



Adelaide Theatre Guide

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SUMMER OF THE SEVENTEENTH DOLL

State Theatre Company of South Australia

Dunstan Playhouse

Until May 16

Review by Jamie Wright

Director Geordie Brookman and a stellar cast bring playwright Ray Lawler's great dialogue, rich humour and flawed, complex characters to life in this production of the Australian classic.

Set in 1953, it's the story of the unconventional arrangement between Carlton barmaid Olive (Elena Carapetis) and cane-cutters Roo (Chris Pitman) and Barney (Rory Walker), who fly down from Queensland's sugar country down to Melbourne for their five-month layoff, and have done so for the previous sixteen summers. But this year is different: Roo and Olive still have each other, but Barney's belle Nancy has tired of the lifestyle and married; recruited to take her place is Pearl (Lizzy Falkland), Olive's co-worker, who has more than a few reservations about the arrangement.

With the addition of Annabel Matheson as Bubba, the girl next door; Jacqy Phillips as Olive's cantankerous, acid-tongued mother and landlady, Emma; and Tim Overton as the young upstart cane cutter Johnnie Dowd, the cast are superb at inhabiting the characters and delivering the 1950s era dialogue - it's impossible to not get caught up in Olive's initial barely-contained enthusiasm, Pearl's nervousness, Roo's frustration, or the sadness underlying Barney's faded lothario schtick.

Pip Runciman's set is not necessarily what you'd expect for the portrayal of an aging terrace house; it's a spacious, sunken area of floorboards and only the bare necessities in terms of furniture and dressing. There's a wall of curtains surrounding the main space, and whenever characters aren't involved in the scene, they sit quietly off to the side – out of sight but never quite out of mind.

There's also some great lighting from Nigel Levings, particularly in the fireworks scene. Quentin Grant's music highlights the emotional scenes with some touching, melancholic pieces.

It's not flawless: after a stunning first act the pace drops a little in the second, particularly towards the end when it becomes more about emotional outpouring than great dialogue. There are some issues with clarity as well; a few lines here and there aren't audible. But these are only minor blemishes on what is otherwise a well-polished gem that demonstrates that, sixty years on, it's still a brilliant, powerful piece of Australian theatre.