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Review: Pride and Prejudice at Pittsburgh Public Theater

October 14, 2018 by Sue

The Pittsburgh Public is staging Kate Hammill's adaptation of one of the most beloved works of fiction *Pride and Prejudice*. In a rather madcap take on the games of love, eight actors whirl across the stage tackling at least 14 roles, costume changes, set changes, and more.

I enjoyed *Pride & Prejudice*, but I didn't love it. I loved the novel. I'm not quite a *Janeite* but my mind is racing back to the staging of *Jane Eyre this spring* by PICT and pondering the quintessential themes that draw us into the Austen (and Bronte) worlds.

Mr. Bennett, Mrs. Bennett, and Lydia were fantastic. This version lent a more endearing tone to these typically unsympathetic characters. Elena Alexandratos lent a lot of gravitas and experience as Mrs. Bennett. Emma Mercier brought the vivacity of 14-year-old Lydia, reminding us that immaturity and her young desire to simply be part of the games her older sisters played. She was also stellar as Lady Catherine DeBourgh, attired in widow's weed fused with a Maleficent style.

The absolute bright star of the show was Chris Richards who played three characters: George Wickham, Mr. Collins and a most fetching Miss Bingley. He lit up the stage in each role. He made me want to see more of Mr. Collins. Anyone who reads the novels knows why this is quite a feat.

During intermission, I confided in Laura that the gender fluid casting made me uncomfortable. The woman cast as Mr. Bennett was fine. The man cast as Caroline Bingley pulled it off because he seemed to adore her. But Mary Bennett? She was an ongoing joke about 'man in dress' as awkward, unlovable Mary. Not so very original or funny. She was a prop, like the mannequin or the red ball reminding us that this courtship dance is a game and some of the girls lose. The performance was not the problem; the character of Mary Bennett was simply superfluous humor. The actor was also Mr. Bingley and it was just as possible for a woman to play both roles and eliminate the snark. I don't think the farcical nature of the show offset this dehumanizing of Mary.

The performance was well-executed and lively. The quick repartee was occasionally indistinguishable, but I'm so familiar with the book that it didn't matter. I found myself losing interest during a key marriage proposal as I wondered how they would condense key scenes in the remaining allotted time. They did it quite well, but I suspect some like myself were reeling with a little shock at what felt to the playwrights cutting room floor.

It is important to note that this adaptation cast two women of color as the elder Bennett sisters (Ashley Bufkin and Simone Recasner.)The Director is also a woman of color (Desdemona Chiang.) The narrative didn't dive into the realities of racism in this Georgian Era, but simply illustrated that the truth universally acknowledged about the games of marriage do include all of us.

What struck me in a new way was the story of Lydia. Lydia listened to her sisters discuss marriage and courting, then made an impulsive decision, and tied herself forever to a reprobate. The family's honor was saved, but she was to be punished for the rest of her life ... because she listened.

She was 14 years old. A child bride. Saving her did not mean dissolving her ties with a man who took advantage of her; it meant cementing those ties and punishing her by partial banishment. There was very little in the way of acknowledging that her mother and sisters set her up for this terrible decision. The sadness of Lydia's situation hit me hard in her final scenes.

This certainly wasn't your typical theatrical performance. Those seated near us were openly befuddled by the use of aisleways as settings and the use of 8 actors to tell a 300 page story. The chit chat I overheard tended to be unhappy that so few local performers were used in the show and the contortions necessary to catch some of the scenes. These may reflect the changes coming to Pittsburgh Public Theater under the guidance of new Artistic Director, Marya Sea Kaminski.

It is a delightful theatrical experience. The new plot points that got into my head are what is supposed to happen – I'm grateful for new insight into this classic. And my companion who has never read the novel was able to follow the story and pick up the main themes quite well.



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I must disclose that I sent a Q&A to Simone Recasner at the behest of the Public who selected her to be interviewed. Ms. Recasner has been too busy entertaining out-of-town guests to honor her commitment to this in-town-blog. So there's that. Her decision not to respond is what delayed my review – I was waiting for her. It is disappointing that a queer female actor launching her career would be so dismissive of a queer female blog in a City with no dedicated queer media.

I like the O'Reilly Theater, but it is not my favorite. Little things like the lengthy time it takes to process credit/debit charges at the bar stand out. We had been at the Byham the night before and they were lightning swift. It is hard to get in and out of the bathroom and have time to grab a snack. I do like the new reusable cups. The reusable cups are an important theme for me. As a patron with hidden disabilities, there are things that I note which others might take for granted.

In sum, if you are a fan of Jane Austen, see the play. If you are curious about why people love this novel, see the play. If you enjoy good rollicking farce, see the play.

For a more traditional and experienced review, see what my colleague Ted Hoover had to say on the Pittsburgh Current.

Pride and Prejudice continues through October 28. Pittsburgh Public Theater, Downtown. 412-316-1600. ppt.org

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