

# British Theatre Guide

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## The Sugar Wife

Elizabeth Kuti  
Rough Magic  
Soho Theatre  
(2006)

*The Sugar Wife* has the power and simplicity of a biblical parable. It also has considerable depth and, on occasions, an excess of earnestness.

Designer Paul Keogan sets the tone with a bare wooden platform that represents not only the home of Martha, a syphilitic prostitute, but more unexpectedly that of the wealthy but self-abnegating Tewkleys, a husband and wife blessed with money but no offspring.

The play is set in Dublin in 1850 where the poverty is so marked that even a freed African-American slave regards Irish life as far harder than that in her own country.

The Tewkleys have every right to be happy. They have their deeply-held Quaker faith to support them and Samuel's tea and sugar business is thriving in a starving city and has made him a very rich man.

The development of his business suggests that he may be loosely based on Charles Bewley, progenitor of what has become a thriving Dublin phenomenon and the first man to bring tea to Ireland from China.

Barry Barnes plays Samuel who builds up an honourable business while buttoned-up wife Hannah (Jane Brennan), the pick of the cast in the title role, does her best for the community. She visits Martha and others in the dangerous but ironically named Liberties district of the city, distributing sympathy and moral rectitude but little in the way of alms.

Life at home is irredeemably dull for the couple who struggle to connect and have gone way beyond the time when carnal bliss was a pleasure for either.

Their lives change irrevocably, as a result of their commitment to the abolition movement in America. Following a thinly-veiled argument about her colour, they invite renowned public speaker and former slave Sarah Worth to stay with them while she is on her speaking tour in Ireland.

Susan Salmon's Worth arrives with Robert Price as the plain-speaking Yorkshireman Alfred Darby, great-grandson of the famous inventor. He has disowned his industrialist family, apparently because he disapproves of their indirect ability to make money from slavery but as much because of his contrary nature.

By the end of the two-and-a-half-hour play, this pair changes the lives of the Tewkleys forever. They do so in a surprising way, aided by Alfred's love of the new art of photography, which at this early point in its development was still daguerrotyping.

More bluntly, he happily reveals the couple's most intimate secrets to each other and, by releasing their sexuality and impregnating Hannah, gives them a chance to enjoy happiness as a family.

Under Lynne Parker's direction, the pacing is deliberately slow in the early part of the play, reflecting the barrenness of the life enjoyed by even the wealthiest Quakers in the middle of the 19th century. Things certainly pick up after the Americans arrive, both as Sarah speaks to the audience and Alfred probes the inner lives of their hosts.

By the end, *The Sugar Wife* has taken on some big subjects addressing not only slavery and poverty but in a fine speech towards the end, offering its support for the anti-globalisation lobby.

A visit from the Dublin-based Rough Magic company is always to be welcomed and marks a new venture for them, the inaugural production of the smaller scale 'Rough Magic Studio'.

This is a thought-provoking play, which is about so much more than the problems of one wealthy couple, rewards a little perseverance at the start.

**Reviewer:** [Philip Fisher](#)