

British Theatre Guide

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Lady Windermere's Fan

Oscar Wilde

Theatre Royal, Haymarket

(2002)

This excellent Peter Hall production, starring Vanessa Redgrave and her daughter Joely Richardson, is a reminder of just how well Oscar Wilde writes. It fizzes with so many aphorisms that the audience is shell-shocked. In order to catch Wilde's wit to the full, it is probably necessary to read the text or visit three times.

There is a kind of echoey prologue during which disembodied voices quote the playwright on the subject of society. These nicely set the scene for the comedy of manners to come. This dissects the society of the time with its apparent respectability and true hypocrisy.

The set is initially hidden behind a massive lacy fan. This then gives way to Jon Gunter's spare, open set which goes through various, subtly effective changes, helped immensely by Jon Buswell's lighting.

In the first act, Joely Richardson tends to look humorously detached with eyes flashing everywhere. This is fairly reasonable as Jack Davenport's Lord Darlington makes love to her rather like a naughty puppy. While he is handsome, the charm just isn't there. Once she moves on to a scene with her husband there is no looking back as Miss Richardson's beauty and Lady Windermere's honesty prove a winning combination.

The second theatrical family gracing the stage are John McCallum, as the besotted Lord Augustus Lorton, and his wife, Googie Withers, who is still going strong. She plays The Duchess of Berwick clearly enjoying herself thoroughly as she toys with both the heroine and the audience. This is no mean feat for an actress who made her debut in the 20s of the last century. These two raise many laughs as really experienced character actors will in these roles.

David Yelland as Lord Windermere is also well cast and is particularly good as the innocent husband who seemingly deceives his wife with the mature woman of doubtful virtue, Mrs Erylne. This good lady is played by Miss Redgrave. She comes onto the stage in rather grande dame-ish mode. She soon relaxes into an excellent performance, wringing maximum pathos out of this part.

The scene in which she demonstrates that she is the noblest Victorian of them all is particularly touching. This follows an excellently delivered speech in which she uses her own hard life as an explanation of all that Lady Windermere should avoid. The use of a real mother and daughter makes a big impact. They look very much alike and Peter Hall has pulled off a masterful stroke in pairing them.

The play is very well paced with a healthy balance between Wilde's fine writing and some good plotting. Peter Hall may not always get his comedies right but on this occasion helped by some top actors, he achieves a great success.

