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It’s a Bird! It’s a Plane! It’s Ralph Fiennes in Man and Superman

David Sheward · Wednesday, May 27th, 2015

When Ralph Fiennes makes his first entrance in the National Theatre’s production of George Bernard Shaw’s epic comedy *Man and Superman*, he’s talking a mile a minute and constantly in motion. He remains that way for the show’s marathon running time of three hours and 40 minutes which includes the usually-excised “Don Juan in Hell” dream sequence. It’s an athletic endurance test for both actor and audience as Fiennes bounds about Christopher Oram’s stark, sterile set and precisely spouts Shaw’s brilliant arguments for the destruction of conventional morality. This challenging, riotously funny production is now being broadcast to cinemas worldwide as part of the NT Live series and theater—and filmgoers eager for a huge intellectual meal should partake.

Indira Varma and Ralph Fiennes in the NT Live broadcast of *Man and Superman*
Credit: Johan Persson

First produced in 1905, *Man and Superman* was hailed as Shaw’s most brilliant and controversial work. Fiennes plays Jack Tanner, a revolutionary philosopher determined to break down the repressive structures of Western society to create a new, freer one inhabited by the superior beings of the title, not necessarily those with capes, tights, and super powers.

Chief among his targets is marriage which he regards as a trap set by pregnancy-minded women to ensnare the creative life-force of the male. Determined to capture Jack in that unhappy state of wedlock is Anne Whitfield, the manipulative debutante whom Jack compares to a python. A subplot concerns the secret marriage of Violet Robinson to American Hector Malone, which allows Shaw to expound on his theories of class and morals. After a conventional beginning in the study of Roebuck Ramsden, a stuffy representative of the British upper-middle class, Shaw breaks all theatrical boundaries and sets the characters on a mad chase across Europe with Anne in hot pursuit of the fleeing Jack. Along the way, they encounter an intellectual brigand named Mendoza and his band of socialist-minded thieves. This leads to the famous “Don Juan” portion with Jack, Anne, Ramsden, and Mendoza becoming figures from myth and opera in a metaphysical debate in hell over the nature of man, religion, heaven, hell, and wars between nations and the sexes.

Director Simon Godwin’s decision to place the play in contemporary times at first seems unnecessary and gimmicky (the stylish modern costumes are also by Oram). But with only a few minor alterations in the dialogue (a delivered letter becomes a text and the automobile speeds are increased), the transposition works. Though the roles of men and women have altered drastically in

the 110 years since it was written, the elemental conflict between the genders remains as do the basic questions Shaw raises about marriage, wealth, sexual relations, and the aspirations of humanity. Godwin wisely stages the action at a rapid pace so that it is never bogged down in talk.

Fiennes is one of the few international film stars who tackles the classics with any degree of regularity—I can't think of an American star of his stature who would dare take on this role—and he handles the complex repartee and physical demands with agility and poise. Indira Varma (*Game of Thrones*) makes a formidable adversary as Anne, pleading innocence with a smile while scheming to advance her own ends. Tim McMullan is devilishly entertaining as the rascally Mendoza and the devil himself in Jack's dream. Nicholas Le Prevost is a convincingly rigid Ramsden who loosens up considerably in the underworld scenes. Faye Castelow is a determined Violet and Nick Hendrix a stalwart Hector. Ferdinand Kingsley is adorably forlorn as the puppy-dog-like Octavius, who moons over Anne and loses her to Jack.

This is a massive, funny, challenging comedy. You'll barely notice that nearly four hours have flown by. It's a great opportunity to see the best of London theater without purchasing an expensive plane ticket.

Screenings worldwide from May 14. Running time: three hours and 40 mins. including one intermission. For venues, dates, and tickets, visit http://ntlive.nationaltheatre.org.uk/productions/49348-man-and-superman.

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