

British Theatre Guide

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Makeshifts and Realities

Gertrude Robins and H M Harwood

Andrew Maunder for Aardvark Theatre in association with Neil McPherson for the Finborough Theatre

Finborough Theatre

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All the one-act plays in this triple bill of work from the early twentieth century are concerned with the position of women at a time when supporting themselves independently was problematic.

Gertrude Robins's *Makeshifts* (which premièred at Annie Horniman's Gaiety in Manchester in 1908) presents two sisters faced with finding husbands or another way of surviving. Outspoken Dolly Parker (Poppy Allen-Quarmby) is a teaching assistant in an infant school, Caroline (Philippa Quinn) works as a housekeeper and they appear to have a lodger but things are tight. How can they secure their futures?

Lodger Henry Thompson (Akshay Sharan) is shyly attentive and brings them little gifts, but he has few prospects. Caroline seem excited about something; she is anticipating a visit from Albert Smythe, who seems to work in the City. Joe Eyre's Albert is cocky and common, striding in and plonking his hat on the mantelpiece clock. He talks about getting married, but when Caroline goes to the kitchen to make the coffee he asks for, he seems to be flirting with Dolly. Albert has clearly assessed both as marriage material, but his wedding plans now don't include them but an acquaintance called Rose who has a little bit of money. Where does that leave these two?

Robins gives the answer in *Realities*, which followed in 1911. It sees Dolly married to Henry, housebound by a baby but happy, getting visits first from Albert's social-climber wife Rose (Beth Lilly making her obnoxiously boastful) and then from a drunk Albert, who now thinks he made the wrong choice and makes a pass at Dolly.

It is difficult now to see how the first play stood on its own. Perhaps audiences found it funny, but director Melissa Dunne doesn't play it for laughs; the plight of the women and their chauvinist non-suitors aren't funny now.

The third play, H M Harwood's *Honour Thy Father*, was produced a year later in 1912 by Edith Craig's Pioneer Players in a private 'members only' performance. Its subject would never have got past the Lord Chamberlain's censorship. It is set in Bruges where bankrupt Edward Morgan has fled with his wife Jane and youngest daughter Madge. Andrew Hawkins's pompous, self-righteous Morgan is an inveterate gambler, maybe once a successful one but now behind with their rent.

Elder daughter Claire (Poppy Allen-Quarmby), barred by her father from training for any line of work, left home to make her own way in a profession that did not need qualifications, just good looks and being accommodating. Now she is in Bruges on a visit, slipping cash to her mother and trying to ensure that sister Madge is left in the position that she was. When Richard Stearn (Akshay

Sharan), a gambling partner of Morgan, recognises Claire from London and threatens to expose her if she won't meet his demands, things are all set for a showdown.

With Suzan Sylvester's Jane, innocently ignorant of realities like money, Beth Lilly's schoolgirl Madge and a brief appearance from Philippa Quinn as their landlady, there is little opportunity for character development, but this is a stark picture of realities.

Seen individually, these might become outdated period pieces, but together they paint a picture of attitudes to women that are today much more shocking than the subject of prostitution. They are a reminder of how far we have come, but with echoes too that the struggle isn't yet entirely over.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)