

Cultural Daily

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The Rise and Fall of Becky Sharp

Stephen West · Wednesday, May 1st, 2019

Becky Sharp, the anti-heroine of William Makepeace Thackeray's sprawling 19th-century novel *Vanity Fair*, is a handful. Ambitious but poor, charming but unprincipled, she's now making her way up the ladder of British society in a hyperactive stage version at [American Conservatory Theater](#) in San Francisco.

Written by Kate Hamill and first produced off-Broadway in 2017, the play compresses the 800-page saga of Becky (Rebekah Brockman) and her nice-girl frenemy Amelia Sedley (Maribel Martinez) to two and a half hours. The result is we get an outline of the lives and loves of these women—the husbands and fathers and children, the flirtations, the scheming, the financial collapses, even the Napoleonic Wars—yet we're left at the end scratching our heads and wondering if we missed something.

The production, directed by Jessica Stone, kicks off with an English Music Hall-style chorus line and introduces the Manager (Dan Hiatt), a sort of emcee in a tux who comments from time to time on the action. He notes here that “the people of *Vanity Fair* are very fallible.”



We then meet Becky as she leaves Miss Pinkerton's School (“IDan Hiatt as Miss Matilda and shall win this game or die trying,” she promises herself). StayingRebekah Brockman as Becky. first at the London home of Amelia's family, she is introduced to brother Jos Sedley (Vincent Randazzo) and Amelia's suitors George Osborn (Alyssa Wilmoth Keegan) and William Dobbin (Anthony Michael Lopez), all soldiers, and indulges in plenty of eating, drinking and flirting.

Unable to snag a rich husband, Becky then heads off to become a governess at Sir Pitt Crawley's estate, where she meets more of the central characters in the tale, including the baronet's son Rawdon Crawley (Adam Magill) and his rich spinster sister Miss Matilda Crawley (Hiatt).

The cast is more than competent and sometimes outstanding, delivering plenty of laughs and with Brockman and Martinez offering solid performances as the leading ladies. The other five members of the cast take on multiple roles, with men sometimes playing women and vice versa, and with more mixed results.

Hiatt is amusing as the Manager and, by covering his tux with a frumpy cloak and donning a wig and ridiculous hat, creates a hilarious version of Miss Matilda. Keegan, on the other hand, is less

believable as Amelia's husband George. Randazzo plays six characters, including Sir Pitt and Jos, and sometimes it's hard to keep straight which character an actor is playing at a given time.



This potential for confusion increases because the tale is told at such a breakneck pace. Dobbin persuades George to marry Dobbin and Maribel Martinez as Amelia, and George is disinherited. All the soldiers go off to war.

at the Battle of Waterloo, where George is killed, leaving Amelia in poverty with a newborn son. At one point in the second act, Becky is the toast of London, partying with the aristocracy and meeting the king (though in rather dubious and compromising circumstances). The next minute her life has collapsed and she's scratching out a living in Germany among gamblers and drunks.

All of the scene changes are accomplished in moments, thanks to the clever and flexible scenic design by Alexander Dodge. The actors move painted screens and wheeled furniture in and out, transforming a town square into a drawing room or a tavern. The period costumes by Jennifer Moeller nicely evoke the time and place. The only technical hitch is a sometime inconsistent sound amplification system using a string of microphones arrayed across the stage's apron.

This production could be more of a success if some of the minor twists and turns in the plot were cut to give breathing room for more significant moments, and if the cast could dial back their frenetic approach to the material. Perhaps the Manager, always ready with a clever quip, could pass the word to his cohorts and let the key emotional scenes shine longer.

Vanity Fair, a co-production with the Shakespeare Theater Company in Washington, runs through May 12 at [American Conservatory Theater](#), 415 Geary Street, San Francisco.

*(Top image: The cast of *Vanity Fair*, from left, Anthony Michael Lopez as Dobbin, Alyssa Wilmoth Keegan as George (holding hat), Adam Magill as Rawdon, Dan Hiatt as the Manager, Maribel Martinez as Amelia, Vincent Randazzo as Jos, and Rebekah Brockman as Becky. All photographs by Scott Suchman.)*

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