

Mary Shelley—A new play about her remarkable life and times

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13 June 2012

Mary Shelley, a new play by Helen Edmundson, opened in Leeds on March 16 and, after a national tour, is now running at the Tricycle Theatre in London until July 7. It is a joint production of Shared Experience, Nottingham Playhouse and West Yorkshire Playhouse.

Edmundson's play is based on the relationship between the remarkable Mary Shelley, future author of *Frankenstein* and wife of poet Percy Shelley, and her father, radical journalist and philosopher William Godwin, between 1813 and 1816.

The play opens with 16-year-old Mary dreaming about an attempted suicide by her late mother, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), the advocate of women's rights and defender of the French Revolution. The young Mary is traveling by sea from Scotland back to her home in London and has recently read Godwin's biography of her mother, published in 1798. Profoundly moved by the candid and revealing book, Mary is inspired to live as her mother did.

Wollstonecraft died of puerperal fever, 11 days after Mary was born. Overcome with grief, Godwin began writing *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* only two weeks later. This was a heartfelt account of Wollstonecraft's astonishing life, written by a man who loved her and appreciated her unique qualities as a writer and a revolutionary.

He was criticised mercilessly by the reactionary press, and middle class public opinion was "scandalised". In the end, Godwin felt obliged to compromise and published a sanitised version of the memoir, with all mention of her love affairs, attempted suicides and illegitimate daughter removed.

Godwin educated Mary and her stepsister Fanny Islay as their mother would have wanted, to fight for political justice and social change and to face the world and its travails with fortitude and honesty.

Godwin himself, in an attempt to provide a home for his daughter and Fanny, married a neighbour, Mary Jane Clairmont, who also had a daughter, Jane, and a son, Charles.

When Edmundson's play begins, this somewhat dysfunctional family is living above Godwin's shop on Skinner Street in London, where he (played by William Chubb) and his second wife (Sadie Shimmin) are unsuccessfully attempting to establish a business publishing children's books.

The action moves from the opening dream sequence to the reality of life on Skinner Street. There is a claustrophobic feeling, but the house is a place of learning and radical ideas. A portrait of Wollstonecraft hangs above Godwin's desk. All of this background is beautifully expressed in the play through the relations within the family.

The second Mrs Godwin seems, at first, to be a woman completely obsessed by the day-to-day problems of life. She appears incapable of a genuine emotional response to the challenges presented by the adolescent Mary. However, by the end of the play, we learn that she is deeply concerned about the welfare and security of her own and Godwin's daughters.

Everything changes when the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (Ben Lamb), a passionate disciple of Godwin, arrives on the scene. Mary (Kristin Atherton) and Shelley soon fall in love, despite the fact that the poet already has a wife, whom he married three years before, when he was 19.

As the plot unfolds, Godwin is appalled by what he sees as his daughter's determination to ruin her life, not only socially but intellectually, too.

Fanny (Flora Nicholson), Wollstonecraft's first child, was born in Paris in 1794 of a relationship with an American, Gilbert Imlay. Fanny has grown up to be a shy and sensitive young woman. She admires Shelley and loves Mary, but is convinced their liaison will end in disaster.

Mary and Shelley elope to Europe, taking Jane Godwin (Shannon Tarbet) with them. Godwin feels completely betrayed by the lovers and cuts off all communication.

However, he is forced to accept financial help from Shelley because the only alternative is debtors' prison. The subsequent scandal caused by the elopement results in Fanny being refused employment as a teacher.

Fanny is torn between admiration for her sister and Shelley, and concern for those who do not have the opportunity to live a life they choose for themselves, as Mary and Shelley did.

One of the most moving scenes occurs between Fanny and Shelley, when the latter is trying to persuade her to join him and Mary in Geneva. She replies, "I can't come to you. I can't live the way you live. I realise that now. Because I don't think it's right. There, I've said it. You can put me in a box with all the reactionaries and cowards and push us into the sea. People get hurt. Children get hurt. Children grow up feeling unloved, unvalued. Out of place.... I'm not judging you. I just know I cannot live as you live. I want you all to be happy".

Shelley pleads with her. "We only have one life, Fanny. We must make use of every second. The powers that be—the rich, the government, society—they do everything they can to close us down, to shackle us..... We have to live bravely. We have to strive towards enlightenment. You have so much to offer the world".

In a recent interview, Edmundson said, "I found William Godwin completely fascinating and I have a huge soft spot for him. His radical beliefs had fallen out of fashion by the time Mary was a teenager.... So when Mary was 16 her father was past his prime, struggling to survive and crushed by debt".

The play is set at a time, only a few years after the French Revolution of 1789, when the British ruling class was terrified that the insurrectionary contagion would spread across the Channel. In the play, the repressive power of the British state, the social pressures to conform, the hostility to any ideas that might disturb the status quo and the grinding threat of bankruptcy and imprisonment are all present. But they are understated, implicit in the plot and the relationships between the characters, without preaching or histrionics.

The use of scenery and props is minimal, yet the play moves seamlessly through time and space. When the action takes place in Skinner Street, its occupants are never completely out of sight but can be seen moving behind the scenery, engaged in folding washing or sitting quietly reading or sewing. It is a small device, but it gives an extraordinary coherence to the action.

As the plot unfolds, we see Godwin refusing all attempts at reconciliation, despite the tragic events that follow the elopement. Despite everything, Shelley and Mary struggle to survive and hold firm to their ideals. In 1816, Mary begins to

write *Frankenstein*, and the book is published anonymously two years later.

Finally, the play moves towards reconciliation between father and daughter and Godwin's recognition of Mary's relationship and marriage to Shelley. But all of this is achieved at the steep price demanded by the mores of bourgeois society.

In the final scene, Mary meets her father for the first time in several years. She tells him she has written a novel, *Frankenstein*, about a man "driven, consumed by the desire to explore the very limits of his powers...of science, of knowledge. He creates a creature...from the parts of other humans. A living being. But when he has created it, he finds he cannot countenance its needs—its need for love, companionship, respect, its whole monstrous reality. It pursues him, across mountains and seas. Across the wide world. They come to hate each other.

"I thought of you a lot, while I was writing. All your ideas about...humanity, they have all been drawn upon. If I ever doubted how much I learnt from you, I do not doubt it now".

Her father replies, "And I am the monstrous creator, I suppose?" to which Mary replies, "I don't know. And which am I?"

The play is a consummate achievement of the writer, actors and director (Polly Teale). It is a breath of fresh air, in contrast to the light-mindedness of much of today's theatre. Most remarkable is the seriousness with which it deals with the problems of its period, but with a considerable resonance for our time.

I attended *Mary Shelley* twice, and both times the play received an exceptionally warm response from the audience. Those in attendance seemed to appreciate the essential theme of the play, the necessity to strive for a better life, in spite of its associated difficulties, not just for the individual but for society as a whole.



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