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Somewhat Informed: Zodrow's Performing Arts Column; The Madness of George III

Andru Zodrow, News Editor

Alan Bennett's 1991 play "The Madness of George III" is an enjoyable romp. A recorded version performed in 2018, produced by the National Theatre and Nottingham Playhouse, is a great way to see the play.

"The Madness of George III" stars Mark Gattis as the titular king. Gattis does a wonderful job of portraying the king as strange and egotistical while maintaining a magnetic energy that captures the audience. The viewers go back and forth trying to figure out if they either love or hate George, a talent that many actors have been able to achieve. Powdered wig and all, Gattis shows his gifted ability to find the perfect comedic timing in each show.

The renewed interest in the play will inevitably draw comparisons to "Hamilton" due to George III appearing in both, as well as each play's preoccupation with the American Revolution. However, Bennett's play is neither a musical nor centered on the colonies.

In trademark British fashion, the show is dry and witty. It challenges and delights the audience in equal measure. Centered on the later years of George's reign, it portrays his descent from eccentricity into sheer delusion.

Director Adam Penford crafts a stage environment that does not rely on flashing lights to draw the audience in. The sets are just detailed enough to capture the eye, but leave plenty of the regal atmosphere to the music and sound design. The performers are given enough room to breathe, which allows the comedy to have a more natural flow, as opposed to a forced feeling. The actors are all wearing tights and corsets, but this constriction does not translate to stilted performances, which is commendable. While the National Theatre has certainly been known to indulge in experimental staging and directorial methods, this production feels like a play being done by seasoned professionals. Certain plays lend themselves to strange seating arrangements, lighting and stage direction, but Bennett's work is done justice with effective and traditional direction.

The casting is one of the strongest parts of the National Theatre production. Many playhouses tout their gender-bent casts. There is nothing wrong with doing so, as women need to be given more creative roles in theater both on the stage and behind it. However, this show opts to make every role seamless. The trio of doctors who comprise a significant amount of running time are all playing men. There are no garrish fake beard appliances or embarrassing deep voices to approximate a masculine tone. Stephanie Jacob and Louise Jameson, the actresses who play the doctors, live rather than act through their characters, and in doing so convince the audience. The choice to avoid additional makeup or wardrobe changes was one that respected the integrity of the performances, while also including female artists in a play with few female characters.



One interesting aspect of the play is how the three doctors converse with a psychologist treating the king, played by Adrian Scarborough. The personas of the doctors are that of quacks and lack modern scientific understanding. The play pits the three medieval doctors, who are teamed up with the king's son, played by Wilf Scolding, against the psychologist. The doctors intend to further plunge George III into madness so his son can take the throne, and the psychologist simply wants to improve the king's mental condition. While watching the king rage in a delusional stupor is enjoyable and shows off Mark Gattis' talent, Scarborough's character is unfortunately one-dimensional for such a pivotal role.

This is one of the problems impeding "The Madness of George III" from being a great play. Comedies need to have easily understandable characters so that the audience can quickly comprehend how the jokes pertain to the figures on stage. However, characters have to be interesting in order for viewers to connect with them. Bennett's play has a few compelling yet simple characters, like George and the conniving Thurlow, but too many actors are forced to work with hollow characters. The king's son is fun to watch but feels insignificant due to his lack of depth.

However, these are issues with the script, not the production. The National Theatre put on a definitive version of the play in 2018, and should be commended for occasionally making it freely available to the public. In a time in which the government feels so critically broken, both in the UK and across the sea here in the states, it is a joy to be reminded for a moment of the royal dysfunction of past eras.