



Adelaide Theatre Guide

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Supporting live theatre in South Australia

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SUMMER OF THE SEVENTEENTH DOLL

Therry Dramatic Society

Arts Theatre

Until 30 August

Review by John Wells

Therry's production of the Australian classic "Summer of the Seventeenth Doll" opens with the National Anthem. The old one. You know, "God Save the Queen". (You probably know more of the words to that one than the current anthem...) This was a delightful and canny device: quite a few of the opening night audience dutifully stood as the crackly recording was played. It served to show that this is a story from another time, from an Australia that is almost unrecognisable. The language, the attitudes and the behaviour were all from a nation we know only in memory. This point was underscored by the excerpts from an old 1948 black and white newsreel of "The Cane Cutters".

"Summer of the Seventeenth Doll" is a snapshot of post-war Australia. It is an examination of the changing mores of a nation just beginning to think for itself. The two cane cutters, Roo and Barney, travel down every year to Melbourne for the "lay off", five months of carousing with their girls Olive and Nancy. But this seventeenth summer is different: Nancy has tired of the charade and has got married, leaving Olive to shoe-horn her bemused and conservative friend Pearl into Nancy's place. Questions of morality, loyalty and the real lives that bubble away under the veneer of conservative society drive the narrative.

But this production does not feel worn or dated. Ray Lawler's brilliant and desperately sad script touches so accurately on timeless truths. Denial, longing and desperation accompany us in every age. The greatest success of Jude Hines' direction is that there is always a raw honesty in what we are seeing on stage. It is an emotionally precise production. Hines establishes a strong atmosphere of moral and personal complexity; the protagonists cling fiercely to the past, wilfully blind to the inevitable disintegration of their relationships. There is an impressive sense of quiet doom.

While Hines has clearly worked hard – and successfully – on the characters, the direction lacks dynamism and the production lacks pace, especially in the first act. The languid pace saps much-needed energy from the action. This may be nerves or opening night hesitance; if the actors relax into their performances and up the pace, this will improve.

There is a touch of hesitance to the characterisations too. None of the ensemble fully attacks their role; the performers circle around the characters and ease in to the performances. Given they hit their marks later in the play, this suggests an opening-night lack of self-assurance. More confidence should bring more zest to the early scenes.

Despite the initially tentative acting, the ensemble warms into a solidly imposing performance. Allison Scharber is a subtle and progressively desolate Olive, with a beautifully judged combination of foolish exuberance and forlorn defiance. Rodney Hutton, as Roo, her broke and broken-down suitor, is conflicted, confused and seething. Their relationship has genuine moments of pathos. Glen Christie (Barney) breathes genial larrikinism and Maxine Grubel (Pearl) is convincing as the uptight and reluctant interloper. Penni Hamilton-Smith gives a rousing performance as the irascible but knowing Emma.



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There are wonderful moments of brash, knockabout humour. This production is frequently funny and light. But the sadness lurking is the anchor of this show. The cast builds the slow and miserable descent with skill and restraint.