

Review

Sharing Truth and Shame



The Inheritance

by Matthew Lopez, directed by Stephen Daldry

This play is performed in two parts of three hours and fifteen minutes each; it's nothing, if not ambitious. I saw it on two successive nights at the Noël Coward theatre in the West End. Matthew Lopez has used E. M. Forster's novel, *Howards End*, as a reference point and inspiration for a play about what we, in our present, owe to the past, and to the future. It insists upon the kinship of gay men over time and talks to us of the necessity of suffering if we are to love and care for each other.

E. M. Forster wrote his novel *Maurice* about the fear, shame, and joy of homosexual love during the year before

the outbreak of the First World War. *Maurice*, like the short stories published as *The Life to Come*, did not see the light of day until 1971, a year after his death. Forster was known to be homosexual among his close circle of friends and confidantes, but this secret was never allowed to leak into the public realm. Forster sustained a love affair for forty years with Bob Buckingham, a married policeman, and became close friends with Bob's wife, May; he died aged 91 at Bob and May's suburban semi in Coventry, and his ashes were later mingled with those of Bob's.

E. M. Forster was conflicted and dishonest in a manner familiar to many gay men to this day. The contradictions and confusions of our personal lives collide with political and social circumstance, which often result in shame and the suppression of truth. This cannot be resolved simply by disclosure or coming out, but constitutes us in a manner common to all men and women regardless of sexual tastes and predilections. There is something universal here which Forster explores in all his novels. He is acutely aware of the class tensions, colonialism, conventional propriety – the life denying fears and prejudices which frame and disfigure the world of his fictional characters. It is here that Matthew Lopez has grabbed the historical baton in order to talk about ourselves.

The play opens with ten good-looking young men lounging about the stage in street clothes, artfully composed in a picturesque tableau which contends with their relaxed and casual appearance. The story of their lives begins to unravel with the help of Walter an older man in suit and waistcoat. He is also Morgan, or E. M. Forster, an active personality in all their stories as he metamorphoses from one person to another, appearing and reappearing, encouraging, correcting, lamenting, and relishing the company and experience of the young men.

Walter haunts the play like the dead swept away by Aids. The life he shares for thirty-five years with the billionaire, Henry, presents the young men in the play, and us watching in the dark, with the amorality of capitalism, when it meets the certainties enjoyed by young social justice warriors, who lack all awareness of their own entanglement in the contradictions inherent in their lives. The viral nature

of racism and nationalism in America is brilliantly articulated as the dismay and defeat of 'Hilary' echoes the dislocation and dysfunction of our own state here in Britain.

The young men in this play are middle class in the English sense of the phrase, and avowedly liberal in sentiment. Consequently, Henry's vast fortune, his wheeling and dealing, his corruption and amorality, provide a counterpoint to their own liberal betrayals, and misuse of each other; their ambition and gaze averted from the love, grief, and tragedy, which actually compose their lives.

Michael Lopez's writing is vivid and humorous, vital and humane; the rapid and feisty dialogue, and its quiet and reflective moments, carry one through the six and a half hours of the play. He and the actors demand unfailing attention, and they get it. It is an extraordinary achievement which explores the camp absurdity, the gripping challenges, the necessity of suffering – death by suicide, by disease, by neglect – redeemed finally by the recognition that care must be taken in all our dealings with the past, with each other, and the future.

This is sharply drawn when the sexual hedonism of the gay milieu, dominated by cocaine, crystal meth and GHB – the misuse, and disregard of each other – is depicted in a powerful evocation worthy of the *Inferno* of Dante. It is a world in which prostitution, brutality, and desire is allowed to run riot without regard to the wreckage left in its wake. This is done by Michael Lopez, his actors, and the director, Stephen Daldry, without unctuous moralism – they have not pitched their tents on the moral high ground – on the contrary they see this kind of crisis as one that flows out of the past and the repression to which we have all been subjected. It is a crisis that must be overcome.

The haunting by those lost to the plague in the eighties and early nineties is depicted seamlessly and with unnerving skill. It is here that Margaret (played by Vanessa Redgrave), the housekeeper of 'Rooks Nest' or 'Howards End', reimagined in upstate New York, reflects on her efforts to save her handsome son from the cruel attention of the queers which abound down in the city, and of her grief when he is brought to the house to die at the age of 25. She and Walter continue to bring dozens of dying men and boys to

the house to accord them the care and dignity which eludes them in the city.

Walter, Margaret, and Eric, who ultimately inherits the house, do not function as Mother Teresa who helped the dying, but did nothing to drain the swamp of poverty and despair. On the contrary, Eric and the other young men, despite the terrifying death of Toby Darling in the flames of a car crash he contrives because he cannot escape from his past, are redeemed by love and the realisation that their gaze must not be averted from grief if they are to learn how to care for each other.

The play is performed on an empty stage except for the brief moments when a cherry tree, symbolic of abundance, change, and dogged survival, makes its appearance, or a large dolls house is displayed, as 'the house', at the rear of the stage. We are always aware of when a person changes into another character, and the action moves from one situation or period to another, the movement between the dead and the living is subtly realised, almost without effort. The lighting, music, and above all the dialogue, brilliantly spoken, carries us along to the heartrending conclusion lifted by Margaret and Eric's determination to see it all through.

Wherever and whenever this play is staged I will make every effort to see it again and again.