

For Richer or Poorer

By Mark Fitzgerald

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There is a certain fortitude in David Hare's play, *Skylight*, that builds on the equilibrium and reciprocity of its confrontment. As soon as we're persuaded to see things one way, Hare thrusts us in the opposite direction, questioning the moral and social basis of which only moments before we'd felt so sure. The two main characters, Tom Sargeant (Richard Goulding) and Kyra Hollis (Rosamund Pike), are living at opposite ends of the social ladder and argue passionately about their personal and professional identity and how they see the world. Both characters are convincing and one of the more remarkable subtleties is that by the end of the performance—even though nothing has changed—you end up feeling for both.

Set in a modern day flat in North London, *Skylight* first premiered at the National Theatre in 1995 and has already become one of Hare's most well known works. Tom is a wealthy restaurant entrepreneur who one night makes an unexpected visit to his former mistress, Kyra. His wife, Alice, has just died of cancer and there is a heaviness he carries with him, a repressed guilt from never having obtained his wife's forgiveness for the six year affair he had with Kyra. Here is someone who drives with his "foot floored to ground," speeding around town in fancy car, and still feels "nothing." Tom has a restlessness that comes from years of buying and selling and is complicated by his loneliness and dissatisfaction with his personal life. It's been about a year since his wife has died when he drops by to see Kyra, and Hare triggers the tension around the backstory and events leading up to their split three years ago. We follow two plots: the one on stage and the one we are left to imagine—but somehow Hare manages to make both come alive and intersect at the most critical of junctures.

How the past has unfolded has a lot to do with the future, and there are moments when you get the sense that both characters have been running in place: "You think there was a day that went by that I didn't think of the wreckage?" Kyra asks from somewhere behind the spaghetti dinner that's been ruined. She walked out of Tom's life when the affair had been discovered and the implication is that this was the cause of Alice's cancer. Kyra used to work for Tom, but for the past three years has been working as a teacher in the underprivileged neighborhood of East Ham. She lives in a low rent district and her apartment is cold not just because she can't afford to heat it, but also because she is using self-denial as a way to diffuse her guilt and anger. This works wonders, she explains, pitting the needs of the many against her own. If she doesn't help these kids, then no one else will, and there is something startlingly humane about her monologue on what it

means to survive. Still, in spite of all the ugliness she faces each day, it's a bit ironic that she can't bear to read the paper or watch the news. There's a certain disconnection she needs with the world to salvage what hope she has to make a difference. "One student at a time," she says buoyantly near the end, juxtaposing the immensity of the problem and the gratification of the task.

Despite the gulf between them and the ardent importance they place on their separate ways of life, it's interesting that Tom and Kyra give in so easily to sex. Besides a tray of silverware being hurled across the room and a weak concession to shred the cheese, the only prelude worth noting is Kyra sobbing on Tom's shoulder at the end of the first act. Undoubtedly Hare intended this to be more of an act of desperation than of longing, but I couldn't help thinking of how adept he was in "The Blue Room," a play that ran at the Theatre Royal earlier this year. (The whole play is a satire on the before and after behaviors in the sexual daisy chain and you can tell Hare was having fun making the hide and seek seem so natural.) It may be unfair to say that the dalliance between Tom and Kyra offered an easy solution for an intermission, but after the arguing heats up again in the second act, one wonders whether Hare couldn't have handled what little spark there was more delicately. Instead, sex was like a hiccup they needed to get rid of so they could continue arguing. "You never serve the pudding before the soup," Kyra scoffs after she realizes the mistake she's made.

We can't forget, however, that for six years they were happy and in love. This is the other plot that complements the one we're watching. That Kyra had befriended Alice gives us a good clue as to why she (Kyra) disappears so suddenly. Hare knows his characters, even the ones we never see, and delivers the right details at the right time, making credible Alice's slow and painful death and the guilt Tom lived through and brings to Kyra's doorstep. We even get to know Frank, Tom's limousine driver, who listens to *Kiss 100* and likes to talk about Cindy Crawford. But one has to question whether Edward, Tom's son and the other character in this play, was necessary. Sure, he sets up Tom's arrival and may even be a source of relief after his departure, but there was never a moment when his presence didn't feel incidental. Granted, eighteen is a pretty awkward age under the best of circumstances, but somehow the effect Hare was hoping for—which I took more as a mark of structural punctuation than a deference to any traditional conduit—got lost in the muddle.

One feels director, James Rogan, has been faithful to script and there are some nice touches, like the sound of the peppers sizzling in the fryer and the emphasis Tom places on sipping the whiskey as he rambles around the room. The whole pace to the dinner preparation felt right, even if Kyra's eruption with the silverware was a bit off. Sometime in the night snow has fallen, and as Tom wipes the frost away from the small window in the kitchen we are left to imagine the beauty of the London winterscape: a stark contrast to the bombshelled flat in front of us. But considering the psychology of the play, the novelty of the snow felt almost wanton and misplaced (heavy rain might

have been better). The timing was off and the effect ignored by Edward in the last scene. Maybe it was a missed opportunity for Rogan, but you can't blame him if Hare felt strongly about wrenching the schism. The cab makes it through the snow, as you knew it would, and its honking at the end is rightfully disturbing, as if Hare wanted to say that this isn't over yet. Kyra gets yanked out of bed by one last knocking at the door and Edward ushers in a catered breakfast tray smuggled from a hotel.

It all seems too pat. If Hare wanted to go out on a whisper, he may have been better-off committing more completely to Tom's departure or at least allowed Kyra a sigh of relief and an opportunity to watch the snow. As it is, we are left to our own devices to bridge the gap between intention and meaning, and somehow a morning after seen—in light of the momentum and depth of the upsurge—fell short of completing any chime or jingle that wasn't already implied. It becomes clear long before third scene closes that neither Tom nor Kyra are going to yield: the polarities between rich and poor, social and private, even man and woman, have been fixed too carefully. If Tom is bombastic in the way he lets loose his anger, Kyra is browbeaten in the way she keeps hers buried. But they know exactly which buttons to push, and maybe this is why their discourse works so well. Just when you think there is no way out for one character, something from the backstory is pushed to the front, knocking breathless the other and triggering the need to dig into even deeper pockets. Each monologue becomes more impassioned and striking than the one before, and though I never expected to say this, there are moments when the intensity of the drama crosses that cathartic threshold that Aristotle once called art and enters into the sublime.

We figured Kyra might use her students' books as a trump card to dismiss Tom, but that doesn't mean it wasn't a bit of a letdown when she finally did. What is less oblique is that Tom—someone who in spite of his guilt has to remind himself that a businessman must never look behind, but should always stay focused on what lies ahead—deliberately left Kyra's love letters out in the open for Alice to read. "I gave you everything I had in those letters," Kyra exclaims in one of the most poignant moments in performance, "why did you throw it all away?" Maybe because whether he likes it or not, Tom does, after all, endorse many of the most obvious labels of a rich and voracious businessman. He wanted it all, and still does. But unlike the shrewd restaurateur he claims to be, he put the pudding before the soup, never thinking that Kyra and Alice might react as they did. Out of fit of rage and remonstrance, he knocks the books onto the floor, shouting, "You can't fool me," only moments later realizing, as he paces around the room one last time, that Kyra hasn't been fooling anyone. The cab is called and the snow is falling and, as Tom passes the books he threw on the floor, there is a moment when it seems as though he's considering picking them up and telling Kyra he's sorry. *Pick them up*, you hear yourself thinking. *Pick them up*.