

Arts & Culture

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THEATER

Sparkling sophisticated nonsense in *The Constant Wife*

By David Cannon
Sentinel Arts Critic

Just how fleeting is fame? Somerset Maugham was one of the most respected British writers of the early 20th century, but when was the last time you saw someone reading *Of Human Bondage* or *The Moon and Sixpence*? But perhaps a Maugham revival is underway – there is currently a movie out based on his early novel *The Painted Veil* and Olney Theater Center for the Arts is kicking off their 2007 season with a revival of Maugham's play *The Constant Wife*.

Oddly, *Wife* is a nothing like *Of Human Bondage* or Maugham's serious novels. We are closer to the territory of Shaw and Noel Coward with the witty one-liners and amusing domestic situation. But Maugham is using that comic surface to put forth a very novel view of marriage, even for the roaring '20s, and director John Going and his talented cast understand the more serious tensions underneath this glittery surface.

Much of the humor comes from characters not behaving like we think they should, or com-



PHOTO BY STAN BAROUH

(L-R) Michael McKenzie as John Middleton, F.R.C.S. and Julie-Ann Elliott as Constance Middleton.

ing up with novel rationalizations for what they are doing. The play centers on Constance Middleton, respectable wife of a London doctor. As her mother said, "she eats well, she sleeps well, she's losing weight ... what woman wouldn't be happy under those circumstances?" But it seems that Constance's husband of 15 years is not that faithful, and several of her friends and

relatives want to tell her of that fact. Plus an old flame from years ago has returned for a visit.

Half the fun is watching these characters act out traditional drawing room comedy situations that never turn out the way they expect. Actors tend toward caricature but never become one-dimensional. Thus Allyson Currin stews as Constance's

sister Martha, just dying to tell her sister the truth. Nancy Robinette is great as a mother with non-traditional views and a pocket book full of witty epigrams (usually at the expense of the males).

Helen Hedman is great in the small but pivotal role of a modern businesswoman – how novel that must have been for the '20s! – and Ashley

West is tons of fun as Constance's vapid best friend who may not be as foolish as she lets on.

But front and center is Julie-Ann Elliott as Constance. Always the calm in the storms around her, but Going and Elliott understand what makes Constance tick. This is not a showy or didactic role, and Elliott can recite her opinions on marriage that even today sound pretty bold and cynical and still come off as endearing. This Constance can exact revenge on her friends and philandering husband and they all thank her for it.

A lovely, uncluttered set by James Wolk and great period costumes by Liz Covey set the mood. If there is any criticism, both the play and the production tend to make the men pretty hopeless at times. But Maugham's play has the last laugh. It has Noel Coward's sophistication but has far more depth. It has Shaw's witty insights but is far more concise.

This is pure sophisticated nonsense masking a very modern attitude in the center. It is all sparkling champagne, but Olney gives this concoction a real kick in the end.

The Constant Wife continues at Olney Theater Center for the Arts through March 11. This play is also the first of Olney's 2007 season, which will include musicals like *Fiddler on the Roof*, dramas like *Of Mice and Men* and *Democracy*, and comedies like the Feydeau farce *13 Rue de L'Amour*.

For more information on the current play or the remainder of Olney's 2007 season, call (301) 924-3400 or visit www.olneytheatre.org on the web.

The Constant Wife
Olney Theater Center
for the Arts
★★★

Dimly Perceived Threats to the System is clearly hilarious great fun

By David Cannon
Sentinel Arts Critic

If it were not for the family, especially dysfunctional ones, what would scriptwriters talk about?

Currently at Silver Spring Stage is a quirky but quite funny comedy *Dimly Perceived Threats to the System*.

That's a formidable title, and individual scenes have college syllabus sounding titles like *Environmental Depletion* (for a family picnic) and *Epistemological Break* (for intermission), but ignore those. They are part of the joke, and there are plenty of jokes in this well produced show.

Threats is a type of show I would expect to see more down at Woolly Mammoth than Silver Spring Stage. The basic plot is familiar

enough, a typical modern American family, complete with parents in mid life crisis and alienated daughter. In other words, it's the perfect crew for the *Little Miss Sunshine* set.

What makes *Threats* unique is that is writer Jon Klein frequently breaks off into fantasy sequences, usually denoted by a shimmering disco ball suddenly coming to life (the Bee Gees as aversion therapy – discuss). A lot of this is the character's inner thoughts playing out before our eyes, with a lot of wish fulfillment fantasies becoming very fulfilled indeed.

So Mom and Dad start having fantasies of having affairs with, well just about everybody. The daughter starts feeling that her school therapist is more than a little unhinged with his pencil sharpener and other electrical equipment. When the father starts having an affair, the family picnic degenerates into a fantasy where the father's ego is the chief victim. Klein realizes that when we start to daydream, we do not always have full control of where those thoughts lead, and some of the funniest moments are when these thoughts go down some odd back alley ways.

Director Michael Sandner understands

how this quirky little comedy operates and has cast the play well, so we drift in and out of reality quickly and easily, with nary a misstep. Karen Kellner and Ted Schneider do well as the typical American parents who get to do some very atypical things and Katie Keddel has alienated daughter Christine down pat.

But the supporting roles get to have a lot of fun too. Stuart Fischer is great fun as the school therapist who has his own healthy mental fantasy life, and Elizabeth Yeats is equally good as the female film producer and Kelli Biggs as a flip-pant doctor caring for Schneider's ailing mother. Yeats and Biggs have the most elaborate fantasy scenes, changing their voices as they become other characters and starting to express emotions that the main characters have in their heads.

It sounds a little complicated, and it probably is for the actors, but it is all clear and frequently hilarious on stage. Brandon McWilliams designed a nice unit set and his elaborate lighting design is pivotal for leading us quickly into and out of those fantasy sequences. And Sandner's sound design really puts us in the mood of the 1990s. Yes, MMBop, the New Radicals, even the Macarena live again.

Definitely a little different, but definitely well done. The play does include adult language and situations, but it hilariously dissects its subject matter and surprisingly puts it back



PHOTO BY NEIL EDGELL

Katie Keddel (Christine Hauser) in *Dimly Perceived Threats to the System*.

together again better than you might expect. Nevertheless, I might give those electric pencil sharpeners a wide berth for a while.

Dimly Perceived Threats to the System continues at Silver Spring Stage through March 18. For reservations, call (301) 593-6036.

Dimly Perceived Threats
to the System
Silver Spring Stage
★★★