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WINTER GARDEN THEATRE

The king must have a son. That's the simple, overriding fact that powers the action of the new drama *Wolf Hall*; that and the fact that King Henry VIII (Nathaniel Parker) has a wandering eye and once he's had a woman he loses interest. Perhaps, perhaps a woman that gave him a healthy son might hold it or at least officially remain his wife. But we'll never know. Instead we watch as the lowly born but very able Thomas Cromwell (Ben Miles) engineers scandal and intrigue and a break with Rome that almost sparks a massive war, not to mention numerous beheadings, all to keep his king happy. Or so it seems. Since we can't know Cromwell's heart, we'll never really know that either.

Don't worry if you haven't read the excellent, far superior novels by Hilary Mantel that this show is based on. Mike Poulton has adapted them in broad brushstrokes and director Jeremy Herrin keeps all the gossip and scandal and backstabbing moving along nicely. You'll easily follow the action. You just won't get all that bothered by it. Have you already bought tickets for this event? Not to worry; it's certainly not dull, not exactly. It's the sort of show one respects and admires and roots for commercially since such a vast undertaking is inherently risky, thanks to more than two dozen actors on the stage. But is it the subtle, engrossing, mysterious masterpiece that Mantel's novels deserved? No.

The problems are many, beginning with the novels themselves. Oh, they're wonderful and I can't wait for the final book in what is now a trilogy. But when I first heard of the project my initial reaction was not excitement but a quizzical "Really? *Wolf Hall* as a play?" Anything can be transmuted into another form of course. But the great strength of the novels is their interior richness. There's plot-a-plenty but that's not what makes *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up The Bodies* great. It's Mantel's quicksilver capturing of Cromwell's thinking, the delight in being inside the mind of the smartest person in the room. All of that would be very hard to dramatize on a stage, to say the least. Your main character remains a cipher to most everyone around him. But what of it? He might address the audience, allow us into his thoughts, like a Richard III. We might delight in his confidence and his confidences. Sadly, the play doesn't attempt this.

A further problem is the Winter Garden Theatre. This is a gigantic venue perfect for spectacle (like ABBA's long-running *Mamma Mia* and *Cats*). You might assume *Wolf Hall* is a spectacle too (20+ actors! Medieval pageantry!) but it's not. The setting is spare and the strongest moments are very quiet ones. By and large, the closer you are to a drama the better you'll appreciate the actors and that is especially true in this giant space. I was lucky to have seats better than 75% of the audience but they were still too far away. Get within eight rows of the stage (and centered) and it won't improve the play as such but you'll certainly have more fun than the many people far behind you. Oh how this might have played better at say the tiny *Circle In The Square*. (Truly, finding the perfect venue for a show is a rarely acknowledged challenge. I assume economics played a factor in

bringing this to the Winter Garden since it's such an expensive endeavor, so who can blame them?)

The script is certainly of a piece with the theater -- it's big and broad too, and the actors seemingly take their cues from it. Accents felt very broad (and shaky) to me. Why does Anne Boleyn (Lydia Leonard) speak in one voice but suddenly get disdainfully French when she spits out the name "Cromwell?" Cheap jokes (like knowingly have Jane Seymour introduce herself as no one important, for example) abound. And every other minute, someone refers to Cromwell's lowly status by calling him "butcher's boy" (also a dig at Wolsey) or some such thing. Truly, the first one hundred such references were enough.

Beyond their slightly silly accents, the enemies of Cromwell all feel rather buffoonish. One never considers any of them the slightest threat. This is fatal to the drama of the play, since Cromwell's survival is a minor miracle every step of the way. But Katherine of Aragon (Lucy Briers) is tiresome from the start. Anne Boleyn behaves like a shrew so quickly you wonder why Henry wants her at all. Thomas More (John Ramm), the great and noble hero from *A Man For All Seasons* who is taken down a notch by Mantel, is toothless. Stephen Gardiner (Matthew Pidgeon) is unceasingly agitated over Cromwell but seems putty in his hands. And on and on and on. Is there no worthy opponent for this man? No, there is not. No worthy opponent and hence no tension. We don't wonder if Cromwell will survive, just how. And that is mere mechanics.

That perfunctory nature extends to the set. Christopher Oram did both the set and the costumes and certainly the costumes have the courtly rightness one would expect from the Royal Shakespeare Company. But why is there a metal grid of sorts jutting down from the ceiling? To suggest castles or complex intrigues? It was distracting and pointless. Worse was the giant cross implied in the way the back wall was broken up into four distinct pieces, the cross often lit from within at certain points. Yes, of course religion dominates the entire play so having a cross dominate the set -- even vaguely -- was surely an obvious choice. So obvious, in fact, that if one couldn't do it in an interesting manner it should be avoided. People enter and exit from everywhere, including side entrances in the audience and then onto the stage, but it made no real impact. The stage jutted out but was rarely made use of in an interesting way, excepting a few rare moments when the audience was addressed by actors playing to a courtroom or other public crowd. Similarly, the lighting (Paule Constable for I and David Plater for II) and dances feel fine as far as they go but never surprise or enlighten.

So it's a credit to the stronger actors and the inherent juiciness of the material that *Wolf Hall* entertains capably. The best scenes involve the friendship between Cromwell and his king, with Miles and Parker maintaining a wonderful back and forth throughout. The king actually is a threat to Cromwell since he's so damn volatile and we actually tense up when he's out of favor and tense up even more when he's back in favor and inevitably handed some unpleasant or seemingly impossible task. They dominate the play in every way (indeed, Miles almost never leaves the stage) and it's much better for their presence. Still, even here, even here, Miles emphasizes Cromwell's street smarts and rough accent from start to finish.

Similarly, you can't help but enjoy the worldly Archbishop of York Thomas Wolsey and Paul Jesson has fun playing him. Less successful is seeing him and Cromwell's late wife wander the back of the stage after they're dead, ghostly attempts to humanize the unknowable Cromwell that fall flat. Joshua Silver is good as Cromwell's clerk Rafe, though Cromwell's son Gregory (Daniel Fraser) and the would-be comic relief of his jester-like servant Christophe are less memorable. One can go up and down the daunting list of actors, such as Leah Brotherhead who scores points as Jane Seymour while the comely Joey Batey doesn't make enough of what should be the key role of the musician Mark Smeaton. (But full credit: one of the show's best scenes is Cromwell breaking Mark down with his implacable logic.)

This one is good, that one is indifferent, the other cartoonish. The costumes are fine but the set banal. And on and on. *Wolf Hall* never coheres as a serious work, just a fitfully entertaining gloss on history and a far better set of novels.

SKYLIGHT *** out of **** GOLDEN THEATRE

David Hare is an excellent playwright whose plays are seen far too little in New York City. Only eleven out of 30 some works have made it to Broadway. So I'm still figuring out where I stand with this verbally adroit, politically committed, intriguing talent. Skylight has loomed large in my imagination since I heard about the great Gambon's legendary performance on Broadway back in 1996. I've kicked myself ever since for missing it. Bill Nighy has said he avoided doing a revival of the role because well, Gambon had done it, hadn't he?

Happily, Nighy has relented. From the impressions of friends who saw the original and my first take on it, Skylight has returned less political and more balanced, less a showcase for one actor and more of a balanced romance than a blistering look at class struggle. It is, I think, a good presentation of a good play, though let me see it again along with another dozen Hare works and I'll speak with more assurance.

It's the early 1990s and Kyra is hiding out (perhaps) in a very run-down neighborhood, teaching disadvantaged kids and clearly still stoically dealing with the fallout from an affair with a married man. In pops the man's 18 year old son Edward, who nervously and awkwardly and bluntly wants to know what really happened between Kyra and his dad Tom and why did Kyra disappear so abruptly three years ago and did she know his mom had died and that Tom was at sixes and sevens and would she help him, please?

It's a bit of a mystery, this play. What happened, exactly? We piece together the story when Tom shows up, having no idea that his son Edward has preceded him. It's been a year since Tom's wife died and we sense he's ready now to see what exactly -- if anything -- might still exist between the two of them. Kyra is wary and defensive and proud. She's changed, she's...well, clearly not happy but her work is rewarding and she's not interested in his world anymore. Maybe.

And the match begins. Committed teacher Kyra and the successful restaurateur Tom fencing over money and privilege and work and life. Tom came from nothing and made lots of money. Kyra rejected her miserable but posh father and has used her top-notch education to work as a lowly teacher at a run-down school. She lives in a dilapidated flat that is inconveniently located across town from the miserable neighborhood where her students live. Tom accuses her of martyrdom; Kyra accuses him of snobbery. Tom says the only people who romanticize poverty are people who've never been poor; Kyra says she's left that bubble of privilege once and for all. And it's interesting and engaging and wittily done. But what we really want to know is, do they love each other? Well, clearly they do. But do they have a future?

First produced in 1995, Skylight feels absolutely of the moment, with its skewering of wealthy people who feel aggrieved, as if they should be celebrated for making tons of money, not taxed. (You can substitute "jobs creator" for "wealth creation" and certain lines might have been said yesterday.)

This debate over values and money and the underclass, at least in this production directed by Stephen Daldry, is clearly a substitute for the real debate about their romance. Kyra was 18 when she first met Tom and his wife and somehow told herself having an affair with him wasn't a betrayal because she loved them both (and their kids). It was perfect and pure, she says, rather unconvincingly, until of course it was discovered. Did Tom want it to be discovered? Did Kyra behave nobly? Can they salvage something out of this disaster or will Tom's dead wife (eaten up by cancer) always lie accusingly between them?

Carey Mulligan and Bill Nighy fence beautifully here, with Nighy all twitches and kinetic energy (he's constantly pushing a chair in and out of place with his foot) while Mulligan is stillness itself. They wound, they score palpable hits, they open up. Matthew Beard in the key but small role of Tom's son is also very good indeed, clearly taking his cue from Nighy when it comes to his own uncontrollable movement. (Neither man can stand still.) Beard had a small part in *The Imitation Game*, [which I did not enjoy](#). But it was hardly his fault and he's impressive here, balancing between gawky teenager and soulful openness.

Bob Crowley's set was the major, distracting flaw for me. Kyra's flat was aggressively awful, though fair enough - it is paid for on a teacher's salary. But sliding walls that separate the kitchen and living room from the bedroom and bathroom were distracting. They closed up like curtains to end act one but that flourish was not successful. The rest of the set was open, giving us a view of other flats in Kyra's complex and the suggestion of many more flats stretching up above her. Yes, it opened up her world to our view. But the view was actually closed doors and windows. Lights flashed on and off but we didn't see inside. And the awkward sense of layers upon layers, a living room followed by a bedroom followed by a hallway outside followed by the building across the way and the open sky...it was just a jumble of information, a constant, unwelcome visual clutter that pulled us away from the intimate tug of war taking place.

Skylight doesn't really want to illuminate the world, anyway. It has a quieter, simpler ambition: revealing that matters of the heart might heat up the night, but it's in the cool light of morning that things truly come into focus.

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