Zadie Smith’s *Wife of Willesden* is a riotous, witty celebration of Chaucer

A review by Kat Zhang (4/5 Stars)

The warm lights of A.R.T., which has been transformed into a raucous pub for the night (complete with audience members seated at pub tables on the stage), shone down on Clare Perkins’ Alvita, resplendent in a fire engine-red dress and black pumps reminiscent of Christian Louboutins. Alvita is Zadie Smith’s take on Chaucer’s fiery and perhaps controversial character, the Wife of Bath, told with a twist that only Smith could bring as she weaves in aspects of her own multicultural upbringing, from the Willesden, London setting to Jamaican culture and beyond. And although much of the context is inspired by Smith’s own background and some references in the original prologue and tale have been swapped out in favor of more modern nods, the structure and content of what Alvita tells her audience in the pub is remarkably similar to Chaucer’s original.

The show is, undoubtedly, an absolute riot. Clare Perkins embodies the modern Wife of Bath, so much so that you can almost see the shadow of the gap-toothed, rosy-cheeked caricature in the way she laughs and talks – but in a way that is just a little bit more believable. The Wife of Bath is also charismatic and argues her points with vigor, but something about the way Alvita will tell us, with no caveats, that all men are rascals who will cheat and lie one second and laugh at her own conviction the next makes her feel more like a person than a caricature. The small cast manages to effectively convey a wide array of characters, and Smith makes the wise decision to tell the prologue through character vignettes – Alvita’s five ex-husbands form a revolving door of appearances, interrupting her and shouting her down. The wisdom of “holy men” of the past is instead delivered by a pastor figure, Alvita’s Auntie P (a Zadie Smith original character), and several cast members portraying Christian saints with gold platters as their halos (you really just had to be there). And oh, the dance breaks. From “Celebrate Good Times” by Kool and the Gang to a twerk-off between Alvita’s ex-husbands to “Super Freaky Girl” by Nicki Minaj, just when the going gets a little slow, the disco ball descends, and music starts to play.

So, there’s no doubt that this show is funny and well-acted. The question is, what purpose does it serve and what, besides a modernization, does it bring to the table for both adaptations of Chaucerian and medieval story and modern theater and its audience? Does the *Wife of Willesden* know who its audience is meant to be, and does it appeal to them in the right ways? The problem with adaptation is that much of the time, it fails to satisfy both the die-hard fans who know all the source material and the casual viewer who wants to see it as its own, new story, and the *Wife of Willesden* is not entirely immune to this push and pull. Although Smith generally does a great job breaking up the rather lengthy monologue with interjections from the ex-husbands or other side characters (which now also include a group of women who voice their support of Alvita’s ideas), it still sometimes becomes slow or repetitive in a way that you can speed through while reading the *Wife of Bath*, but that you cannot escape on the stage. The rhyme and meter are delightful and just subtle enough that those who know its origins can perk up at the myriad of hilarious rhymes (“full” and “genital,” for one) while others might not even pick up on the rhyming couplets throughout. However, the modern references peppered throughout are hit and miss: while Jordan Peterson is the perfect eyeroll-inducing analogue to the Book of Wicked Wives that the fifth husband reads from and Bob Marley is the spiritual leader to rival the (rather repetitive) references to Christian saints in the original, references to Tiktok and Tinder seem a bit more incongruous with some of the Chaucerian references and like easy ways out to modernize the story.

Finally, the original tale discusses rape and abuse in ways that are perhaps troubling or problematic – the Wife of Bath waves away her abuse by her fifth husband Jenkyne and gleefully tells the other pilgrims how she got him under her thumb, and the knight in her tale rapes a woman, but absolves himself (and gets everything he wanted) by simply letting a woman make a choice. Especially given that Chaucer himself may have been seeking self-absolution from his ambiguous *raptus* charges, and the fact that this tale subtly encourages the narrative that being a “good” man entitles one to love, sex, and obedience, Smith could have gone farther in examining how these themes have or have not aged well in today’s environment. *The Wife of Willesden* definitely creates more explicit nods to the fact that the wife may be more bark than bite when it comes to her torment of men through a vulnerable performance by Perkins during Alvita’s discussion of her relationship with Jenkyne (now named Darren). The clarity with which Perkins conveys Alvita’s pain at being hurt so deeply by one she loves cuts through all of the wife’s bawdy bravado in a way that the original Wife of Bath’s telling does not. However, the knight’s rape and its consequences for the young girl in question are glossed over, and the knight takes center stage, just as he is the main narrative character in the Wife of Bath’s Tale. Although Smith has clearly tried to remain faithful to the structure and content of the original work, if harmless extrapolations like Auntie P and Alvita’s girlfriends can make the play funnier and lighter, why not delve into more commentary about the tale’s messaging?

Overall, the *Wife of Willesden* is Alvita’s party and the audience is here to be a part of it – it’s a shocking, delightful, and wry retelling of a beloved and oft-scrutinized tale. And while the dedication to creating an entirely faithful – yet modern – adaptation may hold the story back in some ways, Smith’s clever storytelling, the outstanding cast and set design, and the unique method of storytelling employed in this play makes it stand out from other medieval adaptations, and in a good way.