

British Theatre Guide

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My Mother Said I Never Should

Charlotte Keatley

London Classic Theatre

New Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich

12–16 February 2019

This iconic play broke new ground in the 1980s when it was first written and holds the record for the most produced play by a women writer. It's on GCSE and A level syllabuses and has been produced in 31 countries.

But it's complicated, both in structure and staging, with four actors playing roles that have to age as the decades pass, but with the story not following a linear structure, there are a lot of layers and time shifts which can make it confusing for the audience unless the company has it tightly controlled and with plenty of signposts.

The story revolves around the lives of four related women whose menfolk are talked about but never seen. Yet the impact of their relationships with these men reverberates through their own dysfunctional relationships with each other.

The other important point is that the women are products of their decades. And the play shows the progression of women's rights to both their children and their own lives as the years unfold.

Doris is the elder, played with sincerity by Judith Paris, a women brought up in the 1920s, living through the war, making the best of being married for 60 years to a man who never really showed her love. Her daughter Margaret (Lisa Burrows), brought up during the war years, finds love lacking in the house and so turns to the first man who shows an interest: an American airman called Ken. They settle down and have a daughter quite quickly, but their marriage eventually hits the skids too.

Their daughter Jackie (Kathryn Ritchie) is of the new generation brought up in the 1960s, eager to leave home and be independent. She goes to art school but falls for a child with an on / off boyfriend and doesn't want to be tied down as a single mother, so Margaret takes the child on with the proviso that Rosie (Rebecca Birch) should be brought up believing Jackie is her sister. The rest of the play is then about the failure of both mother and daughter to find a way of telling Rosie who she really is, ensuring that she too is messed up emotionally, while the grandmother becomes in the end the pivotal role to all their relationships.

Director Michael Cabot is revisiting this play, but I'm not sure he makes this a vibrant enough performance or that his choice of set does much to enhance the action or move the story along. The play starts on a patch of bombed-out wasteland during the war years where Margaret plays as a child with her three friends. And every so often the play revisits this site. So the set is 'The Wasteland' and remains so. It's littered with references to the women's lives—shopping trolley, typewriter, dolls, stereo, radio etc—but the cluttered space does make it difficult to set each scene and seemed incongruous when the action called for a living room or an office.

There also seemed to be a lack of energy within the cast, only Judith Paris as Doris really seeming to get under the skin of her character. We cared about her, but it was hard to care about the others as each scene seemed to be paced in the same way and a lot of the drama is spoken of but not acted out.

This is also a long play; at 2 hours 30 mins it felt like it could do with a bit of editing—or maybe updating.

Keatley's play has some important points to make and is an interesting exploration of how women's lives have changed during seven decades. So if you haven't seen it before, it's worthwhile experiencing it for the discussion points alone. But this is not the best or most polished production I have ever seen of this play. And that's a pity and a bit of a wasted opportunity on the part of the company, London Classic Theatre, to bring this revival to sparkling life and make it relevant for a new generation of women.

Reviewer: [Suzanne Hawkes](#)