

# Review: *The Voysey Inheritance*

## Voysey: Inheriting the Whirlwind

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A man might wear elegant clothes and speak like a Shakespearean scholar. He can have his oil portrait hanging over the fireplace and know at all times which fork to use. But as Harley Granville Barker asserts in *The Voysey Inheritance*, the trappings of refinement are meaningless if a man lacks an ethical compass and the capacity for shame. A rogue is a rogue is a rogue.

Barker, a contemporary of George Bernard Shaw, sees the evils of the rich in something akin to genetic terms in *The Voysey Inheritance*, a 1905 play that is being solidly and stylishly revived by CENTERSTAGE. The drama's amoral paterfamilias, Trenchard Voysey, has engaged in an elaborate swindle for decades, bilking clients of the savings they've entrusted to his family's venerable London investment firm. The sins he commits are a legacy of the practices of his father, and now he is preparing to pass on the management of the pyramid scheme to his own reluctant son.

If we tend to think of white-collar crime as a relatively recent innovation, *The Voysey Inheritance* provides some clarifying perspective. The play, staged with skill by Irene Lewis, shares with the work of other playwrights of the period, like Shaw and Ibsen, a belief in the cornerstone-importance of social responsibility, particularly for those in positions of influence. Corruption is a theme in many of their dramas but so is salvation, the idea that a single human being has the power to redeem an entire community through an act of contrition or personal sacrifice.

In *Voysey*, the story draws its tension from the steely determination of Trenchard's son, Edward (a fine Eric Sheffer Stevens), to expose his father's deceptions and repay the stolen money. The intriguing crux of Barker's play and Lewis's production is the shrewd juxtaposition of villain and hero: The father, as portrayed by John Ramsey, is witty and worldly and debonair, a wholly appealing scoundrel. "Why," he asks glibly, "is it so hard for a man to see beyond the letter of the law?"

As the son who wants to do right, meanwhile, Stevens is cold and blunt, a killjoy. The clients who are being stolen blind by the father adore him and despise Edward. The world, it seems, is often irritated by its martyrs.

The pacing and locutions of *The Voysey Inheritance* are reminiscent of all those Edwardian dramas that have landed on the American airwaves over the years by way of the BBC. Even in Gavin Witt's streamlined adaptation, there are times that you become a little squirmy with the work's loquacity. The Voyseys are a large clan, and not all of the family members make for especially memorable characters. Still, as the family ponders the painful implications of the father's crimes—and of Edward's lonely advocacy of restitution to the victims—the story takes on an ever more satisfying urgency.

Though the production suffers a bit from the lack of a galvanizing climax, there is a beautifully played scene in Act 2 that comes close. It takes place in the offices of the investment firm, where Edward is visited by a longtime family friend and one of Trenchard's oldest customers, George Booth (Lawrence O'Dwyer). Edward has been left the burden of revealing to Booth that the father has ransacked his savings. It's the instance in which you're made to feel the impact of the father's misdeeds most profoundly, and O'Dwyer does a nifty job of taking us through the arc of his character's incredulity and despair.

Among the actors playing Edward's assorted siblings and in-laws, Carol Halstead is particularly effective as a modern young woman seeking to escape both a loveless marriage and the conventions of the period, and Jenny Sheffer Stevens's Alice makes a provocative and handsome love interest for Edward. (She's also the actor's real-life wife.) The set designer, Allen Moyer, vibrantly evokes the burnished luxury of the dining room in the English countryside, and Constance Hoffman's costumes are a ravishing production all by themselves. It all makes for a period piece that's apt for any morally challenged period.