

# A Whole New Spin on Jane Austen

**A**s I began to work on *Sense and Sensibility*, I pulled out my battered, college copy of the novel. It was full of notes from my 20-year-old self. Early in the novel, I wrote "I want to be Marianne, but I fear I'm Elinor!" But towards then end, I found this, "I want to be both of them—the heart and head need to live together!!!" The young woman I was understood something essential about Austen, and I'm rather proud of her—although she was a bit too fond of exclamation points.

Jane Austen wrote great novels while living the constrained and observed life of an unmarried woman, surrounded by a society that provided no example for a single, female writer. Imagine her at a tiny writing table, attempting to finish a chapter while always being available for family obligations or any visitors who might drop in. She had no room of her own, no freedom to explore the world and very little formal education. And yet she managed an incredibly rich life of the mind and an impressive six novels in her short life that are still widely read today. Her novels have been adapted for stage and screen, including as the source material for such films as *Clueless*, *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies*.

It's hard to account for Austen's continuing popularity at first glance. Her characters come from the Regency Era, a time that seems very formal and elegant and far from our 21st Century world, but her characters, particularly her women, are smart and funny and flawed in ways that feel current and true.

The central characters of *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, are struggling against a tide of social and economic constraints. They have no money of their own, so they are expected to think of marriage as a business arrangement. But Marianne is too much of a romantic to follow such rules, and Elinor is too sensible to believe that happiness can be found with a mate who lacks the qualities of kindness and honesty that she values, so they are at odds with their society.

Society is everything in Austen's world, and she is a master at revealing the hypocrisy, greed and pettiness of many of her "finer" characters while always avoiding caricature or cruelty. Her wit and insights are subtle, skewering a character with a single line and revealing deep emotional struggle without melodrama.

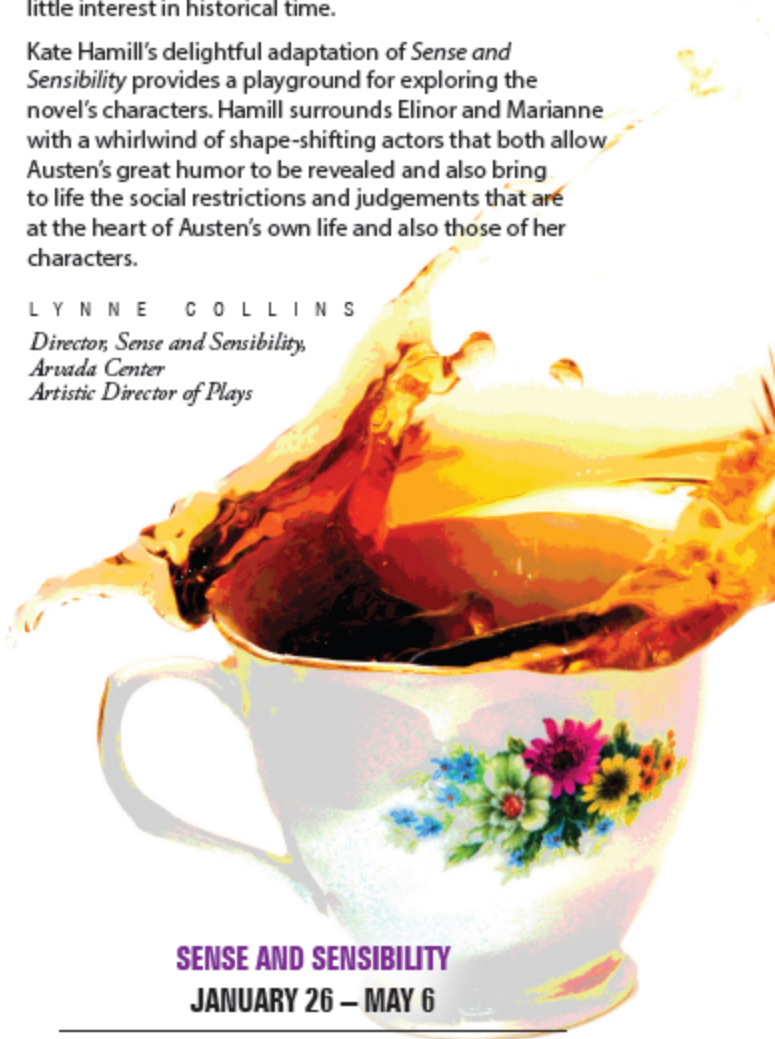
So, while the specific social rules or gender inequities Austen explores may be different today, the very human

characters she creates feel like our peers. What young person doesn't hope for a great romance, who hasn't felt the restrictive bonds of social and family expectations, when haven't there been snobs and bores and gossips? She remains popular because she understood the human heart with all its frailties, and our hearts have little interest in historical time.

Kate Hamill's delightful adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility* provides a playground for exploring the novel's characters. Hamill surrounds Elinor and Marianne with a whirlwind of shape-shifting actors that both allow Austen's great humor to be revealed and also bring to life the social restrictions and judgements that are at the heart of Austen's own life and also those of her characters.

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