



STOPPARD'S MODERN ENGLISH CLASSIC *ARCADIA*: (left to right) Billy Crudup, Lia Williams, Raul Esparza, Grace Gummer. Photo: Carol Rosegg

Theater Review

Uneven revival of talky, obtuse *Arcadia*



Arcadia

Written by Tom Stoppard

Directed by David Leveaux

Through June 19, 2011

Ethel Barrymore Theatre

243 West 47th Street

212-239-6200

www.ArcadiaBroadway.com

By David NouNou

After seeing Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, I went home and looked up the definition of a critic, and here are the definitions on the Web:

- a person who is professionally engaged in the analysis and interpretation of works of art
- anyone who expresses a reasoned judgment of something
- someone who frequently finds fault or makes harsh and unfair judgments

So, as a theater critic, my job is to professionally analyze and interpret a theatrical piece, express reasonable judgment, and frequently find fault and make harsh and in my opinion "fair" judgments. However, in the immortal lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Tom Stoppard?"

Knighted in 1997 as Sir Tom Stoppard, winner of four Tony Awards for Best Play of the Year, more than any other playwright: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in 1968, *Travesties* in 1976, *The Real Thing* in 1984 and *The Coast of Utopia* in 1997, Mr. Stoppard is a prolific playwright and one of the most renowned and respected writers in the world, which brings us to his brilliance and his use and command of the English language, all of which are phenomenal. So

why is it that, every time I see a Stoppard play, I feel I am back in the 9th grade, having to take the dreaded history or algebra test?

Set in the main room of an English estate in Sidley Park, *Arcadia* starts in 1809 where Septimus Hodge (Tom Riley), tutor to Thomasina Coverly (Bel Powley), the young mistress and student of the estate, has to explain to her the meaning of "carnal embrace." Well, that is pleasant enough. In comes Thomasina's mother, Lady Croom (Margaret Colin), lady of the estate; Ezra Charter (David Turner) guest at the estate whose wife (unseen in the play) has dallied with most everyone on the estate, especially Lord Byron (yes, *the* Lord Byron), also unseen.

The same room is used in the present day, where rival authors Bernard Nightingale (Billy Crudup) and Hannah Jarvis (Lia Williams) are there debating and trying to piece together whether Lord Byron stayed at the manor on that eventful period through mislaid letters in a book of poems written by hack poet Ezra Charter, and how this book ended up in Lord Byron's possession in 1816. Along the way, dalliances are taking place, and the modern-day people are trying to figure and sort all that went on in 1809. Naturally, all sorts of different theories pop up until the end when the past and the present will eventually converge on each other. The current owner of the manor Valentine Coverly is dealing with Thomasina's theories of probabilities and patterns, which he is working on in the present day. He then discovers her writings and drawings, which he downloads in his commuter, only to realize that her genius was way ahead of its time. For good measure, throw in talk about algorithms, chaos theory, and laws of thermodynamics and history of English gardening and landscaping, Hermitage and hermits and you are left with a lot to think about. This is the professional analysis and interpretation of the piece. Moving to reasonable judgment and finding fault and making harsh and fair/unfair judgments are next.

To do an effective Stoppard revival, you need a uniformly good cast (hopefully British) who at least have a command of the accent and make it all believable. The accents here were from every region in the USA, and not from Derbyshire, England. Only Tom Riley, as the tutor, Bel Powley as his student, and Lia Williams the modern-day literary writer, have this command because they are British and come off best. Billy Crudup comes off as narcissistic and shrill; Raul Esparza can read the Yellow Pages and make it sound glorious, but falters here as too impassive; and Margaret Colin as Lady Croom fails in both accent and grasp of her aristocratic station. The rest of the cast in this interminable evening just come off as annoying. The lack of cohesive direction just made the evening seem longer than the two hours and 50 minutes it actually was.

Maybe my viewpoint of *Arcadia* may be a little skewed, because just the night before I saw and had to review *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert the Musical* with my editor, and despite some of its flaws, I was thoroughly entertained and delighted. A must-see show. Naturally, theater can come in all forms, be it musicals, dramas, comedies, and revivals of all three and being people have different tastes may enjoy all or any of them. For some, highbrow, nonstop babbling may be their

cup of tea and there the viewer may glean what they want from it no matter how ambiguous. I, on occasion, have been known to like highbrow material myself. However, when on the same night I have to deal with algorithms, theories of probabilities and patterns, chaos theory, laws of thermodynamics, and history of English gardening and landscaping— whoa, stop all this merriment; I got a severe headache from just concentrating on what the players were talking about and trying my best to make sense of all that gaseous babbling.

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Editor's Note: www.StageZine.com, celebrating our 1-Year Anniversary on the Internet. We want to express our gratitude to all the theater PR professionals, industry organizations, and, most of all, our readers, followers, and fans for their continued support and kind words throughout the past year, helping make www.StageZine.com a success.

Broadway Listings

NouNou On Broadway

Broadway Capsule Reviews by David NouNou

DRAMA & COMEDY REVIVALS



VERBOSE STOPPARD CLASSIC *ARCADIA*: (left to right) Bel Rowley, Raul Esparza, Lia Williams, Tom Riley. Photo: Carol Rosegg



ARCADIA

By now, every theatergoer knows that Tom Stoppard is a genius. However, he can be too erudite for mainstream audiences who just want to go to the theater for an entertaining evening without having to endure a convoluted history lesson. To do an effective Stoppard revival, you need a uniformly good cast (hopefully British) who at least have a command of the accent and make it all believable. The accents here were from every region in the USA and not from Derbyshire, England. Only Tom Riley, as the tutor, Bel Powley as his student, and Lia Williams, the modern-day literary writer, have this command because they are British and come off best. Billy Crudup comes off as narcissistic and shrill. Raul Esparza can read the yellow pages and make it sound glorious, but he falters here as too impassive, and Margaret Colin as Lady Croom fails in both accent and grasp of her aristocratic station. The rest of the cast in this interminable evening just come off as annoying. The lack of cohesive direction just made the evening seem longer than the two hours and 50 minutes it actually was.

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