

Review

Milwaukee Rep's 'Sense and Sensibility' sometimes lost in translation

By Mike Fischer, Special to the Journal Sentinel
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Nearly four years ago, the Milwaukee Repertory Theater's production of Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice" shattered box-office records. The Rep has now returned to the well, drawing upon Austen's "Sense and Sensibility." This time, the bucket that emerges is barely half-full.

Austen's first published novel, "Sense" revolves around sisters Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, who enact the drama central to all of Austen's fiction: In a world where being female is never easy, how can a woman be true to herself by expressing all that she feels (sensibility) - while also managing sufficient reserve to keep her autonomy (sense)?

Austen charges 19-year-old Elinor (Kate Hurster) with making the case for sense; the romantic Marianne (Victoria Mack), all of 16, embodies sensibility, causing her to fall hard for the charismatic Willoughby (Ben Jacoby).

One of the highlights of this "Sense" is how successfully director Art Manke's design team has captured what Marianne feels, which literally sets the stage for a showdown between a world governed by restraint and her fervent desire to break free.

With a nod toward Austen's "Mansfield Park," **Scott Bradley's scenic design emphasizes the quasi-Gothic look of late-18th-century English landscaping, with its deliberate cultivation of the wild and extravagant. Thomas C. Hase's lighting design adds lurid shadows.**

Sound designer Steven Cahill's arpeggio-laden score is true to Marianne's flights of fancy. Costume designer Angela Balogh Calin contrasts many characters' richly textured dress with Marianne's simpler, free-flowing gowns - highlighting Mack's lithe build and Marianne's inherent distrust of convention.

But as is true with many Austen adaptations, the Rep's well-appointed stage doesn't fully translate what's on the page.

While Mark Healy's adaptation has pruned subplots and removed characters, what's left is still a mouthful, and Healy hasn't sufficiently dramatized it.

Long before publication, "Sense" began life as an epistolary novel, and that's the way this version frequently plays, resulting in long, exposition-heavy exchanges that slow the pace to a crawl - despite Manke's cinematic transitions, abetted by repeatedly splitting the action on stage.

Actors are split as well; five of them play multiple roles, further complicating a compressed plot, in a novel that already suffers from having fewer fully developed characters - particularly with regard to the men - than any of the great Austen novels that followed.

Good as Laura Gordon is in the stock role of Mrs. Jennings, she is still recognizably Laura Gordon when playing Mrs. Dashwood. Ditto Meaghan Sullivan, in each of her three roles. Nick Gabriel's cameo as the foppish Robert Ferrars undermines the work he has done in establishing Robert's stolid brother.

Turning to the sisters, Mack hasn't yet fully worked her way inward from Marianne's easily caricatured, impulse-driven faults to locate the young woman whom Austen describes as nearly Elinor's equal.

Marianne is not one of the younger Bennett sisters, but a prototype for Lizzie, Emma and Anne; we need to love her as much as we love each of them.

Conversely, Hurster works wonders as Elinor, honoring Austen's description of one whose "feelings were strong" but who also "knew how to govern them." In living that conflict between sensibility and sense, Hurster pays moving testament to why we read "Sense and Sensibility."

IF YOU GO

"Sense and Sensibility" continues through Jan. 13 at the Powerhouse Theater, 108 E. Wells St. For tickets, visit milwaukeeerep.com or call (414) 224-9490.