

British Theatre Guide

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Play Without Words

Devised by Matthew Bourne, music by Terry Davies
Theatre Royal, Newcastle, and touring
(2004)

At the post-show discussion, a member of the audience asked Matthew Bourne if he has invented a new *genre*. Oh the human need for pigeon-holing! We must categorise to understand - or perhaps simply to make us feel comfortable. (Sorry: hobbyhorse!) What Bourne has done is to place the piece somewhere on that continuum which stretches from dance (on the left!) to drama (on the right) with physical theatre (somewhere in the middle), and *Play Without Words* is somewhat to the right of dance but to the left of physical theatre. And if that doesn't show up the futility of trying to assign everything to a category or *genre*, then nothing will!

Based on the 1963 film *The Servant* by Joseph Losey, which starred Dirk Bogard and Edward Fox, *Play Without Words* does exactly what it says on the tin: it tells a story without using words. Instead, it uses movement, and the movement language Bourne has chosen is a fusion of dance and acting. It is this movement language which is new (although it was foreshadowed in his other work, for example in the ballet-based [Nutcracker!](#) or *The Car Man*, his reworking of the *Carmen* story) and, like all the best ideas, it is so obvious that one wonders why no one has done it before.

What he has done is to fuse acting techniques with dance, for - and this is what distinguishes the dance end of the continuum - each movement and gesture is counted, something which, as he says, no actor would ever do.

It is a fusion which works superbly well, but this is not the only "new" thing in the piece: what is really different is his tripling of the casting. Anthony (the central character), Glenda (his fiancée) and Speight (the "baddie") are all played by three performers, and Sheila, the housemaid, by two. For much of the play, all three couples (or larger groups) play out the same scene at the same time, occasionally in unison but more often looking at the situation in a different way: perhaps one group plays "before" and the third "after", or at times it is almost as if they are playing a kind of "what if?" game. One might almost describe it as a four-dimensional look at the situations.

It sounds terribly complicated and difficult to follow but the impressive thing is that it isn't: the story - and Bourne insists that he is first and foremost a storyteller - comes over with great clarity and depth. The depth is contributed to by a series of clever allusions: in the opening scene Speight sits alone playing the trumpet, just as Jimmy Porter does in the film version of *Look Back in Anger*, wearing what looks to be the same shirt! The music sounds similar, but it is so long since I saw the film I certainly wouldn't put *my* shirt on it!

The performances - and they were great! - were assisted by a very impressive set by Lez Brotherston (which just fitted on the Theatre Royal stage) and atmospheric lighting design by Paule Constable, and the cool jazz score (shades of Miles Davis and John Coltrane) tied up a superb package.

Bourne's work is always innovative and exciting and *Play Without Words* is no exception.

Philip Fisher reviewed the [original production](#) at the National Theatre in the 2002 Transformation season.

Reviewer: [Peter Lathan](#)