

## REVIEW: Wives As They Were at The Haymarket

9:57am Thursday 25th September 2008

By Joanne Mace

This sparkling comedy is just the ticket for the first days of autumn.

Despite my having no idea what the evening would hold, I was delighted to find that Theatre Royal Bury St Edmond's adaptation of Elizabeth Inchbald's mouthful of a play, in association with Anvil Arts, is a fabulous combination of Jane Austen, the Regency romance novels of Georgette Heyer and the best in BBC costume drama.

Kit Surrey's stunningly simple set boasts merely two Perspex chairs and seven Perspex boxes, out of which emerge our characters, as if coming to life at a museum. The effect is as if they have been preserved in time, and have now been reanimated for our viewing pleasure, in keeping with Theatre Royal's stated aim to 'restore the repertoire'. Elizabeth Inchbald, who was born 22 years before Austen, wrote 18 published plays, but most students of English literature may have never previously heard of her.

*Wives*, which was first performed in 1797, opens and closes with a rhyming monologue. The opener promises "such theatre stuff as cannot be ignored", and that's what is immediately delivered in a wonderfully zesty first half.

Miss Maria Dorrillon (an impassioned Laura Doddington) and Lady Mary Raffle (a very Jennifer-Ehle-as-Elizabeth-Bennet Ursula Early) are causing concern for Maria's caretaker Mr Norberry (Michael Burrell) with their wild behaviour, and their flirting and spending. Maria is waiting for her father (Tim Frances) to return from India to bail her out, and until then, she's warding off the advances of the earnest Sir George Evelyn (Alexander Caine).

Lord Priory (John Webb), who comes to stay with Mr Norberry, has some ideas for the way to handle the female of the species. He tells the men, in an absolutely hilarious sequence, how he has managed to train his wife, poor old Lady Priory (Joannah Tincey), to behave as he wants. He wakes her up in the early hours to tire her out so that she'll want to be in bed every night by ten PM, and not want to go to any parties or enjoy herself in any way.

All manner of chaos occurs, then, when roguish Mr Bronzely (James Wallace) embraces her by accident in the dark, and the hunt is on for the culprit.

Aside from the hilarity of Lord Priory's recipe for "conjugal sunshine", there is so much there to delight audiences in this highly enjoyable, laugh-out-loud funny production. Performances are, across the board, fantastic, but of course the rogue's going to run away with the show and a disarming and outrageously appealing Wallace makes us ever more deliciously complicit in all of Bronzely's schemes.

Part of the plot - who's the daddy - is given away immediately by the cast of characters listed in the programme, but not remotely to the detriment of the drama, which takes a more serious turn in act two. And, this being a product of its time, we can't expect anything too radical from its heroines - we're still 50 years before *Madame Bovary*. But examine closely their final poses and facial expressions, which hint at the deeper story.