

REVIEW: The Country Wife

- Mermaid Theatre, London – Opened: Thursday, 13th December, 1990

“A bawdy Restoration comedy”

Having to laugh to order must, I suspect, be amongst the most burdensome of an actor's chores. Just think about it – night after night, being required to overflow with spontaneous mirth at something that was never, as likely as not, exactly a hoot in the first place. Anyone who wanted to witness the art of bad stage-laughing at its spellbinding worst, should've headed straight for the Mermaid Theatre and Richard Trethowan's otherwise concertedly lustreless production of 'The Country Wife'.

A possible defence, of course, was that the mirthful reactions of William Wycherley's corrupt, cynical Restoration gents and Sparkish (Michael Ward Allen), his witless fop, are not, for the most part, supposed to be genuine, but rather the spurious displays of the scheming and the stupid. What the male members of Threthowan's cast managed to hawk up, however, both looked and sounded rather different from this – more like what you would get if you were to round up a number of seriously depressed people and force them, at gunpoint, to impersonate the affected guffawings of insincere rakes.

The theatrical gods had scowled rather than smiled on this revival. To judge by the insert in the official programme, they had been positively vindictive towards it. To begin with, the rehearsal and preview period had been dogged by flu and viral infections. John Moulder-Brown who played the central amoralist, Harold Horner, had quit his sick bed just in time for the opening night whilst **PETER**, who played the deceived husband, Pinchwife, was absent for several weeks into the run (his place was taken by understudy, Keith Bridgewater) – initially with a bout of flu, which latterly turned into a viral infection.

Although **PETER's** character, Jack Pinchwife, finds himself cheated on by his new, young wife, he's not a particularly sympathetic individual. He was a drunkard and gambler before marriage, and is the archetypical jealous husband – not because he loves his wife, but because he believes he owns her. He's a latent tyrant, who's not adverse to violence. Not only does he treat his wife like she's his property, but also his sister, Alithea (Helen Masters), who's engaged to Sparkish. Pinchwife wishes to marry off for financial reasons.

Link to the Original Review:

<https://peterwyngarde.wordpress.com/2019/04/04/review-the-country-wife/>

Wycherley's tale of Horner – a life-long cynic about love, who lets it be understood that he's become impotent, thereby ensuring that his adulteries – including an intrigue with the naïve Margery Pinchwife (Kerry Higgins), needed guile, subtle playing if it wasn't to seem off puttingly coarse. The scornfulness of the man; his swingeing lack of scruples, and the way his deceit isolates him from any intimacy other than sexual were barely even hinted at by John Moulder Brown. Decked out in an unfortunately blond wig, he just looked bemused and uncomfortable. Charles II's raunchier subjects might've found it intrinsically amusing to seduce and then abandon woman after woman whilst pretending friendship with their husbands. They might've thought it hilarious to see such conduct lauded in the theatre. Latter generations are more morally squeamish, or liked to think they were.

Sadly, subtlety and guile were banished from the Mermaid. The characters tended to simply move about the stage, cackle with mirthless glee, and then rattle off their lines, imperious to any feeling that was not instant and obvious; oblivious to rhythm, wit or even sense.