

VANITY FAIR

AN (IM-)MORALITY PLAY

BY **KATE HAMILL**

BASED ON THE NOVEL BY
**WILLIAM MAKEPEACE
THACKERAY**



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.

VANITY FAIR
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*Dedicated to Jason O'Connell,
who loves me when I'm good AND when I'm bad.*

VANITY FAIR received its New York City premiere by The Pearl Theatre Company (Hal Brooks, Artistic Director; Jess Burkle, Managing Director) on March 24th, 2017. It was directed by Eric Tucker, the scenic design was by Sandra Goldmark, the costume design was by Valérie Thérèse Bart, the lighting design was by Seth Reiser, the dramaturg was Kate Farrington, the composer was Carmel Dean, the dialect coach was Amanda Quaid, and the production stage manager was Katie Young. The cast was as follows:

AMELIA SEDLEY Joey Parsons
BECKY SHARP Kate Hamill
MANAGER/MISS MATILDA CRAWLEY/
LORD STEYNE Zachary Fine
RAWDON CRAWLEY/MR. SEDLEY/
GENERAL TUFTO/FAIRGOER/
COACHMAN/GERMAN FAIRGOER 1 Tom O’Keefe
WILLIAM DOBBIN/MISS PINKERTON/
ROSE CRAWLEY/GENTLEMAN 1/
SERVANT 2/SERVANT 3 Ryan Quinn
GEORGE OSBORNE/“LESSER” PITT CRAWLEY/
MISS BRIGGS/LADY BAREACRES/SERVANT 1/
LANDLORD/GERMAN FAIRGOER 2/
GENTLEMAN 2/SHERIFF Debargo Sanyal
JOS SEDLEY/SIR PITT CRAWLEY/
MR. OSBORNE/MISS JEMIMA/
LADY CHESTERTON/AUCTIONEER/KING Brad Heberlee

Production understudies: Kenny Fedorko, Lauriel Friedman, Kaileela Hobby, Morgan Hooper, Alex Nicholson, Ben Thompson.

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CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

Suggested doubling:

Women

ACTRESS 1—Amelia Sedley; 20s–30s. Goes from 18 to early 30s during course of play. Bit of a sap, really.

ACTRESS 2—Becky Sharp; 20s–30s. Goes from 18 to early 30s during course of play. Bit of a brat, really.

Men

ACTOR 1—Manager/Miss Matilda Crawley/Lord Steyne

ACTOR 2—Rawdon/Mr. Sedley/Fairgoer/Coachman/General Tufto/
German Fairgoer 1

ACTOR 3—Dobbin/Miss Pinkerton/Rose Crawley/Gentleman 1/
Servant 2/Servant 3

ACTOR 4—George/Lesser Pitt/Miss Briggs/Lady Bareacres/Servant
1/Landlord/German Fairgoer 2/Gentleman 2/Sheriff

ACTOR 5 (m/f)—Jos/Sir Pitt/Mr. Osborne/Miss Jemima/Lady
Chesterton/Auctioneer/King

May also be done with many more actors/actresses, if you want to cast more than 7. However, Becky and Amelia must not double.

NOTES

Scenery/props should be as minimal and flexible as possible. Imagination should fill in most blanks; place is often indicated in the text. Think seedy band of roving actors, putting on a play (or fair) with minimum effort. Tattered, dingy things that once looked nice and have now gone to rot—everything may come out of Becky's ratty little trunk.

This play should be done, by-and-large, at the speed of thought. Please attack with energy.

*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun?
A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever...
All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
To the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again...
What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done...
Is there a thing of which it is said,
“See, this is new”?
It has been already
in the ages before us...*

—Ecclesiastes

VANITY FAIR

ACT ONE

Scene 1

A line of men and women are frozen. Some have small, grimy mirrors; some, bouquets of artificial flowers. Plonking music plays, as if picked out on a discordant piano. Our Manager enters. He winks at us and pulls out a bag of gaudy gold coins. Moving along the line, he gives one to each member of the ensemble, who come to herky-jerky lifelike machines. He looks at the audience.

MANAGER. There are no morals here.

The ensemble creates moving tableaux behind him; one admires himself in a mirror as another steals coins out of his pocket. Another man kneels, presenting flowers to a woman. She stares at a man who does a “magic trick,” pulling coins out of another woman’s mouth; she kisses and pockets them. A man may pull flowers from a bouquet to give to a woman; she shoves them back, examining herself in a mirror. All motions are interconnected; performed again and again.

In our play, I mean. *(To the audience.)* Forgive me if I gave offense.

All of the ensemble is now in motion. They may sing lightly along to the music—just “la la la,” as if they don’t know the words.

This is Vanity Fair; and it is not a moral place. Nor is it often a merry one, for all of its pageantry and NOISE.

The la-la-las get a bit softer in response.

But we’ve scraped together the best bits to entertain you! We have

scenes of all sorts: scenes of high life and some of very low indeed; lofty speeches, dreadful combats, love-making for the sentimental, a bit of light comic business—and the whole accompanied by spectacular set-dressings—well, the best we can afford!

He targets someone in the audience.

Oop, I see a face falling already. Came here unwillingly, sir? Dragged along by the wife? She never gives you any peace, does she, lugs you out to see and be seen at the least excuse. I bet you'll fall asleep during the first act—this whole row will suffer from your snoring—throw back two glasses of wine at intermission and be pulling your coat on at the finale, ready to rush out the door.

But I don't blame you! The people of Vanity Fair are very fallible indeed. (*Pointing to ensemble members as he goes.*) That one was self-serving, you'll say, and this one weak-willed; that one full of deception, and this one too priggish. What do these shallow players in their shabby costumes have to do with a modern man like you?

Beat.

There are geniuses now in the cradle, who shall someday make plays that your children's children will be dragged to, yawning. And to those audiences, the petty dramas of YOUR life will be as much legend and history as Camelot or Avalon or Vanity Fair. Who then will vouch for *your* character?

When *our* lives are shewn upon the stage, who knows what lessons our descendants may draw?

The la-la-las get louder again.

It is easy to sit in judgment. But the right path is often unclear to those still striving in the Fair, when you consider the game's great question: How will you get what you want?

What do you want?

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

ACTOR 2. Honor.

ACTOR 4. Glory.

ACTOR 5. Redemption.

AMELIA/ACTRESS 1. Love.

ACTOR 3. Respect.

BECKY/ACTRESS 2. Money!

ALL. (*Ruefully.*) Money.

DOBBIN/ACTOR 3. (*Looking at Amelia.*) Her.

AMELIA. (*Looking at George.*) Him.

BECKY. *Everything.*

MANAGER. ...and what will you do to get it?

The music stops as Becky whispers something in his ear. He beckons to Amelia, who comes over and whispers in the other ear. He laughs.

Welcome to Vanity Fair!

The music swells, ending in a crash. The company scatters. Left onstage is Miss Pinkerton—a steely old headmistress.

Scene 2

England, 1815; the lobby of Miss Pinkerton's Academy for Young Ladies. Miss Jemima, Miss Pinkerton's quavering assistant, runs on.

A sound of mass teenaged sobbing—in the distinct group-hysteria-key that only teenaged girls can produce. A group of fluttery pink fluffy bonneted girlhood makes its goodbyes to Amelia in the background. Miss Jemima spins directly out of it as she breathlessly wails:

MISS PINKERTON. CALM
yourself, Jemima.

MISS JEMIMA. Miss Pinkerton!
Miss Pinkerton! Miss Sedley's
coach has arrived!

MISS JEMIMA. Sorry, Miss Pinkerton. I'm all to pieces, Miss Pinkerton. How can we survive without Amelia, Miss Pinkerton—
She whips out a handkerchief, truly gets sentimental.

MISS PINKERTON. JEMIMA!

She slaps her once, hard.

MISS JEMIMA. (*Being slapped is not unusual.*) Thank you, Miss

Pinkerton.

MISS PINKERTON. Amelia Sedley entered the Pinkerton Academy for Young Ladies with the advantage of good birth. Thanks to My Guidance and Rigorous Girdling, she enters the world obedient, cheerful, and possessed of every requisite feminine skill—whether in (*In unison with Jemima.*) calligraphy, elocution, or needlework.

MISS JEMIMA. (*In unison with Pinkerton, like a mantra.*) calligraphy, elocution, or needlework.

MISS PINKERTON. —And thus there is no need to grieve, is there, Jemima? And if there is no need to grieve, then WHAT is there to CRY ABOUT?

Is Jemima going to get The Slap again?

MISS JEMIMA. Nothing, Miss Pinkerton. You're right, Miss Pinkerton. It's just—the girls are all so fond of her—they wrote such promises of eternal love in her autograph book, it'd make you wee—(*At a look.*) laugh, Miss Pinkerton.

Jemima hands over Amelia's book. More sobbing and fluttery in the background.

I shall give Miss Sharp her book in private, to spare her feelings. For nobody wrote in hers at all.

MISS PINKERTON. (*Looking up sharply.*) Why should Miss Sharp get a book?

MISS JEMIMA. But every girl who graduates gets one—

MISS PINKERTON. Rebecca Sharp is a *charity* pupil. What's more, she is a dangerous, dirty little bird in our cage; a menace to those girls, a menace to this school, and I daresay a menace to society. We would not graduate her at all, except that it is the quietest way to get rid of her. But she shall not have the parting gift! *This* is only for young *ladies*.

Unbeknownst to her, Becky Sharp has entered during this speech, carrying a beat-up bag. Not beautiful; clever. Becky is dressed in a very shabby manner. If the school is pink and fluffy, she's dark and Gothic. The offstage sobbing suddenly stops when Becky enters. The fluttering pink femininity shrinks and flocks offstage, whispering.

Throw it out immediately, Jemima, and see to Miss Sedley's bandbox.

MISS JEMIMA. Yes, Miss Pinkerton.

She turns.

(Rather frightened.) Miss Sharp!

BECKY. I can handle my own baggage.

Miss Jemima leaves. Pause.

Madame, je viens vous faire mes adieux.

MISS PINKERTON. Don't you spout that foreign rubbish at me, Miss Sharp.

BECKY. *D'accord. Cochon.*

MISS PINKERTON. —I hope you are aware of the condescension that Amelia Sedley shows you by invitation to her father's home. You are not to take advantage of her generosity for long; Sir Crawley expects you to report for *work*—very soon indeed.

A word of advice, Rebecca?

BECKY. Please.

MISS PINKERTON. Do not become accustomed to the privileges of good society during your stay with the Sedleys. When you are a *governess*, I am afraid your place will be very clear.

I do—feel sorry for you, *Becky*.

BECKY. —Shall you miss me, Miss Pinkerton?

MISS PINKERTON. What?

BECKY. I should think you might miss me—teaching the girls French, scrubbing the floors, emptying the chamber pots—saved you the expense of both a teacher and a drudge, didn't I?

MISS PINKERTON. I took you in for charity!

BECKY. Charity. Though you owed my father so much money when he died, and stole all of his paintings—

MISS PINKERTON. Your father was a profligate drunk who couldn't be trusted with his wages. He was lucky that we hired him to teach painting at all, luckier still that we took you in as a pupil, luckiest of all that when the drink finally killed him we didn't turn you out on your ear! And as for your French—I would speak as little about your *French* mother as possible, if I were you. Had I

VANITY FAIR

by Kate Hamill

based on the novel by William Makepeace Thackeray

5 men, 2 women (doubling, flexible casting)

Becky is “bad.” Amelia is “good.” But in an unfair world, it isn’t always that simple... Two women—one born into privilege, another straight from the streets—attempt to navigate a society that punishes them for every misstep. Clever Becky’s not afraid to break the rules; soft-hearted Amelia’s scared to bend them. Both strive for what they want—but neither can thrive without the other. Through Becky and Amelia’s victories and losses, this thrilling, highly theatrical (im)morality play explores how flexible our morals can become when the wheel of fortune turns... Bold, wickedly funny, and shockingly relevant, VANITY FAIR demands that we face our own hypocrisy. After all...who are we to judge?

“[VANITY FAIR] is a gift to actors and a goody bag for its audience. ...This play provides a rare thing—a female character who behaves just as badly as the male ones without being reformed or punished.”
—The New York Times

“...coruscatingly brilliant... Hamill’s VANITY FAIR...[is] a masterpiece of creative compression that is at once arrestingly original and faithful to its source material... [it’s] a dead-serious romp whose implicit feminism has been given a sharper point by Hamill...”
—The Wall Street Journal

“...above all it’s the canny script of Hamill that shines. She captures the sweep of the novel and its many ideas with spot-on choices.”
—The Huffington Post

“...scandalous, relentless and heartbreaking...bound to impress even the most loyal of Thackeray fans. ...one of the most intriguing adaptations of a novel I have ever seen... the plot is saturated with such vigor and life. ...[VANITY FAIR] brings the essence of the novel in all its glory to the stage.”
—BroadwayWorld.com

Also by Kate Hamill
SENSE AND SENSIBILITY
PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

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