapless houseguests, was a huge success when it premiered in 1925 and has had its admirers ever since. Director Damian Cruden's enthusiasm for the play shines through this handsome new production, but despite the efforts of a sterling cast I remain unconvinced that the work is in the same league as *Private Lives* and *Blithe Spirit*. Sparkling but slight, *Hay Fever* is populated by characters whose shallowness would be perfectly acceptable in a farce but who soon outwear their welcome in a sophisticated comedy.

The plot - such as it is - revolves around the monstrously vain and manipulative actress Judith Bliss (Kate Brown). Now living in retirement with her novelist husband David (notorious panto villain David Leonard) and grown-up children Sorel (Danielle King) and Simon (Jack Sandle), the former West End star is reduced to pottering around the garden in an outrageous hat and playing the role of a country squire's wife.

This rural idyll is shattered by the arrival of four guests which each member of the Bliss family has, without telling the others, invited down for the weekend. Motoring enthusiast Sandy Tyrell (Alex Kerr), emotionally constipated diplomat Richard Greatham (Mark Payton), sultry Myra Arundel (Julie Teal) and endearing but pea-brained flapper Jackie Coryton (Amy Humphreys) find themselves ignored, insulted and forced to endure one of the cruellest and most humiliating rituals ever devised by the human brain - compulsory participation in party games. "Light a cigarette in the manner of the word 'winsomely'" is one of the challenges devised by Judith, and although Richard's attempt to do so brings the house down it fails to meet with his hostess' approval.

It takes a first-rate cast to bring off a play so rich in vintage Coward one-liners but so lacking in depth, and Cruden has certainly assembled one. Kate Brown is quite simply perfect as Judith Bliss, a woman who regards other people as either a potential audience or fellow actors to be manipulated at will - the scenes in which she turns Sandy's tongue-tied compliments into a profession of undying love, then thrusts her husband into the arms of a haughtily indifferent Myra Arundel, are a joy to watch (and her husky-voiced rendition of "You Do Something To Me" is a joy to hear). The four victims of Bliss hospitality offer strong performances, particularly Theatre Royal regular Mark Payton as the diplomat who must have been yearning for the comparative peace and quiet of the nearest war zone. Gilly Tompkins gives a scene-stealing performance as the maid Clara, whose incompetence and over-familiarity is due to the fact that she used to be Judith's dresser

Finally, a word of praise for Nigel Hook's wonderfully flamboyant and detailed set - the cluttered and believably lived-in hall of the Bliss' baronial residence, complete with the famous portrait of Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth. The ladies' costumes are also exquisite, although I hope no

endangered species were pushed to the brink of extinction to provide the feathers used in this production!

At the Theatre Royal, York, until 11th June

Reviewer: [J. D. Atkinson](#)