

British Theatre Guide

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Tartuffe

Andrew Hilton and Dominic Power after Molière

Shakespeare at the Tobacco Factory

Tobacco Factory, Bristol

6 April–6 May 2017

All good things come to an end, sadly, or, in the case of Andrew Hilton's tenure as founder and artistic director of Shakespeare at the Tobacco Factory, with a smile on the face and gratitude for all he has achieved since the company's creation in 1999.

After the site, where 40% of the local population once made Wills cigarettes, was saved from demolition, Hilton launched regular spring seasons of classic plays in its intimate gallery that were to be among the most acclaimed theatrical ventures in the country.

Under his successor, STF is to shift its programme to autumn, meaning a wait until 2018 that will seem all the longer given the excellence of this farewell production.

Hilton and regular collaborator Dominic Power have joined forces to write an "English reincarnation" of Molière's great satire on hypocrisy and gullibility.

Government minister Charles Ogden, comfortable, complacent, three-piece suit and watch chain, has lost his sense of purpose and fallen under the spell of Tartuffe, New Age mystic and trader in his own brand of heroic misfortune.

Christopher Bianchi is a joy to behold as the wilfully blind Charles who finds ever more implausible excuses for the charlatan out to steal his money, his daughter, his home and his wife.

Giving everything away sets us free, he is assured, a moral that Mark Meadows's Tartuffe is keen to encourage in others, especially when the money goes to his own fund, charity status pending.

His hilarious sob-story, about finding his father dressed in his mother's frock while she was out on the game, is of course bogus, and the Hindi mantras he has taught his victim to chant are revealed to mean "some people will believe anything."

Half the fun is the obvious gullibility of the politician, surrounded by younger, wiser heads who see through the imposter. Apart from all that, the latter's appearance—gleeful grin, pointy beard, tufts of hair like horns—was enough for me. I've never met Old Nick personally, but I'd know him when I saw him.

The cast, many of them STF regulars, work together beautifully, with Saskia Portway as Charles's third wife Emma, Philip Buck as brother-in-law Clem, Daisy May as daughter Melissa, breezy newcomer Anna Eliasz as the traditional, canny servant Danuta, and Tina Gray—not a newcomer with nearly 2,000 parts in theatre and radio—as a redoubtable Dame Pamela.

The script, written mostly in verse, sounds natural, maintains a rhythmic momentum throughout and sparkles with wit that you listen hard not to miss... the pervs in lycra who pursue a Nissan

Micra, or Charles keeping a lid on his libidinous id.

My only regret was the inclusion of that stand-by caricature, the tabloid newspaper hack, whose appearance burst the reality that made even Tartuffe's wildest extremes seem believable. At least he was a reporter, not thankfully a theatre critic.

Reviewer: [Colin Davison](#)