

JC'S THEATRE SPOTLIGHT – Pride & Prejudice

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What is it about Jane Austen that keeps her scant six novels so much in the hearts and minds of women and girls mostly, all over the world, two hundred years later? In fact, 200 years ago this week, Austen wrote her last words for her abandoned final novel. Her works are set in a bygone time of the British landed gentry, when women depended primarily on marriage to attain social standing and to secure their futures. Not exactly a picture of the modern, liberate woman. But still we flock to the book store, the cinema, and the theatre to see Austen's works come to life on the stage.

So it was to a packed house last Saturday night at Halifax's Pond Playhouse that Theatre Arts Guild presented performance #3 in a four week run of *Pride & Prejudice*, Austen's 1813 classic, recently adapted for the stage by Victoria, B.C., playwright, Janet Munsil.

What do I really need to tell you about a Halifax staging of *Pride & Prejudice*? Well, you'll want to know if it's true to the material. And yes, TAG's current production is very faithful to the original. Although my partner, much more an Austen aficionado than I, found that the emotional high point of Mr. Darcy's bumbling and cold first proposal to Elizabeth was weakened a bit by moments of levity when the power of the moment is in its unbroken intensity.

Is it true to the period? Indeed! Beyond the use of Austen's arcane language and pre-Victorian manner, the TAG production deserves special commendation for attention to costuming detail! Careful study of the era's dress led to remarkable recreations (with a few minor modern alterations). A team of twenty "Sew and Sews" led by Costume Designer, Susan Hall, and coordinated by Vivien Martel, worked tirelessly on creating original costumes for each character, in some cases multiple pieces. The Coast outlined their efforts in a great article: <http://www.thecoast.ca/halifax/pride-and-prejudices-costume-studies/Content?oid=6523127>

Another lovely touch in this production is the music. A wonderful selection of classical period pieces were lovingly curated to transition between scenes. Throughout the show, you can feel the deft touches of director, Gisela O'Brien. The time and care put into the fine strokes is an O'Brien hallmark. She directed me in a couple of Gilbert & Sullivan Society of NS shows years ago, and I have long admired her sense that God is in the details.

Some terrific performances highlight the play. Thea Burton as a delightfully over-the-top Mrs. Bennet, busily and zestfully plotting to marry off her brood of girls. Tony Marshall brings an unexpected Michael Palin-esque quirk to Mr. Collins that made me both laugh and squirm with discomfort. And Rayna Smith-Camp adds just the perfect dash of snootiness to make you want to slap her Caroline Bingley ... just a little.

Of the Bennet daughters, Nicole Moore stands out in the underdog role of Mary. Moore brings a subtle and unassuming pathos to every character she plays. Her comic timing has been sharply honed as a member of the local all-female sketch troupe, Hot Mess. I found my eyes being drawn constantly to Mary's taciturn reactions to the Austenian world from which she desperately attempts to withdraw. While never purposefully stealing a scene, Mary's peculiar, detached manner is infinitely entertaining, a gentle distraction that kept me giggling a little inside whenever Mary would drift toward the epicentre of the drama.

I still don't know exactly what it is about Austen that consistently puts bums in the seats, but whatever it is, it's hard at work right now at TAG. So get those tickets while some still remain.

Pride & Prejudice runs at the Pond Playhouse on Parkhill Road, just off Purcell's Cove Road, until April 8th.