

# Theatre review: Time and the Conways, Lyceum Theatre (\*\*\*\*)

✘ It's not for nothing that the word 'time' has such prominence in the title of JB Priestley's 1937 drama. For time is almost the play's secret character, unseen yet stalking the fortunes of the middle-class Conway family from the end of the First World War up to the dark years before the start of the Second.

Priestley had complex views about the nature of time, believing in the possibility of three time dimensions, in one of which all possible things co-exist. Thankfully, Jemima Levick's quietly blistering production of his time-travelling, epoch-jumping play, a co-production between the Lyceum Theatre and Dundee Rep Ensemble, takes a simpler view – and an arrestingly moral one. If we could see the profound consequences that even our smallest actions and words may have in the future, would we change them? And could we?

The play opens with a carefree birthday party in the country house of the well-to-do Conway family – whose members, as well as friends and suitors, are memorably decked out in gaudy colours to stand out starkly from the drab, empty interiors in Ti Green's striking designs.

After conversations, altercations and flirtations, we jump forward 20 years to a darker world of financial despair and fractured relationships – the result, we gather, of chains of events set in motion two decades previously. Finally, in an astonishing shift back to the opening party, Priestley seems to suggest that only through an understanding of time's power can we free ourselves from catastrophes caused by ambition and greed.

Director Levick's fine cast cope well with the stark time-shifting changes required of their characters. Sally Reid is especially memorable as fiery young socialist Madge, whose wide-eyed idealism has evaporated two decades later as she becomes a doggedly pessimistic teacher. Molly Vevers is strong as the youthful Carol, full of vigorous life and enthusiasm – a performance dripping in irony, thanks to what Priestley tells us of her tragic fate.

Andy Clark relishes the revengeful havoc he can wreak on the family as the businessman Ernest Beevers, and Richard Conlon mixes introversion and perceptiveness as the quiet brother Alan, the only family member with an inkling of what's really happening. The brooding soundscape by composer Philip Pinsky matches the mood perfectly, adding yet another layer of bleak inevitability.

At times it's despairing, at others quietly philosophical, but Levick's expertly conceived production transcends the play's inter-war nihilism to stress the work's profound humanity.

**[Time and the Conways](#) continues at the [Lyceum Theatre](#),  
Edinburgh, until 9 March 2013**