



Adelaide Theatre Guide

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Supporting live theatre in South Australia

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BRIEF ENCOUNTER

Kneehigh/Arts Project Australia

Dunstan Playhouse
Until 28 September 2013

Review by Tony Busch

Anyone expecting a remake of the 1945 Celia Johnson/Trevor Howard movie is in for quite a surprise. A very pleasant and rewarding one.

Director Emma Rice has taken Noël Coward's pre-war story of two married people who meet accidentally and fall in love, and created a classic in its own right.

Interweaving the parallel love stories of three couples with music and film projection, she and a team of British-based Kneehigh collaborators have fashioned a totally absorbing and highly entertaining theatre piece.

While the story's catalysts are firmly rooted in pre-WWII mores, in Rice's and Kneehigh's hands, it examines an ageless question. What would you be prepared to do for love?

Would you be prepared to risk shame, loss of social standing, loss of family to grasp hold of emotion that is so consuming, so visceral it would destroy your carefully negotiated self? Or would you subdue this deepest of desires and retreat to the security of the established and the arbitrated?

For Laura, loved wife and mother of two, the price of perfect love is too high. Michelle Nightingale brings an artful honesty to the character. Hers is a woman controlled rather than controlling and her realisation of shame that follows her surrender to pure passion is telling indeed. It is a very effective performance.

Jim Sturgeon is Alec, the doctor who removes the speck of coal dust from Laura's eye and becomes the apple of it. Sturgeon's Alec is so thoroughly likeable you wonder that he has the nerve to consummate the affair. His actor's instinct is superb and he endows the character with countless tiny details of authenticity.

Annette McLaughlin is superb as Myrtle, the Railway teashop owner. Her brilliant characterisation is perfectly matched by Joe Alessi as platform attendant Albert, who sweeps her of her feet. Their scenes, including a deliciously abandoned tango, are an absolute joy.

Alessi does triple duty, also playing Laura's staid but loving husband Fred, and Alec's friend, whose flat becomes the locale amoreuse. Three fine performances.

Kate Cheel is the teashop waitress, Beryl, eager for love, who is also perfectly matched by Damon Daunno's Stanley, the teashop's concessionaire. Together with McLaughlin and Alessi, they provide much of the humour of the piece and both are delightful to watch.

Musicians Dave Brown and James Gow complete the cast, though everyone contributes vocal and musical skills to deliver the nine Coward songs scattered through the piece, songs which have been arranged or rewritten by Stu Barker.



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Neil Murray's set creates an evocative and practical performance space that adapts to the many changes of scene with remarkable ease. Malcolm Rippeth's lighting design provides all the atmospheric touches to bring it to life. And the projection and film design of Jon Driscoll, Gemma Carrington and Stephen Parker is a triumph. It is wonderful to see multimedia used so intelligently, so perfectly and seamlessly integrated into the storytelling.

This is a show not to be missed, made more so by the fact that Adelaide is its first port of call on a national tour. So you can brag to your interstate friends that you saw it first. Make sure you do.