

Review of Separate Tables by

The Terence Rattigan Society

Enduringly relevant

Lindsay Johns is delighted by 'Separate Tables' in Bromley

This bravura amateur production of Rattigan's 1954 masterpiece at the Bromley Little Theatre was by far the equal of, and in many respects infinitely superior to, much one might see in the West End, with the additional bonus of there being no exorbitant ticket prices, no unduly inflated thespian egos and no frenetic rush to catch the last train home after the final curtain.

Rattigan's magisterial, elegiac examination of loneliness, vulnerability, flawed humanity, the choices broken people make and the over-riding need for compassion and human decency in our interactions with others, *Separate Tables* is, like all truly great art, both timeless and universal, and thus has the emotional potency to resonate with contemporary audiences.

Directed with sensitivity and panache by Hilary Cordery and Kay O'Dea, and with deft touches of humour and pathos, this superbly cast - and superbly acted - production effortlessly demonstrated what a thoroughly modern playwright Rattigan is - and how enduringly relevant his work still is, some seventy years after it was first performed.

Set in the Hotel Beauregard on the south coast, a collection of misfits, loners, spinsters, has-beens and pariahs live out

their days, taking their meals at (the eponymous) separate tables in the dining room, some sheltering furtively from the world, others hiding from it in plain sight. As so often with Rattigan, given the nature of his manifold genius, he is able to transmute the banal, the prosaic and the quotidian - in this case, the tawdry, suburban humdrum of post war Britain, into a thing of coruscating beauty and profound existential meaning.

In Act One, Abigail Moss mesmerises as Anne Shankland, the ex-wife of firebrand political journalist, alcoholic and disgraced Labour MP John Malcolm, who arrives out of the blue to see her former husband, in the hope of rekindling their tempestuous and passionate but mutually destructive relationship.

Carnality incarnate in a figure-hugging red dress, effortlessly exuding a palpable mature sexuality, her Rubenesque appeal - and pathetic desperation - are on full display, and Andy Solts, in a commanding performance as working class, socialist intellectual Malcolm, is both debased and ennobled by her Circean charms.

Debbie Hedges as Miss Cooper, the intrinsically decent hotel owner, plays to perfection the plain yet dependable lady who stoically sacrifice her own happiness for that of her lover Malcolm realising that, despite benefitting from their own relationship of convenience, he is still in love with his ex-wife whom he was convicted of assaulting - the calamitous event which precipitated his spectacular fall from grace and his subsequent ostracism from the political arena.

Act Two focuses on the odiously judgmental Mrs Railton-Bell (played with masterful comedic timing, stage presence and superciliousness by Roxana Graves) and the innocent friendship between her histrionic, emotionally stunted daughter Sibyl, whom her over-bearing mother has cocooned, and Major Pollock, an inveterate, albeit harmless liar and fantasist, whose lubricious indiscretions with young ladies in the local cinema are exposed in the local newspaper and which result in his public shaming. James Strange is exceptional as the mercurial Major, part bounder, part sexual deviant, at times debonair, at times diffident, hiding behind the carapace of lies which bolster his plethora of insecurities and traduced self-esteem. Ironically, only when his duplicity about his educational and army background is ultimately exposed does it result in his finding true freedom and acceptance.

Much to the delight of any classicist in the audience, it is the Major's inability to properly quote the Roman poet Horace which exposes him as a fraud to Mr. Fowler, the retired schoolmaster pitiably waiting for visits from his former pupils which strangely never materialise (played with great poignancy and a capacity for self-delusion by Leslie Du Cane). Likewise the TRS's very own Alison Du Cane triumphs as Mrs Meecham, the shrewd, sagacious spinster who obsessively studies the racing form, evidently preferring the simplicity of horses to the complexity of human beings.

Just like at the end of *The Browning Version* (when Crocker-Harris informs the Headmaster of his intention to speak last at the final assembly), Rattigan's exquisite denouement stresses the noble, laudable heroism of the everyday.

With the exception of the execrable Mrs. Railton-Bell - the self-appointed ringleader of the witch-hunt against the Major, the other hotel guests decide to acknowledge him at breakfast the following morning and engage him in conversation, thus ensuring that, by banishing the shame and social opprobrium, he does not have to seek alternative accommodation and start a new life elsewhere. Here, as we witness the human capacity for forgiveness, one's heart lifts with hope.

Moreover, the play is by no means dated, and is as perennially relevant today to the myriad dangers of our increasingly solipsistic, atomised society, replete with often discombobulating identity politics, and the baleful scourge of a strident and intolerant "cancel culture", where entire careers can be obliterated by a baying online mob for the crime of holding the "wrong" opinions, as it was back in 1954, when homosexuality was still a criminal offence.

The importance of treating our fellow man - especially those on the margins - with kindness, compassion and decency, and the unwavering conviction that humanity trumps bigotry - are perhaps Rattigan's message (even though he is never consciously didactic) and are conveyed with a delightful understatement which sent the audience out into the Bromley night with our faith in the human potential for benevolence, probity and virtue, not to mention love, restored. A superb evening's theatre, in a delightful setting. Marvellous, memorable and moving - chapeau bas!



The Terence Rattigan Society

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Email: terencerattigansociety@gmail.com

Website: www.therencerattigansociety.co.uk

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