

## The Director's View

### Colin Blumenau about his production of *Wives as they Were, and Maids as they Are*



**What was your reason for choosing *Wives as they Were, and Maids as they Are* for your second full Georgian stage production after *Black Eyed Susan*?**

Obviously, we wanted to produce a play from this era. It was one of the early Inchbalds which we had given a rehearsed reading. It is an example of a genre which used comedy to entertain and divert, whilst at the same time introducing elements of social critique and politics that couldn't be denied. The play seemed a very successful combination of those two things.

**You have mentioned elements of social critique and politics. In your view, what is the play about?**

I think it can be treated on many different levels. It can be just a piece of fun, if you want to treat it like that, or it is a very rigorous examination – through comedy – of women's place in late eighteenth-century society. And trying to put myself into a position where I can view it from a woman's perspective, it feels like a very serious critique of the status quo.

**Do you think it is still relevant for today, then?**

Interestingly, I have just given an interview where I didn't use the word 'relevant'. I used 'resonant', which is different. I think as an individual, whether you are a man or a woman, you can associate with what the play is saying. You can choose to ally yourself with any of the characters in it; you can choose to be sympathetic with their situation or you can choose to be antagonistic to their viewpoints. And because there are so many viewpoints offered, it should be resonant for as many people as possible. Certainly, the play is about a society in transition, and generations in transition – that's eternal.

**Do you have a favourite character in the play, someone who touched you especially?**

No, I find them all equally irritating and thus equally real. I have most sympathy for the central female character, Maria Dorillon, because she is at least trying to empower herself. But I like the way all the characters are drawn.

The moment I have most sympathy with in the whole play is when the bailiff comes for Lady Mary. I think it is an incredibly touching moment, and it shows just how brittle people are.



Laura Doddington as Maria Dorillon  
Photo: Mike Kwasniak



Ursula Early as Lady Mary Raffle  
Photo: Mike Kwasniak

### **I quite like Lady Mary...**

Yes, I mean, she is sticking two fingers up at the establishment – that is very attractive. She is totally unrealistic and irresponsible, though. I think her expectations are those of any fanatic. There is no compromise – and compromise is, after all, what achieves things. Fanaticism only creates dangerous tinderbox situations and the reason Inchtald's plays are so fantastic is that they are not fanatical or didactic. She worked within the system to change it. Evolution, not revolution.

Revolution always ends up with blood and people's heads lying on the floor, whereas evolution can be assisted if you are clever about it, and using the things she did makes her a very clever writer. The radicals who advocate revolution always end up in trouble. And society doesn't necessarily warrant it.

### **There are other themes in this play which I find intriguing. You just mentioned Lady Mary as a 'radical'. What about Lady Priory? Could she be seen as a victim of domestic violence?**

Yes, this is interesting. I think she is an abused woman and so does the actress who plays her. The audience, bizarrely and rather tellingly, thinks it's funny. There is a beautifully conceived moment when Lord Priory indicates her with his stick, and she recoils from him. The audience find it funny – I find it shocking. I don't think it is a major theme, but Lord Priory clearly has a temper and acknowledges having a temper, and she shows all the signs of being an abused woman, to the extent that, ultimately, she stays with the man who is abusing her.

### **But she makes a conscious decision...**

Yes, but so do a lot of abused women, don't they?

### **Although according to her reasoning, with society being as it is, she would not be better off with any other man, especially not with someone like Bronzley...**

Well, that is her choice.

### **But she at least gets to make a choice...**



James Wallace as Mr Bronzely and Joannah Tinney as Lady Priory. Photo: Mike Kwasniak

She is the one character that moves the most in the play. Her journey is quite a long one, but ultimately she says that she doesn't want to go any further with it. A decision a lot of contemporary audiences, especially women, will find disappointing.

But then you have to contextualize it with what her choices are. Her choices within the play are very limited. And she consciously makes her decision rather than being stampeded into it. You can't blame her for that, because the alternatives are worse. So, arguably, she has become empowered, she thought about her situation and she decided on the only thing left for her to do since revolution isn't an option.

And that is what is so brilliant about this play: no matter how often you see it, the conclusion is that the society must change in order for her to be allowed to benefit from her empowerment – or her 'enlightenment'.

### **There is clearly a huge issue about marital (and paternal) power in the play. Did you explore the marital laws of the time or did you just go with what the text has to offer? Did you do background research?**

No, not on the law. I have done a lot of reading about the period, its novels and its drama. I don't think the production of this play needs a huge level of research on the legal background surrounding marriage.

I think what is important is to understand that women's options were very limited: you either married, or you were protected – or you fell through the non-existent safety net. Which is again what Inchbald is saying. At the time it would have been quite daring to show two well-off women in prison. By that she is suggesting that, if this wasn't a comedy, these women would be in real trouble.

**Interestingly, looking at Inchbald herself, after her short marriage she always managed to be on her own, without a protector**

She managed her money...

**Yes, she managed her money and she earned it herself, too...**

Money is crucially important, both in the play and in the society it portrays. If you didn't have it, you were stuck. There were lots of people in debt. The society was based on a trust in financial dealings that didn't exist. People who owed the money did get into terrible trouble if they weren't able to repay it. Really quite important people, like Beau Brummell.

**Moving on to the process of directing this play. What challenges do you have as a 21<sup>st</sup> century director when you are presented with a script from this period?**

I don't think it is period-specific at all. The plays that I like are the plays that actually tell a story and my job is to ensure that the story is told in as clear and imaginative a way possible. The challenge is therefore to have enough imagination to contextualize the piece and making sure that the actors are clear about what they say and have belief in what they are saying. But having said that, this has been a relatively easy play to do. Partly, because it is a good piece, and partly, because this is a really good company and the discussion have had have been very well informed.

**Is there anything you have learned from this production which you would like to apply to the next one?**

You treat every show differently, as a new venture.

Nevertheless, I have learned that we can do things very simply.

I have learned that these plays DO stand up for themselves.

I have learned that the direct address prologue and epilogue to the audience are good and audiences like them.

And I have learned not to be frightened of letting it go fast because the audience are clearly with it all the way through.

It doesn't have to be slowed down artificially and there is something really exciting watching actors using their mouths at the same speed as their brains. If you slow down the speech, then the thought-process is slowed down and vice versa. And I think the great thing about Inchbald and her wit is that it doesn't need labouring. Just do it, say the lines and move on! The actors have been really good at it. They haven't started labouring it; they are all still with it all the time, and enjoying it! Loving the experience. And if they love it and the audience love it, you're not doing badly, are you?

**Looking at the largely forgotten drama repertoire of the Georgian period – and we have just discovered that there was a lot of quality there –, how will the British drama canon in general profit from staging these plays?**

If people sit up and take notice it will fill up a big hole. And they'll see how the transition from Sheridan to Boucicault happened. And already, having done three plays, I can see the progression from *Animal Magnetism* through this one to *Black Eyed Susan*. If you're interested in that, then the restoration of this repertoire will help.

The other thing that helps is that it offers the industry a lot more plays they could be doing; very attractive plays. The industry performs a contracting number of titles, but these seem to me very accessible, very enjoyable, not too difficult to stage. They have their own challenges within them, but if our success is anything to go by, they can be enormously popular.



Photo: Mike Kwasniak