



Adelaide Theatre Guide

www.theatreguide.com.au

Supporting live theatre in South Australia

PO Box 738
MODBURY SA 5092

info@theatreguide.com.au
ABN : 93 297 960 525

BLUE STOCKINGS

Red Phoenix Theatre

Holden Street Theatres

Until 29 May

Review by John Wells

History plays are difficult. The narrative and the dramatic effect are dependent on how compelling the historical basis for the play is, and on how the historical era speaks to the audience. Jessica Swale's 2013 drama "Blue Stockings", which tells the story of female students' struggle to have their academic efforts recognised, is a strong but uneven text. Swales expertly captures the deep unfairness and baffling inequalities of Cambridge University in the late 1880s, but frequently the script is repetitive and over-emphasized. At a time when there are searing examples in our community of gender-based injustices, reflecting on the debates about admitting women has a dated quaintness to it. There are some searing scenes, and some dull ones. It is a good play, not a great one.

But this is a great production, not simply a good one.

Red Phoenix's success begins with director Libby Drake. Drake, working with a huge cast, brings a sense of momentum and emotional detail, which serve the essential premise of the play perfectly. Drake has clearly worked hard with the actors to get to the heart of the drama: we feel the characters' outrage and fury, as well as the terrible toll the fight for equality takes on the foot-soldiers in this battle. Drake's direction is fluid and confident. She has been capably assisted by Richard Parkhill's evocative and atmospheric lighting, and Sharon Malujlo's wonderful costumes. The opening scene is a delightful example of the success of the creative team: in a crepuscular amber light, characters rush busily in the wafting smoke of a steam train; into the throng of people come the four resolute female undergraduates: strong, straight-backed and full of intent. It looks beautiful, and sets the tone of the play wonderfully well.

Drake is working with a very talented ensemble. There is a wealth of experience, skill and energy on stage, all of which propel this production admirably. There will always be stronger and weaker actors in a large amateur cast, but the performances here are all creditable. It is worth singling out Kate van der Horst, as the leader of the unruly and determined quartet of female activists, Kate Anolak, as the canny and strategic head of Girton College, Bart Csorba as the principled and revolutionary don, and a deliciously repellent Brant Eustice as the (real) Dr Maudsley.

"Blue Stockings" is a rousing call-to-arms, a wry look back, a celebration of what women have achieved, and reflection on how much further we have to go.