



Adelaide Theatre Guide

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DEATH AND THE MAIDEN

Moore Books SA

Holden Street Theatres

Until 5 November 2016

Review by Anthony Vawser

The worst crimes are often those committed behind closed doors, the perpetrators fully aware that their invisibility will ensure they get away with it. Ariel Dorfman's "Death and the Maiden" is a play built on the foundation of this painful truth. It is a work of gripping tension that powerfully illuminates a number of dark truths about the human race.

Director Kristin Telfer and her three-hander cast approach the material quite differently from the relentless doom-and-gloom that you may well expect out of a play dealing with the effects of rape, torture, and totalitarianism. The strain of black comedy in the text is successfully navigated, while the all-important element of teasing ambiguity is also well-handled, helping to make "Death and the Maiden" a richly intriguing experience indeed.

The performances contribute significantly to the atmosphere of uncertainty. Cheryl Douglas and Thorin Cupit, playing married couple Paulina Salas and Gerardo Escobar, give the characters – and their actions – an almost-farcical edge at times, but this becomes a curious strength of the production, rather than the incongruity that it might have been. Douglas' range of emotional response, from sardonic quipping to silent, shadowy terror, is testament to this actress' admirable versatility.

Nick Buckland is simply brilliant as Roberto Miranda, charismatic and expressive in all the right ways. The battle of wills that progresses between Douglas' and Buckland's characters results in the two performers bringing out the best in each other, continually elevating their characterisations to new heights (barring some slight lulls that are basically confined to the play's midsection). Cupit's portrayal of Gerardo is especially impressive at concealing his fiery streak until bursting forth with maximum effectiveness.

Tony Moore's lighting could perhaps have afforded a little more in the way of atmosphere, but at least it's never noticeably distracting or inappropriate. Shannon Norfolk's production design is especially effective in its use of black cloth backdrops. Stage manager Joanna Webb's contribution is invaluable and smoothly executed, under the circumstances.

The events and themes of "Death and the Maiden" can apply specifically to a certain country at a certain point in time, but they also have the power to stretch further and reach deeper than this; beyond the boundaries of culture and government, into the philosophical realm that leaves theatregoers of any nation keenly thinking about – and reflecting on – what they have just seen. A play with this much intelligence and integrity, presented in a way that is dramatically thrilling, really can't afford to be missed.