

British Theatre Guide

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The Two Noble Kinsmen

John Fletcher and William Shakespeare

Royal Shakespeare Company

Swan, Stratford-upon-Avon

17 August 2016–7 February 2017

“Dear Will, We knowe thou art retyred, and all that, but young Fletch, thy successor, could do with a byt of helpe on his latest. We bethought to have anothyre Midsummer Night scene for rude Mechanicals, and someone lyke unto Hamlet’s mad Ophelia. And let’s do your olde wrong man in ye bedde trick—that always goeth down well.”

Thus I love to think Shakespeare got a call to collaborate with John Fletcher on what became *The Two Noble Kinsmen*.

The RSC’s Swan opened in 1986 with a season that included this rarely-performed pot-boiler of familiar, reprocessed ingredients, revived now for the theatre’s 30th anniversary. Its final lines are arguably the last Shakespeare ever wrote for the stage, so what are we to make of its closing sentiment to “leave you with dispute that are above our question”?

The tragi-comedy is set in ancient Greece, based on Chaucer’s 14th-century story of chivalry, to appeal to 17th-century audiences.

Which setting to choose? Hey, let’s do all of them, director Blanche McIntyre seems to have decided, and throw in the present day too: costumes range from Flash Gordon style ancient warriors to attendants in cardies, and the protagonists of the title take their duelling swords from a golf bag.

To be generous, that uncertainty may be McIntyre’s point, and using retractable cages to frame the action—much of it about repressive rules and repressed desires—works tolerably well.

Popular Jacobean sub-plots aside, the piece really concerns the bosom friendship then deadly rivalry of cousins Palamon and Arcite as they both fall—blindly, absurdly—for the same woman. Their oaths of loyalty transformed into enmity make the best scene in the play, performed brilliantly by James Corrigan and Jamie Wilkes, bouncing verbally and physically against the metal grilles.

Francis McNamee as their longed-for Emilia was burdened by being dressed variously as a Greek goddess and a cross between Pocahontas and Maid Marion. “I saw her first,” says Palamon. “You play the child extremely,” says Arcite. Courtly love? Satire? The dispute remains above question.

Even the music seems uncertain of its tone, opening with a ghastly low-grade musical number, followed by occasional avant-garde squeaks and troubadour songs.

Some of the spoken lines were as disjointed as the play’s overall construction, but Danusia Samal as the gaoler’s unnamed daughter was impressive throughout, and gave one of the best portrayals of a mad woman (viz. Ophelia reference above) I’ve ever seen.

A worthwhile curiosity for the curious.

Reviewer: [Colin Davison](#)