

## Theatre: Reviews

# Witty take on modern marriage and friends

**DINNER WITH FRIENDS**  
**PARK THEATRE**

★★★★☆

Funny and serious, superficial and profound, this light-hearted examination of the complexities and contradictions of contemporary western marriage and its connections with friendship, parenthood, sex and divorce is set in a tasteful kitchen-diner in Martha's vineyard but could as well be situated in Hampstead.

Donald Margulies' insightful script is very funny; mocking the pretensions of hosts, Karen and Gabe, two foodies who constantly refer, with patronizing romanticism, to their frequent visits to Italy. Sara Stewart and Shaun Dooley give faultless performances of this typical middle-class, middle-aged, financially comfortable, happily-married couple. Their easy familiarity, their balance of marital squabbling and physical affection is perfectly judged.

But it's slowly revealed that the success of their relationship is dependent upon the presence of other happily-married couples to applaud and confirm it. Tom and Beth, an edgier, more sexually-motivated pair supply this function. Hari Dhillon gives a convincingly restless portrayal of Tom, a successful lawyer experiencing the mid-life limitations - particularly sexual - of married life. Pinty Williams is a lively, attractive Beth, a new age artist of dubious talent. The two couples have been close friends for twelve years: holidayed together, eaten and drunk together and brought up their children together.

Then, at one merry dinner

party, it becomes clear that Tom and Beth's marriage is on the rocks. By ceasing to conform to the foursome's comfortable pattern they break it up. Although both are anxious to maintain the friendship, this proves impossible because its entire basis has been questioned. After the initial trauma, Tom and Beth are both delighted with their new lifestyles, forcing Karen and Gabe to question their own relationship. What will happen next is anybody's guess. The play provides no answers but makes clear there is no happily-ever-after - especially for the children.

Tom Attenborough's energetic

production, in tune with the wit of the writing, never flags. The second half, when events and dialogue are darker and more thoughtful, the pace is slower. But this is no tragedy: humour prevails.

The elegant set (David Woodhead) is in perfect harmony with the production's style managing to be at once realistic and symbolic of our times and mores. It has an Ikea-like simplicity which enables nifty scene changes and the whole amounts to a sophisticated and entertaining production, making audiences laugh and think - but not too deeply.

Jill Truman



■ picture: David Monteith-Hodge



■ Anne-Marie Duff in *Husbands and Sons* Picture: Manuel Harlan

## Pit drama is grim but gripping

**HUSBANDS & SONS**  
**NATIONAL THEATRE**

★★★★☆

Three plays, three families, three hours of DH Lawrence. If that fills you with dread, I have good news: Ben Power's skilled melding of this trio of mining dramas, unperformed in Lawrence's lifetime, creates a spellbindingly intimate epic.

A Collier's Friday Night, The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd and The Daughter-in-Law (1911-13) all take place in the author's home town of Eastwood in the Midlands. Lawrence, who escaped through education, includes a self-parodic avatar in adolescent Ernest, boasting of his "instinct for Latin". But this community is driven by more animal instincts, and Marianne Elliott's visceral production honours its earthy, violent and sensual core.

The in-the-round Dorfman audience is thrust into the grimy action. Those in the aptly-named pit switch sides midway, so as to connect with the family on the opposite half of the stage - some detail needs to be seen in close-up.

Lawrence's focus is not the brutalised menfolk, but the women trapped in equally claustrophobic domesticity. Power lucidly explores their cycle of love and neglect, turning from indolent husbands to funnel ambition through their sons, who are then pulled from their own wives by this sub-Freudian bond.

Grim, yes, but the dialect is rich with wild poetry and salty humour, and Elliott's thoughtful evocation of the rhythms of working-class life is hypnotic. Bunny Christie's effective hyper-naturalistic design gives us self-contained houses but no walls, with rooms and family names written on the ground - Our Town meets Cluedo.

Standouts in a superb ensemble include despairing wives Anne-Marie Duff, Louise Brealey and Julia Ford, indomitable mother-in-law Susan Brown, gruff, coal-blackened Lloyd Hutchinson and soused spouse Martin Marquez. Reflecting Lawrence's own mixed feelings, there is both sadness and liberation in the knowledge that this is a world lost forever.

Marianka Swain

## Nightmares of drone pilot in chilling war play

**GROUNDING**  
**PARK THEATRE**

★★★★☆

The programme for Grounding carried an essay on war by political activist Lindsey German. She discusses the insanity of conflict in the 20th century and how aerial bombardment has become increasingly asymmetrical. She is talking about drones.

On stage are two young women in flying suits. They are the same character, a Major in the USAF: one (Nadia Nadarajah) is The Pilot and the other (Charmaine Wombwell) The Voice of the Pilot. Nadia is deaf and sign/acts her part; Charmaine, in a ninety minute tour de force, is her storyteller.

The Pilot is a combat ace in one of the US of A conflict theatres and she loves the role. She

loves the aircraft, the Blue, the camaraderie and the important job she does. She is an aware person, thoughtful, proud and content.

She meets a man in a bar; a strange fellow with a thing about women in flying suits. She is pleased to oblige and, nine months later, Samantha arrives. The Pilot is relieved of flying duties, joins the Chair Force then, on return to active service finds that she has been assigned to a squadron flying drones from a bunker in the desert near Nevada.

She can commute to work. She pilots her drone (with a 1.2 second transmission delay) from a big chair in the bunker, seeking out High Value Targets and destroying them. The Pilot misses her old squadron companions and the banter but loves being able to take her daughter to pre-school.

Then the nightmares start.

Lindsey German's "asymmetry" can be taken to mean the inequality between perpetrator and victim but it can also deal with the known impact on drone pilots of serious and long term PTSD. In a very mundane way writer George Brant introduced us to the normalisation and suburbanisation of war, of commuting to kill and the impact on the Pilot.

Both actors were superb. Working with the director and choreographer, they melded together in a symbiosis of skills and expression: there were two figures on stage but one character.

A rich and rewarding experience, Grounding delivers one of the most chilling conclusions to any play currently on in London.

David Winskill



■ Nadia Nadarajah and Charmaine Wombwell picture: Marc Brenner