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Review: Madame Rubinstein at the Park Theatre

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Serious issues, plenty of humour: B. L. Sherrington is all made up by John Misto's new three-handed comedy about two pioneers of the cosmetics industry.

[B. L. SHERRINGTON](#)



Madame Rubinstein, Park Theatre. Photo: Simon Annand.

In the beauty business, there is no room for kindness. It's a cut-throat world, far away from the beaming smiles fed to us for decades by the cosmetics industry, but intimately familiar to pioneering entrepreneurs Helena Rubinstein and Elizabeth Arden.

Miriam Margolyes takes the role of Madame Rubinstein in John Misto's new comedy at the Park Theatre. Right off the bat, Jez Bond's production sweeps us away from chilly Finsbury Park and seduces us with glamorous 1950s Manhattan – complete with jazz music playing in the background and Rubinstein's fifty-shades-of-brown office. Al Turner's design screams corporate America during the post-war era. Kat Smith and Natalie Cole use costume to insert a touch of glamour; Margolyes is dressed in shimmering jewellery and a bold red cocktail dress.

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Misto's play follows Rubinstein through the years up to and including her death, dipping into her complicated relationship with her family as it goes. Rubinstein's refusal to discuss her Polish parents and the uncles she lived with in Australia weighs heavily over the emotional turmoil she has in

developing and maintaining relationships, both professional and personal. She experiences difficulty expressing love for others, particularly her son, boasting that her parents never did anything for her and she has become a giant success as a result.

When her son dies, though, pent-up emotion pours out through her hard exterior. While officially his only job is to keep her safe, Rubinstein's bodyguard Patrick O'Higgins (Jonathan Forbes) is really her right hand man, whom she loves like a son. He becomes her second chance at motherhood, an opportunity for the loving relationship she never had.

It is, however, Rubinstein's bitter love-hate rivalry with fellow cosmetics magnate Elizabeth Arden (Frances Barber) that takes centre stage. Arden and Rubinstein are opposites, the former a bullish farm girl who would "drink gasoline if you dropped an olive in it", the latter a no-nonsense Polish businesswomen with fudged qualifications. They will stab each other in the back without a second thought – "You can screw my husband but nobody screws my business," Barber's Arden screams – but there are at moments of genuine warmth, like when they work together to destroy their mutual competitor Revlon. Above all, they live for their companies.

Much of the success of Bond's production is down to sexual comedy, from O'Higgins' nudity to Misto's wildly appreciated adult humour, which is perfectly delivered by Margolyes. It's a calculated risk, this play. Misto takes serious issues and serves them up with plenty of humour, showing that success only comes with sacrifices but delivering big laughs as he does so.

Madame Rubinstein is at the Park Theatre until May 27th. For more details, [click here](#).

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Review: Madame Rubinstein at the Park Theatre Show Info

DIRECTED BY Jez Bond

WRITTEN BY John Misto