Cowardly living ARTS


The Huntington Theatre Company's production of Noel Coward's Design for Living belies their claim that it is a "fresh, wheeling, sophisticated, and delightfully decadent" comedy. The sets and lighting are stunning and the costuming is exquisite, but the stage direction is uninspired, the acting unremarkable, and the resulting performance is frustratingly ponderous and not very funny.

Design's intricate plot can be delineated simply: Gilda loves a painter named Otto. She also loves his playwriting friend Leo. Otto loves Gilda, Leo loves Gilda, Otto loves Leo, and vice versa. Gilda lives with Otto, has an affair with Leo, moves in with Leo, has an affair with Otto, abandons them both and marries a stuffy art dealer, then discovers that she can't live without her former lovers. Coward's premise - three people can love each other enough to forge a ménage à trois - had decadent overtones fifty years ago when Design for Living first opened, but is fairly pedestrian by today's standards. Yet this doesn't have to be a strike against the play. Neil Simon is living standards. Yet this doesn't have to be a blow to the art of writing and working on stage. With technical support as strong as this it is a shame that the rest of the production doesn't measure up. Despite its grand designs, the Huntington Theatre Company's Design for Living is as sophisticated and delightful as a cheap mannequin wearing a tuxedo.

Katherine Ferrand's portrayal of Gilda is the crux of the problem. Here is a difficult, pivotal role - one that Coward himself had not completely elucidated - therefore, the actress playing Gilda must bring something extra to the part to fill in the missing pieces. Unfortunately Ferrand doesn't know whether her character is coming or going, consequently she relies heavily on stock posturing and a tittering nervousness that destroys what little sympathy Coward might have in store for his audience. Ferrand's concentration is unflinching - she occasionally stumbles over her lines - and she never seems to connect with the other actors on stage.

The two other principals, Richard Council as Otto and Kenneth Meisroll as Leo, deliver passable performances, although at times they do play well together. Their drunkard scene at the end of Act 2 produces the only sustained humor in the show, but both suffer from affected accents and their stage time with Gilda. The production's only brilliant performance is turned in by Jeanette Landis, whose cigarette-smoking, rough Cockney character's fascination for Gilda is unmistakable, and as a result, its moralistic iridate at the play's close arrives from nowhere.

Set designer Richard M. Iskesh, costume designer Marjorie Verheyen, and lighting designer Marcus Dillaird are the stars of the show; their work alone makes Design for Living worth seeing. Act 1's elegant Manhattan penthouse - complete with hanging staircase, padded walls, and a staggering view of New York City - is the most amazing set I have ever seen on stage. With technical support as strong as this it is a shame that the rest of the production doesn't measure up. Despite its grand designs, the Huntington Theatre Company's Design for Living is as sophisticated and delightful as a cheap mannequin wearing a tuxedo.

Bill Bryant