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The Country Wife review – Wycherley's rude classic gets a limp update

Southwark Playhouse, London

There are good moments in Luke Fredericks's revival – but relocating the action to the 1920s is an unnecessary, frustrating fiddle

Michael Billington

@billicritic

Fri 6 Apr 2018 04.05 EDT

Luke Fredericks prefaces this production of William Wycherley's 1675 comedy by saying he wants to blow the cobwebs off something "considered old and outdated". But considered by whom? This is one of the most popular and most frequently revived plays of its period. By relocating the action to the 1920s world of the bright young things, Fredericks sacrifices common sense to surface energy.

Wycherley's plot revolves around a rake, Horner, who feigns impotence to gain access to other men's wives, a ploy that succeeds with the rustic Margery Pinchwife and the urban Lady Fidget. But transposing the story to another era is pointless if you are going to preserve most of the local references and original language. A line such as "He's as jealous of her as a Cheapside husband of a Covent Garden wife" reeks of Caroline London. You also wonder why Horner goes to such trouble if he is living in a world, as this production implies, where anything goes: one point of Wycherley's play is to expose the hypocrisies of marriage in a supposedly monogamous society.

Fredericks and his designer, Stewart Charlesworth, who present the production under the banner of Morphic Graffiti, have certainly cottoned on to the fact that this is a play about sex – but even here they can't leave well alone. The evening starts with rumpy-pumpy behind a museum exhibit. The first act reaches its climax, in every sense, with the sight of Lady Fidget pleasuring herself in the Savoy tea-room to an aria that sounds like the Jewel Song from Faust. After this, the filthiest and funniest scene in English drama – where Lady Fidget goes to Horner's bedroom to examine his china, leaving him limp with exhaustion – is a total let-down. Lines that require the silkiest innuendo are shouted and screamed to the rooftops.

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That is in keeping with a production where more attention is paid to choreography than to text. Heather Douglas, as movement director, has the cast do a range of 1920s dances, including the charleston, the foxtrot and the Lindy hop while changing the furniture. The results are often startling but there is something badly wrong when a scene-change gets the evening's biggest applause. While Douglas's contribution is accomplished, it also harks back to old-fashioned West End period revivals where dinky set-changes were done by liveried, applause-seeking footmen. Plus ça change.

In keeping with the supposed behaviour of 20s hedonists, much of the acting is frantic and shrill, with two shining exceptions. Nancy Sullivan is fresh and funny as the closeted, rural wife who achieves self-fulfilment when exposed to the temptations of the town; she leaves the impression that the balance of marital power has changed for ever. Richard Clews is also very good as her abusive husband, who menacingly wields a teaspoon as if it were a carving knife. Eddie Eyre makes a decent enough Horner while suggesting the working-class world of *EastEnders*, in which he recently starred, rather than that of Mayfair salons. But although some cheered at the end (don't they always?), I felt depressed to see a great comedy turned into a senseless romp.