Betrayal on Broadway

Betrayal, directed by Jamie Lloyd, presented at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre, October 19, 2019. Scenic and costume design by Soutra Gilmour, lighting design by Jon Clark, sound design by Ben & Max Ringham. Zawe Ashton (Emma), Charlie Cox (Jerry), Tom Hiddleston (Robert), Eddie Arnold (Waiter).

Jamie Lloyd's version of *Betrayal*, which transferred to Broadway in fall 2019, after a rapturously reviewed London production, offers a minimalist but emotionally resonant version of the play that embodies themes beyond those indicated in the title of the play and suggests new directions for Pinter's work on Broadway. The anti-naturalistic design and staging choices of Lloyd allow the play to breathe and expand while directing focus on to three unusually excellent actors. The only set pieces are two chairs and one table used variously in several scenes. The center of the acting space is a circular revolve, and around it another in the shape of a ring; these move in opposite directions. The most emotionally powerful use of these was in Scene 7: while Jerry and Emma cavort happily in their flat, turning counterclockwise on the inner revolve, Robert sits in a chair on the outer ring moving clockwise, hugging and leaning over his daughter (an actor who remains uncredited in the program). Lloyd has all the actors stay onstage, still and unblinking, even in scenes when they do not appear, so that we are aware the drama is happening to all three characters at once. In Scene 5 Jerry sits on the floor just a few feet away from Robert and Emma as Robert informs his wife he knows of her betrayal. Designers Soutra Gilmour and Jon Clark embrace shadow, creating weirdly extended silhouettes of the actors on the back and side walls, underlining the eerie, anti-naturalist atmosphere. The back walls (painted gray and tan with hints of pink) move forward to constrict the acting space which is also curtailed by carefully defined washes of light. Often the lighting from above is removed in favor of front lights directed upstage, so that we see the silhouette in sharper detail than the actor. In the last tableau of the play, the actors face away from us bathed in a dim yellow front light that makes their bodies appear like statues.

The costumes avoid all 60's and 70's styles. Their clothes are contemporary: Hiddleston's Robert wears tight-fitting black slacks, a high-necked shiny dark-gray t-shirt, and a black jacket, very 2019; Jerry dons a looser silver t-shirt and baggy black jeans. Emma wears a cotton blouse (appearing blue, gray, or pink according to the light thrown on it) with some frills on the chest and arms, and blue jeans. The actors wear only their one costume, permitting scenes to merge into each other without a break. This allows the emotional intensity of the play to flow undimmed throughout the entirety of its running time. The unchanging costumes subtly underline the characters as amalgams of all the different points in time we see them inhabit in the play. There is more than a hint of a Dantesque atmosphere in which the people we see on stage are the shades of their former selves.

When Jerry asks Robert if as Emma told Jerry, Robert and Emma were up all night agreeing to end their marriage, Robert replies, "That's . . . correct" the actor's added caesura emphasizing just how much Robert is in control of this moment, operating out of a space from which he almost pities Jerry (181; quotations in this review are from the 1981 edition of the *Complete Works: Four* from Grove Press). When in the same scene Jerry asserts that he was Robert's "best friend" (183), more simple words whose meaning is clouded by ambiguity, Robert draws another laugh with the line "Well, yes, sure," as each word is spoken more doubtfully but with exquisite formality. But underneath the point-scoring we can hear a larger question addressed by Robert *to himself* as he wonders about his own judgment, life, and affections. While this Robert has a commanding air, a chilly reserve, and undeniable sexual appeal, and Hiddleston perfectly captures the formal, stylized nature of the character's language, the play's highest acting moments are when he reveals the character's vulnerability and pain. This Robert has something

self-lacerating about him, an intellectual stance that one could imagine as initially charismatic and ultimately draining. In his long speech about Venice's American Express office, Robert verbally tortures his wife, yet the moment is underplayed and leavened with self-reproach and a bitter awareness that he has been forced into playing the supremely cliched role of a betrayed husband. Amidst the bitterness and cruelty, Hiddleston finds depth in the character as his conflicting emotions of hatred, loss, and confusion overwhelm him, and finally the emotions burst out as he cries so intensely we can see the snot run from his nose. As always in the case with acting, the proof is in the pudding: in the feeling generated and perceivable in the theatre audience. Hiddleston's Robert was simply magnetic, and his acting produced what I call the Pinter buzz: that moment when everyone in the audience is concentrating so intensely all we hear is the ambient sound human noise usually crowds out.

As Emma, Zawe Ashton's stage presence and body language are remarkable throughout. Tall and elegant, with a long, somewhat blank face, with a beauty that contains a hint of androgyny, she combines reserve and emotional intensity. Barefoot, she exudes vulnerability, often quivering with emotion, yet often standing with her toes on the ground and making small movements one might associate with ballet. These movements suggest both anxiety and self-display. Ashton has a trick (that doesn't come off as a trick) of alternating slow with rapid line deliveries, suggesting her own struggle to interpret her own experience for herself. In the Venice scene, she grabs and caresses Robert's arm, demonstrating that she still loves him. Perhaps the most notable aspect of her portrayal of the role is an abiding earnestness, the presence of a skeptical self-address in lines directed to and at her husband and her shadow husband. Her vocal address is not about scoring points or claiming status but about finding some way to assert and define herself amidst the necessary contingency and uncertainty of making life choices. Her line to Jerry in Scene 8 "Tell me . . . have you ever thought . . . of changing your life?" ((259) moves far beyond its obvious subtext to mean – well, almost exactly what the words say. The play takes on an existential flavor as it plays off intentionality versus habit and convention. Hemmed in by circumstance, struggling to trust, ascertain and actualize our wills, to what extent can it be said that are lives are truly under own control? Emma is right when she denies that the subject is "betrayal", or marriage, egotism, or deception. This version of the play reaches out beyond romantic issues to pose unanswerable questions about how we give – or try to give -- our lives meaning.

Often the character of Jerry is perceived as a weak link in the design of the play. Somewhat oblivious, perhaps a bit banal, he is the sort of character about which you can imagine his friends say something like, "Well, he's *affable*." The production plays up his lack of knowledge about what is happening around him, especially in Scene 2 with Robert, yet that scene gives us a sense that Jerry is undergoing authentic agony. Being silly doesn't make one's pain less painful. Seeing this production reminded me of something previous viewings had not: that he is a successful and perceptive editor. Charlie Cox did not lose track of this basic intelligence in building the character. Indeed, Jerry's easy compartmentalization of his life seems to have its own small but appreciable measure of wisdom (interestingly, he seems not all that upset by the apparent end of his friendship with Robert, who he says in Scene 1 he hasn't seen "for months.") As the play moves to its beginning/conclusion, which reveals him as a prime mover and not simply an appendage in this romantic triangle, more depth is added to Jerry. He is the one character – in a play where two characters are literary types and the third a gallerist -- who creates meaning and force out of the raw material of language. The need and ardor of his speech proclaiming himself "the reigning prince . . . of emptiness" (266) is stunning, raw, immediate. The shock of the speech is not just Jerry's barefaced audacity, nor the revelation that this beginning will lead to the protracted end we have just seen, but that Jerry creates a moment that lifts he and Emma out of time into the transcendent. It's not Yeats, and on the page the words do not escape cliché --but it works. It's a kind of poetry that does make something happen.

At the end of Scene 9, Lloyd has Robert naturalistically takes Emma's hand to lead her back to their wedding party. But then she stops and resists, as Jerry moves towards her, and the final tableau shows the hesitation and contradictions of Emma's life while linking back, at least in my mind, to Emma's melancholy line concluding Scene 1: "It's all all over" (176). There's nothing necessarily lasting in love or life, I thought leaving the theatre, only fitful glimpses of transcendence amidst the facts of entropy and change.