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"Lady Windermere's Fan" at Cal Shakes

Inside Scoop discussion offers glimpse into creative process

By Lou Fancher

Playwright Oscar Wilde was a master of secrets and a maestro extraordinaire when it came to timing their release. In "Lady Windermere's Fan," subtitled "A Play about a Good Woman," telling (and not telling) tells all about late 1800 society's absurd-to-deadly-serious fixation with appearances, morality, socio-economic class, and the like. As the play opens, the title character is preparing for a party and learning of her husband's infidelities. Inexplicably - from Lady Windermere's vantage point - her husband insists on inviting Mrs. Erlynne, his lover, to the evening's ball. During the course of the four-act comedy, betrayals and birthing truths (Mrs. Erlynne is, in fact, Lady Windermere's mother) lead to a misplaced fan, a heroic "rescue" in the form of multiple lies, and professions of undying marital love, if not honesty.

For actress Emily Kitchens (Lady Windermere), it's a plum role. For Cal Shakes artistic director Jon Moscone, it's a chance to invite Christopher Liam Moore, fresh from Oregon Shakespeare Festival, to apply what Moscone says is Moore's "acute psychology" to directing a classic. For set designer Annie Smart, it's an opportunity to expand upon French artist James Tissot's "Too Early," a painting in which guests who've arrived awkwardly early at a party, gather in embarrassed, coifed clusters.

Dramaturg Philippa Kelly led off a July 29 Inside Scoop discussion - one of the theater troupe's free preview panels held at the Orinda Library a few weeks before each Cal Shakes production begins - by asking Kitchens what attracted her to the role.

"This woman has an incredible heart," Kitchens answered. "Over the 24 hours of the play, she has to re-evaluate what it means to have a good heart. It's growing up in 24 hours."

Kitchens said Moore refers to the play as "heaven on a stick," perhaps causing Kelly to provide an example of paradisiacal casting: "Danny Scheie plays the Duchess of Berwick and one other female role. That's going to be a treat," she laughed. The Bay Area favorite is familiar to most audiences for his comic portrayals, which often culminate in a unique hybrid: alternative, gender-blending, hilarious-tragic characters.

The set model on display was all angles: black, reflective flooring etched with grid patterning; ins-and-outs amplified by multiple doorways; crystal chandelier with cut glass throwing shards of light on the cast. The Bruns amphitheater is 80 feet wide and creating intimacy is a challenge: Smart's flat-panel set dissects the vast space and creates perfect hidey-holes for secret encounters and liaisons. Decorative flourishes on the walls mask the harshness; much like the Victorian-era dress on display from costume designer Meg Neville that will camouflage the determination of the play's steely female characters.

"We backed up from the triangular skirts, big sleeves and flat hats of 1882, the year the play was written," Smart said, demonstrating how the big skirts were gathered and pulled back to form a "flirtatious backside with a lot of bootie." You can flirt like nobody's business, she suggested, saying, "It's a peacock kind of thing - for women."

Moscone said the cast's work on the text is a collaborative, ongoing venture. Kelly and vocal coaches help the actors with pronunciation and Wilde's "wordy, endless" sentences. "The goal is not to cut the sentences, but to structure them so they sound natural," he explained.

American actors tend to stress most words in a sentence ("That makes it sound like molasses," Moscone said), but the British stress two words in each sentence and throw the rest away. "Actors throw words away so that you'll chase them, not so they get lost," Smart interjected. And Moscone agreed, adding that speaking with too much emphasis is "wasted energy."

Kitchens finds an organic way into the text's convoluted passages: "I see a line that looks like a paragraph on the page and I analyze why she goes on and on. At times, it rides melodrama."

Audience questions were sparse, but the panel's answers, revealing.

Kitchens auditioned from Georgia via video tape. Her mother read the alternative roles for the "three hefty scenes" she submitted. Moscone said the key to Wilde's comedy is playing it like it's not a comedy. Kitchens likened Wilde to Chekov, tossing ambiguity into the discussion. Smart suggested Wilde wrote about women in a parallel, timeless manner.

Moscone closed the event, promising Moore's direction would "pull out (the characters') modernity and make them no longer historical relics, but revelatory."

"Lady Windermere's Fan," presented by California Shakespeare Theater, opens tonight, Aug. 14 and runs through Sept. 8 at the Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way (off Highway 24), Orinda. For information, call (510) 548-9666 or visit www.calshakes.org.

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