

British Theatre Guide

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The Stepmother

Githa Sowerby

Chichester Festival Theatre

Minerva Theatre, Chichester

17 August–9 September 2017

Githa Sowerby's first full length play, *Rutherford and Son*, was a huge success. First produced in 1912 and concerning the Industrial North, which she knew well, it was in tune with the problems of industrial workers' rights and the the campaign for women's suffrage and caused a sensation at the time, not only for content but for her sympathetic depiction of each and every character. Her writing was compared to Ibsen and Shaw.

Her second play in 1923 (she wrote slowly) takes place in a seemingly affluent household in Surrey and begins with an ageing, widowed Aunt Charlotte quite happy at her role as 'unemployed dependent' completely controlled by a husband who managed all financial affairs allowing her 'pin money' at his discretion. "What more could I wish for?" she states complacently.

This beginning gives a little background introducing the characters—Aunt Charlotte, her widower son Eunace Gaydon, his two young daughters and a new addition: a young girl, Lois, who has just inherited a fortune, doesn't yet know it and is being blatantly manipulated by Eunace.

Moving swiftly along, black semi-transparent drops blur the scene as the house and occupants age over the next 10 years and, with a really nice touch, the two children lead in their older selves before disappearing for good.

The role of women is still very much in focus here with the injustice of being regarded as inferior in business affairs and Sowerby has her heroine Lois, now married to Eustace, running a very successful dressmaking business, a couture house known as Ginevra.

A very modern young woman, she also manages a household of two teenage children, a very elderly mother-in-law and a husband to whom, when a very young innocent girl, she has given Power of Attorney. Disaster looms when daughter Monica, engaged for a year, needs money to get married and no one can understand why her father will not give consent and refuses to discuss the matter.

Richard Eyre's production is beautifully staged with the black gauze drops descending for scene changes, effected easily and swiftly from living room to Ginevra's office and later to a book-lined bachelor flat (designer Tim Hatley). Dialogue is beautifully written, fleshing out every character, something which is taken to heart with superb performances making them live and causing the audience to care about what happens.

Ophelia Lovibond blossoms beautifully from shy, insecure, bewildered young Lois to a very confident and elegant business woman and a truly caring mother to her two stepchildren. Eve Ponsonby is a typical spirited teenager wanting her own way and Simon Chandler as solicitor Mr

Bennet is quietly serious and concerned about what he sees happening but frustratedly unable to do anything.

All are excellent but it is Will Keen's performance as Eustace which keeps the audience totally involved, his misogynistic remarks often causing gasps from the audience, but Sowerby hasn't made him exactly evil. His raging, uncontrollable temper covers the insecurities of a man who knows he is in the wrong but still ridiculously blames his wife for their troubles.

A very compelling, involving play, superbly presented and well worth bringing to light again.

Reviewer: [Sheila Connor](#)