



STAGE

'NO ONE SEES THE FLOWER FALLING'

→ From the House of Mirth is a moving, beautiful work of art haunted by sorrow

Story **Gordon Bowness** | Photography **Paul Antoine Taillefer**

A beautiful, intelligent and popular woman fails in the game of love and marriage. She has everything going for her but independence (that is, money or power); the game is rigged. Impoverished, abandoned,

she succumbs to despair and substance abuse. She dies alone.

That inexorable, terrifying arc is traced by Lily Bart, the heroine of Edith Wharton's celebrated 1905 novel of manners *The House of Mirth*. It's the book that made

Wharton's reputation, at the age of 43, launching her career as one of the most important writers of the 20th century. The novel's success won Wharton, trapped in a failing marriage to a man eventually institutionalized because

of mental illness, the independence she so desperately craved. It allowed her to chart her own dazzling course — with careers as an author and designer, friendships among the cultural elite (including Henry James, Jean Cocteau

and André Gide), fabulous homes, world travel, a Pulitzer for the 1920 novel *The Age of Innocence* and significant philanthropic work.

But the tragedy of Lily Bart haunted Wharton as it haunted all women of her era. It haunted too some of Canada's finest artists, inspiring them to create a tiny perfect musical. This month Coleman Lemieux & Compagnie remounts *From the House of Mirth*, a stand-out of the 2012 theatre calendar. Or was it a standout of the dance calendar? Or the opera calendar? With choreography by James Kudelka, music by Rodney Sharman and libretto by Alex Poch-Goldin, the unusual hybrid brings together four dancers, all female, four singers, all male, and a five-member musical ensemble in a potent distillation of Lily's story — whatever you call it, it's a must-see. At the heart of the show is a bewitching performance as Lily by Laurence Lemieux, cofounder and co-artistic director of Coleman Lemieux & Compagnie.

Heartbreak was never far from Kudelka and Lemieux when they created *From the House of Mirth*. Kudelka's partner of 19 years, Jim Wies, died suddenly in 2009 just weeks before the first workshop. "Jim would have loved this produc-

tion," says Kudelka, choking up. "It's so much of what he wanted me to do, it contains so much of what he taught me."

"When Jim passed," says Lemieux, "I thought to myself that there's no way this production was going to happen. Then I got a call from James two weeks later wanting to set up rehearsals. That's when I saw his true colours. Goddamn, he's a great artist. He's a good worker, he's committed and he's serious. He went out and did it."

Lemieux spoke to me at the company's new home, The Citadel, near Parliament and Dundas Street East. The show's creation happened in tandem with the launch of a hugely ambitious \$1-million capital campaign (still ongoing) to buy and renovate the building. And during all these high-stakes financial and creative efforts Lemieux's marriage to company cofounder Bill Coleman fell apart. They separated this past year.

"I relate to the love aspect of Lily's story," says Lemieux, gorgeous at 48. "As a woman, I feel the clock ticking now that I'm back on the market. And not back on the market like when I was 28, but back on the market with two kids and lots of trouble," she says, laughing. "But seriously, I'm not back on the market. I can't rebuild that future. I'm transitioning into a new period of my life where I don't know what to expect."

In the novel hardships burnish Lily's astonishing beauty. "She was like some rare flower grown for exhibition," writes Wharton, "a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty." Surely that line is the inspiration for librettist Poch-Goldin's haunting refrain, "No one sees the flower falling."

"The parallels between Lily, and her path in this piece, and mine with the capital campaign and the breakdown of my marriage," says

"THAT'S WHAT EDITH WHARTON IS ALL ABOUT. THOSE UNSPOKEN RULES, HOW SOMETHING UNSPOKEN CAN CHANGE SOMEONE'S WHOLE WORLD FOREVER."

Lemieux, "it kept hitting me in rehearsals how similar they were."

"When we were rehearsing it, we kept saying it was our lives," says Kudelka, echoing a key line in the libretto. "No one knows the cost of beauty better than a not-for-profit arts organization. Laurence kept saying, 'Oh my God, my life is Lily's life: I have to go meet another man about money.'"

"All of the struggles we had around money, with finding

donors, dealing with that personally. It's big money. And you are accountable. Nobody else can help you," says Lemieux. "So I related to Lily around money matters... and her pride."

Right from the start of the show, you feel complicit in its deadly game of manners. You enter the theatre as if it's a salon in a grand house, with members of the cast nodding at you; you are an invited guest, you have a role to play.

The choreography by Kudelka, 57, former artistic director of the National Ballet of Canada and one of the best choreographers working today, is intimate and inward looking. "It's not about high kicks," he says. "It's all about how you carry yourself, how — and if — you touch someone else."

The Citadel seats only 61; *From the House of Mirth* is a chamber piece that won't work in theatres much bigger. Ideally, the creators want to stage it in an actual salon. Lemieux is still hoping get it into The Mount, Wharton's self-designed home and now museum in Lennox, Massachusetts.

"I wanted to keep it small, keep it intimate," says Kudelka, "the audience can't keep the action at a distance. In some ways it was a backlash against all the big institutions I've been involved in. But it's also about my interest in making theatre today... in a time when

Continued on page 26

→ DEVASTATING Laurence Lemieux as Lily Bart in Coleman Lemieux & Compagnie's *From the House of Mirth*.



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ART & ENTERTAINMENT

Continued from page 25

a cell phone can bring a screen closer to your face than anything on stage, it's incredibly difficult to make that strong a connection to the audience. So now you literally have to put them onstage, too.... I want people to see not just watch."

And hear. The gorgeous period costumes by Jim Searle and Chris Tyrell of Hoax Couture (see page 8) carefully map Lily's economic decline. The ruffle of silk adds a wonderfully claustrophobic effect, a taffeta prison.

Early on in the creative process, Kudelka, who directs, decided to have only the women dance and the men sing; the men inhabit it. The remount has the same cast as the 2012 premiere. Countertenor Scott Belluz, tenor Graham Thomson, baritone Alexander Dobson and bass baritone Geoffrey Sirett are four very talented singers. They make the most of Sharman's brooding, sophisticated score with its mix of expressionistic, even-strident moments and lovely, heartbreaking melodies. The men's role in the production offers an evocative statement on the gender politics of 19th-century New York. It's in the spaces between the men where Lily and the other women are forced to make their moves. It's in silence that the women wield their power.

Silence, what's left unsaid, is a key theme in Wharton. In the novel, Lily is invited on a European cruise only to be kicked off by the wife of the yacht's owner. In part it's a smokescreen to hide the wife's own indiscretions; in part it's just plain jealousy. In this paired-down version, that willful act is given to Judy Trenor who speaks the only line uttered by a woman, the infamous, "Miss Bart is not going back to the yacht." In both novel and dance this is the turn of the screw, the start of Lily's final and fatal fall

from grace. And no one has said a single word about infidelity, real or fabricated.

"That's what Edith Wharton is all about," says Kudelka. "Those unspoken rules, how something unspoken can change someone's whole world forever."

Judy is played perfectly elegant and calculating by Claudia Moore. Victoria Bertram gives a powerful stoic performance as Aunt Peniston, the older woman who has seen too much. Christianne Ullmark is flawless as the naïve but impossibly beautiful young protégée. Only her eyes tell of the fearful lessons she's learning. The audience, like the women, watch and learn too. All the dancers fully embody Poch-Goldin's poetic (and at under an hour) efficient libretto. "Ladies at play/ Ruthless and lovely/ Vendettas and lavender perfume the air/ Nothing to say/ A kind invitation to eat or be eaten/ So lady beware."

With furtive glances and turned backs, Lily is ostracized, eventually dying of an overdose, perhaps accidental, by taking too much of a sleeping draught. Her final dances are immensely moving, as much a tour de force of acting as of dance.

"In the final dance, Lily is a ghost figure in the quartet," says Kudelka. "She's the odd one out and they act as if she was never there."

Who knows how inspiration, talent and hard work combine with heartbreak in the creation of art. But during a time of great sorrow Kudelka and Lemieux have crafted an absolutely devastating work of art, one that, to use Wharton's words, allows us to see "deep into the hidden things of love."

FROM THE HOUSE OF MIRTH \$50. 8pm. Tue-Sat (& Feb 17). 4pm. Sat & Sun. Thu, Feb 14-24. PWYC. 3pm. Wed, Feb 20. The Citadel. 304 Parliament St. (416) 364-8011. colemanlemieux.com