

British Theatre Guide

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Quality Street

J.M. Barrie
Finborough Theatre
(2010)

With help from the Finborough, Louise Hill seems to have made her current mission a revival of the fortunes of J.M. Barrie, who in his heyday was far more than merely "the Peter Pan man".

Following her production of [What Every Woman Knows](#) in the summer, Miss Hill now brings the utterly delightful *Quality Street* back into the limelight, 109 years after it was first seen - unusually for the Scot premiering on Broadway before it got to the West End.

Set in the war years of the early 19th Century, *Quality Street* opens in an unnamed English town as the army is recruiting in the period just before Trafalgar.

The street itself houses a large number of unattached ladies who each seem destined for a long spinsterhood, the only exception being the youngest Phoebe Throssel, charmingly played by Claire Redcliffe.

The dark-haired beauty, known to her jealous neighbours as "Phoebe of the ringlets" for obvious reasons, is merely awaiting the time when James Russell's dashing Doctor Valentine Brown pops the question making Phoebe Mrs VB.

When the critical moment comes, the physician announces, not a betrothal but his intention to join the army, from which he returns a decade later short of his left hand.

The play really takes off with the victory celebrations after Waterloo. Phoebe is by now an "old maid" of 30, playing at being a schoolmarm with the ineffectual assistance of her sister Susan, given just the right blend of innocence and supportive disappointment by Daisy Ashford.

Rather than meet the man for whom a flame still rages in her heart, Phoebe introduces and becomes her non-existent young niece, Livvy. She it is that charms not only the Captain but every other officer in town.

As both Shakespeare and Wilde discovered, if someone invents a non-existent saviour, they will both provide rich comic potential and also seemingly intractable problems, when the creator wishes to end the subterfuge.

While the set-up before the interval is fun, the high jinks afterwards are a source of continuous laughter before the inevitable ending.

The cast shows strength in depth, with Catherine Harvey playing the long-suffering servant with a heart particularly worthy of mention.

Praise must also be heaped on the Finborough's Resident Designer and Deputy Chief Executive, Alex Marker, who has excelled even his own high standards on this occasion.

Not only does Marker period-dress and find room for a cast of 14 in this tiny space, he also perfectly creates the blue and white room that the text requires, complete with ornaments and parquet floor. He then stylishly transforms it through three incarnations and, for luck, adds depth to scenes with a street that changes character in the dark and even becomes an exemplar of the celebrations that follow Waterloo.

It may be too much to suggest that a large-cast revival without any star names could transfer to the West End. However, while that is probably not on the cards, the redoubtable Louise Hill is rendering a real service by bringing J.M. Barrie back to the London stage and doing him proud with productions of this Quality. Roll on the next one.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)