

British Theatre Guide

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Lady Windermere's Fan

Oscar Wilde

Classic Spring Theatre Company

Vaudeville Theatre

12 January–7 April 2018

The second play in Dominic Dromgoole's Oscar Wilde season for his newly-formed Classic Spring Theatre Company is a delightful morality tale with an undercurrent of rich humour.

Before the first word is uttered, an evening that runs to a little over two hours presents mixed auguries. In front of the stage is a cleverly designed curtain featuring brief illustrated instructions in the art of conveying information using fans. For younger readers, this might be regarded as the Victorian equivalent to texting or, given the messages, conceivably sexting.

Next, the arrival of Lady Windermere in a drawing room that is surprisingly bare given the family's obvious wealth is heralded by some distinctly anachronistic music featuring a very modern base beat. The modernity then stretches to much of the acting and body language in this revival, which is directed by Kathy Burke.

Grace Molony is suitably young and innocent as the eponymous fan waver. As it happens, the drama takes place on the day that she comes of age, two years after entering into what seems like the perfect marriage with Joshua James's callow and rather hesitant Lord Windermere.

An element of scandal is initially introduced by Kevin Bishop's rather prissy Lord Darlington, quickly confirmed by TV favourite Jennifer Saunders making a rare stage appearance as the Duchess of Berwick, a close cousin to Lady Bracknell, who will be making an appearance later in the season.

In quick succession, each wickedly insinuates that the young Lord has been getting rather closer to a scarlet woman of a certain age than might be deemed appropriate for a married man.

With considerable effort and discomfort, Lord Windermere then attempts to persuade his potentially wronged wife that she must invite the highly unsuitable Mrs Erlynne to her birthday party.

A domestic squabble ensues, threatening the very happy marriage and the arrival of Samantha Spiro as glamorous but mysterious lady who has appeared on the scene from nowhere only exacerbates the dispute.

There is an obvious explanation, which for various reasons is kept well hidden from all and sundry and which it would be unfair to reveal in this review.

Suffice to say that, before the end of the evening, sympathies and affections have switched around, sometimes with startling rapidity, allowing Oscar Wilde to make some wise observations and deliver his trademark aphorisms, some of which now have lives way beyond the play.

Miss Burke is not the most experienced director of classics and particularly in the early scenes seems to lack confidence in the text. As a result, there is a degree of overacting leading to

elements of farce and melodrama that do not necessarily do the play justice.

However, after the interval, when Wilde gets down to the serious business, things settle down and Samantha Spiro delivers a splendid performance in the role created by Marion Terry of the intrepid theatrical family, not to mention delivering a couple of cracking set piece speeches, which should make every viewer happy that we are no longer bound by the artifice and hypocrisy of Victorian morality.

Although some of the humour in the early scenes on this occasion can be overly laboured, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, like just about every play by Wilde, is always a pleasure, especially when the evening features such a well-judged central performance by Samantha Spiro.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)