

THE VICTORIAN LADIES DETECTIVE COLLECTIVE Confronts Convention, Gender Bias - and a Serial Killer

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The Public Theatre's production of **Patricia Milton's** THE VICTORIAN LADIES' DETECTIVE COLLECTIVE is a witty, sophisticated, clever examination of late Victorian mores, skillfully embedded with subtle feminist rhetoric, and all encased in the classic mystery thriller format. Add to this recipe a handful of zany, colorful characters and some facile repartee, and the end result is a delightfully period piece with a compelling contemporary twist.

Milton has a keen ear for the cadences of the period dialogue and so slips into the conversation speeches and one-liners laden of stunning acerbic wit - all aimed at skewering the real villains of the piece: smug, self-satisfied, misogynous men and the society that supports them. In the course of the two hours, the women rail against being deemed the inferior sex, being seen primarily as sexual objects, being little more than a husband's chattel, being victims who deserve their misfortunes, and being artists whose virtue is questioned. One by one these women debunk each of these myths.

Christopher Schario's direction times the suspense of the play perfectly, allowing each reveal to unfold organically until the final epiphany that solves the mystery. He stages some amusing physical comedy as well as verbal banter, and despite the formulaic nature of the mystery itself, retains the audience's interest and investment.

Jennifer B. Madigan designs the attractive unit set - Mrs. Hunter's parlor - complete with numerous details of fussy Victorian décor lovingly recreated. **Erin Fauble** provides the serviceable lighting design, effectively suggesting the passage of time. **Anne Collins'** costumes are characterful, using silhouettes from the 1890s and handsome fabrics, and her designs for the three male characters (all played by one actor) are particularly extravagant. **Scott O'Brien** composes the incidental music that adds a great deal to the eerie atmosphere of the thriller and creates a well-balanced sound design.

The four-person cast performs with energy and élan. **Mathew Zimmerer** is tasked with portraying three widely different men- the duplicitous Constable PC Crane, the smarmy, predatory theatre manager Jasbry Warham-Wynn, and the creepy Cockney butcher/laudanum provider Toddy. He delineates each character brilliantly, with distinctively different accent and body language. **Robyne Parrish** endows the determined, high-strung Loveday Fortescue with an indomitable presence, mercurial temperament, and complete command of the stage. If there is a caveat in her performance, it is the somewhat unrelenting shrillness of her delivery that might call for some modulation for variety. **Joyce Cohen** portrays Valeria Hunter, her older sister, with a sly and secretive inner mischief, concealed beneath her cranky exterior and anxious nervousness brought on by her opium addiction. Her revelation about her fatal past with her late husband is a high point in the play. **Courtney Thomas** makes the American actress Katie Smalls a perfect foil to these Victorian women - plain spoken, fearless, able to defend herself and courageous enough to lead the plan to catch the killer at the end.

THE VICTORIAN LADIES' DETECTIVE COLLECTIVE offers a subtle, urbane, satiric look at the conventions, prejudices, and mores of a past century, that are, regrettably still with us today. As in the best comedy, we laugh because we see ourselves in the looking glass.



Robyne Parrish, Courtney Thomas and Joyce Cohen in The Victorian Ladies' Detective Collective