

Slick take on Austen's social comedy

**Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds,
Mansfield Park by Jane Austen, until
September 29**

THIS delightful social comedy by one of the most popular English authors flies along in a slick new adaptation by Tim Luscombe. With only the most stylised set and a hugely versatile and convincing cast, it covers passing years and different locations at a racing gallop, never losing the thread for a moment.

Jane Austen takes aim at social snobbery and small-mindedness with her usual acuity but, compared to *Pride and Prejudice*, even the best characters are still hidebound by intolerance.

With only a slight change of emphasis, Edmund, the honest, upright hero, could be Mr Collins and the heroine, Fanny Price, is a lot more prudish and judgmental than Elizabeth Bennet.

As Mrs Norris, the spiteful poor relation, says: "The truth is that the world is against the female sex," and this story seems designed to show how true that was.

The play features an erring wife cast out by society because she cannot be bothered to observe the polite fictions of social convention. And, through her characters, Austen is completely supportive of her banishment.

The pretty young Miss Crawford is also cast off in a moment for suggesting that the fallen woman could be brought back into society.

But this is far from being a tragedy. In many ways it resembles a classic farce. From the moment stern paterfamilias Sir Thomas says:

"While I am away I want you to keep a sober and calm house, you just know that chaos is going to ensue, with the younger members of the family going off the rails, socially and sexually.

There is not room to commend all the actors, who deserve high praise, but perhaps a mention should go to Geoff Arnold, dashing on and off stage in different hairstyles and jackets impersonating a number of different men, and also to the self-effacing young man and woman in servants' costumes who executed lightning set changes.

This is an extremely enjoyable evening and a triumph for Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds Productions and director Colin Blumenau.

Gayle Wade