

British Theatre Guide

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

Madness in Valencia

Lope de Vega, translated by David Johnston
Trafalgar Studios 2
(2010)

When Trafalgar Studios opened, the stated purpose of the smaller Studio 2 was to host successful productions from London's thriving Fringe. It is therefore pleasing to see a transfer from the White Bear in Kennington, with a brave revival of an unknown comedy from around 400 years ago.

It may sound like the latest concert DVD from everyone's favourite 80s band but in fact, *Madness in Valencia* is a play from the Spanish Golden Age by a man to whom the word prolific does scant justice.

Lope de Vega reputedly wrote 1,800 plays in a long career but even so, his work is rarely performed in this country these days, although the RSC did revive [*Dog in the Manger*](#) a few years back. Like *Madness in Valencia* that was also translated by Belfast-based academic David Johnston, who on this occasion uses bold modern language characterised by loads of "loonies".

It might easily be suggested that director Simon Evans has chosen to use the play as a frame for his own brand of slapstick, led by arch clown Laurence Fuller playing Pisano, the mad madhouse keeper. Repeatedly, he does his own comic routine, much to the delight of his audience but equally to the detriment of the dear old Spaniard's play.

The plot is comic, with love juices flowing overtime, as young men and women exchange affections with alacrity. The central figures are William Bellchambers' Floriano, in hiding after accidentally killing the tenth in line to the throne, and Erifila, played by Kathryn Beaumont, who has eloped with her father's faithless servant.

The pair are thrown together in an asylum, cleverly designed by Kate Matthews, who uses a few simple wooden frames to create a prison and a warm golden wall to take it to Spain.

The path of true love is rarely smooth in comedy and before the inevitable multiple engagements, both of the main characters are wooed and won by streams of visitors while drifting in and out of feigned madness.

Throughout nearly 2½ hours, the performances are more *Blackadder* than period, which is appealing to audiences today but does few favours to the original. It doesn't help that Evans constantly directs a mixed ability cast prone to gabbling their words statically on a diagonal. The result on a thrust stage was that long periods were spent studying actors' backs.

For anyone that is willing to wallow in the modernised staging and contemporary clowning, this could be a good night out. Those who would have liked to see a golden Spanish play treated with reverence will be disappointed.

Until 6th March

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)