

SIMON GRAY

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The Times Review of Molly

The Times Review of *Molly* at the Comedy Theatre

Irving Wardle

Following Terence Rattigan's *Cause Celebre* after a discreet interval, here is Simon Gray's view of the Alma Rattenbury case; and given the utter dissimilarity of the two plays (*Molly* is based on nothing more substantial than a few pages in a book of famous trials) one can only conclude that the real Alma must have been an extraordinary lady, so recognizable does she move from Rattigan's documentary romance into Mr Gray's cooler world.

One effect she has is to rid the story of any trace of squalor. Here is a fun-loving, hard-drinking woman with an infirm husband twice her age, and a young working-class lover with whom she is tried for murder when the husband is stabbed to death. In both plays, all this is converted into emotional generosity and uncalculating charm: to begin with it seems like childish charm, and then she reveals most unchildlike resources of human dignity and independence.

Mr Gray's play stops short of her suicide; and although it is called after her, it does not present her as a romantic lead, martyred to English public opinion. Rather, she is there as a figure with the power to unlock the different kinds of sexuality in those around her.

She gratifies her deaf and impotent husband by obediently bending over to be spanked for smoking cigarettes; she stirs the spinster housekeeper into lesbian yearnings; and she seduces the repressed adolescent Oliver and gives him the sensation of having been released from under the ground. What she does not bargain for is the incompatibility of these various gifts, and when she learns her mistake she develops in the opposite direction from Rattigan's Alma. In the last scene, she comes back to the house as a social outcast, but still awaited by the besotted housekeeper, Eve. She sends Eve off on a solitary walk. This time she is giving nothing away: generosity brings only disaster.

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Molly is adapted from a television play (Death of a Teddy Bear), and its chunks of retrospective information and scene breaks occasionally leave a short-winded impression. Where it excels is in the precision with which ordinary, harmless people are shown being driven to murderous rage. It starts with Eve's hair-trigger sulks (Molly is always having to placate those around her), and the husband Teddy's desire for companionship. And from the opening performances of Barbara Atkinson and T. P. McKenna it seems inconceivable that the story will lead to anything ugly.

Mr McKenna plays an irritable old Canadian, doing his best to be convivial but always spilling the drinks as well as missing what people say. When he turns ugly at the end, inciting the murder blow with a final spit in the face, the change is entirely credible because he is attacking not only his wife's lover but the country in which he has been made to feel useless and moribund.

Billie Whitelaw treats him with the kind of nursery affection that excludes any real emotional contact. Towards Anthony Allen's Oliver, a finely calculated study of pasty and repressed youth, sticking his hands in his trouser pockets when she first embraces him, she embarks on an extraordinary range of relationships from the initial seduction behind curtains to arrogant rejection, using her full class advantages, when he assumes rights of possession.

Apart from intrusive downstage amplification, Stephen Hollis' production guards the play's approaching climaxes with care, and delivers them with a bang when their moment comes.

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