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reviews

HUIT FEMMES

By Robert Thomas
Melbourne French Theatre
Directed by Miki Oikawa
Reviewed by Richard Burman - 12 May 2007

This was my first visit to the Melbourne French Theatre and, knowing that the performance was to be in French and that my study of the language ceased when I matriculated in it many years ago, I approached it with a little trepidation. But I need not have worried and had a thoroughly enjoyable evening at the theatre. I judged the skill of the performers in delivering their dialogue on the reactions of the French-speaking audience. The play was presented with English surtitles and the crew in charge of them deserve special credit as they were very clear and right on cue.

The performance was at the Open Stage Theatre - the audience sitting on tiered seats in one half and the performance on the open stage floor in the other. The setting was minimal - black curtaining, a small set of stairs, some basic furniture and a large slash of red material sweeping across the black - all very effective.

Miki Oikawa assembled a cast of eight women all of whom were eminently suited to their respective roles. *Huit Femmes* (Eight Women) is essentially an ensemble piece - a comedy, a mystery, a thriller. Who has killed the husband? - Is it one of the eight women? - and later, has he been killed? Miki drilled them well so the play ran very quickly and very smoothly.

Catherine Jackson-Grose played Gaby, the wife/mother. Catherine was on stage for a large part of the play and conveyed well the various emotions of her character.

Her daughters were played by Yolaine Corbin (Suzon) and Sarah Biard (Catherine). Here we had two well-contrasted characters - Yolaine playing the sister who has been away from home and is returning pregnant - Sarah, the young sister who is trying to grow up and who has been the instigator of all mysterious happenings in and around the house. Sarah gave an animated performance full of vitality; while Yolaine gave us a more assured sister who has been out in the world.

Gail Grove was Mamy, the grandmother, and gave a delightfully comic performance, especially when she unexpectedly jumped out of her wheelchair and proved she could walk. Gaby's spinster sister, Augustine, was played by Chloe Brugale. In many ways this was the most difficult role in the play, almost a caricature, and as a result Chloe's performance seemed a bit two-dimensional.

The servants were portrayed by Franciska Toubale, as Madame Chanel, the prim house-keeper, and Aurelia Gachet, playing Louise, the pert and pretty maid. Here were two well-defined comedy performances which received all the audience response they deserved.

The cast was completed by Benedicte Gutton who played Pierrete, the husband's sister with a past. Benedicte clearly portrayed a character who was different to everyone else in the family.

As the set, furniture and properties were minimal, the care taken in the costuming to suit the characters was clearly evident.

A slick production which was greatly appreciated by the audience.

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Melbourne French Theatre's "Huit Femmes"

