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The Maias

Adapted by Alice de Sousa from the novel by José Maria de Eça de Queirós
Galleon Theatre
Greenwich Playhouse
(2011)

A special feature of the work of Alice de Sousa and the Galleon Theatre Company has been the introduction of Portuguese culture to British audiences as in this adaptation of Queirós's novel *The Maias*, published in 1888, which many regard as his masterpiece and which is a set book in Portuguese schools.

It is quite an undertaking to adapt - a Portuguese television version took forty episodes! De Sousa's version probably gives us a very filleted version and doesn't really attempt the broad picture of society life in the streets and social clubs of Lisbon that the book apparently presents but concentrates on the core of the story concerning the romantic adventures of Carlos de Maia and some of his immediate friends, though there are hints of the detail as when grandfather Afonso, slightly querulous in Hugh Hemmings' delightful performance, returns home with his cat in its travelling basket.

The literary origins are a little too evident with "do you remember?" or "did I ever tell you?" introducing speeches that fill in the back story or describe events that are not presented on stage. They seem artificial, especially as this novelist is apparently known for his realism, but in some ways this matches the artificiality of some of the characters.

Eça was deliberately satirising the political stagnation and moral decay of a hidebound society and there is a strong contrast here between the more down to earth characters and the affectation of others. Englishman Craft, straight-backed and precise as played by Christopher Peacock, admits to "an obsession with form and a beautiful phrase" and in one scene, when his friends mention Zola, he declares he can't bear naturalism. Even Carlos's politically progressive friend, would-be author Ega, is a poseur in a fur coat (quite why he was wearing only long-johns beneath it I never discovered) and Peter Rae plays him with exaggerated theatricality while Mark Philip Compton makes Damaso, whose jealousy triggers much of the plot, so camp that his womanising begins to seem like a cover, while another friend, poet Alencar, may be too set in his judgements; Barry Clarke plays him as solid and sober.

It is Carlos who seems the most genuine of them. Damian Quinn gives him a natural charm but even he seems spoiled by his wealth, playing at the idea of being a doctor with elaborately decorated consulting rooms that display decadent pictures of French actresses, and entirely self-centred in the way he treats the women he takes as lovers. First there is Countess Guavarinho, all fashionable elegance and strongly played by Helen Bang, whom Carlos abandons for Maria, the mother of a child he is called out to see as a doctor. Alice de Sousa gives a calm gentleness that belies the traumas of her earlier life and makes even more tragic the discovery later that she is in fact Carlos's sister, long thought dead.

Bruce Jamieson's direction does not entirely succeed in preventing affected behaviour from slipping into actory acting but its many scenes follow each other smoothly, often with interesting details of business on exits that add colour and character and the whole is sumptuously dressed by Richard Cooke and played in an attractive setting of roused silk and blue and white Portuguese tiles designed by Suneeda Maruthiyil.

In compacting the novel into a play one senses much must have been lost but this production does suggest the width of Eça de Queirós's canvas in its picture of fashionable society, its raw presentation of its characters sexual behaviour and irresponsibility, of attitudes to family and 'honour' and critical glance at both cultural and political attitudes. For dramatic purposes we are perhaps given more details than we sometimes need and it could be compacted yet further to greater effect but, like the company's earlier adaptation of the same writer's *Cousin Basilio*, it is a taster that may encourage audiences to explore this novelist's work further, since his work is now available in recent English translation.

Run ends 3rd April 2011

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)