



FATHER & DAUGHTER DISCORD: (left to right) David Strathairn & Jessica Chastain in *The Heiress*.
Photo: Joan Marcus



Theater Review

The Heiress

Star-studded revival lacks chemistry, but drama still riveting

THE HEIRESS

Written by Ruth and Augustus Goetz

Directed by Moisés Kaufman

Through February 10, 2013

Walter Kerr Theatre

219 West 48th Street

New York, NY

(212-239-6200), www.TheHeiressOnBroadway.com

By David NouNou

Written in 1947 and set in 1850 in a Washington Square townhouse in New York, one might expect *The Heiress* to be a moth-riddled melodramatic play, but to anyone familiar with this drama, one cannot help but marvel at how well written and constructed this show is indeed. It is no wonder that it gets revived frequently, because, if properly done, the show can soar to stratospheric heights, as was the case of the 1995 version starring Cherry Jones, Philip Bosco,

and Frances Sternhagen.

Considering that all the action occurs in Dr. Sloper's front parlor of his sumptuous townhouse, Derek McLane's set this go round has certainly provided us with a gorgeous one. Dr. Sloper (David Strathairn) is rich and successful, and lives with his spinsterish daughter, Catherine (Jessica Chastain), and invites his widowed sister Lavinia Penniman, (the brilliant Judith Ivey), to come and live with them to look after Catherine and assist her in the welfare of the house. As we shall soon discover, the relationship between father and daughter is strained at most times and filled with resentment.

Their problem arose when Catherine's mother died when giving birth to Catherine and Dr. Sloper has never forgiven her for that. For her mother had beauty, charm, grace and wit, yet Catherine has none of these attributes. Catherine is painfully shy, timid, and cannot behave properly in front of people. Hence, Lavinia has been asked to stay to improve the young lady's demeanor.

Into this scene enters Morris Townsend (Dan Stevens), a bounder and a cad who immediately starts wooing Catherine and wants to marry her. Since Catherine has never known love before, she does not realize what Morris' real motives are and immediately accepts his proposal of marriage after only knowing him for two weeks. However, these turn of events do not sit well with the doctor who can never believe that a handsome and penniless man like Morris could ever see anything else in Catherine other than her inheritance and a means to live off her money because the young man has no prospects of ever finding a job.

The setup, although familiar as written by Ruth and Augustus Goetz, is formidable. The dynamics they present between father and daughter is palpable: hardhearted unforgiving father and an innocent, painfully shy uncomfortable young lady with no wit, drab and bleak as a gray rainy day. In this mix throw in cruelty, resentment stubbornness, lovelessness, mercenary qualities and deception, and you have got a huge cauldron brewing.

All the ingredients are there, but the one essential element that is missing is chemistry between the three major characters. Oscar nominee Ms. Chastain (for *The Help*), who was in every major Hollywood or indie movie in 2011, is making her Broadway debut here.

A lovely actress on the screen, but looking ghoulish with her messy wig and scary makeup, Ms. Chastain is merely reciting her lines; there is no shading or life to her delivery. Her scenes with her dad are shrill and there is no buildup to her relationship with Morris.

David Strathairn, as Dr. Sloper and Catherine's father, is one-dimensional, lacks bite, and his dry-as-toast delivery is a shame because he is an adept stage actor. There is no shading to his

character, no false charm, calculating menace, or slow-brewing cruelty; all one sees is the superficial resentment in a monochromatic delivery.

We now come to the hardest character to swallow, Dan Stevens (of “Downton Abbey” fame) as Morris. Morris must be played with subtlety, and we must never be sure whether he truly loves Catherine or if he is only after her money. Part of the tension has to be his seemingly genuine ardency for Catherine. I can tell you there is no guesswork here. Only a fool would not know what is his motivation here. Unfortunately, for these three leads, there are few sparks between them. They are totally mismatched and bring out neither the best nor even the good from each other.

The exception of the evening is the wonderful Judith Ivey as Lavinia. Her performance fills the stage of the Walter Kerr Theatre and there is not one false note in it. She is a veteran actress who gives meaning to every word she utters. She combines fluttery zeal and sensibility to perfection. There are two other pleasing performances: Caitlin O’Connell as Elizabeth Almond, Catherine’s other aunt; and Dee Nelson as Mrs. Montgomery, Morris’ widowed sister. Although their parts are not that big, they make their presences felt.

Although it is not a perfect revival and the main reason to see this show is for its three stars, do not be fooled. The real reason to see *The Heiress* is Judith Ivey and a wonderfully taut play that can still pack a dramatic punch in 2012.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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