



HEARTBREAK STATION: Hannah Yelland in *Brief Encounter* at Studio 54.
Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

Noel Coward's *Brief Encounter* both touching & amusing

Brief Encounter

Written by Noel Coward

Directed by Emma Rice

Through December 5, 2010

Roundabout at Studio 54

254 West 54th Street

(212-719-1300), www.RoundaboutTheatre.org

By David Nounou

In Noel Coward's classic *Brief Encounter*, we experience three phases of love: The young (foolish and giddy), the middle-aged (cautious and sublime), and the old (tawdry and clumsy). It is the middle-aged love that is at the core of this lovely, delicate piece.

Based on the ethereal 1946 Noel Coward movie, with Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard as the star-crossed lovers; here, Laura (Hannah Yelland) and Alec (Tristan Sturrock) are their stage counterparts. They are the midlife couple that both run into each other in a restaurant area at a train station while waiting for their respective trains. He is a doctor and married, about to embark on a long journey to South Africa; she is a housewife surviving a stoic English marriage. Through numerous encounters at this waiting area, their respect for each other eventually grows into love but the type that will never be consummated or complete. After all, this is Britain in 1938, and responsibility, obligation, and family matters always come first and foremost.

Besides the heart-tugging story at the core, visually there is the projection design by Jon Driscoll and Gemma Carrington that is visually arresting. They evoke the time and the mood of 1930s Britain. They have to be seen to be truly appreciated. I can't honestly say that I appreciated all the sight gags and the musical numbers inserted to depict a UK music-hall format. At times, they were too many and this diminished the real reason of being there. The rest of the cast was too broadly drawn and it felt like they were sometimes mugging for laughs. I reservedly praise Emma Rice's direction. Sure, she gave the story a lift but she inserted way too many sight gags for this delicate piece. A similar updating was done to Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps*, also a Roundabout production. There it was done moderately and wisely, and it added rather than detracted from the thematic foundations of the piece.

Ms. Yelland and Mr. Sturrock are perfectly matched as the lovers. Although their affection for each other is that of a once-in-a-lifetime, genuine, all-consuming love, they know what their ultimate sacrifice will have to be. We sit in anguish with them at the station as they have those last few fleeting moments together to say their final goodbyes, only to be interrupted by an acquaintance of Laura's. He leaves helplessly to catch his train, and she eventually ends up home, broken and desolate and to be welcomed by her dreary husband and exist in her equally dreary home and life. After all, this was 1938 and people lived up to their vows and responsibilities. Oh,

the look of desperation on Mr. Sturrock's face as he leaves without properly saying goodbye to the woman he loves and will probably never see again, and Ms. Yelland's devastated face as she takes those horrid steps into her home/prison. Noel Coward's depiction of unrequited love at its best remains timeless and relevant.

David Nounou is the Senior Theater Critic and Managing Editor of www.StageZine.com

Published September 30, 2010

Reviewed at Second Night Press Performance on September 29, 2010

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'CLASSIC COWARD': (left to right) Tristan Sturrock (shadow) & Hannah Yelland in Roundabout's revival of Noel Coward's 'Brief Encounter.' Photo: Joan Marcus



BRIEF ENCOUNTER

Based on the 1946 movie written by Noel Coward, Emma Rice has taken the core of the story between two married people who accidentally meet at a train station and start a once-in-a-lifetime love affair that will never come to fruition. The star-crossed lovers are Laura (Hannah Yelland), married, mother and unfulfilled; and Alec (Tristan Sturrock) a doctor, father and someone totally adrift. Their story has the sublime goings on of what will

eventually be a thwarted love affair, along with magnificent projection designs by Jon Driscoll and Gemma Carrington.

However, director Emma Rice has also inserted a lot of music-hall humor, an orchestra, puppets, and interspersed it with young love (eager and foolish), and old love (clumsy and tawdry). Both seem common in contrast to the beautiful and sublime love shared by Laura and Alec. Ms. Rice has so many ideas to make this a visual treat that it sometimes takes away from the reason why we are there. The supporting cast is too brash, loud—and mugging desperately for laughs, and it only deviates from the beauty of the piece. In this case, less would have been more. Between the projection designs and Ms. Yelland's and Mr. Sturrock's exquisite performances, it is worth the time spent experiencing this all-too-brief encounter.

STUDIO 54, 254 West 54th Street, (212-719-1300).

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