

Review: *The Voysey Inheritance*

The Smartest Guys in the Room

CENTERSTAGE Ably Tackles The Biggest Financial Scandal Of '05—1905, That Is

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Because it's about people speculating with other people's money—and ripping them off in the process—*The Voysey Inheritance* dredges up not-too-distant memories of Enron, or so suggests CENTERSTAGE in the program notes to its new production of the play. I don't know. This reporter never really understood Enron.

But this reporter did understand *The Godfather*, and there are definite Michael Corleone resonances in Harley Granville-Barker's 1905 script. *The Voysey Inheritance* is the story of a young man who's sucked into the financial machinations that his family has been indulging in for generations. Once he gets his hands dirty, he knows he'll be there for good, running the family's corrupt investment firm and hopefully staying out of the slammer.

Eric Sheffer Stevens plays Edward Voysey as a dark cloud in an already grim landscape. He's the educated, morally highfalutin son—the one with the brains, the one who actually wants to do some good in the world. As the story begins, he's being initiated into his father's complex financial shenanigans. He's astounded, then petulant, then defiant. He refuses to take on a family business whose speculations are morally unjustifiable. Then, in the tradition of the Corleones, the father (John Ramsey) croaks, and Edward has to take over, like it or not. From here, the play begins to focus on the remarkable transformation that occurs as Edward's own moral boundaries are violated, and finally obviated, as he struggles to keep the family business afloat.

Sheffer Stevens' portrayal of Edward doesn't leave us with much of a character. And it works. With a light touch, Sheffer Stevens manages to turn Edward from a morally upright prig to a smooth operator: By the start of the second act, even the audience is unsure where he's coming from. By the end of the second act, he's a virtual mobster. When he finally stands in the fading glow of the lowering lights, Edward is clearly an empty vessel.

Several performances by the supporting actors are also worth mention. As Major Booth Voysey, Edward's brother, Rob Nagle is a barrel-chested, boneheaded, career military type, but his portrayal falls short enough of slapstick to add some subtlety to the stereotype, his military bearing peeling off until he turns into the sort of morally undisciplined striping that he so despises. Laurence O'Dwyer's performance as the naive George Booth, who has poured most of his wealth into the Voysey firm, is one of the gems of the production. As an aging investor, George is the character cost artists love: faithful to the end, impotently outraged when he finds that he's been duped, and, finally, powerless to do anything about it. Without losing the comic touch, O'Dwyer allows his character to fire off brief spasms of vitriol as he finds that he's been deprived of half his fortune by the firm he had always considered his friends. One century later, unfortunately, there were probably plenty in the audience who could identify with that feeling.

By the play's end, Alice (Jenny Sheffer Stevens) takes control as the woman Edward has long been trying to hitch. For most of the play, she holds Edward in friendly contempt, but at the end, she begins to notice something a little sexy about the new Edward. Once he was a "well-principled prig"; now, he's the family Don. And Alice herself starts to take on the aura of a Victorian Lady Macbeth: The moment she gets Edward to propose to her and accepts, she comes up with her own strategies for the firm.

Discussing the financial improprieties of an investment firm doesn't make for very exciting stage directions. These days, that means that the scenic designer has to take up the slack, and Allen Moyer does so admirably. The opening set is a flat scrim, the interior set a meticulously rendered moving platform, which, as scenes change, lurches toward the audience and stops a few feet before the edge of the stage. At one point, that means Edward has to jump on it to avoid being run over, but barring any major malfunctions—which could be disastrous—it adds an intriguing cinematic dimension to an already engaging play.