

British Theatre Guide

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The Rivals

Richard Brinsley Sheridan
Southwark Playhouse
(2010)

The Rivals, and for that matter the genre of Restoration and soon after Comedy, is under-represented these days. Jessica Swale's lovingly compiled revival is a timely reminder that Sheridan and his ilk are still capable of filling a theatre with laughter and even the chance to reflect on sexual politics anew.

In a novel twist, the action is sandwiched between baroque re-workings by composer Laura Forrest-Hay of hits by Beyoncé and Adam Ant, which says much about the spirit of this production.

The cast is headed by some big hitters but shows strength in depth, so that even those playing the servants demonstrate strong acting talent, even if there is a suspicion that at least one member of the comic musical trio has not previously played the recorder since school days, if at all.

The plot, which is played out in Georgian Bath with appropriate costumes, could be regarded as bridging the gap between Shakespeare in comic mode, Congreve and Wilde, with its unsatisfactory wooing, mistaken identities and eventual multiply happy ending.

The central couple are the very assured Charity Wakefield's wealthy, wilful Lydia Languish, the kind of 17-year-old beauty that any man would love to hook (and three try); and handsome Captain Jack Absolute played by the jaunty Harry Hadden-Paton.

Their passions are mirrored by those of another young couple. Ella Smith, who made such a strong impression winning every award in sight in *Fat Pig*, is Lydia's cousin Julia, who should be attached to the woefully insecure Faulkland (Tom McDonald).

The ups and downs of this quartet's attempts to live and love happily ever after are hilarious, enhanced by the complications that Sheridan piles in true love's path.

The cowardly hick Bob Acres and rakish Irishman Sir Lucius O'Trigger (Christopher Logan and Frank Lavery respectively) give fine comic turns in different styles, as do several of the servants, led by Jenni Maitland's financially astute Lucy and Sam Swainsbury playing the put-upon Fag.

However, in *The Rivals* the two star parts are those of Sir Anthony Absolute and Mrs Malaprop. Robin Soans is a perfect frustrated and magisterial father, while Celia Imrie wallows in the vanity and misplaced language of one of the great literary creations of any age, a woman whose name has entered the language.

Jessica Swale has ensured that every cast member speaks with the clearest diction imaginable and acts in a mannered style appropriate to an eighteenth century work. This can seem a little overdone close-up in the relatively small space at Southwark Playhouse but perhaps she has her eyes on a West End transfer. I look forward to it.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)