

Staging a jane austen romance by director geordie brookman

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Comical. Farcical. Satirical. State Theatre Company hilariously performs Kate Hamill's adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility* in their fast-paced production of this classic Jane Austen romance. Set in the late 18th century England, themes of marriage, gossip, social class, love, and family are explored. Director Geordie Brookman invites the audience to fall in love with this frivolous story of two Dashwood sisters – the sensible Elinor (Anna Steen), and the dramatic Marianne (Miranda Daughtry). Together, their reduced social-standing and financial troubles following the recent death of their father, remind the audience that there is only one way to resolve their issues – find a husband!

With the clever design and use of the set, costumes and props, Brookman admirably transports the audience into a single magnificent, large, high-panelled ballroom, with nine-candle holders mounted at identical intervals, casting a warm, golden glow over the perimeter wall of the stage. As the curtain rises, the audience are instantly drawn towards the colossal chandelier hanging from centre stage, exquisitely adorned with white ostrich feathers. During every scene, the chandelier emanates numerous shades of sharp and pastel hues, magically transforming the three-sided wall. The play commences rather peculiarly – two actors roller-skate from opposite ends of the stage, wearing large multi-coloured bonnets against their unembellished, yet naturalistic white costumes. The audience now watch baffled, as the characters unfurl a long, rectangular sign elucidating in cursive the title of the production. This melodramatic convention is followed throughout the play with various characters riding tricycles with large place cards, cleverly illustrating the location of a new scene, hilarity modern tunes are heard from

ukuleles and kazoos and a human clock says “ tick-tock,” signifying the passage of time. This rapidity also mirrors the swirling emotions of the Dashwood girls when they are left penniless by the selfishness of their brother John (Dale March) and his avaricious wife Fanny (Lizzy Falkland). Moreover, halved coconut shells intimidate the clacking of horse hooves, whilst each door reveals a gossip ardently eavesdropping in on conversations. As such, the Greek chorus are an essential physical device used to provide the audience with further insight into what is going on in the lives of the central characters. Ultimately, through Brookman’s ingenious amalgamation of the set, costumes and props, the audience grow habituated to the incongruous, yet highly amusing events occurring onstage.

In the opening scene, Brookman skilfully creates understated humour through impeccable timing, acting and direction of the production. As such, chairs slide freely across the stage towards a large, wooden table, halting with perfect accuracy and precision to land neatly under Elinor’s descending buttock. These swift transitions continue throughout the production, and not one passes without a waggish chuckle from the audience. As a result, these directional conventions effectively set the predominately light-hearted and playful tone of this production for all audience members.

Falkland’s double dip as the diabolical Fanny and the panache Mrs. Jennings is highly commendable. Particularly, her ability to use a higher language register for the boisterous yet warm-hearted Mrs. Jennings, enables the audience to easily differentiate between these two characters. Whilst Mrs. Jennings thrives on matchmaking and innuendo, Fanny is the physical

representation of the spoiled and selfish women of Austen's time. Her pretentiousness is especially evident in her desire to preserve her money, prestige and reputation by manipulating John to think that the Dashwood girls should incur as little money as possible. Hence, the universal yearning for financial security and gossip in this era takes a central focus through Falkand's magnificent interpretation of Fanny and Mrs. Jennings.

At the heart of this performance, Brookman aimed to explore both the exhilarating and painful side to love through the use of specific music, characters, lighting and costumes. With brooding tension, Marianne perches on the edge of the bed in her room, her eyes carefully following every word on the letter she receives from John Willoughby (Rashidi Edward), an unusually handsome young man. The audience watch intently as her hands quiver slightly, whilst her shoulders begin to slouch, effectively physicalising her anguish and hefty heartbreak. At the same time, the garrulous gossipers gradually tiptoe towards the bed, reminding the audience of the power of word of mouth in this time period. Approaching the bed, expeditious eccentric music from a grand piano moulded in the right corner of the stage cuts through the silence, whilst coruscating white lighting pervades the stage, as Marianne's bed spins and rotates, emblematically mimicking how giddy she feels after reading the dreadful news. Abruptly, the bed halts and Marianne is seen sinking her head into the pillows of the bed sheets, crying hysterically. Dressed in white, Marianne is an innocent young girl who does not conceal her affection for Willoughby. Hence, her costume embodies "sensibility," which juxtaposes the prudence of Elinor's "sense." These stage

elements – music, characters, lighting and costumes, assist to create a sharper depiction of Marianne’s idealised notions of love, therefore effectively enhancing the audience’s sympathy for her situation.

Lighting, acting, music, The most unforgettable moment unfolds as Anne Steele (Caroline Mignone) convincingly plays a vulgar and tactless young lady. Leaning over the arm of a chestnut antique chair, she enthusiastically whispers a “ family secret” in Fanny’s ear, reminding the audience that not all of the Dashwood family are trustworthy and loving. Immediately, white lighting beams over the stage, representing the exposure of a secret, whilst Falkland effortlessly captures Fanny’s disgust – her eyes become wide with horror. Her mouth drops opens, her face gaunt and immobile. Even her fists clench with blanched knuckles. As this scene approaches its climax, the audience observe as piercing screams tear through the air like shards of glass, shattering the taciturnity on stage. The scream comes again, frantic and terrifying. A third scream protrudes from Fanny’s mouth, full of hysteria and disbelief. Bewildered, Lucy Steele, (Rachel Burke) Anne’s younger sister from no fortune, steadily meanders on stage. Precipitously, Fanny advances towards Lucy, fists tightly balled. To underscore this action, a gossipier gravitates towards the wings, riotously playing a ukulele, the outlandish song intensifying as the two girls convene centre stage slapping each other in slow motion, whilst waves of undulating strobe lights impale the stage. Together, these highly stylised features have been adopted in association with each other to vividly underscore this nonsensical and ludicrous scene, all the while eliciting genuine belly laughs from the audience. MENTION

DIRECTOR INTENT AND DIRECTION – was obviously executed by the actors and technical elements.

As *Sense and Sensibility* approaches its climax, theatrical elements including sound, lighting and acting combine to underscore Daughtry's superb portrayal of the hyper sensitive Marianne, particularly when she marches out of the cottage. The booming rumble of thunder intensifies, enabling the audience to envisage bolts of lightning, streaking the stormy sky with flashes of radiance. As dark blue lighting materialises onto the stage, it effectively foreshadows Marianne's melancholy and miserable mental state, emphasising how heartbreak can be devastating. This naturalistic portrayal of the romantically inclined Marianne is unreservedly convincing throughout. With her arms firmly wrapped around herself, Marianne treads forward, shrieking Willoughby's name, searching helplessly into the audience as if expecting a response. Abruptly, she begins to drop to the floor. At the same time, two gossipers raise her horizontally towards the ceiling, effectually representing how she is too weak and drenched from the rain to even support her own weight. However, when Colonel Brandon (Dale March) an older bachelor, rambles on stage, without vacillation he carries Marianne in his arms, like a baby that is too feeble to walk on its own. As Marianne lies impotently on her bed, gossipers stand behind her, incessantly reminding the audience of their ubiquitous presence within the plot. The amalgam of lighting and sound efficaciously conveys the intensity of Daughtry's performance in expressing Marianne's childish and interminable quest to find love, in spite of the cost. As such, Daughtry's impressive depiction of

Marianne reminds the audience that finding love isn't always easy, however pure and ideal relationships are also not impossible to find.

Brookman's latest farcical but nevertheless moving rendition turns Jane Austenian tradition on its head. Using a variety of non-verbal dramatic techniques such as lighting, body language, facial expressions, symbolism, props, sound effects and stage directions, State Theatre Company is bursting with exceptional representations of the numerous characters; ultimately reminding the audience of the value of speaking from your heart as well as the danger of excessive sensibility.