

### **Theatre Project: *Austentatious***

The contemporary British theatre scene offers a wide variety of productions and companies, each providing a unique approach to contemporary theatre. The theatre company *Austentatious*, who perform a show of the same name, are a particularly unique aspect of contemporary British theatre.

The company was formed in 2012 by Amy Cooke-Hodgson and Rachel Parris who made up two of the six members. *Austentatious* now has eight members with the 50:50 ratio of men to women, but still only six actors perform in each show. Currently on their eighth season, *Austentatious* perform once a week at the Fortune Theatre, London. The show, *Austentatious*, is billed as “an entirely improvised comedy play in the style of Jane Austen” (*Austentatious*). Each performance begins with “esteemed Austen scholar, Dr Sam Patton”, portrayed by a different member of the cast each night, who informs the audience that Austen has numerous “lost works” and asks them to then shout out titles of “lost works” they would like to see performed. This in line with common improvisation techniques where “the audience ... not only ‘read’ the performance - in a very real sense it ‘writes’ it, too” (Frost and Yarrow, pp. 209-10). These titles tend to be a play on Austen titles or characters, often with a contemporary reference. For example past titles have included: ‘Dial Emma For Murder’, ‘Strictly Come Darcy’, ‘Mansfield Shark’ and ‘Pemberley Hills Cop’ (*Austentatious*). Once a title is chosen the cast then perform a longform improvisation based solely on the title suggestion. Their use of improvisation is related to one of their key aims of creating “a shared experience which is quite rare these days” (*Austentatious An Impro Novel*) as each play “only existed at that time, at that place with all of these people and we’re the only ones that have that collective memory of it and that’s what makes those characters special” (*Austentatious An Impro Novel*). The form of *Austentatious* is designed to

create a unifying experience among strangers and subsequently promote a camaraderie between the audience.

In terms of structure, as “it is a truth universally acknowledged that Jane Austen's novels are about courtship and marriage” (Chandler, p. 88), *Austentatious* often has an underpinning narrative of this regardless of the title. When asked about this, the company explained: “We have to honour Jane Austen, she is someone who values and uses romance so skilfully so I think it would be foolish of us just to be like ‘Romance doesn’t count’. It’s really part of that genre so we have to respect that” (*Austentatious An Impro Novel*). They went on to say that “female friendship and sisterhood is a massive part of the genre so we really try and give that space” (*Austentatious An Impro Novel*). *Austentatious* aim to “play within the constraints of 1814 but also bring in an element of contemporary modern struggle ... and sort of merge the two together” (*Austentatious An Impro Novel*). This, however, is a difficult feat to achieve and arguably they struggle to find the correct balance. The two performance analyses to follow will explore how well *Austentatious* achieve this aim.

### Performance 1: ‘Sense and Sinsemilla’

‘Sense and Sinsemilla’, set in the winter of 1814, follows the story of the three Peacock sisters, Emilia, Isabelle and Meredith, as they vie for the attention of a gentleman suitor, Doobie Marley. The term ‘sinsemilla’, a highly psychoactive variety of cannabis, was not defined until the opening of the second act however the meaning was made clear through the context of the play. It is revealed that Marley has gained all his money from growing and importing cannabis from Columbia. At the time, this would have been a lucrative business although cannabis was mostly received from Russia and through illegal trading with American sailors due to the Napoleonic Wars (Christopher). Despite this, it is still feasible that Marley made his money through

cannabis in 1814. It quickly becomes apparent that Marley and Meredith, the youngest and least graceful sister (emphasised by her Black Country accent), are suited to one another and they frequently meet at night in the garden to smoke cannabis. The performance made substantial use of physical comedy and mime in order to show their drug use. Due to the improvised nature of the show this was used to great comedic effect as actors frequently changed the meanings of one another's mimes. For example, Marley offered what was assumed to be a blend of cannabis to Meredith who proceeded to mime tying off a vein in order to aid injection, instantaneously, and effectively, altering the meaning of Marley's offer.

Meanwhile, Marley's presence in the town has aroused the suspicions of Andrew Sludge, the elder of the two Sludge brothers, a prominent and wealthy family. Andrew often expounds on the risks of legalising cannabis to his younger brother, Cecil, who is much more concerned with finding himself a wife. This plot point is particularly problematic as in 1814 cannabis was considered beneficial to health and would later be prescribed to Queen Victoria for pain relief in 1890. Cannabis was not made illegal until 1928 (Christopher). Andrew is arguing a modern viewpoint that would not have even been considered in 1814. It also suggests a wider, more worldly viewpoint, which was not often explored in Austen's works, who instead chose to focus on the domestic.

The domestic is brought back to the forefront, however, when the six characters all meet at a party. Cecil becomes infatuated with Isabelle and Andrew voices his concerns about Marley's effects on Meredith. Andrew, in an attempt to rescue Meredith, decides she will marry him instead of Marley. This arrangement is quickly adopted as Andrew has wealth and good standing in society, which in 1814, to a much greater extent than today, means a good deal. Marley decides to travel back to

Columbia to avoid being arrested by Andrew, however, Emilia and Isabelle decide to intervene on Meredith's behalf as she is unhappy with the prospect of marrying Andrew and losing Marley. Highlighting the relationship between the sisters this way allows Austentatious to successfully meet one of their aims as "Jane Austen adjusted the conventional plot to stress the value of women, particularly her heroines, to their men" (Magee, p. 205) and modern women have a lot more say in who they marry. The sisters move within the conventions of Austen's 1814 whilst maintaining a more modern viewpoint on marriage.

The sisters work together, with the help of Cecil, to expose Andrew, who has been secretly selling and using the confiscated drugs he has in his possession. Hidden motives are a frequently employed convention in Austen's work and can be most clearly seen in *Pride and Prejudice* when "Elizabeth realizes the extent to which social attractiveness has masked deviousness in Wickham" (Shaw, p. 287). The play draws on this convention as Andrew is presented throughout as the most morally upstanding character, particularly in relation to Marley, but is revealed to be the most criminal and spends the final scene comatose on the floor after taking too many drugs. Marley, on the other hand, becomes the voice of moderation and thus represents a better match for Meredith, one made from mutual love and respect rather than for instruction. Unusually for the time, Austen's heroines frequently "reject[ed] socially desirable matches in favor of one based firmly on reciprocal and durable love" (Magee, p. 207); an aspect of her work that Austentatious explore with this play. Overall, the overarching narrative of courtship and love appears to meet Austentatious' aims despite the deeply anachronistic plot.

Performance 2: 'Queer Eye for the Regency Guy'

‘Queer Eye for the Regency Guy’, set in the summer of 1814, follows the story of Francis Jameson who, because of his mannerisms and appearance, has been unable to find a wife. His parents are eager for him to marry so that his younger sister, Louisa, is not overshadowed by him. This is uncharacteristic of the time though, as it was not as important that a man should marry than it was for a woman to; having an unmarried older brother would not be a detriment to Louisa. Francis comments on this peculiarity himself where it is suggested his parents are merely exasperated with his company and would rather him be elsewhere. They have therefore invited his cousin, Anthony, to come and transform Francis into a suitable gentleman. However, a young ingénue, Millicent Granger, is revealed to have loved Francis for years and enjoys his company as he is, even if it is slightly brash. Whilst social graces are important aspects of Austen’s novels, characters such as “Darcy and Knightley are certainly reminders that social ease cannot be equated with moral worth” (Shaw, p. 284)

Set in 1814

Francis unable to find a wife because he is considered uncouth

His parents and sister are keen to get rid of him

He is transformed by his ‘cousin’ Anthony -

Millicent likes him anyway

Anthony falls in love with Francis

Louisa falls in love with Anthony

Millicent forced to marry Lord Harlow

Lord Harlow and Anthony realise they love each other - “she can both reinforce and humanize the dictum "Know thyself" by allowing full play to the pathos of love lost through error” (Shaw, p. 288)

Millicent and Frances realise they love each other - “Tempering the comedy of the love plot, then, is Austen's awareness that social convention can separate people who are suited to one another” (Shaw, p. 289)

Focus on Napoleon which makes sense for the time period

Allude to how things are now - Little Chef, Brighton’s sand

Anachronisms - Chekhov reference, mention of theatrical training - George R. R. Martin

Women shown to need chaperones in conversations/visits places

Patriarchy - "That's how questions work for men, you ask the question after you've already done the thing"

Idea that the women have to be married - forceful mother character pushing it on Millicent - "My mother shall die out of spite" - Pride and Prejudice

Similarly, Lord Harlow believes he must be married because "I am a man" and he is trying to follow to the letter what it is that men have to do - "At his first proposal he feels and behaves like the typical self-satisfied man in a patriarchal society" (Magee, p. 205)

Sibling relationships are key in this piece - "I am sorry for questioning you, dear brother" Lord Harlow and his sister

Introduce a dream sequence, interestingly introduced by a different actor than the one experiencing it

Men put in roles they don't want - "I need you to behave like a man"

Never uses the term gay - "plays cricket on Sundays"

Spends a lot of time at secondary public locations - restaurants and beaches, riverbank - unusual, Austen is primarily focused on the domestic, with little action taking place outside of a home

Refers to £400 a year as a moderate income

Ends with a wedding

Live musicians on stage

- Andrew Hunter Murray - Frances
- Ciriad Lloyd - Lady Marlow/Millicent's mother
- Charlotte Gittins - Louisa
- Daniel Nils Roberts - Lord Marlow
- Graham Dickson - Anthony
- Rachel Parris - Millicent/Louisa and Francis' mother

4 chairs and 1 table on stage

Actors in wings but not visible

Reliance on innuendo - "turned physical sex into a topic for covert implication rather than overt description." (Chandler, p. 89)

Evaluation:

“when late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century readers thought of Austen as a child writer, they conceived of her not as a novelist or short-story writer but as a dramatist” (Sabor, p. 201)

“not as mere prototypes for the published novels but rather as a crucial indicator of Austen’s aims and achievement” (Sabor, p. 206)

“rather than their being pale foreshadowings of the novels, it is instead the novels that are subdued afterwords to the early writings” (Sabor, p. 206)

“tales in which murder, sexual impropriety, deformity and drunkenness play so prominent a part could hardly be acceptable to a high-Victorian sensibility” (Sabor, p. 207)

“there’s a world of 1814 and then there’s Jane Austen’s world which does break those rules and then there’s improv and us and we can break them again” (Austentatious An Impro Novel)

“There’s bits of the Jane Austen style that I think we like to play with - the not necessarily saying things out loud, kind of the etiquette of it, and playing with the conventions of where women were in those times” (Austentatious An Impro Novel)

“Things have got better but the narrative in film and in books is still it’s still so rare to have a woman’s point of view surrounded by women” (Austentatious An Impro Novel)

“What matters is to listen, to watch, to add to what is happening rather than subtract from it - and to avoid the reflex of trying to make it into something you think it *ought* to be, rather than letting it become what it *can* be” (Frost and Yarrow, p. 4)

“Every actor is the sum of his or her experiences (real and imagined) learned from other situations in life and on the stage: the collection of behaviours to which he or she has personal and cultural access” (Frost and Yarrow, pp. 151-52)

“The impulse is not towards stasis and calm, but towards movement and change” (Shaw, p. 301)

“Puns and riddles, too, suggest that Jane Austen was rather more knowing than has been realized.” (Chandler, p. 91)

“she is neither ignorant nor fearful, and certainly not prim” (Chandler, p. 94)

“The hardest thing to learn is that failure doesn’t matter. It doesn’t have to be brilliant every time - it can’t be. What happens is what happens; is what you have created; is what you have to work with” (Frost and Yarrow, p. 4)

## Bibliography

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