The Joy of Banned Drama . . . Up Close

PHYL at the Mint Theater

BY ERIC UHLFELDER



PHYL (LILY GANSER) AND JACK (ANTHONY MICHAEL MARTINEZ). *Photo: Todd Cerveris.*



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The Mint Theater's latest production, *PHYL*, reminds us that while large Broadway shows can be spectacles, they can never provide the intimacy, immediacy and experience of a well-crafted drama designed for a 100-seat playhouse, that happens to sit not far from Times Square.

Phyllis...a working-class young woman with few prospects...her dreary work as governess of two bratty kids... chastised by the upper-class madam for speaking with her house guest and who had the temerity of accepting his offered cigarette...that earned Phyllis the boot.

The house guest, Jack Folliott (Anthony Michael Martinez), a charming soft-spoken man, is smitten by the former governess and suggests making amends for the trouble he has caused — with a trip to the Riveria.

Unmarried?

Scandalous, so much so that the authorities at Oxford College prohibited its premier production on campus in 1913. Some observers even thought this a tale of prostitution.

Well, if that seems over the top, it helps if the audience suspends reality and imagines being back in another era when high value was placed on one's reputation, before women could vote, when labor was exploited, and when one's own potential was predetermined by birth.

Though morals were loosening a bit in an awakening Edwardian England following the turn of the 19th century — when Cicely Hamilton a well-regarded British playwright penned this play — women, especially of the working class, were still expected to know their place.

So much the better that the protagonist, Phyllis Chester — played splendidly by Lily Ganer — did not.

For most in the theater, there is a visceral cheer in seeing her throw caution to the wind and not because it's always more compelling when we see someone daring to be different. But because we can see Phyllis as an honorable, decent young woman who recognizes early on that playing by the rules will not help her find love and security, that her choices are limited –- a theme that certainly resonates with many today.

When her much older and good-hearted sister unexpectedly pops by, Phyllis tells her, "I see no chance of the future being any different from the present or the past. I've been governessing since I was 17 — and oh, good Lord, the dreariness, the dreariness of it! What have I to look forward to? What prospects have I? As far as I can see, the only thing to hope for is that in time I shall grow like you."

The play does more than buck norms: it flips them, revealing that a provincial sense of honor is not necessarily sexist but misunderstood decency.



BETTY (TESSA BILMES) AND OLIVE (CHARLOTTE VAN LEDTJE). *Photo: Todd Cerveris.*

While the play is in keeping with many of the themes the Mint has brought us over its 30-plus years, it does something different: putting child actors center stage. It's how the drama opens with two wonderfully precocious young sisters trying Phyl's patience.

Betty and Olive Ponsonby (Tessa Bilmes and Charlotte van Ledtje) mischievously play off one another so well that one can be grateful that it's for our pleasure and not at our expense.

The only force that seems to hold them at bay is Jack, whom they adore. A friend of the family, Jack deftly moves between easing Phyl's angst and cajoling the girls to do right by her. His ease and grace on stage makes his solicitation of companionship seems genuinely heartfelt rather than salacious.

The play's dialogue and pacing feel modern. So does its easy transitions between thoughtfulness and humor. This helps to naturally propel the action by a cast of remarkable actors who always hit their mark. This includes Phyl's sister, Cathy (Jennifer Blood) who exudes monastic purity, the aforementioned Mrs. Ponsonby (Katie Firth) who exudes a dull venom, and a cameo role of Jack's elderly family friend Mr. Westmacott (Curzon Dobell), who delivers news that again turns the play on its head.

That final plot twist is fine. But Phyl and Jack become so fixated on a moral dilemma that hadn't previously concerned them that it seems the playwright felt obliged to give a nod to prevailing mores. She resolves the conflict quite predictably. And while the end is no doubt crowd-pleasing, it does diminish the play's edginess.

Mint productions are always well staged. The second half in particular reveals Brittany Vasta's luminous set design — an extraordinary palette of color, lightness, and elegance. Kudos to Mary Louise Geiger for lighting that sets the scene aglow.

Choreographing the enterprise is director Britt Berke, notching her third Mint production, and to this reviewer, her most accomplished.

And kudos to Artistic Director Jonathan Bank for discovering another lost jewel of a play and giving us a chance to look back at England of more than a century ago and introducing us to Cicely Hamilton, who, with the same deftness as her lead character, took her initial sanction in stride:

"It really does not matter. All those Oxford small boys can run up to London any time they like and see something much worse. The Vice Chancellor is merely expressing his own opinion of the play . . . entitled to exercise his mediaeval privileges in keeping it out of his preserve. At Oxford, as soon as you cease to be an Oxonian and show a sense of humor you are barred."

We can hope Bank can revive more of Hamilton's work.

PHYL is playing at The Mint Theater at Theatre Row at 410 West 42nd St. thru November 7.