



Adelaide Theatre Guide

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COMPLEAT FEMALE STAGE BEAUTY

Stirling Players

Stirling Community Theatre

Until 31 March 2012

Review by Tony Busch

This is a brave choice for Stirling Players. Not only does it require a large cast of very good performers, but it also places huge demands on an amateur company in terms of costumes, props and set. Luckily, Stirling had the talent of director Megan Dansie at the helm to pull it all together.

"The Compleat Female Stage Beauty" tells the (highly romanticised) story of Edward Kynaston, one of the last restoration 'boy players' trained to play women's roles at a time when women were barred from performing on stage.

Aldo Longobardi captures the gender confusion of the character well, imbuing his Kynaston with a double-edged vulnerability. It is unfortunate, though, that his physicality limits his complete transformation into what Samuel Pepys described as "the loveliest lady that I ever saw in my life".

However, Longobardi more than comes into his own when Kynaston finds himself an outcast through a royal decree banning men from playing women's roles. His descent into bawdy-house performer and alcoholism are pitiful indeed and his salvation in finding he can play the man is stirring and credible.

Dirk Strachan, as Kynaston's male lover, Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, has a similar problem in reverse; his lack of frame and brute masculinity is unable to provide the foil that would have heightened Kynaston's grace and femininity.

Peter Bleby is excellent as Pepys, providing more than a hint of that character's potential for irritation. Lindsay Dunn is accomplished as Betterton, the theatre owner; and Barry Hill is waspish and venal as the pompous Sedley, the engineer of Kynaston's downfall. Joshua Coldwell makes a fine Charles II and Steve Marvanek, Anthony Vawser, Neville Phillis and Saul Vanaxton all contribute solid performances.

Allison Scharber is a convincing Margaret Hughes, credited as the first professional female actress on the English stage after the Restoration. She conveys Margaret's initial lack of talent beautifully but really shines when challenged by Kynaston to stop acting and play the woman. Their scenes together are highlights.

Kate Vanderhorst almost steals the show as Nell Gwynn and has some of the best lines in the script. Karen Burns makes a fetching Maria and Masie Fabry and Ruth Horry play the spoilt and vindictive Lady Meresvale and Miss Frayne. Renee Brice is Mrs Barry and Debbie Tester is a riot as the bawdy Mistress Revel.

The set, designed by the director, is simple but very effective and the idea of having scenes changes done in silhouette works very well indeed. Costumes are superb and are a credit to Viki Burrett and a large band of assistants.

Megan Dansie has achieved a very creditable follow-up to her award-winning production for the Guild ("The Pillowman") and deserves hearty congratulations.