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The School for Scandal at Park Theatre

Reviewed by: Emrys D. Jones

At first glance, *The School for Scandal* seems an odd choice of play to feature in the opening season of North London's brand new Park Theatre. Everything else about the venue's publicity campaigns and its initial line-up of productions has emphasised its sleek modernity. A few minutes before the performance begins, one can hear several audience members wondering loudly whether they have made a mistake in coming to see such an old comedy. I trust that such reservations were quickly swept away by the energy and imagination of Jessica Swale's production. While not quite as raucous and exuberant (not to mention, divisive) as Deborah Warner's 2011 *School for Scandal* (at the Barbican), this is an exciting and entertaining piece of theatre. Swale has plenty of previous experience with eighteenth-century comedy, having previously directed *The Rivals*, *The Belle's Stratagem* and *The Busy Body* at the Southwark Playhouse. As with her acclaimed production of *The Belle's Stratagem*, this performance beguilingly splices original songs and pop culture references into Sheridan's eighteenth-century world, never in a gimmicky way but with a fine instinct for the work's enduring appeal and relevance.

Of the play's three main plot strands, it is the scandal school of the title which, surprisingly but usefully, is granted the least narrative force in this production. This is not to say that it is unimportant; far from it, the slanderous preoccupations of Lady Sneerwell and her intimates often attract the greatest laughter and applause, Michael Bryher stealing every scene in which he appears as a fantastically camp Sir Benjamin Backbite. But the production never dwells for too long on the practical effects or narrative pertinence of its gossiping chorus. Swale actively downplays the few moments at which Sneerwell's gang directly threatens the happiness of the main characters. On the one hand, this has the effect of slightly diminishing the character of Sneerwell herself; the insidiousness of her position and the perverse poignancy of her thwarted desires are rather overshadowed by the brash cruelty of her minions. At the same time though, the production is able to prioritise its other two plotlines: the troubled marriage of the mismatched Sir Peter and Lady Teazle, and the struggle for romantic and reputational dominance between the Surface brothers, Charles and Joseph. The fates of these characters never truly seem at the mercy of arbitrary tides of scandal. For all that their actions are the talk (and song) of the town, it is their own decisions, good and bad, which are allowed to drive forward the play.

If one were to quibble, one might argue that the Teazles of this production (played by Daniel Gosling and Kirsty Besterman) are not quite mismatched enough. The fundamental joke of Sheridan's plot – a familiar one from comedic tradition – concerns an older man taking a young wife, first thinking her dutiful, eventually seeing her restlessness and immaturity. There is no such obvious age gap between the performers in this production,

and even if there were, Swale does not seem interested in reducing the Teazles' marital problems to a simple matter of age versus youth. Lady Teazole's flirtation with infidelity and her eventual rehabilitation seem all the more meaningful here, precisely because she and her husband have always been more similar, in temperament as in age, than they realised.

It is in the rivalry of the Surface brothers, though, that one finds the production's emotional core and some of its most intriguing innovation. Yes, there are visual and aural gags that are more immediately striking – the use of a copy of *Fifty Shades of Grey* for Joseph Surface's reading material, for instance – but the most substantial and important change that Swale has made to her source material is in the character of Maria, the contested love interest and Charles' eventual bride. Maria has the potential to be one of the most insipid characters in eighteenth-century comedy. She is given very few lines by Sheridan, very little opportunity to convey to an audience her feelings or ideas. It is therefore refreshing to see her performed by Jessica Clark as boisterous and sulky. She growls in defiance of her guardian, Sir Peter Teazole. At one point, she flounces around the stage to a song that celebrates "bad boys". Maybe not the most subtle way to convey the character's inner life, but preferable by far to the sort of bland, objectified cipher that too often emerges in lazier productions.

The Surface brothers themselves are played with great relish by Harry Kerr (as Charles) and Tom Berish (as Joseph), the former never seeming straightforwardly heroic, the latter clearly as much self-deluded as intentionally villainous. The notorious "screen scene" (Act Four, Scene Three), in which Joseph tries and fails to conceal his liaison with Lady Teazole, is played adventurously, with a screen smaller and more mobile than the text implies. Earlier in the play, the scene in which Charles sells off his family portraits is likewise creative in its use of space. The three full-length mirrors lining the back of the stage become transparent panels in which cast members pose as the Surface ancestors. There is a hint of Hogwarts in the way these portraits respond to their own auctioning. For a play fixated on surfaces and their various possibilities, this magical manipulation of portraiture seems especially appropriate. It also helps to evoke the full significance of heritage and inheritance for these eighteenth-century characters.

While on the subject of the auction scene, it is also worth mentioning that Swale's production thankfully writes out all of the casual anti-Semitism of Sheridan's original text. While I am sure that it is possible to retain this material and treat it in a sensitive way, I have never seen a production of *The School for Scandal* that has been entirely successful in this. Deborah Warner's production, for all of its generosity and humanity in other areas, offered up the money-lender character, Moses, as a particularly repellent stereotype. Though no fan of gratuitous censorship, I was glad that Swale did not distract the audience with undue attention to the character's ethnicity or religion.

Accompanying the production was a beautifully-presented programme formatted in the style of an eighteenth-century periodical and entitled, appropriately, *The Daily Sneer*. The historical introduction provided in this document was a little confusing at points: Swale anachronistically mentions the 1777 play in the context of the French Revolution, and she also delves back into the seventeenth century unnecessarily in order to describe Charles II as “Bonny Prince Charlie”. These are minor problems though, and the programme is ultimately successful in illustrating for an unfamiliar, perhaps uncomfortable, audience, the full vibrancy and accessibility of eighteenth-century culture.

The Red-Handed Theatre production of The School for Scandal ran at the Park Theatre from 12 June to 7 July 2013 and runs at the Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds, from 11 July to 13 July.