

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## John Gabriel Borkman

Henrik Ibsen, translated by Stephen Mulrine  
English Touring Theatre at the Richmond Theatre  
(2003)

The English Touring Theatre already has *King Lear* playing at the Old Vic. Now director Stephen Unwin, using a new translation by Stephen Mulrine, has the chance to direct another play about an old man who has lost his "kingdom" through folly.

Even when he is pacing, like a trapped animal, around the apartment that he has not left for eight years, Michael Pennington's John Gabriel is in control of his fiefdom. He is a man who, despite bankruptcy and prison, retains his self-belief. He still imagines himself as the financier and almost cabinet minister and thinks that it is only a matter of time before the public demands his elevation back to a position of importance.

This is apparent from the scenes that he plays with Fred Pearson as the funny Foldal. The latter is a man who regards the fallen Borkman so highly as a role model that he is happy to be walked over for the joy of the company.

The production starts dreadfully slowly as the animated Gunhild fights with her twin sister, Ella, over the menfolk. It then comes to dramatic life as Linda Bassett's Ella meets Michael Pennington's John Gabriel. It is soon apparent that she still desperately loves him both and Erhard, his son whom she brought up while John Gabriel was in jail.

The younger generation provides further difficulties for their seniors. Erhard Borkman, an unimposing man trying to escape familial ties, becomes the victim of a four-way tug of love between his father, mother, stepmother and his rather jaunty lover. Mairéad Carty plays the delightfully seductive scarlet woman, Fanny, though what she manages to see in her beau is hidden from us.

This production is very uneven, not helped by a late need to replace a key actress, playing the eponymous hero's wife. Gunhild is a major part and Gillian Hanna did not appear to have enough rehearsal time to get into the character and bring it to life.

It does not help that she plays one of three irritatingly weak characters, each contrasting with stronger more compelling partners. This production is far better in its portrayal of the strong halves of each pairing, John Gabriel, Ella and Fanny, than the weak, of whom only Foldal is fully realised.

The final scene moves outside into the snow that we have seen falling throughout and allows the heroic Borkman-Pennington a final moving Lear-like death. This allows all of the major protagonists to achieve peace as the next generation leaves them behind forever.

Within Neil Warmington's simple sitting room sets, Michael Pennington shows what a noble, misguided man Borkman is, rather like one of Ibsen's other idealists, Stockman in *An Enemy of the*

*People*. At the same time, Linda Bassett as Ella demonstrates what selfless love and sacrifice mean.

**Reviewer:** [Philip Fisher](#)