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Tom Hiddleston Stars in *Betrayal*, Pinter's Puzzle Play

David Sheward · Wednesday, September 11th, 2019

Performing a Harold Pinter play is a delicate balance to borrow a phrase from the similarly difficult-to-mount Edward Albee. Pinter's cryptic characters with their numerous pauses and minimalist dialogue can come across as icy or frustratingly inscrutable. Fortunately, the third Broadway revival of his *Betrayal* finds the sweet spot, imparting his meaningful insight on how people connect with and discard each other, unlike its two previous incarnations (I did not see the 1980 original NY production with Raul Julia, Roy Scheider, and Blythe Danner). David Leaveaux's 2000 staging for Roundabout with Liev Schreiber, John Slattery and Juliette Binoche was too nightmarish and menacing, missing the humor and passion. Mike Nichols went to the opposite extreme in his 2013 production headlined by Daniel Craig, Rachel Weisz, and Rafe Spall, emphasizing the laughs and delivering an almost sitcom-y evening. Jamie Lloyd combines the two qualities for a perfect blend of light and dark in his current bare-bones production, now on Broadway after a hit run in London. A trio of attractive British movie and TV stars with impressive stage credits—Tom Hiddleston, Charlie Cox and Zawe Ashton—deliver powerful performances, sexy and subtle in equal measure.



Charlie Cox, Zawe Ashton, and Tom Hiddleston in *Betrayal*.

Credit: Marc Brenner

The play is an intricate puzzle box as well as a sharp-edged love triangle. That may be undoable in terms of geometry, but Pinter achieves this impossibility as well as crossing back and forth across time. If that sounds confusing, the playwright's method will make sense upon viewing.

The plot charts the progress of an affair but in reverse chronological order so that casually-mentioned details take on explosive significance as we travel back in time. We first meet Emma and Jerry, bookish Londoners each married to other people and with two kids a piece, two years after their seven-year liaison has wound down. Jerry is best friends with Emma's husband Robert, who also publishes several of the authors Jerry represents as an agent. At first, everything seems casual and civilized as the characters share drinks and lunch, but with every scene going further back into this three-way relationship—except for two vignettes which move forward—Pinter unflinchingly reveals how each has ruthlessly betrayed the other two.

Lloyd strips the play to its essentials and gets at the heart of Pinter's portrait of easy deception and the pain it causes. Sutra Gilmour's starkly elegant set, lit with painterly precision by Jon Clark, is a grey void on two concentric turntables. Ben and Max Ringham create a sound scape of disturbing dissonance and pop songs played between scenes, evoking loss, anger, and hurt. All three principal

cast members are present throughout the action and there is no intermission.



Tom Hiddleston and Zawe Ashton in *Betrayal*.

Credit: Marc Brenner

As noted, it would be easy for the participants to be played as too cool or too funny, but the superb cast makes these sly deceivers achingly sympathetic despite their transgressions. Hiddleston's lean, handsome features eloquently play a symphony of Tom's emotions which his clipped tones attempt to conceal. Ashton tellingly conveys Emma's conflicted desires as she is pulled—sometimes literally—between two men. Cox plays Jerry as more open and vulnerable, giving equal weight to his selfish recklessness and to his pain and disappointment when both Emma and Robert turn on him. Eddie Arnold makes the most of a walk-on role of a convivial Italian waiter. All the players in this nasty three-sided game are out for themselves, but in this production, we can understand, but not necessarily sympathize with their actions—that's not always true of a Harold Pinter production.

Sept. 5—Dec. 8. Bernard B. Jacobs Theater, 242 W. 45th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 7pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission. \$25—\$189. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

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