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When We Are Married

J B Priestley

Northern Broadsides in partnership with York Theatre Royal

York Theatre Royal

From 09 September 2016 to 24 September 2016

Review by James Ballands



Barrie Rutter and Kat Rose-Martin

Credit: Nobby Clark

Since Northern Broadsides began in 1992, the company's aim has been to create a platform for Northern voices in the theatre. The director Barrie Rutter has described *When We Are Married* as the "quintessential Yorkshire comedy", so the choice of material is ideal and plays to the company's strengths.

Set in the fictional West Riding town of Cleckleywyke in 1908, Priestley's play centres on three respectable middle-aged couples—the Helliwells, the Parkers and the Soppitts—who are established pillars within their community.

Married in the same chapel on the same day, they gather at the Helliwells' home to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversaries, and discover—to their horror—that the vicar who conducted their ceremonies was not licensed to do so. The realisation that they have been living in sin for the last quarter-century is the cause of much upheaval and strife, prompting some of the characters to question whether they want to return to their old married lives or start afresh.

Although *When We Are Married* does not have the same moral seriousness of his later and more famous play *An Inspector Calls* (1945), Priestley explores some of the same issues which concerned him throughout his life, namely the complacency and hypocrisy of the middle classes. However, *When We Are Married* is first and foremost a comedy, and in this production the laughs come thick and fast. This is largely due to the brisk pace of Rutter's direction and the rich ensemble playing of his cast.

Each of the six main protagonists is sharply differentiated and skilfully performed. Mark Stratton invests Alderman Joseph Helliwell with the right level of self-importance, and Adrian Hood is highly amusing as the pompous Councillor Albert Parker who is horrified to learn that he is widely regarded as a boring penny-pincher.

Kate Anthony is impressively withering as the shrewish Mrs Soppitt and Geraldine Fitzgerald imbues Mrs Helliwell with pathos. As the henpecked Mr Soppitt and the long-suffering Mrs Parker, Steve Huison and Sue Devaney share one of the play's most tender scenes and convey the sense of new possibilities opening up for their characters.

The supporting cast are equally fine. Barrie Rutter only makes four appearances as the drunken photographer Mr Ormonroyd, but each of them is amusing and memorable. Kat Rose-Martin scores big laughs as the Helliwells' indiscreet housemaid Ruby, and Lisa Howard conveys Mrs Northrop's delight in the temporary unsettling of her stuck-up employers and their friends.

Jessica Worrall's stylish set design complements the action without distracting from it. The flock pattern which covers all the surfaces of the Helliwells' home captures both the play's Edwardian milieu and the characters' abiding concern with appearances.

My main criticism of Priestley's play is its awkwardly neat ending, as it doesn't satisfactorily address the ways in which the characters have developed over the course of the play. Apart from this, however, I would argue that *When We Are Married* has aged surprisingly well over the last eighty years.

This production marks the second collaboration between Northern Broadsides and the York Theatre Royal, and I have no doubt that they will continue to enjoy a fruitful creative relationship in the future.