



# A Small Hole

## nytheatre.com review

Jon Stancato · August 12, 2006

There is an insightful, innovative, and downright fun play hiding somewhere within Performance Lab 115's stunning but often obtuse production of *A Small Hole*, Julia Jarcho's "mutation" of Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park*, but I'm not sure Jarcho and her collaborators quite know where to find it.

I've never read a page of what the press materials tell me is one of Austen's most problematic novels, but here is what I strained to gather: Fanny's family is too poor to take care of her so she is sent to live with her uncle (Sir Thomas, one of the several roles played by the virtuosic Jeff Clarke) at his Mansfield Park estate with her cousins Maria, Julia, and Edmund. Fanny transitions to her new life slowly, progressing from a nearly mute half-beast to an innocent and thoughtful, albeit easily manipulated, young woman. Edmund, a soon-to-be parish pastor, plays Henry Higgins to her Eliza Doolittle and a romantic/sibling tenderness develops between them. The Crawfords, a sadistic brother-sister tag-team a la *Dangerous Liaisons*, arrive at the estate and attempt to tear the sweet lovers apart through a series of oversexed mindgames.

So, you can see this isn't one of Ang Lee's demure Austen epics. This is (sometimes, and brilliantly so) a world in which the seamy underbelly of Austen's period (actually a pretty dark time for class, race, and gender in the British Empire) upstages her laced-up romance. Jarcho frequently transforms subtext into text; characters actually speak their stage directions ("Hmm...Debating and hesitating," Sir Thomas responds) and it's more than a little titillating (the first time) this corseted cast says the word "fuck" as casually as "tea." And teatime entertainments like playing the pianoforte become, courtesy of excerpts from the Marquis de Sade, live sex shows. Sir Thomas makes grotesque (and quite funny) jokes about his slaves and yet, at one point, poignantly wrestles with a description of a runaway slave ("He—it, the boy—boyshapedthing...").

The ensemble is first-rate, with Clarke and Elena Mulroneo shining with guileless and touching interpretations of Edmund and Fanny, respectively. Walker Lewis amuses as the spoiled and deviant Henry Crawford. Rebecca Lingafelter and Shelley Gershoni are charismatic and endearing, but their characterizations often get lost in a sea of triple-casting. Alice Reagan's direction is striking and baroque, though in its pursuit of poetic staging, often obfuscates the narrative. Perhaps the tour de force contribution here is choreographer Beth Kukjian's wild African-inflected take on Austen's social dance, which highlights both interpersonal and intercultural tensions. The set, sound, costume, and lighting elements, provided by Shane LeClaire, Mark Valadez, Amelia Dombrowski, and Natalie Robin, respectively, are spot-on with Jarcho and Reagan's cheeky pastiche.

Yet, about an hour and fifteen minutes into the 90 minute "theatrical rollercoaster of experimentation" the ensemble advertises in the press materials, one character (I wish I could tell you which, but that's one of the problems here!) begs Fanny to "hang in there a little longer. It takes time, there's a logic in place...and at the end you--". The character never finishes her thought and frankly, I never fell in step with the playworld's promised logic. As someone unfamiliar with the novel, I'm still attempting to sort out exactly what happened onstage and whether the production was too smart for its own good, or not quite smart enough.

### Written by:

Julia Jarcho

### Directed by:

Alice Reagan

### Presented by:

Performance Lab 115  
at the New York  
International Fringe  
Festival

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