

# A tragedy of manners

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Dancer Laurence Lemieux portrays [Lily Bart]'s descent with subtle lyricism and attention to [James Kudelka]'s finer choreographic details (wrists come briefly together as if bound, small careful steps with skirts held up in both hands). Though tightly contained, Lemieux's performance gradually extracts sympathy from an audience that might otherwise condemn her character's seemingly self-destructive choices.

## FULL TEXT

From the House of Mirth

Directed and choreographed by James Kudelka

Music by Rodney Sharman

Libretto by Alex Poch-Goldin

Performed by Coleman Lemieux &Compagnie

At the Citadel Theatre

In Toronto on Wednesday

Lily Bart is an anti-heroine in a morality play with no real moral. She's the beautiful but materialistic protagonist of Edith Wharton's 1905 novel *The House of Mirth*, a bleak preview of the greedy, scandal-addicted world we live in today.

James Kudelka's ambitious new work for Coleman Lemieux &Compagnie, *From the House of Mirth*, pays tribute to Wharton's novel in song, music and dance. Composed and arranged by Vancouver's Rodney Sharman with a libretto by Toronto playwright Alex Poch-Goldin, the work is a theatrically sumptuous retelling of Lily's sad tale.

The action unfolds on a set that is sparse yet suggests luxury and privilege: Musicians line the back wall, a crystal chandelier hangs overhead and performers in evening dress swirl and sway. In short order, Wharton's characters begin to emerge from the wash of movement.

There's Selden (countertenor Scott Belluz), who loves Lily but is not wealthy enough for her ambitions. Trenor (tenor Graham Thomson) has money and initially shares it with Lily, briefly rescuing her from her debts - but of course, he expects repayment in either affection or cash. Rosedale (baritone Alexander Dobson) and Dorset (tenor Geoffrey Sirett) are both fascinated by Lily and offer support at various stages of her fall from grace.

Kudelka has divvied up dramatic duties along gender lines - the men sing the story forward while the women add layers of meaning to the narrative through dance. And so Trenor's wife Judy is performed by dancer Claudia Moore in elegant silence (except when she declaims a single sentence that signals the beginning of the end of Lily's reign).

National Ballet of Canada veteran Victoria Bertram lends her considerable presence as Lily's Aunt Peniston, who disowns her in favour of mousy but devoted relative Grace (Christianne Ullmark). Kudelka's strategy makes for some awkward partnering at times but allows the cast to cover a lot of ground. Lily falls from glittering heights as the belle of the ball to drug-addled outcast in just an hour.

Dancer Laurence Lemieux portrays Lily's descent with subtle lyricism and attention to Kudelka's finer choreographic details (wrists come briefly together as if bound, small careful steps with skirts held up in both hands). Though tightly contained, Lemieux's performance gradually extracts sympathy from an audience that might otherwise condemn her character's seemingly self-destructive choices.

Lily Bart may appear to be the author of her own misfortune, but it could be want of compassion and love that finally kills her. Surrounded by false friends, gossip and judgment, in her final moments Lemieux's Lily literally has her back to the wall as she succumbs to her addiction.

*From the House of Mirth* is crafted with care and performed with skill by singers, dancers and musicians alike. This is a complex endeavour and the work's multidisciplinary coherence is a real achievement. Yet for all Kudelka and his collaborators' attention to detail and craft, *From the House of Mirth* doesn't entirely match the artistic audacity of Wharton's tragedy of manners, even on its own terms. It tells the tale but, for my taste, asks too few questions about the despair lurking between the lines.

*From the House of Mirth continues through May 13.*

*Kathleen Smith is the editor of The Dance Current.*

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