

# Soap Opera Live

*The Royal Family* at McCarter Theatre

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*The Royal Family* was undoubtedly a commercial hit. In the great tradition of Broadway theatre, it is a play that amuses but fails to inform; an ideal evening for humanity trying to lose itself. We will not begrudge McCarter Theatre the opportunity to occasionally drop its civic virtue and artistic vision to pursue commercial cash—after all, theatre in America is woefully under-funded—but its current revival fails even to greatly amuse. *The Royal Family* feels pointless on stage, banal and unintellectual—the self-image American theatre has been trying to shed since the 1920's.

This is not to say that there aren't moments of technical brilliance. McCarter, as one of the foremost regional theaters, does its best to paper over

the play's imperfections with flawless costumes and realistic scenery—K. C. Ligon has even done a marvelous job with the dialects, giving us rich theatrical voices with just a hint of the aristocratic. It is as if the technicians knew that we would be unsatisfied with plot and style, and thought to distract us from these limitations with excessive “dressing”—how else to explain the set's roaring fireplace and falling snow? Likewise the lighting, which had been invisible and nearly perfect during the first act, starts inflicting Meta-Theatrical Vision upon us by the end of the third.

I must confess that there were some stylistic touches I appreciated. The subtly bright pool of light down stage right that the actors used as a virtual spotlight in Act II was nice. Technical frills such as the crisp light falling in through the stage right windows in Act I pleased me as well. But the lighting was hurt in Act II by several mysterious full-stage brightens and the unnatural and obvious way the lights rose and fell on the balcony. The coup-de-grace occurred in Act III, where Anthony delivered a speech on the “new German style” of theatre, with sets constructed on levels and “No exits! Just turn the lights off up here. . . and on down here!” A natural light change is expected here—Anthony switches table lamps, or the such—but the lighting designer (Peggy Eisenhauer) got carried away and let this “new German

style” infect the whole act. *The Royal Family* is not German.

The set designer (Kevin Rupnik) handled the “German style” with more tact—when one steps back mentally to consider it, the set is indeed built on levels just as Anthony describes. This is not overt nor attention-grabbing, however—probably only because the theatre wouldn’t let Rupnik animate his scenery.

Despite Susan Schulman’s poor choice of play, she did a fine job directing her cast. Act II has a very nice sense of manic energy—fittingly, we feel the whole family is living life at the climax of a bad play. Act III is more touching, less comic; also nicely directed; and there are several brilliant turns by Anthony (John Vickery) and Della (Pamela Wiggins). It’s not Schulman’s fault that the play is simply not funny anymore.

It is not that *The Royal Family* is outdated: Schulman calls the play a “very modern 1927 comedy” in the program’s director’s notes, and we agree. All our modern 20th-century staples are present in the play: telephones, aeroplanes, taxis, trains, and cars. The existence of luxury liners and an aristocracy doesn’t date the play; the business of theatre hasn’t changed much, despite the artistic innovations of the past half-century. Perhaps the problem is simply that we don’t know the Barrymores. Our theatrical “aristocrats”

comport themselves differently from the Cavendishes, and it seems certain that a modern audience is missing all the subtly barbed topical remarks.

Ultimately, we have simply outgrown *The Royal Family*. American regional theatre (commercial Broadway excepted) has striven ceaselessly to overcome the stereotype of the American Play, which emphasized emotion over ideas, domestic trials over political meaning, prosaic realism rather than stylized poetry, and proletarian guffaws over intellectual interest. *The Royal Family* seems to capture all that was thought “wrong” about early American theatre; our modern sensibilities thus treat it as inferior.

And perhaps rightly so. For example, the playwrights and director have managed an extraordinary sense of time throughout the second act—the clock moves swiftly from 7:20 to 7:30, 7:45, and 8:00 in the mouths of the actors—but when the climax is over, what does it amount to? Fanny is late, that’s all. The succession of events that so wrapped our interest reveals itself in utter banality.

The salvation of *The Royal Family* is its actors, who sensitively portray the familiar life of artists and their craft. When Oscar Wolfe counsels in Act III that “Fun is work. Work is fun,” we all wish to act for a living, and when he declares his conversion from money-grubbing producer to true

artist, we want to cheer for art, even if Oscar is lying. Soap opera or not, when the lights finally descend on Julia and Fanny Cavendish we are hushed and sincere. Glad to see *The Royal Family* go, perhaps, but respectful of what they were.