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- classical
- comedy
- visual arts
- gaming
- Books

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- new music
- film
- theatre
- dance
- tv
- CD/DVDs

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- reviews | features | gallery | q & a | proms | first person | we recommend

Home » Dance » Matthew Bourne's Play Without Words, Sadler's Wells

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Matthew Bourne's Play Without Words, Sadler's Wells

Bourne's masterpiece - a giddy, sexy, diabolical confection that deserves to become a global smash

by [Ismene Brown](#) | Saturday, 14 July 2012

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Upstairs, downstairs: Bourne's Play Without Words is a lipsmackingly vicious sexual comedy

© Sheila Burnett

Sound the trumpets triumphantly - Matthew Bourne's most original masterpiece has come out of hiding into full view, a giddy, sexy, diabolical confection that hovers on the edge of hellish, and deserves to become a global smash. *Play Without Words* is everything that any sex comedy could aspire to, everything that a *film noir* could aim for, and much more dangerous than either theatre or film can be, because it's what bodies do, not what mouths say, that is leading you into your own sinful nature.

Bourne made the work in a National Theatre workshop 10 years ago, and that experimental milieu drew out of him a concept of amazing boldness and a perfect execution. One can cite any number of source references in it, from Joseph Losey and Joe Orton to Shakespeare, and yet something bitingly Bourne-ish bounces up clean and original through the welter of clever derivations. A scenario of familiar subversiveness is set in 1960s Belgravia where the upstairs masters are taken apart by the downstairs servants, sexually, morally and culturally. But as it's told in dance, you derive a sophisticated, ambivalent subtext that takes the entire piece to the level of an existential essay on free will.

Lez Brotherston created for it one of his most evocative sets, where



“*Play Without Words is everything that any sex comedy could aspire to, everything that a film noir could aim for, and much more dangerous*”

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white Belgravia lurches behind a red bus and a scarlet phone box, where a mobile white staircase doubles as the entrance into a spacious drawing room, where black railings outside indicate a public gents' lav, the scene only needing Sergeant Dixon to amble by. The eye-view is tellingly dislocated, so that you are looking from below the street level.



And in that street, as the piece opens, a wild jazzman is disturbing the SW1 peace with his trumpet, a louche man with no tie and a red checked shirt, who will play a role somewhere between Puck, the imp of sexual mischief, and Lucifer, the lord of damnation, mixing up classes, genders, rules, definitions, leaving only debris and broken men behind.

He is Speight, listed as "an old friend", the only character to be played by a single actor - all the others are triplicated and duplicated, a genius device, because they're going to be smashed up. (Whose "old friend" is he? You wonder.) He's also the spirit of the music that lures the revels on, a deeply delicious creation by Terry Davies that marries late-night jazz clubs to Bach and Caribbean voodoo beats.

“ Which is saucier? When the servant undresses his master, or when he dresses him? These happen in parallel, and crumbs, it's eye-opening ”

The occupants of the house are upper-class Anthony, his manservant Prentice, his elegant fiancée Glenda and the new housemaid Sheila. Three Anthonies, in their beige suits and horn-rimmed specs, three Glendas, in chignons and tight oatmeal suits, three Prentices in navy valet aprons, two sexy Sheilas, the housemaid, who has stepped

straight in from an Italian movie with full red lips and a too-short skirt.

All the different versions are frequently on stage at once, but not milling about, not in the least - each pairing has its own distinct trajectory. Like people in crowds, they know where they're going, and to whom. And because each of the versions is doing something slightly different with the same situation, you see a multiplicity of possibilities, the constant shifting of options and choices available, amorality on a plate, having it all ways.

Sometimes it's pure naughtiness. For instance, which is saucier? When the servant fastidiously undresses his master, or when he dresses him? These happen in parallel, and crumbs, it's eye-opening. Even more so is the quite extraordinarily hot seduction on the kitchen table by Sheila of her master, wearing his cricket sweater over her brief black knickers, an affair that in dance language homes in with laser eroticism onto fingers, toes, sudden tiny, hair-prickling touches - and then explodes with open legs and whirling acrobatic lifts.



And yet Bourne is also so good at cool: his performers are actors as much as dancers, and his three Prentice actors keep a masterly poker-face in their servant activities, literally - and hilariously - anticipating their masters' every move, and breaking almost with relief into sneers and wrenches when the gloves come off.

The Anthonies, the masters, have a trickier challenge to summon sympathy from inside their hooray-Henry exterior, and they need to avoid playing clichés to the gallery (particularly [Richard Winsor](#) last night, who could rein it in). The outstandingly contrasted trio of performers is the Glendas who each present a different set of needs, haughty Saranne Curtin, an arrogant smile around her lips, the sensual, submissive Anjali Mehra, Madelaine Brennan, who you sense deserves better ([pictured, Glendas and Anthonies, in parallel flirtations](#)). By contrast again, the Sheilas are brilliantly identical, Anabel Kutay with her Nefertiti profile and sloe-eyed [Hannah Vassallo](#), exquisitely sex-kittenish with their dark

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Italian hair and bare, tanned legs. The minutely plotted samenesses here and differences there are little switches exactly applied to turn Belgravia into *Lord of the Flies*.

“ Its intricacy of use of the stage could never be filmed, it is pure live stage entertainment of the highest order ”

Swarthy Jonathan Olivier as Speight is as explosive as Elvis, the spirit of the Sixties - yes, it does sound over-familiar, but he's a package of Stanley Kowalski, Mephistopheles and even Petrushka as well, every racy, exciting, rule-breaking adolescent, every evil social terrorist, but also - and this is why it's clever - every confused boy lashing out to

liberate his personal identity.

This is just tremendous theatre, dance, dance-theatre, its innovativeness thrown into keen perspective by the Pina Bausch season just gone, which repeated tropes over and over. And another bonus is that it so completely is bound to the wooden boards of the theatre - its intricacy of use of the stage could never be filmed in any way, it is pure live stage entertainment of the highest order.

This year we've seen a 25-year retrospective of the Bourne identity, from his earliest *amuse-bouches* and the poignantly rewarding *Swan Lake* that the world has embraced, with a new *Sleeping Beauty* to come this winter. Most of his work in the past has derived from other sources. *Play Without Words*, despite its looking back to Joseph Losey and John Osborne, shows something more remarkable still, total individuality, total originality, a unique mastery of theatre. You have three weeks to get to it - run, don't walk.

- [Play Without Words is at Sadler's Wells Theatre, London, till 5 August](#)

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Matthew Bourne's trailer for the revival of *Play Without Words*

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