

# British Theatre Guide

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

## Julie

Polly Stenham After Strindberg

Lyttelton Theatre (National Theatre)

31 May–8 September 2018

First there was [Miss Julie](#), set in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century period when August Strindberg wrote the play. Next came Patrick Marber's [After Miss Julie](#), featuring the same characters and circumstances as Britain celebrated the end of the Second World War, and now Polly Stenham has written *Julie*, which transports the original themes and characters into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Carrie Cracknell's 80-minute-long production, presented in a compressed widescreen format, has a cast that numbers 23, a score more than the original, although that score comprises dancers and supernumeraries, who enjoy an orgiastic rave to celebrate the protagonist's 33<sup>rd</sup> birthday.

While that goes on (literally) in the background, the main events take place in a sunken, Hampstead Heath-side kitchen that designer Tom Scutt has created from what looks like an emptied, gym-sized swimming pool.

Here, screen favourite Vanessa Kirby creates a fragile but thoroughly modern Julie, who is desperately struggling against life's vicissitudes despite being a spoilt trust fund heiress used to the luxuries that only unlimited money can offer. Polly Stenham seemed able to identify better with her central character—recognisable, privileged, entitled, bored and, having just been dumped by a new ex, emotionally insecure—than the servants who circle around her trying to clear up the actual and metaphorical messes that she causes.

Julie parties till she drops, aided by alcohol and drugs, both prescribed and proscribed. Picking up the tearful pieces is Kristina, played by Thalissa Teixeira, a maid but also a sounding board and, in the eyes of her employer's daughter, a soul sister.

She remains confined to the kitchen, chewing the fat with her fiancé portrayed by Eric Kofi Abrefa. Jean, employed as driver to Julie's champagne socialist father, is a heavily muscled man of African descent with enough education to quote Aristotle with alacrity.

Far into a long dark night of the soul, Julie, who has recently been disappointed in love, chooses to seduce Jean, his protestations rather too quickly giving way to slow motion passion in a rooftop garden.

Guilt, recriminations and an unforgettable scene involving an unfortunate canary that is pure Quentin Tarantino lead to three-quarters of an hour of angst, leading to a rather truncated ending that strays far away from Strindberg's original.

Vanessa Kirby, who has extensive stage experience, manages to make the most of her starring role, while her two main companions acquit themselves more than capably in support given more limited material.

While much of the language rings true, relocating a play that is primarily about class and illicit passion, even when set amongst today's ultra-rich, and then bringing in themes of race cannot have the ability to shock an audience as the original themes would have done in 1888, nor does a contemporary setting have the same impact as 1945 when the country was all too aware of its class history and was seemingly on the brink of escaping it.

The result is a relatively lightweight entertainment that highlights the skills of its star but could make some viewers wonder whether the National might not have been better commissioning a revival of the original text in its own period. On the plus side, a play that is likely to appeal to a younger audience will be accessible to those who are keen to try it out since the production is both part of the Travelex £15 Season and scheduled for the National Theatre Live treatment in hundreds of cinemas worldwide on 6 September 2018.

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