

## ABROAD

## THE CONSTANT WIFE

(APOLLO THEATER; 779 SEATS;  
£35 (\$50.75) TOP)

LONDON A Bill Kenwright presentation of a play in two acts by Somerset Maugham. Directed by Edward Hall. Sets and costumes, Michael Pavelka; lighting, Ben Ormerod; sound, Simon Whitehorn. Opened, reviewed April 11, 2002. Running time: 2 HOURS, 20 MIN.

Constance Middleton ..... Jenny Seagrove  
Mrs. Culver ..... Linda Thorson  
Martha Culver ..... Serena Evans  
Bernard Kersal ..... Simon Williams  
Marie-Louise ..... Sara Crowe  
John Middleton ..... Steven Pacey  
Barbara Fawcett ..... Lucy Fleming  
With: Robin Browne, Eric Carte.

By MATT WOLF

Those in search of a taste of the West End the way it used to be — before, for instance, a whiff of the contemporary and/or the multicultural arrived by way of “This Is Our Youth” and “The Mysteries,” among others — will breathe a sigh of relief at “The Constant Wife,” emitting a double purr that Edward Hall’s revival isn’t half bad. Hall (director-son of Sir Peter) came to this staging from the Royal Shakespeare Co., having left Stratford’s reclamation of Shakespeare discovery “Edward III” in a dispute over casting. Few would claim that Somerset Maugham’s 1926 play — first seen in, of all places, Cleveland — reps a discovery, but there’s enough in Maugham’s semi-pioneering take on sexual politics to keep auds guessing today, not to mention cheering heroine Constance Middleton (Jenny Seagrove) in her quest for both passion and financial independence.



LADIES' NIGHT: Sara Crowe, left, Serena Evans, Linda Thorson and Lucy Fleming in “The Constant Wife”

Can the two co-exist? Not easily in the well-upholstered Harley Street environment (the soothing design is by Michael Pavelka) of a play that proved a durable vehicle nearly 30 years ago for Ingrid Bergman in the title role. Constance’s marriage to surgeon John (Steven Pacey, making the best of a pin-striped dupe) is durable, after a fashion, but only because his wife willingly turns a blind eye to indiscretions that come as no surprise to her — indeed, his latest prey is her best friend, Marie-Louise (Sara Crowe). The point is that Constance now merely adores the man she once loved; erotic and economic freedom, she knows full well, lie elsewhere, with Maugham folding sub-Wildean dialogue (“Decency died with dear old Queen Victoria”) into the midst of an incipiently Ibsen-esque modern woman, and her set.

Constance, for one thing, would like to be able to do her own philanthropy, thank you very much, and seizes precisely that opportunity in the return from Cannes after more than a decade of erstwhile suitor

Bernard (the ever-smooth Simon Williams). The result, in Maugham’s pragmatic — some might say cynical — equation, allows Constance to be “unfaithful” and “constant” virtually at once, while battling the belief that fidelity on either side can be bought. (Constance strikes out on her own by becoming an interior decorator: How up-to-date is that!)

One could make the case that “Wife’s” central character is more interesting than a play that occasionally risks patronizing Constance in much the way her social milieu does. After all, what chance does any woman have amid a climate in which men are tolerated as “fluctuating and various” one minute, extolled for “doing a friendly act” — you can guess what that means — the next? One has to wonder, too, just whose side Maugham is on, making the alternative to cuckoldry Constance’s venomous prune of a sister, the sort of woman — in Serena Evans’ snappish perf — whose glasses make immediately clear that she’s lacking a man.

Director Hall deserves credit for enlivening the sort of script in which a forbidden embrace is met by a remark like, “Oh, my dear, don’t be so sudden.” But even if such stiff-backed Englishness seems faintly risible today, Constance retains a fascination that comes with parcelling out guile like so many lumps of sugar. She’s a good match, too, for Seagrove’s trademark cool, which here comes accompanied by some deft physical business involving handkerchiefs (even if “Othello” this is not). Embodying the opposing view of emancipation from her daughter is the briskly enjoyable Linda Thorson, as a matriarch capable of making a single word like “fertilized” sound impossibly louche.

The only genuine letdown among the cast is the squeaky-voiced

Crowe, who seems doomed forever to effect scant variations on the same clenched-artifice that brought her to attention more than a decade ago in “Private Lives.” (She was the scene-stealing Sibyl to Joan Collins’ forgettable Amanda.) It doesn’t help that Marie-Louise’s broadsides — “Aren’t you a little fatter than when I saw you last?” — seem a bit rich coming from an unflatteringly costumed player who is hardly the sylph she once was. Surrounded by a company determined to play “The Constant Wife” for real, Crowe takes the cheesy way out, as befits a character whose response to emotional distress is to have her hair washed.

## DAISY PULLS IT OFF

(LYRIC THEATER; 932 SEATS;  
£35 (\$50.75) TOP)

LONDON A David Ian for Clear Channel Entertainment production, by arrangement with Andrew Lloyd Webber, of a play in two acts by Denise Deegan. Directed by David Gilmore. Sets and costumes, Glenn Willoughby; lighting, Brian Harris; set design re-created by Terry Parsons; costume design re-created by Bushy Westfallen. Opened April 29, 2002; reviewed April 30. Running time: 2 HOURS, 30 MIN.

Daisy Meredith ..... Hannah Yelland  
Trixie Martin ..... Katherine Heath  
Monica Smithers ..... Anna Francolini  
Clare Beaumont ..... Katherine Igoe  
Sybil Burlington ..... Jane Mark  
Miss Gibson ..... Charlotte West-Oram  
With: Jeff Bellamy, Karen Pinkus, Gailie Morrison, Delma Walsh, Maxine Gregory, Amber Edlin, Jenni Maitland, Natasha Green, Helen Brampton, Roger Heathcott, Emma Stansfield.

By MATT WOLF

Nostalgia isn’t what it used to be, and neither is “Daisy Pulls It Off,” the West End long-runner from the 1980s that has returned to Shaftesbury Avenue as part of the ongoing fetish for things theatrical from that decade (“Noises Off,” “The Real Thing,” “Morning’s at Seven,” etc.) that has taken root on both sides of the Atlantic. My memory from 1984 — well into “Daisy’s” original run — is of a charming pastiche of a near-Edenic England in which the twin virtues of honesty and pluck triumphed on and off the hockey field. Lo these many years later, we’re all less innocent, and so is Denise Deegan’s play, which now prompts a faintly grin-and-bear-it response that a slow-to-awaken second-night audience (for most of the first act, anyway) seemed to share.

That’s by no means to fault the utterly enchanting lead, newcomer Hannah Yelland, who by rights should turn out to be every bit as much a shining “Daisy” alumna as such veterans of the first go-round as Samantha Bond, Kate Buffery and Lia Williams. Playing a poor girl who at the eleventh hour discovers her aristo background while vanquishing the snobbery and condescension around her, Yelland possesses a bright smile and a winning, uncloying way with turns of phrase — “capital,” “ripping,” “thanks awfully” — that tend to pall after 2½ hours.

Deegan’s script pokes affectionate fun at an English literary genre, the Angela Brazil schoolgirl novels of a bygone era, that can best be described as the fairer sex getting its own back on “Tom Brown’s School-days.” It’s interesting, too, to note that “Daisy” first occupied a West End perch up the street from Julian Mitchell’s “Another Country,” a thoroughly male portrait of the enclosed and self-absorbed world of brethren to which “Daisy” is a kind of lighthearted distaff antidote.

Director David Gilmore might have been better off with a braver approach to the text, rather than merely attempting a facsimile of the lucrative original that extends to replicating the original design.

As it is, everything is much as before: No sooner has smilingly tomboyish Daisy arrived at Grangewood — “the jolliest school in England” — before that oak-paneled institution’s first scholarship student has run afoul of the venomous and beautiful and posh Sybil Burlington (a grimly overeager Jane Mark) and her toadying sidekick, Monica Smithers (Anna Francolini, the splendid Gussie of last season’s “Merrily We Roll Along”).

Life quickly becomes a misery for the usually buoyant Daisy, the lone sister among four alliteratively named brothers who pines for mother. Eventually, Daisy’s family refashions itself in a way that won’t be revealed here, though it doesn’t demand too much sleuthing to figure out that a character described as “solitary” and “mysterious” will end up crucially linked to proceedings.

Deegan’s narrative has its cake and eats it, too, proffering a meritocratic vision of England that is somewhat undercut by giving Daisy a social out unavailable to most of the coachloads of students who may end up seeing the play.

Daisy’s gee-whiz energy aside, one has to admire the verve of a show that has chosen to re-emerge amid a climate in which all too many British schools face far greater dis-

ciplinary problems than the burst hot-water bottles that prove the greatest threat to the hymn-singing Grangewood. (To that extent, “Daisy Pulls It Off” seems less a 1920s period piece than an outright fantasy.) Still, amid a very variable cast, Katherine Heath manages to make exclamations like “Jemima!” sound sufficiently fresh without curling one’s toes, playing Daisy’s staunchest ally even when the chips are down. And Yelland’s finesse in the title role — she’s neither too knowing nor too coy, the part’s twin traps — signals a real find in a young performer who truly pulls it off, even when a rather wearisomely cheery evening has begun to pall.

## VINCENT IN BRIXTON

(ROYAL NATIONAL THEATER/COTTESLOE;  
406 SEATS; £24 (\$35) TOP)

LONDON A Royal National Theater presentation of a play in two acts by Nicholas Wright. Directed by Richard Eyre. Sets and costumes, Tim Hatley; lighting, Peter Mumford; music, Dominic Muldowney; sound, Neil Alexander. Opened, reviewed May 1, 2002. Running time: 2 HOURS, 40 MIN.

Vincent van Gogh ..... Jochum Ten Haaf  
Ursula Loyer ..... Clare Higgins  
Sam Plowman ..... Paul Nicholls  
Anna van Gogh ..... Emma Handy  
Eugenie Loyer ..... Emily Blunt

By MATT WOLF

One of the most chronicled of artists is put through the biographical mill once more in Nicholas Wright’s decidedly interior Royal National Theater play, which doesn’t demonstrate much of a lust for life. The true topic of “Vincent in Brixton” is two souls joined together in sorrow, whose unlikely love ultimately is replaced by zealotry on the one hand, a soul-stirring acceptance of diminished expectations on the other. Wright takes his time getting to the final scene of a leisurely evening that can be as earnest as its gauche, forthright title character. But for all the irritations along the way, the play ultimately delivers a genuine punch, abetted by a director (Richard Eyre) and distaff lead (Clare Higgins) who have come to seem an increasingly invaluable theatrical pair.

Eyre and Higgins have worked together numerous times, most notably on a commendably hallucinatory production of “Sweet Bird of Youth” in 1994 for which she won a best actress Olivier. I’m not sure there’s another director who so intuitively understands Higgins’ skill for communicating rapture cheek-by-jowl with a clenched despair that never descends to self-pity. In “Vincent in Brixton,” Higgins plays Ursula Loyer, the fortysomething landlady of the south London home where the 20-year-old van Gogh — not yet a recognized artist, even to himself — took up lodgings in the 1870s.

At first, Vincent (Jochum Ten Haaf, a Dutch actor possessed of an immediately appealing gawkiness) is taken with Eugenie (Emily Blunt), Ursula’s daughter, who is pursuing a stealthy liaison with fellow lodger and wannabe artist Sam (Paul Nicholls), despite Sam’s assessment of himself as “the wolf that walks alone.” But slowly, Ursula — not to mention the transfixed actress who plays her — begins to exert an allure on the tenant half her age, with Vincent in turn finding a soulmate of sorts in the older woman’s grief. She is, he says, “a mirror of my despair.”

Ursula has been mourning her late husband for 15 years, clad in a cus-



ARTISTIC LICENSE: Jochum Ten Haaf plays the title role in “Vincent in Brixton.”

tomary black that Vincent manages to lighten, along with her spirits. By the closing scene, several years have passed, Vincent has pushed on and Ursula is back in her widow’s garb, her daily routine turned to the school she runs for young children — think of her as Masha and Olga in “Three Sisters” rolled into one.

What exactly happened to van Gogh during his stay in London? Wright shows a fevered man teetering on the apostolic brink, who has a catalytic effect on the very person determined to swear off that depth of feeling. Once reawakened into passion, Ursula’s withdrawal from it is, accordingly, that much more acute: “Giving up hope,” she concludes, “isn’t mad, just practical.”

Wright has a distinguished ancillary career as a translator and theater historian. It’s not that much of a stretch, then, to see the shadow of Chekhov on multiple fronts, with the eventually married Sam and Eugenie poignantly coarsened into a Lambeth version of Andrei and Natasha, also from “Three Sisters.” Vincent would, of course, go on to kill himself, Konstantin-like, at a shockingly young age, but Wright leaves this clearly aberrant visionary on a precipice, discovering his powers as an artist while shutting out the prospect of true and reciprocated love.

The material hardly allows for a lot of laughs, and the ones achieved at the expense of Vincent’s nagging sister Anna (Emma Handy) seem too crude by half. (Why go to the extent of hiring a genuine Dutchman to play Vincent and then cast as his sister a British actress whose over-the-top accent becomes a running joke?) The writing, too, tends toward the unconvincingly portentous (“Nothing in this house is what it seems,” notes Sam helpfully) and even the flowery, as if Wright were circling around a mating dance whose actual dynamic lies too deep for words.

That realm beyond the spoken is skillfully expressed by Tim Hatley’s Vermeer-like set, a kitchen every bit as quietly evocative as his Broadway designs for the London-spawned “Private Lives” are giddy and gay. That production’s lighting designer, Peter Mumford, excels himself here, the light catching the fringes of Ten Haaf’s hair as if the actor were being visibly transformed into a van Gogh canvas.

As for Higgins, visitors to the flexible Cottesloe space — the playing area this time around is a narrow rectangle with spectators on all four sides — owe themselves the sight of the actress toward the end, her gaze jointly one of defiance and defeat. “It starts with something small and then it becomes everything,” Ursula says late in act one. But the remark applies to a performer whose detailed evocation of loss lands right at the heart.